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GJLL

**Phenomenal
Literature**

A Global Journal devoted to

Language and Literature

A Peer-Reviewed Print Journal

Volume-6, Issue-1 | July – Sep 2021

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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PHENOMENAL LITERATURE

*A Global Journal Devoted to
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POETRY

1

The Luminary

ALESSIO ZANELLI

Prostrate, at the foot of the summit.
A crag over the valley on one side,
an outjutting rock face on the other.
Stuck on a ledge, at nightfall,
left with no option but to watch
the slow ascension of Venus
above the sharp horizon,
against orange and scarlet,
then crimson and purple,
up to full splendor over deep blue.
And to recollect the path traveled,
like that, as though in play,
until short of breath.
Knowing that, if destined for heights,
it would have been impossible
to climb beyond that observation point.
Alone.
The expanse, no longer regainable,
dark and silent below, on the clear side.
And the third brightest celestial body,
shining in comforting desperation,
to dispense one final glimpse
before the light goes out.
Infinity, reachless on high, on the blind side.



2

The World Would Be Free

ANDREW SCOTT

We are walking with shackles
on our exposed dreams of this world.
There can be a time when we can be free.

There will be a time
when we come out our caves
just to hold each other freely
regardless of looking eyes.

When we come to an understanding
that with all our differences
we are the same as human beings.
All we have to do is listen and embrace.

When a young man can play
in a park with whoever they wish.
When a little lady can keep
her faith and innocence
without adult corruption.

When no one dies
due to race or religion
or living in fear
of who we are,
then the world will be would be free.



3

Showers

AVDHESH JHA

With the feelings blocked and maturity waived for the walls
of aphorism,
Expression of love abhorred and differences adored for the
walls of cynicism;
Amidst the mountainous walls of unhealthy and grave
competitions
There always exists the enriched simplicity with showers of
compassion.

With aggression allowed and thick hollow walls of ego
touching the sky
The shattered and deterred courage losing its strength and
leaning to die;
Amidst the floods of priorities and the highest walls of
schedules and indemnity
There exists the mighty softness with showers of wit, the only
hope of humanity!

Whatever be the strength of the walls, the showers are
efficacious,
The only worthy shower of health, happiness and harmony;
the Xian nu;
When the hopes remain only at the mercy of time and
internet walls
The fairy with showers of blessings remains the only the hope
of one and all.

For the life, as a life; for the idea as an idea; the Xian nu full of
care and love

She proves her worth and turns a wall but the wall of love;
the strength of life;

To choose between best and worst, the power to choose
between life and death

The only one, who cares one and all, to help them add to the
worth of life.



4

Crater

BISHNUPADA RAY

there is not much in the back
yet there seems to be much
like memory baked in the sun
glazed tiles of the brain
double charged
sharing reflections face to face
with closed eyes

between them
only a distance of tears
but a gulf of separation
is measured with a zero

the inside of the zero
is a crater
where brain clouds meet
with electric touch
discharging fumes of dreams
and nightmares
from their place of isolation.



5

Frogs and Snails / Sugar and Spice

DEBRA AMIRAUT CAMELIN

Each generation
thinks it can do better than the previous one.
As a feminist in her sixties
I believe my crony contemporaries haven't fared well
when it comes to achieving real gender equality.

In school,
I learned "gender" is a social construct,
a belief that exists because humans agree it exists.
Working with health care data,
I learned "sex" is the easier variable to group:
ticking boxes of male, female or other –
the 3rd box measuring those with intersex genitalia.
From my queer daughter,
I learned "other" are the outliers – some might say outcasts –
that are almost always marginalized.

Today,
the *other* is broadening its scope.
Daring to tick this box, they demand to be seen.
Those sexual and gender minorities classified
as hard-to-reach populations are unmasking prejudice
(that hypocritical sacred morality)
and exposing sexual phobias that once compelled them
to be silent.
New adjectives are being birthed –

in the face of having a uterus or testis:
agender, cisgender, gender-fluid, non-binary,
trans, two-spirit, unisex, and so many more.

Gender identities crying out:

I belong here! I belong here!

My daughter's partner is trans male
and a reissued birth certificate confirms his gender.

A reality impossible when I was a young girl.
Leonard Cohen once wrote: "a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in."

Let's hope today's generation can widen the crack,
bringing faces out from the shadows.



6

Hopes

DHRUV SOMAYAJULA

Blink, and you miss. Don't, and you'll still
miss my willpower, it's that fickle.
Every goal, plan, thought, and dream,
doomed to fail like the hammer and sickle.

