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A Global Journal devoted to

Language and Literature

A Peer-Reviewed Print Journal

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Dr VIVEKANAND JHA

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Dr RAJNISH MISHRA

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PHENOMENAL LITERATURE

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CONTENTS

POETRY

1. Up high I swing 7
Amtheyst
2. Crying Scared 8
Andrew Scott
3. The Developing Country 9
Avdhesh Jha
4. Bruises 11
Barbra Nightingale
5. The Sins of Poets and Pastors 12
Duane Vorhees
6. Someday I'll die and see God even though 13
Gale Acuff
7. A True Life Song 14
H.L. Dowless
8. From "The Second Book of Job" 16
J.T. Whitehead
9. From "The Second Book of Job" 17
J.T. Whitehead
10. The Death of Roy, the Hermit 18
John Grey
11. Every Night Before Sleep 19
John Grey

12. The Candle Smoke is Rising Joseph Hart	20
13. Leland Julie Allyn Johnson	21
14. Images of the River of Maternal Salvation (Ganges) K.V. Raghupathi	22
15. Breaking Story Karla Linn Merrifield	24
16. Honour as Horrified Lakshmikaandan R	25
17. Diogenes Down in the Dumps Les Wicks	26
18. Dharma Chakra Mahathi	27
19. An Animal in the Darkness Marc Isaac Potter	28
20. Summer is Dying Michael Lee Johnson	30
21. EMI: What You Gain, What You Lose? Mithil Jha	31
22. Void Ngo Binh Anh Khoa	32
23. Lunch-time at the Cookery Noel King	33
24. That Silence Patricia Nikolova	34
25. No Darkness Patricia Nikolova	35

Contents	Page 5
26. Jaundiced Lifeboat Peter J. Dellolio	36
27. Scrambling Antique Peter J. Dellolio	37
28. An Eulogy for an Epilogue of Life Prasanta Kumar Panda	38
29. A Million Stars Roger G. Singer	39
30. Whisper Ron Samul	40
31. Mock Sonnet 20 Sam Smith	41
FLASH FICTION	
1. The Black Fleece Gary Duehr	42
2. The Druid Paweł Markiewicz	45
3. Emotional Curiosity Yuan Changming	47
SHORT STORY	
1. Number 27 Dominik Ślusarczyk	51
2. Hanging Together Inside Faleeha Hassan	60
3. Coffin Maker K. V. Dominic	64
4. An Ante-Purgatorial Preoccupation with the Body and its Place of Burial Kevin P. Keating	69

5. Coco	75
Marc Isaac Potter	
6. Dreamers	80
Nahid Rachlin	
7. The Queen of Panchala	91
Tapti Bose	
EXCERPT NOVEL	
1. A Visitation and a Promise	97
Felice Picano	
MEMOIR	
1. How I Evolved as Reader, Writer, Teacher	105
Rick Hartwell	
2. To The Beach	114
Patty Somlo	
MONOLOGUE	
1. Doubt and Wonder	123
David James	
PLAY	
1. Lead Us to Culture	126
Gary Beck	
ARTICLE	
1. Rewriting of the Ramayana: Haldhar Nag's <i>Mahasati Urmila</i>	131
Chittaranjan Misra	
CONTRIBUTORS	138

POETRY

1

Up high I swing

AMTHEYST

ancestors raving whispers
thrusts my wooden swing
over the thousand hills
beyond the fertile pastures
past the valley crevices

my auburn strands
escape its hair tie
cavorting with the wind
the higher I swing

untamed by my hand
my sunflower dress
flies high to the tune
of the morning cricket trills

the mockingbird's melody
rocks the sun to sleep
soothes the fiery wind
into a light calm breeze
brings my swing to a still



2

Crying Scared

ANDREW SCOTT

when I saw the blood
spitting out of your mouth
everything flashed before me.
The emotions of losing you
became so real.

I have never seen you so weak.
All those years of being stoic and strong
makes seeing you like this the hardest.
Never imaged seeing that part of you.
I fight tears every time.

As I watch you being helpless
the memories of all of our conflicts
come flooding back to me.
The anger from then now gone
after so many healing years.

I know how strong you are.
I have seen it many times
and I believe that strength
will heal you fully.

But that does not mean,
in quiet, I am not crying scared.



3

The Developing Country

AVDHESH JHA

Loose to gain and gain to lose; earn to spend and spend to
earn;
With all the facts and fictions, its way towards yearning the
best;
The pampered follower of the developed, the fate of cheap
politics,
The destiny of poor; it is the developing country beyond the
west.

The region of self-obsessed leaders where all isms is a
religion,
Where life is always at stake and liveliness always subjected
to test;
Least bothered about basic needs, rights, democracy, and
freedom,
With pretentious science of immorality; it is a developing
country in nest.

With history of differences and economics of poverty and
capitalism,
With the seasons of inflation, weather of crime and climate of
injustice;
The geography of falsehood and corruption and civics of
inhuman attitude,
Ruled by the guardian of government; it is a developing
country on apprentice.

Amidst the fix of certainty and uncertainty; rich getting
richer, poor getting poorer,
With the readiness to step on moon but inspiring the people
to pray the moon;
The culture of change as per the need and requirement, the
superficial civilisation,
The dilemmic, neither developed nor undeveloped it is
developing country in doom.

With poor heart but body neatly dressed; with difference in
outlook and background,
Used to abuse, it is a tool in the hand of a fool, a game for the
developed to play with;
Lead to mislead, with progress only on paper; the potential
customer of the intruder,
The prey of the developed; with all the striking opposites
develops only with its myth.



4

Bruises

BARBRA NIGHTINGALE

A scrape on my arm.
Blue and purple streaks
 across my thigh.
A reddish swelling
on the back of my hand.

A phantom lover
who plays too rough?
My cat nipping
 as I sleep?
A drunken walk down the hall
bouncing off the walls?

Each morning, I search
 my body for clues,
but my brain does not assist.
Wrap yourself in cotton,
 it smugly says.
One step closer to the shroud.



5

The Sins of Poets and Pastors

DUANE VORHEES

When preachers and poets exercise
our metaphorical rhetoric
we much prefer the dramatic
– the pitchfork of lightning –
above the anticlimactic
– a blanket of sunshine.
The wrinkled and crippled shall arise
sooner than the smooth and the spry.
The salve is shadowed by the sting,
and Found, by Wandering.
The tornado and the torrent
and the volcano's ring
are prized beyond plastic ornaments.
We tend to the tortured and the tried.



6

**Someday I'll die and see God even
though**

GALE ACUFF

I won't have eyes like I have now, I'll leave
them behind on my body in my grave
on Earth or maybe the undertaker
takes them out when he preserves me and sub-
stitutes a couple of jewels or fancy
stones for 'em but up in Heaven I guess
my soul will see somehow, see God that is
at my judgement, it's kind of hard to say
how dead I'll be yet how alive, it's some
of both actually my Sunday School
teacher suggests but then again that's what
I've got here on Earth, I'm only ten years
old but still well on the way with dying
'til at last I'm dead. It's a miracle.



7

A True Life Song

H.L. DOWLESS

I'm way out here in a foreign land,
With the tiny mosquitoes and the heavy heat,
Thought I'd be living a life so grand,
But I'm-a sweating until I wanna squeak!

Well the bars are now all closed,
But this cane juice liquor isn't any good.
I sit comfortably by the wall inside this town by the coast,
Wishing I could vanish away if I could.

I'm here next to the Amazon Jungle,
In a bamboo room swinging in a hammock,
With my native angel beside me all in a bundle,
She's the only thing holding me here in this spot.

We drink banana cheer
Inside this place so discrete;
For breakfast we have rhea eggs
And fried spider monkey meat,
When our native camp cook comes near.

They have a drink made of mushrooms and vines.
It causes many to see demons and hear voices,
And feel the ghosts of their bamboo wind chimes,
While I stand before so many exotic choices.

Soon we have danced all morning long
To the thump of a native beat,
Quaffing cane liquor to a tribal song
As we all stand facing toward the east.

As we were all so filled with cheer
The earth beneath us shakes and trembles.
When the grand illustrious Madonna of the skies stands near,
All of us seemed to move so much more nimble.

The Madonna smiles
Telling me;
“Welcome in my dear child,”
Then with a raven she flies away,
Saying,
“Never ever fear,
‘Cause I’ll come back again someday!”



8

From “The Second Book of Job”

J.T. WHITEHEAD

III

Job's losses left him as blind as Homer or Milton and now he is the owner of very little. Someday his awareness will match that of the poets. He has less to carry homeward, and has no homeward to speak of. It's impossible to look back without becoming frozen. His Book is closed. To lose faith, okay, but *the Word*? It was lost as well.

So at the machine, for a spell, staring at the keys, the screen,
and his hands, it all came out gibberish:

“NIGHT OLD MAN HATE MONEY WHITE LUSTY DISH.. .

“

For now, it was just blindness, no *insight*.

That spirit of Homer would have to wait.



9

From “The Second Book of Job”

J.T. WHITEHEAD

XIII

On the train homeless *Job* lost perspective, but also gained some: the tracks never turned:
an inevitability he learned, metaphorically. He learned how to live still, calm, right here. He was stationary. Meanwhile, the hills and the forests raced by. It was the world outside that was moving. Science told him it was him, that his eye and his body were moving, disproving his false sense of all else moving very fast. He sensed that everything was on track.

Now. Even without a destination, or a new home, there was
no turning back.

Loss was the cost of this realization.



10

The Death of Roy, the Hermit

JOHN GREY

The shack is empty but for the bike.
And the curtains scavenged from the dump.
And the bed with the cracked headboard.
His few clothes were junked,
along with the dishes and the one fork,
cans of food, the wood stove, and the stack of kindling.
Same with the water-ruined set of encyclopedias,
published before the second world war.
No photographs to throw in the fire.
No letters. No utility bills of course.

I'd see Roy riding that bike, along the river trail,
over the old wooden bridge where we fished.
He sometimes sat on the opposite bank
and tossed his own line in.
Now that bike is a monument to stillness.
No one claims it, not even the kids who don't have one.
Curtains flutter in wind cracked by glass.
Folks' noses are too sensitive to take them down.
A possum nests in the mattress stuffing –
a silent, wary, obtuse creature.
He's the Roy of the natural world.



11

Every Night Before Sleep

JOHN GREY

She undresses for bed, slowly, by rote.
The light is on.
Anyone could look in the bedroom window,
watch ringers fiddle with buttons,
blouse ride off shoulder.
Her fingers follow the old silk road
of bone and flesh.

He's reading a horror novel
but it's her nerves that tingle.
Are there beasts out there in the woods?
Are they just waiting for the right moment to attack?
Surely, somewhere in the darkness,
something is hatching
or oozing up through the earth's crust
or is fired into being
by a bolt of lightning.

Outside is all drizzle.
Streetlamps stir clouds of mist.
He sees it as thick, she as ominous.
Something's about to break in,
leap on her body,
make passionate love to her.
Threats are everywhere.
They go where they're most needed.



12

The Candle Smoke is Rising

JOSEPH HART

The candle smoke is rising
Through an infinite geometry,
And I am slowly yielding
To the guardian of sleep, –
The soft caretaker, sleep.



13

Leland

~ for Wesley

JULIE ALLYN JOHNSON

do you remember the blue heron, son
the one at the river's elbow
as we approached
the crest of the hill,
how we cheered—
bright-eyed smile
on your happy little face
seeing its elegant silhouette
against the slow-moving stream
with the hush of early morning
waking up all around us



14
Images of the River of
Maternal Salvation (Ganges)

K.V. RAGHUPATHI

I

On a lonely afternoon
away from the hubbub

Or at the vertical junction of the sun and the earth
watching the mellifluous flow

Birds resting on the banks and treetops in a meditative pose
and the rays falling flat

Kissing the flow's surface
with a graceful touch and hug

There's not a singular sound around
trees are standing and stooping like hunched monks

And so much more the river shares
the history of human sorrow
when I look into her eyes.

II

Untamed River; a mystery
swelling and surging like a herd of wild buffaloes.
The flow is an indisputable queen of the land
with her womb fertile forever
for speckled fish as her children swimming
and cormorants chasing their shadows beneath
as the slating slanting sun is succumbing to illusions
fizzling out like pancakes on the frying pan.

III

Crisply the brilliant sand brightened brighter
beneath my crunching feet, whispered
behind me my elongated jelly candy-like shadow
swayed to the rhythmic flow.
Fantastic shapes in vibrant sun-licked water
across, the birds flitted to and from
with sharp turns jumbling invisible patterns.
In ecstasy the river
drank the saffron sunlight;
in joy the tourists and pilgrims
drank the beauty of flow;
who can measure the range of their joy
or set the bounds of beauty?
In ecstasy, I chuckled
sipping the River's love.



15

Breaking Story

KARLA LINN MERRIFIELD

Now in the hour of tempest's descent
with chaos-shaping clouds, wind, snow, waves
causing closure of schools, closure
of highways and railways and subways,
and the many-jeweled bridges of the boroughs,
but none for the widow across the Hudson River,
atop the highlands, who keenly observes
the rewriting of Sandy Hook, the erasure
of dunes, the deletion of beaches, beach grasses.
It is no wonder she shrinks from storm's hysteria
as it thrashes its way into epochal history.

In the house of the dead, a blizzard smothers
a diminished spirit and her brittle heart crashes.



16

Honour as Horrified

LAKSHMIKAANDAN R

Earlier, they wish to have me
for ornamental and as honour.
I am rare and unreachable to many,
though I have few residences.
During the emergency, I am there for them,
to assist and accommodate.
My friend Pandemic made everyone
to realize my presence much more.
Later, I am not for emergency
but for Anger and Hatred.
Exploited me, for what they want.
I wish to stay as I am in origin.



17

Diogenes Down in the Dumps

LES WICKS

What if we're all dead already?
There was talk about a virus
so we never quite touch
can never quite know.

That spooky sound... a train up on the hill?
Within, without there may be a tunnel
or a passenger. A solitary ogle of light approaches.
Perhaps a Ghost Train
from that carnival gone bust.
No matter, both the same
scissored night
like some gag-suit worn to a funeral
gets torn to pieces
caught up in the enthusiasms of grief.

Someone lit up my world.
But what is that worth when I admit
an enduring fascination for raptors & car taillights?

Silence allures
it is often mistaken for *deep*.
Can hardly read in this murk.
I bought a ticket, a gesture
communication
shape
perhaps tomorrow.



18

Dharma Chakra

MAHATHI

The frozen blood is still alive and warm
in cold Siberian tundras. The beat
of winds still smells the roasted human meat
of those who thought that death was better balm.
And at Tiananmen square the deadly calm
still echos roars of tanks with blasting heat
of darted cannonballs running to greet
of innocent students who sensed no harm.

Though doomed, this devil's sperm still lives within
the civil world spreading their evil genes
on earth to keep aloud their loony din.
These goons lo never give up try'ng to spin
their death machines. But keeps rolling with sheens
our Dharma Chakra; love as its lynchpin!



19

An Animal in the Darkness

MARC ISAAC POTTER

There was, but it
Is turning over,
Belly exposed.

Is it sick?
Papa said do not shoot an animal that
Does not run, it might be sick.

The only wisdom,
A distant streetlight,
Yawning from loneliness
Went black.

Now I cannot see
The belly-bursting animal.

Did it slip away when
I was breathing
Life
Into my courage?

The leaves of the Oak Trees,
Thicken themselves,
Turn black,
As still as a frozen Panther.

There is nothing left for
Me to do but go home
Empty-handed
And empty.

Was it a raccoon? ... Was it a large squirrel?



20

Summer is Dying

MICHAEL LEE JOHNSON

Outside, summer is dying into fall,
and blue daddy petunias sprout ears—
hear the beginning of night chills.
In their yellow window box,
they cuddle up and fear death together.
The balcony sliding door
is poorly insulated, and a cold draft
creeps into all the spare rooms.



21

EMI: What You Gain, What You Lose?

MITHIL JHA

With life turning huge, fast and furious
We fly high to reach the sky of the expectations
and aspirations, when we hardly know, we fall
a prey in the grey unto the valleys of suspirations.

Being a prey of needs, to satisfy and pacify them,
we fall a prey to equal monthly instalments tow;
when we are hardly aware of the likeliness of
Falling a prey to false glamour, pomp and show.

Whether wanted or unwanted, with EMI,
time-being we feel, we are privileged
to see our needs satisfied and pacified
but only at the cost of our freedom.

For it is this EMI that slowly deprives us
initiating with lessening our strength,
Followed by courage, leadership, motivation,
truthfulness and thus cutting the length.

Until we know, it ensures, we are slaves,
of feebleness, weakness, and Inferiority;
Hereby, we need to think with EMI
What we gain and what we lose as identity.



22

Void

NGO BINH ANH KHOA

I have not written a story
for how many months now?

Inside me, a void expands,
devouring away at my identity,
hungrily yearning to be filled,
or to be transformed
with a big bang
into something substantial,
meaningful,
real.

