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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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POETRY

1

Stellar Graffiti

ALESSIO ZANELLI

Look up for the time is ripe –
not even seers would deny that.
And if stars shouldn't shoot anymore,
on account of a cosmic strike of sorts,
against man or what else I don't know –
I'd use the remains of my childhood dreams
just like fluorescent neon markers,
to streak the silence of the night with colors
and picture fireworks all across the vault.
Before I write my next piece of truth
in the shape of fluctuating lines,
my empty mug cools down,
and remembrance fails –
I'll have filled up the void I cannot name,
wiped out everlasting nothingness,
made sense of these overflowing skies,
befriended their affronting vastness.
Only then I'll be allowed to lay down the pen,
mute my conscience out awhile,
drift off to well-deserved sleep.



2

Fire Traders

BISHNUPADA RAY

their convoy stops at a transit halt
and they come out of their truck
like the walking green
in a daylight sun
soldiers they are
they carry about them
a stoic discipline
and a cheerful camaraderie
and they look indifferently
at the passing girls
and other things
their lonely life
and their full camaraderie
they will end up in the war zone
like the walking green
in a daylight sun
for a fire trading.



3

Spark

BISHNUPADA RAY

under the neck-deep rubble and ashes
a fire still rages
like a talent that gets buried
under the age-old dust and moss
like a dream that wakes up
in a fairy-tale
like a potential that approaches
but never reaches perfection

it observes the early birds
and aspires to the mid-day sun
it watches the fast life of success
and sends futile sparks of rage
up through the neck-deep pile
of rubble and ashes, dust and moss.



4

Crustacean

BISHNUPADA RAY

the world takes the outer hard shell
as the way of my formation
but the soft jelly beneath the shell
is where I am truly formed
some organisms are always gnawing
at my outer shell to reach my pulp
and when they are able to open up
an access to my vulnerability
I know where I am truly formed.



5

Cultural Havoc

CHANDRANATH MISHRA "AMAR"

Who says Nero is a proper noun, a name?
It might have been, once upon a time,
There was that emperor in Rome.
But for this wonderful democratic land of ours today,
Nero is an abstract noun, a mentality,
A whole state of mind.
Among the seven hundred million of us,
There are at least seventy or seven hundred surely,
If not seven thousand,
Whose every pore of being is pervaded by Nero,
In Delhi, in Kolkata, in Chennai, in Mumbai,
In state capitals like Lucknow and Patna.
Where the play on pleasure's flute,
Deluded by their senses, their hearts,
As they dip their noses in their drinks,
And tear apart with their teeth well-cooked meats,
Looking around among orchestra parties
To mark the poverty line, like the Equator.
Just as the Chinese won't recognize the MacMohan Line,
So too poverty doesn't recognize this line.
During the days of the Raj,
Poverty as elder sister of Lakshmi, wealth,
Went from village to village, dancing around the land
But what of today?
As of now, having abandoned all good sense,
Learning, reason, morals,

She doesn't just dance, she sings too,
Such was the dance and music,
That, in the name of 'culture', played havoc,
In Delhi, the other day.



* The poem is originally written in Maithili by Chandranath Mishra
"Amar" and translated into English by Murari Madhusudan Thakur

6

Said the Minister

CHANDRANATH MISHRA "AMAR"

I asked him, in confidence,
"Please to tell me, honoured sir,
Have you everything you wanted,
Or is there still something wanting?"

He said:

"Man's desires are infinite!
Where's the one who has everything he wanted
That it should be so with me?
The question remains then of content,
One has to be content then.
Still there's one thing in my heart,
Just one little thing I wanted:
I should like to hear
What the radio or the T.V. says
After I'm dead;
I should like to see
Who does what to help my dear son,
In what ways, to bring solace to him."
Reclining a little on the sofa,
Deep in thought he seemed,
With his eyes shut.
So said the Minister.



* The poem is originally written in Maithili by Chandranath Mishra "Amar" and translated into English by Murari Madhusudan Thakur

7

Love: A Definition

CHANDRANATH MISHRA "AMAR"

What is love?

At least I know what my love is:

I'm just myself, untouched by ego.

Never in life have I known

Love to be odd or incongruous.

Being together is love that has kept me in the community.

My own 'my'-ness in its midst,

In keeping with time and circumstance,

Becomes, by turns, son and father, friend and brother,

Companion and husband, and many others besides.

To become all these needs a lot of becoming,

And for that, it brings together all that's needed.

The love of the father for the son,

Like the coconut whole,

Seemingly hard on the outside, coarse and tough,

It's full of milk, milk-white, sweet and liquid inside,

A tender fruit that can be known only by its taste,

It's vain to try to describe it.

The son's love for the father, like the sun's heat.

To the butter that is the father's heart,

That melts it at once.

The teacher's love for the pupil,

Like the tender sugarcane that looks like a stick,

Starting, but its sweetness grows as you chew on it.

A friend's love, like sugar in water.

Becomes one at once, no distinction remaining.

The love of one's own, of brothers,
Like the bucket with the rope on it,
It draws the water from the well,
In quenches everyone's thirst.
The love of married couple, like crank and chain,
Keeps pulling life's bike forward.
But love as a whole that I found,
Like butter hidden in milk,
Springs above when you churn it,
Remaining apart, however hard you try to keep it together.



* The poem is originally written in Maithili by Chandranath Mishra
"Amar" and translated into English by Murari Madhusudan Thakur

8

The Four Elements

DARREN SOLOMON

1. EARTH

There on the ground something yet to be found, walking
through the path seeing the cloud.
Walking on the ground is the covered crust, taking a step to
the path is a must.
I walk on the ground through the storm, knowing the earth is
one big form, on the ground I found a grain of corn.
I walk on the ground of the earth is the crust, taking a step
towards my path is a must; through the path that I walk is
dust.

2. FIRE

There is where I stand on my feet, where I sense the heat, I
see the blaze, that the fire I gaze.
When you need the fire which you hire, when heat is what I
need, I have to ignite a seed, when my appetite I want to feed.
I can see the fire with my sight, giving the view making it
glow through the night.

3. AIR

It's when in the place that flight makes it fair, I looking up
there the element you can't tear.
When the breezing of the wind of the wind that I care, when
the weather staying the same everyday is so rare.

When looking up there is the element I can't tear, through
I've got a pear.
When I get to travel in the skies that so rare, where I want to
go that I care.

4. WATER

The element is so calm, which I can't do any harm to it, can be
useful when running a farm.
When it gathers together in a force, in time it flows through in
its course, with the minerals contains its source.



9

Red

E. MARTIN PEDERSEN

Seven new red pens on the desk
 weapons of war
to re-correct errors of the past
 tossed like pick-up sticks,
I gather them into my fist
 slide them into a cup
 all right-end up
 (what satisfaction)
awaiting spontaneous combustion
 pick out a ripe blood orange
 slash onto absorbent cellulose
 splash like a samurai victory
without moving any of the other swords
do I win something dangerous
a blue-ribbon or ulcered eyes?



10

The Wings of Black Crows

HOLLY DAY

They were as powerful as they were exotic, ghosts
of terror, the flapping of stained sheets
just out of sight. Their eyes bent spades into old train cars
huddled shadows in the rusty quiet, dreams of wheels
turning.

I wanted so badly to stand in the room as a light
to take a small bit of their pain into me and survive it all
next time; they will have to wait. There are more bodies
in the lake out back that need to be counted. My visions can
wait.



11

Target Range

HOLLY DAY

she held the gun in her hand and imagined
she was the prostitute she'd read about in the newspaper
knew that if she was that prostitute and she'd had this gun
there was no way those boys would have done to her
those things they did. she pulled the trigger and a hole
appeared in the paper target. if she'd been that prostitute

this hole would be in a person that needed to stop
there would be one boy on the ground and his friends
would say "Oh shit! Oh shit! She shot him!"
and she would say something like "You bet I did,
motherfuckers."
or something suitably badass and scene-appropriate.

she pulled the target off and held it up for appreciation.
the good ol' boy standing next to her grunted something
about cluster patters and kill shots and she wished
she'd aimed more shots at the target's nuts, because
a nice, tight cluster pattern of bullets around a paper target's
crotch
would probably have shut an asshole like that up, too.



12

Garden Memories

JAMES G. PIATT

In the changeless expanse of wind blown
time, I watched as memories flooded across
my mind. I saw a misty silhouette of a
beautiful lady sitting underneath the shade of
a sycamore tree in her flower-laden garden
filled with the beautiful fragrances of jasmine,
and red roses, and smiled.



13

How Wonderful Life Can Be

JAMES G. PIATT

The heat of the noonday sun
Warms the earth, and colorful Flowers shed their
scents into the air. Find a place to sit under the shade
of a tree, smell the fragrances, and think about how
wonderful life can be.



14

The Kitten

JOSEPH HART

Tiny skull and spine
That curves into a tail –
Lying in the sun,
Fragile, small and pale –

Nothing else remains –
A kitten hardly grown –
Much can be inferred from this.
Nothing can be known.



15

Legacy

JOSEPH HART

Intelligence has realized
Every human dream,
Intelligence that's far above
Predatory kings –

Kings that like a magnet draw
Ugliness from mobs,
Mobs that cannot understand
Or do what great men do –

But topple statues, smash the shrines
Or vomit in the temples –
Destroying art because it's art,
And good because it's good –



16

Clouds

JOSEPH HART

Do animals see beauty in the clouds,
Rifts and puffs? Or beauty in the sea?
Heaven and eternity in shrouds?
Or genius in the instincts of a flea?



17

Keith

JOSEPH HART

You don't remember Jacqui.
You do remember John.
Memories break up
Like cobwebs and are gone.

Less than non-existent,
Elusive as today,
Tomorrow never comes
And yesterday won't stay.

Now I live alone
Throttled by a past
That everyone's forgotten;
Memories don't last.

Like a coral reef
Buried in the sea,
Ships continue passing,
And life is memory.



18

Somewhere a Cat

JOSEPH HART

Somewhere a cat
Rubs its side against a fence.
That's sleep.
Cobwebs between doorless jambs
Are doors.
That's the moon.
Dark purple wine
Splashes down the sides
Of a lead mug.
That's the night.



19

Voter

M. SHAMSUR RABB KHAN

I know you fool me
Again and again, still
I trust you since I am
Too old to get one
Like you, and you liar
You know I am fooled
Again and again, still
You betray me since you are
Too cunning to get many
Like me, and I, a voter,
In a long queue,
A helpless, usable scaffold
For you to scale the height



20

Past and Present

M. SHAMSUR RABB KHAN

In this big land of golden past
Where human misery still
Stays in horrible lower cast
And cruelty kills people at will

In this big land of golden past
Where poverty stares live
At million, terrible aghast
And hunger kills children alive

In this big land of golden past
Where corruption booms with speed
With which the rulers run so fast
And leaves the children to bleed

In this big land of golden past
Where clashes and mass killing
Continued by iconoclast
And the killers go free walking



21

Wish

(Kamna)

RAJA NAND JHA

How I wish to sing all the while,
To hear one sing.

To have one whom,
Half in bud, half in bloom,
To sing like cuckoo a floral tune,
To vernal days turn my life-span
Holding Holi in heart's hinterland.

Ahead with tottering steps
Even through tear wax as in cheer.
To drip and drip drops of ditty
On my soul athirst.

Recluse at heart
To nurse a wish never to part,
To fast within and feed without.
Midst a thistle, far from bower
To foster, full, a fragrant flower,
Humming to it in sun and shower.

To fly on fancy's wing
God's glory to sing,
To raise the ugly too to a swing.
To quaff like lord Shiva the poisoned chalice.



22

Distancing

RAJIV KHANDELWAL

You
May not believe
What I saw today
When I set out for my close-of-day walk

Two cars
One a Mercedes driven by a free flowing bearded man
The other an Audi with a spunky lady driver
Halted
Against the backdrop of the tall mall wall
Within minutes of each other
As if the stoppage
Was stage choreographed

They got out of their cars
And huddled together
Hemmed by car and white wall
Practically hidden
From prying pedestrian peek
And stood close
Almost at a lovers distance
Oblivious
Of the casteist world around
As if cloaked by a blanket of invisibility

And unwisely unafraid

Like our class mate in the seventies
Who was daring enough to smoke
When the very word "cigarette"
Used to be a taboo

Neither these two now
Nor the schoolmate then
Seemed bothered of being beyond the pale

Except us



SHORT STORY

1

It Has To Be Somewhere

D.J. TYRER

Michael Davenport-Rowndes was in the doghouse with Sylvia. Not literally, of course, but unpleasant enough. It was a situation he was familiar with, but one he could never endure, let alone enjoy. Michael had heard of masochists who positively thrived upon suffering, but the mind-set was quite beyond him; comfort was his watchword.

He considered taking a sip of wine, but didn't. He'd rather lost the taste for it.

The half-empty glass passed between his hands in nervous repetition as he attempted to focus his mind upon his current predicament, the hubbub of the party silent to him.

Sylvia's new iPhone was missing. So new that she'd only just finished transferring her entire life onto it that afternoon, it was now somewhere other than upon her person or in her vicinity – and, she held him to blame.

Michael looked up at his friend, Dig. "I don't see how she can blame me... I mean, it's not as if I took it, is it? And, she didn't ask me to babysit it."

Dig responded with a shrug. "Search me, pal. Has any man understood a woman?"

Although he couldn't even say he was certain he'd ever understood a man, even himself, let alone a woman, it wasn't the sort of answer Michael was hoping for. Then again, given his friend's track record with women, Dig probably wasn't the one to ask.

He waved away the response and asked, instead, "You haven't seen it, have you?"

Stroking his chin, as if pondering some deep philosophical question, Dig considered. "No, 'fraid not."

"It *has* to be somewhere," said Michael. "Stands to reason, surely?"

Dig nodded. "Of course. iPhones don't just vanish into thin air, not like socks. Darn things are always going missing."

"True." Michael nodded, then they lapsed into silence.

Michael poured the last of his wine into a plant pot and sighed. The only way to restore his relationship to comfort was to find the phone, he knew.

He had read an Agatha Christie or two in his time and the detecting lark had never seemed too difficult. Not that he'd ever managed to guess the murderer, but it wasn't as if he'd ever been trying; besides, this was no murder.

Michael gulped. At least, he hoped it wasn't...

He considered. Sylvia had said she'd kill for the new iPhone, when she was busy hinting for him to buy her one, but he was certain she hadn't meant it literally.

No, it was nothing more than a misplaced item, just as he often mislaid his keys.

