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# GJLL



**Phenomenal Literature**

A Global Journal devoted to

# **Language and Literature**

A Peer-Reviewed Print Journal

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Chief Editor:

Dr. VIVEKANAND JHA

Associate Editor:

Dr. RAJNISH MISHRA

Review Editor:

Dr. CHANDRA SHEKHAR DUBEY



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**Volume 4 ♦ Issue 1 ♦ Year 2019**

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**PHENOMENAL LITERATURE**

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## POETRY

### 1

## The Sea

ALESSIO ZANELLI

And then came a primordial sea,  
by imposing waves and raging foam,  
a grave incessant howl its battle cry,  
an annihilatory storm its chariot,  
the cyclone's eye its charioteer,  
to overwhelm and submerge  
all that we'd been erecting  
thinking it would never crash,  
as if none of it deserved to stand.  
And when finally the wind abated  
the sea suddenly reverted home,  
the once richly fashioned land  
perfectly smooth and blank,  
the one big trace of its passage.  
To us not even our dream was left.





## 2

### What is the Cost?

AVDHESH S. JHA

It seems happiness is easy, very easy; but truly, happiness  
costs a lot; from the life and of the life;  
Entertainment mostly costs money, But happiness and true  
happiness in most cases is at the cost of life.  
Every house did cost at least the youth of a life, every first car,  
posited restrictions on some talent;  
The richness we are enjoying is a story, the story of history of  
the poverty, faced by our parent.  
Nothing is free, Education is at the cost of childhood, and  
Maturity is at the cost of innocence:  
What more, the most valued friendship, cost the family time  
and Marriage is at the cost of freedom.  
The better future we acquired and cherished, Is just like this  
enormous splendid building  
Attracting the vision of all, but no one knows, of the buried  
life of a brick to play a long inning.  
The luxury and leisure we enjoy like the waves; remaining  
ahead and above, dancing and hailing;  
It is at cost of the luxury and leisure of nature light, we hardly  
know the cost of our dancing and hailing.  
As of now, we believe in wealth and richness; this richness  
cost us togetherness and simplicity;  
We believe in etiquettes, pomp and show too, but it is at the  
cost of originality and divinity.  
There were many who left all and everything, they wished us  
to breathe, the air of freedom;

The costliest freedom, we hardly care, is no way cheap, it did  
cost the sacrifice of the wealth, family and lives.

Nights are beautiful at the cost of day and so does the day,  
cost the night;

Day and night are like breathe and breathlessness; each  
breathe is at the cost of breathlessness.

How meaningful! Life and death cost each other; if death cost  
the life, life is no less; it is at the cost of death;

The life is ours; How to live, the choice is ours; How if we  
realised, each second of life that is at the cost of death.



### 3

## Red

CHIKA OBI

Guy winked,  
Lady blushed,  
Valentine's Day it was; the colour all knew.  
Kisses blown randomly into the thin air.

Time flew, voices rose,  
Opinions grew discordant,  
Gradually getting the boundaries closed up.

Bottles broken,  
Triggers pulled.  
Soon, skins tore open  
And crimson poured.

Wounds got healed,  
Albeit time appeared frozen.  
The cops put a tape,  
From afar, the colour was visible, red,  
As unnecessary became a guess.

Throttling down the busy boulevard,  
Within seconds,  
Steaming engine brought to a screeching halt.  
We wondered why all stood still,

The lights were green when we passed,  
Now, red they've turned  
And no one dared drive near.



## 4

# Vending Machine

DEBASIS TRIPATHY

I could have anything I wanted from you  
with just a little press, you kept serving  
me like the soft-touch vending machine  
in the vast common area of my office  
dispensing anything, everything free –  
no coins, no cards, no complications,  
till you ran out of stock and I  
never had the faculties to refill you.

Sorry, I used you and left you empty  
like the abandoned & off track train-car,  
comatose and tenanted by a living ghost.



5

**Yin and Yang**

DMITRY BLIZNIUK

The night trees are like horsemen sleeping in the saddle,  
their backs are hunched, but they hold the reins  
in the sun-tanned hands.

The sunset above the river looks like a girl in a red kimono  
who does her toes with the nippers of birds and the nail file  
of the wind,  
and the comb of the horizon in her hair  
glitters like a barrel of an antique musket.

You'd better not look in the river – the clouds are reflected in  
its glassy surface.

Orange, green, and bloody tints,  
and colors of unreal saturation.

Animal innards.

Dolphins, aliens, placenta.

A transparent pregnant woman's stomach.

And I can see the two twins who share the whole world,  
Yin and Yang, the ancient sign, the two big-headed prawns.



## 6 My Skeleton HASSANAL ABDULLAH

Only remains, my skeleton.

Hopes are gone, wishes are gone,  
the youthful nights cheering fast,  
in the south pole of my heart, are also gone,  
remains, my burning face,  
mountain loads of lethargic responsibilities.

In pitch black darkness, remains the mourning of a torn flag;  
the silt-island, my last shelter,  
has gone flooded again,  
remains, the ill-thoughts, and  
times that choke my respiration.  
Dreams are gone,  
only remains, my skeleton dangling from a rope.

The eyes that showed peace now emit fear  
The eyes that showed tenderness now reprimand  
The eyes that would bring the spring breeze now give fire  
The eyes that would remind me of a vast ocean now show a  
desolate land –  
remains, the vicious victory of the enslaving chain.

Burning in a frenzied fire,  
my useful words  
gradually sunken beneath the shade of fallen leaves.

Where there was rain, now there is unforgiving sunlight –  
hanging my skeleton from a broken branch.



## 7

**When you Finally go Home**

IAN SALVAÑA

remember, I am still writing an elegy about skins. Don't yet forget that our bodies first met, all the frictions of sweat suffocating the humid air, before words came out as babbles. This is not to say we sin when we dissipate in darkness, eating each other's flesh, bathing nipples, tongue to tongue, writing a temporary code, encrypted with saliva's mischief, as I see your eyes completely black. Yes, it is dim and we are yet to know each other's names, the names we use when we hide our real selves, real lives, real feelings, because we should be devoid of feelings when we are hungry as we turn the room into a pyre of bodily heat. If the moon will peek through the nuder walls, it will uncover drips of water forming within the inner secrets of my pillows. The covalence really is about your tired eyes, your closed eyes, your still face when you escape the world after we pass our body's own checkpoints. Yes, we only lose ourselves when we cum twice and we catch our breaths for hours, naked and unconcerned of tomorrow, knowing we are strangers to one another. You will go home knowing I am Gino, and the night's young stars will cradle you to sleep on the other side of the city only to forget me when you chat once more and ask, "*Hey, what's up?*" Tonight, the cold wind will be my blanket as I lay lifeless in a bed wet from mourning. When I fall to sleep, I will dream of drowning, a sea without water, a desert of sadness, as I wait in contempt for another night to burn our bodies.



## 8

### The Gym

JAMES CROAL JACKSON

Planned to hit the gym after work  
to flex these treadmills of atrophied muscles,  
but decided to quit my job and drink instead –  
first work-free morning's sunlight's sharpness  
in my skull. From this decision, I have hurt  
my liver once, my heart twice from lack  
of exercise, ate Five Guys for lunch then  
missed the gym again. If we are all not  
getting our week's workouts in running  
from the shadow of time, embrace it.  
Consider the elders who try marathons –  
the ones having run so long  
they find their living long absurd.





9

**The New Abnormal**

DONALD CARLSON

1.

Tipsy to the point of almost toppling over  
I ask myself what does renovating my kitchen matter now?  
    Until I consider the island  
    The warm solidity of white maple  
    Of walnut counter rubbed  
    With mythical Tung tree oil  
    That spontaneously combusts  
The fiddle backed and cross-grained surface  
Into a mocha to rival the dark brew in my cup  
    Richer than Ghirardelli or Godiva

    But I'm not my kitchen  
    And no man is an island

2.

    Welcome to the new abnormal  
The world is broken but in wonderful ways  
    A rusting car limps along on a busted axle  
    Flocking seraphim appear as tufted varieties  
Of *Passerae* the uptalk of their twitters and chirrup  
Scattering like a nimbus of glitter over the pewter morning  
    Settling on the dormant grass  
If you come round today saying *Knock knock*  
    Will I not say *Who's there?*

3.

The cheeks of the sky blush over the vista  
Of concrete roadways mimicking iron  
The sun enthroned in its cloud monsternance  
Swaddled in vapor that tamps it down  
So sight can see it without being undone

When I was a kid I would stare into the sun  
For fully five minutes thinking I could become mythical  
Thinking that a superpower could cancel out loneliness

Let me explain myself:  
I am not a they



## 10

### I am

JANINE CANAN

I sit on the edge of the River.  
The River is so wide – it is coursing,  
foaming, overwhelming in its bounty.  
I scarcely need to reach in and out springs everything –  
art, soul, happiness, purpose.

No, not sitting on, I am the edge,  
the shore, the bed soaked in the River's bliss.  
And all this water is me too. Wet, watery,  
softer than earth – sheer magic movement.  
I move among the selves of this world and I am.



## 11

### The Biggest Question

JOSEPH HART

Was I only born to live and die,  
Then go into a grave and just decay?  
Can this be all there is? It can't be. Can it?  
Is consciousness the work of evolution?  
Extending to the feelings of a cat?  
And everything I think in opposition,  
Nothing except fodder for a song?  
Death is vanquished by the savior: love.  
Perhaps. Except love doesn't come to all.



## 12

**There are Things I mustn't See**

LANI O'HANLON

Veil and dress smell  
like ballet tulle. I am blinking.  
Mammy says that I must try to stop.

The big oval shaped mirror.  
Seven year old me in a white veil,  
comb caught in long hair.

The glass blurs and floods.  
I blink five times quickly  
just to get it over with.

Lift my hand to admire  
satin pouch bag, pearls sewn in  
and catch myself blinking again.

'Ready for your first communion.'  
Mammy says, coming into the oval,  
beautiful like Elizabeth Taylor.

We open the heavy fat door.  
Here is the sea, blue bright, I blink again  
look down at my dress, light all around.

My knees are white, my lace socks  
all white except for my eyes, red  
and sore and blinking and trying not to.



## 13

### Oconaluftee

LEE CLARK ZUMPE

The parting season embraces its successor  
    beneath wind-swept poplars  
while generations of mountain folk ballads  
mingle along the banks of the Oconaluftee.  
    Misty songs drift across rolling ages,  
        along well-worn trails,  
And through patches of Appalachian-spun shadows.  
Outside the chestnut log farmhouse, I take her hand in mine.  
    Their gentle voices rise with the winter breeze.  
        The ghosts are happy here.



## 14

### Fidelity of Life

MEHAK GUPTA GROVER

Why is humanity dwindling?  
With ups and downs,  
It is becoming more crinkling.  
And the face of earth frowns  
With every passing town.

People are becoming insane,  
society is comely abase.  
Nothing is in frame  
Everything is becoming vague  
And turning degrade.

Community is spinning vainglorious,  
Stinginess is overpowering sympathy.  
The power of veracious  
is vanishing with fallacy  
and there is no more propensity.

Let's create a cluster of happiness  
That flows the instinct of prosperity.  
Let's build the magic of oneness  
And follow the realm of solidarity,  
Only the one that confers tranquillity.



## 15

### Universal Oneness

MELISA QUIGLEY

Earth orbits the sun  
Ozone layer protects the planet  
And birds chirp in the trees  
Finding the perfect partner  
New life – a baby cries  
Parents connect with their offspring  
Seeing my soul in the mirror  
And gazing into another soul's eyes  
Love dissolving obstacles  
Cycles of the seasons  
Sun, planets, stars, and moon  
Time immeasurable  
Unbounded space  
Past, present and future  
We are all connected  
Our essence is identical  
We are the oneself  
Living life limitlessly  
People, plants, animal and mineral kingdoms  
Energetically married to one another





## 16

### March

MICHAEL H. BROWNSTEIN

The slipshod ice of clarity,  
Daylight dripping snow into pellets  
Opaque and clear, off white with an essence  
Of ash tree, clouds, a spirit within wind.  
On the dunes, scrub brush, sand thorn,  
And stacked on the piles of crusted ice,  
Herring gulls each with a piece of fish  
Waiting patiently for the long spray of spring.



17

## Morning

MICHAEL H. BROWNSTEIN

You wake to a million miles of something,  
but your fingers do not know what this something is,  
nor does your nose or your eyes.  
Your tongue is full of morning paste and so it remains  
ignorant.

What of your ears? Did they hear something?  
This is the problem: A million miles is a million miles.  
For reasons unknown something goes nowhere and  
everywhere.

One thing is certain though – it did wake you up.



## 18

**Spider Woman Ghazal**

NANCY CAVERS DOUGHERTY

Hope is like this, you remember, leaving delicate nerves spent,  
still vibrating to infernal buzz of verbal replay, spent.

After the night's revelry, full-moon prozac'ed and frayed,  
in her mildewy home as Venus sets, back legs splayed, spent.

Exoskeleton quivers to every twitch of ligament, venom sacs  
worn and heavy, her purse of mirrors & vanity to avail til spent.

*Oh don't say* she's nothing more than some potato head,  
one of those tubers overgrown in red brown clay, spent.

Roots, roots, glory of roots, new shoots and offshoots and  
the old, tired and purpled, fungi-ed or fuzzied fey, spent.

What worlds do we not know? Concealed everywhere – these  
squares & boxes, cartons of dreams, holders of place, unspent.

As soon as she inches out, you ken the flicker in eight eyes fixed:  
ultisols of desire, luxurious dirt, mineral traces, yet spent.

To go underground, among molecules of the moist alluvial. To  
breed. To breathe in with every pore. To explore, dare, nary spent.

Her birthright, your birthright; this calling, reaching, groping.  
The mechanizations pulse, spinning out from the Big Bang, spent.

The kids are in red t-shirts, they twirl and flex their pedipalps.  
Good heavens! It's all upside down, roots of the forebears, spent.

What gets crossed out in mistranslation, cornered and lopped,  
all the rich nuance and melody you miss – say it, say it,  
*say spent.*



## 19

### Women of Copenhagen

NIELS HAV

Now I have once again fallen in love  
with five different women during a ride  
on the number 40 bus.

How is one to gain control of one's life  
under such conditions?

One wore a fur coat, another red wellingtons.  
One of them was reading a newspaper, the other Heidegger  
– and the streets were flooded with rain.

At Amager Boulevard a drenched princess entered,  
euphoric and furious, and I fell for her utterly.

But she jumped off at the police station  
and was replaced by two sirens with flaming kerchiefs,  
who spoke shrilly with each other in Pakistani  
all the way to the Municipal Hospital while the bus boiled  
in poetry. They were sisters and equally beautiful,  
so I lost my heart to both of them and immediately planned  
a new life in a village near Rawalpindi  
where children grow up in the scent of hibiscus  
while their desperate mothers sing heart breaking songs  
as dusk settles over the Pakistani plains.

But they didn't see me!

And the one wearing a fur coat cried beneath  
her glove when she got off at Farimagsgade.  
The girl reading Heidegger suddenly shut her book  
and looked directly at me with a scornfully smile,

as if she'd suddenly caught a glimpse of Mr. Nobody  
in his very own insignificance.

And that's how my heart broke for the fifth time,  
when she got up and left the bus with all the others.

Life is so brutal!

I continued for two more stops before giving up.

It always ends like that: You stand alone  
on the kerb, sucking on a cigarette,  
wound up and mildly unhappy.



## 20

### Spiritual Climax

NORBERT GÓRA

Break the threads  
woven from greed,  
money only runs  
to the bottom,  
cut off the cords  
tangled with materialism,  
all that glitters  
is not gold.

Space and time  
like two jewels,  
there is only you missing  
in the crown of evolution,  
no peak can be compared to  
the wealth of spiritual climax.

True power is hidden  
in the source of universal oneness,  
unity as divine thoughts,  
it will take you beyond  
the gray of earthly clouds.

Constellation of shining stars  
at your fingertips, leave humdrum

on the shore of the ocean of experiences,  
let the waves of the spiritual Magnum Opus  
guide you through the waters full of doubt.



## 21

### Turned the Corner

RAVI VIRADIA

She took a deep breath, while laying, longing to delay sorrow,  
Coughing up in his hospital bed, glancing at dark shadows,  
As the patient lies, she feels hollow,  
Dark lights fill her eyes, her memories of him illuminate from  
within,  
Whose heart was to give, hers or his?  
Troubled by paranoia,  
The longing for the light,  
She asked would it be easy for him to reach heaven by a one-  
way flight?  
Take consideration to the medications she was told,  
But she knew, she could behold, only one remedy,  
One of her mind to tell herself to stay positive,  
Persistence ensued, and she then turned the corner,  
He missed his flight to the above,  
He stayed grounded, he healed slowly,  
She then opened her eyes, and noticed she had prevailed.





## 22

**The Offering**

ROBERT L. MARTIN

To the Gods and their generous offerings,  
Their speech of melodious enchantment,  
The way they free it from its bondage,  
The way they knead it and make it pliable,  
The way they cast it into open spaces,  
Of how they bend and shape it into a song,  
Of how they direct it to a certain place,  
How the ears were designed to receive it,  
How it feels when it enters into the heart,  
The way it mingles with the spirit inside  
And plants a thrill in the loin,  
The way it forms a metrical cadence,  
Of how it reaches the arms and legs  
And invites us to the dance of euphoria,  
The emancipation of the spirit,  
The direct communication to the Gods,  
The love of all things unseen but heard,  
Of a creation not of this material world,  
But a world of beauty and bewilderment,  
A love long dedicated to life and the living,  
Of reason exalted to the height of passion,  
Of a sound that climbs up to the summit  
And touches the hand of the Gods,  
Whose tears mingle with the climber's tears,

The one whose body belongs to the spirit,  
The spirit that cast a spell  
And sent the sound on its sacred mission.

An ode to the music and its  
Pilgrimatic intentions.