Till then, it will continue
making its aching presence known,
like an unborn child kicking against
its confines,
demanding to be born.



23

Lunch-time at the Cookery

NOEL KING

From a salad plate he plucks
a long green leaf, suck snips
its end, crushes it in politeness
amid a face that's lost
in the fragrance of her
blending herself to him.
She hurts, hunts for time
run out in spaces
that hear her paradise.
In the plush restaurant
they sway to each other.



24

That Silence

PATRICIA NIKOLOVA

the trees bow head and shoulder
their epaulets drop without a fight

only old boots remain
to sprout in the earth

their broken hands point
upward, downward

as alien birds croak
atop their greatcoats

an unbearably white sky
stoops to kiss

their mud encrusted
lips



25

No Darkness

PATRICIA NIKOLOVA

lately i think of you as i sit by the riverbank
but there is no river

you and i salute the trees in the forest
but there is no forest

then we feed our bread to birds
but there is no bread

then happily we're back home
but there is no home

then we hold our little child
but there is no child

seated then, we dine on words
without a thing to say

then in the gloom our shadows merge
without any darkness

without darkness

no darkness
there's none



26

Jaundiced Lifeboat

PETER J. DELLOLIO

Jaundiced lifeboat surgery mixed in moonlight tears.
I used to play lots of handball when I was young.
Nectar solitude in the hidden lumber seizures.
Leprosy must be the most hideous disease in the history of
mankind.



27

Scrambling Antique

PETER J. DELLOLIO

Scrambling antique fetid baked *Now, Voyager!*
I go into a blissful trance when I am on a beach.
Gladiator briefcase not very nocturnal penguins riot.
The silence of the night is mystical.



28

An Eulogy for an Epilogue of Life

PRASANTA KUMAR PANDA

When life has become almost life
Never most of it,
And love in it feels like
Love of not any times,
Yet hatred of all the times
filtered into relations of all kinds,
Old people around remind me
I've also become old enough
To be sentenced to death.
Likely being old enough to die is a crime,
For being wise certainly.

Yet waiting for it
As if the sentence is withheld for a day or a few,
Or the firing squad is not ready yet to kneel,
And aim at one like me
Who has an almost life
Surviving almost deaths all the while.



29

A Million Stars

ROGER G. SINGER

he was born to
turn the other way

cloudy eyes
stormy hair
half smile
angels have
outlawed him

his shrine
are the ghosts
yet to be
unpacked

he follows
stone walls
and great trees
stepping into
the shadows
where he
appears thin



30

Whisper

RON SAMUL

I heard Dickinson's soft breathe
so close to my ear
I thought she kissed it.
And everything I knew of her,
poetry and words dissolved.
Just the smell of almonds from
a dry sigh caught in a dusty mouth.



31

Mock Sonnet 20

SAM SMITH

In our squeezed-together city lives,
cramped housing and treeless suburbs,
sensory deprivation can have us deceived
by our own imaginings, by England's
dishonest democracy. So who now decides
what is worthwhile – in these Emperor's
clothes constructions? For us, who are elbowed aside
the principal puzzle can be – how does one
join the game? Our willingness is beyond doubt,
but who do we get to stake us? Or do we not
bother? How then though to measure self-worth?
How when we are left as just one more speck
of an aimless mass? How, when listening to off-duty
Samaritans, can make you want to kill yourself?



FLASH FICTION

1

The Black Fleece

GARY DUEHR

I lost my black fleece jacket. Boo hoo, I know. It zips up the front, with a pocket that holds a knit hat in a lump; on the subway, I touch it to make sure the hat's still there. I do have a forest-green fleece, but it's unworn, shapeless. I want my black fleece hanging there on the hook by the front door, ready to slip on when the morning's chilly, its rumples hugging my own. I'm no longer a 2nd-string high school football jock, my middle's been pulled down by our two kids hanging from my waist.

My wife, Jan, thinks I'm crazy. Buy another, give it up. But Brad, please, no more fleece talk. It's grounds, she says, any judge in Suffolk County would side with her. She dreams of a double condo like her pal Gail has, one for her and one for her former English professor with 15 years on her, joined by a connecting door that locks on either side. "Two," my wife mouths, holding up two fingers in a victory salute whenever a petty argument slides downhill.

We're Brad and Janet, stupid, I know. In college we used to do a mean Time Warp at parties. Now our go-to is "Shallow" with her screeching Lady Gaga and me growling out a ragged Bradley Cooper. My fingers pick out the notes, but their callouses have gone soft. I admit I'm a little jealous of the looks she gets.

So, yeah, I try to keep the fleece talk to myself, but she catches me looking at the empty coat hook. It's been less than a week. Like an idiot I left it at Logan when I was catching a daytrip to DC for a job interview with the Office of the Inspector General. I had settled into my Extra Comfort seat, earbuds in, and the overhead air hit my bare arms, pimpling them. "Oh shit," I thought, too late. I called airport security and left a message. I worried over it all day until I flew back, wandering down the Mall pinned down by its white marble buildings. I ducked in Air and Space to warm up and almost bought a navy-blue fleece with a NASA insignia. But that felt like cheating.

I texted Jan to drive out and search Gate 11, but she had meetings all day. First thing on touching down that night I scanned the rows of black vinyl seats. Nada. The terminal was deserted, even the Coyote Grill had its grate pulled down. I caught my pale reflection in the dark plate-glass windows, the red lights of jets idling on the tarmac. Even though it sounds ridiculous, I feel lost without my black fleece. After my last position got reorged, I can't stand to lose many more things.

The next day I told Jan I had an appointment downtown, but I spent hours at Logan searching nearby gates in Terminal C, thinking someone may have moved the fleece. I had to buy a ticket, but I just cancelled at the Help Desk for credit. Lost and Found had zilch.

The day after that I questioned the guy cleaning the men's room, the TSA officer who buzzes open the glass door to ground transportation, the American agents at gate counters. They looked at me like I was simple and gave me a pity-smile. I took photos of the boarding area with my iPhone until I realized I was attracting too much attention.

I saw an old guy bending down at Gate 13 to check under the seats and trailed him for a while. A scavenger? He had on a zip-up jacket but not fleece. I thought about partnering with him, but I'd rather work solo.

At home I search through our albums for an old photo of me wearing the black fleece, in case I have to prove it's mine. I remember the night our daughter lost her stuffed bear in a neighborhood park; Jan and I spent an hour combing the grass with flashlights while she sobbed in a sandbox. I know the bear's still there somewhere.

While Jan's out buying groceries I scour the closets, the mud room, the patio, thinking maybe I hadn't actually taken the jacket to the airport, and it's all a huge mistake. At dinner the kids notice how distracted I am, barely touching my pork chop, and ask what's wrong with Daddy.

"He's got too much on his mind," Jan says, scraping up squash from her plate. I catch her mouthing "Two" behind her hand over her mouth, her index and second finger pointing in my direction.



2

The Druid

PAWEŁ MARKIEWICZ

In a Druid's soul: gold of rainbow. A druid wanted to go into a forest and pick some fungi, to cook later a magic super decoction from them. In the Druid's soul: the Golden Fleece. He gathered some mushrooms such as the red-capped scaber stalks-fungi, a boletus rufus and a good foxy bolete. In dear Druids's soul: a joy of butterflies. He met on a path next to an ancient Zeus-altar a lovely wildcat. The tender druid and the animal wanted to speak. In this Druid's soul: dreams of muses. The wildcat wanted to tell the druid his riddle. It was difficult: what is the most amazing star in a romantic heaven?. In Druid's soul: magic wing of Ibycus-cranes. The druid answered falsely, it was a morning-star. A Rhodes-star was true. The druid had to give to the wildcat the scaber stalks. In dear Druid's soul: tears of luck. The herbalist met on a path near an ancient stream of Apollo, the dreamer, a boar from distance. They began speaking later. In Druid's soul: amber from angels. The boar told the druid his most magnificent riddle. The druid had to say, what is the best shooting star, with which he has ever dreamed. In meek Druid's soul: brightness of the Augean stables. The druid answered falsely: it was this in the German mountains Harz. The boar told – true shooting stars before rainbow. The boleti rufus for the boar. In the dearest Druid's soul: diamond of history. The druid met later, on ways into a cave of the god Hephaestus full beauty, a wild shrewd fox with golden eyes. The beings wanted to speak. In Ovidian Druid's soul:

shooting star at dawn and dusk. Having welcomed, he told the kind druid a puzzle. It sounded mysterious: what comet dust is the most dazzling in the whole world?. In Druid's soul: herculean stars. The druid answered falsely: it may be a comet dust in a fabulous, kind evening. At a native heaven was true; the foxy bolete – given to the fox. In tender Druid's soul: fungi of eternity, the sempiternal being of time. The druid lost fungi. He was happy – Artemis showed him – as a good man – path to an amaranthine glade with many honey agarics. In soft Druid's soul: wings from Your heart. At home the druid may have rested and he cooked the decoction from the honey agarics, what gave him eternal strong – wing of the spell and charm, an apollonianly picturesque sword.



3

Emotional Curiosity

YUAN CHANGMING

He doesn't know how curiosity can kill a cat, but he's acutely aware how it's killing himself. Ever since she first asked him what do you like me about? When they fell in love again after they'd lost each other for nearly half a century, he's been haunted by this question. Without getting an answer, he feels he just cannot live peacefully. Indeed, for him, the answer means not merely an emotional statement but an intellectual discovery, which can help him to gain a better understanding of himself. After all, knowing himself is a major task he has to fulfill in this lifetime, something becoming increasingly urgent for him as a retiree with so many health problems.

Everything about you! He replied, firmly in tone, but far less accurately in content than he'd hoped.

Your answer's too general, too vague, she commented.

True, he agreed. This answer did sound like a handy or lazy catch-phrase. He had to come up with something more articulate, more specific.

What do you like me *most* about? She narrowed down her question a bit later.

Well, depends on the time! When he first saw her during a high school meeting, he recognised her as the prettiest girl in town. A year after, when he had a chance to look at her more closely on a forest farm where they labored together as 're-educated' Red Guards, he realised that if viewed

separately, her eyes, eyebrows, nose, mouth or ears might not necessarily be beautiful, but put together, her facial features looked perfectly attractive. Coupled with her fair, soft, smooth and immaculate skin as well as her slender and shapely figure, her physical appearance was simply stunning.

But I know I'm never as good-looking as you describe, she said.

Her response is certainly understandable: if she'd stood side by side with his wife when they were all in their early twenties, she might not have looked as beautiful as his wife to most people, even including himself; yes, he's sure of that. But somehow, he enjoys gazing her more than any other woman in the world. Is it really because absence makes the heart grow fonder? Or perhaps because every time he sees her, he finds her even better-looking than before? For instance, when he reencountered her at a dinner party in early October in 2019, he found her wearing her years so well she seemed to belong to a younger generation. It probably had to do with her gracious manners. In other words, it must be her personality that's contributed significantly to her good looks.

Still, I know my looks aren't really so good, she stressed.

But they *are* to me! He reiterated. After doing a lot more thinking, he realised that she's most attractive to him for two reasons. One is, she looks not only pretty but warm and tender at the same time. Probably because she often smiles like a flower blooming from her innermost being, the very sight of her makes him feel happy. That's why he gazes her via iPad until she's too tired to hold her cellphone in her hand every time they meet online. In particular, he finds something unique in her facial expression. As in the case of Mona Lisa's

mysterious smile, she always looks genuinely interested. This interestedness undoubtedly adds greatly to her attraction.

If you say so, she said.

Despite her response, he continued to say he's finally decoded her beauty in *his* eyes. For one thing, he enjoys listening to her voice. Her accent sounds familiar and soothing because it carries with it a distinct note of everything good about their common hometown. Even her breathing makes him feel comforted like an infant listening to its mother's heartbeats in her arms. He often imagines smelling the unique natural fragrance from her body, which only he can discern with his exceptionally sharp nose. Even an offline touch would send him right to heaven.

Most amazingly, from their occasional sex talks, he's learned that she still functions perfectly well though her periods stopped fifteen years ago.

So, you like my looks or sexuality most? She asked, coyly, still not really satisfied with his explication.

Of cuz, that's the starting point for me, just as for any male in the animal world, he replied half-jokingly.

Then what *exactly* do you like me about? She persisted another time.

He believes he's found a good enough answer, but as he does more thinking along the line, he feels sheepish that the answer is still hidden even from himself, though he's been trying hard to come up with the right one over the past months. Sometimes, he wants to give up the effort, but he's born with a strong sense of curiosity. He must continue his pursuit.

As he keeps writing and publishing more love poetry inspired by her, he's come to see her not only as his Muse and

but his true soulmate he's been looking for during the past few decades. Recalling how he always enjoys talking with her, about anything, ranging from art, literature and aesthetics to job, money and gossip, especially sex and love, he finds there's nothing they cannot talk about now online, nor will there be anything they cannot do together once they meet offline.

I love you most as the perfect nest for me as a bird, he replies.

You get me lost. What's that supposed to mean? She wonders aloud.

However far my body travels in this world, however high my soul soars in the spiritual space, my body has to return to you with my soul. Just as your personality is the home to my selfhood, your intact vagina is the nest for my dick to perch for the night...

Watch your mouth! She says, coquettishly.

Okey-dokey! I'll keep trying to find the answer about my nest, but for now, what do *you* like *me* about?

Shhh, listen, they are playing *Home sweet home*,

In our cradle tongue?



SHORT STORY

1

Number 27

DOMINIK SLUSARCZYK

"We're late," Becky calls as she climbs into the car. She slams the door behind her, cutting herself off if she had more to say. I hurry around to the driver's side and tug the door open. Becky has already started doing her make-up in the fold down mirror. Her make-up is already perfect: she spent hours doing it in the house. She always likes to touch it up on the way, though. Covering up all her wrinkles is becoming a more difficult task with each passing day.

"We'll only be like 10 minutes late," I say. "It's not a big deal. They can just have a drink at the bar while they wait for us."

"I don't like being late, Tim," Becky says. "When I say I'm going to be somewhere at a certain time I like to be there at that time. People will think we're disorganised if we're always late. Disorganised is right next to messy. Do you want people to think we're messy?"

"Being a little late is normal. Everyone's doing it."

I slowly edge the car down the drive and then pause at the edge of the road. I look both ways and there are no cars coming. I slowly drive out and turn right towards the bar. I accelerate until we are going 10 mph over the speed limit.

"Don't speed," Becky says. "Only criminals go over the speed limit. Do you want everyone to think we're criminals?"

I slow the car down to the 30 mph we are supposed to drive. We are over 15 minutes late. When we get there Sandra is already drunk.

"The lobster was just lovely," Sandra says. She is a thin woman. Her hair is a deeper brown than it was last time we saw her so she must have dyed it. Becky has started dying her hair too: she hates the little greys that have started appearing. She keeps badgering me to dye my own hair. She says her being seen wandering around with an old man does not look good.

"The lobster here is always lovely," Becky says. She is holding her wine glass at her side and swirling around the contents. "You can't get it every time, though: eating lobster all the time would be boring."

I see the waiter approaching out of the corner of my eye. He is holding a small black tray which surely has the bill inside. I start fumbling around in my pockets for my wallet.

"No, no," Jeremy says. He reaches out and puts a hand on my arm to stop me. "We're paying. You paid last time."

"You're paying?" Becky says. "Nonsense. I've drunk twice as much wine as either of you."

"And the lobster was almost twice as much as your pasta," Jeremy says. "We're paying. We insist."

I take my hand out of my pocket and pick up my wine glass. I swirl the contents around a little. I have no idea why people swirl around their wine but I like to do it because it is fun.

"I'll turn my light off when I've finished the chapter," Becky says. She is propped up by a couple of fluffy pillows. Her full body pyjamas have frilly white bits around the wrists. "Just lie on your other side."

I turn off my light and lie the way Becky suggested. I close my eyes and Becky's light doesn't bother me at all. I drift off to sleep easily. I dream of our wedding day. Becky is young and beautiful. Her hair is tied up into some strange kind of intricate bun under her veil. She has the biggest smile on her face I have ever seen. She cries a single tear when the priest asks her if she does. As she wipes away the tear she says she does. As soon as she has wiped the tear off her cheek a tear appears on her other cheek.

We dance to our favourite song. All of our friends are there. They cheer and stamp their feet in time to the beat. My parents watch from a bit further back. I hug Becky tight as we slowly rotate in the centre of the dance floor. She whispers that she loves me into my ear. I whisper the same sentence back but I am really thinking about how I love the baby growing inside of her belly.

We had to rush into the wedding. Neither of us were paying enough attention to Becky's body so we didn't realise she was pregnant until she had been pregnant for 3 months. As soon as we found out she was pregnant we decided to get married. I decided, anyway. You have to be married to have kids. You can't bring up a child in an unmarried home. Getting married was the right thing to do for the baby. Becky was unsure to start with but she cracked after a little convincing.

We had to get married 3 months later so Becky wasn't too pregnant on the wedding day. It was mad: we had to book a venue, a band, organise a meal, all in only a few months.