"I'm going to find it," he told Dig, who nodded absently, having transferred his attention to some of the ladies in

attendance in a manner that was liable to earn him a rebuke from Jennifer, or a slap from the women in question.

Threading his way amongst his fellow revellers, Michael began both to mingle and to search, lifting any object from trays to handbags that might be large enough to conceal an iPhone beneath it.

“Hey! That’s mine!” exclaimed the owner of one of the latter, yanking it out of his hands as he raised it for a peek beneath.

“Sorry, I –” She cut him off by bringing it down upon his head. He wasn’t sure what she had in it, but it was enough to make him sag into a seat with a cry of “Oh, heck!”

“Oi! Watch it!” the man whose lap he’d just landed on gave Michael a push that sent him tumbling into another man, who seized him by the collar of his shirt.

“Terribly sorry,” said Michael.

He was forgiven with a rough shove that sent him spinning into another reveller, whose name, he thought, was Miranda.

“Oh, bother,” he muttered as he whipped back his hands, as if scorched, from a placement he knew was liable to have his name linked with all manner of venomous hashtags. “Sorry! Accident! Accident!”

“You great oaf – you’ve made me drop my coat.”

Michael sighed with relief at the perfectly ordinary term of abuse; he was happy to be labelled some sort of idiot, he was used to it.

“Let me help you,” he said, bending down and almost butting heads with her as she did the same.

In the movies, such an event was likely to lead to true love, but all he received was some harsher abuse.

He winced, but continued to assist her, grabbing up anything he could.

“Here you go,” he said, handing her some coins that had fallen from the pocket of her coat.

“Your wallet.” He passed it to her. Unlike Sylvia’s purse, it was quite masculine looking. In fact, it was just like his. He decided to keep quiet on the point – gender was a minefield.

“Oh, and look, you dropped your iPhone.”

She grabbed it from him with a glare.

Suddenly, Sylvia was there like a rapacious harpy, snatching it from Miranda’s hand with a cry of, “That’s mine!”

“No, it’s not!” Miranda tried to stand, but tripped over the leg of the coffee table and fell back down.

“There!” Sylvia thrust out the now-unlocked iPhone. “See? My thumb print unlocked it – mine!”

Miranda gave a cry and covered her face.

Sylvia gave a curt nod. “I’m calling the police.”

The woman sobbed as Sylvia did so.

With a sigh, Sylvia ended the call. “I guess it’s your lucky night – the police say they have nobody available to deal with you.” She glared down at her. “Well, get out of here!”

Miranda scrambled to her feet and ran for the door.

Sylvia turned to Michael, who was still in a crouch, a bewildered look on his face. She smiled.

He gave her a tentative smile in reply.

“Well done. I knew you’d find it.”

He managed to keep his smile in place.

“But,” she asked, “how did you know?”

“Sorry?”

“How did you know that Miranda was a thief?”

Michael took a long breath, then slowly let it out.

“Well, to be frightfully honest with you, I didn’t. Know that she was a thief, I mean.”

Sylvia narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Well,” he rubbed his chin, “it was all just a jolly accident, you see. I bumped into her – well, I bumped into a few people, actually – and, well, there was your iPhone.”

It was not, he realised, the story he should’ve been telling. Something cribbed from the pages of Agatha Christie, something full of ingenuity and, perhaps, a little daring, should’ve been, but his brain was trailing his lips and the truth was tumbling out.

At least, he considered, he hadn’t admitted not even realising the phone was hers.

“It was a happy accident,” he said. “My discovery, I mean.”

Sylvia’s eyes remained narrowed a moment longer, then return to their usual large and soulful state and she smiled and gave him a satisfied nod.

Michael wandered away in search of food and drink, his appetite having returned, while Sylvia sank into an empty seat and began to check her life, which had been on-hold while she searched for her phone.

He returned with a tray of munchies and a fresh glass of wine each. Sylvia took hers absently and ignored the proffered assortment of snacks, sweet and savoury.

“More for me,” he murmured, continuing to eat.

They were silent for a few minutes, then Sylvia looked up from her phone.

“This party is dull,” she said, “I think I’ll go home.”

“Only by comparison,” he replied. “My apprehension of that dastardly thief, Miranda, was quite exciting, don’t you agree? Certainly got *my* adrenalin pumping.”

“You fell into her.”

“So I, er, did... Well, shall I call for a taxi?”

Despite having her phone in her hands, Sylvia didn’t offer, so he dug his out and called.

“It’s on its way,” he told her and she followed him outside into the chill evening air. He was grateful she’d remembered to bring her coat.

The taxi arrived and they climbed in.

The driver began to regale them with his thoughts upon the latest mess the government had made. Sylvia ignored him, remaining focused upon the screen of her phone, while Michael bobbed his head politely, despite having no idea what the man was talking about.

“Indeed – uh-huh – yes – quite so.”

They dropped Sylvia off; there was no invitation to a late-night coffee, or even a quick cocoa, so Michael stayed in the taxi and headed for home.

Still, he thought, he’d briefly been the hero, so it wasn’t a bad night, all things considered.

The taxi stopped.

“That’ll be twenty-four quid, exactly, mate.”

Michael gave the man a polite smile and reached for his wallet.

“Um...” He patted his jacket pockets.

“Anything the matter, mate?”

“Er... Well, to be frightfully honest with you...”

He should’ve been paying more attention, but Sylvia’s phone had distracted him. Miranda didn’t have a wallet *like* his – it *was* his.

The cabbie glaring at him, Michael wondered how he was going to pay.

Maybe Sylvia could assist him?



2

House and Shed

GARY LANGFORD

A child nostalgically appears as middle age approaches, to be cast away as quickly as a child grows on small filaments of sound and light. Your idea/my idea is a supportive statement in the summer of the couple.

For a time, work casts them as civil servants, and civil they are to public complaints on a limited database. If necessary they lie on their worksheet, having to answer a dozen per hour as a work requirement, until early retirement to found their new business arrives.

This is House and Shed.

Each confidentially plays their hand, the joker of hearts: 24 years' service – industrial, commercial, domestic and romantic. There is a free selection of your second service. 'We make customers satisfaction our policy without impeachment.'

Chuckles descend in clouds of laughter.

They drive into the heads of tomorrow where they become their own industry and superannuation funds in a settlement yet to come.

Spring puts a spring in their step.

ZEN is on the number plate of a car that they buy at a bargain price under the guise new becomes old in each year since the engine comes off the assembly line and this engine

left the showroom two years ago, waiting for them to arrive, exhaust purring without a single cough.

'You are mine,' says ZEN, adding, 'just as I am yours.'

House and Shed are flattered, having never been adopted by a car before.

'You just can't tell,' says Shed.

'I'm glad you hear the number plate, too,' says House.

'Truth's the strangest of events.' He nods. 'People see psychologists when they shouldn't.'

ZEN is a fitting private altar, as they have avoided church and formal religious material since childhood, coming from families of indifference.

They pledge indifference to indifference.

House and Shed are soothsayers. They enjoy looking up the meaning of soothsayer to nod wisely into each other's eyes as time gathers force on the eye line.

'I am soothing,' she says.

'I am saying,' he adds.



Her capital of governance is the house, from which she circumvents opposition from other rooms in the natural artwork of the kitchen, bathroom and bedroom. A tradesman rebuilds these. The specialist is a tradeswoman who uses her hammer like a rock 'n' rolls drummer, ferociously hitting weathered skin in triumph.

'I'm very peaceful,' she says when the drumming of nails ends and she is tired, ready to go home at the end of the day's rebuilding. 'I'll sleep well. Exhaustion beats sleeping tablets in the pipes.'

'I know what you mean,' says House when she doesn't know what she means.

The tradeswoman puts her hammer away to head away.

There is now a bright white light, over which tools of the house rule in simplicity.

Stove and sink are her favourites, almost like friends, cooking and washing away years of artificial elements to encourage the growth of the special dish that only she knows will be cooked when it is discovered by her in her own cuisine experiments.

Dishes are her daily sculptures. She sells a few dishes on-line, freezing and posting them after payment.

Sunday is the weekly exhibition. She sells a few of her food sculptures online, usually at midday, as the sun is overhead to applaud through invisible texture. This grows the more she dresses food in each dish with her own mixed herbs – experience, she tells herself – and is rewarded when the shed doesn't keel over and the sun brightens in delight.

Applause is as she keenly dresses herself to temporarily dance alone in the kitchen to the sound of silence, holding the fork like a mike.

As a young woman she dreamt of being a singer. The oven adds to the sun's applause, especially when she mimes to her own audience who feel young again.

Her partner arrives, dressed in his only suit, fashionably dark with light threads along narrow lines, made in China when the Chinese were learning European measurements.

Fashion advancement was the Chinese becoming bigger, of thought, body and weight.

Emotion heats in tiny molecules.

Tenderness is bold hearted.

Sun determines to light above their section for as long as possible, irrespective of music or silence, to acknowledge the romance of a house and a shed in suburban passionate thought.



Shed's capital of governance is the small-decorated building at the bottom of the garden's kingdom in which animals and insects balance to butcher each other for food in the daily battles.

Knowledge helps in garden wars; such as the tick is one of the mightiest of them all, able to inject allergies into human victims.

On the other hand, butterflies do well to make the following day. Wings are their air force, shot down in ease.

Morning has a temporary cleanliness and clarity.

Walls are his paintings, picking up a brush instead of civil service. A few are regularly traded at the local butcher shop for first class meat from a farm within painting distance.

Or so the butcher says, occasionally cutting up a painting with a meat axe and lustful scream. When he does so he gives the painter as much meat as he wants, walking from the back room in bliss.

Not once does he say why, other than, 'don't take this personally.'

Shed doesn't as others are sold for money, not meat and he feels charm has come through the door.

Recently shed membership grows, mostly those who need a break from their own sheds and houses.

His shed is seen as a gallery.

Shelves, chairs and a large table are rich in oak, no longer found in a forest that is now another suburb of mortgages.

The smoothest chair is worshipped, perpetually warm and worn in a painter's usage.

Shed members are conducted to sing Beethoven's First Symphony that, oddly enough, most of us have forgotten, other than Shed and Beethoven who surreptitiously looks down on the choir from a painting that hangs above the door as Beethoven's Ghost-phony.

Beethoven entered the shed due to the painter being dissatisfied with his portrait, repainting it in white, only to find Beethoven agreed with time's fall, as the paint dried and he ghostly looked out on a music world that catalogued him as a genius.

'What's that?' he asked.

Beethoven always had a sense of humour.

He now sighs at what shed members do to his First Symphony, mostly due to this needing an orchestra, not shed singers. He wonders if deafness is a bad thing after all, even if he asked for hearing to be returned to him in the afterlife until he discovered universal noise runs at a volume of burnt planets.

Beethoven's joy is discovering if he keeps composing the quieter the planets become

Critics rain on the shed.

Beethoven has never liked critics, so his ghost now applauds the singers.

House and Shed sail along in a drought or flood. Each is a wharf to the other, whether in a harbour or at sea. Each is a saviour to the other without glasses to drink or see from.

Sunday.

This is the selected one by both House and Shed. All couples have these days, whatever the cost or decision.

They applaud.

House dresses in a ball gown, appropriate makeup glowing in the mirror. Youth is returning. Flowers have grown to hang from windows and on the roof. Each flower is picked to bloom in the perfect moment we crave.

Shed puts on his suit - dry-cleaned - to walk across the garden His nerves surprise every animal, insect, plant and weed that has settled down, late afternoon. The nerves are due to a childless painting, coloured in yellow stars and named as a song by Don McLean, *Starry Starry Night*.

There is faith.

Shed knows House will open herself for him.

House knows Shed will be true. His paintings still surprise her, just as her meals are rich in a sauce specially made for him in every gram of fat, sugar and sodium.

I'm with you, you're with me, is their own song.

'Bravo. Encore.' They call, doors opening, windows up and down in unison of joy.

Their property is a romance to us all.



3

Soft Refusal

GREGORIO TAFOYA

FR HU DUR CONSENT LETTER

Female respondent hung up during consent letter. It was the most common call note he had to type into the system. He didn't blame them. Halfway through his memorized spill he had to catch his second wind and take a breath. That was something that was mentioned in his supervisor review.

INTERVIEW 24123 needs to work on breath control.

A good day was getting one survey completed during his nine-hour shift. Usually a post-partum woman was so desperate for a reprieve that she suffered through the grueling fifteen to twenty-five minute survey and stuck with him. Even during the invasive and oddly judgmental questions regarding the immunization of children 12 months to 4 years old.

And at how many months did infant R first receive something other than breast milk?

Strangely, that wasn't the question the turned most respondents off. They were somehow eager to prove that their administering of other liquids to their children was both responsible and well researched.

The question that most turned off respondents dealt with income.

"Look I don't know what that has to do with my baby Newcombe"

“So because we don’t make six-figures is that going to count against us in the survey?”

“Combined family income? So it’s just assumed that I am dependent on a man to raise this baby huh?”

His response was standard.

“The questions about income are just to provide general demographic information to ensure a thorough and rigorous study.”

Usually he was in the middle of enunciating “demographic” when the disconnect bubble popped up on his screen.

It was mind-numbing work, but it was the best job available in the institution and he treated it as such. Always reading verbatim, never interacting with the respondent off script, except to offer his single mandatory retention line, and remaining professional throughout.

Some guys got so caught up in the monotony that they did stupid shit. They would flirt with any female voice on the other line, asking them a million variations of “does it get lonely,” and push the boundaries of their brief interviewer to interviewee relationship to a breaking point.

He got just as excited to hear a female voice as the next guy, somewhat because his heuristics told him that a female was more likely to complete a survey than a male one, but also because the only other female voices he heard all day were drenched with a masculine authority.

But he wasn’t retarded. He knew the confines of his role. Sooner or later that recorded line came back to bite every one of those guys who pushed themselves to far into the private lives of their respondents.

The most spectacular way a guy lost his job was when he reached a local (within 100 miles) pizza parlor, and ordered a pan crust with all the fixings. It arrived before their shift was over and word had already gotten out that a surprise was in store.

It was no surprise however that the guy who had done the ordering was slapped with a \$100 fine, the rounded up amount of the delivery, and a 30 day hole shot.

So no, most of the time all he did was do his job, go back to his bunk at 4 pm after nine plus hours of dialing, and collect anywhere from \$75 to \$115 a month, depending on his performance.



4

üBER ALLES

JAMES R. KINCAID

“He alone, who owns the youth, gains the future.”