## 23

### The Clock Cell

ROSA JAMALI

Something dies accidentally  
And the sunlight which has soaked is wet and obscure  
If I continue the lines  
The frozen object captured in your hands slips down  
Or the day has come to an end.

Vacant  
When I get home  
Standstill current of water  
And the sunlight which is damp  
On the blank sheets  
I wept on my old garments.

The elements  
Its origin has been painted by my blood The rain of cats and  
dogs on my plantation The moon is vast!  
Here with my frostbite on the iron post, I gave the time to the  
hand of river  
The time was a whim dropped away  
The moments have been wasted and cleared away...

The wall has turned blue  
Me and the black gown  
Happened to pour down to the river.  
It's a calf death breast-fed.

What is it?  
Sediments on a neutral background  
It could be in a different colour  
It's been many days since I started walking on the rope  
The creased moon is falling down the ceiling.

Blizzard  
A flimsy stone  
The frostbite on the window glass  
The bridge has fallen down  
Silence on a metal tape  
Ending to a blind full stop.



## 24

### Funk

SANJEEV SETHI

On days when happiness is a norm,  
it hits. Otherwise I forget to spell it.  
Lexicon is loaded with entries. One  
is never stripped of options. This  
ushers me to you. You probably are  
flushed with smoky tresses, teeth  
better toothless. I'm no silver fox.  
Let me stress: while I was invested  
I stumbled upon sensations I hadn't  
felt before or since. In stock market  
of emotions you are my blue-chip.



## 25

### Desire

SRAVANI SINGAMPALLI

I wish I were the rain  
The rain of felicity  
The rain of poetries  
Or perhaps the rain of equanimity  
In their gloomy lives.

I wish I were blind  
As blind as pure love  
Smelling the fragrance of optimism  
And feeling the tranquillity in cool breeze.

I wish I were the life  
The life in the pure water  
The life in the eternal sunshine  
Or perhaps the life  
In those innocent smiles.

I wish I were the song  
The song of a nightingale  
The song of a passionate lover  
Or perhaps the song of  
A dewy-eyed orphan child.

I wish I were his pain  
The pain which is bittersweet

The pain buried deep inside  
The pain conceived into his poem  
The pain which has stolen all my desires!



## 26

### Adaptation

SRIPARNA BANDYOPADHYAY

Pains cannot be muted unless  
Conscience is not deaf;  
Frustrations remain explicit  
that smile can't camouflage.

Who am I to express thought?  
Only a celeb can deliver speech, or  
A declared activist can register protest.  
I can only boil in fury,  
with my subdued agony stinging inside to bleed.

Better we learn about ourselves  
From the channels and papers  
Where news makers are great cooks,  
And intellectuals find solutions  
emerging from their wine glass  
to express in their best seller books.

Or simply relish some narcotic smoke  
to lighten my overburdened head,  
And get lost in the Hypnotic world to  
forget that I am still not dead!





27

## Mosquito Tower

WILLIAM C. BLOME

Squint at the setting sun,  
And make a point of doing that  
While you pace the square base  
Of Mosquito Tower. Then dial  
Into the omnipresent, high-pitched  
Whine as if it were a shortwave  
Frequency, coming at you through  
Dark clouds and vermilion air.



## 28

### Morning Traffic

WILLIAM MASTERS

This morning, from my bedroom window view,  
I watched a dog sniff down my garden path.  
He did not know I watched him as he tasted  
The red camellia blossom that he bit in half.  
Then he licked the morning dew  
From several blades of grass,  
And with glancing eyes and shifting paws,  
He jumped aside to let a caterpillar pass.  
Excited by the sidewalk sounds,  
He turned to watch, unabashed,  
The parade of morning leashes  
With captive dogs attached.  
Then, with stately canine grace,  
He turned around and left the place.



## 29

### The Millions Standing

YUAN YUAN

On the pathway of the street, while standing,  
Watching the pedestrians led me to dismay  
Which in sway led me back to the dream I had  
Whereby upon a barren moor I walked in May.

It was only then, a meteor streaked overhead,  
The trace of which was cut by hungry high rises role  
As if sweat and tears become the only water source  
I wonder if every dust in the air carries a thirsty soul?

Oh! elite, oh! As if full with all and everything  
You're so busy with your work, pride and alias,  
Posing and talking of generosity and affluence but  
Without any emotion for the begging girl passing by.

Have you ever dropped into the dark abysm  
Which is the bottomless and between the hearts?  
Innocently, I put on my garland of welcome for you,  
But, you are just an aggressor who behaves so cruel!

Secretly, the one will raise his head in the hell,  
Against the people who made fun of his fall  
I wished, I had a pair of wings as well a gun,  
To comfort the world and protect someone.

Before the water freezes and after the snow melts,  
As if the purity appears and disappears from the billions  
The journey between birth and death is undefinable  
How do we, as one of the millions judge the millions?



## SHORT STORY

### 1

## Madam Brady's

ANDREW LAFLECHE

Soon after the momma left the room, three open palm whacks struck the front door. The boy jumped.

"Judge Randy," the boy's momma said. "Good evening, Sir."

The Judge removed his hat and stepped inside. "Ms. Brady."

She extended an arm for him to drape his coat over. "Can I get you a drink while we wait for the others?"

"Two fingers of scotch, please."

"You just head down to the lounge and make yourself comfortable."

"You're an impeccable hostess, Ms. Brady."

"I don't imagine you'd be here all these years if I weren't."



The lounge wasn't a lounge, unless a dimly lit space soon to be filled with cigar smoke and serious gambling made it one. No. This was Ms. Brady's gig alright, an underground casino of sorts, and calling it a lounge sounded better than calling it

a basement; only a lounge allowed everybody to feel dignified.

Green lampshades hung from the ceiling. On the far side of the room, across from the stairs, stood a hand carved wooden bar, its leather counter sunk with five holes for drinks. On nights where the town's elite had not reserved Ms. Brady's private service, she dealt blackjack from behind the counter while Texas hold 'em players policed their own game at the main table. Solitary plush cushioned chairs were paired with wooden tables around the room where gamblers could become momentary spectators as they sought refuge from their losses but weren't quite ready to quit.

Judge Randy assumed his position third seat from the dealer. For as long as he'd been visiting Ms. Brady's he always sat in the same seat, each time winning as much as he lost, not including the bills he occasionally dropped when he pulled in a winning pot and stuffed the paper in his pockets.

Even if the little boy hadn't heard his momma greet Judge Randy, he would have known who it was by the way the Judge dropped into his seat as if he had no fear the chair wouldn't hold his Texan figure. Furthermore, the Judge always wore low-cut leather cowboy boots, brown, no matter what color pants he was wearing.

The boy minded his posture, hidden beneath the table, now that the guests had started to arrive, heeding his mother's warning not to touch anyone, or to make a sound.



Ms. Brady looked like royalty as she descended the stairs, purple dress topped with large gold earrings.

"Your scotch, Judge," Ms. Brady said.

The Judge sipped his drink.

“Can I get you anything else?”

“Just an ashtray, dear.”

She removed a stack of ashtrays from behind the blackjack table and placed one in front of the Judge. She set the rest at the other seats. Ms. Brady struck a match and held it to Judge Randy’s cigar. He puffed three quick puffs and it was lit.

Three whacks at the door. The boy gasped. If Ms. Brady heard, she didn’t flinch. “Excuse me, Judge,” Ms. Brady said. The Judge waved his hand. Ms. Brady dipped her head and disappeared upstairs.



“Boy,” the Judge said. He lifted the table skirt.

“Sir,” the boy responded, knowing if his momma ever caught him making a peep he would get a lashing that would keep him from sitting for a week.

“You stay away from that Dr. Baxter when he shows up, no matter how big the bill he waves at you,” the Judge said. “You understand me, boy?”

“Sir,” the boy said, not quite sure why Judge Randy disliked Dr. Baxter so sincerely.

The Judge pulled a fifty-dollar bill from his fold and passed it to the boy. “You keep this,” he said. “It’s yours. Don’t give it to your momma, don’t tell nobody I gave it to you. It’s just for you. Maybe one day you’ll be able to escape this place.”

“Thank you, sir,” the boy said.

"If that Dr. Baxter ever even looks at you with his queer eyes, you tell me, okay boy?"

"Sir," the boy said. He wondered what the Judge meant by queer eyes.

The Judge let the skirt fall to conceal the young boy in his place.



"Lady Madam," Harold Coffee said, greeting Ms. Brady.

Dr. Baxter grinned.

Ms. Brady fought the chill which ran her spine.

"I'll bring your drinks down right away," she said.

The two men hung their jackets and made their way downstairs.

Ms. Brady poured the drinks. She paused at the top of the stairs to compose herself when the third knock came. Her shoulders tensed. Ms. Brady set the two drinks on the ledge and straightened herself. She forced a smile and answered the door.

Mr. Lapointe towered at six and a half feet. He tipped his hat to Ms. Brady as she welcomed him into her home. "Ma'am," Mr. Lapointe said.

Ms. Brady closed the door behind him. "Jimmy," she said and locked the deadbolt behind him. "Ma'am is my mother's name. I'll have none of that in this house."

Mr. Lapointe smiled. "Lady Brady."

Ms. Brady smiled, "Whiskey and ale?"

"You're a real gem, don't matter what anybody says," Mr. Lapointe said.



Ms. Brady pretended to be offended, mouth agape. Mr. Lapointe leaned in and kissed her cheek.

“It’s good to see you again, Jimmy.”



Once all the men were seated, Ms. Brady started. “Let’s have a good clean game.”

“How clean do you expect tonight to be?” the Judge quipped. “You mustn’t of heard about Coffee’s ruthless double-ender he fleeced poor old Ms. Schrodinger into with her real estate down by the river.”

“Ruthless?” Harold Coffee said with a grin. “You make me sound like a gangster!”

Both men were good friends and had been for a long time. “I had nothing but Ms. Schrodinger’s best interest at heart that entire transaction.”

The Judge snickered. “Course you did.”

“If you want to talk ruthless, how about this guy and his ninepercent loans he’s marketing as a deal.”

Jimmy set his whisky on the table. “I can remember mortgage rates hovering around twenty-four points,” he said. “I’d take 9% any day.”

Ms. Brady placed Mr. Lapointe’s glass in the holder.

“I’m with Jimmy,” Dr. Baxter said. “Nine percent is a steal. Everybody has to make a living, don’t they?”

Ms. Brady knew if she let the men continue jabbing, they would go on for an hour without a card played. “Five-Card-Stud to start?”

The men agreed.

“Alright,” she said. “No blinds. Four rounds of betting. All five of your cards must be played in the showdown.”

Mr. Lapointe turned to the Judge and said, “You might find this interesting.”

The Judge raised the bet. “Shoot.”

“Ms. Stacy was in the bank the other day, and I was asking her how she was making out with Jerry having passed and all; her two boys –”

“Yes, a terrible tragedy,” Dr. Baxter interrupted. “If a doc tells you to have your colon checked, take the finger.”

“She actually mentioned you, Baxter,” Mr. Lapointe said.

The Judge glared at Dr. Baxter.

“She did, did she?” Dr. Baxter said. “What a fine woman.”

“She said you offered pro-bono dental work for Oscar and Aaron.”

“That’s mighty generous of you,” Harold Coffee said.

“It really is the least I could do,” Dr. Baxter said. “Jerry was a friend of mine, his family’s been long time clients of my practice. If the situation were reversed, I’m sure he would have done the same.” He pulled on his drink, smiled. “Anything I can do to help.”

“I’m sure,” the Judge said. His distaste for Dr. Baxter was public knowledge.

“I wasn’t referring to your pro-bono work, Baxter,” Mr. Lapointe continued. “Ms. Stacy said you offered Oscar a job minding your lawn over the summer.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Dr. Baxter said. “Figured the boy could use some extra cash, keep him out of trouble, you know, without his father around to keep him in line.”

The Judge's face hardened.

"Whatever happened to the Harris boy?" Mr. Lapointe asked.

A rabid flicker flashed across Dr. Baxter's face and disappeared. "Moved out east to live with his dad," he said.

"You and him were pretty friendly," Mr. Lapointe added.

It was dare, a line drawn in the sand, naming something not to be named.

"It seems I remember a night back in university," Harold Coffee said. "Where a frat woke up after a party claiming –"

"Gentlemen," Ms. Brady interrupted. "Are all bets in?"

The men stared at their hands.

Harold Coffee turned his empty drink. "Could I trouble you for another gin and tonic?"

"Aye," Mr. Lapointe said. "And another sipper and ale, if you wouldn't mind."

Dr. Baxter said, "Another round for me too, please."

The Judge didn't say a word; he nodded.



The conversation remained muted while Ms. Brady refreshed the drinks upstairs. If she didn't intervene every now and again, the game would disperse early. She needed the money.

When Ms. Brady returned, Harold Coffee said to the Judge, "The rumor mill has it you're thinking about running in the primaries."

The Judge smiled. "You know I don't comment on rumors."

“Blink twice if it’s true,” Harold Coffee said.

“Harold,” the Judge laughed. “I’m two years from retirement. Do you really think I want to be locked away in an office, pushing paper for some Congressman’s agenda?”

Ms. Brady placed new glasses in front each of the men and assumed her position at the head of the table. “Shall we continue?”



## 2

# Portraits of a Family

HARLAN YARBROUGH

Yes, that's fine – at least until the twins wake up.

About a month ago.

No, they're the only ones – in fact, they're the only twins in either of our families, as far as we know.

Thank you. I learned in school, but, of course, I've been living here for seventeen years.

Oh, I suppose. We're very green in every other way, though, and our individual effect is like a grain of sand on the beach. All the same, it *is* important that we set a good example, I know. I like to think our kids' contributions to the world will offset their environmental footprints.

We'll just have to wait and see, won't we. All four of the older kids have organised and campaigned for years, just like we have.

All sorts of issues, but especially GMOs, climate change, and pollution.

Randy junior – he's our eldest – is a post-doctoral fellow at Stanford.

He's twenty.

His brother has just finished his PhD thesis at UC Berkeley.

Nineteen.

I suppose it is, but our kids are all eager to learn. They just move at their own speed.

Yes, the three oldest all started university studies at fourteen. Liam – he's the fourth – just started this year.

Fifteen.

Those two see each other a lot, 'cause they play volleyball together. It's nice.

Oh, yes, he's great. I feel so lucky to be with him.

Twenty-one years.

I don't think we ever have, not really. I mean, we've had discussions where we disagreed, maybe even arguments – pretty lightweight arguments though – but never anything close to what y'could call a fight.

I don't know. Every morning, I just sort of fall in love all over again.

I hope so. Yeah, I think I can safely say he's in love with me, too.

He was married to my mom's best friend's sister.

No, not from her. They had already sort of split up. His ex- ... ummmmm, no, she wasn't his ex- then, 'cause they were still married. But she'd lost interest, I guess – I don't know how any woman could, but I guess she did ... Anyway, she and her sister decided to swap, and then her sister didn't want to give him back.

They were together for...I don't remember exactly...seven or eight months, I think, but they were just 'way too different. She didn't care about global issues, environmental issues, that sort of thing, and she absolutely would not emigrate.

No, they still get along OK, and she comes over to visit every couple of years. I just sort of look the other way, when they want to have a cuddle. I feel like I owe her that – I ended up with him, after all. He always asks first if it's OK, and I always say it is. She's an old friend and no threat to me or our relationship.

Not exactly. See, my mom had designs on him – since she was fifteen, before he'd married Belle's sister – and she could see that he wasn't going to last with Belle.

No, they were never married, but they had one child.

She got back together with her husband, and they raised him.

My mom had been asking him to come over to help with things that needed fixing or, I think, whatever excuse she could find to get him to visit. She'd been feeding him meals and trying to get him into bed.

I don't think they did. Not then.

I don't know. I never asked her. I think she probably didn't feel guilty, 'cause she knew he and Belle weren't going to stay together.

No, I'd been living on my own for years. I was twenty-seven, I think. My mom and I have always been close, though, so I spent a lot of time at her place. That's how I met Randy.

Yeah, I guess I sort of did, but she's forgiven me. We came to an arrangement, you might say. I'm willing to share. I think I was just too in love to feel guilty.

That's right, you met her. She lives here with us.

They've had two. Jørn's away at college; Mette's going next year.

Oh, goodness, no! How could I? She had a crush on him before I was even born. She was there first, so to speak.

Well, no, not in that sense – but not for lack of trying.

Yes, I suppose it does seem strange. Here was this guy, old enough to be my grandfather, but he just had this spark about him. I don't know. You've met him, you must see what I mean.

Exactly! Some special energy. Something.

Yeah, and I'd been hearing these second hand stories from Belle through my mom, so I was curious – interested, let's say.

Uh huh, and then I met him at my mom's and I just thought, "I wonder what it'd be like," y'know? I was thinking, "I'd like to try that." So I did.

I think he and Belle had just decided to call it quits. If I'd met him two days earlier, he'd've prob'ly said no. If I'd met him two days later, he'd've prob'ly already been with my mom. Great timing – I was *so* lucky.

I guess she must've been angry, but I think she was more sad. She just seemed heartbroken. Randy and I both felt awful seeing her like that.

No, we didn't notice right away. We didn't notice anything but each other for three or four weeks, but then we realised Mom was really down.

Quite the contrary – it was more my idea than his, 'though he loves my mom.

No, we've never been a threesome. None of us are into that.



Not really. I mean maybe someday, but not any time soon. He has more energy than I do, for goodness' sake. Wait 'til you've spent some time with him. You'll see.

He's best known for his writing, I guess, but he had a long career as a musician. He's still an amazing musician.

He doesn't really tour anymore, or only very rarely. He plays for local dances and fundraisers, and he still does a few shows and festivals each year with his daughter.

No, from before. Belinda. She's really nice – and a crash-hot musician.

Oops! The twins are awake. I've got to go.

#

That's right, our seventh and eighth children were born last month.

Yes, twins.

Dizygotic.

Oh, ummmmm... fraternal. You know – two ova.