We had to pay through the nose to get everything we needed at such short notice.

My stag do was the most drunk I've ever been. With how hungover Becky was after her hen do I imagine she got as drunk as I did. Even though she was hungover she spent all day on her phone and laptop sorting out stuff for the wedding. She wanted our big day to be perfect and she spent so much of my money it should've been perfect. We got the best band we could find and the best venue that was available at such short notice. We had to pay, though. The people who owned the venue saw us coming; they charged us almost triple their normal rate. I protested but they said it was very unusual for someone to try and book the venue at such short notice. Becky looked at me with wide, expectant, eyes and I agreed to pay what they asked. I wanted her to be happy: the internet says the emotions the mother feels are passed onto the child in the womb.

Our son was born still born a month after our wedding. He never got to breathe a single breath. His body was all black and barely formed. I only caught a glimpse of him before the nurse hurried me out of the room. I never saw him again. I don't know what they do with dead babies; maybe they just put them in the bin.

Becky had to have surgery: the premature birth damaged her insides. They had to cut here and take this bit and that bit out. The doctor told us she was infertile now. She cried for days. I'd already started looking at alternatives. We could use a surrogate. It would still be our baby. It would grow from my sperm and Becky's egg.

"Next left," Becky says. I slow down and take the turning. The road we turn onto is pretty because it is lined with trees. The houses are all set back from the road behind high walls. Some of the walls have regularly placed pillars and some of these pillars are topped with tiny statues. The gates to the houses are tall and black and topped with spikes.

"What number?" I ask.

"27. Should be just up here on the right."

I drive along slowly, constantly glancing at the walls to see what number we are at. We pass a 23 then a 25 then the next house is 27. I pull over to the side of the road, making our car the only car parked on this side of the road. There is a blue car on the other side but it is so far away I can't make out its make or model.

From what we can see of number 27 it is spectacular. The building is 3 stories high and the red brick walls are decorated with beautiful cream moulding. The porch of the house is wide and oval and white. The garden is concealed by the high wall but if the building is anything to go by the garden is surely beautiful.

I turn off the engine and take the keys out of the ignition.

"Be good," Becky says as I open my door. "The nicer we are the better deal they'll give us."

There is an intercom set into the wall next to the tall black gate. I press a button at the bottom of the intercom and the grey plate buzzes slightly.

"Hello," a voice says through the intercom. I press the button because I think that is what you're supposed to do if you want to speak into the intercom.

"We're here to see the house," I say. "Sorry we're a little late."

"It's not the same," Becky says. She is sat at her vanity doing her make-up. "This whole surrogate thing is stupid: I want to have my baby myself."

"Yes but you can't," I say. "You don't have a womb anymore. Surrogacy is our best option."

"Something about the whole idea is...icky."

"What do you want to do then? We could adopt. We might have to wait a couple of months but we'll get a baby eventually."

"Adoption's stupid too."

"Those are our only options."

"Not at all: not having a baby is an option too."

I stare at her with my mouth hanging open. I've always wanted kids. Ever since I was a child I've wanted to have a family. I want to teach the boy to play football and the girl to do her hair. I want to cry on their first day of school. I want to see them graduate. I want to help them when they lose all their money on the stock market.

"I thought we'd discussed this," I say. "We both want to have a family. You want at least 3 kids."

"I wanted 3 kids when I could give birth to 3 kids. I don't want any of this stupid surrogate or adoption crap."

"Thank you for showing us around," I say. I shake the old man's hand. His hand is wrinkly and dry.

"Yes," Becky says. "We really appreciate it."

"No problem at all," the old man says. "If you want to buy it you've got to be quick, though: one family came to see it yesterday and another's coming on Wednesday."

"We'll bear that in mind," I say. I give the man a small nod then I walk through the door he is holding open. In the front garden there are rose bushes along one wall and multi-coloured flowers along another. The small square of grass is perfectly trimmed and pretty.

"It's way out of our price range," I say as I turn onto our road. "It's almost double what we want to spend."

"What you want to spend," Becky says, correcting me. "If you want a nice house you've got to pay for it."

"We can find somewhere nice for cheaper. There's loads of houses on the market for less than 2 million. We'll just buy one of them."

"I like number 27. I like the building. I like the garden."

"We can't afford it."

"If you sell your stocks we can afford it easily."

I want to protest further but I know there is no point. We are going to buy the house. Becky chose our first house. She chose our second house too. Becky makes all of the decisions now. She has made all of the decisions ever since I put a ring on her finger.

"Is that what you want?" I shout. "Do you want to live your whole life without ever having a child? Do you want to live your whole life without ever going to a graduation, a piano

recital, a play rehearsal? Don't you want to watch them grow? Don't you want to see what kind of person they turn into?"

"You want to know what I want?" Becky says, far quieter than I am speaking. "I want to still have a womb. I want our child to have been born healthy and happy instead of dead. I want to be a real mother, Tim. I want to feel the baby grow inside of me. I want to push the baby out of me. I want to hold the baby in my arms and know that I made him myself. I want to watch him grow knowing that he started growing inside of me. That's what I want, Tim, but that's impossible now. The doctors messed around inside me with their scalpels and now I'm ruined. I'll never get to feel a child growing inside off me. I'm never going to get to be a real mother."

"This is real, Becky," I say, waving the orphanage leaflet around as I speak. "This is real too. People who adopt are real mothers too. The parent isn't the person who gives birth to the child: the existence of orphanages proves that. The parents are the people who raise the child. The parents are the people who take the child to school and buy him new shoes. The parents attend the piano recitals. The parents are the people who are there for the child; who gives birth to the child is irrelevant."

"I don't want that. I never wanted that. I never wanted to be a half parent, a kind of parent. I don't want this, Tim. I don't want to adopt. It's over. We will never be real parents. The doctors made sure of that."

Becky turns and exits the room. My hand falls to my side and the orphanage leaflet slips out, drops to the ground, and slides across the floor. I think about following Becky and restarting our argument but I know there is no point. If Becky doesn't want to have children then we are not going to have

children. The only things we do are things Becky wants to do. We go on the holidays she wants to go on; to the restaurants she wants to go to. Ever since I put that ring on her finger she has made all of the decisions for us; as it is her right to. I wouldn't have it any other way: I never wanted a slave I wanted a wife.



2

Hanging Together Inside

FALEEHA HASSAN

The floor of his room was empty, except for old newspapers and some books dozing with dusty covers near a necktie. A chair leaned against a dilapidated wooden table like a man who had fallen asleep with his head on it. The room's walls were pockmarked by numerous nail holes left from hanging pictures and an incongruous set of posters. On the wall hung a shirt the hand of neglect had circled with dust as its immaculate whiteness vanished. Beside it, from the head of another nail, hung a pair of brown trousers soiled apparently with spots of oil. In addition, a shoe and its mate languished in a corner next to the body of a black leather belt, which had lost its sheen.

A shadow slowly departed through a gap by the door, which stubbornly remained open even after a man's hand tried to shut it. The closed window, though, retained the stench, which suggested the window had not been opened for a long time.

The pair of pants fidgeted squeamishly and asked, "Why has he abandoned us, as if he hadn't worked his butt off to buy us? He hasn't worn me for a month, and that makes me feel I'm a chain shackling him to pain—after he nearly went crazy dreaming about me. Remember how he used to walk past the clothing store, day after day, slowing his pace as if melting with regret when he saw all the other trousers like me gradually disappear from the shop? When

we did meet—I mean when he saved up my price—he didn't wait till an afternoon breeze had brushed aside the noon heat. No, he raced to me, smelling sweaty, just as the shopkeeper was closing the store for a siesta. He clung to the door with both hands, pleading, till the man opened the shop. Then he purchased me, expending all his money and many words of gratitude. He brought me here, and it was the same for you, Shirt. You were fresh, clean, and fragrant. Do you recall how he bathed, donned us, and rushed to her? Do you remember that rendezvous?"

The shirt sighed regretfully and replied, "Yes, I saw her smile at him. They sat down together. She caressed my sleeve and called it chic. Then my threads almost melted from her whispered words."

The pair of trousers trembled and shouted with rage: "But what's happening? Why doesn't he celebrate us now? Why is he content to wear shabby clothes so matted with dirt they resemble his hair and beard?"

The shirt replied sarcastically, "Do you think you're clean? Now that he doesn't think to shake the dirt from your creases?"

The pair of trousers shuddered so nervously that it almost fell to the floor. Then it said, "Why mock me? You haven't reveled in the scent of clean soap for a long time or smelled the way you did the first time they met. Have you forgotten that?"

The shirt replied dreamily, "That's true, Friend. I've wanted to retain her scent. Don't you remember how close she was to him? He wished to possess her scent for a lifetime but failed. These humans lose touch with reality and cling instead to the fringes of a dream."

The trousers' voice had a sorrowful rasp when it stammered, "What's frightening is that he no longer needs us! He no longer wants us! He no longer loves us! I understand that love is needy and that he's replaced us with other old, shabby clothes; but why?"

The shirt rested its collar on its sleeve thoughtfully and observed, "Some people are crazy. Yes, most people are crazy. But why do they toil to acquire us and then slouch around in old clothes?"

The pair of trousers scoffed, "Perhaps it's nostalgia?"

The shirt wondered aloud: "Nostalgia for whom? For what? Nostalgia for poverty? For filth? For body odor?"

The pair of trousers shook violently. "I beg you! Be quiet. Keep still long enough for us to plan what we should do if he's gone a long time." Pointing to the belt and necktie, it asked: "Should we fall and kill ourselves like those two? Or go dumb like his black shoes?"

"Or, should we wait to become a tasty meal for the armies of moths that consumed the contents of his wardrobe before he kicked the remnants outside?"

The shirt replied in a mournful whisper, "I think she won't return to him and he won't return to us, even though I watched their shadow puppets sketched on the ground—when they met... and parted. He was so enchanted by her that he forgot: what's impossible always remains impossible. He wasn't watching with the eye of his spirit. Oh, my friend, without him, our existence makes no sense. The worst humiliation is being unable to reject what you hate, and I hate being discarded. I hate anyone who discards me. I even hate the person who made me—for what?"

The pair of trousers wondered aloud, "Aren't you blowing the situation out of proportion? You are something. You exist."

The shirt replied intensely, "Says who? A thing without the person, who just departed and forgot about us is, nothing. Our existence is a logical contradiction. We cannot exist without the body we clothe, that becomes us as we become him."

The pair of trousers asked sadly, "Will he return?"

The shirt replied softly, "I don't know, Friend. Perhaps."



Note: Originally written in Arabic by Faleeha Hassan and translated into English by William M. Hutchins.

3

Coffin Maker

K. V. DOMINIC

“Papa, why don’t you give up this fearsome profession? Can’t you find out a better job that gives happiness to you as well as to us, family members?” Elsy asked her father Peter who was making a coffin in his shop adjacent to his house.

Peter: “Daughter, what else job can I seek when unemployment is at its apex in our State Kerala. As you know, I am not healthy enough to go for daily wage labour in agricultural lands or construction sites. My father had been doing this job to sustain our family and I had been apprenticed by him to help him in the shop. This is the only job I know and we are meeting our needs from the returns of the sale.”

Elsy: “Tell me papa, don’t you long for or even pray for people’s death? Is it not a sin?”

Peter: “Usually I don’t wish for people’s death. Since death is a natural phenomenon like birth, it has to take place regularly. But there are some days when not even a coffin is sold. As you know, there are many other coffin shops in this town. On those days I wondered why there were no old age deaths. But I never wish for premature deaths.”

Elsy: “Then why have you made small coffins for kids? Look at that small one on that shelf.”

Peter: “When one comes to the shop for a kid’s coffin, how we can say no? In fact, when I make a kid’s coffin my

hands shiver due to the mental agony. I pray to God to spare kids from death and let there be no customer to buy the one I make." Tears sank his eyes.

Elsy: "Papa, this job gives you no satisfaction and not much gain for the pain you take. Why not take a loan and start a lottery selling booth? No much physical labour is needed for that job."

Peter: "There are innumerable lottery sellers in this town, dear daughter. At the most one can earn only 500 to 600 rupees a day. It can suffice only our minimum necessities a day. For yours and your brother, Alex's study we need much money. Moreover for medicines for me and your mamma more than a hundred rupees are needed a day."

A stranger appeared at the shop then. "I want a good coffin." He said. He looked intently at the face of Peter and asked, "Are you Peter?"

Peter: "Yes, my name is Peter. Kindly tell me who you are." Meanwhile Elsy left the room through the back door to her house.

"Don't you remember me, Peter? I am Afsal, your classmate. We studied together in the high school. You were then the best pupil in the class, best in studies and other extracurricular activities. You were the school leader also. Why is that you are running this shop? Didn't you go for higher studies and try for a better occupation?" Afsal said.

Peter: Now I remember your face, dear Afsal. It is long twenty five years since met each other. You have changed a lot, Afsal. You were then a very lean boy. And shy too. Not mingling with others. I couldn't go to college for higher studies. We were then living in a village and the college was far away in the town. My parents were poor and they couldn't afford to send me to college. This shop was

originally run by my father. He asked me to help him in the shop when my school education was over. Thus I have been chained here for the past two decades. My father died ten years ago by cardiac arrest. The responsibility of looking after my mother, wife and two children rested on my shoulders and I couldn't seek any other job. I am now an asthmatic patient under treatment. My mother is almost bedridden and wife has arthritis complaints. In fact I don't like this job. But there is no other option to feed my family. Horrifying images of death are dancing around me whenever I work here. No pleasing positive thoughts enter my mind." With wobbling sounds Peter continued, "I can't make any coffin controlling my mind from meandering through the images of illness of my mother and wife. I always pray God to avoid a situation of using the coffins I have made for burying my mother and wife." Tears flowed from his eyes.

Afsal: "Don't cry, dear Peter. If you are willing I can save you from this hellish job. I have now come to buy a coffin for my neighbour. My neighbour Mathew, aged 50 died of cancer. There is none to help the family for the funeral arrangements. Kindly pack that coffin. How much does it cost?"

Peter: "Six thousand rupees. Kindly wait ten minutes to make it ready for use."

Afsal: "Okay. I shall wait. Meanwhile let me tell you what I am now. I am working in a factory in Kuwait. The managing director of that factory has requested me to bring an employee when I return after a month. It is a very good factory which exports organic chemicals. They give good salary. Are you ready to come with me?"

Peter: "Surely, I will be extremely grateful to you if you can save me from here. But I have no money with me for the tickets, dear Afsal."

Afsal: "Don't worry; the company will bear all expenditure. Have you got your passport?"

Peter: "Sorry, I haven't taken it since there is no chance for me going abroad."

Afsal: "No problem. You may apply for it tomorrow itself. You will get it within a week. Once you get it we shall apply for your visa and the tickets. I hope your family can manage in our absence. How old are your children?"

Peter: "My daughter is 21 and she is studying for her B. Ed course. My son is 19 and is studying for his B.Sc. Physics. They both are studying in the government colleges in this town."

Afsal: "Since your son is mature enough he can buy things for the house. So your absence will not make a crisis for the family. You can send money to the family every month. You may tell your family about this golden opportunity and seek their permission to leave."

Peter: "Surely dear friend. I believe they will happily allow me to seek this employment abroad. You are an angel sent to me by God to save us from the ocean of grief. Inexpressible is my gratitude to you, dear Afsal. Our family will be indebted to you forever."

Afsal: "Peter, a friend in need is a friend indeed. This is a simple help I can render to you and I am not losing a single rupee for it. The happiness I get by saving you and your family is eternal. What else do I need? Kindly apply for your passport tomorrow itself through Akshaya Kendra. Keep this money with you. There are twenty thousand rupees. (He

gave the money to Peter's hand) You may buy necessary groceries for the house, three pairs of dress for you and give the rest of the money to your wife for one month expenditure. If the coffin is ready kindly call a taxi jeep to carry it."

Peter called for a taxi jeep and the coffin was put into it.

Afsal: Let me go, Peter. When you receive the passport, call me. This is my visiting card. (He gave his card to Peter) Good bye Peter!"

Peter: "Good bye Afsal!"

Peter couldn't believe what happened. Was it a dream? God heeds one's prayers in strange ways, his mind whispered to him.

Needless to say, Peter went with Afsal to Kuwait after a month and started a new happy chapter in his life.



4

An Ante-Purgatorial Preoccupation with the Body and its Place of Burial

KEVIN P. KEATING

Saint Paul on pilgrimage. He's traveling to Naples to visit Virgil's tomb at the *grotta vecchia*. His back aches from carrying a leather satchel stuffed with dirty tunics. His worn sandals offer no arch support, and his calloused feet are starting to cramp. The sunny skies of southern Italy haven't been kind to his exposed scalp. He began losing his hair in his late teens, about the same time he had his first seizure, saw his first burst of blinding light, heard a chorus of reproachful voices, tumbled into a terrifying void. He asks himself again why he chose to journey on foot rather than sail from Rome. Financial problems. Legal fees. As a Roman citizen, he's entitled to his rights, but the upcoming trial before the emperor worries him. His correspondences with the palace have been lost to us, but we know from his surviving letters that Paul was a highly literate, thus formally educated, thus relatively affluent, thus exceptionally rare individual for his time and place. There are times he regrets giving everything he owned to the poor.

