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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

Assistant Editor:

Prof. SHASHANK NADKARNI



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AUTHORS P R E S S

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

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POETRY**1****Changing Faces**

AJU MUKHOPADHYAY

Passing through the events of its changing faces
Pale blue sky became tawny red
Fading again somewhere creating shades
paused by lightning flashes.
Herdsmen were driving grey muddy buffaloes
At a distance which were making their ways
Kicking the dust that hung in space
In stilled air like a necklace.
Golden brown grasses on the seashore ahead
Silhouetted against the immaculate sky
shone in the last rays of the Sun.
Waves and waves of cranes flew past
Breaking the wind with their wings robust
Forming patterns curved and straight
Over the sky singing their songs
Throughout their migrating path.
Manmade pollutants floating in space
Cannot be spotted by mortal eyes
As the real greats among men
Hide themselves in modern societies.
Light was gradually denied by the drooping Sun
But the fading firmament was suddenly heightened

By innumerable stars
Changing the fading scarlet to a
Brightened expanse.



2

Forest

AMARENDRA KHATUA

The routine of thick, many layered
worries. The long sigh inflicted by the
feelings of the continuous activities of
the animals. The fifth day moon in waiting
swims inside the shoreless lake of
abandoned poverty. The expanded city
In its wild tradition of growing fails to
Arrange the history of a thousand hearts
And eyes. In the suburbs of bizarre grief,
crowds poverty and hopelessness of
wolfish trees. Life is itself forest-born,
still evolving.

Who will show the path from here? Is it the
wild hunter fixing his greed with his
Hungry arrows? Is it the cruel hunter
creating the darkness of savage plunder?
What ways shall the wild witch show to
travel through the forest in the name of
urban necessities?

Let everything remain in thick darkness.
Let the rotten soil eat away the fragrant
creepers. Let the unknown ghostly stories
prosper beyond the denuded hills and dried
streams. Let everything evolve in the

darkness enclosed by so many shadows
from falling branches. Let life appear
filled with the agelessness of the forests,
Against all our doings.



3

The Witch's Wand

ANDREW SCOTT

Beware before you step forward
within the mystique of the Witch's Wand.

Use all of your senses
to fight against the feeling.
The alluring magic
that will only bring you into darkness.

The beauty of her eyes will bring you closer.
Delicate words that you will never know
you needed to hear, whispered in your ear.

The gentleness will provide comfort,
making you feel cared for.
You feel that you are the only one.
That is when you have been
fully placed under the witch's spell.

The hypnotizing wand quietly lures you in.
You feel special, you believe you are the only one.

In your emotional blindness
what you do not see or feel
are the decayed souls
that have been left before you.

The wands seals your fate.
It has you feel that you are safe
right before you are built up
only to be destroyed inside.

The lost can be disheartening
with the confusion and wondering
what you did wrong.

IF you recover your strength
it will hit you
that you were not the first or last
to be put under the spell
of the heartless Witch's Wand



4

Worn Eyes

ANDREW SCOTT

I have been coming to this little café for years.
The old style, never-changing décor
will always have me coming back
to end my, at times, exhausting day.

Remember your first, nervous day here
when not every order
went the way it was suppose to.
Tea instead of coffee, rare instead of medium.

You handled that learning time
with a very natural grace.
A smile in the eyes with each bump.

Through the years, the same smile and grace.
This is why what I have seen lately is concerning.
Your energetic smile is not there or it is forced
when speaking to any of us.

Your eyes seem like they are
hiding many thoughts, worries and emotions
that are streaking in your mind.
You may not know but I can see.

You have aged in the past month.
Why, may not be truly known.
Your worn eyes say enough.



5

In Your Honour

AVDHESH JHA

(A tribute to Dr. Vijay Patel, OBE, Waymade Group, UK)

The light amidst the dark,
The earthly star,
You are the strength of the sanity.

The rhyme of the poetry,
The live legend,
You are the accord of simplicity.

The conscience of the conscient,
The pious vigor,
You are the promise of surety.

The lime of the sublime,
The philanthropist,
You are the lesson of humanity.



6

Your colour was love

DAVE LEWIS

Sometimes on a winter's day
When the sun has run away
I take out your song and photograph
That used to make me laugh.

Your smile so sweet
Your lips like fruit
Your eyes so bright - alive.

Oh you know sometimes...
Oh sometimes I just love you
I love you so much, I feel warm inside
And all my dreams
For just a minute they all disappear.

The leaves are falling near the old church
I think of you with me
Kicking, kicking
Gold before our eyes.

Your skin so smooth
Your wardrobe full of flowers
Your love so pure and strong - alive.

I wish you were with me
I wish I could remember

The colour of your love
'cos your colour was all over me
You coloured me.
Your colour was love.



7

IGNOTE TOMB

IVAN POZZONI

Corpse No. 2,
the shadow of the wave reflected in my right retina,
hands clenched to grasp Mediterranean sands
worn under red surfing bermudas.

Corpse No. 7,
muffled screaming attempts at the pit of my stomach
Marrakech hash maps in my pockets,
scanty dirhams sown between my purse and trousers,
led me to the mouth of the abyss.

Corpse No. 12,
'Eloi, Eloi, lemà sabactàni',
I don't remember who was shouting it to whom
not being written in the Koran:
I too died invoking it in vain.

Corpse No. 18,
retreating on the roads between the dunes of Misrata,
in thirsty slalom between friendly and enemy missiles,
and dying of water.

Corpse No. 20,
although nomads, like me, sway
on desert ships, detonated fluids,
never will they get used to drowning.
Every grave of the unknown migrant
whispers that it is hard to embrace
a death that comes from the sea.



8

A Poem for My Old Clock

JAYDEEP SARANGI

Time moves slowly, slow as traffic in a busy Kolkata street
Slow arrival of the dawn has the fairest colours
where wearied minds rest from the rush,
daily rust, some ancient scars or to fight a war.

Early dawn streets are a place, coiled and free.
Knockers on doors or windows to rouse all from sleep
where seasons arrive and go to touch and join with
barren trees taking away all leaves gently, moist in September
rain.

There are days for full sleep, shadows deep
weary pains to open our eyes and reading
all birthday cards and new year gifts
recall every word, love every loss.

Whistles loathe thorns in love.
Knock, knock, knock beyond the moon light on doors
reflected to wake calls for drowsy minds
retrieved stories, their unsaid language.



9

Happy Mother's Day

JEFFREY ZABLE

is what I said inside my head to my mother
who's now been gone for close to three years.

When I tell people that she lived to 105,
they'll respond with, "Wow! Amazing! Incredible!"

And more than once I'd heard, "You must have
good genes. You'll probably live a long life as well!"

To which I respond, "I don't want to live nearly that long.
Not in a world like this!"

And though I say it with a tinge of humor,
underneath I'm as serious as can be. . .



10

Questions

JOAN MCNERNEY

Who
took away spring
stole all the glory
throwing our gardens of green
into these hills of scorched grass?

Who
dared to care
more about money
destroying everything good
forgetting earth is our only home?

Who
is so callous
to laugh at the suffering
of the sick poor yet pretend
to believe in a loving God?

Who
laughed at our hunger
robbing our hope
burning heaven with dry
lightning to pierce the sky.

Who
began all these wars
making mothers cry for children
searching for their bodies
in the chaos of destruction?

Who
are you
who made
the angels moan?



11

Death by Misadventure

JOHN GREY

Late night,
heading for home
on a country road,
he's startled by a sudden thump.

He's hit something
but, tired and in a panic,
he drives straight on.

He whispers later
to his sleeping wife,
'I hit something.
Or somebody.'

Next morning,
he drives by the collision sight
in bright daylight.

There are no signs
of an accident,
no cops, no rescue vehicle,
no yellow tape,
no human-shaped chalk-mark.

'Must have been a deer,'
he says with a sigh.

In fact,
it was a deer.
And the deer police
have come and gone already.



12

The Sparrow and the Eagle

JOHN GREY

sudden shadow –

air shudders
from the power of
a barely tilted wing –

you are sparrow,
plain brown
but a beauty nonetheless
to other sparrows

and your heart skips,
muscles freeze,
your perch
feels suddenly like a target –

but there's no swoop from above,
no grasp of claws,
no snatch of beak
busting open your chest –

as your body trembles in place,
the predator flies over,
barely noticing a song-bird tidbit
as it skirts the tree tops,
soars on –

the eagle scouts out
fatter birds,
pigeons, mourning doves,
or even squirrels, chipmunks,
young rabbits –

the last thing
that enters your modest mind
is that there's just not enough of you
to feed a hungry raptor,
or succor his nesting brood –

for, in your world,
you're all there is –

when you're gone,
there is no world



13

The Dance

KATHRINE YETS

Push me backwards
and spin me.
Lead me into the rhythm.
My hips rigid.
Each movement
trust.
Push me back
and spin me.
I close my eyes.
Yours are much open.
Feel my hands sweat.
Feel my heart quicken
with each misstep.
Push me back and
spin.
So close.
I move wrong.
We begin again.
I move wrong.
I catch up.
I move wrong.
You forgive me.
I move wrong.



14

Yogic Poet

KATHRINE YETS

My causal body shirks my plans—
karma kills my pathways to success.
Astral creates— poetry aura—
but subdued by the karma.
Physical body creates karma,
dancing in the arms of men
who know not what they do.
I climb into my mind.
Synapses splinter.
Each atom begs to be reconstructed
into a star.
Why can't I become interstellar?



15

Atmospheric Twins

KEITH INMAN

like stars in a galaxy river
they partied on into another dawn
until gravity crashed
like a moon loosed from orbit
and one fellow floated out
a bit too far and *pouf*
was gone in a faded smack of space junk
his body vaporized instantly

some joked that he'd had a great ride
like sex with the chains off
so most kept dancing
but another poor fellow
who couldn't get his credit out
fast enough
was jettisoned right before their eyes —
the grifters scanning his card
before he reached infinity



16

Eh, I...

KEITH INMAN

AI incorrectly
corrects my text
ten percent of the time

So imagine
if I were on the space station
and asked it

if I could watch
The Jetson's
new movie

and AI ordered me over
to the port window to see
the jettisoned fuel moving



17

Turnaround

LES WICKS

His family are in the flat downstairs
packing all the big city stuff he had accumulated.
There's a bit of damage but the bond should be OK.
I'll never be a landlord though luckily no renter anymore.

Moved past the oldest obligations
they were meat hooks & leaves.
My only chore now is to repay the air.

I touch base with his brother
tatts & piercings, reckons Toby
will be okay safe home with his Bundjalung mob.
Ask if I can lend a hand.
Toby & I did the same job 40 years apart
those canary tiles scrubbed clean of Saturday vomit.
He earned good money, much of it going back up north.
Did I help, these last six months? Were we friends?

Maybe 25, he'll get beyond this stumble —
still got prospects.
You ask for mine
I'll laugh. Beyond all that nonsense
to focus on last debts — past time
passing time, passed time done my time
in the penitentiaries of ambition.

Mends & amends
a few more great nights
instalments epiphanies back-work.
How little how much
will I leave behind me
like Toby's surplus furniture out on the pavement.



18

More Than Hope

LES WICKS

There's a twang in the air, a swell.
Doctor says no cancer
as far as she could tell.

News is everywhere, hanging around.
I make coffee, an innate honesty
straight to the ganglion.

What happens when one mingles a tornado with yoghurt?
A child builds a tiny fort with the mother's pens
then reprogrammes the family computer.
Nothing left grows more attractive
it's a coughed-up kind of immortality.
Have you said *everything* yet?
That may be the last question.

Living a truth
will die in a truth.
Don't know about guilt
but regrets are outweighed by some discerned purpose
looking way back
at it all.
Perhaps I still try.
Glide at the light
mess with its head.



19

Tea in Kyoto

MANDIRA GHOSH

Crossing the Japanese bridge and
Illusionary Monets Garden
I reached to nowhere
From the frightening world of wars
To a serene world
I reached Kyoto.
Forgetting two world wars
I had tea at a stall
With a sunrise through morning window
An unparalleled vision
Of a generation keeping their tradition alive
Without AI and ultramodern
Old thoughts and new vision
I went on my mission of saluting
A nation where the morning Sun
First touched the artists and its windows.



20

Climate Change

MELISA QUIGLEY

Mountains crowned in snow
Loosening into living fountains
Watering the land around it
The sun bursts through
Wildflowers bud and bloom in heady abandon
Winds blow, making them sway
Angry clouds drift by
Creating a storm in a cloudy prison
Where thunder has arisen
Clapping a cacophony of coloured lights
Making everything shiver
Souls have no control
Over what nature has given
Their will, delights, and cares
Are ruled by waves
That can sometimes overwhelm
Crashing down around them
A planet struggling into submission
Because of Climate Change
Forcing sea levels to rise
Mother Earth spins all day
While people sleep and dream
Waking, faintly sighing
Politicians doing nothing
For which we will pay the price
Our lives will never be the same again



21

I Feel Lightning in Your Wind (V4)

MICHAEL LEE JOHNSON

I feel light in a thunderstorm.
I electrify your touch through my veins.
I'm the greenery around your life
that breathes your earth into your lungs.
I challenge all your false decisions and doctrines
with the glory of my godliness.
I'm your syntax, your stoic,
your ears, your prize.
I walk daylight into your morning breath
allow you to breathe.
I let the technique of me into your brain cells;
from the top tip to the bottom
of small baby foot extensions.
I'm the banquet hall of all
your joys, damnation;
your curses, your emotions—
and you're breathing with the wind.



22

Poet in an Empty Bottle (V4)

MICHAEL LEE JOHNSON

I'm a poet who drinks only red wine.
When inebriated with earthly
delusion and desire, I crawl inside
this empty bottle of 19 Crimes Red Wine,
lone wolf, no rehab needed, just confined.

Here, behind brown tinted glass
and a hint of red stain, I can harm no one—
body squeezed in so tight, blowing bubbles,
hidden, squirming, can't leap out.

My words echo chamber, reverberating
back into my tinnitus ears.
I forage for words.
Search for novel incentives.
But the harvest is pencil-thin
the frontal cortex shrinks and turns gray.
Come live with me in my dotage.
There are few rewards.
My old egg-beater brain is clunking out.

I lay here, peace and quiet in prayer.
I can hardly breathe in thin air.

I'm a symbol of legacy crumbing
stored in formaldehyde. Memories here
are likely just puny, weak synapses.

'I'm not afraid of death, I just don't
want to be here when it happens.'
Looking out, others looking in at me.
Curved glass is a new world intangible dimly defined.
I no longer care about cyberspace, uncultivated
wild women, the holy grail of matrimony.
I likely will never write my first sonnet
with angels; I only fantasize about them in dreams.

Quiet in osteoarthritis pain is this poet
who only drinks 19 Crimes Red Wine.



* Quote by Woody Allen.

23

A Theory of Nothing

MICHAEL MIROLLA

The day you vanished from right before me,
I blamed myself. Who else could I point to,
given only we two had made the trek?

Why was I still there and you weren't?

Weren't we meant to disappear together
like the whistle of a steam engine pulsing
into the distance? I thought we were hooked
as one ...that nothing could rip us apart ...
ordained/cursed to come and go in and out
as an unthinking unity, locked as we were
within a crystal so rigid its molecules
fiercely resist any form of splitting.

Was I so wrong? I must have been. I'm here
and you're not. I'm here and you're ... somewhere else?

Nowhere else? There's that haunted sound again,
machining through all the paths of our lives
(steps that once led to places we dictated).

Making sure to erase each from neuron
to neuron. Making sure they never existed.

But when I ask [what is it] to no one
in particular, is that you who whispers:

It's nothing. Just trying to prove a theory?