A boy and a girl.

Well, I guess you're right – not very environmentally friendly. On the other hand, if they all become really effective environmental activists like the older ones have...

Uh huh, we celebrated our twenty-first anniversary three days ago.

Of course! I feel like the luckiest man on the planet – wait! That isn't as all-inclusive as it used to be – on the planet, in space, on the moon, or on Mars. How's that?

That's kind of complicated. She's my ex-wife's sister's best friend's daughter.

We mostly all get along surprisingly well.

That's right, she lives here with us. You might've met her.

No, conventional we are not. But, hey, I love 'em both. They're both happy. I'm happy. The kids are happy – most of the time, but kids always have ups'n'downs – and healthy. I don't see that there's a problem.

Involved? I'm still in touch with Belle. We talk once or twice a month, and she visits every year, sometimes twice a year. Sometimes we all go over there – every couple of years or so. I don't like to travel any more than I have to. I guess it's fair to say I'm still involved.

Yes, of course, I'd like to see Holger more often. I'd like to've been more involved in his early childhood, but he lived with us nearly half the time through his teens. We're pretty close, considering. We talk almost every week.

His stepdad passed away five or six years ago. He'd had health problems for years.

Randy? Mathematics.

That's correct. My degree is in math, too.

That'd be Seamus. He's a physicist.

Indeed they do. Mainly on volleyball though. I get the impression Seamus collaborates more with Bridie – that's his sister Bridget – on academic things. She just finishing her senior thesis on a topic they've collaborated on – something to do with the ways in which quarks can interact.

I play music with a lot of my kids, but Belinda is the one I play major gigs with most. We've recorded a dozen albums together.

Yes, Randy and Seamus are on some of them, and we've done lots of shows together.

I don't know. Probably. I still have some ideas I'd like to get in print. I don't have anything currently under contract, but I'd like to think my agent would be pleased to sell something new.

Maybe next year. I have notes for three or four projects, and I'm working on a couple of 'em pretty regularly.

Probably not. I'll prob'ly keep writing – and playing music – until I keel over. I'm spending less time writing, 'cause I'm spending more time with our kids and grandkids, but I doubt I'll ever stop.

You're most welcome. Glad to help. I hope you got something useful.

#

My parents? Oh, they're great.

Yeah, I'd say so – a *lot* better than other parents.

Oh, maybe a little too indulgent, but really pretty straight down the middle, y'know?

Well, of course. Dad has always been into science and math – but not in a narrow way. I mean, besides the music – which he's famous for – he's involved in political and environmental stuff and interested in cultural and historical things.

Yes, and the writing. And he and Mom got us started playing volleyball – they still play! He isn't fast and can't jump high, but he still plays – and he passes well and sets well for a guy his age.

Yeah, Seamus and I have made a few dollars, winning tournaments. I don't think we'll get to the Olympics though.

They've both always been supportive of pretty much everything we wanted to do.

No, not absolutely everything. Seamus wanted to play the drums, and they talked him out of that – but he's such a good banjo, and dobro, player that it would've been a waste.

Perfect? No. We've disagreed about things, and I still think they've been wrong sometimes. But they're still the best parents I know.

Yes, math. At the moment, I'm working on an extension of the Riemann Hypothesis to certain kinds of Kähler manifolds.

No, I didn't expect you to.

You'd have to talk with them about that.

No, it never interfered with the way they raised us.

I don't think of them as half-siblings. Holger and Valdemar are my brothers, and Gitte is my sister. We're all family. Not quite so much with Belinda and Alyssa, but they're quite a bit older and we haven't spent as much time around them.

Hey, no problem. I'm happy to help.

That's right, we'll be playing at the San Francisco Open next month at the Embarcadero. C'mon down and see us.

Good afternoon.

No, that's fine. In another month I'll need to be reviewing for exams, but right now I have time.

Tell you about 'em in what way?

Heck, yeah! They're the best parents I ever had.

Yeah, that's a bad habit. I think I picked it up from my dad. We used to call 'em Dad jokes.

No, they really were exceptionally good. A little too strict, maybe, but otherwise super. I love 'em to bits – all three of 'em.

Yeah, I s'pose it's because of my dad. I mean, he didn't push me in any particular direction, but he was always very encouraging – although he was encouraging about almost everything. Prob'ly Randy and Seamus, too, 'cause I've always looked up to them.

Yes, I do. I haven't made any money at it – the boys have – but I've found a good partner, and we're thinking of hitting some of the beach tournaments this summer.

I don't think so – we haven't registered – but I'll prob'ly go watch my brothers play.

Yes, piano and harp – and some guitar. Not like Belinda, though – she's awesome. The boys are really good, too. Randy's like Dad: he can play anything.

Yes, physics, like Seamus.

Ummmm...know anything about quantum chromodynamics?

No, that's OK – no reason you should. Just say I'm studying quarks and what they do.

My opinion of them? I already told you: I think they're great.

That's none of my business, really. They're all happy, so—

Unconventional!? Hell, yes! We're all unconventional, in case you hadn't noticed. What's wrong with that? Do you think I should be studying makeup instead of quarks?

No, no. You've been perfectly OK, very polite – prob'ly more polite than me... "than I have," I should say. Don't worry about it.

Yes, I do – I need to go babysit a computer for my thesis advisor for a little while.

You're quite welcome. Write something nice.

#

English is fine. Or if you'd rather German or Danish, that's OK, too.

Swedish, some Dutch, and a little bit of French. I don't like French, prob'ly 'cause I don't like France.

Because I've been ripped off every time I've been there.

Fair enough. Otherwise we'll be here all afternoon.

I never think of 'em as half-brothers. They're just my brothers. That reminds me of an old record album Dad turned me onto, *Twin Sons of Different Mothers*.

A songwriter named Dan Fogelberg and some flute player.

I don't remember much of the music. It's just the title.

Why would I resent that? He and my mom weren't together, so he couldn't've been there all the time. I lived with them later, though, f –

Dad and Janne, I mean.

Six years or so.

My step-dad was a lovely guy. He was never the special, talented, intelligent, charismatic guy Dad is, but he was a good guy.

Not really. I mean, it isn't really any of my business. They all get along great, and I think Dad has always been careful not to hurt any of 'em – not to hurt anyone, for that matter.

I don't know. You'd have to ask them.

Probably.

Uh huh. Oops! 'Scuse me, while I read this text message.  
... Oh, that's what I've been waiting for. I've gotta go.

She'll be – wait, just follow me... There she is.

#

I should get citizenship, I guess, but no. I do have permanent residence though.

Randy arranged it through some sponsorship thing. We're lucky, 'cause the movies have made him a lot of money.

From his novels.

Goodness! That's more than twenty years ago.

Sure, I'll tell you what I can.

Oh, goodness, no! He never cheated on Belle *or* her sister, not that he wouldn't have had good reason to.

I don't know whether she did or not, but I know she treated him badly for years.

Verbal abuse, I guess you'd call it, but she hit him sometimes, too.

I don't think so. I'd be very surprised. That wouldn't be like him at all.

Maybe defending himself, but I really don't know.

*Ja*, he put up with it for a long time. I often wished he'd leave her.

For his sake, too, but probably mostly for my own selfish reasons.

Never once. I tried to get him into bed many times, but he was always, "I'd like to, Janne, but I'm in a committed relationship."

Not exactly – not at all, really. I mean, he never cheated on me, 'cause he and I had never been lovers when they got together, and I can't say she took Randy away from me, for the same reason.

Oh, well, I guess so. You'd be stretching a point. How could you say he cheated on her, when she was the one who suggested he sleep with me. I think it's accurate to say Randy's never cheated on anyone.

She was just being kind to her mother. She's a naturally kind person, and we've always looked out for each other.

Very much so. I am *so* glad he relented and she's willing to share. I do still love him.

Not as much as he loves my daughter, but, yes, I think he does.

With Belle? That's so rare, and we're all good friends, and she's a widow and all.



Mmmmmmm... What do you think? You've talked to them. They're all emotionally healthy, they're all happier than most people. We must've done something right.

You spoke with him earlier, right?

He's in his second year of law school.

Ha ha! That's right. Ha ha! You'd better write something nice, or he'll sue you.

Of course not. Just write the truth.

Exactly. Do you want a cup of tea or coffee or anything, before you go?

Just around the corner there by the stairs, under the stairs. That's it.



## 3

### Three Sisters and a Townhouse

ED WOODS

Acquaintances of ours needed someone to drive a large truck for their move to a new townhouse at a time when I was recovering from knee surgery. I stated lifting or using a clutch operated vehicle is out of the question but if they had help to move apartment contents I would rent a truck and drive only. Little did I know this agreement would become a memorable horror. Date chosen but for some reason I knew something else was going to interfere but for the life of me it escaped detection. I mentioned all of the small and fragile items be moved in boxes via cars leaving only the biggest items for the truck. The move was six weeks away and my van could carry several small boxes but again they would have to load and unload the vehicle.

Near the date media news of a marathon race would close all access to their apartment for the day. I advised the sisters to change the date and cancel the truck rental but it turned out they didn't book a truck or the elevator. I verified all the small boxes were moved. They answered no. I suggested numbering the boxes in a list of importance. Example given was a few plates, glasses, coffee mugs, cutlery, in one box for use right away then remaining kitchen items can be stored for later. Again I sensed a nightmare in the making.

The following weekend all plans were ready as it was the only date left to move for rental payment purposes and I

confirmed the truck and elevator must be booked due to multiple demands at the month's end. They reassured all of the small stuff was at the house and truck and elevator were booked.

Friday arrived and we verified to meet at the truck rental center. They said to meet at the apartment and get a ride to the truck. At 07.00 am, we arrived and phoned to meet in the parking lot and this is when we were advised that the move must be Sunday because it is superstitious to move on a date where the numbers end on a down stroke. The 27<sup>th</sup> is out so it has to be the 28<sup>th</sup>. I was not pleased with this waste of time. Sunday morning at 07.00 am, we arrived at the apartment and found out the rental company didn't open until 09.00 am, so we went up to the apartment and as I entered I wanted to cry.

Nothing had been moved. When asked why they told me it was moved their reply was to keep me happy. Dressers still full and closets stuffed and bags on the floor. Above all else there was no help. The sisters were watching TV having breakfast. I said we had better move on this stuff fast and fill boxes or garbage bags because this is definitely an all day job but the main problem is my less than fully recovered strength from surgery.

At the rental company there was nothing booked nor to rent in their regular fleet. I saw their commercial fleet lineup and mentioned qualifications for this category so we rented a 20 ton truck as I knew the loading dock at the apartment could take commercial vehicle. At the apartment a truck was already in the dock and movers informed me they had it booked for the entire day. Then the superintendent didn't have a clue the sisters were moving today. I made arrangements with the other group that while they were

away we could load and be out by the time they got back. Bit by bit the items were moved by me.

Furnishings and huge TV plus queen size beds and kitchen table. A massive entertainment unit had to be taken apart first. The living room was filled with bags of clothing. My leg began to tire in pain. A priority of heavier items is brought down as a base load and the small stuff can go on top. At this point the sisters had to leave for two hours as an arrangement had been made for a Pastor to bless the townhouse before anything or anyone could move in. Surprise!!! This will only take two hours then we can continue. I asked what else can be added to the equation of complications and continued on my own.

The sisters returned and said we shall dine on pizzas. I, the fool thought pizza delivery was enroute but no that would be too simple. They fired up the stove and the next thing we hear is someone yelled, "Fire!!!" The pizza was inside the boxes and caught fire. I yelled to not open the stove as it is metal and will not burn. Too late! They opened the stove door and blackened soot hit the ceiling and moved across the rooms highlighting cobwebs and sticking to kitchen grease residue on the walls. I yelled out: "Do not open the hallway door" but again I was too late. The alarms in the hallway activated. I explained an apartment unit alarm stays within the unit but a hallway alarm brings the Fire Department and like clockwork the Fire Department arrived with three trucks and Police.

I informed firefighters all is ok. Their Chief tried to locate the Fire Key for the elevators to shut them off. He reamed out the super for not knowing as it was supposed to be obvious on the outside wall entry point but then an impaired tenant told the firefighters it was behind a nearby bush. Key retrieved and elevators locked off, all was well. I

reached the 9<sup>th</sup> floor then the elevator went down to the lobby for placement. As I walked down the hallway a resident with mobility issues was crying that he didn't want to die. I told him all is well and I will help him if anything else arises. Six firefighters with axes and oxygen backpacks entered the scene from the 9<sup>th</sup> floor stairway and I felt humiliated. The senior firefighter said it must be verified visually all is safe and using the elevator is not in their procedures.

The apartment was verified as nil risk then one firefighter and one of the sisters developed a dialogue. They seemed to be an item right from the first word and blanked out everything else as if in the midst of a serious situation a love story is unfolding. The team leader diverted attention to safety lessons of oven use then I motioned him aside and said to get the two neo-lovers to exchange information as my knee has limited stamina terminal point due to arrive on the soon to be exhausted express train. He looked at me in bewilderment.

The horror show continued as elevators were released from shutdown and the once friendly Super is now our enemy but this horror show must be completed today and I implored him not to add to complications because I am ready to walk away and shoot myself. Between schedules and religious interference and a budding love story amongst an apartment still half full every human has a breaking point. He just walked away.

Truck loaded up and under way the townhouse location was not designed for moving in or out. It had a narrow single lane roadway in the shape of the letter 'P' around the property and at one point the truck was too large to negotiate the turn. I had to back up to the roadway and then back in and onto the lawn in front of their home. Many residents yelled their dissatisfaction with my timing. I thanked them

for the added pressure but understood seldom do they see large trucks. Most items went in OK until large beds failed to navigate the circular staircase that would only allow an infant cot so we stationed them in the living room to deal with later. Enroute back to the truck rental site one sister said they own the appliances so one more trip was necessary. It coincided well with the other tenant's move but they were upset too because at the other end of their move were complications as well. The driver/helper was livid and we exchanged horror stories and then ended up laughing. The burned stove plus washer and dryer were loaded.

The townhouse property manager was wandering around as I backed in and he said the barrier would be locked at 9.30 pm. and to not disturb him afterwards. I finally convinced this guy to leave the lock open and I will close it when we are finished. He said bylaws state no one can move in after the gate is locked. I guess the bylaw makers never met such sisters but he was convinced to leave it open because the truck must be back by midnight or double charges apply so it is cheaper to replace the barrier should I drive over it than the cost of double charges. We finally got all of the items in the house but they wanted the stove downstairs first. I said it will have to wait and have healthier people help.

At the truck rental a staff member was working late to prepare the next day's rentals. He opened the gate and said the commercial truck was too large to be parked amid smaller units as the morning agent didn't have a license to move it or use air brakes. I found a spot where it could fit and listed the small van numbers not to rent out until after 9 am, when they open. It turns out the commercial division opens at 6 a.m. so as in keeping with the scenario there was no problem as they could move it out of the way or rent it out first and clear the area. Problem solved.

Around 2 am, finally getting into my car the apartment Super left a note upon my car wipers that looked as if it was written in hatred haste. My car cannot be parked overnight!! It will be subject to tow and ticket if still here by the morning. Why is it people in authority know how to hand out a penalty but fail to lend a helping hand. Once home I passed out cold on my bed with an aching leg.

Two days later the sisters pleaded for help as the beds were still in the living room. In the end one back bedroom windows were removed to rope the mattresses and box springs up the outside. A 4-way rope tied around the mattress with one main loop at the top to pull it up to the window where I could get my hands on it. I fashioned 2x4 boards for the sister's to push the bottom out from the deck to get an angle started to bend them through the opening. This was repeated six times for the three queen size beds. There were four bedrooms so I mentioned they either buy a large bed today to get it up here or wait and buy a twin bed that will fit up the stairs. My next surprise was the purchase of dressers and tables for that were ready to pick up now and at the furniture shop found monsters dressers. We had to walk them through the living room to the rear deck then disassemble into a shell and get the shells up through the open window and the drawers up the stairs.

The stove remained an eyesore on the main floor so I offered to pay two teenagers in the driveway to move it as my leg was completely numb. One of the sisters paid the teens and I arranged that they could help whenever needed because there is no one else available. The property super came by as I was reinstalling windows to say there could be a problem as I worked on the unit without communal council approval. I asked him to return in twenty minutes which he did. By this time we were sharing coffee in the living room

and I asked him about what windows he was talking about. He knew there was nothing that could be done because neighbors reported it but he personally did not see me do anything. I said the neighbors must have been hit by a solar flare and hallucinated about my window removal. The sisters poured him coffee and served cakes and other treats and he eventually welcome them as new tenants.

I felt a state of collapse driving home in agony and said to my wife my moving days are over and I will never again mention the Class of my driver's license.

Upon my next post-surgical checkup it turned out this horror show actually strengthened my knee sooner than the normal schedule.





## 4

### Makara

JEVIN LEE ALBUQUERQUE

*Big Sur is a journey. Let go, you know better than to over-think it; she will be fine on the rocks, with you, fishing. Ah, the Subi, winding turns, ocean several hundred feet below, right, whale spouts visible to the trained eye, new hues of blue for all to see, see my girlfriend, Makarahhhh, in the passenger seat, golden hair, long, past the waist, nose ring, waiting to be tamed, chain-to-ear. Many a trip to India, smiles my gal, morning light, clouds afraid to disturb, Makara's first trip to the rocks, in search of a potential Lingcod, or the devil's Cabezon, perhaps God's rockfish, painted in splashes of joy; fish, spirit, her belly has enjoyed for the last sixth months, but now, she is ready, to see, the source of energy, nurturing our unborn child.*

Rugged shorelines. Mountains, hills, canyons, redwood groves spring left, beyond picturesque to believe in angels, scampering over rocks, creeks, amusement's muses, purity. The sun rises behind the lighthouse, bless us with safety, a notion we appreciate, those who believe, mantras, to the gods of morning; music from India through speakers Ommmmm, she smiles coyly, my mermaid coy fish of far away battles, pure seas, having healed from shark attack, new life, her hand massages belly.