A properly Hellenized intellectual from a prosperous merchant family. Early adopter (some have argued inventor) of a radical new philosophy. Levantine Buddhism. Even on pilgrimage, he advocates for spiritual peace through meditation and the renunciation of material possessions. The luxury beliefs of a spoiled young man? Before calling

themselves Christians, the disciples tell anyone willing to listen that they are followers of the Way. To those sincerely seeking peace of mind, Paul says, "Imitate the Way of Christ." Never mind memorizing passages from scripture. The gospels have yet to be written, the pseudepigrapha, the heretical gnostic texts, the psychedelic revelations on Patmos. As has been well-established by botanists, *psilocybe cubensis* grows in great abundance on the island's windward shore.

Committed to practicing the proven methods of a master, Paul travels on foot to Naples because Jesus demonstrated that walking was the correct Way to go on pilgrimage. "Come, follow me." The experience is an embodied one, not a metaphor, not an abstraction one reads in a self-help manual. Exhausted but determined, weak-kneed from the savory smoke wafting from street vendors' stalls, he stops mere blocks from his destination at a corner that offers a sliver of shade. From a doorway a sullen teen misdirects him and then laughs. Just another stranger asking the way to *grotta vecchia*. But Paul isn't a tourist; he isn't making an obligatory visit to a museum to admire some dusty relic before heading off to a seaside inn for a carafe of red wine and a heaping portion of world-famous southern Italian cuisine. Gnocchi alla Napoletana, petto di pollo alla domiziana, piccatina di Vitello al limone. Recipes that have been handed down virtually unchanged since antiquity.

Tradition tells us that when he finally arrived at the old cave, Paul collapsed to his knees and wept over Virgil's bones. Theologians speculate that had he but known him, Paul would have led Virgil to salvation. An intriguing possibility. Others find it strange that he chose to visit the grave of a pagan poet. Why not seek out a fellow traveler baptised in the Spirit? All of this comes from the voluminous annotations in our edition of the *Commedia*. But some

mysteries can't be solved by reading a book. This spring, when I visited Europe during Holy Week with my family, I happened upon the crypt purely by accident. There I had an embarrassingly brief but insightful experience.

This was my first time outside the United States. Our itinerary: three days in Rome and Vatican City; two days in Naples with an afternoon excursion to Pompeii; and then a train ride north to Florence where, because of my semester-long immersion in the *Commedia*, a visit to the Museo Casa di Dante. Naples marked the midway point of our travels. We didn't arrive until late afternoon, and after checking into our hotel, Mom and Dad cut me loose to roam the streets, a young man of eighteen with a pocketful of lira, free to go where he pleases. I wasn't thinking of Saint Paul, I can tell you, and had no intention of seeking out Virgil's final resting place.

In civilised nations like Italy and France, where the drinking age isn't strictly enforced, I had no trouble slipping into a small shop to buy a foglietta of Piedirosso. Not that my parents would approve, but during our vacation they allowed me to drink wine with my meals. And dear old Dad *did* send me on my way with a wink and a knowing grin.

After strolling the crowded Riviera for an hour, I climbed the steep hills and wandered along a series of winding residential lanes crisscrossed by clotheslines heavy with colorful linens. Buildings built of stone, the chipped and broken masonry covered in graffiti I couldn't quite decipher. Third year Latin wasn't of much use. Neither was ancient Greek. In the crooked streets, dogs squatted with indifference. Loud laughter erupted from open windows. In a park far from the tourist district, I sat in a grove sacred to Mercury where I sipped my vino and waited for my stalker to approach. I'd caught glimpses, heard halting footsteps. Block

after block. A few minutes later, a girl emerged from a stand of stately pines and said *ciao*. Dark hair down to her shoulders. Shockingly green eyes. Older by a few years. A university student? She was on her way home and asked if I was lost. You may laugh when I tell you her name was Magdalena and that she'd spotted me in the *enoteca* near our hotel.

Emboldened by the wine, I asked if she might serve as my guide. She said *certo*. I've always looked more mature than most of the guys in my grade. I'm nearly six feet tall now. Graced with good complexion. A solid tan probably helps, too. Why else would a pretty college girl bother showing me the town? We walked along the Via San Gregorio Armeno and then made our way to the Spaccanapoli district where every merchant sold plastic rosary beads and postcards of nativity scenes. She took me by the Gesu Nuovo Church. I bought her dinner at a restaurant near the Palazzo Reale where we drank lots of Piedirosso. Afterward, we took a taxi to Pozzuoli where she told the driver to stop at an old warehouse from PNF days. It looked abandoned. The windows were painted black. A man in a trench coat stood outside, smoking a cigarette. I hesitated, but Magdalena gently taunted me, pulled me by the arm. Inside, Italian couples skated around a roller rink and sang along to Xanadu. As we sailed on rented skates through the flashing strobe lights, Magdalena and I held hands and kept looking into each other's eyes.

By then it was late. Almost midnight. I knew my parents must have been worried. But what is midnight to the young? After leaving the roller rink, Magdalena led me down the Via della Grotta Vecchia. A name I should have recognised. We entered a vast Roman tunnel. Cool and quiet in the purgatorial darkness. Magdalena pushed me against the

dripping walls and kissed me on the lips. Her experienced hand slipped effortlessly inside my pants. She showed no concern of getting caught. Not that there was time for anyone to see us. My amorous exploits were limited to clumsy groping in the backseat of a car after the semi-formal, a frustrating make-out session on the basement couch. Now, in that cavernous Italian tunnel of love, I scaled the mountain of Purgatory and was rapidly nearing heavenly bliss when my eyes adjusted to the dark and realised we were sliding around the walls of a crypt. A jawless skull watched us with grim curiosity. Magdalena, firmly in control, whispered in English.

“We are profaning Vigil’s mortal remains.”

Ah! Saint Paul forgives my carnal sin.

One minute later, when it was all over, Magdalena told me she needed to go and pointed me to a distant light at the opposite end of the tunnel. Naples, she said, was five miles north. Then, like an apparition, she vanished into the shadows. I shouted her name, recoiling at theecho in the ancient crypt. I tugged up my chinos, fumbled with my zipper, buttoned my shirt. It was only after I’d emerged from the tunnel and reached the lonely stretch of road that I realised my wallet was missing. All of my cash gone. No possibility of hailing a cab, taking a bus, a train. I trudged five miles back to the hotel, thinking of what to say to my parents when I knocked on the door.

I recalled Virgil’s words to Dante: “Is your mind so distracted that you lose your pace? Why do you care what they are whispering? Just follow me and let people talk. Be more like a sturdy tower that does not tremble in the fiercest wind. For any man who lets one thought—and then another—take him over will soon lose track of his goal.”

I had time during my walk to reflect on my four years at Francis Xavier. It occurred to me, almost with the power of revelation, that rather than the usual hedonistic pursuits, I would dedicate my life to a higher calling. Not God precisely. No, nothing so conjectural. For awhile, I said to myself, I'll follow the usual script: college, career, marriage, children, an acrimonious divorce after many years of mutual anguish. But I'll return to my one true calling. Books. Pen and paper. A commitment to serious study. Self-exile to the sprawling Kingdom of Pauperdom. We all know how the courts treat men.

I won't bore you by describing my parents' reaction when they opened the hotel door and saw the ragged figure panting in the corridor. The lipstick on my face and collar helped diffuse the situation. Did I see a glimmer of pride in Dad's eyes? Did I hear a tremor of sadness in Mom's voice? Details. As one of the few teachers I can trust at this school, I submit this essay to you, Father Thomas, as both confession and prophecy. And after you grade it, I'll stow it away in a secret place and see if it all comes to pass. Who knows? Years from now, when I'm down to my last pennies, maybe I'll return to the *grotta vecchia* and read again in the *Commedia* about Virgil's obsession with his final resting place. Guidebooks say his tomb is a place of enchantment, of miraculous cures, of startling changes in destiny. And should I see a familiar woman, her face transformed by hard experience, I may be persuaded to believe the legends are true.



5

Coco

MARC ISAAC POTTER

When I eat Trail Mix, especially when I eat a lot of it – munch munch munch munch.. .. at one sitting, I use my left hand as a Feed Bag. I pour the trail mix into my left hand and then I put my mouth to my left hand and grab as many of the trail mix items as I can

As I may have mentioned in the past, our group home has 4 beds per room, that is to say, two sets of bunk beds per room. My room, the room that I'm in, gets the afternoon sun.

Also, my room has a very large shelf across the room from the windows that bring in the sun. So I keep some drinks on that shelf like some tea and some instant coffee in a plastic bottle and some water, some drinking water.

When I walk over to my shelf to get my drinking water, I take the bottle in my left hand and take the cap off the bottle with my right hand I take one big gulp and then I swallow it and then I take another gulp and then I swallow it and then I put the cap back on and then I sit the bottle back on the shelf.

What kind of car did Coco Drive? It will be very fun to find out. I think she should be driving a convertible, a very nice convertible.

I guess you know she is a psychologist and she makes a lot of money and her husband is a leader in a big company and he makes a lot of money too. They don't really have a big house because they didn't want to be conspicuous in terms of

what kind of house they had, plus they wanted to live near their friends.

Since most of Coco's friends are people from a middle-class world, Coco and her husband decided that they should still live in a middle-class neighborhood. This way they can be near their friends, who by the way are mostly Coco's friends because her husband works a lot, and he does not know how to make friends he just seems to work a lot. Among all of Coco's friends, who are mostly middle-class people, there is an exception.

I might say that Missy is an exception because she does have the big Manor and confidentially just between you and me she did inherit a lot of money from her grandmother. When Coco gets into her opulent convertible she heads for the radio station. Sometimes her husband borrows the convertible to drive. He does this because his car is a very important-looking businessman's car. It's not really a fun car. So he likes to borrow Coco's car. When he borrows that he very often changes the radio station.

But Coco has gotten to know what radio station her husband likes and how much of a twist with her wrist she has to do to move the radio station selection from where her husband likes it back to the station that she likes.

When I dictate this story into my smartphone using Samsung if I were to leave the text just the way Samsung prints it from my voice, the story would be total gibberish. Sometimes, in real life, when I'm talking to my friends on the phone or when I'm writing an email, I can apparently be funny sometimes. At least that is what some of my friends tell me.

I suppose Coco's husband is an interesting man, but he does not seem like a very interesting man to me. Except of

course for a few traits. For one thing, he is a better husband than most men were in the 1950s. But I think that's because Coco simply would not have put up with him being any different than that. You see in that family with Coco and her husband whom I'm going to call Mr. Coco. You see in that family Coco is really the important person she really runs the show. She makes sure that the children get lots of extra education. She makes sure that she keeps her credentials up for her psychology degree. And she makes sure that her husband Mr. Coco does the various things that he needs to do in order to rise up the corporate ladder rung by rung.

Coco's daughter is also named Melissa. Don't even start in on me about the fact that both Coco's daughter Sharon and next-door neighbor Melissa I don't want to hear it. Besides, the two girls have nicknames for each other I have not decided on what those nicknames are as of yet and neither one of the two girls have told me what the nicknames are yet.

Coco's car is a Buick convertible I just haven't decided what model. I think it's either a 1955 or 1956, but Buick made a lot of cars in those days and I don't know which car I want it to be.

It is not likely that it is a Buick Special because my understanding is that the Buick Special is the lowest-level model that Buick made at that time and I really don't see Coco driving the lowest model made of anything.

Another thing that I have not told you about Coco is that she went out and bought a third car. What kind of car did Coco get for her even more fun car? I have a feeling that she bought a European sports car. This was one of the few times that her husband got truly irritated because number one he felt like they absolutely did not need another car and instead they had to be saving money for the kid's education. Number

two when he was actually honest with Coco he said that it was an embarrassment for him at work when his wife went out and bought a little sports car. To which Coco said totally losing her s*** why in the hell should it be an embarrassment to you at work?

Later they made up and it was the first time they had ever had makeup sex and they enjoyed it a lot. And there was no question but that Coco did whatever she wanted. She was not telling her husband that she had just gotten a big promotion at work with a substantial raise.

As you may remember, in the 1950s women were not allowed to have a bank account exclusively in their own name. For years Coco Hedman stashed money away with both her brother and also with her father, She started years ago putting money away with her father but when she thought it through more completely, Coco realised that once she passed away he might give that money to his brothers and sisters or even his nieces and nephews since her father had started being very forgetful. Why do we have so much emphasis on Coco? Heck if I know! I'm not really the one writing this book!

Please realise that Coco is a very forward-looking woman. She plans ahead very carefully for example the reason that she got the extra car was that she wanted to make sure that her daughter had a car when she graduated from high school which is still a few years down the road.

Also, I forgot to tell you that a lot of people teased Coco and Mr. Coco saying that they had 2.5 children here's why they said that people said that. When Coco's daughter Sharon was in high school she took one year in what country? Anyway, she went to Europe and traveled to several places in Europe. Her mother came to see her during her time in

Europe because Sharon was in Europe for almost a year. During the time that Coco and Sharon were in Europe together, they went off to Africa for a safari. You have to remember that Coco is a highly religious woman and a very conservative Christian. Well, they were in Africa they stopped in to do some missionary work. The two ladies had told Mr. Coco a little bit about what they were going to do but they were very vague about it. I can tell you more about this trip later.

The point here is that during their trip Coco decided to adopt a little boy from the Pygmy tribe. This was not easy and there were many times over the years that she secretly wished she had not done so. This was not easy and there were many times over the years that she secretly wished she had not done so.



6

Dreamers

NAHID RACHLIN

“... As I look out of the window of my room, all I see is a mass of gray. I hear other students in the hall or on the campus talking loudly, laughing. I feel like fish out of water, while they are in water swimming together.. Life is hell.”

A chill went through Ellen again as she reread Asef's e-mail. He is pleading for help. She had called him last night, when she just received the e-mail and pleaded with him to come home for the weekend but he said he preferred to stay on and do some work. Then she tried to talk him into seeing a counselor at the university's infirmary. “Mom, don't worry about me, that was just a mood,” he said.

Feeling like fish out of water is nothing new for him, she thought. After his first day in high school, he had said, “Mom, why did you name me Asef? They make fun of me.” That had been his father's choice and she had gone along with it, actually liked it. It was good to have a name that wasn't typical, added distinction.

I will go and visit him on Saturday, she decided. She moved the e-mail to her save file. She liked to keep all his e-mails which she felt connected them, though at times only in painful ways. She began to get ready to go out to Costco where she would buy everything more cheaply than at the local supermarket. As she got a glimpse of herself in the mirror, she thought, Butterfly didn't do as good a job this time coloring my hair, it's too red. She had felt that way too when she saw herself in the mirror in the hair salon but she

had not complained and given Butterfly a good tip anyway, having sympathy for the girl who barely knew English and was trying to find her way in this country, having come from China just a year ago. She thought how when she married Kami, Asef's late father, she became aware of the huge problems immigrants faced. In fact, applying for her job, teaching English as a second language, had stemmed from a desire to help.

She left the apartment and got into her car parked in the lot at the back of the building. It took a long time to drive across town; the traffic was so heavy. At Costco she took a cart and began to move through the aisles, picking up one item after another packed in huge quantities as if they were made for giants rather than human beings – paper towels, salad dressing, potatoes. She also bought a package containing six shirts in bright checkered colors for Joe, her husband. She wished she could buy something for Asef but he was so particular; it was hard to tell what he would or wouldn't like.

When she returned home she noticed the message machine was blinking. She pressed the playback button. "This is the University Campus Store. We have an unpaid bill of \$200 for Asef Emami. Three notices were sent to his college town address but there has been no response." She felt shaky. What did this mean, where was it leading? She listened to the other messages anxiously, but they were from two colleagues. One wanted to make a lunch date, the other to invite her and Joe for dinner to her house. She couldn't do either. She called Asef's cell phone, but only the voice message came on. She decided not to leave a message. It would be better to talk to him instead. She returned the other two calls and talked about all sorts of things except for what was pressing on her heart. It was an ache she could share with very few people.

"Artie, I'm worried about Asef. He's running up his bills; he's really depressed," she said, as they sat at the dinner table.

"I work hard and you do too to make a living. He should be more responsible." She tried to change the subject. "How was work today?"

"A few baseball jackets sold. We're surviving."

He looked so different from Kami, Asef's biological father. Kami had been dark and thin, Artie, broad shouldered, with light coloring. Artie had opened up the sports shop soon after college and stayed with it all these years. Kami had been the opposite – he drifted from one field to another. He was a political science student when they met, then dropped out to work as a reporter for a Turkish newspaper and on the side wrote what was his passion – short stories, a novel, dreaming he would make it as a writer of bestsellers that would be made into movies. She had felt a stronger connection to Kami than she ever did to Artie, even though he was from a similar background to hers, both with middle class American parents and upbringing.