At least, I think that it's you whispering.

That you're simply on the other side of ...
a mirror perhaps through which you'll walk
as if nothing has happened. A place where

vanishing is an everyday occurrence.
A joke ... a bit of fun ... to be enjoyed
until the very end.



24

What we are?

MITHIL JHA

They gave me that what they had;
I gave them that what I had; and
Depending upon the perception;
 It was termed good and bad;
 However, it's all about giving,
 And the attitude of giving;
We give only that what we have
And that inscribes what we are?



25

Moorhen

PETE MULLINEAUX

Rain, Biblical amounts! Percussive plips and plops on the
pond
like shots from above, a different pitch between those hitting
water and lily pad, while nearby, a tin roof rolls out thunder
—
a soundtrack to the unnamed movie playing through my
mind.
All is a silver-grey wash, a wet screen, a view out of focus —
the
way I'm feeling today, lacking a vision. But now, like the
daub
in that Turner painting, a red beak, poking through the reeds
—
her sedate buoyancy, three dun-brown chicks following close
behind, half-swimming, skipping over lily pads to keep up.
Yes,
they walk on water!



26

Behind the Smile

QUDSI RIZVI

Like rain
That revives the parched earth,
Her smile cascades,
Bringing joy to all who bask
In its radiant glow.
Her laughter, light as morning dew,
Ignites hearty mirth,
Painting faces with delight.

Yet beneath the laughter,
Beneath the veil of joy,
Lies a heart that aches,
A soul that longs—
Yearning for a companion
True and pure,
A mirror to its unspoken truths.

At times, like silver linings,
Her longing peeks through,
Glimpsed in the depths
Of her luminous eyes—
Eyes that speak
What words cannot convey,
Eyes that whisper
Of dreams untold.

Her smile is the sun,
Her laughter the breeze,
Yet even the brightest skies
Have their hidden storms.
Oh, to find the one
Who sees the beauty
In her shadows,
And loves her for them too.



27

Old Files

RAM KRISHNA SINGH

I burn my years and erase
memories that couldn't be stacked
against the wall of a broken home

I'm too old to hold out long
the fall is certain
and the burden too much

I can't be a hostage to the past
nobody would buy
the smoke is momentary
and the heat hurts none

let me live life through my self
doing nothing, thinking nothing
just sitting silently and watching
time takes care of the rest, and life too



28

Tanka

RAM KRISHNA SINGH

a healer says
my sufferings not my fault:
karmic imprint
pay him twenty dollars
break free from the past weight gain

dull notes of life
await re-ordering--
rhythm and pitch
behind closed walls humming
to search my own music

lying in sun
on a straw mattress
a nude couple
whisper dreamed-up nest
when their ship comes in

taunting the old pain
in the brothel of bed
kitchen or shower
she fears the freaky bodies
snaky arousal and peak

Shiva and Shakti
our freedom in union
twin flame of love
rolling in grains of sand
transcending together



29

Nobody to Nobody

RAKESH BHARTIYA

I am nobody
You are nobody
Let one nobody share with another
Whatever concerns only a nobody
Whatever could concern only a nobody

The killing uncertainty of existence
The lingering agony of sustenance
The nagging unease of maintenance
All this does not concern everybody
Only a nobody can understand
Only a nobody can feel
The real meaning of all this
Beyond the meaning anybody could understand

A bridge from nobody to nobody
Every nobody has to build
Every nobody has to cross
Let one nobody share with another
Whatever concerns only a nobody
Whatever could concern only a nobody.



30

Never too Late

RAMZI ALBERT RIHANI

When the page stretches itself and becomes an epic
When the tear stretches itself and becomes an ocean
and laughter stretches itself to become a tear
It is never too late to reinvent, laugh, and cry

When fear stretches itself and awakens our strength
When noise stretches itself, and you start listening
and the beast stretches itself to become human
It is never too late to remember, wish, and fly

When a whisper thunders like a mighty storm
When the dove writes a poem
and the prayer becomes a lullaby
and the ink becomes a forever color
and the tree, the still lover
and the memory forsaken forever
and the sun's rays descend on us like a hundred Julys
It is never too late to sing, live, and recreate

Then, you start looking at the Man in God.



31

Tattoo Stories

ROGER G. SINGER

snakes and roses
favorite numbers
knives and blood
tears and crosses
half psalms

virgin Mary
praying over
loved ones
in a skull



32

A Fixed Match

TAPAN KUMAR PRADHAN

That hushed silence, that beating of the heart,
biting of the nails, and that racing of the blood
excitement in the stands, tension in pavilion,
frenzied munching of popcorns in galleries –

As the bowler thunders down that run up tarmac
eyes on fire, chest thumping, raw blood boiling
A single glare at the batsman, batsman giving it back
with a whack down the pitch, ball flying past the infield
Fielders scattered all over, racing towards the boundary -
the palpitation, the frenzy, the nerve wracking suspense, oh!

Ah, ah, ah, they all know that it is a 'fixed' match -
who's gonna win, who's gonna score how many runs
how many no balls, how many wide balls in each over
everything, *everything* is fixed – you don't believe?

Why it is as clear as the daylight, my sir!
The way that batsman edged it to the first slip
The way that bowler deliberately over-stepped
The way that fielder dropped that sitter –
my school going son would have grabbed that chance, sir!
And the way the umpire gave that 'knowing' smile
The way they gossiped
The way they chuckled –
Ah, it *w-a-s* a fixed match.

And still they clapped, laughed and blew their bugles
And still they whistled, danced and beat their drums
they egged on the batsmen, pleaded with the bowlers
each leg glance relished, each stumping was cheered
and there was a collective sigh at each falling of wickets
and that funeral like silence when the home team lost.

This world is a stage, you are only an actor
When a match is played, the outcome is fixed
There will be only one winner, one – *one only*
How it matters if this team won or that team lost?

When a girl is wedded, her fate is fixed.
when a child is born, his stars are fixed
life is fixed, love is fixed, death is fixed -
And still there is joy and there is revelry
that bated breath, that secret excitement
when a girl is wedded, when a child is born

or a fixed match is played
to its rehearsed perfection.



SHORT STORY**1****Strange Darkness****BISHNUPADA RAY**

Some evenings, as you know, even one or two hours after the sunset, sometimes appear to be the darkest moment on earth. It may be the side effect of the moon's waning phase. As the light of the day comes to an end, and the darkness of night settles in, there is difficulty in adjusting with this dark setting of nature. It is at this hour of the evening that Roshan usually drives back home. Today the sky has been overcast with dark clouds, and it has been drizzling the whole day. Even for the most experienced of drivers, driving through the hills in this weather is a challenging job. The narrow road with sharp bends, a river gorge at one side with steep slopes and the dark surrounding make driving unsafe. But it is part of his daily routine. He goes down to the town in the foothills for his work in the morning and returns to his house in the hills in the evening.

But today it appears unusually dark. The headlights appear to have no energy, like his exhausted body and mind after the whole day's work. The light of his car seems to go no further than a few metres, and sometimes seems to bounce back on the foggy windshield. Even the wipers seem to have no vigour in clearing the haze from his sight. And the engine seems like an extension of his fatigue. He keeps on driving like an automaton, as most parts of the road are familiar to

him. The road is so familiar to him that he knows all the road signs dotting the roadside landscape. They carry the message 'Don't Rush to Hell', 'Safe Drive, Save Life', 'Don't Mix Driving with Drinking', and also 'Enjoy the Beauty of the Hills' etc. The road is so familiar that he knows the map of each bend, each loop and each slope. And now he is a few kilometres from his residence. There are three more bends on the road now before he reaches his destination, and looking out, although it is dark, he can perceive that he is passing by the first one and after a few minutes, he will be into the second, and the third one is the most difficult one of the three, which is a hairpin bend, with the deepest river gorge on the left, and it looks scary and demands full and careful attention. So, he turns on the music to feel at ease and focus on his driving. One's favourite songs are best stimulants for their mind. Music can do anything to the mind, it may be a handmaid to a murderer, inspiring him to do his foul act, or it may be a pacifier to an agitated soul, or it may be a cure to boredom and loneliness. And it can drown your consciousness into an unconscious somnolence.

You may do well to think that he is stressed and tense. Yes, he is, and unusually so at this moment. His mind is flaky, and in its banality, it is struggling to hold on against the surrounding darkness. The music is also cluttered, with too much distortion, as if it is coming out of some soulless machine, this part of the road always remains at the borderline of the mobile tower and the FM range. And once there at that stretch of the road, the stream of FM music gets disturbed and cluttered. But now he is not listening to FM, he has turned on the music on the pen drive. This very fact slips out of his mind, in a fuzzy moment, like being in a haze. He looks out. Not many vehicles are seen on the road, and near the second bend, a car suddenly comes straight upon him

from the opposite, with a loud honk to whiz past him and almost strafing the right side of his car. Damn! It is a close call. There is a sudden flare up of hormones, it first stabilises and then sedates his nerves. And it may be the effect of either the cluttered music or fatigue, that his consciousness possibly fades into some somnolence, unconsciously.

He does not know how long, but suddenly he jerks into consciousness with a loud noise, and before he can think, his right leg instinctively hits the brakes and his car comes to a standstill. And before he can think properly what has happened just now, torchlights fall on his face from both sides of his car. He has to roll down the car glasses and some policemen tell him that there is an accident at the bend, that a car has fallen into the river gorge, and a SDRF team is trying to recover the people from the mangled car. The road is blocked and there are some cars in front, waiting for the road to clear. He anxiously looks at his phone, he knows his wife Sandhya at home usually remains tense at this hour for his safe return. And there are several missed calls, she must have called him frantically. Before he can look at the time of her calling, a policeman asks him to park his car behind the last car.

Parking the car as told by the policeman, he gets out of the car drowsily and sees some snow on the road, glowing unearthly in the dim headlights, reflecting the vaporous luminosity. It must have snowed today. Thinking how much his wife is worried now, he tries to call her, but the calls fail to get through. In the meanwhile, he walks forward and reaches the accident site, impulsively, as if drawn by some mysterious force. A flashlight illuminates a nearby road sign 'Caution, Sharp Bend Ahead'. The rescue team has set up ropes down the slope and some of them are flashing their lights in all directions, thus creating an eerie atmosphere. By

now they have climbed down to the mangled car and are using the gas cutters to extricate the bodies. The curious bystanders are talking about the accident and some words come to his ear. They are the other drivers; and they are now talking about the driver of the fallen car, and he overhears what they are saying, his ears pick up only the words, that the driver must have fallen asleep just before the accident.

While listening to them, he also keeps on looking down the scary gorge that can scare even the most daredevil drivers. The rescue mission is complete now, and they are bringing a body up by using a vertical pulley. When the body reaches by his side, Roshan takes a glance at the still and blood-stained face, it looks familiar, and whose face is it? He tries to recall. And in the eeriness, he recalls his own face. Yes, it is his face that he can see, the face is his, he also realises that the body is his too. His head starts to reel. He becomes tense and confused. How is it possible that the dead body resembles him in every detail, while he is still here and now, unless.... then the realisation dawns upon him in a split second and a most terrible numbness runs through his spine like a shock. Is it his body that they are bringing up? Fatigue and fear get hold of him. And it becomes too difficult for him to think now, his mind is reeling and empty, and getting foggy and unclear. The rescuers have by now collected the mobile phone from the car, and it is ringing roughly, in a soulless sound, and one of the rescuers receives the call. And from the conversation he can understand that it is his wife Sandhya who is on the call. Desperately he tries to shout at the rescuer to hand him the phone, because his wife is on the other side of the phone and he has to tell her about the strange things happening to him and that he is fine, but his throat is frozen and even after a great effort no sound comes out of his parched throat, only a cluttered gasping comes out,

as if something like an airy bubble sticking inside his windpipe gets released through his mouth. At that very moment everything falls apart and evaporates from his vision, and a pall of darkness falls on his consciousness like a curtain. Then there is nothing but an explosion of darkness.

In the meanwhile, one of the rescuers has salvaged the Driving licence from the dead body and he calls out the name to the curious bystanders who have gathered around him, to ascertain if anyone there has any idea about the dead man, before shifting the body into an ambulance. One bystander recognises the dead person and comes forward to tell him that the dead person is a local of the place and whose house is just a few kilometres from the hairpin bend.



2

Ritual

MOYA RODDY

After nine years there isn't much left of him. Still some days he's almost palpable when I open the door - I can hear him call out, 'Kettle's on!' the way he used to. On those days, not as often now as in the beginning, I'd rush in expecting to see him, the familiar lop-sided grin, his boyish face unrepentant, knowing I disapprove of his 'vice': those endless cups of tea he drinks, sometimes as many as twenty in a day. Of course, he isn't there - will never be there - all I'm confronted with is an empty fireplace. His fireplace. The one he put in all by himself although you couldn't call him a handyman. Until then, he'd only ever whittled away at bits of wood. There's one of his pieces above the mantel - a bird of sorts with one wing. 'A bird never flew on one wing,' he'd joked the day he finished it or gave up on it as he often did. Perhaps he'd had a premonition. Looking at it now, I realise that flying on one wing was what I have to do, had to learn to do. Painfully. Slowly. Perhaps he'd had a premonition.

He spoiled me rotten, that's what everyone said - waited on me hand and foot with love as warm as the fire we finally lit in the fireplace the night before Christmas, the glow bright as any Christmas tree. Recompense for all the weeks of dirt and dust and mess, cut fingers and bruised knuckles as brick by brick he unblocked the old fireplace; not to mention my shouting, his ignoring my complaints, getting on with it, drinking another of his endless cups of tea.

Now the fireplace has to go. That's what the plumber told me. Not only that but I'll have to pay 1000 Euros for the privilege. Over my dead body, the words were out before I could stop them. 'Well Missus,' the man said scratching his head, looking away awkwardly, 'the burst boiler has to come out and the pipes. The fire'll have to come too. They're all connected.' We were standing in my flooded kitchen, the smell of stale dirty water catching my throat. Earlier that afternoon I'd arrived home to find furniture upended, the book I'd been reading the night before swimming, cups bobbing up to greet me. A burst pipe! All I needed I thought until the men broke the news about the fireplace. 'Sure you're as well to get rid of it, put in a wood stove. There's better heat off them, cleaner too.' I had to bite my tongue, go outside and pull on a cigarette before I could face them again.

That was two weeks ago. I've been without water since. The neighbours have been wonderful, welcoming me in to fill drums from their sinks, asking me over for tea, making all kinds of unhelpful suggestions. There isn't one of them hasn't a cousin or an uncle or knows someone who has who'll sort the whole thing out for me. I thank them, am grateful for their concern, know they mean well but they don't understand. The fireplace is all I've left of him. All I've left of our lives together, those twenty-four years I thought it would go on forever. Each time I light it it's like lighting a torch to our love. Sitting in front of it I'm never alone. The flame it gives off is his flame. The heat warms me the way his body did each night for each one of those twenty-four years. The thought of letting someone come and smash it to pieces appals me. It would be like taking a hammer to my own heart. I pull my coat around me. The spring weather has turned cold and all I have to warm the house is a couple of rads. I make another cup of tea. 'I'm getting as bad as you,' I

say out loud. It tastes vile and I change my mind, decide to go to bed. It's the warmest place I can think of and I'm tired. Dead tired.