Green fields, cows rub against barbed wire, cut, cringes Makara, baby kicking. He will kick, dad was a soccer player; will be safe, mother's a healer. We both understand, no need for words, my head filled with too many, for the morning, the

heater, perfect temperature, floating over pavement, sunlight, ocean, spiritual platforms for naked bodies, walk beaches, Thai-Chi, Buddha-life, balanced by rebellion, a Henry Miller perfume, in full sexual bloom.

Trees now. Deep breaths, three connected. Ugly Stick, twelve-foot-fishing-pole, rattles, in the back, ice chest filled, backpack: filet knife, sharpened, hooks, 6 oz sinkers, 80lb braided line; the fly-fisherman's nightmare – a crane for hauling fish out of kelp. To the dinner table, a flurry of jazz-zzz, into your belly, zooooom, Cajun spice, ah, no more wine for Makara, but begin with white, finish with *La Rioja*, always Spain. Catch, do not release!

We drift, tight turns, magic carpet, high mountains, cliffs drop into blue-green abyss, sway to horns of bull kelp tangles, steep descent, one must wait for access. Vultures abound the rushed; Condors the calm. Nesting. Warm smiles, my family a few months away.

"This is it!" I tell Makara, disturbing mother, son. "Sorry," I continue. "But look at that, have you ever seen a more beautiful..."

"No," she says, "it's lovely." After a breath. "I really need to pee." Through the campground we go before parking near a meadow that will lead us to the edge of the world. Sing. Birds, trees, trails, vibrations. "You alright?" I ask her, carrying fishing pole, cooler, backpack, awkward, like a man, rushshshshshsh, she slows me down to enjoy, we breathe. "Let's go," I tell her; she shakes her head, subtle, as though worried to return to her point of origin, perhaps an old friend from the sea will show, remind her where blood once flowed.

I attach a mono-leader, thread hook through a whole squid, on a dropper loop, 6 oz weight at the bottom, swivel-on-top, connected to braided line, the kelp cutter, slice easy. Makara, hands together, eyes-closed, whispers: "I am not a

drop in the ocean, I am the entire ocean in a drop." Repeats. "Honey, can you bite this?" Makara removes excess line from the swivel with her teeth. "Thanks, babe." I launch a cast off the forty-foot-cliff, into kelp, into her home, the devils on the bottom, my desire yearns. I wait, fishing pole pointed to sea, rock structures rise from water, point to the heavens, my index finger gently to line, bow to cello, waiting the slightest pulse. Tic. Tic. Weight slides gently across rock bottom, connected the line, my very essence, the waves surge against cliff below, Makara looking over the edge, quickly retreating, a note of fear, my boy ready to jump. I smile; she steps farther away, but the light, blue surface, three feet of clarity pulls her back to the edge, waves crash over festoons of barnacles. Crabs scatter. We breathe out the stress of work, the impending mortgage, if we can afford it, the basics of simply being good parents. Accident, kinda, but so much love, we connect with rocks, strong years of beatings, ocean, tough days, the violent days, where skin is lost, but on we carry, the little one will be a king.

"How long does it usually take?" she asks, after an hour.

"I usually have a few by now," I tell her. She's too sweet to laugh, so we laugh together. "Let's try down there," I continue, ocean, waves crash onto exposed reef – it's the low tide. A time when the sea reveals its devils. She shakes her head. "You shouldn't go down there." I can only hear the cello, notes, drifting over kelp beds. "I will stay up here," she says, a wave thundering down on reef below. "Suit yourself," I tell her. "The fish are down there, I just know it." Bites, lots of them. "I had one." She smiles back as I bait my hook for the fourth time, but she is cozy, leaning back into the sunshine, the waves slap shore in surging bursts, feigning friendliness, the kelp snickers with truth.

"A fish," I tell her, setting the hook on one that swims into a cave, head shake, but with heavy gear, I hoist bulbous head, up the water column, through the kelp, one more run, back down to the devils, but I finesse him, out of the dark, over the ledge.

"Nice one, babe," she says, to the sound of a guitar, pluck. Dark hair, raggedy clothes, plays blue grass, stop-start, fifteen feet above Makara. She turns around to see his gaunt features, lonely stance, patchy-beard-music, keeping his heart, a beatin'. I smell the devil. Makara waves, he steps away out of sight, the fish flop, dangle. With a rock, I smash the Cabezon with one deft blow, a second, but his spirit is protected by his massive head. I cut the gills, to bleed, keep the meat fresh on ice.

He emerges, again, behind Makara. "I'm coming down," he says, Makara smiling always, smiling. The Cabezon rattles walls of plastic cooler. I swing the Ugly Stick crane around, 6 oz wrecking ball following the line. "Nah, man! You're not coming down here." He is much closer than I am to my girlfriend's swollen belly. He stops in his tracks, injured, looks at the ground. Decisions. I stare, the waves rush from behind, over exposed reef, pull at my ankles. Wounded, he heads back up, out of sight. I begin to gather the gear, Makara catching on, easing toward me, down the cliff. I nod. "Just wait here," I say, working my way up, see him walking away, guitar slung over back. Back-down, wait a while, the white-water, edge so close. Makara's eyes reflect ocean, the place that frightens, a history I will never understand. I shake her gently, but know it will take a while. Finally, up the cliff, sudden jolt, stop.



He is cracking the lid on a tuna can with his knife, half-pointed in our direction we pass by as he mumbles something to himself, to the sea, I motion for Makara to continue on, await the inevitable challenge. I can't decipher what he is saying, the kelp hiss background, majestic sea, having seen all theatres of men. The Cabezon slaps against prison walls. Cutting through blue sky, a Condor, sends me on my way. I look back, catch a glimpse of the blade, entering my skin, blood, see M A K A R A H H H H: gills flaring in her neck, hair slicked back, kelp, fins, tail-smash-guitar; crocodile teeth around knife, hand, tumbling down the cliff, the cooler silent.



## 5

# A Night Out

KIM FARLEIGH

Fifteen-storey buildings dwarfed the three-times-life-size sculptures of human figures in the square where we were supposed to be meeting beside a bookshop at seven o'clock. I was alone there at seven o'clock. Ironic ignorance (bookshops teem with information) made me think: Is this happening? If so, are attractive women coming?

I went to a lookout on one of the buildings' tops. Through transparent screens, the people below resembled ants. Despite time's magnitude and the vastness of events we don't see ourselves as tiny.

The organiser rang.

"Who's there?" she asked.

"Paco and I," I replied.

I had just recognised an "ant" below.

"Oh, God. Only you and Paco?"

"Yes."

"I'll be late. The bus I'm on is moving sooooo slowly."

"So" hammered by bad luck's horrors. It was the bus's fault. She always arrived late to avoid waiting.

Paco paced upon concrete. His red T-shirt above flat grey reflected our predicament: passion without hope.

When ants flurry around without direction, engulfed by huge dimensions, they really look lost.

I returned to ant level. Paco smiled, amused by the absurdity of nobody being there, merry, mahogany irises beaming in his pale face.

“Have people pulled out this afternoon?” I asked.

He opened Marta’s web page: Seven people still listed as coming.

“The Magnificent Seven,” he said, “With Four Missing.”

When Marta intentionally arrived twenty minutes late, discovering that Paco and I were the only ones who had turned up, she huffed: “People! Incredible!”

She was outside that analysis.

“Was anyone at the bookshop door?” she asked.

Because her entertaining bitterness was now the substitute for the passion I had been hoping to experience by more profitable means, I said: “No.”

This avoided pleasure-destroying facts. A woman I recognised from another meeting had been waiting near the bookshop. She had left when a man she knew had appeared. Maybe she was one of the seven and had left not knowing where we were?

“Typical!” Marta scoffed. “Fifteen people this morning. And now? This even happens when I have to book places in advance!”

She never threw people out of her group.

“Throwing them out doesn’t work,” she said. “They register again under other names.”

Therefore, wrong messages got sent.

Because her fury was entertaining, I avoided saying that someone might have been in the bookshop, expecting to see the organiser at the door at seven; but why ruin amusement with logic? The night was now going to be dull enough (no beauty igniting romantic hopes), so why wreck the one delight now available to me? My masochism was limited; but so was my sadism. I avoided attacking her self-perception, especially now that that self-perception had become interesting. I could have said that she should have been punctual, given that anyone in the bookshop would have been expecting to see a woman at the door and not a man; but why destroy thrilling self-deception with dreary logic?

"And nobody's contacted me either," she said. "No messages!"

Her beaming, laser eyes glinted like brown chrome. Grey follicles mixed with rust-orange and dark-brown hairs above her forehead, the hair trapped by a blue band. Her yellowish teeth added another hue to her kaleidoscope.

"I'm never going to organise another one of these events again," she snapped. "Never!"

Beneath my deflation, anger flamed. Had I known that no women were coming, I would have done something else. But you can't write to unknown women and say: You ruined my night, bitch!

"There's no point in waiting," Marta said. "Let's go."

Her unconscious motto.

We joined a queue under a dwarfing monolith. Self-belief denied that from the monoliths' tops we were tiny.

We entered an auditorium to see a retransmission of *La Traviata* from the National Opera House. The auditorium's floor rose from the front row. A huge screen hung above a



stage, speech unclear within the audience's chatting rumbling: animated hands, lively facial expressions, moving lips, energy cast into a night that would eventually be deemed by the thousands who attended as increasingly irrelevant as a source for conversation, just another distraction to fight the internal legions that skilful commanders organise to make you face the jury of the unconscious.

The screen was waiting to reveal a passion that would emphasize that my night was facing blandness. For me, adequate substitutes for direct emotion don't exist. Avoiding reality doesn't help me. That screen, blank as my romantic prospects, was going to become a window into tumultuous hearts, while my heart would continue beating at its normally insipid pace. *La Traviata's* emotional roller-coaster was going to form an ironic counterbalance to the disappointment produced by this night out. How many people in that auditorium loved opera? Two percent? But we need distracting forces to conquer the legions within that rise in perfect formations against our cherished states of mind unless we whip those formations with cinema, exhibitions, opera, musicals, theatre, sport, painting and chit-chat. Tonight, I've already had both flanks savaged.

The lights dimmed. My flanks got a breather. I even advanced against the legions within when a man entered the auditorium shining a torch, shadow heads expanding onto walls, shadows moving as the man moved, the torch brightening the screen, astounded people whispering: "What's he doing?"

Free events attract people who behave eccentrically in unaccustomed circumstances, inflated shadow heads flashing upon walls, whispering increasing, the screen hazed by torch

light, shadow heads symbolising the gulf in size between ego and reality.

Only the front row was unoccupied. People avoid front rows in cinemas. It doesn't matter if the view is perfect and you can stretch out; no: front rows are deadly!

Torch bleached the opera's colour. Indignant whispering soared. The audience should have been sympathetic towards someone with front-row hatred. What Torch was doing wouldn't enter a rational mind as an option; but Torch delighted me with his disregard for decorum.

Someone snapped: "What ahhhhh yooooo doing?"

"Are" hammered by mallet superiority.

Maybe Snapper was a two-percenter? Torch, ignoring the front row, believed he could disturb strangers while pursuing comfort. Maybe he felt so important that he felt he could extend his privileges to the detriment of the majority? He wasn't alone in that respect. His ego may have been so big that he felt his choices represented perfection.

Soaring whispering made an usherette douse the torch. The final: "What ahhh yooo doing?" stimulated usherette action, roulette-wheel-spinning heads having flashed shadows across the auditorium's walls.

Unwanted attention normally deters Torch-like behaviour. But Torch would have continued had the usherette not intervened, an entertaining distraction that had lifted my emotions above normalcy's flat plain. Thankfully, Torch's idiocy contradicted predictability, like a prehistoric man discovering he had a small sun in his hand and he couldn't get enough of it. I had been hoping for a breakdown in normalcy to lift my emotional state out of its trough; now I had little choice but to watch *LaTraviata*, the opera in which

love fights death, the female protagonist going from bliss to despair to dying amid romance and sickness that crushed boredom. Love battled, but, of course, death won, the dying principal actress impressive with torment, the make-up artists having given her previously white face a purple-dying tone, impressive that she could sing so beautifully while being prostrate.

But sharp emotions increase capability, an unconscious lust. Hence, we love.

Afterwards, life at base-level throb, Marta said: "That torch guy was unbelievable."

"He spotted someone," I said, "who owed him money, but the other guy slipped out a side door despite Torch's attempts to achieve justice."

Paco's face grinned like a switched-on torch. Our drinks came. The street we were in was lined by cafés. A breeze produced a slight chill.

Marta's indignation, perched on a black horse, besieged towns of disobedience, administering vengeance.

"I'm going to send messages to the people who didn't come," she said, "telling them what I think."

Cool wind gusted. I clutched my torso.

"People ask why I don't throw people out of the group," she continued. "But why don't people send messages to these people telling them what they think?"

I'd be the guy who'd send an angry message to a woman whose mother had just died; then I'd have to undertake consolation and reputation building, just for a night out.

"Maybe they went straight into the theatre?" I suggested, not adding, "because we weren't at the bookshop door at seven?"

“Then they should have sent me messages,” Marta replied.

“Maybe they sent you messages,” I offered, “not knowing that you didn’t have internet access?”

“I looked at six o’clock,” Marta said, “and nobody had taken their name off the list. It’s a bit late pulling out half an hour before.”

Despite people possibly sending her messages at five to seven, Marta’s eyes burnt revengefully. When angered, those eyes had a strange deadpan dryness from which dismay beams arose, like furious indifference. The missing people had become the criminals responsible for previous offences to her equanimity, possible that someone had been punctual, not seen anyone at the bookshop, then had sent her a message before joining the queue, not wanting to miss the opera. I couldn’t say that that hadn’t happened.

“Imagine if Torch,” I said, “had yelled: ‘Marta, are you here?’ And other people had started saying: ‘I’m looking for her too. Where is she?’”

Titillation boomed dimples from Paco’s merry eyes. Marta’s deadpan eyes glared; the parched expression in her irises meant I couldn’t read her thoughts. One thing was certain, however: The view she had constructed obliterated dreadful possibilities.

“If Torch had screamed: ‘Marta where are you?’” Marta said, “I would have said: ‘Why weren’t you at the bookshop at seven?’”

I avoided comments about buses. Self-deception is so sincere.

The messages Marta exchanged the next day with a woman accused of not having appeared the previous night

were made available for public viewing. The woman claimed she had been at the bookshop at seven. I thought of the woman I knew who had been standing twenty metres from the door. We had met once in another group that used the same web site as Marta. When the man she knew appeared at seven o'clock, they joined the queue. Maybe she had been the woman Marta had attacked?

Marta's response to that woman was: "*We* were the only ones there. *We* waited twenty minutes. But if you're convinced you were there with *us*, while *we* were waiting, why should I argue with that?"



## 6

# The Fatal Ambitions of a Troll under the Bridge

MONISHA RAMAN

The intense patter of rain always crunched my gut. Every drop that hit the ravaged asbestos which served as a roof to my 300 odd square feet home triggered my apocrine glands in multitude ways. Added to the mayhem of dealing with leaks from pores in the asbestos and finding dry ground to rest was protecting her. As means to revoke the jitters, I would immerse myself in the sweet scent of the first drops that hit the parched coastal land, and the strong aroma of jasmine from her hair and the extras from its leaf wrapped storage. The loud and explosive thunder forces my eyes open as I stare into the alien white ceiling. It is strange that my olfactory system is the first to reminiscence the finest days of my youth- my course of life wooing her as a lover and striving hard to fulfilling my promises as a trustworthy partner before I was thrown into this dingy, dark chamber, behind bars as a co-conspirator, as per the assumptions of law.

The likes of me – the unseen, crummy sapiens of the lowest rung of the societal ladder have always been mashed beneath the seats of power. The filth from our being has stained the once honoured lounges, so much so that the enclosed sections of power now reek of grime. Those men in power who disguised themselves as our guardians have conned us underground dwellers for generations now. I have

to confess that I get three inedible meals a day and a solid surface to sleep within the caged environ of the State's largest prison, but the fact that my sinful birth as a lowlife propelled me here for no fault of mine is gradually heating the pit of my stomach. I haven't stroked her oblong face in a year; the one chiselled and sharpened in flattering angles.

### THAT SWELTRY SUMMER

I am assigned gardening duty for the day. As I dig the blooming red soil with the partly rusted Hoe Dag, the blistering rays suck out the strength within me. I am quickly taken back to that summer sundown which now feels like aeons ago.

'When was the last time you looked under the bridge, Aiya?' I asked my master one humid afternoon in his perishable goods store as the heaviness in the air threatened to cut our skin. During the summer months, he barely visited the shop. He probably spent the afternoon gazing at the ceiling fan, probably cuddling his wife.

'Barely sprouted and you have endless questions. What is your problem?' his 60-year-old ego could not fathom a lame query from a 20-year-old ghetto inhabitant. Contrary to his fanciful thoughts this concrete space that earns us both a living does not offer me any comfort. The winds blowing across the Adyar River whose merciful bank serve as tenements for more than 70 families are more liberating. There is no room for the air current here in this room five times as big as my home, as every little space is stocked with goods.

'If you had looked below occasionally, you would have known that there are families, like yours, fighting for a bare minimum life against the stench and muck.' I had intended to

snub replying to his lament on the foul odour arising from the neighbouring gutter.

'*Laal Salaam!* Is this audacious talk rooted in impressing that dark school girl?' he questions.

'Don't call her dark.' I retort.

'She is rightly named *Kuyil*,' he snaps referring to koel, the common bird in our neighbourhood.

'Her name is Mayil,' I correct him.

Those summer afternoons when my longing to escape into one of the neighbourhood retail showrooms with air coolers and refreshing temperatures heightened, it was the sight of her face that created the Arctic environ around me. The way she tilted her head in my direction, the way her lips spread a few centimetres carefully concealing her perfect pearls they held within, but at the same time conveying cheer.