She put more gravy on her potato and ate an extra portion of apple pie. She could feel Artie's eyes gliding over her disapprovingly for not watching her weight, but then he asked, "What's wrong, is it Asef? Why don't you ask him to come home on the weekend?"

"I did. He doesn't want to. I'll go there and see him instead, surprise him."

Artie, after helping her clear the table, went into the bedroom to make a phone call to a co-worker. She sat on the sofa in the living room and glanced absently through the newspaper. The room had a rosy color with the late sunlight coming in through the lace curtains and reflecting off the red Turkish rug on the floor. A relative of Kami's had brought the

rug for them from Turkey years ago, a belated wedding present. She and Kami were infatuated with each other from the moment they met at a friend's apartment in Boston, when they were both students. Within a year they were married. Her parents liked his charming ways. They were not as demanding of him as they would have been of an American man. When he did something that fell below their expectations they attributed it to cultural differences. Then Kami's mother and aunt and uncle visited from Turkey – his father had died years before. They all stayed in their small apartment in Brookline. His mother and aunt made elaborate Turkish food every day – two kinds of rice, one with saffron and the other with raisins and lentils, soup with noodles they made from scratch, chicken with crushed walnut and pomegranate sauce, beef and eggplant stew. That was a real treat; she and Kami had been mainly eating takeout food, hard for them to cook when they were both working and going to school at the same time. They had married in a church but then his family gently asked them if they would marry again in the Muslim religion. All it took was for Kami's mother to read a *surah* from the Qur'an and ask if she were willing to say, "Allah is who I workshop and prophet Muhammad is my guide." She had gone along with that to please them. Then they gave her a Muslim name, Ezaat Saadat. The two sisters wore head scarves and long sleeve dresses. The sisters liked Ellen's manner. "She's so unpretentious and straightforward," she had heard his mother say to her sister. His aunt said, "And her turquoise eyes, so striking with her auburn hair." They praised her for being organised, hoped she would be good influence on Kami who had a tendency to procrastinate, and was disorganised.

Asef was ten years old when Kami decided to go to Turkey for a visit. Before leaving he had said, "I feel like fish

out of water here.” Did she ever tell Asef what Kami had said or was the phrase was all his own? Asef looked like his father and had the same tendencies, somewhat absent-minded and irresponsible and at the same time full of dreams. He too wanted to write, have an impact on the world.

Kami went on the trip alone, saying he wanted to immerse himself in visits with his family and friends, speak Turkish, reminisce about childhood memories. He promised he would take Ellen and Asef for a visit at another time, show them the best of Turkey. Asef listened with rivetted attention to his father’s account of places he would take him to on that visit when they were together. Top Kapi palace housing opulent Ottoman treasures, the grand bazaar with sprawling indoor souks and markets, peddling a great variety of merchandize, taking a boat ride on Phosphorous with a bridge that divided the European from the Asian sides of Istanbul. But Ellen felt that Asef was depressed and he was hoping to cheer himself up by being with old friends. He had a sense of failure about his writing, about the level of income he had.

Once in Turkey he sent photographs. In one he was sitting with his uncle on a carpet, each of them smoking a water pipe. In other photos he stood with one family member or another

in front of a mosque with a blue and rust-colored minaret, in a garden filled with ancient tall cypress trees and roses, on the rooftop, where boys were flying kites.

Then tragedy struck. A motorbike got out of control and hit Kami on the sidewalk, killing him instantly. According to the Muslim edict he had to be buried within a day and so she and Asef could not be there for the funeral. The news came to her late at night from one of Kami’s cousins, telling her

tearfully what happened. Asef was stunned by the news, unable to express his feelings. He just became withdrawn, shyer than he already was. At times Kami dying was like a nightmare that she might wake from. But of course, that didn't happen.

Finally she gave in to her friend, Jane's pressure to meet her husband's friend, Artie. A part of the reason she opened up to the idea and then married Artie was because she hoped he would function as a father for Asef. But that didn't quite happen. Asef and Artie remained strangers to a large degree.

It was sunny but cool as she drove on Saturday to see Asef. Once she entered the smaller country roads, the scenery was striking with fields stretching on both sides. She thought of the spring two years ago when she drove Asef from college to college for interviews. He was shy, hesitated before saying anything, but on the whole, he left a good impression. He had also been a good student and did well on his SAT's, so he had gotten into a lot of schools. She had never imagined he wouldn't be happy at the university he had so carefully selected – being within half an hour of car ride from home and yet living on his own with roommates.

She reached Medford at five o'clock. She parked the car across from the two-story frame house standing among many other similar buildings and got out. She went up the steps and then into the small hallway. A table underneath the mail boxes was covered with magazines, packages, and large envelopes. She glanced to see if there were any for Kami. But there was nothing. She had a pang of sadness as if a trivial detail like that pointed to his loneliness.

She climbed up the stairway to the second floor, wondering if she would find Asef in and what his reaction would be to her unannounced visit. She rang the bell of the

apartment he shared with two roommates. There was no answer. She turned the knob, went into the living room and called. "Is anyone in?" No answer. She went toward Asef's room. Pasted on the door of the room adjacent to his were several rejection letters from different law schools. "Due to the large number of applicants..." Kami used to tack his short story rejections on the bulletin board above his desk. What a ridiculous idea. But perhaps making it public made it less painful to bear, as if it was nothing to be ashamed of.

The door to Asef's room had nothing on it. She knocked softly. "Come in," It was Asef's voice.

"It's Mom," she said before opening the door.

To her surprise he was not lying on his bed as she had feared but was dressed and sitting at his desk, with a thick book in front of him, *Introduction to Thermodynamics*. Then she noticed he was wearing mismatched socks, one green and one brown, and his shirt and pants were wrinkled.

"Mom, what are you doing here?"

"I'm sorry," she said, going towards him. "I've been worried." She kissed him on his head.

The room with the windows shut and shades pulled down had a stale, oppressive feel to it. The bed was unmade and items of clothing and books were strewn on the floor. On one wall hung a poster of a tiny man standing among tall buildings on a street.

"Let's go eat, if you haven't had dinner yet."

He got up obediently. "We could go to Beat the Drum."

They got into her car and he directed her to the restaurant. The feeling of his room was clinging to her like dark ashes. In the restaurant they sat at a table in the back. A cool blue light shone on everything. A waiter took their orders

and left. "How do you feel? I've been worried... that e-mail..."

"Mom, that was a fleeting mood."

"I'm glad to hear that." Then she thought she should quickly tell him about the phone call from the campus store and get it out of the way. "By the way, did you forget to pay your bills?" She thought she and Artie were generous in allowance they gave him, but obviously he spent it on other things. "The campus store..."

"I've been so busy studying, but I'll pay them soon." He looked at his hands he had clasped on the table.

The waiter brought over the food – chicken wings and Sprite for him, roast beef and wine for her – and arranged them on the table. They ate quietly.

"I have no one, Mom," Asef said after a while. "You have Artie and me... are we no one..." "Of course not," he said ruefully.

"Maybe you need a girlfriend, someone right here. How about that girl, Elyse you mentioned?"

"I don't know... she has someone, I think."

"You could try anyway; ask her out for coffee or a drink." She thought of her friend's son who had met a girl online. She told Asef about it. He just shrugged.

After dinner she said, "I'll drop you off and then check into a hotel, so that we can have breakfast together."

"You can sleep in my room if you want. I'll sleep on the living room couch. We're allowed to have guests once in a while."

When they returned to his apartment his roommates' doors were closed, with a low drone of music coming from one of them. Asef took some things from his room and went

to sleep on the shared living room sofa. There was a private bath in his room, making it easy enough for her. She opened the windows a crack and pulled up the shades to let in fresh air. She picked up some of the clutter from the floor, then she showered and went to bed. The tree tops visible before the window, looked like hazy etchings under the sallow street lights. The moon was full, yellow, surrounded by dark lumpy clouds. Lying there, aware of the scent of Asef's herbal shampoo, the indentation of his head on the pillow, she was filled with an acute sense of missing him as a child, when his father was with them too. Kami showed him how to do somersaults, taught him to play backgammon. He had been so devoted to his son.

She woke at dawn. She could hear footsteps and the faint sound of TV from the other rooms. She lay there for a while so that she wouldn't be in the way of roommates.

Then she and Asef went out and had bagels and coffee on Main Street. "Mom, I'm flunking out," Asef said suddenly, half way through the meal. She looked at him stunned.

"I thought you were busy studying."

"Not enough. My finals are coming up in less than a month. I'm so far behind." He said that with frightened despair like a mountain climber losing his footing, slipping downward.

"Oh Asef, how did you get yourself into this?"

"I don't know." Looking out of the window, avoiding her eyes, he jumped into another subject. "Wasn't it dangerous for Dad to go to Turkey? There were a lot of demonstrations against the government and upheaval there, I read later. Maybe what happened wasn't an accident."

"No one suspected anything else."

Asef hadn't talked about his father for a long time. It was hard for her to assess from his tone if this was an attack on her for not stopping his father from going there with all the political turmoil, that she must have been aware of before Asef was. She said, "He felt he needed to be with his family and friends. Who could predict an accident?"

Asef retreated into himself. After a moment of silence between them he said, "I guess I'd do what Dad did." After another silence he added, "I'd like to go there."

"That'd be a good idea. You'd be able to meet your cousins and other relatives there. They'd be so happy to welcome you into their homes. But first you need to finish college."

They talked for a long time, about his father, school, his roommates. And she managed to make him promise to see the counselor.

"If it makes you feel better," he said.

As she dropped him off on the campus, she said, "Call if you want to talk about anything."

Asef shook his head and trotted up the steps to his classrooms; he seemed somewhat cheered up. Still, on the way back home she was so preoccupied with Asef that she kept taking wrong turns. Would Asef keep his promise to see the counselor? That would be the first step. Her visit would have accomplished a lot.

On Monday morning, the college Ellen taught English as a Second Language at was teeming with students. She took the escalator to the second floor and then the elevator to the fifth floor. She was a little late and rushed past Heidi, the secretary at the reception desk. She passed Judy, the program coordinator of her department, said a quick hello to her, and

went to her office. She collected her notes from the desk and wandered into her classroom. Twenty students, all from foreign countries – China, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Iraq, Syria, among them, were waiting.

She sat at her desk and looked at the pile of papers the students had put there. She picked up the paper on the top. “Khadijeh, please start reading your essay,” she said.

Khadijeh began to read. “I am twenty years old. I have seven sisters and brothers in Damascus...” Her voice trembled with emotion as she went on, “I want to learn, to understand so many things not allowed to me in my own country. I want to do important, big things.”

There was a feverish exited expectation in the air that anything was possible.

At the end of the session as Ellen left the classroom, she thought this was their dream; this was their illusion.



7

The Queen of Panchala

TAPTI BOSE

After eighteen days, the great war at Kurukshetra had ended. The Pandavas were victorious over the Kauravas, and for the Panchalas, the allies of the Pandavas, too, the war was won, or so they said.

Then why were there no victory celebrations in Kampilya, the capital of Panchala? Like a blind woman, I, the eldest wife of Drupada the King of Panchala, coursed my way to the empty chambers of the Princes and the Princesses. Did I hear a heart-wrenching cry, but it was only the howling wind, and everywhere in the palace was only a deathly calm. The servile women were holding me, whispering that I had gone mad. I was to be taken to Kurukshetra to the Panchala camp, was all they said.

I entered the chamber of the eldest Panchala Prince and sat beside the bed that had cradled my daughter, or should I say, son. It was the time I was heavily pregnant, dreaming of holding my first child in my arms. I laughed, as my Sakhi plaited my hair into a braid, and brought out colorful garments, and costly ornaments and I was about to tell her, 'Sakhi if a daughter is born...,' But I could not finish and swallowed my words because my husband, Drupada, came.

It was a different feeling, and everything changed when Drupada entered my chamber and said, 'My queen, you are my eldest wife; you must bear a son, the heir to the throne.' I was filled with anxiety and a sense of self-loathing. How

could I have forgotten about my duty to my husband? And the day my child was born, all I heard was the voice of Sakhi: 'Congratulations, my Queen, it is a girl.' I remembered what my husband had said and I remembered the string of his wives and concubines waiting to take my place, and seized by dread, I proclaimed my first-born daughter a son. Her name was Shikhandi.

I could not forget that she was the de facto heir to the throne, even if it was a lie. But I had created the lie, so I had to suffer it till the end. At a young age, she was sent to train in warfare and the arts, and when youth came to her, I saw the changes wrought on her beautiful body.

I had trapped my daughter, to play the part of a man with a woman's body. 'Mother bless me, I am going to be a warrior,' she said. True women too could be warriors and take up arms, but that was not the point. It was that to hide a single lie, I had taken recourse to a thousand. And my daughter? Caught in the midst of a cruel ambiguity for no fault of hers, she went to the forest to give up her life, till a Yaksha gifted Shikhandi his manhood.

Even then Drupada was happy with the prophecy that Shikhandi was to be the cause of the destruction of the Kuru patriarch Bhisma. Drupada then wanted a powerful son to avenge the Brahmin Drona, the son of Bharadwaja.

One can still hear the Sutas singing the story when Drupada's childhood friend Drona, the son of Bharadwaja, came to his court. As the story goes, he was in poverty and unable to provide for his son, Ashwatthama. By then, Drupada had become a staunch advocate of Kshatriya supremacy and regarded Brahmins contemptuously as mere dependents.

‘How can a poor Brahmin be my friend? I am a King and deserve friendship from an equal, a man of prosperity, only a King,’ he said, and there was derision in his voice. Drona had not forgotten the insult, and so he had demanded from his pupils the capture of Drupada, as preceptor fees. It was his favorite pupil Arjuna who captured Drupada and brought him to Drona. It was the ultimate humiliation to a Kshatriya like Drupada. ‘I hope you can now call me my friend,’ Draupadi mocked, and he took over half of the Panchala kingdom to become its regent.

And so, to avenge Drona, Drupada adopted another son Dhristadyumna, and a daughter Draupadi, said to be born from the sacrificial fire, and the altar. I was also thus the mother of the daughter Draupadi, the epitome of beauty who was also called Krishnaa. But then there was another prophecy that said that this daughter would be the cause of the destruction of *Kshatra*, and I was again frightened. How could a daughter destroy the whole Kshatriya clan?

When a poor Brahmin won Draupadi, in her Swayamvar, it was a blow to Drupada, but seeing her so happily following that handsome youth, I was filled with happiness. But then I learned that, that youth was Arjuna, and so my daughter was to be married to all his brothers the Pandavas. I knew then that Krishnaa would only be a pawn in the world of men. How ironic that one should blame Krishnaa for the war when it was her husband who wagered her and it was their enemies who attempted to humiliate her. Did she not deserve the vow of protection at least on that fateful day?

In the present, the chariots were racing to Kurukshetra, and I had long left Panchala behind. With me were a few of the Brahmins and some of the officials of the court. Their faces were grave. The King, my husband, was dead. Drona

had killed him, and now the immediate past was hitting me like the storming rain.

And I had heard that in the end, when hearing Yudhishthira's half-lie Drona sat in Praya, Dhristadyumna screamed, having decapitated Drona. 'A Kshatriya only knows how to kill, and *dharma* and *adharma* are matters of interpretation only,' he had said. What a fool he was that he thought he could be free by killing Drona, as Shikhandi was to think that manhood gave him freedom.

And Ashwatthama too, the son of Drona, like Dhristadyumna, was burdened with the duty of vengeance. To set himself free he slaughtered Dhristadyumna without a weapon, and then killed Shikhandi, the Drupadeyas, and the remaining princes and the warriors at night in their sleep to erase the Panchala bloodline.

But even otherwise, I could not blame Ashwatthama for doing what had also been Dhristadyumna's and Shikhandi's purpose in life. But could I forgive him for directing the *Brahmastra* in the womb of Uttara, the mother of the unborn child? The war for the order of Dharma had ended in a night massacre, and in the end, the *Brahma* weapon had been directed at a woman, a mother pregnant with a child. The womb that nature's gift, that by the laws of men only enslaved women, became in the end the target for the ultimate weapon.

At last, I had reached Kurukshetra. Night had descended on the battlefield as the wild carnivore animals fed on the corpses of warriors piled in heaps to be burned by the *chandals*. And the women in white cloth, ran around searching their loved ones whom they had lost to a cruel fate, among the dead. I saw my daughter in laws and co-wives, some were beating their breasts, wailing, and lamenting, and

others were losing their senses over the body of their husbands and sons. And Krishnaa the daughter born of fire fallen on the earth holding onto her five dead sons.

What was the difference between me, the mother of the Panchalas, on the side of victory, and Gandhari, the mother of a hundred Kauravas, on the side of defeat? Gandhari had once hit her womb in despair of being defeated in the race to give her husband the firstborn heir, earlier to her sister-in-law and rival Kunti. Had Gandhari been crushed by the hidden ambitions of Dhritarashtra, as I was by the vengeance of my husband Drupada? Was not Duryodhana caught in a web of insane jealousy in the conflict of being heir and not heir? I saw Gandhari going back again and again to her firstborn, Duryodhana, lying dead on the fields of battle, his body being attacked by vultures and jackals.