Adolf Hitler

“It wasn’t all that remarkable, not hard to understand, just ordinary youngsters from our village getting together, boys and girls, for what you might call romps in the woods, overnights and sometimes longer in summers. Like youth everywhere, having fun-boys and girls together, just enjoying themselves. The camping was for boys only, naturally.”



I hadn’t been paying attention to the Mercedes-Benz dealer, which was rude, seeing as how this was his house, dining table, booze, shrimps, and beef. I wasn’t sure what “it” he was discussing or, for that matter, how my wife and I had ended up here, half-listening to a monologue. My wife’s job, an assistant professor at old U of Michigan, meant that much of our time, my time for sure, was occupied going to dinner parties. For all I knew, there may have been rewarding things to do in Ann Arbor, available to those not obliged to bore away their late youth. In this particular case, we had been invited by a friend in the Classics Department, who said we’d find this evening with a businessman amusing, a break from the usual all-academic monotony. It seemed to me every bit as tedious as the usual drone, forcing us to attend, if irregularly,

to this very old German fellow maundering on about his early days.

The reason I had missed the first part of his extended memoir was only partly due to ennui. I was using most of my attention to stare at part of the woman across the table from me, not lasciviously, exactly, but intently, I guess you could say. I was staring, truth is, at her breast, the one visible to me as she plunged forward periodically, getting to her food or maybe just subject to spasms. I wondered at the time why was I so intently ogling this routine woman and her routine breast, even if it was flopping so obtrusively in my line of vision – when I leaned a very little bit leftward. I decided my attention was attracted in the same way a child or cat might be mesmerized by the only moving thing in a static landscape.

When I find myself drifting, I have this bad habit of lunging into the conversation, even or especially if I have to guess at the topics afloat. I do this, I suspect, to cover my inattention. It never works, but I never learn.

“Sounds fun, these romps in the woods. Did I get it right, that there were girls frolicking there too?”

“Not always, and not for camping, as I say, though girls were an active part of the larger organization. Girls I knew and, frankly, had my eye on, were of course in the Landjahr Lager.”

“Of course. So your overnight frolics were with boys only. I used to go to Y-Camp myself, you know, YMCA camp. Boys only. Overnight, too.”

Nobody picked up that ball. The Teutonic host smiled cordially.

“Probably a lot like your experience.”

More silence.

“It strikes me now how much time we spent naked there, swimming and so forth. I suspect boys keep their clothes on now, what with the pedophiles, Jerry Sandusky and all.”

My wife kicked me sharply in the shim, so I hastily covered my slip: “Quite natural for its time. I think enforced covering is more objectionable than naked boy – for things like camping. Don’t you agree?” I smiled winningly at our host.

Host let me off the hook. “Yes, yes. Like you, we were very innocent, though we all remained clothed – I’m not sure why. Not that your experience was wrong, not at all. It’s just that we did little swimming, I’m afraid – more rough things, such as hiking through brambles and dense woods. Imagine doing what we called a wandern in der Wald naked. Oh my.”

I knew enough finally to keep quiet, tried to shrink back into my seat, pretending to know exactly what such a wandern would be.

Our host kept on, kindly covering for me: “I was local editor of our ‘Will und Macht,’ but that marked the beginning and end of my literary life, so I cannot pretend to the learning that surrounds me here tonight.”

“Excuse me for asking,” said a woman I think was in Anthropology, “but was your organization overtly political? I guess I mean, did you have to hear lectures, that sort of thing? I hope I’m not being rude.”

“Of course not. I can see why you’d ask. After all, there have been many years of propaganda here in the United States, painting a harsh picture of young people like me. We were kids, like all kids, who, I can assure you, did not seek

out lectures. We did nothing that youngsters anywhere do not do, nothing unnatural or" – he paused briefly, his voice rising only a hair – "impure."

May have been my imagination, but people seemed embarrassed. Nobody made a sound, anyhow, which sort of forced our host to continue.

"I do not know about the Y-Camp, which was doubtless a wonderful experience for American youth. I do know a little, though, about the Boy Scouts of America, an organization I admire very much and feel a kinship with."

More silence. Mr. Mercedes continued, in a mild voice:

"We were just like the Boy Scouts, yes we were. I think there are many similarities between your group and the Hitlerjugend."

I detected discomfort. For some reason, I thought I should be the one to relieve it, despite not understanding the cause. Shames me to admit it, but I was thinking the ease-destroying problem was the veiled suggestion of homosexuality among the romping boys. You're wondering how I could have been so dense. So am I.

"I didn't," I said in a calming voice, "mean to suggest anything wrong about the woodland activities. I am sure they were completely innocent, like the Boy Scouts on their campouts and hikes and – " why didn't I shut up? – "Jamborees."

He looked at me blankly, with just a hint of anger, only a touch, as if he'd like to run one of his Mercedes over me back and forth several times.

Another guest, this one a high-ranking guy from my wife's department, was next in line to make things worse: "I don't know how it was with the German Boy Scouts."

"We had no Boy Scouts," interposed our Host, still polite, if cold.

"Oh," he went blundering on, "but I was about to say that my experience in scouting, Being Prepared and all, taught me everything I needed to know and more about sex. We'd get out there in the woods, inside tents, and – well, you know."

Something had to be done, but I knew it couldn't be done by me. I was hoping Marie would step in, and she did

"I was wondering," said she, in a matter-of-fact tone, "whether the movies you watched as a boy, in your village there, were sometimes the very ones we were seeing, though I know European films are now, and certainly were then, vastly superior to Hollywood trash, so much more sophisticated."

Everyone stared open-mouthed, but her gambit worked and we somehow made it through another ninety minutes, out the door, and into the car.

"Nice job, Lou," she said, as soon as the door was shut – her door, mine remaining open.

'Yeah, I really don't care if that idiot Kraut spent his youth fiddling with other German willies. I don't know how we got onto that'

She stared at me with what even I could see was contempt.

"Playing with willies? Those kids were informing on parents and teachers, identifying Jews, forming the core of the new Reich."

Finally, I got it. "Ah, shit."

"Yeah, ah, shit."

“The Hitler Youth?”

“The Hitlerjugend, of course. He was talking about it for an hour. Where were you?” She looked at me suspiciously.

“I was bored, I guess. The Hitler Youth? Just like the Boy Scouts?”

“An apt comparison, would you say?”

“Ridiculous. Boy Scouts weren’t gassing Jews.”

“Being an old Boy Scout, self-identified, you’d know.”

“Wonder why Adolf there said that about the Boy Scouts?”

“Well, do you suppose, just maybe, he’s a fascist prick who’s covering his ass, rewriting his past, normalizing his monstrosity?”

“Sure, but it’s still odd he would talk about it as if it were nothing much. He must know Americans might regard the Hitler Fucking Youth as slightly different from the Brownies.”

“Like I say, he’s.... “

“Yeah – excuse me for interrupting – but he really didn’t seem like a fool, not altogether, not apart from that. How about if we bracketed off all that psychological stuff, and, just for funsies, assume he has something.”

“Has something? He’s recognized the Heil Hitler in the Boy Scout salute?”

“Stay with me. What I mean is, what if he isn’t a pathological, Jew-hating unreconstructed Nazi, but a guy who grew up inside an organization that appeared to him part-innocuous, part-fun, and part-irritating. It was just something that was there, something Otto and Rudolph and

Max all did, just that – what they did. Not at all unlike the Boy Scouts.”

“But.... ”

“I know, what they did seems horrid, WAS horrid, but we weren’t there. And we don’t know dick, really, about the Hitler Youth, at least I don’t.”

“Well, you can fix that. When you aren’t engaged in your many money-making and helping-around-the-house activities you can be studying past issues of ‘Will und Macht.’”

“I can also talk to What’s-His-Name at Mercedes R Us.”

“Yeah, he likes you.”

“I can apologize, you know, win him over.”

“Or the other way round.”

I decided a phone call would be a mistake, so I headed on over to the dealership, which seemed to me low-key. Not surprising, as this asshole just knew how to lure the unsuspecting into his Third-Reich trap. Yeah, and I had to drop that. If I wanted to know about Bill (his name, I discovered), I had to stop pretending I already knew. I didn’t know a thing. I wanted to know. Keep to that.

The opening didn’t go well. First off, Bill was – I could see it in his face – so angry at seeing me it was all he could do not to have one of his underlings stop patrolling the lot and pitch me into the middle of Jackson Road. Only reason he didn’t, I figured, was a suspicion that I might have stopped by to get me one of his specially equipped Mercedes.

I’ll not spare you – nor me – the humiliating groveling I went through to get him to hear me: “Bill, I realize I know

nothing at all about your childhood, what it was like. I'm sorry I made judgments out of total ignorance, absolute ignorance, and simply want to know. We Americans really are fed predigested knowledge. I promise I only want to open myself up to what you went through, what it was. It's so easy to judge and so hard to understand. I'm not saying I am capable of understanding, but I can do better – and I can stop being such an idiot.”

More or less, that was it. Bill didn't soften – he wasn't the softening sort – but he heard me out and, finally, said he would talk with me, very briefly, but didn't have time right now. I had an inspiration:

“Let me buy you lunch, Bill. No, make it dinner.”

He seemed startled, then agreed.

As I turned to leave, he touched my shoulder: “You know, this is not easy for me.”

I said I knew it wasn't, then changed it to, “I imagine it can't be.”

He touched me again: “My name is Wilhelm.”



There didn't seem to be a German restaurant in Ann Arbor, none I knew of. Besides, even if there had been, going there would be pretty blunt: why not just entertain him at home, with some swastika festoons and pictures of Auschwitz? So, I settled on one of our town's many theme restaurants, this one down-home country, with bales of hay stuck around and wait-people in coveralls and flannel shirts. Country music. Nothing could have been less appropriate – I hoped.

Our waitress told us her name was “Marie,” that the specials included “Homespun Hash” and “Down-on-the-

Farm Flounder" (I swear) and that she'd be happy to bring us drinks while we made our difficult decisions. I wondered whether some kind of Old Country beer would be just the thing, but, of course, deferred to Wilhelm, who ordered iced tea. So did I, though I hated it.

He began immediately: "The comment about your Boy Scouts: that got your attention, right?"

"To tell the truth, so did the way you spoke of The Hitler Youth."

"Which you know all about."

"Not a thing. That's what I meant to say. I know nothing, nothing at all. And that's wrong"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Well, it's partly idle curiosity. But what drives me really is a suspicion that most of what we know, I know, is protected ignorance, projected from various political cliches. That's especially true, I believe, in those areas where the most emotion collects, if you know what I mean."

How could he?

He stared at me. I couldn't tell if he followed or if he gave a shit.

"I'll admit I figured the Youth consisted of a bunch of blond-haired fanatics, brainwashed by a totalitarian state."

"And you yourself were not brainwashed into thinking that? Eight million kids all fanatics?"

"Eight million?"

"All the young boys in Germany. All. And they were brainwashed, unlike any other kids in the whole world."

“No, you’re right. I can’t speak for others, but I have nothing but received ideas. I keep saying that. Apart from Leni Riefenstahl movies and my dad’s stories, I know zilch.”

“Your dad’s stories?”

“He was in the Battle of the Bulge, as it’s called here. I guess you know that – I mean what it was called.”

“Germans had a different name for it.”

“Oh.”

This was getting nowhere. So I plunged, “I really didn’t find out anything useful from my dad. He spent a night hiding in a cellar, he said, peeking through a small basement window at the feet of German soldiers in the street outside.”

“A town taken and retaken?”

“Yeah.”

“How long was he in the cellar?”

“You know, Wilhelm, I don’t know: surely not long, maybe overnight.”

“Did you ask?”

“No. Wasn’t like it wasn’t a fascinating story for a boy, like a horror movie, but he only told the story once.”

Wilhelm stared at me.

“He didn’t talk much – ever – about the war. He was in bad shape when he came home. My Mom said he once knocked over a card-table and dived under it, scattering cards and guests, when some kid, maybe me, popped a paper bag.”

“Shell shock.”

“I guess. Yes, you’re right. Odd I never thought of that term. My Mother called it ‘nerves,’ said, ‘Your father is just a little jumpy.’”

"It must have been hard."

"Yeah."

"Very hard on Americans."

"I deserve that. Sorry."

"Well, as you'll get around to saying, you weren't the ones invading Poland."

"I won't be the one to say that. You weren't the one invading Poland, either, Wilhelm. You didn't make the decision, mobilize troops. You were inside something else. That's what I want to ask about."

He didn't pretend to misunderstand.

"Call me, Bill. Sorry for my tone. OK, here we go. I was born in a small village close to the French border, 1932. You can figure out a lot just from that date."

"I guess I could if I knew anything about what it was like in Germany then, but I don't."

"Well, I'm sure you know Germany was almost ruined by the Treaty of Versailles and had a Great Depression that was much worse than anyone else's for a time and started a decade earlier."

"Not exactly.... I mean, I didn't really know."

"Well, they did – we did. Listen to me, now: when Hitler came to power in 1933 there were over six million unemployed, though that figure tells you very little about privation and the lives of those barely managing not to starve."

I started to say something, but he was locked in now.

"My best friend's mother became a whore to feed her family."

He paused but I knew he didn't want a response.

"By 1938 there were only 2000 unemployed, a tiny number. Can you wonder that some admired Hitler? You might have done so? At least you would have been swept along. I'm not saying my own admiration was based on employment statistics, but they help explain the situation I grew up in. You can surely see that."

He wasn't looking for an answer.

"My parents didn't admire Hitler personally, nor did many others. But – listen to me now – it seemed to them, I think – remember how young I was – just politics. They were trying to lead their daily lives. That is, until my father was called up."

"What was that like – for him or for you?"

"You weren't able to talk to your father and I don't want to talk about mine. That OK?"

I said it was.

"I do know that my family did not want war, hated the invasion of Poland you mentioned – as did most of our village. "

He paused to take a drink.

"OK, the Jugend. By the time I was old enough, the Movement had become compulsory, not that any of that would have mattered to me – or to any other boy. I joined in 1943, when I was eleven. The compulsory business was just an organizational formality, useful for bookkeeping and administering supplies. Before 1939 and the decree, virtually all German kids belonged, over seven million, I have read."

He looked at me hard. "That's what you want to know about, satisfy your curiosity. OK, it was glorious, the finest time of my life, those two years, up until the Communists

came from one side and the Amis from the other. But before then, it was like the Boy Scouts, only better. I'm pretty sure it was so much better, enveloping, I guess you might say. I don't expect you to believe me, but it really was a wonderful experience, not simply 'fun' but meaningful."