The shrill of the bell announcing lunch hinders my thoughts. As I line up for my share of soggy rice and stale accompaniments, I think of my bare minimum meals; soaked leftover rice and vegetables (only when the winds of fortune are kind) cooked to perfection by Mayil.

#### WAVES-OUR HARBINGER

As I head back to my duty post lunch, the familiar odour of a rotting animal carcass takes me back to the first time I laid my eyes on her. At that pre-dawn hour when light converged with dark, spreading its word of hope, the rays from my hand torch landed on her, on the other bank, her skin reflecting the colour of the hour and her eyes frantic as she paced around in her long printed skirt and yellow blouse. She quickly joined her gang of girls and women who had come to relieve themselves. They hushed back spotting me; embarrassed I



took giant steps back before running into my house. The bridge diagonally above our colony was silent except for the occasional tinkle of the cycle.

To the same bank, I returned every morning and late night, hoping to catch a glimpse of the girl with the enticing face and unpretentious demeanour. The effluent laden mild waves carried my desires to her. She kept the messages buried in the most cheerful pockets of her mind before succumbing to her yearning.

The narrow, rough by lanes, the now apathetic river, the numerous life forms and their wastes that swarmed around it, the hordes of thatched-roof huts echoed our desires; predominantly hers. 'Out of this pit' was her foremost one. Like my father's *beedi*, the fumes of her aspirations always lingered around me. 'A concrete house.... perhaps small, a clean outdoor space, a small one for my rangoli designs; coloured ones – no, I'll stick to rice flour *kolams*. A job in the supermarket – with air conditioning, so that I can stay cool all day. Now that I completed my SSLC boards, I can get into them. A decent job for you where you don't have any business with that ape-faced *Anna*.

The blow of the whistle interrupts the echo of her wishes. We have to line up for the evening roll call. The consequence of the late evening hot spell dampens my white cotton shirt, now showered with soil.

'Hard day?' enquires Maqbool from behind as we queue up.

'Guess it's going to be a harder night.' I reply.

'Hmmm... Roughly 60 more days of dealing with this shitty heat, the gang wars of these orphaned donkeys and the ghastly stares of that superintendent and I'm out of here.' He sounded excited.

'Good for you' I reply devoid of emotions. I have forgotten to express in the two years I entered this place. Like the prop roots of the banyan that stared at us from a distance, my mind did not sway. But unlike them, I had neither foothold nor the luxury of a lap to bury my head. I don't know if I will ever get those comforts back in life.

#### THE LONESOME DUSK

Arriving a few minutes late to queue up for dinner meant a sharp lash on the legs. In here, our dinner is served when the evening hours are still bright. A rarely served delicious meal meant sacrificing it to those pig-headed blunt dogs who have been here for more than a decade. Today, I am grateful for the stale food.

The late night hours are the most horrendous. As the winds of desolation outweigh the mugginess in the air, thoughts of Mayil congests my breath crunching my interiors the way the inspector quashes my fingers under his feet; until I break into a sob. My chest soaked in saline moisture misses the heaviness of her head and the strong aroma of herbal powder she uses to wash her hair. Our aimless banter soaked in the passionate saline moisture, her endless giggles at these hours, the way she closes her eyes every time I stroked her lips – the aftermath of love is gruesome.

I do not want to contemplate the present. She was right all along. I should have stayed away from that ape-faced man. That man who was clever with his plot all along.

I remember the endless quarrels I had with Mayil over him, 'No bootlegging! Nothing illegal!' her pitch reached hysterical extremes at such times.

'This pays the most. And this is the least illegal,' I would try to convince.

'Why don't you join Ganesh *Anna* and learn to plumb from him or go with your friends to clean hotels?' she would plead

'And scamper like a street dog for just a five or a ten a day?' I would retort.

At the mention of finances, her subdued tone would take over with a murmuring curse that went on constantly like the honking of vehicles on the adjacent bridge during the evening hours. She was right all along. I should have just succumbed to the dreadful drudgery like the others. He promised a bright future, a one free of labour and a fancy home. I thought I could work my way up and who knows perhaps one day represent this ward in the local administration?

'Just this once,' he said in the presence of the representative from the force. 'It will be two years at the most. I will ensure you get exclusive treatment in there.' He promised. 'Just this time, my brother. I don't have anybody else to rescue me. If you refuse now everything I had erected all these years carefully will collapse in a wink. I consider you my very own. Please.' he had pleaded, his appeals interrupted by his whimper at intervals.

I imagine they had discarded her, into to the river, like the remains of the goat after sacrifice. Perhaps, they have given her money in exchange for a few hours of her alluring body. They could have sent her to streets to fend for herself.

What kind of irrational route had my thoughts taken then? How could I stumble on the labyrinth of his whimsical requests? But fall I did, surrendering everything I earned and cherished and battled. Into the abyss my moment of regret drove me – sans filth, sans stench and foulness as I had aspired, but devoid of the power, love, passion and adulation

that helped me survive the horrors of a noxious shanty neighbourhood. In this void, I will decay and I know light is still an outlandish enchantment for germs like me who are meant to rot under the bridge.



## 7

# Little Exchanges

SCOTT LEVY

Mary Abon took her daily inventory:

Money in the bank. Food in the fridge. Clothes in the closet. Book on the shelf.

Since Mary kept the items in her life to a minimum, she knew that this ritual was unnecessary in a practical sense. Perhaps it was the very nature of such minimalism that drove her to it—she could remind herself of what still remained, and do so quickly. She could attempt to avoid being reminded of what was now gone.

This left even more time for reading the book on the shelf.

Harlan McDermott, unlicensed P.I., swam upstream against a flood of alcoholism to solve the murder of his ex-wife. A man haunted by demons, his work as a sleuth in pursuit of justice served to momentarily silence them. The clues were piling up with escalating speed. Soon Harlan, and Mary herself, would arrive at an answer. Harlan would then return to his bourbon. Mary would then return his story to The Little Library.

The mostly barren rural town where Mary passed her days in the echoey emptiness of her self-imposed minimalism was a good fifty miles from any sort of library that could be labeled 'big.' But the wooden stand bearing the sign, "Free Library: Take a book, leave a book," was only a block away.

The sign was aptly worded. Every time Mary had visited, a single book occupied the diminutive structure. A single book, freshly read by her, was returned to it.

Once Harlan McDermott ended his hiatus from liquor, Mary Abon would exchange his world for another—the circumstances, style, and genre of said world to be discovered upon exchange. She would still have money in the bank, food in the fridge and clothes in the closet. A new book would be on the shelf.

Mary's inventory, like nearly every aspect of her current life, would remain unchanged. It was only within the freely acquired content of pages did she move toward what came next.



For the second time, Janice Ritt bid farewell to Olga Detrovavitch. When the fictional countess had first been encountered, in the pages of the 600 page 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian novel, Janice had fewer wrinkles, gray hairs, and aches in her joints. She had a teenaged girl who still spoke to her, and a husband who still breathed. The reasons for the decades-long wall of silence between her and her daughter Angela were as complex as the issues between Olga and her numerous lovers. It was the more simply explained blight known as cancer that had stolen the breath from Charles, her husband.

Charles had built the Little Library. He did so to encourage her to minimize the clutter in their home.

"Once you've read a book, you no longer need it," he was known, on more than one occasion, to grouse.

This was back in the days when she was content to have one go-through per novel. After all, there were so many

others to dive into, so many other ways to swim in the waters of what came next.

But now, as the years added weight to the figurative pressure she felt on her chest, as the walls of her house seemed to spread farther away, opening spaces that remained unfilled by flesh and blood companionship, the unspoken voice in her mind argued with Charles's ghost: "After I've read a book, I need to visit it one more time. I know what comes next. I want to know what I missed. I want to learn."

As long as she re-gorged the words on those pages, she could stall the realization that lived in her gut—that even though age had given her new perspectives to accompany her re-reads, she questioned if she had learned anything that could be used. She had found nothing that reopened Angela's voice. Nothing that reanimated Charles's expired cells.

But the cycle of those novelistic retreads opiated her just enough to keep her going. She still possessed the capacity to think, to see, and to walk the short distance to the Little Library.

The cycle was nearly complete. The inventory was emptying. Like all novels, her part in the take-a-book-leave-a-book exchange was soon to end.

Janice believed that she too was ending. It seemed fitting. Her own exit would contribute to a silence more complete than that of any library.



Mary trudged through the snow. She limited her ventures to inventory replenishment. The supply of money, food and clothing remained satisfactory. Only the next storied volume was needed to complete her monastic larder.

She arrived at The Little Library at the same moment as another. A quick glance revealed, for the first time in Mary's experience, the empty box beneath the sign instructing the book swap. A slower glance revealed, also for the first time, the woman before her, older by a generation. The two of them, so accustomed to print, read each other's eyes.

Speaking not a word, they bypassed the box for a hand off. Each took a book, each left one. Harlan McDermott's plight was soon to be revisited. The loves and travails of Olga Detroitvavitch were on the verge of fresh discovery.

Each woman turned and returned to their heated, well lit houses.



One week later, with nothing to read, Janice trudged through the snow. In spite of the chill, her breaths came free of struggle. In defiance of the emptiness, her beating heart delivered no chest pains. The end of her life, which she predicted would accompany the final second reading, had thus far failed to imprint itself upon the pages of her flesh.

Taking a direction opposite to that of the now abandoned structure built by Charles, she made her way to the tiny diner down the road. True appetite eluded her. She hungered simply for something to do.

Through the window she saw the woman who had taken the final book, staring into a coffee cup. Even from the sidewalk, Janice could see her tears.



"I had a feeling that they were all your books."

"Not too many other people around."



Mary and Janice, sipping their refills, ordered a slice of pie. Neither was sure about managing one all to themselves, so they decided to attempt a split.

“There really aren’t any more?”

“No, sorry. Unless you’d like to read them again.”

“Too soon for me.”

“And twice is enough for me.”

The pie arrived. They surprised themselves by finishing it. Each received another coffee refill.

Perhaps it was the caffeine that made speaking easier. Perhaps the sugar assisted.

“I keep reliving the moment the state troopers came to my door,” Mary found herself saying. “They think my husband leaned down to pick up my little girl’s doll, which she dropped. That’s when he swerved into the other lane.”

Mary sipped her coffee. The steam failed to obscure the fresh round of tears.

“I lost my David and Allie in an instant.”

Janice reached for her companion’s hand. Despite them having officially met a mere half hour before, it was accepted.

Thus they sat in silence for a few moments. Eventually, the older of the two shared her own tales of grief—her own husband lost to death, her own daughter, alive but gone.

Their conversation turned to the books they’d shared. Praises and gripes were exchanged. Mary revealed her hatred of the abusive spouse Calvin Fortlette, her envy of the witty teenage sorceress Mandy Tuffield, her disdain for the privileged snobs Henrietta and Alvin Shankstun. Janice admitted that it wasn’t until her second go-throughs that she realized Daniel Resto had framed Abby Pidge and that the

Land Of Treblair existed only as the consumptive child Ruthie Halstone's fever dream.

Neither spoke of how these stories had temporarily quieted the howling of their torments. Neither needed to do so.

Eventually, a second slice of pie was ordered. The first had been apple. Blackberry was chosen as the sequel.

"I really shouldn't eat like this at my age," Janice said.

"You think it will hurt?"

"I don't know. It hasn't seemed to." She paused, directing her eyes toward the cooling blackness of her coffee. "I'm still here."

"So am I," said Mary.

As they waited for their order the two women looked at each other. The pie was a certainty. Beyond that, they knew not what came next.



## 8

### Morels

STEVE GRONERT ELLERHOFF

“They look like brains?”

“They do, buddy. Look.”

Kneeling in the middle of the trail, she again showed him pictures on her phone.

“Zombie brains,” he said. He fiddled the cuffs on his jacket.

“Rotten-out zombie brains,” she confirmed, rising and resuming this hike in the woods.

She and her brother Danny used to ride their bikes all the way out here to forage this time of year. Keokuk Street – then and now – was gravel and hills, bridging town and wilderness through fallow farmland. Crazy to think of riding clear out here and still having energy to go tromping around. But they did. She remembered they did.

This crest of oak and walnut was their setting for adventure, the place where they ran off to be Goonies. This was where E.T. got left behind, where Harry met the Hendersons and Ewoks made their treetop homes. She and Danny also projected into this forest all the dread they needed it to safely hold for them. The presence of burial mounds made it their own Pet Sematary. All those King and Koontz paperbacks she was too young to read at twelve – yet read at twelve – came to life on this wooded ridge, an escape

from their young parents' confusion about being young parents.

Whether her marriage held or not, Ryan would have it much different than she and Danny had.

"You can eat 'em?"

Somehow, despite lacking an attention span, he was still on morels.

"If you like. Gotta cook 'em first."

"What if it turns you into a zombie?"

"A lot of mushrooms are poisonous, like we talked about."

"But not these."

"That's right. And always have me check before you even taste a mushroom, okay?"

She hadn't seen a morel in person since finding the whole hillside of them with Danny. They came home with their backpacks full and Grandma cooked them up in the cast iron skillet that now hung in her own kitchen. Butter and egg and flour did wonders for just about anything, but the good she got in mushroom hunting was always in scratching and pecking around for them. Danny loved the taste. He scarfed down whatever he found each spring with culturally insensitive declarations of taking in the power of the Indians who'd built the mounds long ago. It was another time.

"You ate them before?"

"Yep," she said. "I don't like the texture though."

It was a good time to come out here, mid-April. Poison ivy wasn't up yet. Bugs were at a minimum. And the wildflowers were blooming, half a dozen varieties genuflecting all through the overwintered leaf litter.

Dutchman's breeches clustered here and there just off the path. Those she remembered by name because it was so silly: their arcs of little white hearts had looked, to someone with naming rights, like lines of European underwear hung to dry. She also recognized the clumps of bluebells and violets. Others she had to look up, referencing a PDF on her phone. According to the Guide to Iowa Woodland Ephemerals, the white flowers with a yolky center were bloodroot, the pink starry cups growing in blankets around every other bend were anemones, and reaching shin-height with their two leafy hands were the may apples – Danny had shown up with a shirtful of their fruit one year, hanging from a handlebar. Said they tasted like funky pineapple. She humored him, having a taste. Sure enough: funky pineapple. He feasted alone on the back stoop and later had the squirts so bad she felt sorry for laughing at him.

Ryan conscientiously stepped around a small flower growing in the middle of the trail. She knelt. Its two leaves were sort of sage green, blotched in brown, and its bloom opened downward, bereft of confidence. The white petals swooped down and curved up like a dollhouse light fixture.

The PDF was failing her.

"That's not a mushroom, Mama."

"I know, just give me a second here, buddy."

She snapped a picture for Instagram, as she had for each new blossom along the way.

Determined to figure out what it was, she scrolled along the trail behind him, trying links.

"It was a white trout lily," she announced.

"Mama, you ate the mushrooms," he reasoned, swinging his arms, "but *you* didn't become a zombie."

“No.” She lowered her voice. “But that doesn’t mean I won’t eat *your braaaaains!*”

The Boy Wonder squealed, bolted beyond reach of her gnarled fingers. She pursued him with fake limp and growls to the clearing.

The Havana Hopewell mounds – she’d looked them up – were still here, manicured but for white oaks growing out of them. Pink anemones sprinkled each circular hump. Seeing them again for the first time in a long time, she still swore she wouldn’t know they were there if Danny hadn’t told her they were. Couldn’t find out why they were called “Havana Hopewell” online – Wikipedia had an entry but nothing on the name. Surely some archaeologist had a pretty darn good reason for calling them that, right?

“See the mounds?”

She didn’t call them Indian mounds. She didn’t know whether or not her preschooler should grow up referring to them as Indians or Native Americans. She thought about telling him there were skeletons buried there but then maybe that’d be disrespectful, too, to sensationalize an ancient cemetery.

He didn’t react really, staring off into the woods.

She took care to pull her socks up over her jeans. *Keeps the ticks off your balls*, that’d always been Danny’s reasoning. *No guy’s gonna want a girl who’s had ticks on her balls*. Here she was, cracking up at his jokes twenty years later.

She’d already pulled Ryan’s socks over his trousers back at the lot, before he stepped into his rubber cowboy boots. She thought about having him step out of them to check and make sure they hadn’t rolled down – but that might be too

helicoptery. Sure, sure, she was overthinking. He'd get the head-to-toe soon as they got home.

"Ready, buddy?"

"Ready!"

She stepped out of the clearing, into the unmown, Ryan behind her. Within thirty paces they joined a deer trail all but hidden until they were on it, heart-shaped tracks pocking the narrow track. Ground was pretty wet, the mosses reviving and baby ferns fronding thanks to showers the night before.

She proceeded as if knowing exactly where she was going. Truth be told, she was second-guessing herself – though when wasn't she? In parenting. In her marriage. Since she couldn't remember how to get there, she tried to trust intuition. This ridge seemed more or less level but uneven, wooded lobes radiating off its spine. She was pretty certain the lobe they were wandering onto was the one whose southern hillside had all those mushrooms that time she and Danny hit the jackpot.

They passed a site of trauma. An enormous trunk stood snapped off about ten feet up, its dead crown slumped beside it. Bark sloughed off in sheets and at the base grew low shelves of burgundy stuff. Ryan stared at it with her.

"That – I don't know what that is, but I think it's a fungus."

"Gross."

"Don't touch it!" She'd said it in mom-voice. She redirected conversation. "Here's where we can start keeping our eyes peeled for morels though, okay?"

A few trees had fallen here, rotting away in peace and moss, clamshells of another fungus lining them. Seriously, she could spend all day out here on her phone looking everything

up. But stopping herself, she took a spin, sensing familiarity. A staggered row of white oaks with young basswoods mixed in – something told her it was the place even before spotting the red boulder down the gully, so out of place but just where it belonged. She could remember Danny sitting atop, tipping a bag of Corn Nuts down his throat.