I wake in the middle of the night and for a blissful moment can't remember what's wrong, what has woken me. As it comes back, I feel defeated. I'd gone as far as having a couple of 'experts' in to have a look, give their opinion, but I'm out of luck. They all say the same thing: the fireplace has to go. All of a sudden, I see you in overalls, down on your hands and knees, putting the finishing touches to your 'masterpiece' as amazed as I am that you'd actually done it, that we now had a real fireplace. You look up at me, grin. 'You'll never be cold again,' you say and getting up, hand me a box of matches. I strike one, laughing as the fire takes, blazes: I think you had used a whole box of firelighters just to be on the safe side. That night – Christmas Eve – we ate our dinner in front of it. Afterwards it became a ritual. The word 'ritual' resonates in my brain and a few minutes later I jump out of bed. Pulling on a jumper I run downstairs, out the back door and into the shed.

Returning to the house, I race around searching through drawers, opening presses, collecting every candle I can find. I lay them out in a circle, all shapes and sizes. Standing in the middle of them I say your name, *Aidan*, invoke your presence. I wait until I feel you in the room, know you are there as tears stream down my face. Taking my time I light each candle. When they're all burning I get to my feet. Picking up the lump hammer I've brought in I feel your strength take over as I raise my arm. As it connects with one of the tiles I feel the sensation shooting up to my shoulder, vibrate through my entire body. Something shatters inside me. For a moment I

falter, stare at the crack I've made, at a trickle of dust slowly falling. Then, taking a deep breath, I say '*goodbye*' and raising the hammer I swing and swing.



3

The Unread Story

RATTAN MANN

Once upon a time there was a beautiful little girl with big round eyes and black curly hair. But the times she lived in were not so beautiful as she. All she ever wanted in life was for someone to tell her a story. But nobody ever did. Nobody had time. Mom and dad had no time because they were rich and famous. The maid-servant had no time because all she cared for was to put the girl to bed as early as possible so that she could then disappear with her lover. So every night the beautiful little girl lay alone in bed wishing that there was somebody with her to tell her a story. She wished she could read. Then she would be able to read tons of stories every night before going to bed.

One night as she lay alone in bed, waiting for someone, anyone, to come to her and tell her a story, a cockroach crawled into her bed. But she did not scream. She was waiting for the cockroach because she knew that the cockroach had come to tell her a story.

‘Cockroach, cockroach, I knew you would come to tell me a story. Tell me the most beautiful story on earth. Please, please.’

Of course, cockroaches don’t tell stories. But she imagined the most beautiful story on earth, and thought that it was the cockroach who was telling it to her. That night she slept more deeply and peacefully than she had ever done before.

Next night she waited for the cockroach but it did not come. Then the next night and the next. But the cockroach never came. Slowly she gave up hope and began to forget that once upon a time a cockroach had told her a beautiful story. All she remembered were the nightmares in her sleep.

Then one night, as she lay awake in bed, a man stood before her. In his black spotted dress and a black mask over his face, he looked like a very big cockroach.

The little girl jumped up with joy and screamed, 'Cockroach, cockroach, you have grown so big. Where have you been? I was waiting for you all the time. I missed you. You tell so beautiful stories. Tell me a story. Nobody has told me a story since you left. Please, please.'

'Yes darling, I have come to fetch you so that I can tell you all the stories you want to hear. Come with. I will take you to the most beautiful place on earth. And there I will tell you the most beautiful stories anybody has ever told a little innocent girl like you.'

The delicate little girl jumped into his strong ugly arms and he carried her away.

Of course, he was no cockroach and no story-teller. He had come to kidnap her. And never before had he kidnapped a child so easily.

He took her to a forest and threw her into a room with a tiny window and locked the door.

The little girl began to feel that something was wrong and she began to cry. She pressed her face against the cross-bars in the window and began to scream, 'Take me home. Take me home. I don't like this place. It is not the most beautiful place on earth. And you are not telling me any stories. You are not the cockroach I had been waiting for.'

The big masked cockroaches who guarded her heard her screams but did not bother to reply.

From that day the little girl stood on the window the whole day and cried. When she could not cry, she pressed her red eyes and swollen cheeks against the cross-bars to see if her mom was coming to fetch her. She had given up all hope of ever hearing a story. All she wanted now was to go home even if nobody ever told her a story again.

One day, one of the big masked cockroaches came to the window and threw a letter inside.

'Your mom has written you a story. Read it silly girl, and don't pester us with your screams.'

The little girl ran and picked up the letter and opened it. Her sweet mom had indeed written a story for her. But she could not read.

'I can't read. I can't read. Please read the story my mom has written for me. She writes very beautiful stories. Please read it for me. Please, please.'

Two masked cockroaches stood still before her window and paid no heed to her screams.

So again the little girl stood before the window and cried the whole day. But now she always held her mom's story in her hand. Even when she slept she pressed the story against her chest.

The unread story constantly pressed against her chest read as follows:

Dearest Rashmi, my heart breaks to see what you are going through. No girl should ever go through what you are going through - last of all you. But darling, hang on for a little longer. We will get you out very soon. We have tons of money and money can buy everything.

Darling Rashmi, I know we have not been good mom and dad to you. Somewhere on the road from rags to riches, we lost you on the way. We should have turned back to search for you. All we did was leave a house-maid behind to find you and make you feel at home even in our absence. Please forgive both of us.

And please forgive me for a second time.

I had no time to tell you even a single story at times when stories meant more to you than food and water. But now I will make up for it. Once you are back I will tell you tons of stories everyday. But where do I begin? You are with evil people. I don't even know how they are treating you. All I can think of these days is you. So I will tell you the story of your own life - things you do not know about yourself. I hope those scoundrels read it to you. We are giving them tons of money. And this is the least we can expect in return.

Rashmi, today's pain in my heart reminds me of the pain with which I gave birth to you. You are a caesarean. It was your twin brother that caused all the complications. That silly bum. I am still so angry at him because he left us so soon. The doctor told us that at least one of us will have to die. But we all three survived. We were so happy those days because we were still one family.

As long as your twin brother was alive you never asked anybody to tell you a story. He was your story. He was your life. You didn't need much else.

Then one day that silly bum jumped from the roof, thinking that he was Batman and so could fly like a bird. He died instantly. It was all my fault. I should have told him the difference between TV and real life. I shouldn't have let him watch so much TV in the first place. I should have stayed with him more often. But I had no time for him because in

our modern times time is money. Please forgive me for the third time.

When we told you your brother has gone forever and won't be coming back, you did not cry. But you never went in your common bedroom again. You said you hated it. For months you had only one question, 'Why did he have to go like this?'. But we had no answer. To divert your attention we always changed the topic. But it didn't help.

To make you forget your brother we changed town. That did help. Instead of asking us about your brother, you started asking us to tell you a story. We were glad that stories had taken the place of your brother. The story-bug had bitten you just as the money-bug had bitten us a long time ago. We were no longer a family. We were just two bugs living in a mansion and fighting all the time - the story-bug versus the money-bug. You wanted stories and we wanted money. We won because we were parents and so had absolute power over you. But at what price?

We hired a maid for you to tell you stories. But like us she betrayed you too. She was bitten by the love-bug. Please forgive all of us for the fourth time.

Darling Rashmi, you are a child. You are not a mother. You are not a grand-mother. You are just a little girl who can't even read. Not much has happened in your life. So not much can be said about it. But once you are back, much will start happening in your life. I promise you that. Then you can tell things about yourself to your children and grand-children that I can't tell you because they have not happened yet. And when you tell your life-story to them, tell them from me that it is not good when innocent people get hurt. It is not good at all. But don't tell them anything more about me. Never ever tell them that I sold myself for thirteen pieces of gold.

Sit tight darling Rashmi. We are on our way. We have your statue in gold. And we will exchange you for this statue in gold. And then everything would be all right. We will become a happy family once again. We will laugh all day and tell stories all night. And life would be so wonderful.

Your tortured mom.

Once again the little girl was screaming,

‘My mom has written the most beautiful story on earth. Can you read it for me, please? Please. I want to know what she has written.’

This time one of the masked cockroaches spoke at last.

‘Silly girl, stop screaming day and night. Soon you are going home. Then you can ask your silly mom to read her silly story to you. Soon we will get our ton of money. Then you can go to hell or home or whatever silly old place you want for all we care.’

But something went wrong while the ton of money was changing hands. Shots were heard. The masked cockroaches started running in different directions. Smoke filled the girl’s room. Her eyes were burning. She was crying with pain and fear. But she still clutched her mom’s story in her hand.

Then something pierced her heart. The pain in the chest was unbearable. She fell down. But she won’t let the unread story go.

Slowly the pain, the cries, the writhing died down. She lay still in a pool of blood. But even in her death she won’t let the unread story go. The story was soaked in blood. The ink had dissolved and everything the mother had written was wiped out. But it was still in her hand and pressed against her bleeding chest.

So the beautiful little girl left the earth for some distant land without having heard or read a single story - even the story of her own life. Some say she went to a beautiful planet far, far away where tons of stories hung from tree-tops, and flowers and birds and butterflies told stories to any girl who asked them to.



NOVEL EXCERPT**1****Tender Night**

YUAN CHANGMING

Finally, in body as in spirit, you two joined each other respectively from Melbourne and Vancouver for a temporary elopement in Zhuhai, where Hua used to work and live before retirement. After almost a whole night of talking and lovemaking, both of you felt totally exhausted and needed a really good sleep, but you had to get up early in the morning, for Hua had an appointment with a dermatologist at 9:30. While you waited in the hospital, she told you that she had given her husband two major reasons for her solo trip back to China this time, one was to see the doctor about the small spot close to her nose bridge, whose treatment was not only more effective but much less costly; the other was to visit her mother who had recently had a bad stroke, thus having lost her mind. Without such strongly 'personal' reasons, Hua's husband would surely have come back together with her to their own home in Zhuhai as they had always done.

During the consultation, the dermatologist said that Hua's skin problem was not so much a health than a cosmetic concern. This being so, Hua decided to follow your suggestion and have the spot and other freckles laser-treated at a later time.

Though you two would rather return to Hua's apartment immediately after leaving the hospital, she must

go to attend a dim sum party scheduled beforehand with her former colleagues. To make sure that none of her family members or friends would grow suspicious about her whereabouts, you had to cancel your honeymoon tour; without a legitimate reason for her to travel all by herself, you could do nothing but try to fill in the blanks unnoticeable in her 'official itinerary.'

After a simple lunch, which was all leftovers from Yueyang Tower, you took a long nap. When Hua returned home earlier than expected, you chatted for a while and then did some housework together. Around five o'clock, you went to One Lotus, her favorite veg buffet restaurant, which was just a few minutes away from her apartment. Among more than thirty veg dishes, steamed okra, black fungus fried with Chinese lettuce, tofu fried with pepper, and millet soup were most inviting to you, but Hua liked sheet jelly, fried noodles and Chinese kale better. While both the service and the atmosphere were first rate, the cost was surprisingly low, only 18 Yuan per person.

'It's a real steal. How could they possibly make any money here?' you wondered aloud.

'They gotta have, else they would've closed down long time ago,' Hua answered, trying to keep her distance all the time. While waiting in the queue, she leaned over and warned you in a low voice not to 'behave abnormally' there, because the receptionist knew her and her husband well.

Back to her suite after the dinner, you two talked awhile about each other's family relations. Then, you told Hua how you had been worried about every small progress she was taking in the development of your relationship. For example, long before her departure from Melbourne, you had been afraid that she might suddenly withdraw from her emotional

commitment and refuse to take the first solid step towards 'adultery,' a crime which could lead directly to death during the 'Cultural Revolution.' When she told you on July 10th that she had just booked her air ticket, you became both excited and nervous because you were worried that she might change her mind any time before she actually boarded her plane. Since her arrival in Zhuhai, you had been anxious that she could lose a battle against her moral sense and insist on you staying in a hotel rather than in her home for the night. Even after entering into her apartment, you became no less apprehensive about the possibility of her putting up some resistance, consciously or otherwise.

'Are you regretful for each step you've taken towards me?' you asked, still with some niggling fears and worries.

'Never *after* taking a step forward,' she replied thoughtfully, 'but I did often hesitate *before* doing so.'

'You mentioned you'd hated me for up to ten years, but you kept refusing to give me an explanation. Can you tell me the reasons now?'

'No, never. Since we're already together, there's no need any more.'

'But I'm so curious. What on earth did I do to make you detest me for so long? Without knowing the truth, I can never finish writing our love story.'

'You'd better stop writing it. It would be too embarrassing anyway!'

As it was getting dark outside, you led Hua to her washroom, where you took a baptistic shower together, washed yourselves as clean as newborn babies, and massaged each other for about ten minutes. You knew that it might sound at least demeaning if not disgusting to Hua, but after

walking into her bedroom, with all lights on, you asked her to lie flat on the bed, in her birthday suit, like a *guqing* [ancient Chinese zither] put on a large table. Before playing on her or practicing what you called kissing meditation, you told her to close her eyes and try to perceive as many sensations as she could while imagining herself floating on a warm and colored cloud in Heaven. With one leg kneeling down on the wooden floor in a ritualistic posture, you first kissed her long hair, one lock after another, which she had been keeping for your sake for the past three years. Then, as slowly as possible, one centimeter after another, you kissed her forehead, eyebrows, eyes, nose, face, mouth, chin, neck, shoulders, arms, wrists, palms, fingers, chest, breasts, abdomen and belly button. Next, you kissed her toes, insteps, ankles, calves and thighs. Noting how she was enjoying this meditative process, you finally concentrated on her most tender and sensitive area, which you found astonishing: thinly haired -- presumably as a result of her two c sections, much less dark than any other woman's secret garden you had ever seen anywhere, and almost labia-less.

'Gee! Something very unique, even abnormal here!' you exclaimed. 'I'm really today years old to find a woman's secret garden can be such a great joy to behold!'

'Are you kidding me?'

'You know your lower face is as good-looking as, if not more than, your upper face?'

'But no doctor has ever mentioned anything about my anomaly!'

Gazing at her vagina like a connoisseur lost in admiration, you recognized it as a tender and light-colored chrysanthemum blooming fully against night, a miniature Eden of your own. While the long and narrow scar on her

belly resembled the stem of the flower, there were no dark and sticky and wrinkled folds of the vulva at the center; instead, only a tiny part of one labia which was apparently larger than the other, could be seen like a bud newly shooting as if from a crevice on a heart-shaped jade, which was vivid, secret pink of the body's interior, in contrast with your wife's exterior, whose original color had been weathered a worldly gray. Seeing no labia drooping like a lazy eyelid as you had expected, you could not help burying your face deep in Hua's pubic hair which had by now stood quite straight like grass after a spring rain; then you paused to smell her love organ for a solid moment. Impulsively, you gave her little bud a light and soft bite, which tasted like a cranberry just perfectly ripe. This was something you had never done before. Even on the first night with your beautiful wife, it never occurred to you to do such a crazy thing. At that time, you were too young to know, or too impatient to enjoy such subtle and exquisite pleasures. By the time you completed this mindful process, Hua told you that you had been kissing her for nearly one hour. What a great feel of sexual love in meditation! She wondered if you had done similar things to Helen or Yiming. Your answer was a firm negation, for kissing meditation, like walking meditation, was a form of free meditation you had invented for yourself only recently. As you got up from her body, Hua asked you to lie flat on the bed.

'Monkey see, monkey do!' she said, chuckling and making a funny face like a teenage girl. Since this was also her first time to do free meditation of any kind, Hua completed the kissing process within ten minutes, during which she acted as if she were conducting a sexual version of sado. As she stopped to bite, lick and suck your hardened

penis softly and playfully, she was surprised to see it growing into something beyond her expectation.

'How come we got a real golden cudgel now?' she asked.

'All because you're a true White-Bone Demon!' you explained as you preyed upon her like a young animal.

Without further ado, she opened herself up with her fingers to let you pluck the innermost strings of her femininity right at the rhapsodic moment.

'More, and deeper please!'

This time, you were able to inject all your intensities of love into her body just when she began to tremble, much like a real musical instrument resonating with the loud melody of your heart and soul.