Afterward, during the oblations to the dead on the banks of the Ganga, I saw Kunti weeping in a corner. She had abandoned her firstborn, Karna, perhaps out of fear of shame; he was born to her before marriage. And Karna, brought up by the Sutas, remained forever caught in the ambivalence of being a Suta and a Kshatriya. Perhaps ultimately, this led to him fighting the war on the side of Duryodhana only to be killed by one of Kunti's sons.

What were *dharma* and *adharma*, and what really remained of Stridharma the vow of obedience to husband and father? Women spent a lifetime conforming, often at the cost of themselves, to raise dynasties of men. Now that those generations were decimated, would the women immerse themselves in the river?

Like Gandhari and Kunti, who now wondered how much they were responsible for the deaths of their eldest sons while they acquiesced to their fathers and husbands, I wanted

to see Shikhandi, who had first taken my womb. Shikhandi was born as the first child of a queen; if, in my desperation, I had not declared her a son, perhaps then my child would have been alive.

And for the last time I saw it, there was peace in the face of one who had been denied forever the due of the firstborn. 'Oh, forgive your ill-fated mother Shikhandi; she loved you so,' I whispered into the ears of Shikhandi, now dead, and wept into the long night.



EXCERPT NOVEL

1

A Visitation and a Promise

(Novel Excerpt: "FROM AN AGE OF GOLD")

FELICE PICANO

This idyllic time continued for I had been promised along with suffering, happiness in equal measure, and greater than most men could tolerate. We now approach my fifteenth year. The summer had been a cool one, so all crops thrived and new born livestock survived and fattened well. Autumn came early and with it even cooler air, fore-omening a cold winter. For Eurytion and I and the other noble born at his court it also signified good days of hunting, as the freezing weather drove so many wild animals out of Thrace and over the foothills to our warmer clime where food was still abundant.

After duly propitiating Demeter for grain and Artemis for game, we set out in groups of five or six, sometimes before sun-up, often bundled in so many skins and hides we resembled wild animals ourselves. By midday usually the sun had warmed us and we had stripped down, our servants taking the extra clothing. And, as a rule, they held onto our mounts too, because we were after hinds and roe, deep in the little forest glades that each mountain side held between its gigantic granite roots.

Nor were we disappointed this particular fall day. Our hounds had flushed out deer we'd never seen before, almost

red in color, with black tipped ears and tails, more elaborately horned than we were used to. We took three down with our arrows, all clean kills, then another two wandered by and we sped after and shot them down cleanly too.

I thought we ought to cease at this point—we had enough for a feast – but a great buck had escaped our arrows, and Eurytion and Helops were fired up to get it too, and like men often do, they busily, noisily, fired each other up even further.

So, after we had whistled for the servants with our horses to come and dress and carry back what we had slain, we moved deeper into the woods.

One or another of us would catch a glimpse of the stag, but so always fleetingly it might have been a shadow: a sighting of its scut, now here, now gone; or a motion behind several trees; once Eurytion shot at what he thought was its great stand of antlers only to find he had shot arrows deep into twigs of the same color, and driven them into the ground.

I began to sense something amiss when it all became very quiet, so that even our footsteps seemed muffled. I had gone ahead maybe a dozen steps when the silence became complete.

I stopped where I was. Looking ahead. I thought I saw motion, but no, it was nothing at all, and I turned back to my companions.

“Do you hear the silence?” I asked, almost in a whisper.

None of the five replied. Indeed, when I went to them they were as though frozen in place, lifelike, warm to the touch, but unseeing and unhearing, like perfectly painted statues of themselves. Nothing I could do or say altered them;

and I became very frightened, for what if the same happened to me? We would all be vulnerable. I decided I would remain there to protect them until whatever ailment held them fixed in place had departed.

Behind me, deeper into the glade I heard motion, and, I thought, a voice.

I slid forward a few steps, cautiously indeed, until I found myself at the edge of a mirror-like pond. On the other side was a kind of motion but as of nothing visible, for while leaves and twigs moved a bit as though passed behind, nothing might be seen moving them, nothing at all but leaves and twigs and trees.

Voices not quite audible seemed to surround me on all sides. I knew then that something, an enchantment or a godlike illusion, was upon me. I placed my bow on the ground and knelt on a patch of moss, awaiting what might next happen.

"Cousin" I heard the word directly ahead of me, "Cousin! Stay where you are." And the words weren't so much spoken as tinkled, as chimed, like bells, or a lyre, strummed at its highest notes. "Stay a short while," was repeated.

Around me on three sides suddenly were young women gliding so effortlessly and quickly barely in then out of sight that I knew them for Dryads of this glade. Two dropped over my head a kind of wide-brimmed hat woven of reed and grass. It blocked my direct view of the other side of the pond now, but not of the water itself.

In the water's reflection, I saw the Huntress! Her limbs were so white they looked edged now in blue now in silver. Her face I could not make out, as the water always trembled

just there, but Her body was wondrous to see, half-clothed for running through woods hunting.

"Cousin! Peleus!" She chimed. "Stay a minute and hear me out."

"You do me great honor, Divine One, to acknowledge any kinship."

"Lovely Cousin Peleus! Hear me out for I have a boon I must ask of you."

I remembered the words of the Three Sisters then, in the cave with three entrances when I was a little boy, so long ago predicting my chores for the Divine Ones.

"Whatever I may do for you, I will attempt to my utmost. Only ask."

"Cousin Peleus, thank you. You will be well rewarded if you comply."

"Only ask, Goddess."

"Soon, Peleus, you will leave this land unexpectedly and you will encounter someone who is dearest to me of the entire human race. Atalanta is her name, and she is like you, like a youth in her size and her strength and in her many talents."

"Atalanta." The name tumbled across my tongue.

"Raised by a jealous king of a land where women are frowned upon even more than here, she was raised to be a prince, like yourself. And like yourself, Peleus, she cannot be as her adopted father wishes her, but she must be herself."

"Adopted father. Is she not his at all?"

"No. She is greater than him, Cousin. She is my only child."

At this news, I could hear an audible stir all about me, the Dryads, amazed.

"Listen, Peleus – as the Full Moon, Selene, I reign over the earth completely four nights a month. Many sights have I seen over the centuries; and so you may be sure it is by now a cold eye that I cast. But one night, I saw a youth stretched sleeping across the top of a high hill of Mount Latus near Miletus, across the sea in Asia Minor. His clothing was tossed aside, his crook lay by his side, his sheep slept soundly, and so I knew him for a shepherd. And there he lay, open to the night, almost, I thought, in bold invitation.

"Three more nights did I see him sleeping so.. . bravely, undauntedly, invitingly, before I gave way to my natural inclination, for though I am a chaste Goddess, I am also changeable as the phases of the moon, and so overwhelmingly beautiful was this youth to me that I could not help myself from adoring him.

"The next, a dimmer night, I had the sky covered over with clouds, and I went to him. As he slept, I closed over his eyes with a thick dew, so he might never be able to open them and be exposed to my full glory, and I held his mind in such a way that even if he should waken, he would believe he was inside a dream all the time with me. We lay together the next twenty-four nights and it was an ecstasy, Cousin, unparalleled for me. For the first time ever I understood how it is that my kind could become enslaved to ones so much lesser as mortals are. Endymion was his name.

That last night, I let him know I would not return for another five days. For my brightening was due and I knew its effulgence could not be forestalled –or be tolerated by humans. Endymion begged me to come one more time and though I said no, I did go to him, Cousin, because I was

enraptured with him. But no sooner had we begun to culminate our lovemaking, then he used a cloth to wipe clear his eyes, for I could no longer hold him within a dream state, and awake as he was, he had to see who I was, and what I looked like.

“As we consummated, Endymion looked full at me, Peleus, and in that instant he was blinded.”

“I fled in tears and fury. Knowing that it was what I had wanted too: to be completely Endymion’s, sound, touch, taste, smell—and sight, yes. He must know me completely. I had wished it. It had occurred.”

“How he managed to find his way off that hill in his blindness, I will never know. But he somehow did for I searched the next three nights and he was not on the hill, nor anywhere I could see.

“Soon I felt life stirring within me, and I knew we had made another life.”

Around me, I could hear the soft weeping of the Dryads at the sad tale.

“Divine One, did you never again see your love?” I asked brushing away my own tear.

“I did, Cousin. I pleaded with the Great Father for that sight, for one more sight of my beloved. And at last, He had heard enough of my complaining and entreaties and He agreed to give me what I so desired. Beware what you ask of Him, Cousin, because He paid me in full with that fulfillment of my desire.

I visited my love upon that hill one more time. Endymion was alone, and it was on a night of my fullest strength, and he was there calling for me, asking me for one

more touch, begging for one more kiss. I went to him, believing I could not harm him any more than I already had."

We all held our breath, the Dryads and I.

"I did more than kiss him then, Cousin, I gave myself to Endymion one last time... . And, as I sped away sated, back into the night sky, I heard my love shout out something I could not fully make out, and then. . . then, Cousin, I witnessed my love plunge himself into a chasm – to his death."

"He shouted that he could not go on living without you?" I asked, and then answered myself. "What mortal could?"

She didn't respond to that.

After a long silence, she continued: "Atalanta is the child of that union, and now she needs my help. But the great Father has banned me from helping her, from raising her, from having anything to do with her. He tells me I am clumsy and careless with fragile mortals, and I admit that I do seem to be. That is why the babe was given up for adoption. The only way I can help her is by having *you* help her."

"I shall, yes, of course. What must I do?"

"She will tell you. Or you will know when the time comes.

"I shall, yes, of course, Divine Cousin," I repeated.

"No matter what she asks of you, you *must* agree. No matter what others around you think or say.Trust in me that you will be richly rewarded, Cousin."

I heard the Dryads in motion around me, and a faint clangor of tiny bells on Her shoulder straps, as she moved. Then once more that eerie silence dropped all around me again. When I looked at the pond water Her image was gone.

I got up slowly and looked for them. But no, they were gone as instantly as they had appeared.

I remembered my companions then, and I turned around to them, and I was astonished to hear them asking aloud where I had gone to, and calling for me. I rushed to them, only to see them again, fully alive, in lively typical motion.

"There he is," Eurytion said, and laughed.

"Look what a crown Prince Peleus has made for himself," the King said, of the reed hat. "And from the fen itself. He's so inventive! Come."

I did as Eurytion asked, and no more was said by any of us about following the great stag. It was as though it had never existed, or had been wiped clear from their minds. And, so, I guessed it was sent by Her to lead us here where we might converse, me and my Cousin. And where I would promise to help her. A thoughtlessly made promise with grave consequences.



CREATIVE NON-FICTION

MEMOIR

1

How I Evolved as Reader, Writer, Teacher

RICK HARTWELL

"We were twelve days out of Auckland, New Zealand, when it struck... "

I have charged myself with describing my evolution as a reader and writer and teacher. I consider this a heavy burden. I can easily describe my evolution as a reader. While not a passive experience exactly, reading is, at least, a receptive one, while writing is wholly participatory. And teaching is transactional. All three, of course, require deep reflection. I have always been a reader, from my earliest recollections to this morning. I have not always been a writer; perhaps I could have been, but that was thwarted a long time ago. And I returned to teaching in my late forties.

The sentence that opened this reflection was the opening line in a short story I wrote as a twelve-year-old in a creative writing class. I went on to describe a storm of such fury that my boat was dashed to pieces on an uncharted South Sea Island, and I had to make do, *a la* Robinson Crusoe. Defoe, it was not. Melville, it was not. Conrad, it was not. Hemingway, it was not. But what it was, was me, at twelve. You can probably guess where this is going. The teacher did not think

much of it. If I recall, I think he (she?) (Shows what an impact THAT teacher made!) wrote “Nice” on the margin and then proceeded to correct all the spelling, grammar and syntactical errors; for which I was, undoubtedly, very grateful!

I could have used this as a learning moment and gotten better at writing. I didn’t. I could have gotten mad. I did. I could have continued to write short stories. I wouldn’t! I wouldn’t because I had encountered the obvious fact that my lack of mechanical skills was more important than what I had to say. Even by the age of twelve I had read somewhere that a writer must write from experience. I had had the experience, certainly not the South Seas, but Catalina Island. I had had the experience; certainly not the “Storm of the Century,” but a coastal waterspout. I had had the experience; certainly, I hadn’t captained the *We’re Here* (notice the borrowing from Captains Courageous?), but I had my own twelve-foot catboat named *Kismet*. And so on and so on. I felt totally dashed by that teacher’s insensitivity to what I was trying to do as a writer. I withdrew into my writing and became a closet poet. There are so very few of them in adolescence, of course!

I continued to read voraciously and frequented the bowels of the city library. I was most fortunate to fall in with the part-time night librarian, Miss Vera Svoboda (notice how much you can recollect of those who really matter?), who was also the Latin teacher at the high school. After numerous failed attempts to charge out books that were from the adult section (this was in the late ‘50s and very early 1960s!), she finally began to track my readings. She discovered that not only were they eclectic, but they were also exhaustive. I read everyone, author by author, whom I encountered. I read my way through the entire library holdings of each author I touched, or rather, who touched me. Ms. Svoboda noticed

and must have approved. She granted me license to check out from the adult section and, miracle of miracles, allowed five books at a time! She allowed and encouraged me to be a reader. This, in turn, allowed and encouraged me to be a writer.

My reading became a Joycean stream of consciousness. As an example, I read all of Ernest Hemingway, including his The Snows of Kilimanjaro. Africa, right? That led to James Ramsey Ullman's The Day on Fire. Arthur Rimbaud in Africa, right? After reading all of Ullman in the library, that led to reading all of Rimbaud. Which led to Baudelaire. Thence to Blake. Which led to. . . Well, you get the central idea. I was immersed in this. I was awash (I'm certain you'll pardon the extended metaphor since the shipwreck in seventh grade) in the glories of language; the twist of a phrase; the juxtaposition of words crashing against or melting into one another. To borrow from Rimbaud, I was drunk on words; *Le Bateau Ivre*.

I started to write again; mostly poetry, but some short pieces as well. But it was not until the eleventh grade that I would again share with anyone, and I do mean ANYONE. Finally, I decided to show some of my poetry to my English teacher, Miss Miriam Self. She asked to keep it overnight! She didn't mark it up! She didn't put it down! She returned it privately! She praised it! She told me to keep it! She told me to write more! She asked to see more! She validated me as a writer. Don't misunderstand, I still had little to no command of the mechanics of writing (perhaps I still don't), but I finally felt free to write, encouraged to write. And I continued to do so.

I graduated high school; went away to have some life experiences; the usual – marriage, deaths, Vietnam, drugs, divorce, etc.; and finally made it back into school. On the G.I.

Bill I enrolled at Santa Clara University, a Jesuit liberal arts school. I was keeping a low profile because I had returned from Vietnam and gotten out of the Army. This was 1969 and you just did not advertise that you had been a baby-killing mercenary, etc., etc. Among other classes, I took “bonehead” English. I mean, come on, I HAD TO!

The class was taught by Fr. Francis Duggan, S.J. I mean this man was a degreed Jesuit, and I’m certain he had survived The Holy Inquisition! (Depending on your point of view, he may have even participated!) He read John Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn” to us. He read it with us. We read it together. We read it independently. Then!? Then he told us to write a paragraph describing the scene on the urn that Keats described poetically. I GOT AN F!!! Yes, there were mechanical mistakes; he noted that I rambled; that I hadn’t said anything new; that I wasn’t descriptive. I felt terrible. This was my first quarter in college after leaving the military and I was about to chuck it all. I made an appointment to discuss my grade with him. Fr. Duggan had me rewrite the paragraph. He corrected it again. IT WAS A D!! He told me to focus, to refine it, and to rewrite it again. I did so and again he corrected it. IT WAS A C-! And so, on and on. It will sound like an exaggeration, but I rewrote that paragraph seven times. I finally received a B+. (It was, of course, worth an A at that time!) But. . . I finally had some inkling of what it was to be a writer and an insight into what it is to be a teacher. As an interesting byway along my path to becoming a writer and teacher, this is the same professor who made(?) me read Joyce’s Ulysses and Steinbeck’s In Dubious Battle and Paton’s Too Late the Phalarope, and, and, and. . . So, what was the difference between the unremembered seventh grade creative writing teacher and Fr. Duggan?

Writing (no different from reading and, for that matter, no different from teaching) is a process, not a product, and it is a process of constant refinement and revision. Fr. Duggan didn't tell me not to rewrite the paragraph again (I probably could have gone on indefinitely); what he did say was that at some point a writer lets go and allows the item to be "finished." I guess I still haven't let go of "We were twelve days out of Auckland, New Zealand, when it struck. . . ." Somewhere along the way, along with the detritus of a failed marriage and career redirections, the manuscript of that precious story has been discarded. Interestingly, the final revision of *A Paragraph on "Ode on A Grecian Urn"* is still among my papers.