“Okay. I know they’ve come up here before.” She set down her satchel and stooped to scan the ground. “I remember them coming up around tree trunks. Check the tree trunks, buddy.”

She showed him the picture on her phone once again. The guides she’d skimmed online said it’s good to bring little ones out like this – so much closer to the ground, they can usually see them before you do.

“You got it?”

“Got it.”

She got out the Dollar Tree mesh sacks, preferred by morel hunters because they supposedly disperse spores for next year’s crop as you collect them through the woods. He took green, blue was hers.

“And if you see one, be careful not to touch it until we’ve both identified it!”

The two tiptoed tree to tree, peering all around the base of each. Here the slope faced south and west, perfect for afternoon sun. Mother and son toed dead leaves, lifting may apple hands to check underneath. They knew the characteristic pattern, that strangely pitted cap more like sea sponge than mushroom. She knew from research they range in sizes and colors: greys, yellows, giants.

They left no hillside oak uncircled. They checked the basswoods, too, though the web suggested oak, ash, elm.



"I'm not seeing *any* mushrooms, Mama!"

"No," she said. "No, me neither."

They chicken-stepped back up to where the trunks had fallen and sat on one, hip-to-hip. Ryan kicked his heels in last year's moldering leaves while she opened her satchel with food.

"This was me and Uncle Danny's spot. We used to come out here and have our lunch here on this hill just like this."

"When he could walk and talk?"

"When he could walk and talk, yep."

She packed the same lunch they always packed as kids: bologna sandwiches on white bread with yellow mustard, a pack of Corn Nuts to share, and a liter of orange pop apiece.

Ryan bit into his sandwich peeking out of its foil and three chews later made his sour little goblin face.

"Mama, the hill looks like a big butt."

He was right. The drainage-winnowed cleft, separating the wooded rise into two hills curving down to the plain, did indeed look like a big butt.

"And we're sitting on the left cheek," she said, being reminded in her own mouth why she hadn't bought bologna since first moving out on her own in high school.

Ryan, in true Ryan-fashion, launched off the log and assaulted Imperial stormtroopers beyond the other side of a tree.

"Be careful!" Mom-voice again. It wasn't that mom-voice ashamed her – it was just something she noticed herself doing without thinking about it first.

"Mama, I found you something!" He was suddenly in front of her again, hiding one hand behind his back.

“Oh gosh, what did you find me?” She knew it could very well be some kind of dead insect or a handful of deer poop.

He held out a small yellow flower on a thin stem. “It’s a flower and it’s your favorite color even!”

“Oh my goodness, you thoughtful little man!”

Somehow he managed to bring to her the only yellow bloom in the forest. Everything else was white or pink or purple-meeting-blue. And its petals, its shape, were peculiar. They looked to her eyes like a violet.

“A yellow violet?”

She got out her phone and Googled *yellow violet*. Sure enough, they were a thing. Following a link, she started reading a poem about one by William Cullen Bryant.

“Look at the bear, Mama!”

Beyond the screen in hand was her boy and beyond her boy was a rotting log and peering over the log at her boy was an animal. Not a large animal but half the size of her son. Standing on its haunches, it looked like a cross between an otter and a bear. A big sort of weasel.

“That’s not a bear, buddy.”

Her voice came stronger than she felt. She hesitated to stand, unsure what it’d do with her height.

Ryan stooped and the creature slapped its paws to the log, lowering its snout for a sniff at him.

“Let’s don’t startle it, okay, buddy?”

They were eight feet apart but she was still sitting and that thing could clear the log faster than she could get to him. It gawped and she saw canines.

She hadn't stumbled on a wild animal before – and she didn't know what this thing was.

There wasn't an app for this.

It kind of looked like a wolverine, like in that *Golden Guide to Mammals* Grandma had on the bookshelf in the dining room. Danny showed her when they lived at hers. They were into X-Men – he had her quiz him on Marvel trading cards, memorizing them all. Wolverine was named for a shaggy-haired carnivore and this thing – smallish, toothy, brown – looked kind of like the illustration from the book.

It'd be super cute in a zoo but its yellow claws testing the berm of that fallen trunk overrode the thought.

A fox wouldn't have surprised her. A badger. Things she never heard of weren't supposed to live in Iowa. Iowa was meant to be predictable. Danny never mentioned something weird living out in these woods. She couldn't think of anything like this happening to her friends – nothing from any parenting blog – not even a fairy tale. Goldilocks met bears, Little Red Riding Hood a wolf, but no story of a mother and son meeting a whatever.

Ryan giggled – then bubbled into a laugh – and she loved him for recognizing there was something delightful about the thing because she couldn't on high alert.

The animal flinched, whipped its tail in an arc.

At that she rose and the creature sprang back, leaping an improbable angle, sprinting up the nearest oak. Its claws bit loudly into the bark.

“Wow!”

She had her arm around Ryan and was carrying him away, him dissolving in leg-pumping tears, and the thing up

the tree flailing its tail and stuttering a horrible warning through its sinuses. She'd never heard anything like that and neither had her boy, shocking him silent.

It only made the noise the once.

She retraced to the tree that fell in on itself, far enough to seem safe whether it was or not, and set Ryan down.

"Mama needs you to stay right here and not move so she can grab our stuff. Okay?"

Spooked into compliance, he gave her a nod.

"Can you sing Darth Vader's song for me? Sing Darth Vader's song while I get our stuff. So I can hear you."

The voice wasn't Mom-voice, was more direct, Ripley-vs.-Aliens voice, and it worked better than Mom-voice. Ryan was singing the "Imperial March" just like that.

She headed back to where they'd sat themselves down, a bit shaky but hyper-alert, stepping on every twig she could crack, rustling leaves, keeping track of her boy's melody with her ears and her eyes open for the animal. She figured the encounter was more or less over. Surely it knew they could not follow it up a tree.

When she got to their stuff, the thing wasn't in the branches anymore.

It had gone.

Bending to collect their stuff, there was her phone, still in her hand. Had been there all along. She'd not even thought to snap a picture. No proof for her Instagram followers. It'd be hers and Ryan's word it even happened. She'd probably get lectured about wild animals and parental irresponsibility over dinner.

If Danny could talk, he'd surely be able to identify it from description alone. She was pretty sure wolverines didn't live anywhere near Iowa...

She thanked the animal, whatever it was, for going and shoved the remnants of their picnic into her satchel, fetching the dropped yellow violet and high-stepping it in the direction of her son's voice. His tune didn't seem to break for a single breath until she returned to him, his ankles crossed and hands clenched together behind his back.

"Gotta pee?"

He stopped singing. "No."

She knelt and hugged the fear out of him, kissed him on the cheek. She felt hers lift, too. "Thank you for doing what I asked you to do. You did such a good job."

"It was a wild animal," he said, still a bit stunned.

"And we gave it its space," she said. "And now we're going to go."

They followed another deer trail back to the clearing with the mounds. Finding the yellow violet in her hand, she threaded its stem into the buttonhole on her breast pocket. It stood out brightly against the buffalo plaid. Ryan had no desire to walk all the way back to the Odyssey. He sprawled out in the pink anemones, honking and snorting in dismay, so she snapped a pic of him for Facebook. She framed him like the Wyeth girl with the field and farmhouse. He hadn't eaten that lunch.

"C'mon, buddy. We gotta walk to the car if we're gonna get tacos."

"We're gonna get tacos?"

"Mhmm."

"We're gonna get tacos!" He was off the ground and at her side and off they went.

She would not be bringing Danny any mushrooms, would not get to see if placing morels in his knotted hands would ignite recognition – re-cognition – a signal of memories somewhere inside him of their days, twenty springs ago, foraging in the woods.

"Skunked." That's what he would've said.

"That wasn't a skunk, Mama. That guy was brown!"

"You're right, buddy," she said. "But we got *skunked*, which is what we say when we go out looking for mushrooms but don't find any. That's getting skunked."

She knew her boy was listening even though he didn't seem to be.

Getting skunked today, she supposed, meant not getting skunked when visiting Danny tomorrow at the state home. The glimmer test would have to wait. Maybe she could buy some at the farmer's market with her allowance. Spendy but worth it if Danny reacted.

She stopped for a pic of the broken sunlight shining off the stripe of moss slaloming along the path through the woods ahead. Third time's a charm, she set to cropping and filtering while following Ryan out of the forest.

Not far from where they encountered him, the fisher cat came up through an applause of budding may apples and held still under a burled oak on a lower hillside. They were a ways off in scent and sound now. He was alone again. The soil at this spot, sandy, was perfect for digging and, sure enough, between two roots spread the opening of a fox den. Leaves cluttered the entry, half-sealed by a torn spider web spackled with dust.

He stilled. Listened. No mewling, no milk-thirsty yips within.

Too bad, being hungry.

He sniffed around to be sure it hadn't been recently marked. On the oak's northern side in a patch of damp moss grew two grey morels, fruited less than a day. They'd sprouted like a heart, their stipes fused, their smell of earthen spore and loam. He let them be.

Not even the sound of the smaller, louder one in the distance now. He exhaled and lifted his head for a tongue-curling yawn.

The fisher cleared the tree's perimeter and, no trace of urine or musk, tread down the hole, breaking through the web stretched across the entrance. He'd wandered farther than ever in search of a mate. This hole, dry and full of tamped leaves, would be fine for a rest. He could rise that night, find something to kill and eat, keep going.



## ESSAY

### 1

## Teaching at Fifty-Six

JAMES MULHERN

Inspired by the words of Thoreau, Whitman, Emerson, Dickinson, and other patron saints of American literature, I tell my students, in whatever ways I can, they contain multitudes, that nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of their own minds, and the real business of life is to live in the present, find eternity in a moment. We dwell in possibilities, I say, and possibilities are endless. As a teacher of American literature, I want my students to use the literature as a way to make connections and find meaning.

Explore the circumference of your life. Write about your experience. Celebrate yourself! I urge. My students answer, This ain't math, Mr., or say under their breaths, Mr. Mulhern be on crack, He be trippin', or That's so gay. I teach poor inner-city kids, children of immigrants, immigrants themselves, kids who are struggling with many issues that I never dealt with in my Boston Irish Catholic upbringing, but sharing many of my issues as well: insecurity, perplexity, longing, nanosecond cycles of optimism and pessimism, but always, hope eternal. To live is so startling for them, it leaves little time for anything else. In particular: their homework, their reading, their essays, and their attention in class, which is otherwise engaged by cell phones, ipods, or the booty licious body in the next desk.



I begin my American Literature course by asking students to answer the questions, Who am I? Why am I like I am? *What do I believe is true?* They have to write an essay and read it to their peers. Most of them cringe at the thought of writing an essay, especially one that needs to be read aloud. My hope is that they start to see beyond the surface of themselves, their adolescent identities, and begin to know a sacred self deep inside, what Emerson calls the infinitude of the private man. Literature, as I see it, is the ladder hanging close to the side of the schooner, this assignment is the first rung, and I want my students to get wet. Telling students that they are schooners and that my sincere hope is that they get wet leads to all sorts of exchanges. Fuck you, for example. Mr., I ain't getting wet for nobody, or perhaps the definitive, That's nasty. My methodology is more precise. I give them a handout with specific, concrete directives, and have them read it first to themselves. Then I or a student reads it aloud, then I paraphrase each point several times, then I am repeatedly interrupted by Sasha, Makeba, Latitha, Tim, or Mark, who asks me if he/she can to go to the restroom, then I forget what I was in the middle of explaining, then I begin all over again, then somebody in the back says, What the fuck is he saying?, This sucks, I feel sick, or It's too hot in here.

I can appreciate my students' sensibilities, however. They are teenagers, and in the short span of their lives, how could they possibly be certain of who they are? I think back to when I was their age. I was certain of so much and so little at the same time; this is the paradox of youth. I remember sitting around Melinda Baker's table – my friends and I full of ideas about religion, politics, and sex, beginning to feel like we had some control over our universe. I don't know what my students talk about when they hang out with friends; I'm not there. But I know they wrestle with the same angst I felt

when young. I see glimpses of it in their papers, and I love them for it.

My students are searching. All of us run fast, stretch our arms farther, until one fine morning we are older, at the halfway part, looking back. I think of Melanie from yesteryear who wanted to be an actress, how serious she was in the school plays, her erect posture and fair, fair skin; Andrea, the artist who designed all her own clothes, the beret she wore, the way she sauntered down the hall, hips swaying; John, long dirty red hair, high as a kite, reeking of marijuana, lanky, too tall for the small desk, sleeping at the back of the class; Michael, grinning and laughing with wide-eyed David beside him, both feigning innocence when I tell them to be quiet, then laughing some more; Rhonda from night school, her four children, cervical cancer, passing her GED exam after the third time, the way she cried. All of them are in their thirties now. I'd like to see them again, talk for a moment. It would be awkward to dwell longer than that. Teaching has joy, but there is sadness, too. When my students graduate, I experience the sensation of being left behind. Students come and go. The door closes and you are left in the room, remembering mostly their eyes, knowing them all, how they would fix you in some formulated phrase, mold you by their vision. What *did* they see when they looked at me? Would they say school was worth it after all?

Sometimes, as a writing exercise, I tell my students to describe the rooms and furniture within their homes. Any structure and/or furnishing will do, I say to the recalcitrant ones. (Point of pedagogy – always give your students a choice.) I use this technique as an exercise in characterization and setting, but also as a way for students to better understand their past and present.

Nadine, a future fashion designer who doodles outfits, creates a short list: “coffee table, dressers, armchair (pink), one desk.” Jessica, with the meticulously organized notebook, relates how her “dog took care of a one-seater real good” and describes the sofa as the “main sitting piece where we chill and relax playing PS2, XBOX, and watching DVD’s on our big screen.” Alex, a thin dreamy-eyed young man in the corner, explains that his “dad sits on the rocking chair when we have guests” and smiling Shane, who asks each week about his grade, catalogs the “crappy, uncomfortable S---- High School seats; falling asleep in a beanbag chair; tripping over an ottoman; bar stools; break dancing on a rug,” and an enigmatic “mattress outside Circuit City at 2 am.”

As a teacher, you hope to evoke insights or epiphanies, transcendental revelations that pour effortlessly onto your students’ notebooks. But this happens infrequently. The results are usually more prosaic. To expect gems of eternal wisdom is presumptive and naive. Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen years on this planet. What enlightenments can be gained in that short span of time? At fifty-six, I still grapple. Judy, a petite Jamaican girl who rarely speaks in class and wears a vacant expression most of the time, writes, “My mother has covered my brown couch with some red cloth to hide some of its ugliness. Plus my eighty-four-year-old grandma has taken permanent residence on it, never getting up from it except to go to the bathroom and eat. Now I call my brown couch ‘the forbidden couch’ because it’s like I can’t go near it. Even so, I have all these memories from it that I keep close to my heart.” There are themes here – pertinacity, aging, boundaries, ugliness we hide, positions we claim, memories we cling to.

If we are fortunate, we become freer as the years progress, and the emotional scars, from our more mature vantage points, appear as they really are – minor scrapes and

cuts, dissipating rings, a rock cast into water. In the grand scheme, our personal experiences are the diminutions of a song, and this, to me, is sweet music.

But still we feel the pain. Life hurts. I am moved to tears when I read my students' essays or when they share their stories in class: alcoholism, molestation, AIDS, violence, drug addiction, poverty, cancer, death, depression, loneliness, the loss of a parent or sibling – it's all there, the opera of life. At times I want to be a father to all of them. I imagine that I'm rich and can pay for their college educations or buy the things they need.

A few years back, after Thanksgiving break, one of my students told me she was withdrawing from school. An older female relative hovered in the doorway while Charlene told me her mother and siblings were killed in a car crash on Thanksgiving eve. They had been traveling down Route 95 from Georgia to bring her home for the break. I said I was sorry and hugged her. What will you do now? I asked. She said she was moving to Georgia to live with cousins. In a moment she walked out of my classroom and life forever. The image of Charlene's innocent, shocked expression returns to me again and I wonder what's become of her. What is her world like now?

But the universe is also joyful and magical. We are simply too distracted to see the goodness, to enjoy the game, to decipher the messages, or to crack a smile. We hesitate. The letters are laid out for us like those on the Ouija board, over which I slyly pushed the heart-shaped planchette to the delight and fright of Mom and Cheryl (my childhood babysitter) on a hot July evening, the crickets sounding in the humid darkness outside the window. I spelled out the cliché story of an old lady, a former occupant of our house, who cooked her baby in the oven. I see the trinity of our heads

over that board as we tried to discern and rift our way into the secret of things – *What wisdom can we find here?* A peal of laughter, a gasp, a scream, our excited faces staring at the stove. We laughed more, and things never felt so good. These are moments that radiate.

Carl Jung, a favorite of mine when I struggled with spiritual issues, discusses synchronicity, or the concept of meaningful coincidences, those shining moments when similar events cluster together and give one the sense that something extraordinary is occurring. There is a significance that cannot be explained by Western conceptions of cause and effect.

Like the moment Kayla announces in class during a discussion of Langton Hughes's "Salvation" on the very same day that I write about my own disbelief in the Jonah story: "I have a question about the Bible. Are we supposed to believe that Jonah was swallowed by a whale and lived inside that thing for three days? Cause I think that's crazy! I don't believe that junk is true, Mr. Mulhern? Is it true?" And she looks at me with an adamant cause-I-just-really-gotta-know expression on her face, as though I will end her confusion right then and there.

I answer, as teachers are supposed to respond, respectful of the students, many of whom come from Biblical literalist religious traditions, that people read the Bible in different ways: some believe that it is the literal word of God, and others believe that the stories are meant to be understood symbolically. In America, I add, we believe in tolerance, and respect the diversity of religious beliefs. I don't say, what I really think – that a literalist interpretation of the Bible is ignorant, dangerous, and offensive, and that I get angry at all the hate, misery, and evil that Christianity has caused in the long history of humanity.

As if sensing my dour and too-serious thoughts, Deshae, who is seated at the back of the room, bursts into laughter at something she is remembering. She jumps up and down in her seat, and exclaims, "Jesus came into my church this weekend."