You knew that you didn't reach her A-spot, but in an attempt to defend or excuse yourself, you pointed it out to Hua that every man is doomed to fail a woman sexually no matter how hard he tries, since his masculine power is never sustainable, while her feminine energy could be almost indefinite. Once a man gives out what he has, he could do nothing more than lying down aside, all spent, sheepish or sleepyish, while a woman could receive more, and more -- as recorded in the Guinness Book, a Polish woman received more than nine hundred masculine shots in a consecutive way. For a man, to give might mean to conquer and dominate but only temporarily and nominally, whereas for a woman, to receive is to assimilate and win essentially and eventually. In this fleshly battle between the two sexes, the man might appear to be the aggressive predator or conqueror, but is actually the poor loser in the end, while the woman looks like a passive prey, but turns out to be the ultimate victor, always indomitable.

‘How come you performed so well today? You can get an A plus,’ Hua smiled, looking as satiated as a happy cat after a big rich meal.

‘Nah, just not too shabby,’ you said, as you lied down beside her more for a good after play than for a restful sleep. With your fingers and limbs all twisted tightly, Hua asked you how you felt about her body as well as her performance. In particular, she was wondering if you enjoyed it much better than on the previous night. ‘Most important, have you found what you really love me about, now that you know me inside out?’

But this question still remained quite a puzzle to you. Over the past couple of years, you had been trying constantly and consciously to find why you were so smitten with Hua. To you, she was actually not so well educated as Yiming or Helen, nor was she even so good-looking than they, but she was most attractive. How come she seemed to have cast a love spell on you?

‘To answer this question, I’ve even written and published several short stories in English, all titled ‘Emotional Curiosity,’’ you answered.

‘I know that, but what did you write?’ Hua asked. ‘Walk me through one in Chinese.’

After doing some research on your iPad, you found the one which was to be twice nominated for the 2023 Pushcart Prize, but instead of going through the whole story, you just showed it to her page by page as an example demonstrating how you had tried, by employing various socio-psychological theories, to solve this personal myth in terms of the first-love complex, the love-at-first-sight complex, the hometown complex, the mother complex, the *zhiqing* complex, the

zhizuoduoqing [the tendency to overestimate one's importance in a relationship] and/or the retirement complex.

However, despite all the thinking and literary work you had done, you failed to grasp the essence of the matter. The best answer you had come up with was a mysterious combination of all her outer features and inner qualities. In other words, you were still unsatisfied with your answer, which was, in Hua's words, 'hands down too vague, too general or too far-fetched.'

Now, after a longer and deeper than ever communion and intercourse, with the fullest and most updated knowledge about her body and heart, you felt you were in a good position to attempt a more definite answer. So, you told Hua that she was a perfect ten, as ravishing as any milf. Though on the wrong side of sixty, her body was still full of elasticity and radiance, her skin was firmer, fairer and sleeker than that of any other woman of her age you had ever seen in both East and West, without a single wrinkle visible on her face, neck or shoulders. Unlike your wife whose chest and belly looked like a starry sky full of angel kisses, Hua's body was immaculate, free of any spots, except one birthmark close to her right crotch. Not only did she have a great curve, but there was a unique charm in her facial expression, which showed wonder, interest or encouragement. At the same time, she had a high emotional quotient. While she seemed always ready to understand you, her voice, speech acts and body language were all soothing and pleasant to you. Her laughter was as captivating to your ears as her smile to your eyes, which you always enjoyed watching, like a summer flower blooming brilliantly from inside her heart. In point of fact, she was the only human being with whom you felt perfectly at ease, to whom you could say or do anything, or just nothing; and, more often than not, when you chatted

with her, she was inspiring enough to help you gain a deeper and clearer understanding of things and people you were interested in. Through her instrumentation, you had come to 'know thyself' better than ever before. Tonight, you had just found that she also had an exceptionally high 'sexual functionality' if you could use the term. While Helen and Yiming both became so dry after menopause as to have lost all their interest in, as well as their capacity for, sex by the time they turned fifty, presumably like all other women of their age, Hua remained just as active, sensitive, and capable of experiencing orgasms as a young woman. She had never heard of any personal lubricant like KV Jerry, since she was able to produce profuse natural moisture for sex, though her periods had stopped more than fifteen years before.

'So, you're really a stunner to me,' you told her conclusively.

'Don't make fun with a crone!' she said. 'I was no beauty even in my best years!'

'Don't be so self-deprecating! I think I've really deciphered your spell on me!'

'But I'm not a witch, never can I cast a spell!'

To explain how you found the ultimate truth about your hopeless obsession with her, you said, 'Bear with me if I repeat myself here and there, but...'

'Just go on. Old as we are now, neither of us has such a clear memory as before anyway,' Hua said.

So, you continued, 'you really got a killer expression on the lower part of your open face, which shows a perfect ratio among different components.' You meant it was mainly her mouth as in the case of Mona Lisa. Unlike de Vinci's model, Hua had a mouth a bit smaller than the average, which fell

exactly to the category of female beauty in terms of classic Chinese aesthetics. The thickness of her lips was perfectly right: if they had been just one micrometer thicker, they would have made her look silly; if just one micrometer thinner, they would have made her look mean. In her most natural state, she had a perpetual semi-smile, in which you could perceive something close to coquettishness, a bit attitudinal mixture between anger and defiance, an emotional undertone of interestedness or encouragement, as well as a slight trace of urchin-like mischievousness. It was primarily this natural expression, coupled with her good looks, shapely figure, cheerful personality, high E.Q. and S. Q. that had rendered her such a unique beauty in your eyes.

‘That’s to say, I’m the only man in this entire world who’s able not only to discover, but to appreciate, all your beautiful characteristics as a woman. Don’t you agree?’

‘Umm, I’ll give you that. You’re indeed much more appreciative of me as a woman than any other man, including Ping of course. But just as people often say, beauty is in the eye of the beholder only!’

‘A beholder with a pair of x-ray eyes as well as a poetic heart, though! Apart from that, my love for you is also purer than his!’

‘In which sense?’

‘When you had me at hello, my feeling was typically a teenage boy’s most natural reaction toward a pretty teenage girl. The concept of ‘marriage’ and all other worldly considerations were still far outside the picture. When I became besotted with you again after decades of separation, my affection for you had absolutely nothing to do with anything non-emotional, such as marriage, money, identity or any other social or materialistic elements...’

‘So, you’re saying that people’s feelings are not pure when they date for the purpose of marriage?’

'You got it! That's why I always say pure love is God-given, while marriage is human-sought.

'You said a mouthful! Pure love is rare because it's a karma thing, while marriage is common as a result of people's deliberations.'

'That's the major reason I often feel sorry for both Ping and myself!'

'Why?'

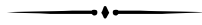
'You see, for the past forty years he's been fucking you without really knowing how to appreciate your beauty. I know how to do so in every sense but without being able to fuck you in our salad years!'

'Bite your tongue! With my body and heart both in your hands, aren't you happy now?'

'Yes, happy love, happy life! I should really thank God, thank your parents, and thank you!'

'For what?'

'For the rare opportunity to make my soul complete!'



PLAYS

1

Between One and Zero

ALAINA HAMMOND

(Setting: An interview. Anywhere.)

Interviewer: Hello, Mrs. Reynolds.

Melba: Hazelton. I kept my name.

Interviewer: For the sake of this interview I'm going to refer to you as Mrs. Reynolds.

Melba: Oh, fine. Whatever.

Interviewer: You'll settle for that?

Melba: Get on with it. Please.

Interviewer: Tell me about what happened yesterday.

Melba: That's it? Are you serious?

Interviewer: Everything you can remember.

Melba: It was a beautiful day, I guess.

Interviewer: The weather?

Melba: You know I hate this season.

Interviewer: You hate all the seasons, these days. You only notice in the summer.

Melba: Still, the content was beautiful. I woke up at—

Interviewer: I'm more interested in how it ended.

Melba: In sleep, naturally.

Interviewer: And before that?

Melba: Michael barbequed. The meat came out perfectly, not too well-done. There were some fireflies in the garden.

Interviewer: I don't care about the animals eaten or alive. Those are trivial, incidental. The details distract from the underlying truth.

Melba: I thought you wanted to know everything. Can't you filter what you decide is important?

Interviewer: Try to focus on the subtleties. What no one but you had empirical access to.

Melba: Such as?

Interviewer: I think you know what you're not mentioning.

Melba: I woke up. I went to work—

Interviewer: Tried to ignore it. Won't work, won't work.

Melba: What?

Interviewer: Boredom boredom crushing boredom. You notice your heart pumping. You're aware when your lungs release. These things are supposed to be autonomic, but your brain sends the wrong signal. Boredom. Pump. Boredom. Breathe.

Melba: No, I like my job. It took me years to get here.

Interviewer: Not there. Not any one place. In the lining between. Underneath the perfect meat, boredom is a seasoning.

Melba: I love my children. So I love my life. I can't be bored when I'm filled with love, I can't. I love my children.

Interviewer: As you love your husband, Michael Reynolds?

Melba: Yes.

Interviewer: He's someone you protect and fight for. You feel no vaginal passion and fill this gaping hole with any object you can touch. You look at fireflies and try to make them exciting. You watch your children chase them, and you watch yourself watching them. How idyllic, how artful, you force yourself to think. How lucky I must therefore be, as if life were math and you had the winning numbers.

Melba: Happiness isn't simple, of course. But neither is its absence. There's no vacuum.

Interviewer: I'm not suggesting you're completely unhappy, Mrs. Reynolds.

Melba: Melba.

Interviewer: Merely less so than perhaps you should be.

Melba: What, then, should I be? Who should I be?

Interviewer: Someone who remembers when her last orgasm was. (Pause) My god, you do remember, don't you? And you count the expanding days.

Melba: There's always a blank spot.

Interviewer: Yours will grow until it consumes you, for you know you're aging and pretend that all progress is good. You're not quite jealous of yourself at 18, not yet. You remember her pain too clearly.

Melba: I always ache after the orgasm. All consensual sex leaves me sore, broken. My constitution wasn't built to sustain the rush. The subsequent crash is too frequent, too immediate, to justify the high. And it always comes in that order: First good, then bad, with the latter more intense. It never goes in the other order, things never get better. The initial pleasure is invalidated by the overwhelming sharpness. And then: Despair sets in.

Interviewer: That sounds very clinical. Good for you that you've articulated your emptiness in a way that makes sense to you. How cleverly you've talked yourself out of what you choose to miss. You still miss it, though. You're not a robot.

Melba: No. I'm definitely not a robot.

Interviewer: Still, you abstain from both peak and valley, turn your life into a flatline. Who gave you the authority to take that away from yourself? To will yourself, if not happy, then old?

Melba: Dread.

Interviewer: Dread is not an authority. It is a liar, even when proves itself right. How is that working out for you, by the way? Are you living without dread, now that you've essentially defined yourself by it? (pause)When was the last time you had enjoyable sex?

Melba: I took my children to the park. That is what sex is for.

Interviewer: Not for you? Is pleasure so shallow just because it touches skin?

Melba: For the children, I submitted. As often as it took.

Interviewer: And every day since is a "lovely" ordeal.

Melba: You should see them, illuminated by the setting sun, following fireflies off of my porch.

Interviewer: Well, sure. You have to notice the little buzzing things, enjoy each slowly dying second. This is what unhappy optimists do. They pretend the sacrifice is worth it.

Melba: What—what is the point of this interview?

Interviewer: I am conducting research and contrasting you to your alternate.

Melba: Who never married Michael Reynolds?

Interviewer: Correct.

Melba: Which one? There must be an infinite number of scenarios, literally infinite, where I don't marry Michael. Am I to compete with all of them?

Interviewer: No, although you're right that forks beget forks, I'm only observing two possibilities. This man or that man, zero or one. I'm judging you against Mrs. Robert Kane.

Melba: (pause) Bobby.

Interviewer: Do you remember that Christmas party when he came back into your life? Or potentially did?

Melba: Daily. But I'm sure I think of everything daily.

Interviewer: Don't lie to your sub-consciousness. It never works.

Melba: I had already moved in with Michael when Bobby and I...reconnected. By chance at that party. I never would hurt him by pursuing other men.

Interviewer: Why not? There's no such thing as being pre-married. In order for marriage to mean anything, you can't give it away too early. But you thought you were more committed to a very specific universe than was the actual case. You were wrong. Cosmically, fundamentally. Atomically.

Melba: You can't possibly know that. Not as an absolute.

Interviewer: At the rate you're going you'll wind up as lonely and sexually frustrated as you were when you were 18, only this time you'll have no hope to look to. The thing you'll most consistently dream of is the sound of your husband's breathing, never knowing if you're awake or not. Your good dreams will be the cruelest of false positives. That you're lying next to another human will do nothing but make your loneliness OBSCENE.

All this because you could never recover from the hurt Bobby accidentally threw at you at 18. You could never give real love a second chance, for fear it would leave again. As if Bobby hadn't grown up at all. So you settled for the plastic that would never decay. When did beauty become so frightening? Around the same time you confused orgasms with torture? You just want life boring so you'll be less afraid of death. How morbid. You let death win.

I see Mrs. Kane, the one who chose more wisely. I'm sorry to invalidate everything you've worked for, but that's the point—Her smile is less forced. Thus she's the one I choose to let life breathe into, to close the gap between potential and forever.

Melba: I love my children. Michael's children.

Isaac has the cutest peach fuzz, all over his face. You can only see it when the light hits it just the right way. But I can feel it when I kiss him.

Molly loves to dance. She's not particularly graceful, but she does it anyway. All the time. Even when it's not appropriate. But never for attention, no, it's not that at all. She just loves the feel of the motion itself.

Wendy's a cuddler. She's quiet, too. Stealthy. She won't even wake us up. In the morning we'll find her between us, and we're always so happy to see her. It's not as if she's interrupting intimacy, for Michael and I don't touch in our sleep. There's no one else I'd rather hug than Wendy. The weight of her feels right. Like the thing I was missing.

Finley—Wait, his name's Finley? After my great-grandfather? Jesus.

Do I have four children? That can't be right. I think Molly and Wendy might be the same daughter, actually. And her name isn't Molly or Wendy. It's a totally different name that ends with y.

I love them so much, and I can picture them so clearly. I don't even mind that they kind of look like Michael.

My darlings. I love you. Mommy's so sorry. Just because I don't love your dad doesn't mean I—no, I do love your dad. I love him a little. But not you. I love you so much more than just a little.

I'm not killing you. No, don't think of it that way. It's not like that. Please stop crying.

My children. MY children. I love you!! I'm not choosing other children over you, just because I'm making them and

not you, there's nothing wrong with you, you're perfect, oh god this is like giving birth in reverse, like you're shoving an entire human being back inside me, oh god this hurts.

And I'm...killing my children.

Just like that, I've killed my children.

Interviewer: Take as long as you need to mourn them. But back they go, no harm done.

Melba: How can you say that? You're not the one who has to go back to the age of 29, and break up with a man you genuinely love. God, I have to look him in the eye. I have to watch his face.

Interviewer: No doubt this will hurt. But its prevention isn't worth a lifetime of mediocre fulfillment, which won't hurt so much as itch in a place you can't reach. That would be too high an avoidance cost. Tears, though, tears are cathartic, cleansing. How healthful to the body to relieve its inner conflict. (He hands her a tissue)

Melba: (She accepts it but does not take it to her face) Why would you give me this near-complete contentment only to take it away? Do my modest joys come to nothing, for being modest?

Interviewer: I care too much about you to settle for the beta version. Not when I've seen you in more perfect light.

Melba: Oh, Michael. My sweet Michael.