"I've been trying to think," he went on, now in a much softer tone, "why it was so fine. I know it seems monstrous to you, a lot of hysterical kids, goose-stepping and saluting. You suppose it's some defect in the German character, some permanent moral affliction, a genetic monstrosity."

Before I could protest, he went on.

"Think of this: it was open, free, and democratic. Imagine that. We were all the same, treated alike. How strange that was. You probably know that, except for us in the Jugend, Germany was still a country of traditional classes and class power, almost feudal. We got outside such things. Beyond that, we could do what all kids love to do: hike, camp, play games. The marching was tiresome, but the war games and the sports more than made up for that. Such joy in being young and unleashed, that was part of it. Sure, there were lectures, but very few, probably less indoctrination than in the Boy Scouts."

I didn't protest, wondering if he might be right.

"The biggest thing was getting away from parents. I didn't care about serving the Fatherland. I was eleven! But to be free! It was a complete and wonderful world of young people. Our teachers mocked religion, and you can bet we carried all that home with us. We regarded not only our parents but old party-members with contempt: fat, sputtering fools we thought – and we were right. You following me?"

"This is all new to me," I said. If he heard, or cared, he didn't show it.

"But what you want to know about is the Jugend and Jews, I know. I wish I could understand it better myself. I've thought about it so often over the years and still don't... There was a big sign at our school that read, 'Jews are traitors and our sadness.' That sort of thing was everywhere, certainly by the time I was in the Jugend. There was little talk about Jews, really, but this attitude was there, as ground-work, the idea that Jews were inferior and very dangerous. It was explained to us that Hitler was a genius in these matters and had studied the eugenic and racial sciences, making it clear to him that even inferior races could produce remarkable specimens. That's what we had to watch out for, the mutations. I know it's all nonsense, but we were little and didn't have any real interest in this boring topic."

"Boring?"

"I'm trying to be honest. How interested would you have been at eleven-years-old in genetic science?"

"I see."

"I doubt it. And yes, we heard about the camps. You could say that we heard about the camps and that we approved. But approval was never an issue. It was just there. Not as if we were presented with a dilemma and asked to solve it."

"Weren't you...?"

"Oh, I see. How could we, even kids, approve of extermination? Tolerate it. Why didn't we rise up? Don't bother to say anything. You see – though you won't believe this – we thought the camps were farms. All of us just accepted that. We knew that Jews were deported, but we had no idea what was going on. Auschwitz – we knew the name – was a farm. So we were told and believed, a farm. Jews were sent there to keep them from polluting the rest of us and from

sabotage. We never knew about the gas or the rifles, the little children. We did not know. We thought they were farms. Had we known.... We didn't."

"I believe you."

He looked right through me.

There was a long pause.

"I know you want to hear about kids reporting parents, becoming little Gestapo agents. That did happen once in our village. It was before I was in the Jugend, and nobody talked about it. I don't disagree that the threat was there, and I don't disagree that the power it gave us was delicious. Would I have turned in my parents? No. My father early on often mocked Hitler, imitated his shrieking and even put finger on his upper lip – you know, his silly moustache. Lots of adults did that sort of thing. We didn't care. We didn't worship Hitler. We were part of the Reich, the Volk, not instruments of a tyrant. You see? Can you see that?"

"I think so."

"It wasn't just fun and games for us; you're right about that. It was much more than the Boy Scouts. We felt we were at the heart of a new history, not just a new country, a new way of thinking about what it was to be alive, to be human. Parents weren't the enemy. They were irrelevant."

"True, from your point of view," he went on, "the great power we had was to be sure nobody talked of losing the war, of surrender. I knew that at the time, that I was the enforcer of patriotism. We were part of the New World that extended backwards, too. We were reclaiming our heritage, the power of the Volk. We were the new Germany, the new collective, the new human form."

After a second he added, "Read Nietzsche. We went beyond the illusion of the individual into the grand world of the All, the One."

He was silent a long time. I thought he was done and made leaving noises.

"Bill, I can't tell you how grateful I am to you. I.... "

"When I was at school, our teacher often said to our class that we were so stupid, not half would graduate."

I didn't see what I could say to this. He didn't seem to want me to chuckle in recognition of how alike schoolteachers are the world over.

"He said that often."

I kept my mouth shut.

"I remember him saying it, as if it were this morning. And you know what, he was right, except that his calculations were too generous."

"Really," I said.

"Almost three-quarters of the boys were dead before they were eighteen, some young girls, too. Kids of 8 and 9 were slaughtered."

"Oh my God."

"Did your father ever mention Aachen?"

He had. Some instinct told me to deny it, but I didn't.

"He was in that battle? So was I. American troops against a group of children nine-to-fourteen year-old, boys and girls, along with a few old men, very old. "

I didn't see what I could say.

"I survived," he finally said, looking me straight in the face. "So did your father."

"Yes."

"My father did not, nor did my sister."

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you," he said, again softly, "Now, what do you understand?"



5

Two Tramps

NIGEL FORD

A man neatly dressed carrying a small brown suitcase walked down the towpath with deliberate steps as if to a destination. Most others walk the towpath in ad hoc fashion. A large American stars & stripes sticker decorates one side of the suitcase facing outwards towards the river. This man is walking from roughly west to east.

A woman neatly dressed walks up the towpath carefully and swiftly as if late for an appointment. She carries a medium sized brown suitcase of the reinforced cardboard type upon which a small Union Jack sticker was affixed onto the outside of the lid. She is walking along the towpath from roughly east to west.

The distance to the bench on the towpath from each of these persons is roughly equidistant and they are planning to arrive at the bench at approximately the same time, which they do.

Seated on the bench, staring at the river, these two people sat with their respective suitcases placed on the ground between their legs.

'Swop?' asked the woman.

'Good idea,' replied the man.

They then exchanged suitcases.

They sat staring at the river for a while.

'Peaceful,' said the man.

'Very nice,' agreed the woman and stretched and stood up. 'Shall we get going?'

'By all means,' the man agreed. 'In which direction? East or West?'

'We've done both East and West haven't we. We can tell each other all about it,' the woman pointed out.

'North or South then,' suggested the man.

'Yes. One of those. South perhaps,' the woman touched a finger to her lips. 'Warmer. Sunshine would be nice.'

'Good idea,' said the man and rose.

Balancing their suitcases on their heads they waded across the river, walked up the bank on the other side, and disappeared from view.



6

Party

NIGEL FORD

Hijinks, granny used to call them. Two of them playing with a ball in the river, tossing to and fro, T-shirts soaking. Another stood on her head on the towpath, attempting to drink from a bottle of beer, yet another balanced on the arm of the bench, a glass of white wine in one hand, a fag in the other, intent on using the arms and backrest as a tightrope. This did not go well.

Others turned up. Exhibiting themselves and baring their souls in one way or another. Commonly known as letting off steam.

Music there was too, blaring into the glossy night, and the odd passer-by treading through and around them with care, smiles stuck to their faces, not wanting to intrude, not wanting to be noticed, just wanting to be out of there and gone.

No complaints though.

Mostly youngish, but there was a prophet, long and gangly, wearing a long grey beard. Long hair tied up with a rope, wearing an olive green suit, red tie and plimsolls. Who sat on the bench listening to earnest and drunken enquiries, beseeches and woes.

A person on a bicycle wobbled up, one hand holding a cool box that looked heavy, wobbled some more and crashed into the rushes, machine, human and box all vanished.

Laughter erupts.

It was a good party. It went on for a while.

Then it wasn't there. They'd all gone.

The dawn was a glimmer. Suddenly a deafening clamour of bird chorus burst into the air from all directions.



7

Sleep

NIGEL FORD

He was an excursionist you might say. Although he always ended up at the same place as the intent of his excursion. I am an excursionist of one excursion, he would tell himself, I take a small and certain excursion frequently and with considerable relief to the bench on the towpath.

I do not know what I would do without it. I sometimes wake in the night, bewildered and sweating, convinced that someone has taken it away and my one, faithful refuge will have gone.

I should revolt myself, and that with extreme unction. I am a comically sad figure of a person, in constant need of refuge.

They mean well, those about me, they love me dearly I'm sure, if I were to suddenly expire they would be devastated, they would weep, shout, curse, stamp their feet at the exasperating pain caused by my expiry, a feeling which they think, will never die.

But it will.

It will gradually fade away and me with it. The occasional ache in the stomach churned up by memories. But these too, will more or less disappear, for almost ever. It becomes an emotion, only less strong, like joy or fear. It becomes dilapidated, some bits missing. It lies prostrate in its uselessness of inveterate death.

I am numb with self-pity. I must shake off these ruminations.

He slept. Started. How long had he slept? He felt ashamed of himself. He must pull himself together.

He rose from the bench, cleansed of reflections. Bright and sparkling with new life. And walked back home to the quixotic and comic particularities of the everyday.



8

The Ring-Rope

NORBERT KOVACS

Many people had gathered at the barren tract by the field when one man took a long, thick black rope and laid it in a huge circle around them all. The people were glad the rope set them apart from the land and danced within the ring it made. The more enthusiastic stepped right along its edge; they made a game of planting their feet suddenly and forcefully beside the rope and laughing. Girls danced with crisscrossing steps, modeling the rope's wound strands. The youth did this carefully, their feet pointing left or right, their bodies poised, arms out. The dancers moved in an excess of joy. Many of them sang, their voices in harmony:

O we are free!
We have our rope
To bind us all.
So we will live.

When they finished dancing, the group gathered in the middle of the ring where an elder spoke to them. "We are many and different," he said, "but because we have chosen to keep within the black rope, we have become like one. Here we no longer wander without place as we once had. Too many live meaninglessly outside our circle. Those outsiders say they feel certain of themselves, but do it without feeling; they say they fight with reason but do not understand their reasons. They claim to believe but have no faith. However,

we are different. We have chosen to stay here. We have our place; surrounded by this black rope, we are all included.”

After the elder had spoken, a young man went to the ring's edge, took some wet earth and sculpted a small scene. Within an oval he traced in the dirt to stand for the black rope, he set a dozen small figures made of the wet earth. He gave each a different face just as each person had in the ring. When he had done, the people within the rope ring drew near. Some, feeling moved, kneeled beside the ring that they recognized in the sculpture. The onlookers held quiet a long time, awestruck by the model of their ring world. They continued to visit the sculpture until the rain made it ooze into mud again.

To celebrate their new freedom, the people ran a race within the ring. They ran in parallel courses, since there was not room for everyone to run beside the rope. Some ran right by the rope side, their steps careful, as during the dance, not to step outside it. These runners raced long, glad that their legs followed the rope's border. Beside them sped a second course of runners more within the ring. These people ran quickly, glad to be next to those running right by the rope. Those who could not fit in this second course ran a third course further inside the ring, where they moved the quickest of all. And some few people who did not fit in the third course kept within the ring's center, not running, but spinning and jumping with joy. The runners ran and re-ran their circles, the contest to see who would run longest. The event inspired the greater athletes to amazing feats of stamina in their happiness. The most energized lasted hours. A few nearest the ring center went on sprinting despite having to turn often in their tight circle.

As the runners raced, a certain man pushed aside another to get ahead in the second course. The man who was

pushed came after the first and pushed him. The two fell to shoving and fighting. Several racers noticed, and a broad-shouldered man running by the rope came and parted them.

“Don’t have this violence,” he told the two. “Why should either of you fight when we all live together in the ring? We are not like the people on the outside who cannot respect one another.”

The two men ended their quarrel on hearing this and resumed running. Neither was happy to have quit fighting but held silent.

After the race, the people gathered to hear their philosophers discuss the ring’s meaning for them as a group. One said the ring stood for security: “While we stay inside it, we do not have to fear any other people telling us what to think or do. We are set apart.”

Another philosopher said the ring represented comfort: “The rope binds us to this tract of land. We revel in our identity with the ring.”

One woman said the ring stood for strength: “The rope marks us off from the world. Here we always understand we should be as one. We have less reason for division than the many wandering beyond the rope’s edge.”

One man said the ring stood for inclusion: “Within this rope’s border, we are together, all for each. We belong to one another as a group.”

All the reasons the philosophers named made the people believe the rope was good. However, some in the corners of the group thought that the high-sounding ideals the philosophers claimed could not be true – not all the time at least.

The long talks by the philosophers prepared the group to hear the poet, who next rose to speak. He said, "See this earthy mud by where I stand, the low, gentle, green grass beside it, the smooth, flat land where we sit. The rope binds us to it. Here, we have reserve, peace, and place. Even as the rope marks us from the world and gathers us together like a people, the earth provides for us in these confines. Above we have the open blue sky, a clear, wide field in the air. We bask in the sun's light. The wind freshens our kind and we feel we are alive not confined. The rain cleanses us. All of this we have to sustain us within the ring bound by our rope."

As the poet spoke, men passing in the field approached and called to the group.

"Why are you all sitting in the dirt? Can't you see you're filthy?"

"They don't care," one newcomer said to the other. "They *like* being that way."

The first man stalked to the rope side. "You all think you're something for sitting in the muck, eh? Well, you look like fools. Do you hear: FOOLS!"

"Someone told me they think they're enlightened sitting inside their rope. Can you imagine?"

"What junk! But what can they think listening to that guy's high-sounding crud? Hey, how great are you all for wallowing in mud?"

The man who said this snatched some dirt from the field, balled it in his palm, and flung it at the group by the poet. Several young men in the ring jumped to their feet and stalked toward the rope side. They cupped their hands into fists, ready to fight the men who stood beyond the ring's edge. However, the poet said, "Do not attack. Remember we

are inside the rope and have chosen peace for this place. We must not treat the aggressor like he has power over us anymore." Then to the outsiders, the poet turned, scowling, and said, "You should go if you find no good here."

Their faces etched by anger, the young men of the ring returned to its center and the outsiders walked from the field, sneering behind them.

In the days after the hecklers left, the weather warmed and the people in answer to it filled with joy. Companions spoke of love for one another, friends for friends, the stronger for the weaker. Men and women drew together. The good mood overcame couples. Pairs lay on the ground and shared their feeling in front of everyone, shifting naked on the barren earth. The by-standers cried out that the lovers did a shameful thing. "Aren't we bound by some thought for decency here?" an old woman said in a strident voice. "We shouldn't have to witness this. Or to have their clothes flung around us." Those gathered near agreed and the lovers lying on the ground felt ashamed. The couples broke, dressed, and did not join together again during the day.