She runs to the front of the room, sits down, and begins her story, shaking her hand in front of her face, excited in her recollection, laughing, smiling ear to ear, "There's this homeless guy. He thinks he's Jesus."

There is an explosion of laughter. Ebony, Veanna, and others say, "I know him!" They exchange stories of this man, discussing how he's made the rounds in their churches.

Deshae continues, "He just walked in, said he was Jesus, and started rollin' on the floor. We were all singin' and the pastor, he just ignored him. I wanted to laugh, but I knew my mother would kill me." I, like Deshae's classmates, find the story amusing, and prod her. I want the details, trying to picture the reactions of the congregation more completely.

No one did anything? They just ignored him? I ask.

"Yeah." She laughs. "We didn't want to disrespect him. We just carried on!"

The other students share their anecdotes, and then I bring the class back to order, to our discussion of Hughes's "Salvation." We draw comparisons between our individual experiences and those of Langston Hughes, who recounts his childhood attendance at a church revival and the "special meeting for children 'to bring the young lambs to the fold'" at the end of the service. In a bittersweet essay, Langston explains his anxiety and frustration as he "kept waiting to see Jesus," how he believed that Jesus would literally come into the church and walk down the aisle. That night he cried over his deception, when after waiting an interminable amount of

time, his “aunt came and knelt at my knees and cried, while prayers and songs swirled all around me in the little church.” Finally, he approached the altar, pretending to “see” Jesus come, and joined the fold of “little lambs” (his tired peers) who had already been “saved.”

It occurs to me that teaching is my salvation. There are wonderful moments, when things move so fluidly, and the pitch of our discussion seems just right – students are smiling, engaged, sharing feelings, excited. A palpable energy (the Holy Spirit?) moves through all of us – a realness, an in-the-momentness that charges the air and electrifies our conversations. Connections are made. Questions are answered. We learn who we are. If we are fortunate, we intuit an answer to the question *Why?* Sometimes we discover what is really true.

I believe this is true – People like to imagine that rare and delectable places lurk in some remote part of the universe or some distant epoch from the past, but right now, in my classroom, surrounded by students, I dwell in that delectable place, a most memorable season of any day. I feel intensely awake, most alive – renewed. I think, *This is communion, and teaching will be the pond that I bathe in each morning, every new day.*

## 2

# The Excellent Writer Within

MICHAEL LEVY

The art of good writing comes from the artist within. All humans have the ability to become great authors, poets, artists and musicians, etc., so why do most folks find it such a difficult task? Why do many people say I could never be a writer or I could never aspire to write poetry? Moreover, why do folks who do write grow discouraged when their work is rejected?

We are what we think, so if we believe we cannot succeed in our daily actions, then for sure we will never get away from our perception of what we think we are. This self-defeating attitude was not of our making. As we were growing up and maturing into adulthood, we were indoctrinated with thousands of negative thoughts. This gave us a belief that we are only homemakers or only truck drivers. This limited vision of our role in life gives us a limited life. People the world over have great creativity. Once we start to understand who we are and the reasons we exist, we start to cultivate eloquent works of creativity.

Just writing worthy, meaningful literature will not get the success it deserves unless we possess the resolve to carry on writing in spite of the critics. There will always be those who criticize a writer, no matter how well the composition. Rejection is an everyday experience for most writers. This is a joy we must accept and grow from. Just because someone does not like our essay does not mean it has no value. It



means it was not acceptable to the editor or book reviewer who was reading the essay.

We can do two things when we feel constant rejections. We can give up and say it was not meant to be. Alternatively, we can say, "How do I become a better writer and have my work accepted by more of the establishment?" Once a small section of the general public starts to take an interest in our writing, the sheep mentality of the "establishment" will no doubt follow. It always has. It always will. Success breeds success.

Until we can find the inner core of creativity and start to write from the soul, we will never become great writers. We may achieve a modicum of success by writing a few columns for a newspaper or magazine but that could keep us in a vacuum. We can scrape a living, but may not amass a fortune, for we are trying to write and trying will never cut the mustard.

The secret to excellent writing is to enjoy with ecstatic abandonment each letter and syllable we put down on paper. The pure joy of writing makes us successes; nothing else will. Those who tell us we have to struggle and sweat have not grasped true meaning in their lives. We need no approval of any human to be a success.

Stop trying to become a success. We are successes already. We were born. We are the success of life. The sperm hit the egg and here we are... Hello world!

Everything else we do and achieve is just a bonus.

Life is to be enjoyed, not endured. Joy brings true meaning to life.

Now the next question to ask is "what is joy?" What does joy mean and how do we achieve it? Look within, take

time to silence the mind and feel the texture of nothingness. Smell the perfume of celestial splendor. Discover the sound of cosmic waves flowing through your subconscious mind. Palpate infinity. Breathe eternity. Conceive the splendor of maturing into the essence of a successful writer. Be the word, become the poem, and live the adventure. Everything we do is inscribed in our soul's book of life. We just need to learn how to read the instructions written within every cell and molecule of our being.

Each tissue and sinew bleeds muscular power of infinite, majestic might. Fly on the wings of limitless mastery. Escape the shrouded cocoon and become the enchanting butterfly. The dreams of authentic reality are about to manifest a rainbow of magical delights:

*"Write on Time" "Compose in Space"*

J\_ust

O\_bey

Y\_ourself (THE GENIUS)

### 3

## Fanfiction is Out and About

TAMMY RUGGLES

Years ago, when fanfiction was in its infancy, if someone wanted to share a story based on a favourite TV show, movie, book, song, or play, it would go into a paper newsletter and then be mailed hardcopy to other fans. Or it would go into a paper zine, along with other fanfiction stories and fan art, and then purchased by mail.

These zines were assembled in time-consuming, painstaking fashion, and were treasures to keep. Secret treasures at times, given the erotic nature of some of the same-sex pairings that occurred, and are still occurring today.

Then the internet happened, and it changed the way fanfiction was written, produced, shared, and regarded.

The secret society gave way to open borders. Anyone could write anything, and post it on their own fanfiction site, or in an archive. The stories were emailed to other fans, shared on Yahoo mailing lists, and now, on social media.

Back in the day, professional writers tended to keep their fannish writing to themselves, for fear of being dismissed as an amateur, unprofessional writer.

Now that has turned on its head. With the success of 50 Shades of Grey, by EL James, and the movie After, based on a One Direction fanfic, fanfiction is now mainstream. Thousands if not millions of fan works exist in the world. Just look at Fanfiction.net or Archive Of Our Own. And if all of

this is new to you, then you can visit a site like Fanlore, TV Tropes, or the Organization for Transformative Works and find out the ins and outs of the fanfic world. It has its own culture, customs, and language.

Some critics, even in fandom itself, say that fanfic is nothing but a cesspool of stream-of-consciousness writing, or personal fantasies written on a keyboard. But others say it's the next big thing in literary fiction. True, you will have to trudge through the desert to get to the oasis, but everyone has a story to tell, and that's what fandom and the worldwide web is all about.

There are fanfic recommendation sites that can point you in the right direction.

Some fanfic writers take their work very seriously, while others just do it for fun. It can be a hobby, or it can be a full-time job, but what it always has been and always shall be is a passion. Fanfic writers write because they want to keep their favorite characters alive. They want to put them in new and different situations, anything from same-sex relationships called Slash, to regular non-sex stories, to 100-word one-shots called drabbles.

Mulder and Scully are beamed up onto the starship Enterprise to mingle with Kirk and Spock?

Of course.

That's what fanfiction is all about.

## ARTICLE

### 1

# **Blending the Performer, Redeemer and the Femme Fatale: A Structural Analysis of the Three Women in Christopher Nolan's "The Prestige"**

MS. A. KRISHNA SUNDER & DR. NILA N

Movies have consistently disseminated the dominant ideologies girdling the structural sovereignty of an epoch. Since time immemorial, women representations in movies have been put to question. The dearth as well as misrepresentation of women in Hollywood had indefinitely raised quantitative layers of uproar and outcry. Though the roads of feminism had partaken enormous measures to enhance feminine experience and female manifestations through movies, the ultimate effects had often been disparaging and denigrating.

Being perceptible channels, movies can very often reverberate the camouflaged intentions of a director. The plot of a movie governs his/her repressed ideologies as well as opens up directly to the unfathomable subconscious. An in-depth analysis of Christopher Nolan's movie *The Prestige* will transparently bring out the mechanisms used in representing the women characters. Nolan's women are either overglorified, undermined or sexually objectified while his men bathe in as tragic heroes pulling sympathetic abundance

through their character magnification. Though Nolan has been largely appreciated for the finesse of his directorial skills as well as his artistry in the expanse of mind games and puzzles, his representation of women had been hardly judged. The main endeavor of this piece of writing is to fill the critical void in the assessment of Nolan's female representations. A scrutiny of these female characters through Laura Mulvey's essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* published in the year 1975 would shed light into the disappointing tentacles through which their characterizations are diminished.

Released in the year 2006, Christopher Nolan's *The Prestige* is a pastiche of obsession, deceit and trickery. Set in Victorian London, the movie narrates the endless rivalry between two great magicians, Alfred Bordon and Robert Angier. Though the puzzle movie with its most intimidating climax won millions of hearts, the misrepresentation of female characters had reaped undesirable repercussions to the evolving current social structure.

It takes as starting point the way film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle. (Mulvey 1)

As Laura Mulvey, the most popular British Film theorist and Feminist opines, the pivotal idea behind a movie is to establish the existing social order – the patriarchal society – through sexist ways thereby permeating visual pleasure to the masculine orb. Nolan spreads flesh and blood to his three women characters in *The Prestige*, namely Julia, Sarah and Olivia.

Irrespective of the role, screen presence and character orientation, all these three characters can be identified through the same mechanisms. The first female image that

Nolan portrays in the movie is that of Julia McCullough, a stage performer and the wife of Robert Angier. Played by the American actress Piper Perabo, the role of Julia is ineluctable to the whole context in which the plot of the movie spins on. Apart from being Angier's wife, she is a stage performer and coalesces and brings substance to the unified performance of John Cutter and his co-assistants Robert Angier and Alfred Bordon.

If we are to read her through the lens of Mulvey's essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Julia, without a doubt, is an instrument owing visual pleasure through her physical charm to the male spectators. Her physical appeal is put to maximum use as Nolan portrays her. She is showcased on screen for the first time as an elegant piece of attraction on stage. Her short costumes and her bare thighs to which Angier plants a kiss makes her an object of gratification not just to the male figures on stage, but even to the spectators present for the stage-show as well as the real spectators of the movie. Thus her sexual presence disseminates three layers of masculine glances - the men on stage, the men watching the magical performance and the real spectators of the movie.

Mulvey's essay sets in motion with this sardonic hypothesis of the social structure in which women are placed in various filmic segments only to please the male imagination. Thus the established norm of a filmic structure is to entertain a man with women as its objects.

Thus, Julia either remains as a common object on stage pleasing the audience or as the sole property of Angier-the hero in his bed chamber as his mate. In both cases, she is narrowed down to the role of a pleasure-bringer and is hardly being shown with the merits of a performer. As Mulvey states, "looking itself is a source of pleasure" (Mulvey 3). To exemplify this, Julia's physical attractiveness is made

use of. Julia is the one who sets the story of the movie in motion and triggers the emotion of rivalry and revenge in the minds of the two great magicians. Despite her pivotal role in the movie, she retracts as a revenant and never comes back even through memories after her death.

While Julia is a clear-cut object in the hands of the director, the second character named Sarah is a prototype of a woman configured within patriarchal norms. She is an ordinary young lady who happens to meet Bordon during one of his stage performances. She falls in love with the great magician and sacrifices her entire life for him.

The main idea behind representing Sarah in the plot is basically to create a foil to the other two female characters and to prove how a traditional family-woman should be as per the codes of a male dominated society. Sarah's physicality is not exposed as with the case of the other two women. Her costumes are more traditional and it fits accurately for a traditional home-bound woman whose entire devotion goes to her husband and her home. She is seen more fastened to household activities like cooking and cleaning up his home, dressing up his wounds and being in the market to fetch household goods. While Julia and Olivia are stage performers, Sarah is more tied to the household chores, taking care of their only girl child, Jess.

We live in a society ruled by the father, in which the place of the mother is suppressed. Motherhood and how to live it, or not to live it, lies at the roots of the dilemma. (Mulvey 1977)

Sarah is good looking though not as attractive as Julia or Olivia. Sarah fits exceptionally into her role with the accustomed coding of the family. The concept of family has been encompassed within the structure of mainstream global cinema since its early inception and the ideology behind the



concept is to strengthen the women's oppression and to exemplify her weakness in general.

The political mechanism behind introducing the concept of a family is to establish the hierarchical relationships, the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed. The presence of the family is to establish the values of the society through the suppression of women. Sylvia Harvey in her essay *Woman's Place: The Absent Family of Film Noir* in Ann Kaplan's book opines thus.

The representation of women has always been linked to this value-generating nexus of the family. The value of women on the market of social exchange has been to a large extent determined by the position of women within the structure of the family. Woman's place in the home determines her position in society, but also serves as a reflection of oppressive social relationships generally. As Engels suggested, within the family 'she is the proletarian, he is the bourgeois.' (Harvey 36)

However, it is quite disdainful that Nolan has introduced Sarah to make her a symbolic representation of a family, a microcosm of the society. The determinates of dominance and subordination which is the essence of a larger society is represented through Sarah. The methodical mechanism through which Nolan establishes a family into Sarah's character is largely a cause to bring in a balance to the current society and in pulling women back to homes through the male perception. Thus Sarah is a representation of the female archetype – the woman as the redeemer. She is totally tied to her family – her husband and her daughter. We do not particularly see a world of Sarah distinct from this. The scene where Bordon gifts her with the key of a new house is a clear indication of trap to cage her within the so called patriarchal order. She commits suicide halfway through the movie and in a way sacrifices her own life to safeguard her husband's magical tricks. Sarah becomes an epitome of self-sacrifice and

devotion, making herself a total foil to the other women characters of the story. She is seen as a nurturer – a redeemer throughout the movie.

Olivia Wenscombe, played by Scarlet Johansson is the third female character as well as the only woman character with the lengthiest screen presence in the movie. Olivia, unlike Julia or Sarah, interacts and spends her days and nights with both Angier and Bordon and therefore is a character who knows all the men in her circle better than anyone else. Olivia is extremely attractive in her appearance with her long blonde hair, blue eyes, pouted lips, make-up and jewellery. Her attractiveness is greatly put to use as she performs as a stage assistant with Angier initially and with Bordon lately. Even John Cutter, the one who organizes stages for Angier brings Olivia as an assistant by stating thus. “A pretty assistant is the most effective form of misdirection” (00:36:52). Cutter presumes that the seductiveness of Olivia on stage can, to a great extent misdirect the audience even when things go wrong on the stage. Her cleavage as well as her bare long legs – a symbol of a Noir woman/Femme Fatale – is displayed frequently to quench the visual desire of the male ego. This intention connotes with what Mulvey states in her essay.

Similarly, conventional close-ups of legs or a face integrate into the narrative a different mode of eroticism. One part of a fragmented body destroys the renaissance space, the illusions of depth demanded by the narrative, it gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out or icon other than verisimilitude to the screen. (Mulvey 7)

Olivia is partly a Neo noir woman constructed by Christopher Nolan. Nolan has consciously subverted the norms of a pure Noir woman and has made her character quite distinct with her own attributes. She is not completely a

Femme Fatale disturbing the family circle of the man she is behind. At the same time, she is bold and independent to a great extent and is highly demanding in her nature. She opens up about those things which she can't chew in and reacts vehemently in very many occasions.

Like a Noir Spider woman, she is not completely diabolical and does not try weaning the men from their families. Sarah's death affects her and she believes she is partly responsible for the unfortunate incident. When Bordon talks about Sarah in the most detached manner, she responds in a bitter way without knowing that this is Fallon and not Bordon. "Its inhuman to be so cold" (01:39:31).

Nevertheless, the consistent visual motif is not necessarily the entire meaning of an image, says Janey Place in her essay *Women in film Noir*. A spider woman is in fact a sexual woman who operates and functions under her sexuality. Apart from the common origins of a Femme Fatale, a sexual woman in any context of any movie is multi-dimensional. Thus Olivia through the lens of Christopher Nolan is multi-dimensional as she partly identifies herself with a few traits from the Femme Fatale in Noir movies.

However, the extreme independence possessed by these women is often rewritten in the name of absorbed narcissism and as a result, the woman often gazes at her own reflection in the mirror. This kind of a self-interest rather than utmost devotion to the male figure is one reason why she is disdained.

Olivia is neither a deadly seductress nor a rejuvenating redeemer. Her visual dominance and her spatial independence often makes her similar to a Femme Fatale. With his classic deviations and abundance in the skill of character crafting, Nolan has created his own space in

representing Olivia partly with Noir features. Beyond the door of the theories, Nolan has specifically designed the character of Olivia by subverting her Noir traits to please all the men on screen and undoubtedly, the male spectators, as long as they immerse themselves into it.

Women are often forced to fit into the concepts and ideals of femininity to satisfy men's needs. The misrepresentation as well as objectification of women on screen can only fuel the existing disparity and gender inequality in our society. The recurring female deaths in Nolan's movies have definitely chiseled a set notion about women in the mindset of the audience. When women's refrigeration happens constantly and continuously from the great directors like Christopher Nolan, the ultimate consequence that it sprinkles down will be heavily devastating and disparaging.

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## BOOK REVIEW

### 1

## *The Only Story* by Julian Barnes

BRIAN FINNEY

I recently finished reading one of my favourite author's latest novel, Julian Barnes' *The Only Story*. This is his 23<sup>rd</sup> book. As often happens with experienced writers he dares more with less. He often uses short sentences and everyday vocabulary. Yet he constructs them into a complex narrative.