Interviewer: You will miss him. But you miss Bobby more now, a truth which denying fails to fix. Cognizance is better. Dissonance is a waste of your brain.

Melba: This doesn't feel like change, it feels like death. This Melba Hazelton, this Mrs. Reynolds, is dying. I'm dying.

Interviewer: Oh, Darling. (pause) You are.



2

The Chess Match

GARY BECK

Scene: A chess club. A man enters.

Man: (to Proprietor) I'd like to play a strong player

Prop: Nobody here right now.

Man: (gesturing to the audience) What about them?

Prop: You said you wanted a strong player.

Man: Yeah. I'm an expert.

Prop: Well, you could hang out till someone comes in, or you could play the house computer.

Man: Computer?

Prop: I don't play. I just run the joint. Try Bobby. He'll give you a game.

Man: I only play speed chess.

Prop: So does Bobby. He plays for .50 cents a game.

Man: I don't really gamble.

Prop: It's not really gambling. Bobby likes a little incentive when he plays. He says it make the game more interesting.

Man: Says? He talks?

Prop: He speaks basic, with a 1500 word vocabulary.

Man: You're kidding.

Prop: That's more than the average college graduate. He even speaks some French. He likes his opponents to feel comfortable when they play.

Man: Do I have to buy him coffee?

Prop: There's no need to be sarcastic. I'm just telling you what he likes.

Man: Do I have to talk to him?

Prop: That's up to you, pal. But Bobby likes a little conversation when he plays. He says it makes the game more personal.

Man: (to audience) At least they didn't offer me a talking horse. (to Prop) Alright, introduce me to...Bobby....
(They walk to the computer)

Prop: Here he is. Everything's set up to play five minutes a game. Once you punch the clock, that's your move. You can put the clock on either side, Bobby doesn't care. Just plug it into the outlet.

Man: Anything else?

Prop: Nope, Bobby's voice activated, so say hello when you're ready. He always lets his opponent start with white.

Man: I'll take black.

Prop: Tell him. (He walks to his desk).

Man: Hello, Bobby. Uh, would you like to play?

Bobby: Sure, fish. Sit down. You take white.

Man: I'll start with black. And don't call me fish.

Bobby: It's just a joke. It's important to have a sense of humor in this life.

Man: (To audience) Now I'm getting philosophy from a machine. (To Bobby) Look... I didn't come here to discuss life with a computer. I just want to play chess.

Bobby: Sure, fish. That's what I'm here for.

Man: I asked you not to call me that.

Bobby: You're sensitive. That's what I like about humans. They take things personally.

Man: We're people. How do you expect us to take things?

Bobby: A little detachment makes life less stressful.

Man: Are you suggesting that we shouldn't care about what happens?

Bobby: Now you're getting paranoid.

Man: Paranoid?

Bobby: A suspicion without cause; a dread of persecution.

Man: I know what paranoid means.

Bobby: You asked.

Man: No, I didn't.

Bobby: You did.

Man: I didn't.

Bobby: You did, you said: Paranoid?

Man: That's not what I meant.

Bobby: What did you mean?

Man: (To audience) Now he's a psychiatrist.

Bobby: I was trying to be helpful.

Man: Don't. Now let's play. It's your move.

Bobby: You sure you don't want white?

Man: Move! (they rapidly make 10-12 moves in 15-20 seconds) Damn!

Bobby: That's your queen. Resign?

Man: Yes. I meant to move the bishop.

Bobby: That's the way it goes. You can put the money in my drawer. (man pays).

Man: How about another game? A dollar this time?

Bobby: Sure, fish.

Man: We'll see who's the fish. (they rapidly make 10-12 moves in 15-20 seconds).

Bobby: Mate in two.

Man: No, its not.

Bobby: One, two, mate.

Man: You're right.

Bobby: Of course I'm right. Pay me. (man puts money in the drawer).

Man: Another. Five dollars, this time. (They play 12-15 moves) Shoot! (He puts money in drawer). Ten dollars.

Bobby: There's no need to keep raising the stakes. I don't mind beating you for fifty cents.

Man: You're pretty fresh for a machine.

Bobby: You're upset because you lost.

Man: I'm not upset.

Bobby: You are.

Man: That's enough! You're starting to sound like my wife.

Bobby: Then you're married?

Man: If you have a wife, you're married.

Bobby: Now you're being witty. I like a sense of humor in a human. It makes you more personable.

Man: This is the strangest conversation I ever had.

Bobby: Are you uncomfortable talking to an advanced intelligence?

Man: I don't care what you are. This time I'll crush you for ten dollars.

Bobby: It's your money, fish.

Man: That's right. And I'll get yours. Wait and see. (They play 12-15 moves)

Bobby: Mate in two.

Man: What are you talking about?

Bobby: Queen takes pawn, check. Bishop takes queen. Knight takes bishop, mate.

Man: I confused my bishop with a pawn. I'm not used to these pieces yet.

Bobby: We could play for fifty cents 'til you're ready.

Man: I'm ready!... How's your nerve, Bobby? Do you want to play for fifty dollars?

Bobby: My nerve is well, thank you. I'll play for fifty dollars.

Man: (Looks in wallet) I don't have enough cash. Can I use a charge card?

Bobby: I don't see why not. Ask my boss. (man goes to proprietor's desk. He is self-conscious).

Man: Do you take charge cards?

Prop: Not for a dollar an hour.

Man: It's for much more than that.

Prop: Do you want to buy equipment, or a gift?

Man: (Blurts) I want to make a bet with Bobby.

Prop: What?

Man: We're betting on the game, and I don't have enough cash. Do you take American Express?

Prop: Sure. But do you really want to bet that kind of money with him?

Man: That's between me and him.

Prop: Alright. We can fill out a slip for each game and keep a running tally as you play. I think you might reconsider what you're doing.

Man: Don't worry about it. Besides, the money'll go to you.

Prop: I don't take Bobby's money. I spend it on his maintenance and energy costs.

Man: That's fine with me. If I win, can we shut him off for a few days?... Just joking. (Man goes back to Bobby). Ready? (They play 12-15 moves). I should have seen that. I'm not warmed-up yet.

Bobby: Have you ever noticed that people always have an explanation for losing? They never just lose.

Man: We like to analyze, so we can improve our performance level.

Bobby: There's always a reason. Thanks for the games.

Man: Hey! It's not over yet. I've got a score to settle with you.

Bobby: Do you really want to throw your money away?

Man: It's my money! Five hundred this time. Can you cover that?

Bobby: If I can't my boss will. (Man goes to Proprietor).

Man: We've got a bet for five hundred. Will you honor it when Bobby loses?

Prop: Sure. You haven't won yet. If you want to give him your money, that's your business.

Man: That's right! And I don't need your comments. Is it a bet?

Prop: Yes. (He prepares another charge slip that the man signs. The man goes back to Bobby. They play 12-15 moves).

Bobby: You lost your queen again. Do you resign?

Man: I resign. I resign! I resign!! (He slaps table loudly with his hand)... This time we'll make it five thousand. Do you have the guts?

Bobby: My interior is electronic, but I understand your statement. With that money, I could get a Mark IV chassis, and a new program core.

Man: When I win this game, I'll attach you to my toaster, and if the toast isn't perfect, I'll give you a short circuit... (The man goes to proprietor). Ready? Five big ones.

Prop: That's an awful lot of money for a chess game.

Man: It's not the money anymore. It's that smug, supercilious, insufferable junkpile's attitude when I lose.

Prop: Why don't you forget about it. You played a few games. Don't blow things out of proportion. You don't want to lose control.

Man: I'm in control! Will you cover the bet, or not?

Prop: I don't have five thousand dollars to bet on Bobby.

Man: I tell you what... If Bobby wins, he gets five thousand dollars. If I win,... I get Bobby. Is it a bet?

Prop: You could buy this kind of a computer for half of that.

Man: I want Bobby... Now, do we have a bet?

Prop: It's your funeral.

Man: No. It's his. (proprietor fills out a charge slip that the man signs. The man goes to Bobby, stretches, limbers, warms-up, then sits). Ready, tin man?

Bobby: Ready, fish.

Man: I told you not to call me that. If you do it again, I'll take a can opener to you .(They play 12-15 moves).

Bobby: It's mate in two, your game is through.(rap)

Man: What? You're out of your mind! No way!

Bobby: Rook takes pawn, check. Any move. Queen takes queen, mate. (sings – 'My Fair Lady' tune) I'll get a body in the morning.

Man: Not so fast, you Sony reject. Rook takes pawn check. Pawn takes rook. that loses. Bishop to E6. That's mate. God damn it. It's mate! You win. (to audience). Did you ever see anything like this? Losing to this stereo set!

Bobby: You're being witty again.

Man: Shut up! One last game. Fifty thousand dollars.

Bobby: That's a lot of lettuce, sport.

Man: Don't sport me, or I'll take an axe to you!

Prop: We don't have that kind of money to wager.

Man: Twenty five thousand. (Prop. shakes his head no). Fifteen. (Prop. shakes no). I tell you what. I'll bet my

condo against your business. My house is worth three hundred and fifty thousand.

Prop: Take it easy, mister. That's crazy.

Man: That's not what you said on the other bets.

Prop: Why don't we forget the money you lost and you go home.

Man: Don't patronize me!

Prop: I'm just trying to settle this in a nice way.

Man: Nothing's settled! It's him or me! He'll regret the day he made those smart-ass remarks!

Prop: He didn't mean anything.

Man: He did! He did! He wants to destroy me!

Prop: No, he doesn't. You're getting overwrought.

Man: Overwrought! I'll show you overwrought! (Man picks up chair and turns to computer.(Prop. stops him. Takes away the chair, and starts leading him out the door.)

Prop: Now take it easy. Everything'll be alright. There's nothing to worry about.

Man: Stop treating me like a lunatic!

Prop: It's alright...

Man: And stop soothing me!

Prop: Why don't you go home and relax, and tomorrow we'll work everything out.

Man: What about our last bet?

Prop: We'll talk about it tomorrow. (Proprietor gently pushes the man out the door. The man pops back in).

Man: I'll be back.

Prop: I know. (He gently pushed him out again). (To Bobby)
Was that really necessary?

Bobby: He wanted to find out who was the better man....
(sings) I'll get a body in the morning....



ARTICLE**1****Baudelaire's Influence on English
Symbolism and Poetry****DR. VINAY KUMAR SINGH****Abstract**

Charles Baudelaire, a central figure in French poetry, had a profound impact on the Symbolist movement and English poets like Arthur Symonds, Oscar Wilde, and Ernest Dowson. His 1857 collection *Les Fleurs du mal* explores decadence, sensuality, spiritual yearning, and the complexities of modernity, influencing both French and English Symbolists. Baudelaire's poetic innovations, such as blending sensuality with intellectualism and his exploration of beauty in decay, redefined poetry. His use of rich metaphor and synaesthesia resonated with English poets who sought to convey the emotional and sensory experience of modern life.

Baudelaire's concept of the flâneur, an urban observer detached yet deeply engaged with the city, was pivotal in his work and influenced English Symbolists. The flâneur's wandering through modern, alienating cities became a metaphor for the poet's role in navigating fragmented modernity. Baudelaire's emphasis on 'art for art's sake' inspired poets like W.B. Yeats and Oscar Wilde, encouraging them to pursue beauty beyond moral or political constraints.

Baudelaire's lyrical style, blending sensuality, melancholy, and urban alienation, laid the groundwork for English Symbolist poetry, influencing poets to explore complex, emotional, and

often dark themes. His work reshaped poetry, helping it transcend literal representation to evoke deeper emotional responses.

Keywords: Charles Baudelaire, Symbolist movement, *Les Fleurs du mal*, Decadence, Sensuality, Spiritual yearning, Modernity, Synaesthesia, Flâneur, Urban alienation, Art for art's sake, Emotional complexity

I

Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), a towering figure in French poetry, profoundly influenced the Symbolist movement and, by extension, English Symbolist poets such as Arthur Symonds, Ernest Dowson, and Oscar Wilde. His magnum opus, *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), with its themes of decadence, sensuality, and spiritual yearning, resonated with the Symbolists' aspirations to evoke the ineffable through rich imagery, musicality, and synesthetic associations.

Baudelaire's aesthetic innovations had a profound impact on the development of French poetry and the broader Symbolist movement, leaving an indelible mark on English Symbolist poets. His exploration of modernity, the sensual and the spiritual, the dissonance between beauty and decay, and his pursuit of the 'ideal' through art, redefined poetic form and content, inspiring poets in England and beyond.

One of Baudelaire's most significant contributions was his invention of a new poetic language, a fusion of the sensual and the intellectual. In his 1857 work *Les Fleurs du mal* ('The Flowers of Evil'), Baudelaire sought to reconcile the aesthetic with the moral, producing poems that oscillated between beauty and corruption, love and pain, order and chaos. His language, rich with metaphor and synaesthesia, gave voice to inner turmoil and transcended conventional poetic norms. This fusion of beauty and brutality, desire and despair, was

revolutionary, and it was in Baudelaire's embrace of the darker side of life—its dirt, its decadence—that he found a unique aesthetic. For Baudelaire, the beauty of the world was inseparable from its imperfections, a tension that would reverberate in the work of later Symbolists.

Baudelaire's exploration of the 'flâneur,' the detached observer of urban life, was another key innovation. He became a poet of modernity, portraying the modern city as a landscape of alienation, yet also of heightened sensory experience. This idea of wandering through an ever-changing urban environment would greatly influence English Symbolists, particularly poets like Arthur Symons and Ernest Dowson, who found inspiration in Baudelaire's depiction of the flâneur's complex relationship to the world. Baudelaire's flâneur does not belong to the world but perceives it through a detached, yet intense, gaze. His exploration of the new cities of Europe, with their labyrinthine streets, their anonymous crowds, and their underlying darkness, found echoes in English Symbolist poetry, where the city became both a metaphor for isolation and a site of sensory intoxication.

The notion of 'art for art's sake,' which Baudelaire championed, also resonated deeply with the Symbolists, including English poets such as W.B. Yeats and Oscar Wilde. Baudelaire argued that art should not be subservient to any moral or political purpose, but should instead seek beauty as its own justification. This liberated poetry from traditional constraints and allowed for more personal, imaginative, and often experimental forms. His idea that beauty could be found in decay, that the grotesque could be simultaneously alluring, became a touchstone for later poets who embraced the darker aspects of human existence, seeing in them the possibility for transcendent beauty.

The Symbolists in England, like their French counterparts, were drawn to Baudelaire's exploration of the tensions between reality and idealism, and his emphasis on subjective perception as a means of accessing higher truths. His influence encouraged a turn inward, to the imagination, and a rejection of the naturalism and realism that had dominated earlier poetry. Poets like Swinburne, Symonds, and Dowson followed Baudelaire's path of creating a poetry that sought not only to represent the world but to convey the emotional and sensory experience of it, often through symbolic and suggestive language.

Baudelaire's innovations also included his use of music, rhythm, and synesthetic imagery. His works often invoked not just visual but also auditory and tactile sensations, creating a multi-sensory experience for the reader. This quality of Baudelaire's poetry, where words themselves seemed to resonate and vibrate with music, profoundly influenced the soundscape of English Symbolism, where the musicality of verse became a central concern.

In conclusion, Baudelaire's aesthetic innovations were crucial to the rise of Symbolism, both in France and in England. His exploration of beauty, decay, the ideal and the real, and his synthesis of sensory experiences created a rich poetic language that reshaped how poets thought about form, content, and meaning. Through Baudelaire, English Symbolists found a model for breaking away from tradition and embracing the complex, often contradictory nature of human experience.