I marshal my thoughts. I plan my day.
Do I bite off more than I can chew?
I beseech myself to face my battles,
I pray that this isn't another Waterloo.

I actively move for every distraction,
Only staying passive for the task at hand.
I am impossible, incorrigible, a dog's tail,
I need only ask, and I give in to my demand.

I do not expect too much from myself,
only that I'll be true to my word,
My word gets cheaper with every promise,
And soon my hopes will never be heard.



7

Winter Pears

DOUG TANOURY

On a wooden swing hanging
From the highest bough
Of his backyard pear tree
We learned to fly at the
Speed of dreams on summer
Afternoons, leaning back
And gripping rusted
Chains and looking far up
Into thick foliage that hid
The dark limbs that held us.

From the tall tree that grew
Small winter pears
I'd fly with him across the
Summers and briefly
Forget for a moment
My parent's marriage,
The family finances,
My sister's sickness.
In quick motion sweeping us
Upward, we learned to fly.

Before I knew of fallen fruit
Or how spring winds
Waste pear blossoms,
I knew him. He flew

Unfettered and without
Cares where dreams
Grew slow like winter pears
On the highest branches
To ripen and fall only
In late summer.

Today, under a pear tree
Drooping with fruit
I dreamt him here.



8

Our Magic Carpet

E. MARTIN PEDERSEN

An old Indian blanket is good enough
for us to lie back and fly
all that matters
a square cut from a newspaper
the births and deaths page
a two-for-one movie ticket
or a tiny coupon
to the pixie sparkle
in her money eyes

let's choose that square space
take that lovely ride
even after Mom died.



9

Remembrances and Waiting

JAMES PIATT

Remember the tall log pole pine trees beside our rented cabins in the forest, the river of rapids and blueness flowing down the road where we pitched our chairs under trees, on rocks near the water's edge, and watched our kids swimming in the cold pool formed by the river? Remember the warmth of the sun as we relaxed by the river, basking in the sun, talking of simple things, and reading books? Remember the balmy nights as we sat under the bashful stars, the eerie sounds of night birds, our laughter and political discussions, and the huge orange moon peeking at us from between the pine trees? Those idle hours of joy are but fading memories now, now that we are old, and spend our hours in the summertime on our porch, drinking coffee and munching on your homemade cookies: And in our library during the winter nights watching our mysteries on TV, and nodding off in our chairs. Where did the time go as we went on vacations to forests, swam in rivers and deep blue pools, rambled along old deer trails, raised our children, built our house, created herb and vegetable gardens, and planted fruit trees? Time has vanished too quickly, age has taking over, and now this winter, as the pouring rain batters our old house, we find we are just shadows of our former selves now, just remembering memories... and waiting.



10

Oh Anxious People

JAMES PIATT

Madly pursuing Hedonistic delights of the world, do, not fail
to see the concluding hours of the vanishing magenta sun, as

it counts down to the time that ends your journey:

Those, whose pursuit is only for golden objects, and hunger
only for visions of Hedonistic tomorrows, fail to appreciate
today's heavenly gift of gentle moments; and while you
crave for earthly riches, do not fail to search for nature's

beauty:

You travel the lonely path from the balmy breeze into the icy
gale far too often; and by disregarding the sweet perfume of
serenity, you excavate your burial chambers while you are
yet a youth. Future wealth for which you zealously strive,
will turn to grey ashes while your soul is still in its childhood:

Forget visions of tomorrow, relish the significance of each
moment today as you trek along life's path, look into the
eyes of God, before time plunges you into the stone grey
horizon, and you are buried in a cement tomb.



11

For the Animals

JAMES MULHERN

Lions loll in the streets of Johannesburg,
a sleuth of bears rise on hind legs in Yosemite,
wild boars advance through the Israeli city of Haifa,
crocodiles surf waves in La Ventanilla, Mexico,
penguins parade the streets of Cape Town,
mountain goats march past shops in Wales,
scurries of squirrels spring freely in a Santa Monica park,
flocks of birds cry out, and a chorus begins.

“Free at last, free at last,”
we say from behind our masks,
inspired by their bliss,
joyful in their fortitude,
sad it has taken this long
for us to understand so much.



12

Losing a Sense of Balance

JAMES RAGAN

It comes with the weather,
wet grass on the ball of my foot,
limping, kicking off the sun
to keep my flesh smooth, free

of roots, of growing
too much to bear.