Since my time with Fr. Duggan, I have been in and out of the Army twice more. I have been in and out of so many schools I've lost count. I've earned an A.A., a B.A., an M.A., and multiple teaching credentials. I have numerous rejection notices from multiple publishers (don't we all!) and I have never been published for money! I read. I write. I teach reading and writing. I study writing. Am I a writer? Am I a "teacher"?

Insofar as a writer is willing to "let go," then yes, I am a writer. Do I make a living from writing? Then no, I am not a writer. I make my living now as a teacher of reading and writing. But I have great difficulty in separating the reader from the writer and the writer from the teacher anyway. I would not be a, or the teacher I am today if I were not the reader and writer I have become. I would not be the teacher I am today if I had not encountered early teacher models along the path, even prior to Fr. Duggan.

Miss Vera Svoboda – no missing letters here, she was plainly a Miss and not a Ms., and a plain one at that – was the Latin teacher and School Librarian at Gilroy Union High

School. She was also the Assistant Librarian for Gilroy's single city library and a door-to-door sales representative for The Encyclopedia Britannica during the summer. She was tall, slender, without feminine curves. She wore steel-rim glasses on a craggy nose and her graying hair was pulled up into a tight bun at the back of her head. She preferred long dresses ornamented with lace on the cuffs and collar and always wore the proper, sensible shoes. She had the appearance and grace of a formidable, ageing greyhound. Her life was self-contained, regulated and as seemingly austere as she appeared. This facade was a lie through which I innocently penetrated.

The other, older woman in my life was Miss Miriam Self, an English teacher whom I encountered in my junior and senior years at Gilroy. Interestingly, I can recall absolutely no other English teachers in twelve years of public education. While not the antithesis to Miss Svoboda, Miss Self provided counterpoint and balance. She had dark, dyed hair which she wore down, and she adorned herself with jewelry and a liberal lather of cosmetics. She was relatively short, shorter even than I, and was fully rounded, which provided an ample palette for her floral prints and shawls. She was neither a premature hippie nor a displaced Gypsy but was proudly individualistic and eccentric.

I recall sharing (if that can be the word!) my adolescent poetry with Miss Self. She never criticized, corrected, or ignored it. She read it immediately. She reinforced me as a writer and encouraged me to continue. I have tried to remember her when I too am the "secret sharer" of my own students' poetry or prose. Her overt encouragement meant more to me than all the editorial critiques in the world. It was with Miriam Self that I read Ivanhoe, Silas Marner, A Tale of Two Cities, The Scarlet Letter, "Macbeth," "The Lottery,"

“The Tell-Tale Heart,” “Hiawatha,” “Thanatopsis,” and many, many more. Could it be that no one else ever read literature during the previous ten years or so? I can’t remember any. She enthused and infused her students with the great lines of literature. She required us to memorise some – with varying degrees of success – and she dramatised our readings, emoting, bellowing, theatricising! God, she was glorious!

In school, in Latin class or the library, Vera Svoboda, Miss Svoboda, was the visual opposite of Miriam Self. Miss Svoboda was tall, lean, with a craggy face and demeanor. She was didactic, autocratic, domineering, demanding, and stern. I still can’t read “Julius Caesar” in Latin, but it’s amazing how many snippets and phrases I know and how, by language analogy, I can break down new words into their constituent parts. What Miss Svoboda did teach and preach was a love of language; yes, of Latin, but also of Greek and Persian and Italian and Anglo Saxon and French and Spanish and German. She used foreign words and phrases as a master chef uses spices; not to overwhelm, but to accentuate. She would disclose and discuss some, ignore others, write some on the board with no explanation, and treat some of our inquiries as if we had disputed the transmutation of the Eucharist. I did not conquer Latin, but I did crack the previously impenetrable shell of language.

It was, however, in her guise as Assistant Librarian at the Gilroy Public Library that Miss Vera Svoboda had the greatest influence on me. I was always a denizen of public libraries. Even as a kid on Balboa Island I would steal empty soda bottles from the alley garages and turn them back in for the two-cent deposit. I needed this money, not for library fines – I don’t believe I ever incurred any – but in order to pay for the ferry to cross over to the Balboa Peninsula where

the nearest library was, and then to cross back over with my next load of books. I'm one of those who remember when the ferry ride for a pedestrian with a bike was only a nickel each way. But I digress.

Miss Svoboda ran the Gilroy Public Library, Main Branch (there were no others except pretentious) at night, closing promptly at 9:00 p.m. each evening except Sunday. I knew these things for I was often the last customer out of the library. In fact, I was often the only customer. For months and months Miss Svoboda monitored my selections and my habits. She began to make some suggestions and she began to break the rules! She allowed me to check out more than two books at a time. She allowed me to renew a book more than once, consecutively. And she allowed me to check out books that were maintained in the "adult section," behind the counter. It is only from my perspective as an adult, and perhaps from my perspective as a teacher, that I have come to fully appreciate what breaking these rules may have cost Miss Svoboda or could have cost her. But oh my god, the benefits. . .

I began to read literature that many do not encounter until college, if even then. Did I understand it all? Did I methodically read it all? Did I discuss these books intelligently? No. No. And no. But did I appreciate what I was reading? Absolutely yes! I appreciated the language, the word choice, the use of phrases, the seasoning of the right word in the right way at the right time. I began to feast on books, and I was probably overloaded. And when I was seventeen and eighteen and rebellious at everything, Miss Svoboda did not admonish me to continue to read. She did not chastise me to come back to the library. She did not coerce me to go on to college.

Somehow I know now that she knew that I would return to books and libraries and learning and schools. And she was right and she was influential and she was one of my first master teachers. It is very hard for me to separate the impact of my sixth grade teacher, Mr. Richard Carlson, who never gave up on me when I was expelled and provided me with books and lessons until the end of the year, and Miss Miriam Self, who encouraged my writing and poetry, and Miss Vera Svoboda, who infused in me the wizardry of words and the wonder contained in books, and Fr. Duggan who took the time to help do a task again and again and again. Sadly, they are all probably no longer alive. Perhaps, just perhaps, they live on in me as a teacher when I don't give up on a student, or when I over dramatize a poem or a line from Shakespeare, or when I allow a student to bend the rules and read a book above her level just for the sheer pleasure the words bring, or when I craft an alternative assignment that captures a student's rapt involvement.

I hold a philosophic extension of a basic Buddhist tenet: if you have served a good life and have touched someone so deeply that you are remembered beyond your own lifetime, you are on your way to immortality. I have now passed on to you the story of these teachers. Perhaps those I touch have been touched by Miss Miriam Self and Miss Vera Svoboda, or by Mr. Richard Carlson, or Fr. Francis Duggan, as well. Their influence is thus perpetuated.



2

To The Beach

PATTY SOMLO

Once summer arrived, I could take my habitual walk, feet bare, in the space where waves washed over. I didn't feel lonely anymore. I had lived on the island through several spring months, which many days felt like December. My black wool coat, known as a Maxi, reached all the way to my ankles. Days I attempted to walk the beach, I donned that coat, plus a wool hat and gloves, and a long scarf wrapped around my neck two or three times. Even then, fierce gusts smacked me in the face and made the walks short.

I had gone to live on Long Beach Island in New Jersey, what residents of that state call *The Shore*, after dropping out of college. No longer a student at American University in Washington, D.C., I had lost my way. A fierce argument with my mother, practically our only form of communication, led me to declare I would not return to college in the fall, the tuition of which she had grudgingly paid. I loved college, especially the social life and living in such a vibrant city. But my mother's endless complaints about money felt like a blade slicing my skin. I could no longer take the pain.

I moved into a gloomy subterranean apartment not far from campus with a college friend and got a job working for an insurance company. Eight hours at my desk dragged, making each day feel like a week and a week like a month. I had plenty of time to daydream, fantasies often transporting me to a sunlit beach.

Somehow, I discovered that the application fee to the University of Hawaii was waived for military offspring, of which I happened to be one. As I was aware, the Island of Oahu where the campus was located had some of the most beautiful beaches in the world. I knew this because I had spent three glorious years, from first through third grades, living on Oahu. One of my fondest childhood memories was of a beach on the island's Windward Coast, where I body surfed waves tall enough to make even the bravest kid tremble.

Returning to Hawaii, for which I had clear happy memories, unlike other places my military father dragged us to live, seemed too wonderful to be real. As it turned out, it was. After receiving a fat envelope containing my acceptance to the University of Hawaii, I did the math, and nothing added up. Where would I get the money for the flight from Washington, D.C. to Honolulu? How could I afford the cost of tuition, room, and board? What if I couldn't find a job? My dream suddenly transformed into a nightmare.

In time, though, I came up with a different plan. I would go to an affordable state college in New Jersey, mostly funding tuition, books, and room and board with a student loan. To cover the rest, I felt confident I could find a job.

In the meantime, there was a closer beach than Waikiki or Oahu's Windward Coast. My brother-in-law's friend who owned Hand's, the one large store on Long Beach Island open year-round, was willing to give me a job.

The owner of Hand's also found me a place to live, on Centre Street in Beach Haven, in a former carriage house. The street was lined with majestic Victorians that had once been the summer homes of wealthy Mainline Philadelphia

families. By then, most had been turned into boarding houses, where college kids rented rooms for cheap stays.

My room was in the attic of the house I shared with a large friendly family, the O'Learys. A window faced east, with a view on clear days of the sea.

Throughout my childhood, I had lived off and on in Mt. Holly, a small South Jersey town about an hour's drive from the island. At some point during our Jersey sojourns, we made our way to Long Beach Island. Near the end of the ride, on a tree-lined, two-lane road, we would pass the Pine Barrens, a mythical place for which frightening tales were told, and whose residents were compared by outsiders to the people of Appalachia. Sand drifted across the road, letting me know we were getting close.

A long, curved bridge, known as the Causeway, led over Barnegat Bay to the island. As soon as we reached this point, my heartfelt full, anticipating a fun day or weekend, or week, if I was lucky.

Over the years, I developed habits while staying there. Early in the morning, I would hop on my bike and peddle the quiet streets close to the beach before cars arrived. At that hour, Long Beach felt like my own private island.

Some mornings, I walked. The beach was usually empty then, no umbrellas and lounge chairs or radios blasting the latest hits. The ocean would be calm, with barely a wave. I always had a good think on those walks. Not until much later would I learn that I suffered from undiagnosed anxiety and depression, the reason I often felt dissatisfied. The beach, and especially these walks, served as a natural medication, calming me down, while cheering me up.

Afternoons, I sunned myself, in a low-slung chair on the sand, or with my oldest sister Barbara, sunk in the shallowest

water, where the ocean cooled our feet. As in my Hawaiian childhood, I rode the waves, except in late afternoon when the water turned rough. By that time, the fearlessness of my younger days was gone.

Evenings, I walked over to the bay side, to watch the sun set over the water and warm wood of the docks, painting boats shades of pink, orange and mauve, some nights, my sisters and I slid into a booth at the Beach Grill, with a wide window overlooking Barnegat Bay. After studying the giant menu, I always ordered my favorite dish, flounder stuffed with crab meat.

The spring I moved alone to the island I had a crazy idea. I would paint. I don't recall ever dragging my easel out to the sand. It was too cold and blustery. Instead of enjoying the lack of crowds, as I did on August mornings, I felt lonely. Outside of June, July and August, the island turned into a small town, mostly populated by working-class residents with whom I had little in common.

The people I lived with, Mr. and Mrs. O'Leary, had five kids, and naturally, busy lives. I was invited for dinner once a week, but other nights stuffed something unappetizing down in my little attic space. A few mornings a week, I walked to the diner, one of the few restaurants open year-round, and sat at the counter. I'd eat a soft glazed donut and sip weak coffee, staring at small cereal boxes arranged on glass shelves. Men in paint-stained overalls occupied stools on either side, laughing and talking, barely acknowledging my presence, making me feel even lonelier.

Two weeks before Memorial Day, I stumbled into a different job at a favorite spot, The Frosted Mug. A kind man named John who made his living as an electrician had decided to try running the popular drive-in that summer,

while the owner sailed his boat down to Florida. We would be learning together, John informed me with a smile. I was the first hire. Others would follow, once the college kids arrived.

John taught me how to set one of the trays with tiny feet onto a lowered car window and make it stay. I practiced, but worried I'd never get it right. My fear was justified. The first time I fastened a tray holding two heavy frosted glass mugs full of root beer and two red plastic baskets containing burgers and fries, I missed. Luckily, I caught the tray before all the root beer poured into the driver's lap, but not before enough had soaked him.

I figured that would be the end of my Frosted Mug career. Thankfully, it wasn't. The incident signaled the finale, though, of our car service. John claimed we didn't have enough staff to cover car service and the two walk-up windows.

I worked nights, listening to Motown tunes wafting out from the kitchen in back, where John, and on weekends, his friend Jerry down from Philadelphia, moved sizzling patties around on the smoky grill and chatted and laughed. Lines at both windows were long. During those three months, I scooped so much ice cream, a small hard muscle formed on my right arm.

In the quiet mornings, I strolled the sand, thinking about my life, wondering if I might ever find happiness beyond moments like these, wanting the peace I felt to go with me once I left the beach. Afternoons, the sand was packed with people, spreading out beach towels and chairs, umbrellas and coolers, kids and plastic toys, floats and boards. Battling music blasted from radios. The serenity was gone. Still, I loved baking under the hot sun, not aware of its dangers.

I managed to get a severe burn, my skin flaming red, and eyes practically swollen shut. Mrs. O'Leary poured baking soda into the tub and ordered me to soak. A week later, my skin peeled off.

Near the end of the summer, the heavy glass window fell on my index finger, practically slicing it off. John rushed me to the tip of the island. Streets were deserted, as it was after midnight.

The doctor's breath smelled like a tavern, but he was our only choice. He stitched up the finger and gave me antibiotics. John and I were both relieved the finger wasn't lost. He paid me for the next two weeks, even though, due to the injury, my job was done.

Decades later, my husband Richard and I fell in love with a remote peninsula. Though I'd never considered owning a beach house, Richard and I started talking about doing that, over a Dungeness Crab dinner, in a poorly-lit restaurant on the coast.

A few months later, a realtor named Bill drove us up and down the narrow roads, lined with scrub pine, to tour small cottages. The last one we looked at was blue, board-and-batten-sided, set at the dead end of a short street. Feet from the front white picket fence was a miracle – a path through the dunes to the beach.

The Long Beach Peninsula was narrow as a toothpick on the Washington map. We had made it through two rainy winters in Portland, Oregon, by then, having moved from San Francisco, where we could no longer afford the rent. In a tree-filled neighborhood across the Willamette River from downtown, we had become the owners of a Queen Anne Victorian cottage, teal-blue, with pale yellow fish scale shingles dripping down the front. The house needed work,

more than a little TLC, which kept us occupied and less depressed about the weather.

That April morning, the sun came out, a wondrous sight we desperately wanted to enjoy. I looked at the map, discovered that finger of land, pointed, and said, "Let's go there."

Feet from the little blue cottage, the path through the dunes was long, taking several minutes to reach the end. The beach was wide. Unlike the Oregon and Northern California coasts, where dark rock formations dot the ocean close to shore, the water along our strip of sand on Washington's Southwest Coast was simply water, reminding me of the Atlantic. Dunes ran the length of the beach, as they did in New Jersey. Our Washington peninsula even had its own bay, Willapa, paralleling the ocean to the east.

We bought the seven hundred and fifty square-foot cottage and proceeded to furnish it with beds, a sofa, end tables, and hideous lamps we got cheap from a local motel. In an antique mall, we unearthed cute beach pictures and signs to decorate the walls. One wooden plaque had a large index finger pointing, and underneath the words, *TO THE BEACH*.

By the time we started spending weekends at the cottage, which we tentatively named *The Heron's Nest*, though never had a sign made or called the place that, I had fallen in love with more beaches than I could name. When a person lives here, there and everywhere as I had done, a special grief hangs around your life. I have lived with that grief, mostly about places I've loved, and the beach is no exception. When I'm on a beach that reminds me of my past, a feeling drops over me, some mixture of relief and sadness. That happened nearly every time we were at the cottage, when I strolled our beach or stood on the wooden deck, gazing at Willapa Bay.

Of course, the Southwest Washington Coast, even in summer, is not like the Atlantic. The surf is rough and the water temperature icy. Our Ocean Park beach was not a swimming beach. It wasn't even much of a sitting and sunning beach. Driving was allowed, and cars and trucks occasionally passed. A few got stuck in the sand.

Being on the Ocean Park beach reminded me of others I had loved, and at the same time, didn't. Hot summer days in Beach Haven or all year on Oahu, where the perfect temperature, riding the waves, getting tan and eating ice cream blended into a special happiness, were strikingly absent. And there were many, many days of rain.

We loved our time on the peninsula, as I have loved so many beaches in my life. Yet two years after buying the cottage, we put the little place on the market. In part, we sold the house because unlike our neighbors, we didn't have family to invite down for holiday weekends or to use the cottage when we weren't there. The beach, Richard and I came to understand, is a social place. Being there alone felt lonelier than at home in the city.