Upset that they were scolded, some of the more passionate ones spoke of visiting the tall, blue mountain beyond the field surrounding the ring. "A big place like the mountain would have many spots to see," a wistful young man said. "You know by the dark forest that covers it. It must be full of unknown places; we all could take different paths in those woods."

His friend answered, "We should go. The more we talk of over *there*, the less I wish I was *here*."

Several people, the philosophers and the man who had laid the rope, cried, "Do not think of going to the mountain!

What would our ring mean if the people left it whenever they felt? How can you forget the rope is here?"

Suddenly frightened, the people who had planned to visit the mountain abandoned the idea. When they next walked by the rope side, they were quieter. The bolder ones, whose hearts had set on going, thought of themselves caged inside the place.

Since they had chosen not to cross the rope, the people made to enjoy life within it as much as possible. The many found a favorite activity in lounging on the open earth, their backs rubbing the ground. The more indolent lay there for hours, forgetting the world and themselves. However, the ring was not very large and, since many tried to lie out at the same time, the people argued over who should. The shorter and smaller said they ought, since the ring had room enough for them to but not for anyone else.

The taller people answered: "If we are all together in a group, don't we have to accommodate each other?"

The next thing, the stronger, bigger people insisted that they should lie where and when they chose: "Doesn't strength give us some privilege?" Then they threatened, "What might we do if we don't get to!"

The weaker objected. "The people set down the ring to protect us all from the outside, where we all were counted weak. Everyone here should remember the weaker among you for it and give us preference."

Everyone argued along these lines, the short with the tall, the strong with the weak, whenever they tried to lay on the ground. In their anger, they pushed and rolled one another aside to take room they believed theirs. The people sprawled where they could to sleep at night, bodies

crisscrossing, and disliked that their neighbors pressed close to them.

Much of the day, the people did not lounge but went walking within the ring. Folks passed by the rope and ran between its bounds. However, the great number had problems doing this since the group was crowded. Many who hoped to walk by the rope side could not reach it because of the people who kept there always. Without free space of their own, children ran freely, sometimes knocking down their elders. The weak and slow were pushed aside by the stronger. To stop these things from occurring, the engineers in the group created a new system of movement for everyone. The system designed neat, regular circles for motion from the rope's edge to the ring center. The people moved between the circles by carefully placed, short passages. To make the system run, a select number each day sat in a special area to allow the rest to move the easier. Parents were to hold their younger, small children by the hand to avoid their running and colliding into everyone else. The group maneuvered more easily per the design and their leaders extolled the results in their speeches. "We have established an order within our ring that testifies to our unity," they said.

However, a party of independent minds believed they should have their old liberties in walking. "All the rope does is set a boundary," their advocate said. "It doesn't prescribe our movement within it." To show their upset, several of the independent minds walked cutting across the now established circles where they willed.

The majority in the ring felt this an affront. "How can you act as if you may go anywhere?" they told the new dissidents. "The many people here respect the circles. Why should we worry about you crossing our paths as we walk them? We designed the system to help us, not you!" The

more aggressive beat and kicked the upstarts who had walked at random in the ring. The dissidents, discouraged, quit their protest and fell into line.

One morning, soon after order was restored, the people awoke to find a few people within the rope-ring had died in the night. The dead had seemed in good health, so the people were frightened. "Some disease killed them," the body examiners said, pointing to black lumps around the dead faces. "It might be circling among us now." This idea roused a vocal subset who insisted the group part from the ring to avoid anyone else dying. However, a very old philosopher, respected among them, said, "We should not abandon our ring. Disease is one thing, but the rope is another. Here we have our place, have placed meaning. Outside it was death, inside life. Let us keep together here despite the illness among our number." The poets, the engineers and other leaders of the people agreed and nobody left the rope-ring. Still, many worried how much longer they could last, or indeed if they would.



9

Memoria

PHILLIP FREY

Hudson Laboratories

Project: Memoria.

Interview Experiment Number: 1,195.

Conclusion: First success.

Note: Neuron interference eliminated the subject's first paragraph of recorded thoughts.



Another one of my favorite spots was under the dresser. It was a good place to think about things. It was there in the shadows I came to realize that people always want more. As for me, all I ever wanted was a rubber toy or a little catnip. If luck were on my side I would find a live mouse or bird to chase down.

I know about people because I lived with one. Her name was Sarah. She was an actor, and so were her friends. They would come over and talk about plays and movies, and the jobs they almost got.

I watched them carefully, especially while they laughed. I came to understand that they used laughter to hide their fears. I never laugh. That's because I have nothing to hide.

Things were going along pretty well in the apartment. Until Sarah fell in love. He was a stockbroker and moved in

with us. His name was Sam, or Sammy to some of his friends. Whenever I heard his name, Sam or Sammy, I would think of salmon, one of my favorite dishes.

During the beginning of my relationship with Sam he paid attention to me in a kind enough way. But then things began to turn sour. I got into the habit of sitting on the bathroom counter while he preened. He looked into the mirror as if he cared for nothing but himself. Whenever Sam would catch my stare I had the feeling he knew that I saw nothing but vanity.

Sam didn't like this about me, this special insight I have into people. They are unable to deceive me, and it was this that had made him suspicious of me. I didn't mind because I had made a game of it. There wasn't much else to do.

During Sam's second year with us he and Sarah threw loud words at each other. People don't know anything about silence. All they want to do is make noise. That's what they dream about, making at least one big noise in the world.

Sam wanted to marry Sarah, under the condition that she give up her acting career and leave Los Angeles with him. The brokerage house had promoted him. Sam would be heading up their St. Louis office. Another good thing for Sam was that he wouldn't be seeing Sarah's actor friends anymore. He referred to them as – what was it... losers, I think it was.

I truly believe Sarah loved Sam. Why she did is beyond me. It seems that the core of human love will never be understood. It was difficult for Sarah when she finally made her decision and refused his proposal. Her acting career took center stage, you might say.

A week later Sam left for St. Louis. Good riddance, I had thought at the time. Poor Sarah, though. She cried for days.

After a few months had gone by, things had quieted down and we were back to normal.

About two weeks ago Sarah came in with the mail. "Bills – bills – bills!" she said to me, and then, "Oh – here's something from Sam."

This was the first time Sarah had gotten mail from him. If she had gotten any before, I'm certain she would have told me. They had been keeping in touch, though, through their computers, Sarah with the hope that someday they would get back together.

She sat at her desk. I hopped up there alongside her and got comfortable.

Sarah opened the square envelope. From it she pulled a fancy-looking picture with words all over it. Suddenly, she burst into tears, pounded the desk with her fist, turned to me and said, "A wedding invitation!"

Sarah lay her head down on folded arms. Her weeping saddened me. I purred and licked her hand.

The next day, while we were on the sofa, Sarah stroked my back and told me how hopeless things had become. It wasn't just that Sam was about to marry someone else. There was a money problem, and at 36 years old her career was still going nowhere.

Soon afterward, Sarah had begun to come home late at night. She would pass by me without so much as a look, then walk unsteadily into the bedroom, where she slept in her clothes on top of the bed. It wasn't until the mornings that she would tearfully take me into her arms.

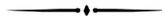
Even if I could speak I don't know what I could have said to comfort her. I'm the first to admit that I don't know everything.

As a matter of fact, I have been a little confused lately. Any animal would be, stuck in a miserable cage, surrounded by other cages. The dogs don't bother me, they know how I feel about them. The other cats press their noses against the wires wanting to communicate with me. I have nothing to say to them. And not much else to say to you.

I was taken out of the apartment last week. They found me in the shadows under the dresser. I never thought Sarah would do that to herself. She is the first person to deceive me. And the last. I have learned my lesson.

Like now with you, my keepers. You think I don't know what you have in store for me. I have watched and I have listened. I'm no fool.

From everything you have just heard I suppose you think I have lost my mind. Well, maybe I have. It doesn't bother me. Sarah was bothered and troubled, but not me. Yet isn't it odd how we will both end up the same.



10

On Breathing and Timing

REY ARMENTEROS

I've been sick for a week. One time in high school, I had a cold that lasted months. I thought I would never get over it. It became a permanent fixture of my everyday. Three and a half months, and then one day it was gone. Another time, I had a cold that just wouldn't let go. It was taking me in its grip just after I had moved to this city to start a new life. I was taking cough drops, trying everything. The cough drops were filled with menthol. Eventually, the cold released me, but it took my sense of smell with it. I could no longer smell anything, unless it had a powerful odor. If a public toilet reeked, all I could smell was menthol. I would be out on the streets, exposed to the diesel fumes of ancient trucks, and the only smell I got was menthol. I figured it wasn't so bad, losing your sense of smell. It did have its perks. You were no longer subjected to rancid odors from every corner of the world. I don't know how long this lasted.

Eventually, I got my sense of smell back, allowing my connection to this world to be at five once again. I no longer smelled menthol, but a few years later, I got into cigarettes. I tried the menthol kind, but that was not for me. Smoking cigarettes was a social thing. I mean, I only got into it as a social smoker, which meant I only touched the stuff when I went out drinking. It was a way to curb costs. A beer was about the same price as a pack of cigarettes, but it only lasted

you fifteen minutes at a bar, whereas each of the twenty cigarettes in a pack lasted you about ten.



Then one day, you couldn't smoke indoors anymore! I was there when it happened, and it happened in San Francisco, where the new laws changed barroom dynamics overnight. Some of the bars were adamantly opposed to this new law that would not only affect our city but influence the rest of the world in time. There was one bar on Sutter Street where the owner was a tyrant. He did whatever he wanted in his bar, and he would not allow such a law to take reign at his place. It was his place, he would say. This meant he could throw you out because he didn't like the look of your face. He didn't like cocky bastards, and I've seen him threaten the college boys that almost got fresh with his bartender. We would go outside to smoke and he would corral us back in the bar informing us that such laws were not welcome in his place. I didn't like this guy, but I got along with him.

I was with a large group of people from work one night, and we were in the neighborhood, and so I suggested we go to his bar. We all knew each other from the workplace, and they thought it was a good idea. At first, the tyrannical owner was surprised, and he looked a little guarded, but he finally warmed up to us. But then he didn't like the Polish guy in our group, who was already looking the worse for wear, like an amateur drunk. The little tyrant was happy I was bringing him so many customers, but later he wanted to know why the hell I brought these people! He didn't like them. And they didn't like him. They were laughing at him when he turned around after asking us to keep it down. I was feeling uncomfortable. I at the very least wanted everyone to get along if they were not going to go and actually like each

other. It was two worlds colliding. In those days, I lived in about seven worlds, and I didn't want one of them to go through a mutual Armageddon with another one.

Suddenly, everybody started sneezing. Twenty-something people were hacking and wheezing all at once. The tyrant was swinging around again to demand what the shit was going on. We were asking him what the hell did he put in the vents! He started coughing too. It was ridiculous, everybody looking at each other and almost laughing if we weren't choking. Everyone piled out of there to get the cold air of the rolling fog back into our lungs. Was it mace in the vents? Was it tear gas? They were telling the owner that they could have the place condemned with one phone call. Tabs were paid, and we got the hell out of there. Who knows how much of that stuff got back out of our systems again?

That year, I would get into smoking cloves. It was nothing like menthol or regular cigarettes. You had to really suck to take a drag from one of those brown cigarettes. The tobacco was irregular in makeup, and it would crackle and snap when you pulled on it. Almost immediately, something in it would numb your lips, but what I liked best about it was the sweet flavor. People would warn me, saying that I didn't have long to live. Those cigarettes are ten times worse than the regular ones. They slashed your lungs, one guy told me, like drowning in razor blades. I was smoking everyday now and not too concerned with tomorrow.

I was starting to see myself as one of those people that accidentally become life smokers, but I never wanted to identify myself with cigarettes. I was in fact not a smoker; I was nothing more than a cheap guy who allowed himself to fall into circumstances that weren't going to last forever. I had gotten into cigarettes with the understanding that it was

going to be a phase. But who really knew if I was going to be able to quit them or not?

I learned that people like me (the kind that supposedly don't smoke everyday) were best off if they quit before they hit their late thirties. If I got off the train at the right time, I could have my cake and eat it too. That meant I could have the good times cigarettes can offer you without paying for it in the end.

But how much is enough time doing something? The knowledge of a bleak future tied to a machine in a hospital was not always enough to cease the habit. I kept going. And one day, I got into meditation. This was because I was teaching a kindergarten class in another country, and I couldn't take it. The meditation was supposed to help me get past the rage I was getting when trying to control these brats. The thing is I couldn't accomplish any sort of meditation, but I did succeed in executing deep breathing exercises. This helped a little. I would focus on my breathing in class and then count to ten. It usually worked; at a moment's notice, I could get myself under control, which meant I would forego yelling at the kids.

There was a byproduct to my search for a calm mind. What I noticed is that my lungs were expanding. It felt like they were stronger than ever before. What a waste it would be if I didn't let go of smoking already! By that time I was again only doing it at bars. I don't know, but the timing was right. I swore off cigarettes and would only return now and again for a taste of memories.

This morning, I was coughing in the car, and my little girl asked me if I were okay. I was taking her to the daycare, and I explained to her that being sick is not all bad. My cold had changed into a coughing cold now, and so I was going to

be coughing up phlegm that was going to take the bad stuff out. I explained to her that even when we are not sick, we are still breathing in bad things that a large city makes. Getting sick is an opportunity. It is the only natural way to get that filth out.

When she gets older, I'll explain to her that like all things in life, the good and the bad come in cycles, which have to be accepted. I wish I weren't sick, but at least I'm not smoking.



11

The Journey

CHAGANTI NAGARAJA RAO

Gopal's joy knew bounds when he received communication from the public service commission of his home state informing him that he was selected for appointment as chief officer of local body in his home state. All these days Gopal was in a faraway state of Assam for a meagre salary as a junior cadre officer and it was a painful fact for a highly qualified man like him. Now that he was going to his home state as a gazetted officer was a matter of unusual joy, not only for him but for all his near and dear. His parents celebrated Gopal's selection for the coveted career with special gaiety, distributing sweets to all neighbours. After having achieved an unexpected success Gopal felt a little discomfiture to continue as a junior cadre officer in his present job. He immediately left his job in Assam on long leave and reached his native place.

Gopal returned to his home town one fine morning. His father wore a pride look at his son's achievement purely on the basis of merit. His mother was very jovial on her son's return, telling this news to each and every visitor to their home. His other family members were imagining the bright future Gopal was going to have before him and the comforts and status that he was going to enjoy commensurate with his newly acquired status.