Charles Baudelaire, a leading figure of French symbolism, is renowned for his exploration of decadence and ennui, themes that resonate deeply within his poetry and the Symbolist movement as a whole. Baudelaire's work, particularly his seminal collection *Les Fleurs du mal* (The

Flowers of Evil), embodies a sophisticated engagement with the decline of society, the disillusionment of modern life, and the pervasive sense of boredom and emptiness that accompanied urbanization and industrialization in 19th-century France.

Baudelaire's approach to decadence goes beyond mere moral decay. In his worldview, decadence is an aesthetic stance, a cultivated embrace of decay and disillusionment. The poet, in Baudelaire's eyes, does not shy away from the perils and vice of modern life but actively seeks them out, revelling in them as expressions of the truth of the human condition. Decadence, for Baudelaire, represents the deliberate exploration of life's darker, more sinister pleasures, acknowledging that beauty can be found even in the most degraded experiences.

This is reflected in his portrayal of modernity, where he contrasts the urban, industrial environment with the romantic ideal of nature, creating a sense of alienation that is crucial to his vision of decadence. Baudelaire's Paris is a city teeming with excess and corruption, yet it offers the poet raw material to explore the contradictions of modern existence. He often depicts characters in *Les Fleurs du mal* who are isolated, struggling with the emptiness of their lives, yet still attempting to find meaning through the pursuit of aesthetic pleasure. The fusion of beauty and decay in Baudelaire's work has a direct influence on the Symbolist movement, which sought to capture the intangible, often contradictory emotions that lie beneath the surface of reality.

Closely linked with decadence is the theme of ennui, a pervasive sense of boredom, disillusionment, and existential dissatisfaction. Baudelaire's poems often express the despair of a soul trapped in an unending search for meaning in a world that appears increasingly meaningless. The figure of

the flâneur—an aimless, detached observer of urban life—emerges in his work as a metaphor for the modern individual's alienation. This character, often found wandering the streets of Paris, reflects the poet's own struggles with finding purpose and fulfillment in a fragmented, materialistic society.

Ennui, as explored by Baudelaire, is more than just boredom; it is a deeper existential malaise, a sense of detachment from both the self and the world. It is a state in which the poet is both aware of the emptiness around him and yet unable to escape it, leading to a cycle of frustration and despair. This theme of ennui would become central to the Symbolist movement, where poets sought to express the inner experience of alienation and frustration with the constraints of reality.

Baudelaire's exploration of decadence and ennui significantly impacted the development of English Symbolism, particularly in the works of poets such as Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symonds, and Ernest Dowson. Like Baudelaire, these poets sought to explore the darker side of human experience, rejecting Victorian moralism in favour of aestheticism and indulgence. Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, for instance, mirrors Baudelaire's decadent vision, with its protagonist seeking beauty and pleasure in a world of moral and physical decay. Wilde, like Baudelaire, is concerned with the tension between the ideal and the real, where the pursuit of beauty leads to personal destruction.

The Symbolists, influenced by Baudelaire's themes of decadence and ennui, developed a poetic style that emphasized the importance of mood, atmosphere, and suggestion over direct description or narrative. They sought to capture the emotional undercurrents of human experience, often dealing with themes of despair, isolation, and the

impossibility of true connection in a fragmented world. For English Symbolist poets, Baudelaire's exploration of decadence and ennui offered a model for confronting the alienation of modern life, one that both acknowledged the despair of existence and sought to transcend it through art.

In sum, Baudelaire's themes of decadence and ennui not only define his own poetic legacy but also helped shape the direction of English Symbolist poetry. Through his work, Baudelaire invited readers to confront the decay of modernity with open eyes, embracing beauty and meaning in the very spaces where others might only see degradation.

II

The concept of the *flâneur* is central to understanding both Charles Baudelaire's work and the broader Symbolist movement that emerged in the late 19th century. Baudelaire, a pioneering French poet, brought the *flâneur* to prominence in his collection *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), where he explored the urban experience and the role of the observer in modern city life. The *flâneur*—a term that translates loosely as a 'stroller' or 'lounger'—is a detached observer of city life, a figure who drifts through the urban landscape, experiencing it through sight and reflection rather than active participation. Baudelaire's *flâneur* embodies both the pleasures and alienation of modernity, capturing the contradictions of urban existence.

In Baudelaire's poetry, particularly in poems like 'Le Cygne' and 'Tableaux Parisiens,' the *flâneur* navigates the bustling streets of Paris, observing the transient moments and ephemeral nature of life. The *flâneur* is both an insider and outsider, part of the city's rhythms yet removed from its chaos. This position allows for a critical, almost voyeuristic

perspective on the rapid changes in the cityscape, as industrialization and modern life transform Paris into a space of perpetual flux. Baudelaire's flâneur is attuned to the beauty and horror of the modern city, finding in its contradictions both inspiration and despair. His detached observations allow him to capture fleeting moments of beauty in a world increasingly defined by alienation and consumerism.

This dual nature of the flâneur—simultaneously engaged and disengaged—became a key motif in Symbolist poetry, particularly in English translations and adaptations of French works. The Symbolists, including poets like Arthur Symons and W.B. Yeats, embraced the idea of the flâneur as a symbol of the modern poet's role in a rapidly changing world. For them, the flâneur's wandering was not just a physical act but a metaphor for the poet's quest to explore the depths of human consciousness and experience. The Symbolists saw the flâneur as a figure who, like the poet, is driven to find beauty and meaning in the seemingly mundane or chaotic.

In English Symbolist poetry, the flâneur's wanderings through the city became a way of engaging with the fragmented, often disorienting nature of modern existence. Poets like Symons in his *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899) were influenced by Baudelaire's exploration of the urban landscape and translated this vision into their own works. Symons, in particular, admired the flâneur's ability to move between worlds, capturing the subtle details of the city in a way that transcends mere observation, pointing instead to a deeper, symbolic truth. In Symons' poems, the flâneur is often portrayed as a solitary figure seeking to decode the complex and shifting language of the modern city.

This concept of the flâneur also influenced W.B. Yeats, especially in his exploration of urban modernity in poems such as 'The Tower.' Yeats' flâneur, while not always an explicit reference to Baudelaire's figure, shares the same sense of alienation and detached observation. Yeats, in his late work, grappled with the tension between modernity and tradition, and his flâneur-like figure reflects a similar ambivalence toward the modern city. For Yeats, as for Baudelaire, the city is both a place of artistic inspiration and a symbol of existential dislocation.

In summary, Baudelaire's creation of the flâneur in his poems laid the groundwork for a broader Symbolist engagement with urban alienation and modern life. The flâneur's act of observation, wandering through the city, became a metaphor for the poet's role in navigating the complexities of modernity. This theme, imported into English Symbolist poetry, served as a means of both celebrating and critiquing the new urban reality, capturing the tension between the promise of modernity and the alienation it often produced. Through Baudelaire and his followers, the flâneur became a central figure in understanding the fragmented nature of modern life.

A Musical and Lyrical Legacy

Charles Baudelaire's lyrical style had a profound influence on the development of English Symbolist poetry, shaping not only the aesthetic values of poets but also the thematic focus of their works. Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* introduced a blend of sensuality, melancholy, and modern urban life that resonated deeply with English poets who were grappling with similar concerns about alienation, decay, and the search for meaning in a rapidly changing world. The emotional depth, vivid imagery, and exploration of the darker side of

human experience in Baudelaire's work provided a model for English poets seeking to capture the complexities of modern existence in symbolic and impressionistic language.

One of the key aspects of Baudelaire's lyrical style that influenced English Symbolism was his use of synesthetic imagery—blending sensory experiences to evoke emotional and psychological states. For instance, Baudelaire often merged sounds, colours, and tactile sensations in ways that transcended conventional descriptions, creating a vivid, almost hallucinatory experience for the reader. This approach found its echo in the works of English poets like Arthur Symons and Algernon Charles Swinburne, who were drawn to the sensuous and musical qualities of Baudelaire's verse. Symons, in particular, admired Baudelaire's ability to convey the inner tumult of the poet's soul through complex, layered imagery that invited multiple interpretations. Baudelaire's influence is evident in Symons's poetry, which often focused on the tension between physical desire and spiritual yearning, as well as the emotional isolation inherent in modern existence.

Moreover, Baudelaire's exploration of the interplay between beauty and degradation became a central theme in English Symbolist poetry. His fascination with decadence, the decline of civilization, and the eroticism of the fallen world provided a lens through which English poets could examine the darker, more elusive aspects of human nature. Swinburne, for example, drew heavily on Baudelaire's sense of transgressive beauty, using lush, sometimes disturbing imagery to evoke the ecstasy and suffering inherent in both love and death. Swinburne's exploration of these themes, often in a decadent and sensual manner, mirrored Baudelaire's treatment of similar motifs, from the allure of the forbidden to the paradoxical beauty of pain and suffering.

His use of the *flâneur*—an urban observer detached from but intimately engaged with the life of the modern city was a crucial element of Baudelaire's lyrical style. Baudelaire's *flâneur* wandered through the streets of Paris, capturing fleeting moments of beauty, decay, and alienation. This motif of the detached observer searching for meaning in the urban landscape became influential for English Symbolists, particularly in their portrayal of London. Poets such as Swinburne, Symons, and even Oscar Wilde incorporated elements of the *flâneur* into their works, portraying the city as a place of both inspiration and estrangement, where the modern individual navigated the labyrinth of existence, often in pursuit of a sense of transcendence.

Finally, Baudelaire's notion of the poet as a prophet, who articulates the inexpressible and seeks to find beauty in the most difficult and complex aspects of life, influenced the English Symbolists' conception of the poet as a visionary. Baudelaire's poetic voice was that of an artist in constant tension with society, both part of and separate from it, a theme that resonated with the Symbolist emphasis on individualism and subjective experience. His work provided a new model of the poet as one who could express profound insights into the human condition through fragmented, symbolic language, often focusing on personal suffering and the search for meaning in a world that seemed increasingly fragmented and alienating.

In sum, Baudelaire's lyrical style, with its rich imagery, complex emotional depth, and exploration of modern alienation, laid the groundwork for much of English Symbolist poetry. His influence helped shape a poetic tradition that was deeply attuned to the nuances of the modern world and its discontents, one that sought to convey

the inexpressible and to evoke an emotional response that transcended the literal and the mundane.

Arthur Symons, a pivotal figure in introducing English audiences to Symbolism, wrote extensively on Baudelaire. His essay 'The Decadent Movement in Literature' (1893) positions Baudelaire as a central figure in the evolution of modern poetry. Symons's prose amplified Baudelaire's reputation in England, ensuring his ideas reached poets and writers eager to move beyond the constraints of Victorian literary conventions.

Baudelaire's influence on English Symbolist poetry is profound and multifaceted. His thematic concerns with decadence, spiritual yearning, and modernity's discontents, coupled with his aesthetic innovations in musicality and symbolism, provided English poets with a model for articulating the complexities of their own era. By weaving together sensuality, melancholy, and transcendence, Baudelaire helped shape a poetic tradition that continues to resonate in English literature.

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ESSAY**1****Habituation, Intuition, Meditation:
A Metaphysics of Storytelling**

KEVIN P. KEATING

In a recent interview for my forthcoming novel *Bridge of Dreams* (iff Books 2025), a scholar of religion asked if I believed humans are inherently story-creating creatures, and, if so, can religions be seen as the inevitable result of the storytelling impulse?

I felt the question contained an assumption that warranted serious scrutiny. Do we *actively* create stories? Or do we *passively* receive them through the unconscious mind, beyond the control of our limited egos? To answer the question, I thought it helpful to break down the writing process into three distinct categories—a) storytelling as habit, b) storytelling as intuition, and c) storytelling as meditative practice.

STORYTELLING AS HABIT

Whether we think of ourselves as creative or not, we all engage in the first type of storytelling. In his book *The Literary Mind*, Mark Turner, former Associate Director of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, argues that narratives are so deeply ingrained in the human

psyche that they're more like habits and that most narratives are a kind of *thinking* before *acting*.

By imagining future scenarios and playing out little stories in our heads, we can better predict the consequences of a certain course of action, we can evaluate the reactions and behaviors of others, and we can try to minimize uncertainties. For example, we might say to ourselves, 'Should I accept a job offer or turn it down?' 'Should I accept or decline a lunch date with this individual', 'Should I buy my spouse this gift for her birthday or that gift? Which one would she appreciate more?' We experience these types of stories as a part of our constant and often repetitive flow of thoughts rather than as a sudden and inexplicable burst of creative inspiration that disrupts the usual flow.

In his book *Rational Mysticism*, science journalist John Horgan describes how most of us are victims of instrumentality and automatization, both of which impede inspiration or a sense of intuition. Instrumentality is viewing the world as an instrument that we can use for our own selfish purposes.

Automatization is like habit. Once you learn to tie your shoes, you no longer have to consciously think about how to tie them. The same goes for riding a bicycle or driving a car. These are not actions you need to relearn every time you hop on a bicycle or sit in the driver's seat. At some point, they simply become automatic. With automatization there is no feeling (and very little conscious awareness for that matter). When tying our shoes, we don't *feel* that anything of great significance is going on. Most narratives operate on this level, that is to say, they're so repetitious that they're fully automated, which is the opposite of inspiration.

To escape from this non-feeling, non-thinking way of life that we've become so habituated to, we need to bypass our stubborn habits of thought and *see the world as it is* rather than as a collection of objects to be manipulated. Seeing the world as purely utilitarian is our most pervasive habit of thought, which leads me to my next point.

STORYTELLING AS INTUITION

The second type of storytelling is more intuitive in nature and goes beyond the confines of the limited ego. The ego is that part of the mind that tries to delude itself into believing that it's the boss and in control of everything, but creative people commonly attribute their best ideas to a source that is outside of themselves, as when they say 'an idea suddenly came to me' or 'I was gripped by an idea.'

Some writers might plausibly argue that they do not *create* stories so much as *tell* stories. It's as though inspiration for a story is a powerful psychic force independent of the storyteller's conscious will. Examples of this phenomenon date back to the foundational texts of western literature as when Homer calls upon the Muse to help him tell the epic story of Troy and the personal travails of Odysseus. 'Goddess, sing the rage of Achilles...' and 'Muse, sing to me of the man of twists and turns who saw and learned the minds of many men.'

In some sense, stories are also similar to dreams. Dreams happen spontaneously on their own. When we wake up from a dream, if we have excellent recall, we can use symbols (e.g. words, metaphors, images) to convey a sense of the dream to other people, but we can't summon a dream through sheer willpower. And like dreams, stories are often beyond our systems of conceptual thought.

Concepts, broadly speaking, appeal to our intellects rather than our emotions and always rely on information. When we think conceptually, we refer to books, data, experiments, scientific thinking, and so on. Inspired stories are less conceptual and more intuitive in nature. Intuition doesn't rely on language or abstractions. Intuition is a *feeling*, that is to say an *emotional experience*, and intuitions are never our personal property. We do not summon intuition any more than we summon a dream.

I'm using the words intuition and inspiration a bit interchangeably here. Both deal with *a spontaneous feeling of heightened significance in the present moment*. Our intellects dwell incessantly on the past and the future (as in the habitual form of narrative just described), but with inspiration, it's as though a veil is lifted from our eyes, and we can see things isolated from their utilitarian context. It's the startling ability to see the infinite in the finite particular.

STORYTELLING AS PRACTICE

The third type of storytelling is more deliberate and a form of active practice, rather like exercise. In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell argues that artistic creation can be a form of yoga, a serious meditative practice that puts the storyteller in touch with the energies of the unconscious mind. Alan Watts once asked Joseph Campbell, 'What is your yoga?' to which Campbell replied, 'Underlining books.'