Then there was the rain. On that narrow peninsula, storms were anything but mild, with wind that shot sheets of rain sideways. During a dark Fourth of July weekend when we never saw the sun, I admitted, and Richard agreed, this was not how I wanted to spend my free time.

After the papers were initialed and signed and we'd packed the last boxes in the car, Richard and I took a final walk. We stood quietly and watched, as shorebirds dashed away when each wave rolled in, and then scurried back once it appeared safe. I lifted my gaze toward the horizon, which let me imagine I was at that favorite childhood beach on Oahu or on Long Beach Island. As that view had always

done, it let me believe anything was possible, including travelling back to favorite beaches, without leaving this now familiar one.



MONOLOGUE

1

Doubt and Wonder

(For Tobias Wolff)

DAVID JAMES

CHARACTER: a man or woman, middle aged or older
(preferably)

SETTING: anywhere

MAN or WOMAN

My Grandma James, Gaynell James, shriveled up in a nursing home with full-blown diabetes. Died there. She gave me my one memory from early childhood. I was probably 5 or 6 and she took me on a train ride, someplace, where there was a toy store. Because it was my birthday, I could pick out any toy I wanted. It's a foggy memory but a real one. To this day, I can feel the movement of the train.

Grandma Kyle, Rose, got Alzheimer's and spent years trying to escape lock-down. Died there also. I remember Christmas in her house in Detroit. My cousin and I opened up matching army tanks. Model tanks that moved with batteries. Grandma was in the kitchen, cooking, touching our heads as we crawled along, following our tanks.

Maybe everyone's life adds up to a handful of memories and dreams. Over the years, the events and people and stories mix together into a kind of memory soup, and you can

spoon out a piece of potato, part of that story on Harson's Island when you were drinking all afternoon and tried to hit a passing freighter with a golf ball. Instead, you accidentally threw your driver out into the canal. The club twirled in the air like a propeller in slow motion. Another spoonful of some chicken and onions, and you're holding your naked son, minutes after he was born, lowering him into a tub of warm water, his first human bath.

Some would argue that there's an afterlife, a heaven. I'd like to believe that, as a religious person, but that doesn't help me now. A heaven doesn't tell me why I'm here, what I'm supposed to do, how I'm supposed to do it. Maybe it's the reward for a well-lived life. Still, I have to leap to get my head around it.

Pundits tell us to live every day like it's our last day. Who does that? Really? I'd like to meet that person. She probably doesn't have a savings account. Why would she? It's her final day. Probably has no job. If she's not going to see tomorrow, why would she spend her last day slaving away in some stupid office? No. That line of thinking doesn't work in real life.

In real life, you have to feed the bird, cook some eggs, clean the dishes, get the oil changed in the car. There are duties. Obligations. Necessities. Go to work. Sometimes you get the chance to do what you actually want, you know, read a book, knit some socks, make your own shotgun shells. You might write a song or a poem; hit a bucket of balls; if you're real lucky, you play cars on the floor with your grandson.

The trouble begins when you create a little time for yourself to think. Albert Camus said one of our weaknesses was our ability to doubt and wonder. A worm doesn't doubt his decision to burrow underground. He doesn't think, maybe I should have burrowed over there, in that other yard?

Maybe I shouldn't have left that compost bin years ago? No. We're not worms. Yet.

We get to question everything. And since there are no right answers, we waver, we imagine, we worry. We don't know if we should go here or there, take this or that, move to Washington or North Carolina, buy a new house or keep renting. The world is up in the air, and so are we.

I'm not you and you're not me, thank God, but we're all in the same boat. Drifting. Floating. Dreaming. Blown in every direction. Burning under the noon sun.

Here's all I know: one, there are only so many days you can be alive in the world. You'll feel better about those days if you're kind to the people and animals and plants around you, if you do something, anything, to ease someone's pain.

And two, there's no way humanly possible to know what happens after we die. So don't worry about it; don't even spend three seconds thinking about the afterlife or no afterlife. Be here in your body at 10:14 a.m. And be here at 10:15, 10:16, etc. Take in the trees dropping their leaves, the rain starting, the interesting faces of the people you meet, that dog barking on the corner.

The way I see it, life is the sum of your memories, actions, thoughts and dreams from day one to the end. Start now. When you're alive, all things are possible, good and terrible. Shoot for the good, so when the end comes, it'll come with regrets, just not as many.

That last image in your brain before you go might be your grandma lifting you onto a train, or a marvelous green tank rolling across the living room carpet.



PLAY

1

Lead Us to Culture

(A One-Act Play)

GARY BECK

Scene: A restaurant. Enter Katherine and Larry, who are shown to a table. They sit, order wine and sip for a minute Larry ignores her first question.

Katherine: I asked you how you liked the wine?

Larry: It's alright.

Katherine: What does that mean?

Larry: Just what I said.

Katherine: Do you like the bouquet?

Larry: It's okay.

Katherine: Well what about the taste?

Larry: It's okay.

Katherine: Is that all you have to say?

Larry: About the wine? Yeah. You know I prefer beer.

Katherine: We discussed your bad habits. I explained that appreciation for wine is an acquired taste. You have to keep trying it.

Larry: I think we have to seriously discuss all this culture stuff.

Katherine: I really don't want to talk about it now. I just want to enjoy a nice, quiet dinner.

Larry: But you said we'd talk....

Katherine: Later.

Larry: That's not fair. I've been doing what you want....

Katherine: What I want? I've been doing this for you.

Larry: Don't give me that! You've been enjoying every minute of it.

Katherine: I admit I do like cultural activities. I find them stimulating. Unlike some people who prefer to sit at home and watch TV all the time.

Larry: I don't do it all the time.

Katherine: That's not the point. You agreed that you needed to get out more and said you'd try to appreciate the cultural life of the city.... Well. Didn't you?

Larry: Yeah.

Katherine: Don't you see? This is our chance to bring some excitement back into our relationship.

Larry: I guess so.

Katherine: I know how hard you work. Especially with the market going up and down like a roller coaster and all your clients demanding safe investments.

Larry: You don't know the half of it. They're scared out of their Brooks Brothers underwear and

I've got to reassure them all day long. It's exhausting.

Katherine: That's why it's so important for you to do things that relax you.

Larry: You call that concert last night relaxing? A bunch of old oriental guys in funny robes, banging and screeching away on weird looking thing uses that hurt my ears.

Katherine: They were playing classical Cambodian music on ancient instruments.

Larry: It sounded like they were torturing cats.

Katherine: You do have to make some effort to understand another culture.

Larry: I hear the same sounds in the subway when the train pulls in. Why can't we go to an Elton John concert?

Katherine: Because you have to acquire culture while you're still young and can learn to savor it.

Larry: Aw, Katy.

Katherine: Katherine.

Larry: What's wrong with Katy?

Katherine: It's too casual for the art world.

Larry: It figures.

Katherine: Excuse me?

Larry: What do you care what you're called when you go to a museum or gallery?

Katherine: Katherine is more elegant.

Larry: Yeah. As if anyone cares. That gallery today was crazy. I thought art was supposed to be beautiful to look at.

Katherine: It is. You have to learn how to see it.

Larry: The only thing I learned there was that those artists make stockbrokers look intelligent. One artist had a dead fish in a tank that was selling for 40 million dollars. I had to laugh at that.

Katherine: I noticed.

Larry: Then there was this statue of a balloon animal that cost 5 million dollars.

Katherine: It's called sculpture.

Larry: Whatever. The nuttiest thing I saw was a model made by this guy who wanted to wrap Yellowstone National Park in plastic and it would cost 60 million dollars. That's like covering the Statue of Liberty with a condom.... (Katherine looks around and shrugs apologetically to anyone looking at them.) Are you telling me that stuff is art?

Katherine: Maybe what we started with is too challenging. We'll try the Metropolitan museum tomorrow.

Larry: Hey. I know that place. My class went there when I was a kid. They had these big pictures of fat, funny looking naked ladies....

Katherine: Alright. We seem to have found something you can connect with.

Larry: Aw. They probably changed it for all that new kinda stuff.

Katherine: Don't worry. They still have your naked ladies.... Now let's have a pleasant dinner and forget our little disagreements for the time being.

Larry: Sure thing, Katy.

Katherine: Katherine.

ARTICLE

1

Rewriting of the Ramayana: Haldhar Nag's *Mahasati Urmila*

CHITTARANJAN MISRA

Retelling and rewriting of epics and myths connect the present with the past. It helps us rediscover the relevance of the old texts from contemporary angles. In India the major epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have been rewritten and retold in multiple languages and the epics have reemerged through a process of modification. Whenever a story is told it brings certain changes to the old version. It is because of the use of language and the intention of the story teller. In case of rewriting of epics, the language is of utmost importance. The new version calls for modification of language to make the old text accessible. In a way each rewritten version instills a new interpretation. The newer versions make us look at the characters and plots of the older ones with a questioning attitude. A comparative perspective gets built up through multiple versions of the same stories told again and again. Haldhar Nag's long poem *Mahasati Urmila* draws attention to the minor character Urmila of the epic. The conventional approach to the Ramayana as the story of Rama and Sita can be reread as the story of Laxmana and Urmila. This freshness of approach does not distort the significance of Sita. It rather places Urmila's character

foregrounded while complementing and intensifying the spirit of the original epic.

In recent times we find the preponderance of the character of Sita in the rewritings of the Ramayana and of Draupadi in the rewriting of the Mahabharata. The two novels – Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* and Chitra Banerjee's *The Palace of illusions*, are examples of such re-writings of the story of Draupadi. Similarly, Devdutt Pattanaik's *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* and Kavita Kané's *Sita's Sister* can be cited as examples. Myths and epics other than the Ramayana and the Mahabharata chosen by contemporary creative writers have made their writings popular. Amish Tripathi is famous for the Shiva Trilogy. Ashwin Sanghi has emerged as one of India's highest selling English fiction authors for his bestsellers like *Chanakya's Chant*, *The Krishna Key*, *Keepers of the Kalachakra* based on his art of rewriting. Sanghi says, "Popular mythological fiction writers of today are often asked why we 'distort' the 'accepted' narrative of our epics and puranas. We are often at pains to explain that the retelling of ancient myths is a very old tradition. We have 300 versions of the Ramayana and the story in each version is rather different." (Sanghi.2019)

Rohit Sharma says, "rewriting, is not wholly an unintentional act. Unlike oral culture, the trend of rewriting a story in literature serves for various premeditated designs that the respective authors have in their minds. Because of this intentional element, the act of retelling in written literature tends to become politically and culturally charged". (Sharma.2016) In the context of Haldhar Nag the intention is culturally charged. He celebrates the sacrifice of Urmila and restores her to the level of a Mahasati, the paragon of womanly virtues and offers her the tribute she deserves.

Nag structures his poetic tribute to Urmila in five divisions or sections. Each section reveals a unique aspect of her character where the poet twists the original and adds certain episodes devised through his poetic imagination. Since Nag's imagination is steeped in a flavor absorbed from the oral tradition the narration bears a semblance of the folk element and becomes more appealing. But Nag considers the saint poet Tulasi Das as his Guru, his ultimate inspiration. His poem *Rasia Kavi* (biography of Tulasi Das) is an acknowledgement of this as a disciple.

In the beginning of *Mahasati Urmila* Nag writes:

Unheralded unsung she is,
In all seven books of Ramayana.
For the poet in me, Sati she is,
Even greater than Sita in purity. (Translation: Nath, Surendra)

But he regrets that the character of Urmila has been marginalised in the epic. She is like 'a lonely flower thriving on a lost twig of Ramayana'. To make the character more visible he has described the five occasions the Sati has been honored. This honor is metaphorical of recompensing the marginalised and deserving women of the poet's contemporary society. Nag in most of his poems is full of empathy for the afflicted and poetry for him is a performative. He tries to speak on behalf of the voiceless making his listeners and readers aware of social injustice.

The description of nature is punctuated by cultural components in *Mahasati Urmila*. The mood of the cheering people of Ayodhya preceding the coronation of Rama is expressed through a number of images chosen from the rituals of village people who keep water pots at the entrance of their huts with mango leaves and coconuts. With the blowing of conches, the ringing of bells, sounds of big drums, the dancers wait for the auspicious moment like excited

peacocks at the sight of the clouds of June. There is the aroma of pancakes, sweetmeats, and fries in the air. The images are chosen so as to cover the whole range of auditory, olfactory and gustatory sensations in the readers. Portrayal of rural backdrop and cultural practices of village folks provide a frame for the placement of the character in the poem.

When the banishment of Rama is pronounced Laxman appears shattered imagining the imminent peril of the Raghu dynasty. He is not able to reconcile with the calm Urmila maintains at the hour of crisis. He feels that his wife is hands in gloves with Kaikeyi. His scorn is expressed against women in general:

Women's ploys are unknown,
Even to gods in heaven.
You shatter happy families,
You speak even and act uneven.
You turn brothers into enemies,
Homes you break up out of greed.
Of sin and virtue, you have no fear,
Even so much as a mustard seed? (Translation: Nath)

Haldhar does not subscribe to such conventional misogynist attitude and that is the reason why he not only builds up the venerable image of a devoted wife through Urmila but also acquits Kaikeyi of the charges levelled against her as villainous. Urmila asks her husband to join Rama and Sita to serve them in the forest: "Keep watch when Rama and Sita sleep, Arrow nocked, on guard you stand". Laxman is awed at the firm composure of Urmila at the hour of crisis but comes to know that Urmila had the secret knowledge that

"He who sits on Ayodhya's throne,
For the fourteen years next,
His heart will burst, he will die.
Do not forget this forecast."

After realising Urmila's great knowledge and power, he admits that he was groping in illusion but Urmila with 'the light of knowledge' has shown him 'the path to liberation'.

As a Maha Sati Urmila receives blessings from Shiva and Parvati. Urmila attains what the great sages and yogis are not able to despite their austerity. From Shiva's palm a beam emanates and guides her to a cave where she finds a stone statue of Rama to be worshipped by her till Rama's return to Ayodhya. Her repeated attempt at dislodging the statue and fastening the same by a cord fail and blood oozes out from the idol of Rama. At this point Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati reappear and Lord Shiva well pleased with the Sati's tenacity and resoluteness makes the idol light and portable. Such inclusion of newer subjects and events enhances the beauty of the poem. The victory of Laxman and the defeat of Indrajit is depicted as a war between Satis-Sulochana and Urmila:

"In a war between Satis, won a Sati
That was the Great Sati Urmila."

In another episode Nag introduces Hanuman who has to admit the great power of Urmila: "Before you my glory is smashed", he says. In the last section of the poem while waiting with the prayer plate and the lamp in which God of Fire was burning bright, she views the return of the trio – Ram, Laxman and Sita. She in her worshipful welcome moves the prayer plate and suddenly the scene in a flash as that of lightning gets transformed. She becomes able to have a glimpse the Lord in the ocean of milk held by *Seshnag* with Laxmi serving at His feet. Fourteen years of austerity and prayer elevates Urmila to the position of 'Maha Sati' though in canon texts Sita is given the title Tapaswini. Nag has creatively elevated the position of Urmila as a great woman of power and a symbol of unmatched devotion.

Haldhar does not subscribe to the style of utterly distorting epics to show one's distrust of grand narratives. He restores the universal appeal and rewrites the epic in Sambalpuri (Odia) style. Epics in the hands of urban and elitist writers are often subverted, mocked at. The new versions provoke the readers to harbor distrust and suspicion against the very philosophical basis of the epics. Haldhar modifies but does not negate the ideological basis of epics. Nor is there an intention of demolishing the notion of universal truth as represented in postmodern writings. He retains the spirit of Indian value system as a principle that sustains mankind regardless of time and place.

Haldhar did not have the advantage of being in any institution of higher learning. He had no training in rhetoric and literary styles. Born in 1950 to a poor family in Ghens village of Bargarh district, Odisha Haldhar has become famous as the 'Lok Kabi Ratna' for his amazing memory, reciting style and the folk elements blended in his poetry written in Kosli Language. In 2016 he was awarded Padma Shri by Government of India. His way of handling literary devices like simile, imagery, symbolism, personification, hyperbole and irony reflects his mastery as a gifted poet. The way he has visualised the trinity of Ram, Laxman and Sita in the poem is fabulous and aesthetically flawless. The first nine stanzas of the second section of the poem offer a series of trigonal images. Urmila sights the three figures Ram, Laxman and Sita in three heaps of clouds, three palm fruits, triple-clustered twigs of the *palasha* tree, the trident of Shiva in the temple, the three eyes of the Lord Shiva, the three flowers (*arakh*, *dhutra*, *champa*) adorning his head and the triple clustered *bael* leaf garland, the three ash lines on the lord's forehead and the arms, and Ganga flowing in three streams from the dreadlocks of Shiva's hair.

The appeal of his poetry and the applause the poet has received speak volumes in support of Nag as a poet of the people. His rewriting is in consonance with the Indian sensibility and universal empathy.

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