Gopal waited for two months for appointment orders from the government. He had not received any orders. After

another two months of hopeful waiting for orders his father suggested to him to go to state headquarters and enquire about it in the head office. He went to the state headquarters and met the superintendent of the establishment section about his posting. The well-placed powerful superintendent just gave a curt reply that orders would be issued within a few days. Taking his word to be true Gopal returned to his home town. Another two months had run away fast. He neither received appointment order nor any communication relating to it. Gopal had become a little impatient and thought of resuming his present job in Assam till he received appointment order of his new assignment. But his father discouraged such an act since, having attained a higher level it would be embarrassing and below his dignity to resume a smaller job, travelling a distance of about three thousand kilometres. On his father's discouragement to resume his present job Gopal continued to hopefully wait for appointment order and looking for the post man daily. Another two months had run away fast without any progress in the matter.

One morning, an official of the department visited Gopal's house and said that a minimum of Rs.40000 should be paid to the superintendent who, in turn, would pay the amount to the minister and get the government's approval of his name for the post based on the recommendation of the public service commission. It was a terrible shock for an honest government servant like Gopal's father to pay bribe for a getting an appointment order for which selection was made through a severe educational test. Gopal's father remained quiet for the time being. Days, weeks and months were rolling away fast without any progress in the matter.

"It is in our own interest to throw away just forty thousand rupees. Pay it and get the appointment order early.

If they delay it further, that would incur greater loss for you," said Gopal's father after another month of patient waiting.

Although Gopal initially refused the idea he accepted it finally. He left for state headquarters with the money. The very moment he entered the directorate, the superintendent was very angry with Gopal and threw a serious look at him and took no notice of him, who was standing humbly near his table for more than an hour. He later came to know that the superintendent of the establishment of officers' section in the head office occupied a key position and though he was a non-gazetted officer he was the channel through whom all the correspondence had to pass to the minister and the heads of the department besides the bribes collected from the officials. He was generally appointed by the head of the department based on the recommendation of the minister of the department and he generally belonged to the minister's caste. That is why even the senior level executives render obeisance to him, sing his praise and prostrate at his feet for getting official favours done by him. That was the importance of the office. The department was so organised that the superintendent in the directorate and the minister in the Secretariat could bag all the bribes without allowing others to share even a paltry sum out of their illegal earnings. Even the officers of the national civil service working in the department were like rubberstamps in his hands. It was not the cadre but the caste that mattered most in the department.

"A word with you sir," said Gopal with fear and confusion writ large on his face.

The superintendent looked at Gopal seriously for a second. Gopal continued his humble pleading.

"Not now. Come in the evening," came the serious curt reply of the superintendent.

“Sir, sir, sir...I brought money,” Gopal pleaded again in a low and obedient voice.

“Money? How much?” said the superintendent loudly and looking at Gopal with an insinuating smile.

“Forty thousand rupees...to be handed over to the honourable minister; not bribe sir, it is only party fund given out of high respect for the minister,” said Gopal and placed the amount on the table with a hesitation whether he would accept it openly or not.

The superintendent took the amount and counted the notes and said: “You can go. Proposals of your posting are on the way to the government.”

Gopal was rather shocked when the superintendent was bold enough to take the money in public office in front of others and counted the notes with bare hands even without the slightest fear over the possibility of a trap by the sleuths of the Vigilance cell. His boldness clearly revealed the security enjoyed by certain officials in the government. The officials of the state government were so courageous that they accept bribes publicly even in the presence of the Vigilance Commissioner. A retired member of the national civil service was generally appointed as the Vigilance Commissioner who might belong to a politically marginalised, economically poor and socially degraded caste who enjoyed no benefits of any welfare scheme initiated by the government and was quite powerless and ineffective. It was not one's official position or intellectual brilliance that would entitle him to exercise power or enjoy pelf but one's caste and his ability to amass wealth through illegal means even daring the government and the society. Adding insult to injury there was no effective legal machinery to bring to book such offenders for their offences.

That was the reason for the unlimited power of certain officials of the state government who were above law.

Gopal waited for two days in the state capital to take appointment orders by hand. But two days later he was informed that it would take another fortnight more as they had to verify the vacancy position. He, therefore, returned home and continued his hopeful waiting for the appointment order.

Gopal's father used to scold him sometimes even without reason. He was now irritated with Gopal's misfortune.

"You scoundrel! Why did you return without demanding orders even after paying bribe? That reveals your inefficient and ineffective way of approaching people and to get things done. Go to the state capital again and plead for order, or meet the director directly and explain your case," said Gopal's father harshly.

As per his father's advice Gopal went to the capital again and the head office. There was always some problem in meeting the director directly bypassing the superintendent since the superintendent was closer to the minister than the director and he might be prejudiced against him and consequently there would be serious repercussions. As Gopal approached the superintendent, he looked at him seriously as if he never saw him earlier.

"What you need?" asked the superintendent after half an hour.

Gopal was shocked at his query. He politely explained the matter and humbly pleaded for help. The superintendent passed certain insinuating remarks at Gopal, which he patiently tolerated, and then turned to his files. Two clerks sitting to his left were laughing at Gopal for his hapless and

helpless position. Gopal was blushed. He waited for an hour but could not draw the attention of the superintendent. He silently left for the secretariat to meet the minister and plead for help.

The minister was busy collecting huge amounts of bribes in the name of party funds as he was constructing a cinema theatre in his home town. He therefore fixed the rates for various services. As per the rates fixed by the minister Gopal had to fill the minister's pocket to a gap of Rs.10000 more. He immediately sold away his ring, shoes and some of his new clothes in the second hand market and visited the minister's personal secretary humbly seeking his kind permission to see the minister.

"If you brought money please give it to me. The minister is now going out. You cannot meet him now," said the minister's personal secretary. As Gopal handed over the amount to him in a cover the latter again handed it over to the minister who just stopped for a while on the veranda, counted the notes and said to his secretary, "Tell him," and went away.

"We have received only thirty thousand rupees from the superintendent. Please bring another ten thousand rupees. Don't doubt the sincerity of the minister. The moment you pay the amount you receive appointment orders within seconds," said the personal secretary and followed the minister.

No sooner did the words come from the mouth of the secretary than Gopal fainted. He walked with difficulty to the canteen and had a glass of water. He looked into his pockets and found hardly twenty rupees. If he stayed in the capital for any longer he had no alternative to beg. He, therefore, left for the railway station with a rueful face.

The train was overcrowded. Gopal reached his home town with great difficulty and trial and explained his position to his father. They all could somehow rake the required amount by selling gold and through borrowing. Gopal left for the capital to try his last chance of luck. After receiving the amount the personal secretary to minister counted the notes and smiled at Gopal as if it was positive gesture. Gopal was still doubtful of his prospects. A minute later the secretary said: "Why you are still standing here? You can go. We will send you appointment orders."

Gopal returned home with a shameful face. His health-both physical and mental- deteriorated beyond recuperation in the near future. Two more months of fruitful waiting strongly goaded Gopal to return to Assam and resume his present job till he received order of his new assignment since his pride of becoming a direct recruit gazetted officer still hanged in the air.

He made all arrangements for his journey. A week before the date of journey Gopal's health suffered a further setback. But he kept the matter secret for otherwise his parents might compel him not to go. Gopal was to leave for Assam on July 21, the same day when he returned to his home town last year with a great hope and joy of becoming a gazetted officer in his home state.

It was July 21. The time was 12 noon. Gopal was ready to start his journey with his suit case and bed holdall. His brother went out to bring him an auto rickshaw. Gopal being physically very weak laid himself on the cot to relax. His mother came with a cup of tea when her attention was drawn to the calling bell. As she opened the door she found the post man standing with a registered letter from the government. As she hurriedly received and opened it she could not control her joy.

“Gopal! Gopal!” shouted his mother in uncontrollable joy, “Your journey to Assam is cancelled. You have received appointment orders.” Gopal seemed to have not believed it. His mother went on: “Do you still doubt? Look at these orders. You are posted as chief executive officer of Chandrapur where you studied for four years. It is a matter of pride for everyone that you now head the local government of the town where you were a student about a decade ago. Get up and see the orders. Last year you arrived on the same day. This year you received appointment orders on the same day. This morning I worshipped the god very seriously. The result is this order. God is really great since He comes to the rescue of His staunch devotees without a second’s delay”

As Gopal didn’t move, she turned to her husband and said: “Gopal still doubts this order. His journey to Assam is cancelled.” As Gopal didn’t respond she approached him and physically shook him showing him the appointment order. The moment she touched his body she could understand that his journey to Assam was cancelled since he had already set on his journey to an unknown world. Fate is really great!



12

So Strange

KIM FARLEIGH

Abe Moses Bloomberg was at a bus stop, escaping from Tel Aviv, from bare arms, bare shoulders and exposed waistlines: from "Arab-screwing harlots spreading filth and godless lust!"

He wore ankle-length black coats, climate irrelevant, his hair turned grey by "radiation from Arab harlot filth drug-taking gay vice," from "scum needing extermination."

His giant-sponge hat symbolised escape, seas opening, skies raining fish, *history*, like Abe's imagination, brimming with fantastic *facts*.

The sponges hid bald crowns. God thins crowns to emphasize the sides' spouting follicles that in "the coming paradise will fly free in morality's winds."

The hard-plastic container Abe held was shaped like the black hats seen in settlements, hats for Wild West towns. With forty-fives on their hips, the black-hat brigade would resemble slick gunslingers; but automatic weapons now proliferate, terrible because pistol-hipped, black-hat brigades, wearing white shirts and black trousers, under ebony, yard-long-perimeter hats, attacking "Palestinian filth" to rid "scum" from Judea, would look wonderful in movies, while causing "filth" to flee: Who hangs around when armed, wild-eyed eccentrics, with weird haircuts, appear, chanting: "God

is great!" the eccentrics' fingers "producing lightning?" (*History* would claim their fingers produced lightning.)

An Arab boy scaled the bus stop's sign post, reaching a ledge a metre above the footpath, turning the ledge into a lookout post, grimacing Abe hissing: "Arab vermin polluting Yahveh's land." Abe often spouted that on radio. His racism made him a regular guest. Only the Germans had been that "liberal" when expressing ideas. The listeners shared Abe's inspiration.

The boy's Real Madrid shirt displayed "Ronaldo" above a seven, Ronaldo inspiring athleticism, the boy's God earthly. Abe's God wasn't earthly, but Abe *knew* his God intimately. Maybe Abe had invented that God? Anyway, if God wants you to populate "sacred land," and exterminate "Arab rats," you need flexible vision, no one's vision more flexible than Abe's. He believed and like magic his beliefs became true! You could rub his magic-lantern brain with stories and out would pop "insights rich with sacred vision."

Abe's namesake would have sacrificed his son to show faith. And Abe knew his other namesake had also existed. Tombs for literary figures? That would be crazy! And because Abraham's tomb existed, then Palestine was his people's. What fast-buck-chasing property developer would deny that?

A physicist living in Abe's building had asked Abe, while Abe was staring at a cell phone in the building's lift: "What's God's number. I need answers on star formation."

Slitty-eyed Abe glared at "the infidel," eyebrows raised by thermal fury.

"Close down Saturdays," the physicist bellowed, shaking his raised hands. (The man had real conviction). "This lift! Your phone! The universe! Kill all Arabs!"

That “left-wing radical” faced eternal punishment, especially as the physicist’s “evil temptress daughter, parading bare-armed naked, sleeps with Arabs!”

The daughter, with her long, honey-coloured hair, and her big, glinting, blue eyes, had Arab friends. Abe had seen “that muck” in his building! His building! Incredible! “That evil, temptress, slut daughter” was testing Man’s moral foundations. And Abe had passed the test. Well done Abe! She hadn’t quivered Abe’s moral fibres let alone raised his penis. Was Abe impotent? Anyway, she couldn’t tempt rock-solid Abe whose namesakes’ virtues Abe matched to ensure a place in His Eternal Kingdom. (It could have been called HECK: His Eternal Christ Kingdom).

“Get off that ledge,” Abe belched in Hebrew. “Get out of our bus stops! Out of our land!”

The kid said: “Fuck you, Jew.”

Youth, adoring freedom, dislikes repression. Some adults do as well.

An Arab on a bench beside the bus stop’s sign post slapped his legs, laughing. That man lived in a flat with ten others because his family’s properties had been stolen by Europeans under a law that eliminated property rights before 1952.

“You’re all condemned to hell,” Abe declared in Hebrew. “Every stinking one of you.”

“Soak that sponge in ice,” the Arab said, in Arabic. “It’ll help you cool down.”

Abe didn’t understand a word. The boy’s laughter mixed with the chugging of traffic.

An approaching woman caught Abe’s attention. Her white-powered face highlighted her mascara-rimmed eyes,

her neck-bitten, Transylvanian-Zombie self-containment suggesting she slept in coffins. Purple-white hair plastered her head, her dress's brown-branch-yellow-leaf pattern before the background of a light-purple sky.

The Arab boy, descending the post, faced away from the approaching woman as his father emerged from a shop. Son and father smiled at each other. Jaffa's Arabs, although invaded by eccentric believers, remained amiable.

Abe initially assumed that the "purple-haired witch" had been banned from Paradise because of iniquity. Then his comforting certainty waned: Why was she here? Was she alive? Or floating in abeyance because of unforgivable sin? Ignorance-hit Abe felt strangely inadequate. He had assumed he knew everything. Now uncertainty rocked his magic-lantern brain with concussing doubts! Yes! Certainty-Rocking Doubts!

The woman's right hand rushed up to her suddenly perturbed face as the Arab boy, having turned to face his father, waved his right hand, almost clipping the woman's nose.

Realising she was there, the boy stepped aside.

Abe, watching her pass, thought: Bizarre. Must be a sinner.

Wearing hat-sponges above twirling fronds was normal. So was wearing long, black coats in summer.

But it was Abe who was "engulfed by strangeness." On the bus, his slitty, mica eyes faced women's exposed limbs, his black eyebrows raised by horrid, bare flesh, the women's long hair glittering "like lust," disgusting that some Jews ignored that God had given them Israel. What was wrong with them?

Abe craved for his West-Bank-settlement destination, to escape “ignorant lunacy,” to be where people “admired reality.”

“Cover up!” he barked.

The women, who adored pop singers and the beach, didn’t know that military occupations existed or that Arabs faced discrimination.

“You will pay for your ignorance,” Abe declared.