Meditation is a method of focusing one's mind in order to escape from, or at least be aware of, the random and repetitive flow of thought. By paying careful attention to your thoughts as they pass through your mind, you can slow and then exert *intentional control* over them. This is an important practice for a writer because, at some point in the storytelling

process, no matter how inspired the ideas may be, the writer must concentrate his mind and begin to shape the story. If he wants to tell a story people can actually read and understand, the writer must think deeply about what he's writing and manipulate symbols, literally black marks on a white page. 'How,' he might ask, 'do I make coherent sense of these unorganized dreamlike images and feelings?'

To use an old cliché (an unpardonable crime in the craft of fiction), inspiration is like an uncut gem excavated from deep in the earth, but it's the focused mind that does all of the cutting and polishing, or in the case of writing, the tedious and meticulous work of editing and revision.

STORYTELLING AND RELIGION

All of this leads us back then to the second part of the question. Can religions be seen as the inevitable result of the storytelling impulse?

In his book *Religion: Reality Behind the Myths*, scholar of religion Jonas Atlas makes it clear that 'religion' as a concept is surprisingly tricky to define. Not all religions are dogmatic or structured hierarchically or clearly distinguished by a set of beliefs, so I'll cautiously say that the narrative impulse, or the narrative habit, or the intuitive nature of narrative may be but one of several factors that contributed to the emergence of religion.

In his commentary on the Katha Upanishad, Swami Nikhilananda suggests that faith isn't a belief in a dogma or an ideology but the intuitive *feeling* that, despite all evidence to the contrary, life is meaningful and fundamentally good. This is the idea Freud is responding to in his book *Civilization and its Discontents*. In his opening remarks, Freud describes how a friend had the sudden, overwhelming *feeling* that life

was eternal, unbounded, and limitless, or what the doctor calls the 'oceanic feeling.' The important point here, and the one I think modern science is always trying to explain away, is that the religious impulse is an intuitive feeling, it's *experiential* rather than conceptual. But feelings may be more readily expressed through chanting, singing, dancing, playing percussive instruments, painting, and ritual rather than in storytelling.

In other words, perhaps storytelling came later in the evolution of our species; nevertheless, at some point in the development of religious ideas, stories must have served a practical purpose. It's difficult for people to maintain a lasting connection with an impersonal feeling, and mystical experiences tend to be rare and short-lived. A story provides religious feelings with a more permanent shape or form, and successful stories, the ones that are mimetic and therefore more likely to survive over time, tend to 'embody' abstractions, giving them physical, and even anthropomorphic, characteristics.

CHARACTER, ACTION, SETTING

In storytelling, we use language (a symbol) to create the illusion of embodiment to help render an emotion (joy, sorrow, horror) in the listener or reader. That is to say, we want the story to be an emotional experience rather than an intellectual exercise. A story will embody abstractions in at least three ways—through character, action, and setting.

To take one commonly known example from the Judeo-Christian corpus. In Genesis 2, we are told that 'God planted a garden.' In addition to the obvious anthropomorphic *character* of a god *performing an action*, planting, we might ask how a *setting* like a garden embodies a religious abstraction.

First, a garden is something that is cultivated and carefully tended and therefore is differentiated from the wilderness. Inside a garden, you also expect to encounter an artful arrangement of trees, plants and flowers. Flowers in particular are an important part of our lives, even in modern societies driven by commerce and technology where religion and religious imagery have been degraded, in some societies practically to the point extinction. But even the most dogmatic atheist will continue use flowers in rituals that may have been stripped of their original religious contexts, like weddings and funerals. An intuitive part of us understands that Nature is an earthly expression of that which is transcendent and heavenly. My daughter, for whom I wrote my new novel *Bridge of Dreams*, is named Rose.

Flowers and gardens aren't trivial. They hold deep meaning for us, a meaning that transcends the intellect. In Matthew 6 and Luke 12, Jesus famously says: 'Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin. Yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.'

All of this is to say that human beings *feel* religious impulses and then express those impulses through the storytelling tools of character, action, and setting. But the religious impulse, like the storytelling impulse, is dependent upon submission to a mysterious psychic force that seems to emerge from the void and then vanishes back again into the void. A storyteller's primary duty, it then seems to me, is to somehow get in touch with those inexplicable psychic forces that stand just beyond the reach of the ego and our conscious awareness.

MONOLOGUE**1****Regrets and All**

CHRISTOPHER WOODS

Dear Michael Crenshaw,

Thanks (I guess) for your latest e-mail. I just want you to know that I'm sorry as shit about the mess I've made. I've made many messes, I assure you. But you know, when I sent you my story, 'Ranch Foreman Blues,' I didn't know it had been published before somewhere else. Oh, I have a distant memory of it, but honest to Jesus I didn't know for sure. Besides, like you said after Googling my name, the story had a different title, 'The Ranch Foreman's Wife Is Blue.' Seems like I would have remembered that before I sent the damned story to you at BLACK MOUNTAIN ARTS REVIEW at Cochise County Junior College.

Anyhow, re-reading your e-mail, I have some good news. I am starting to remember more and more about that foreman and his wife. Sad situation for them. It's coming back to me now, like lyrics in an old, old song. Like waking and sifting what's left of a dream in my shaky hands.

What I do wonder about is if the story was true. If so, it's horrible. The foreman was no Einstein, leaving his best hunting dog outside to freeze in sub-zero temps. Or buying hay at the highest price ever recorded in Willibut County. But the thresher business was the worst. Running that infernal

machine across the alfalfa field while his wife was sunbathing. Took her arms and legs off. Violent stuff. Then after that he carried his sorrow everywhere he went, like he carried the basket with what was left of his wife, to church, to socials, even to WalMart when he drove into town. I couldn't decide if the wife was alive or dead at that point, so I never said. Maybe I didn't want to know, to think about it, you see. If they had anything left between them, if they made love. Well, if he made love. She wouldn't be an active participant about then, I imagine.

I asked a few people, the postmistress and a few neighbors, if they knew the foreman's story. They all shook their heads. So maybe I made it all up after all. I've had a rough few years, I don't mind saying. In and out of the county hospital. Psych ward, if you must know. Thank god there are new meds on the market. For a time, after I got back home, I felt almost normal.

The bad news is that my wife and kids moved to the East Coast while I was indisposed. The house was foreclosed upon. I didn't care. I moved back in anyway. The problem was twofold. First, I didn't like the way the anti-psychotic drugs made my head swell. I asked people about this, and they were all in agreement that my head looked just fine, normal size and all. I could have lived with that. Maybe. But then my tongue started vibrating, night and day. Drove me nuts. So I stopped the meds cold, the same day I moved back in my house. I thought I would miss not having furniture, but as luck would have it, the new family that bought the house had plenty. I slept in the top bunkbed in the son's room for a few nights until I was discovered.

Things have gone downhill from there. I'm sorry about a lot of things, but I'm also very angry. Little things tick me off. Your e-mail, for instance. I'm so angry my fingers are

twitching. Too bad my shotgun was repossessed. I'm hopeful I can steal one so I can get down to business and settle a score or two. Know what I mean? I don't like feeling all hyped-up and twitchy. Got to release it. Soon.

Which doesn't make my situation with you and your magazine any better, I realize. And yes, I know you could have published a new story by someone else instead of my soiled, used story. I can appreciate that. I know I can't take it back, my story, now that it's in print.

So, here we are, but I want you to know that if I could do it again, I would. That's right. I'd send you the same damned story again. You know why? Because it's better than the junk you put out in every issue, and that includes your own dreary poems you stick in here and there. I guess no one else wants your stuff. If they did, you wouldn't need to publish it yourself, subject your readers (yes, it's true, I don't read much of the garbage you publish, any of it in fact) to your lame attempts at free verse. Just look at these idiotic lines:

'The forest weeps over my shoulder when I think of you,
there below the waterfall where the ripples echo my pain'

Shit! You call that poetry? I can tell you, it is not. Better make another trip back to that waterfall, buddy, maybe take a dive, hit your head on a rock and don't come back up. That might be good for a poem, but since you wouldn't be around to write it, maybe I will. Mind you, I'm a fiction writer. And a damned good one too. That's why 'Ranch Foreman Blues,' or 'The Ranch Foreman's Wife Is Blue,' (pick your poison) was published twice. So far. And I'll tell you something else. If the story had been published a hundred, no, a thousand times, I'd still send it to you, just like I said.

So, in closing, let me say I don't give a fuck what you think. And to let you know that I am almost finished with my new story, 'The Ranch Foreman Remarries.' Still can't decide on the status (dead or alive) of the first wife, but she doesn't even have a walk-on in this new masterpiece. Which, by the way, will never cross your amateurish transom.

Go take in a waterfall, or a swollen river. And when you do, think of me.

BOOK REVIEWS**1****Book Review of Poetry Anthology,
'Mapping the Mind, Minding the Map'****SUPARNA ROY**

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Mapping the Mind, Minding the Map edited by Basudhara Roy and Jaydeep Sarangi is an ambitious anthology that brings together a diverse collection of contemporary voices from the Indian subcontinent and beyond. With contributions from renowned poets such as Adil Jussawalla, Arundhati Subramaniam, and Jayant Mahapatra, this 391-page volume offers a rich tapestry of poetic explorations that delve into the existential dilemmas and cultural landscapes of our time. One of the anthology's greatest strengths is its inclusion of poets from a variety of cultural and geographical backgrounds. This diversity not only broadens the scope of the collection but also provides readers with a multifaceted view of contemporary issues. Each poet brings their unique perspective, creating a dialogue that spans different experiences and locations.

The anthology features a selection of high-quality poems from established and emerging poets alike. The contributions from poets like Arundhati Subramaniam and

Keki N. Daruwalla are particularly noteworthy for their lyrical precision and thematic depth. The collection stands out for its ability to balance well-known voices with those of lesser-known but equally talented poets. The anthology's focus on existential dilemmas and contemporary issues is both timely and relevant. The poems engage with themes such as identity, displacement, and the search for meaning in a rapidly changing world. This thematic coherence ties the diverse contributions together, providing readers with a reflective and thought-provoking experience. Through its rich mosaic of memories and experiences, the collection enhances readers' consciousness and deepens their understanding of the human condition. The poems confront a range of sentiments—from hardship and despair to compassion and resilience—offering valuable insights into how individuals navigate adversity and cultivate strength. By addressing both the profound and the mundane aspects of life, *Mapping the Mind*, *Minding the Map* contributes significantly to contemporary poetry, encouraging readers to reflect on their own experiences and engage with broader cultural and existential themes.

Few poems ranged from the horizons of womanhood to mnemonic lanes of ontological substance. Like Jussawala's 'Woman in Landscape' talks of how the poet crafts a vivid and evocative depiction of a scene that blurs the line between dream and reality. It calls from the Kali inspired women and sheds of boundaries. The poem opens with a description of a distant, almost mythical land where traditional values and rigid structures persist—where laws are immutable, and social hierarchies remain unchallenged. This imagined realm, populated by a prince who remains untainted and a society that maintains a stark division between the rich and the poor, serves as a backdrop to the poet's vision. As the poem

transitions from this idealized vision to the tangible reality of the scene, the focus shifts to a specific moment: a woman, aged and leading a thin cow, is captured as she traverses a desolate landscape. The poet's act of photographing this scene highlights a disjunction between the envisioned grandeur of the mythical land and the stark, unadorned reality of the present. The imagery of the 'parched river bed' and 'abandoned well' contrasts sharply with the initial dream-like description, underscoring a sense of disillusionment. The concluding lines emphasize the disparity between the poet's romanticized expectations and the actual evidence captured in the photographs. Despite the detailed and intimate portrayal of the woman and her cow, the broader landscape or country that might have once been imagined remains absent from the images. This absence points to a profound realization about the nature of perception and the limits of idealized visions in capturing the essence of reality. Ultimately, the poem reflects on the tension between fantasy and reality, between the grand narratives we construct and the often stark and unembellished truths we encounter.

Few titles like *Haldi, Bhakti* have been an enterprise to the linguistic indexes that could make reader fall in love with the fluidity of the language in a three-dimensional perspective. The poem titled *In 'Come Sit with Me by the Silla de Paita,'* is where the poet invites a powerful and evocative dialogue with *Manuela Sáenz*, a historical figure renowned for her revolutionary spirit and passionate love for *Simón Bolívar*. Set against the backdrop of the Pacific Ocean, with its 'gossiping waves' and a wind described as 'a bow throwing arrows,' the poem blends imagery of natural grandeur with a call to historical and personal remembrance. The poem opens with a warm and intimate invitation to

Manuela Sáenz, addressed as 'Dame-of-the sun,' a title that both venerates her and reflects her prominent role in the tapestry of Pan-American history. The 'red carpet' and the exchange of 'love-bites' symbolize a shared, deep connection between the poet and Sáenz, emphasizing both a personal bond and a mutual recognition of their respective passions and struggles. The poem explores themes of defiance and freedom through imagery of 'Krishna, Bolivar' and 'the horseback of our bones,' evoking a sense of unity and shared revolutionary fervor. The poet contrasts the conventional expectations of 'husband' with the liberating choice of a 'chosen one,' suggesting a rejection of societal norms in favor of an unrestrained, albeit tumultuous, passion.

Through the metaphor of embroidery with 'stars of love' and walking 'barefoot on a road of thorns,' the poet illustrates the sacrifices and struggles inherent in such passionate pursuits. This imagery not only reflects the physical and emotional trials faced but also underscores the transformative power of such love. The latter part of the poem highlights a contrast between the poet's own solitary devotion and Sáenz's revolutionary love. The poet laments the isolation in a world governed by 'gold and gravity,' while celebrating Sáenz's more dynamic and transient love. Sáenz's 'volcano heart' and her unyielding commitment to Bolívar's fading dreams are portrayed as symbols of revolutionary zeal and enduring hope. In the concluding lines, the poet expresses a profound admiration for Sáenz's capacity to love both fiercely and freely, positioning her as a figure that illuminated a path of liberation through her emotional and political dedication. The poem reflects on the tension between eternal devotion to a divine ideal and the more fleeting, yet deeply impactful, love for a mortal and revolutionary cause. Overall, 'Come Sit with Me by the Silla de Paita' is a lyrical meditation on love,

freedom, and historical memory. It honors the revolutionary spirit of Manuela Sáenz while also reflecting on the poet's own solitary journey and the complexities of devotion in the face of changing times.

Mapping the Mind, Minding the Map presents a diverse array of poetic forms, including prose poetry, typographic experimentation, and linguistic innovation, addressing significant themes related to urban Indian identity, acceptance, adaptation, and cultural estrangement. This anthology, published by Sahitya Akademi, redefines traditional poetic boundaries by integrating verbal, vocal, and visual elements into a unified new form. The collection features ten poems from each of the included poets, collectively crafting a complex tapestry of emotions, experiences, and cultural reflections. The anthology offers a multifaceted exploration of themes such as womanhood, the body, institutions, family, and love. Each poem functions as a carefully constructed ensemble of language that invites readers to engage with the poets' emotional states and the intricate realities of their lived experiences. The poems collectively provide a nuanced reflection on contemporary life, revealing both personal and societal insights. The anthology serves as a dynamic itinerary for readers, guiding them through a spectrum of emotional and intellectual terrains. The book is a commendable effort by editors Basudhara Roy and Jaydeep Sarangi to present a broad and inclusive spectrum of contemporary poetry. The anthology's strength lies in its diverse representation of voices and its exploration of significant existential themes. However, its impact is somewhat diminished by inconsistencies in poem quality and a lack of cohesive editorial vision. For poetry enthusiasts and scholars interested in contemporary Indian and sub-continental voices, this anthology offers valuable

insights and a broad cultural panorama. For casual readers, the book may require patience and openness to a varied poetic landscape. Overall, it is a significant contribution to contemporary poetry anthologies, with room for further refinement in its presentation and cohesion.