Take as an example his introduction of the words of the title. "Everyone has their love story," the much older married Susan tells Paul, the young narrator who's fallen for her. She goes on to elaborate: "it may have been a fiasco, it may have fizzled out, it may never have got going." But, she concludes, "It's the only story." The narrator says, "I feel rebuked. Not rebuked by Susan. Rebuked by life." Simple and complex at the same time.

Section One is told in the first person and recounts Paul's naïve conviction at the time that his first love will last forever. "My attitude to our love was peculiarly straightforward... I simply thought: Well, that's the certainty of love between us settled, now the rest has to fall into place around it."

But Section Two, which tells what happens to the pair when Susan leaves her husband and moves with Paul to London, soon elides into the second person as the affair turns into a difficult long-term relationship: "You realise that, even

if she is the free spirit you imagined her to be, she is also a damaged free spirit.”

By the last Section Three they are no longer living together, and Barnes quickly switches to the third person to reflect the distance that separates Paul from his younger self: “nowadays the raucousness of the first person within him was stilled. It was as if he viewed, and lived, his life in the third person. Which allowed him to assess it more accurately, he believed.” At the same time Paul acknowledges, “In love, everything is both true and false.”

In other words, first, second and third person narrations each have a different truth to tell. The narrative as a whole sees equal validity in all three persons. Barnes, the skilled novelist, uses different narrative voices to reinforce his relativist vision of both the experience of love and the act of writing about it. Paul often talks about his experience of love in terms of novel structure: “The end had been terrible, and far too much middle had overhung the beginning.” Love is a story we tell ourselves; but it changes with each telling.

Read it for yourself. It’s relatively short – and masterful.

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Alessio Zanelli** is an Italian poet who writes in English and whose work has appeared in over 150 literary journals from 13 countries. His fifth original collection, titled *The Secret of Archery*, was published in 2019 by Greenwich Exchange (London). For more information please visit [www.alessiozanelli.it](http://www.alessiozanelli.it).

**Dr. Avdhesh S. Jha**, an author, poet, teacher and observer is a strong critic with an inclination towards societal development. Presently he works with EDI of India. With ten doctoral scholars, being awarded the doctorate degree, the guide and mentor to Ph.D. aspirants, has presented several papers on different topics at national and international seminars. He has written about more than 200 poetries in English and Hindi. Associated with institutes of national repute, he has organised seminars and workshops and delivered talks and lectures at various seminars, workshops etc. He is awarded with CHAROTTAR GAURAV and BHARAT EXCELLENCE.

**Chika Obi** is a young and enthusiastic writer from Nigeria. He strongly believes in educating, explorative and informative writing; as exemplified in his works. His choice of writing runs across the different genres. Some of his poems like; DROUGHT IN THE LAND, TALE OF MAHAMA, and AGAIN COMES THE TIME have appeared on Kalahari Review. Others like; AFRICAN BEAUTY and TALE OF FIVE FINGERS have appeared on [www.nazcardwritersblock.com](http://www.nazcardwritersblock.com); while some are being



considered elsewhere. He has no traditionally published work yet. RED is one of his unpublished poems –his magnum opus.

**Debasis Tripathy** is originally from Odisha, a state in eastern India and he currently lives in Bangalore solely to earn a livelihood. He started writing seriously a little late, but luckily since then, within a short span he has his writings published in Muse India, Formercactus, Prachya Review, Nuances, CLRI Journal, Setu, and Indian Review, among others.

**Dmitry Blizniuk** is an author from Ukraine. His most recent poems have appeared “The Pinch Journal”, “The Nassau Review”, “Press53”. Dmitry Blizniuk is the author of “The Red Forest” (Fowlpox press, Canada 2018). He is nominated for a “Pushcart Prize” 2018. He lives in Kharkov, Ukraine.

**Hassanal Abdullah**, author of 40 books including 16 collections of poetry, is a Bangladeshi-American poet and the editor of Shabdaguchha, an International Bilingual Poetry Magazine. His poetry has been translated into eight languages and published in many countries throughout the world. Mr. Abdullah has introduced a new sonnet form that he calls “Swatantra Sonnets,” for which he received the Labu Bhai Foundation Award (2013). He has also written a 304-page epic, *Nakhatra O Manusar Prochhad* (Anyana, 2007), where, based on several scientific theories, he illustrates relations between human beings and the universe. In 2016, at the International Silk Route Poetry Festival in the Szechuan Province, China, he was awarded the Homer European Medal of Poetry & Art.

**Ian Salvaña**, 22, is a faculty member of the Sociology Department of Ateneo de Davao University in the Philippines. He has been accepted to the 2019/20 political science MA program of Central European University in Budapest and Vienna. He was nominated for the Pushcart Prize by The Brown Orient and his works appeared in various journals in his country and abroad. He hails from his Mandayan hometown of Cateel, Davao Oriental.

**James Croal Jackson** (he/him) has a chapbook, *The Frayed Edge of Memory* (Writing Knights Press, 2017), and poems in *Jenny*, *\*82 Review*, and *Reservoir*. He edits *The Mantle* (themantlepoetry.com). Currently, he works in the film industry in Pittsburgh, PA. (jimjakk.com)

**Donald Carlson** lives and works in North Central Texas, in the USA, where there are only two seasons: hot and hotter. Some of his poems have appeared in *Windhover*, *The Lost Country*, *The Pawn Review*, and *Poetry Dallas*. In 2015, he collaborated on a volume of poetry with two friends and fellow poets, Timothy Donohue and Dennis Patrick Slattery. The joint collection, *Road Frame Window*, was published by Mandorla Press. In addition, he recently published a collection of verse entitled *TESTIMONY: A POETIC RETELLING OF THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN* independently.

**Janine Canan** lives in California in the Valley of the Moon. In 2009 she received "The Sacred Feminine Award" for her work, which now embraces 21 collections of poetry, essays, stories, translations and anthologies. Her anthology *She Rises like the Sun: Invocations of the Goddess by Contemporary American Women Poets* received the Susan Koppelman Award for best-edited feminist work, and her first gathering of Mata Amritanandamayi's

teachings, *Messages from Amma: In the Language of the Heart, Health & Spirituality's "Best Spiritual Book 2004"*. For further information, please visit [janinecanan.com](http://janinecanan.com).

**Joseph Hart** has a BA in psychology. He has had poems published in small magazines, and was twice nominated for a Pushcart. His favorite poets are Keats, Millay and Robinson.

**Lani O'Hanlon** has an MA in creative writing from Lancaster University and has studied fiction with The Stinging Fly. She received a travel and training award in 2017 from the National Arts Council to complete a first novel set in Ireland and Greece. Her poetry *regularly* broadcast on Irish national radio; RTE, shortlisted for *The Bridport Prize*, *FISH*, *Mslaxia*, *DiBiase*, *HC Poetry on the Lake*, and a prizewinner - *Hennessey New Irish Writing*, *Dromineer*, *The Irish Writer's Centre Novel Fare*, *Brewery Lane*, *William Allingham* and *Over the Edge*. She has been the recipient of various literature bursaries including residencies in The Tyrone Guthrie Centre and The Molly Keane House.

**Lee Clark Zumpe**, an entertainment columnist with Tampa Bay Newspapers, earned his bachelor's in English at the University of South Florida. He began writing poetry and fiction in the early 1990s. His work has regularly appeared in a variety of literary journals and genre magazines over the last two decades. Publication credits include *Tiferet*, *Zillah*, *The Ugly Tree*, *Modern Drunkard Magazine*, *Red Owl*, *Jones Av.*, *Main Street Rag*, *Space & Time*, *Mythic Delirium* and *Weird Tales*. [www.leeclarkzumpe.com](http://www.leeclarkzumpe.com)

**Mehak Gupta Grover**, is the author of the book - THE HUMANE QUEST (volume-1& 2), published by Authorspress, New Delhi. She is born and brought up in

Jammu and settled in Chandigarh. She has a bachelor's degree in Law. She has been bestowed with '100 Inspiring Authors of India' award.

**Melisa Quigley** is a writer and poet who finished a degree in Professional Writing and Editing at RMIT University in 2015. Her poetry, flash fiction and short stories have appeared in numerous anthologies.

**Michael H. Brownstein's** work has appeared in American Letters and Commentary, Skidrow Penthouse, Convergence, Meridian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry, The Pacific Review, and others. In addition, he has nine poetry chapbooks including *A Period of Trees* (Snark Press, 2004), *Firestorm: A Rendering of Torah* (Camel Saloon Press, 2012), and *The Possibility of Sky and Hell: From My Suicide Book* (White Knuckle Press, 2013). He is the admin for project Agent Orange ([projectagentorange.com](http://projectagentorange.com)).

**Nancy Cavers Dougherty** teaches cello to beginner students and plays in the Santa Rosa Junior College Community Orchestra. Her poetry has appeared in literary journals and several anthologies. She is the author of three chapbooks: *Tape Recorder On*, *Memory In Salt*, *Levee Town* and *Silk*, a collaborative work. She has been an advocate for a number of community projects including teen counseling services in the high schools and art-making in group settings. She and her husband live on a small farm in Sebastopol, California.

**Niels Hav;** in his native Danish the author of six collections of poetry and three volumes of short fiction. His work has been translated into several languages such as English, Arabic, Turkish, Spanish, Dutch and Farsi. In English he

has *We Are Here*, published by Book Thug – and poetry in numerous magazines.

**Norbert Góra** is a 28 years old poet and writer from Poland. He wrote two dark poetry collections in English and one short story collection in Polish. He is also the author of more than 100 poems which have been published in poetry anthologies in USA, UK, India, Nigeria, Kenya and Australia.

**Ravi Viradia** is a general surgery resident physician, working, born and raised in West Virginia. He has established roots in music though engineering and producing melodies since adolescence. Writing poetry and lyrics has always been his passion, and with his experiences on the wards throughout these past 4 years have enabled him to incorporate the raw emotions experienced in medicine into his poetry.

**Robert L. Martin's** writings have appeared in "Mature Years," "Alive Now," "Wilderness House Literary Review," "Poets' Espresso," among others. He won two "Faith and Hope Awards," Published two chapbooks, and appeared in six anthology books. He is also a jazz pianist and the organist at First UMC of Wind Gap, PA for 25 years.

**Rosa Jamali** is an Iranian poet, translator and playwright. She is author of five books of poetry. Jamali has also written plays, numerous book reviews and critical articles, and has also translated selected poems of Yeats into Persian. Her most recent books are "The Hourglass is Fast Asleep" and "Highways Blocked", which have been mentioned for combining present day setting with the myths and themes of Persian mystics.

**Sanjeev Sethi** is the author of three books of poetry. His most recent collection is *This Summer and That Summer* (Bloomsbury, 2015). He is published in more than 25 countries. Recent credits: *Packingtown Review*, *The Sandy River Review*, *Modern Poets Magazine*, *Shot Glass Journal*, *Episcopal Café*, *Future Trading Anthology Six*, *Miller's Pond*, *The Poetry Village*, *Selcouth Station*, and elsewhere. He lives in Mumbai.

**Sravani Singampalli** is a 22 year old poet from India. She writes all forms of poetry. She got a commendable mention in wing word short story prize and some of her works have been shortlisted by wordweavers.in. She is presently pursuing a doctoral degree in pharmacy at Jntu Kakinada University in Andhra Pradesh, India.

**Sriparna Bandyopadhyay (b. 5<sup>th</sup> Dec 1971)** is from West Bengal, India. Sriparna has published total nine books of poetry, juvenile fictions, micro stories, short stories and some more are in queue. Recognition received so far are 'Bango Samskriti Samman, 2012, 'Rritobak' short story competition 2016, Sharmila Ghosh Sahitya puraskar 2016, Usha Bhattacharya Smriti Sahitya Puraskar 2018 and Nabaprabhat Rajat Jayanti Barsha Sammanana 2018.

**William C. Blome** writes poetry and short fiction. He lives in the 'States, wedged between Baltimore and Washington, DC, and he is a master's degree graduate of the Johns Hopkins University Writing Seminars. His work has previously seen the light of day in such fine little imags as Poetry London, PRISM International, Teesta Rangeet, Bangalore Review, Roanoke Review, and The California Quarterly.

**William Masters** is a San Francisco writer. His fiction and poetry are from his unpublished collection, *Portraiture: A San Francisco Story Cycle*. His poem, *Morning Traffic* (published in the 2017 *The Best of Kindness* poetry anthology) received the Wendy-Pixie award for kindness to animals.

**Yuan Yuan** (Hindi Name: Sneha; English Name - Aniston), the poetess from The Mainland China, is a passionate art lover with love for language and nature. Having the base of arts education, the author loves to express the feelings in foreign languages. Having written several poems in Chinese, the author writes in English and Hindi.

**Andrew Lafleche** is an award-winning poet and author of seven books. His work uses a spoken style of language to blend social criticism, philosophical reflection, explicit prose, and black comedy. Andrew enlisted in the Army in 2007 and received an honorable discharge in 2014. Visit [www.AJLafleche.com](http://www.AJLafleche.com) for more information.

**Harlan Yarbrough** is educated as a scientist and graduated as a mathematician. She has settled in Bhutan but in previous decades has lived, performed, and taught in the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, and Denmark. Harlan has written four novels, three novellas, three novelettes (two published), and thirty-some short stories, of which eighteen have been published in six countries. Her work has appeared in the *Galway Review*, *Indiana Voice Journal*, *Red Fez*, *Veronica*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, and many other literary journals.

**Ed Woods** was born in Toronto and now lives in Dundas, Ontario, Canada and through attending workshops established writers gave encouragement to expand upon life experiences through poetry. Topics range from the serious to comedic twist and a wide range of

observations or insight written from the heart. The most creative times seem to open channels to a wide variety of thoughts that flow onto pages.

**Jevin Lee Albuquerque** recently completed his third full-length novel, *Hawgfish*. A semi-finalist in the 2014 Faulkner-Wisdom competition and recent Pushcart Prize nominee, his prose and poetry have appeared in numerous literary journals. Two of his works, a poem and short story, were translated by Bernard Turle and can be found in the French collectif, *Poussières Du Monde* (Éditions François Bourin, 2014); poetry forthcoming in the anthology, *Universal Oneness* (Authorspress, New Delhi, India, 2019).

**Kim Farleigh** has worked for NGO's in Greece, Kosovo, Iraq, Palestine and Macedonia. He likes to take risks to get the experience required for writing. He likes painting, art, bull-fighting, photography and architecture, which might explain why this Australian lives in Madrid. Although he wouldn't say no to living in a Swiss ski resort or a French chateau. 155 of his stories have been accepted by 93 different magazines.

**Monisha Raman** is a content editor by profession and she finds solace in words. A borderline compulsive reader, she has been published by Women's Web and Juggernaut (writing platform). Despite being a graduate in Science, she pursued her love for the written word. She is passionate about travelling and considers coffee the elixir of life. She blogs at <http://behindthewoodendoor.wordpress.com>

**Scott Levy** currently teaches in the Writing Program at Chicago's famed Second City Training Center. His short story *Trading Jackets* was published in the May 2019 edition of *Five On The Fifth*. His comedic piece *A Curse*



upon the Lords of Vax was published in early May in *The Satirist*. A collection of his short audio plays can be found at [www.nightmedicine.com](http://www.nightmedicine.com).

**Steve Gronert Ellerhoff** holds a PhD in English from Trinity College, Dublin. He is the author of *Post-Jungian Psychology* and the Short Stories of Ray Bradbury and Kurt Vonnegut: *Golden Apples of the Monkey House* (Routledge, 2016), co-edited *George Saunders: Critical Essays* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), and is an Editorial Assistant in Fiction for *The Flexible Persona*. Recently he finished writing *Mole* for the Animal Series published by Reaktion Books. More of his stories are linked at [www.stevegronertellerhoff.net](http://www.stevegronertellerhoff.net)

**James Mulhern** has published fiction in many literary journals and has received accolades. Seven stories were selected for different anthologies of best short fiction. In 2013, he was chosen as a finalist for the Tuscany Prize in Catholic Fiction. In 2015, Mr. Mulhern was awarded a fully paid writing fellowship to Oxford University in the United Kingdom. That same year, a story was longlisted for the Fish Short Story Prize. In 2017, he was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. His writing (novel and short story collection) earned favorable critiques from *Kirkus Reviews*.

**Michael Levy** the author of 16 inspirational books including; *Cutting Truths*, *That's Rich* and *The Joys of Live Alchemy...* Michael's poetry and essays grace many web sites, newspapers, journals and magazines throughout the world. He is a prominent speaker on health and wellness maintenance, stress eradication, wealth creation and development, authentic happiness and inspirational poetry. <http://www.pointoflife.com/>

**Tammy Ruggles** has been a professional writer for 17 years.

Her first book, *Peace*, was a paperback published traditionally by Clear Light Books. Her newest, and final book, *Starsky and Hutch Next Gen*, is published as a Kindle eBook at Amazon.

**Dr. Nila. N.** works as Assistant Professor in English at Mercy College, Palakkad, Kerala. She is a Research Guide at Calicut University and her academic interest lies in the area of Diasporic literature and ELT. She has more than 20 publications to her credit and has authored chapters for books too. She is also the recipient of Malayali Mudra Award from Malayali Samskarikam for her achievements as a teacher.

**Ms. A. Krishna Sunder** works as Assistant Professor, Department of English at KAHM Unity Women's College, Manjeri, Kerala. She is currently pursuing her Research in Hollywood Movies and Women Representations. She is a writer and has authored many articles and literary pieces. Her main interest lies in Hollywood movies, Feminism and Misrepresentation of women in cinema.

**Brian Finney** is a writer and Professor Emeritus of Literature at California State University, Long Beach. Educated in England, he taught and organized extra-mural courses for the University of London. Since immigrating to the US in 1987 he has taught at UC Riverside, USC, UCLA, and California State University, Long Beach. He has published eight books, including *Christopher Isherwood: A Critical Biography* (1979) which was awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. He lives in Venice, California.  
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