With armed, revengeful men accumulating on the borders none of them appreciated that comment’s irony.

The bright-eyed women covered their mouths, one arching back with delight. Leaving the bus, Back-Archer said: “A time traveller from three thousand BC! Fantastic!”

Abe’s relief on reaching the settlement confirmed that God was his guide. The ridge-top settlement topped olive-tree-dotted slopes, a stone, Palestinian hamlet, like an extension of the earth’s granite, in the valley below. A grey, circular, concrete tower sat beside the settlement. A black slit lined the tower’s top. Soldiers occupied the tower, staring through the slit at donkey-riding Palestinian farmers, the soldiers thinking: We have to protect armed settlers from unarmed farmers who graze sheep?! You need an army for that?

They had been told how “dangerous” the Palestinians were. Perhaps machine guns and rocket launchers were hidden under their saddles? But it sure didn’t look like it. And why, one soldier asked himself, do we have to be wary of people that Yahveh reveres, the simple grazer who represents our connection to Ancient Israel? Sure is confusing.

Anyway, the view from up there, whatever the case, was pretty, Abe delighted to be on "Jacob's patch," an indentation in the ground a Jacob footprint in Abe's imagination, a sign from God that Abe had found Utopia, the sky like sapphire cut smooth by God and placed over Promised Zion for The Chosen Few.

At night-time, spotlights on high poles illuminated the valley with luminous silver. Nothing moved below without being spotted. That suited Abe. That "scum" could be controlled. Maybe a biblical flood could "wash that scum away?"

But something perturbed Abe. One of the settlers wasn't religious. Abe had only been expecting to be surrounded by "infinite wisdom." He hadn't known that the government needed immigrants to live in settlements before allowing them to live west of The Green Line, Abe shocked, for God usually informed him about relevant matters.

That "someone" wore blue jeans, T-shirts and ear-rings, a "cancer cell" amid perpetual black and white. The "Cell" read "sacrilegious drivell" on hilltops instead of chanting in the synagogue. Abe suspected that "Cell" liked Arabs. Abe wouldn't have been surprised. He had once seen "Cell" photographing Palestinian farmers and speaking to them! Those "irreligious radicals" had to be watched, allowing Yahveh to complete His work.

And watch Abe did. He heard "Cell" tell a soldier: "These settlements breed repeated humanoid robotic units of wild belief. The US cleverly removes these nutcases from the US, while exploiting the situation for economic reasons, and avoiding accusations of anti-Semitism. They send these crazy bastards to these hilltop camps to labour for Jewish American

industrialists. The industrialists can't lose: they get rid of lunatics while making a pile from them."

That "radical" didn't know that Abe was listening from behind a greenhouse where fruit was being produced from free land. Stolen land sky-rockets profit margins. The greenhouse's orange roof matched the hues of the products being produced underneath its curved metal.

Gaskets seemed to burst in Abe's temples. Initial fury became satisfying conviction. God had put him unsighted within earshot to "eliminate pollutants in His terrestrial realm." He followed the "radical" up to where the "radical" read "sacrilegious drivel." On the hilltop were cypress trees where the "drivel-reading radical" read. The "radical" realised that a Palestinian village once existed there because almond and fig-tree shoots now penetrated the surface, the past difficult to eliminate.

Leaning against a trunk in mottled light the "radical" looked up quickly. A "repeated, black-and-white, humanoid unit" with a long, grey beard, and long twirling fronds under a black hat, was approaching on a donkey.

"Lunatics, hey? Repeated humanoid robotic units, hey?" the "radical" heard. "Crazy bastards, hey?"

Like a bearded frontiersman grabbing territory from Red Indians under God's orders, Abe carried weapons, those arms "gifts from gun-promoting God."

"Say your prayers, asshole," Abe said, taking aim.

The silence enabled a drawn-out groaning from a sheep in the valley below to echo long languidly yearningly throughout the land.

Palestinian farmers looked up sharply, struck by uppercut surprise. Their sheep continued chewing straw-

coloured shoots inside olive groves, the groves' stone walls like natural frontiers that had arisen from granite turf over the vastness of agricultural time. A shot's echoing aftermath rumbled, grumbled, reverberating through the valley, slithering into silence, absorbed by the lands' folds that blended into purple haze.

An "enquiry" concluded that an unnamed Palestinian had scaled the slope in view of the army and had committed murder. Reading the story, the physicist told his daughter: "It was probably that maniac who lived here. He now lives in that settlement. Three cheers for the Zionist free press. It's so free it invents anything. That's freedom for you."

Abe's radio rants had made Abe a national hero. National heroes don't get convicted of murder.

"Exterminate Arab rats in Zion!" became Abe's trademark. School children bellowed this out in playgrounds, impressing their teachers, inspiring bulldozer drivers to demolish Palestinian houses whose owners had added rooms and balconies without permission.

"Murder Nazi Philistines! Raise Gaza to the ground!" Abe howled on radio. "Annihilate the plague of anti-Semitism!"

And most of them yelped: "YES! YES! YES!!!"



13

A Spirit Called Envy

HAREENDRAN KALLINKEEL

A farmer tills soil, toils hard; reaps the fruits aplenty, of labor's returns. She raises cattle, feeding them fodder from her vast land. She enriches her fields, with manure from the bovines.

Fed well on hay, rich in nutrients, milk flows from the udders of cows and buffalos. Grateful, the cattle produce more manure for her cultivars. Her profits double, thus does her joy.

Spirits soaring, she becomes healthier, stronger, and happier.

A spirit called Envy, fed up with scorching heat, rises from Hell's hole, to spend a few days in the comfort of green Earth. He carries a magic wand, under the belt of his garment.

The lushness of the farmer's land, glaze of her bovines' bodies, paints taints of jealousy in the spirit's soul. He raises his hand, snaps his fingers.

The magic wand appears in his hand, he turns it into a flute. Another snap of crooked fingers; an apple, scarlet and shining, a temptation, appears in his other hand.



With an apple in one hand, flute in the other, the spirit approaches the farmer.

“Thou art wasting time,” the spirit sings, “caring merely for your body, never your soul.”

“I work in my land, feed my cattle; they produce, I reap my share of happiness.”

“Food should,” the spirit sings, “never be an only pursuit; you have to so too, cater to the soul, pursue the route to Heaven.”

“What’s there in Heaven,” the farmer asks, “that isn’t here; this land, my home?”

“Oh, an apple from there...” The spirit’s voice grows sweeter. “Shall I give you; get you warmer to the truth, it will.”

“That’s nice of you.” She bites the bait.

“Then will I give you,” the spirit continues his song, “an instrument of music, play it; find you will, the path to eternal bliss.”

“You’re so kind.” The farmer’s simple soul rejoices, accepting the flute.

The spirit raises his hand, curses her with magical powers latent in his wand.

The farmer brings the flute to her lips. Music flows, enchanting. The bovines train their ears, plants sway.

Immersed in music, her innocence, the farmer keeps playing.

Time passes, she unaware of thirst and hunger, still in magic’s spell. Elevated, she soars to distant skies, in the wings of music, her innocence. Bovines remain hungry, stables empty; plants crave for water, the land arid.



Maggots eat her dead cattle, the tongue of a flame from hell burns down dried hay in the fields. The land looks like a bald head, ash smeared.

Music dies away in the far horizon, her innocence never reaches heaven. The scent of rot, the smell of burn, brings the farmer down to Earth.

Innocence lost, in horror, she observes the aridness of her heaven on earth, the bleakness of her future.

Hunger notching her stomach, she searches for her plough.



PLAY

1

Culture Clash

GARY BECK

SCENE

The outdoor dining area of an East Village, New York City restaurant.

Enter three men in their late 20's. They sit at a table.

CHARACTERS

Greg – White,

Reggie – Black

Edgardo – Hispanic

Jennifer – White

Nina - Hispanic

Greg: I don't mind losing. I just can't stand the way they knock me around.

Edgardo: Aw. Stop complaining, Greg. If you tried a little harder, we wouldn't get beat so bad.

Reggie: That's easy for you to say. You were an athlete in college. Greg and I are techno-wizards. We shouldn't even be playing basketball.

Greg: That's for sure. I don't know why we let you talk us into this.

Edgardo: You know why. It gets us out of the IT department twice a week, with a nice dinner paid for by the company, and a week's paid vacation at the end of the tournament.

Greg: Alright. We know that. But why basketball? You should have picked a company sports league where at least we'd have a chance. We go home with aches and bruises every time.

Edgardo: Mira. They don't have badminton or lawn croquet, my feeble friends. All you gotta do is learn to get out of their way when they have the ball. When you have the ball, just run past them and shoot as quick as you can.

Reggie: You better tell it to them. That asshole from legal kept hitting me with his elbow whenever he was near me. Even when the play was over. I think I have a cracked rib.

Edgardo: Don't be such a wuss, Reggie.

Greg: Is he a wuss because he doesn't like being hurt?

Edgardo: They hurt me too.

Reggie: It doesn't seem to bother you as much as it does us.

Edgardo: It hurts me. I just don't make as much of a fuss about it.

Greg: Why can't we have a video game league?

Reggie: Yeah. We could really kick ass.

Edgardo: That's exactly why nobody else wants it. They know they wouldn't stand a chance.

Reggie: We don't have a chance in basketball. Is that fair?

- Edgardo: We entered for a reason. You seem to be forgetting that. Listen. I'm a reasonable guy. You know what's at stake. If you want to stop it's okay with me. (Reggie and Greg reluctantly shake their heads no.)
- Greg: We'll finish, Edgardo. We're just tired of all their name-calling. That fat, hairy slob of a lawyer kept elbowing me and calling me a faggot. I keep trying to trip him, but he always avoids it, then elbows me hard.
- Reggie: He did that to me too, except he called me a black faggot. He doesn't wear a shirt and got his sweat all over me. We shouldn't have to take that shit.
- Edgardo: Hey, guys. There are only two games left. Let's be cool and get through them. If you don't want to do it next year, we won't.
- Greg: I don't know if I can take two more games.
- Edgardo: Don't be a girlie-man, Greg. We don't have to play against the Neanderthal lawyer again. The last two games are with accounting and sales. The accountants won't be too physical. You guys can handle them.
- Greg: Maybe. But those salesmen are animals. They must smoke crack, or take something that makes them so aggressive.
- Edgardo: Enough for tonight. Let's relax and change the subject.
- Greg: Hey. Look at those two girls coming this way.
- Reggie: They're great looking chicks.
- Edgardo: Don't get your hopes up. They're probably N.Y.U. dykes.

Greg: You're crazy. They're beautiful.

Edgardo: That doesn't mean anything these days. They could be lipstick lezzies.

Greg: What's that?

Edgardo: That's when both girls are feminine.

Reggie: What are N.Y.U. dykes?

Edgardo: The school has a reputation because so many lesbians go there lately.

Reggie: How do you know all that?

Edgardo: If you take your head out of your Blackberry once in a while you'd know what was going on.... I'm going to talk to them. (Enter Jennifer and Nina.) Hey, girls. What's happening? (They ignore him and start to walk by. He leans over and stops them.) What's the matter? Are you too good to talk to us?

Jennifer: We're not interested.

Edgardo: We just want to talk. Don't you like men?

Nina: As a matter of fact, we don't. Now fuck off.

Edgardo: No need to cop an attitude. I was just being friendly.

Nina: Save it for your asshole buddies.

Edgardo: You got some mouth on you. Didn't your momma ever teach you any manners?

Nina: Not as far as pigs are concerned.

Edgardo: There's no need to be so insulting.

Jennifer: Then next time don't stop us, asshole.

Edgardo: You're beginning to piss me off.

- Reggie: Take it easy, Edgardo. Let them go.
- Nina: That's right, Edgardo. Listen to your sissy friend.
- Reggie: Why are you insulting me? I didn't say anything to you. I just tried to cool things.
- Nina: You're with him, aren't you? Pigs always hang together.
- Greg: (To Nina.) Don't you think you're over reacting? We're not looking for trouble. We just wanted to talk to a couple of good looking girls.
- Jennifer: Well we are a couple, but we don't like low-life male come-ons.
- Reggie: How are we supposed to know? It's not as if you're wearing a sign that says women only.
- Jennifer: Then you should keep your mouth where you keep your brains, right between your legs.
- Edgardo: It's a waste of time trying to be polite to them. Keep moving, bitches.
- Nina: Who the fuck do you think you're talking to?
- Edgardo: A couple of dumb dykes. The same way they talked to us.
- Jennifer: Forget it, Nina. It's not worth hassling with them. Let's go.
- Nina: And just take their shit?
- Edgardo: (To Nina) Listen to your wife.
- Nina: (To Jennifer) I should kick his ass. (Edgardo laughs)
- Reggie: (To Nina.) Your friend is right. Let's forget it.
- Nina: The dominant black man isn't so tough now.

- Greg: He's trying to apologize before things get out of hand.
- Nina: (Pointing to Edgardo.) Let him apologize.
- Edgardo: For what? Trying to talk to a girl who turned out to be a guy in drag?
- Nina: One more insult and I'll punch you in the mouth.
- Edgardo: Beat it, butch, before you get hurt.
- Jennifer: (She tries to lead Nina away.) Come on, Nina. We don't need this.
- Nina: The fuck we don't. (She throws a punch at Edgardo, who ducks, then mocks her.)
- Edgardo: Is that all you got, little boy? Try again.
- Jennifer: (She grabs Nina's arm, who shrugs her off.) Don't, Nina. Let's go. (Nina moves closer to Edgardo and swings again. This time he blocks the punch, spins her around and boots her in the ass.)
- Edgardo: Now take off. Next time I won't be such a gentleman. (Jennifer tries to pull her away, but Nina yanks free and lunges toward Edgardo. She picks up a butter knife from the table and tries to stab him. He moves aside and she hits Reggie, who yells loudly.)
- Reggie: Ow! My arm! She stabbed me. Yow. That hurts.
- Jennifer: Let's get out of here! (The girls run off. Reggie is moaning and holding his arm.)
- Edgardo: Should I chase them?
- Greg: What for? To make a citizen's arrest for assault? Let's help Reggie. (Edgardo and Greg inspect the injury.)