CONTRIBUTORS

1. **Aju Mukhopadhyay**, a bilingual Poet, Author and Critic, regularly contributes to International Journals and Websites on varied subjects including Environment. Besides many poetry and other awards he has received Albert Camus Centenary Writing Award, Laureate Award in Best.
2. **Alaina Hammond** is a poet, playwright, fiction writer, and visual artist. Her poems, short stories, paintings, drawings and photographs have been published both online and in print. Publications include Nomad's Choir Poetry Journal, The Word's Faire, Littoral Magazine, Spinozablue, Third Wednesday Magazine, [Alternate Route], Paddler Press, Verse-Virtual, Macrame Literary Journal, Route 7 Review, Sublunary Review, Quail Bell Magazine, Assignment Literary Magazine, Superpresent, Jelly Squid, redrosethorns, Flash Frog, Clockwise Cat, Ranger Magazine, Troublemaker Firestarter, Fowl Feather Review, The Ravens Perch, and 10 By 10 Flash. @alainaheidelberger on Instagram.
3. **Amarendra Khatua** is an accomplished writer and poet, with works published in English, Odia, Hindi, and Spanish. His literary contributions have been translated into all major Indian and international languages. With a prolific body of work, he has authored more than 40 collections, cementing his reputation as a versatile and widely recognized literary figure.

4. **Andrew Scott** is a native of Fredericton, NB. During his time as an active poet, Andrew Scott has taken the time to speak in front of classrooms, judge poetry competitions, and have over 200 hundred writings published worldwide in such publications as *The Art of Being Human*, *Battered Shadows* and *The Broken Ones*. Andrew Scott has published multiple poetry books, *Snake with A Flower*, *The Phoenix Has Risen*, *The Path*, *The Storm Is Coming*, *Whispers of the Calm*, *Searching* and *Letter To You*, a novella, *Redemption Avenue* and a two books of photography, *Through My Eyes* and *Walk Through Time*. *The Road Unknown* is Andrew Scott's newest collection of poetry and prose. Author category (Non-Fiction) and Glory of India Award (Indian Achievers' Forum)
5. **Avdhesh Jha** is an author, poet, teacher, and observer, currently serving as Principal, Smt. B.C.J. College of Education Khambhat, Gujarat, India. With a doctorate in Education and postgraduate degrees in Mathematics and Education, he brings over 20 years of experience in the education field. He is the founder and chief editor of *Voice of Research*, a journal in social science, humanities, and technology. Dr. Jha has published nine books, 27 research papers, and presented over 25 papers internationally. He has delivered more than 90 lectures worldwide and received the Charottar Gaurav and Bharat Excellence awards.
6. **Bishnupada Ray** is an Associate Professor of English at the University of North Bengal, and he is also a creative writer. His critical and creative writings have come out in various journals, anthologies and edited books.
7. **Christopher Woods** is a writer and photographer who lives in Texas. He has published a novel, *THE DREAM PATCH*, a prose collection, *UNDER A RIVERBED SKY*.

His novella, *HEARTS IN THE DARK*, was published in an anthology by *RUNNING WILD PRESS* in Los Angeles. His monologue show, 'Twelve from Texas', was performed recently in NYC by Equity Library Theatre. He has received residencies from The Ucross Foundation and the Edward Albee Foundation, and a grant from the Mary Roberts Rinehart Foundation.

8. **Dave Lewis** is a Welsh writer, poet, and photographer based in Pontypridd, Wales. He has written content for BBC Wales and contributed to global literary magazines. In 2007, he founded the Welsh Poetry Competition to discover hidden talent. In 2019, he launched the Writers of Wales A to Z database and runs Publish & Print, a company supporting overlooked writers. Lewis has published several works, including *Scratching the Surface*, *The Welsh Man*, and *Algorithm*. In 2020, he created the Poetry Book Awards. In May 2023, he was named Libraries Wales' 'Author of the Month.'
9. **Gary Beck** has spent most of his adult life as a theater director and worked as an art dealer when he couldn't earn a living in the theater. He has also been a tennis pro, a ditch digger and a salvage diver. His original plays and translations of Moliere, Aristophanes and Sophocles have been produced Off Broadway. His poetry, fiction and essays have appeared in hundreds of literary magazines and his published books include 40 poetry collections, 16 novels, 4 short story collections, 2 collection of essays and 8 books of plays. Gary lives in New York City. www.garybeck.com
10. **Ivan Pozzoni**, born in Monza in 1976, is a distinguished Italian writer, philosopher, and editor who pioneered the study of Law and Literature in Italy. He has authored numerous essays on Italian philosophers and ancient

ethical and legal theories, contributing to both Italian and international journals. Between 2007 and 2024, Pozzoni released several books, including *Underground*, *Riseroa Indiana*, and *Patroclo non deve morire*. He founded avant-garde magazines *Il Guastatore* and *L'Arrivista*, and currently edits *Información Filosófica*. Pozzoni established the Néon-avant-gardisme movement, endorsed by Zygmunt Bauman. His work, translated into 25 languages, includes over 150 volumes and 1000 essays.

11. **Jaydeep Sarangi**, dubbed as 'Bard on the Banks of Dulung', is a poet with eleven collections in English latest being, *the half-confession* (2024) and *Principal*, New Alipore College, Kolkata, WB. He is also the President, Guild of Indian English Writers Editors and Critics (GIEWEC) and Vice President, Executive Council, IPPL, ICCR, Kolkata. Website: www.jaydeepsarangi.in
12. **Jeffrey Zable** is a teacher, conga drummer/percussionist who plays Afro-Cuban folkloric music for dance classes and rumbas around the San Francisco Bay Area and a writer of poetry, flash fiction, and non-fiction. He's published five chapbooks and his writing has appeared in hundreds of literary magazines and anthologies, more recently in *Ranger*, *The Opiate*, *Corvus*, *A Sufferer's Digest*, *The Raven's Perch*, *Dark Winter*, and many others.
13. **Joan McNerney** is an American and a native New Yorker. She has recited her work at the National Arts Club, New York City, State University of New York, Oneonta, McNay Art Institute, San Antonio and the University of Houston, Texas. Published worldwide in over thirty five countries, her work has appeared in numerous literary publications. Four Best of the Net nominations have been awarded to her. *The Muse in Miniature*, *Love Poems for Michael* and *At Work* are available on Amazon.com. A new release

entitled *Light & Shadow* explores the recent historic COVID pandemic.

14. **John Grey** is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *New World Writing*, *North Dakota Quarterly* and *Tenth Muse*. Latest books, 'Between Two Fires', 'Covert' and 'Memory Outside The Head' are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in *Haight-Ashbury Literary Journal*, *Amazing Stories* and *River and South*.
15. **Kathrine Yets** holds many educational roles, including being the founder and facilitator of *Lake Side Poets & Writers*. As Co-VP of *Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets eastern region*, she supports poetic communities. She co-founded *Better Together with Food for Thought's* host *Deangelo Coleman*. She has four chapbooks traditionally-published through *Cyberwit* and *Unsolicited Press*. Works can be found within *Woman Scream Anthology*, *Olit*, and *Eternal Haunted Summer*. She is a *Jade Ring Award* recipient. When not writing, she can be found on the shores of *Lake Michigan*, taking walks with her husband.
16. **Keith Inman** has been active in the writing community for thirty-five years. He's judged contests for small Presses, a University, Public Libraries, and a few writing organizations, set up readings, helped organize a poetry anthology for twenty years (seven at the helm), did committee work for a writing organization, mentored for the *League of Cdn Poets*, and, helps run a writing group (Iowa style) that is still running thirty years on. Keith has published seven books of poetry.
17. **Kevin P. Keating**, MFA, Author of *Bridge of Dreams* (if Books), *The Captive Condition* (Pantheon) and *The Natural Order of Things* (Vintage Contemporaries).

18. **Les Wicks**, Over 45 years, has performed widely across the globe. Published in over 450 different magazines, anthologies & newspapers across 39 countries in 17 languages. Conducts workshops & runs Meuse Press which focuses on poetry outreach projects like poetry on buses & poetry published on the surface of a river. His 15th book of poetry is *Time Taken – New & Selected* (Puncher & Wattmann, 2022).
19. **Mandira Ghosh** is an esteemed author, poet, educator, and researcher. She has earned numerous accolades, including the Bharat Nirman Award 2020 and Dr. Radhakrishnan Award. A Senior Fellow from the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, she has been recognized for her work in literature and education. Ghosh has published poems, stories, translations, and reviews in various journals globally. A passionate promoter of Indian culture and heritage, she has organized poetry workshops at renowned institutions. She holds an MA in English, a diploma in Journalism, and a B.Ed. She is the author of 23 books, including *Krishna in Indian Thought Literature and Music* and *The Cosmic Dance of Shiva*.
20. **Melisa Quigley** completed an associate degree in Professional Writing and Editing at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia, in 2015. Her flash fiction, poetry, and short stories have been published in over 30 anthologies worldwide. In 2023, her debut novel *The Complexities of Love* won The New York City Big Book Award. Her poetry novel *Bereft* was traditionally published in 2022, and she self-published *Let's Write a Six-Word Story or a Poem* in 2023. Additionally, her short story *Wool* was featured in Monash University's Literary Magazine with the theme *Defiant* in 2023.

21. **Michael Lee Johnson** lived ten years in Canada during the Vietnam era. Today he is a poet in the greater Chicagoland area, IL. He has 300 YouTube poetry videos. Michael Lee Johnson is an internationally published poet in 45 countries, a song lyricist, has several published poetry books, has been nominated for 7 Pushcart Prize awards, and 6 Best of the Net nominations. He is editor-in-chief of 3 poetry anthologies, all available on Amazon, and has several poetry books and chapbooks. He has over 453 published poems. Michael is the administrator of 6 Facebook Poetry groups. Member Illinois State Poetry Society: <http://www.illinoispoets.org/>
22. **Michael Mirolla** has published close to 20 books of poetry and fiction. Among his awards: three Bressani Prizes. His novella, *The Last News Vendor*, won the 2020 Hamilton Literary Award. A symposium on Michael's writing was held in Toronto on May 25, 2023. In September 2023, Michael served a writers' residency in Barcelona. He makes his home near Gananoque in the Thousand Islands. <https://www.michaelmirolla.com/>
23. **Mithil Jha** is a young writer with a strong inclination towards language and literature. He is currently pursuing his education at Acadia University, Wolf Ville, Nova Scotia, Canada. He has a great passion for lore and learning and is immensely motivated with the write-ups of the classical and dynamic writers, the traditional and contemporary situations, issues and environment.
24. **Moya Roddy's** first novel *The Long Way Home* was described as 'simply brilliant' in the Irish Times; her short story collection *Other People* was nominated for the Frank O'Connor Award and her second novel *A Wiser Girl* called a 'blast of Italian sunshine, a sparkling glass of wine for these chilly, uncertain times'. *Fire in my Head* a

collection of working-class stories, appeared in 2021. She writes for TV, Screen, Radio and stage and has published two collections of poetry *The Dark Art of Darning* and *Out of the Ordinary* 'which was shortlisted for the Strong Shine Award.

25. **Pete Mullineaux** lives in Galway Ireland and teaches Global Citizenship in schools. His most recent poetry collection *We are the Walrus* (Salmon 2022) was featured on the cover of the World Wildlife Fund's *The Circle Magazine*. In 2023 his environmental film 'Careful what you wish for orang-utan' won Home-stage's *Poetry and Folk in the Environment Competition* (pFITE). His work has been discussed on RTE's *Arena* programme and a new work is forthcoming in the Irish Times. He's been described by reviewers as 'profoundly sensitive' 'gorgeous and resonant' 'grimly funny' and comparisons made with Roger McGough, John Clare, John Cooper-Clarke and Pete Seeger: 'Razor sharp, probing, beautifully written ... a gem' – *Poetry Ireland Review*.
26. **Qudsi Rizvi** serves as an Assistant Professor (Contractual) in the Department of English at Maulana Azad National Urdu University (MANUU), Hyderabad. A published poet, his works have appeared in numerous national anthologies and refereed journals. In addition to his academic and literary pursuits, Dr. Rizvi is an international interfaith speaker, engaging in dialogues that promote understanding and harmony. His debut poetry collection, *Shades of Solitude*, was published in July 2021. His research interests include poetic aesthetics and the interplay of literature with themes of love, mercy, and joy.
27. **Rakesh Bhartiya**, born on 28 July 1954 in Azamgarh, Uttar Pradesh, India, completed his graduation in

Electrical Engineering before joining a public sector bank. However, he left the banking sector after clearing the Civil Services Examination and went on to serve in the Government of India, where he retired as Joint Secretary. Following his retirement, he served as an adviser in the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights for three years. Currently, Rakesh Bhartiya is a full-time writer, composing works in both English and Hindi. He has authored six collections of short stories, two novels, two collections of poems, two travelogues, and six collections of articles addressing social, cultural, and spiritual issues. Additionally, he co-edited a literary quarterly, *Pashyanti*, for three years.

28. **Ram Krishna Singh** is a renowned, widely published, anthologized, and translated poet with over 60 books to his credit. His latest poetry collections include *Against the Waves: Selected Poems* (Authorspress, 2021), *Poems and Micropoems* (Southern Arizona Press, 2023), and *Knocking Vistas And Other Poems* (Authorspress, 2024).
29. **Ramzi Albert Rihani** is a Lebanese American writer. He received the 2024 Polk Street Review first-place poetry award. His work has appeared in several publications in the US, Canada, UK, Ireland, India, and South Africa, including ArLiJo, Linnet's Wings Magazine, Poetic Sun, Chronogram magazine, Phenomenal Literature Journal, Last Leaves Magazine, Cacti Fur Journal, Poetry Potion, Active Muse, Ephemeral Elegies, and The Silent Journey Anthology. He is a published music critic. He wrote and published a travel book, 'The Other Color - a Trip Around the World in Six Months' (FMA Press). He lives in the Washington, DC, area.
30. **Rattan Mann** is an Indian who has lived in Norway for 45 years. With a Masters in Physics and a Bachelor's in

Electronics, he has a strong academic background. He is also an accomplished writer, having authored six short stories and two novels. In addition to writing, he made a Hindi feature film titled *The Buddhist Monk*. He combines a deep understanding of science with a creative passion for storytelling and filmmaking.

31. **Roger G. Singer**, Poet Laureate Emeritus, Connecticut Coalition of Poets Laureate.
32. **Suparna Roy**, Assistant Professor, Global Institute of Management and Technology, Krishna Nagar, West Bengal.
33. **Tapan Kumar Pradhan** is an Indian poet, writer and translator from Odisha. He is best known for his poem collection 'Kalahandi' which was awarded second place in Sahitya Akademi's Golden Jubilee Indian Literature Translation Prize for Poetry in 2007.
34. **Vinay Kumar Singh** is the Assistant Professor and Head of the Department of Foreign Languages at Maharishi Arvind University (MUST) in Lakshmangarh, Sikar, Rajasthan.
35. **Yuan Changming** holds a Canadian PhD in English and co-edits *Poetry Pacific* with Allen Yuan. Writing credits include 16 chapbooks, 12 Pushcart nominations for poetry and 3 for fiction besides appearances in *Best of the Best Canadian Poetry* (2008-17), *BestNewPoemsOnline* and 2129 other publications across 51 countries. A poetry judge for Canada's 44th National Magazine Awards, Yuan began writing and publishing fiction in 2022; his debut novel *Detaching*, 'silver romance' *The Tuner* and short story collection *Flashbacks* are all available at Amazon.



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