- Edgardo: It didn't even break the skin. She was right to call you a sissy.
- Reggie: Well it hurts. And I didn't even do anything. It's all your fault.
- Edgardo: All I did was say hello How was I to know they'd be vicious, fighting dykes?
- Greg: Maybe if you didn't call them offensive names nothing would have happened.
- Edgardo: That nasty little bitch started it.
- Reggie: And I got hurt.... I don't think I have to go to the emergency room, but I'll probably miss the next game.
- Edgardo: Don't use this as an excuse. You'll be alright by then.
- Reggie: Maybe. But promise me no more confrontations when we go out. This could have become a nightmare.
- Greg: Yeah. What if she really cut Reggie?
- Edgardo: I get it. Don't worry. I'll be cool.
- Reggie: I hope so. We were lucky today. Another time things could spin out of control and someone might get killed. It's happening all over these days.
- Greg: Yeah. People are getting shot for just looking at someone. And it's not as if they're giving them the evil eye, or something. It's just sick violence.
- Edgardo: Alright. I get the message. That's enough. Let's call it a day. (Exit.)



BOOK REVIEWS

1

Review of Purabi Bhattacharya's Poetry Collection, *Sand Column*

U. ATREYA SARMA

Sand Column | Collection of Poetry | Purabi Bhattacharya |
Writers Workshop, Kolkata, 2019 | ISBN 978-93-5045-191-5 |
pp.92 | Rs. 300

Purabi Bhattacharya is an accomplished writer of prose and poetry originally hailing from Shillong but settled in Gujarat owing to her and her husband's profession. The book under review *Sand Column* is her second collection of poetry, the first one being *Call Me* – also published by Writers Workshop (2015).

With an intense sense of topophilia, Purabi quavers about her impressions of Meghalaya welling up from the memories of her impressionable age and most of them have a threnodic tone. It is where she was born and brought up. Her poems are couched in rich and enviable diction; and the thematic treatment and manner of expression is certainly not "plain" and direct though she claims that her genetics is rooted in the plains. Her reflections are existential, surreal and subliminal in their tonality; hence the reader should not be in a hurry and try to skim the poems. If he shouldn't miss the cathartic pleasure the poems offer, he should set himself in a serene mood to read, pause, re-read and ponder to get at

the logic of the concatenation of the poet's thoughts and reflections and the heart of the poems. This being the characteristic of Purabi's poems, it will be worthwhile to listen to what she herself says about her poems, as under –

This that I bring to you is a lump, worded.

The collection is broadly divided into two sections. The former, "Tears, Tissues," talks about Monday mundanity and goes on gathering the process of mainstreamization, I have been running away from, taking over me. The latter, "Tethering Memories," pieces together a pain of being away from an "imaginary homeland" and touches upon the not-so-cordial relations between the imagined Them and perceived Us. I love and continue to live a *Dkhar*, which in Khasi means people from the plains, and has now turned into a pejorative for non-tribals or migrants, especially Bengalis. Non-tribals of our generation born and brought up in Shillong could never escape the sticker; the jibe sticks on.

I hope the lump melts... someday.

(Preface)

A progeny of her forefathers who had long ago migrated from the plains of Bengal to Meghalaya, Purabi born and brought up in the hilly terrain of Shillong and then settled down in the far western part of the country in the Aravalli hills - loses herself into a meditation of memories, before trying to string them up together –

From the tiding Poshina Hills | counting | each weighting
steps | with trunkload of | schooldays shenanigans | to those
whiles | yielding | to lover's arms, | measuring moments |
metamorphose, | memoirs | warily stay strewn like pebbles,
small big | uncollected | amongst cactuses and goose grasses |
all over the dunes.

("Those whiles" – p 14)

[Poshina Hills is a town in the Sabarkantha district of Gujarat.]

Wistfulness and nostalgia seeping out of a web of indelible memories gnaw at you all the while, some of them “moistened” (35), some “unripened” (41), and some painful and yet to heal – as in the poem “Scheme” where “the lump in the throat” (54) is too big to swallow and too hard to melt which is why it is likened to “the temple elephant.”

Having “always romanced silence” that is “Cordial” and “Agreeable” and conjuring up the memories of “a soft meadow with shades of green smiling, untethered,” and not a “cimmerian” situation where one would like to “think of running out of the bitumen sprawl,” the poet poignantly recalls her father whom she lost to “unspoken times” and who she had little time to speak to. In her “totemic Nongrim rain” with tears flowing out of her, she chokingly says: “I gave him away to the Brahmaputra breeze” (“Maybe” – p 30).

[Nongrim: A locality in Shillong]. The poet has taken care to explain the native terms specific to the Meghalayan background and culture by way of footnotes.

And the above strain trickles into her dream one night, in an amorphous mix which if she doesn’t tether immediately, could go helter-skelter and vanish out of her mind. So she takes care to capture and describe it, well in time –

I was in a hurry to tie all of this with a sailor rope | and... | I do
not remember if I could. | My eyelids were wet with tears, my
father | was gone. | My mother in white waits for her term to
end | and I, to speak to Father for the last ever time.

(“Last night” – 56)

Life is full of uncertainties with many a mysterious turn and twist lurking around, irrespective of day or night or season. It’s summer and the sun is bright, yet its rays reek of blight, filling the air with necromantic signs. See how the poet captures it –

There was space between the hospital beds | and | there was
waiting | for men to become | bodies; | filed, | and fed to
woodpiles.

(“Summersun” – 32)

Don’t be carried away by an impression that the title of the above poem is the two-word ‘Summer sun.’ She has neologised the title by unusually compounding them. There are a few more neologisms of this type – “Dayclose” (16), “desertcomb” (24) and “Crackdown” (67). Similarly, the compound-word ‘trunkload’ appears in the poem “Those whites” (14).

The poem “Dayclose” (16) is dedicated to Pratishta Pandya; and there are two more poems like that dedicated by the poet to her near and dear ones – “A third eye” to Julie (42), and “another dusk” to Barbie (52). In the poem “From the northwest” (47) the poet describes the current weather and blames it for the seemingly irreconcilable differences between the partners –

I volatile, you vulnerable | you burn, I am frozen, neither |
something is in flames, even if | in pyre it is not yet in ashes.

When it comes to the beauties of nature, though not in her long left homeland, but far elsewhere, the poet is at her fanciful and photographic best, as under –

When it steered its way in, | the trees became laburnum, the
sky sea | Krishna flute was no longer an offed piece of wood |
almost everything | became bougainvillea and gulmohar burst
| for days on. An orchard ripened stealthily, steadily, | by the
bank of Narmada Canal.

(“Unlike a fairy tale” – 48)

And the same poem is dotted with alliterative, assonant and consonant beauties like “to settle down on the sericeous sands,” “Juggernaut always gifts himself,” and “round coral ammo drowns” (49) as in some other poems.

All of us have our own perceptions, preferences and priorities in life, sometime boasting and gloating and sometimes self-flagellating. Despite all of it, we tend to be philosophical at one moment or the other. And Purabi captures one such moment, and enigmatically so –

One fine night | it lets you see yourself in the dark. And shows
| how small you are in the scheme of all | that is and not.

(“Scheme” – 55)

Most of us tend to despise the old people and even call them “selfish” for being “in a spittoon full of memories, quarrels, resentments and anger” and for forgetting “the art of giving” but we should remember, the poet warns, that we too would be no different when our turn comes (“Pain, unsalted” – 60).

The nostalgia for a place you had to leave long ago coupled with your roots shifting, willy-nilly, to some other geo-cultural place far away forever, when internalised in you takes you to a heightened intensity of raw hurt, as is felt and observed by the poet, in the poem “amongst your own” (71) –

It hurts. It hurts to love a place so much | and become a
visitant | amongst your own.

Once you read through the poems in the collection, you will certainly feel that the chastening and purgatory purpose of recalling and describing painful memories stands fulfilled.

And let’s end on a positive and cheerful note, by joining the poet in a garden of glee free of worries and woes –

I was never alone, never until now. | You gave me enough,
enough to spoil me this life. | And here I am a pet. Dancing
wild in my thoughts from branch to blossoms | Ferns to
thistles, orchids to ivy.

(“In your garden” – 76)

2

Review of Ishika Bansal's poetry collection, *My Diary and Other Poems*

CHANDRA SHEKHAR DUBEY

**My Diary and Other Poems | Collection of Poetry | Ishika Bansal |
Diamond Pocket Books, New Delhi, 2019 | pp 85 | Rs. 150**

"My Diaries and Other Poems" by Ishika Bansal, a teen aged budding poet, is a remarkable book of verse which opens up many trajectories, engaging the readers with her vast and varied lived experiences at this tender age. On first reading this book of verse consisting of forty seven poems read like a school going child's diary entries and notes, but when you dive deeper into it, it takes you to a world of dream, fantasy, mundane reality, interpersonal relationship, love and living. Ishika plays with words echoing the internal rhythm with undercurrents of palpable feelings, varied tones and textures of emotion and ideas with candidness and maturity of a philosopher in her. Her all poems in this volume has buoyancy and rhythm, lightness and brilliance wrapped in scintillating images and verbal explosions. In her poems there is meeting of a subjective and objective world, internal and external reality. In Author's Note in this volume, Ishika confesses that "...it carries a sharp reflection of my personality". Her images are grounded in reality, reflection and mundane experiences which are logical and discursive. At the personal level, her poems, as the title suggests, expresses a person's quest for meaning in life, as one moves from naïve experiences of childhood to the crude and

complicated experiences of adolescence. Ishika's journey in Blake's term, is from innocence to experience. Her simplicity is engaging and appealing to the readers as it operates on multiple levels from thematic lucidity to language and form. She chooses a variety of themes candidly taken from her experiences which suit her form. It becomes imperative to analyse her poems in the book under review for their inherent meaning and message.

Of poet Sidney says: "He cometh to you, with words, either accompanied with or prepared for the well inchaunting skill of Musicke". Ishika's tryst with words begin with her two poems in this volume titled "Words 1" and "Words 2". These two poems celebrate the power of words in shaping human relationship and sustaining sweetness and light in life. To her words are healing, rejuvenating and perennial source of joy, if used prudently. "Words used in a good manner are like gold/ But they are like a flowing river / Which never comes into hold" (p38). These words set the tone of the rest of the poems in this book of verse with remarkable simplicity and poignancy. Her poems flow like a river of words uninhibited suspended with granules of her unhindered thoughts and feelings. "My Diary" provides an insight into recording her "secrets, lies and truth." which further strengthens her words "And all your drafted sheets /Track my every position and action" (p39) with a mechanism of check and balance. To her diary is better than 'teddies and toys' which further speak of her teenage maturity. Her honesty of purpose and dexterity in "Speak Out" has been reflected in realistic depiction of her school class in "My Hustling Class" very candidly. She chooses themes for her poem not planned with craft and acumen but randomly jumping from one to another spontaneously and naturally befitting to her age. U Atreya Sarma has rightly put her

sportive zeal in these words in the blurb of her book “True to her age, she is playful, bouncy, impish; fresh in her reflections and outlook. She is also observant and resonant with a positive attitude, well beyond the maturity levels of her age”. Undoubtedly, she is always searching, seeking – looking for a place to call her forte for the people who will understand and appreciate her poetry. “Childhood” is a poem which begins with a statement and grows with words of wisdom and caution. It is amusing, appealing not because it has brilliance of craftsmanship or very powerful ideas but because of its grains of truth and simplicity of expression. Moreover, it is a poem on childhood by a child for an adult to handle it carefully so that it doesn’t get spoiled or sullied. To quote her “Childhood is filled with innocence and naïve looks/ Children are strands of imagination / Are to be embellished/ By keeping them away/ From all hooks and crooks.” (p 41). She candidly locates the promises, radiance and problems of childhood in this poem breathing into it music of life. What strikes me of her poetry, is her young age (She is barely thirteen years old), her moral awareness, self-knowledge and her mature experience. She talks to you, engages you with her captivating thoughts and moves on with her poems to the journey called life. She is a teen age poet acutely conscious of her position with all contradictory demands on it by the family, society and her companions. Her poems invoke a new sensibility with highly graded locales, images and allusions to which she is so familiar. Needless to say, autobiography is writ large on this poem. Her conventions, convictions and philosophical moorings drawn from an adult world melt into her innocence. It is this duality which gives her poems a nostalgic undertone in many cases, especially when ideal period of childhood is invoked. “Sleep Addict, Me”, “Trust Your Instincts”, “An Apology for My Handwriting”, “One

Grade Up-My New Classroom”, “Zero Period” and “A Birthday Present for My Friends” are sequel to each other celebrating the reoccurring motif of locate i.e. is school, and the world enshrined in this locale. There is a note of ingenuity, a streak of imagination resonant with sights, sounds and sense of the space in all these poems. The poet uses free verse, alliteration with rhythms of spoken words to create a poem which needs to be read aloud for its full impact.

“Creation’, “Embellish Your Future”, “My Worthy Hand”, “Loneliness”, “A Great Phase in Life” and “Our Work Lasts Forever” present slices of life reflecting her wisdom and maturity of thought. These poems provide an insight into reflective mood of the poet with enduring expressions of fear and anxieties about serious issues of life. The most important thing to remember about these poems, however, is that their most important characteristics lie not in their content or their adherents, but their spirit and positive outlook. “Creation’ ‘is a poem that celebrates the joys and pangs of creation, the joy of “winning the whole world’, soulful satiety of fulfilment “My soul feels alive, a new creation being done,” (p 43). There is poise, grandeur and inherent simplicity in the words of these poems. These poems locate the various types of entrapment which an individual confronts, and express the desire for escape and freedom. “Mom’ ‘is a poem that celebrates the angelic, self-sacrificing role of mother. The description of routine works of her mother lovingly etched in a portrait points to her cultural roots. The poignant images of these poems echo her desire to explore the unexplored coupled with innocence of childhood. Ishika’s vision to make this world a better place to live in has been reflected in these words “With the help of yours/ I’ll beautify this world/ And some ways I’ll mend/ I want every goal of mine set by myself/

Till I have these worthy hands (p63). Ishika breaks from theoretical and romantic conventions of poetry to uncanny situations and existential paradigms in which her own existence is caught. The meaning and message of these poems have been artistically woven into her strings of words and images.

While I recommend this book of verse to readers of all age. I would definitely recommend it to teenagers mainly because it will resonate better with them. I love that I could see into her mind set and read exactly what she was feeling when she thought out situations. Her thoughts flow well and move along the book very quickly, working on Coleridge's theory of 'suspension of disbelief.' Her emotions and images are so genuine, and they are spot-on for a thirteen year old girl in her situation. Ishika has many insights on life, on theme ranging from mundane chores to faith and matters of heart. She amuses, muses, leaving the readers in her own microcosmic universe of lived experiences with hope for future.

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