It comes with cutting hair,
the weight of my forehead
pulling the ears, out-
growing the rest of me

with brains, with thinking
stones breathe, live forever.

And sometimes with losing a woman,
a bone of me,
dying,
gone.



13

The Honest Truth

JEFFREY ZABLE

I've tried very hard to feel love for all humanity,
but because some people speak and act completely
antithetical
to what feels right to me, I must say that some do not
make me feel love and acceptance for them at all.

In fact sometimes I feel rage, disgust, and a sense
that no matter how hard I try I'll never be able to love them,
nor will I ever want to have any form of contact,
whether it be in person, on the phone,
or through some form of telepathy.

Now, I'm aware that many would find this attitude
not to be humanitarian, but I feel that at least it shows I'm
honest
and not trying to hide behind the veneer of a smile
like a lot of people do, pretending that they're tolerant of
everyone –
though they'd probably flay certain people alive
if they could get away it...



14
Remembering George Hitchcock
(U.C. Santa Cruz 1973)

JEFFREY ZABLE

He'd walk into the classroom carrying a bag
and place whatever was inside in the middle of the table.

It was always some unique object like a feathered hat,
a fetish from an African tribe, a stuffed owl, or an old ship
inside a bottle.

We'd sit there and write whatever came into our heads
until he'd tell us to stop. Then each of us would read
what we'd written and he'd comment as to whether anything
might work into a poem.

He would then read us poems by poets both living and dead
who he knew personally like Weldon Kees, W.S. Merwin,
Kenneth Rexroth, and many others who I no longer recall.

I do remember feeling pretty much in awe of George,
as he always had that presence that was larger than life...



15

Eyebrows

JOHN GREY

The old moneyed family's survival
is all in the way they raise their eyebrows.
Forget the fortune generated
by long shuttered mills.
Try asking them a question.
Or offering an opinion.
Those clumps of hair head northward
even as the eyes stay put.

The skill has been handed down to the children.
Even less subtle than their elders,
their faces seem to expand six inches
to accommodate the sudden separation of body parts.

There's no humility in the genes, young or old,
though there's nobody in the current generations
whose sweat, whose risk-taking, actually earned a dime.
They cling to their name like it's a lifebelt in the ocean.
Or they sink and eyebrows are the last thing showing.



16

Terminal Song for Cautious Martyrs

JOHN SWEET

dirty snow and dead lawns in these
final days of someone's life and
does it matter whose?

not really

know that you're loved and
know that you're doomed

move in the spaces
between houses

between cities

and tell me your secrets
but not that you love me

not that you need me

we are too far out to sea for
so much useless weight



17

Knives, Deeper

JOHN SWEET

in the act of failure,
salvation

in the hands, in the heart, in this
mouth filled with sharpened teeth

words,
but not my own

a warmer violence

sunlight or a bleeding fist

a thought,
but turned outward,
twisted, stretched into
some new shape

the highway maybe, where it
arcs out around the city

the city as it falls into ruin

a cancer? a virus?

slow decay, in any event, with the
houses all collapsing in on
themselves, the cellars filled
with bones, old yearbooks, baby shoes

the past is the enemy, of course,
because everyone dies

love?

a theory, maybe,
but not a solution,
and then what?



18

What is Chartres?

JOSEPH HART

What is Chartres? Is it a cathedral
Or the brief expression of a concept?
An old, abandon building is condemned.
On one crumbling wall I'll draw my face,
The dearest image and the oldest source,
A perfect likeness of mortality.



19

A Cat's Tail

JOSEPH HART

Tread upon a cat's tail.
He will yelp and run away,
Then cower and look sad as if
He thinks he isn't loved.

Pet him for a moment. He will
Jump into your arms,
Seeming to be happy to
Believe he's loved again.



20

Dwindling Knight**MICHAEL KESHIGIAN**

Life loomed large in childhood,
 an acre, easily a mile,
 the apple tree,
a spectacle of gigantic dimensions,
germinating fruit the size of melons
 amid grass and wildflowers
 higher than a house
and alive with as much mystery
 as the imagination allowed,
infested with long legged creatures
 and flying predators,
confronted by a brave soldier,
 possessing stout heartiness,
armed with broken branch sword,
trash lid shield and brown bagged helmet gear
 precisely slit for covert surveillance
against an enemy constantly plotting
to overthrow the king, to rule the kingdom,
 were it not for the worthy defender
daily engaging danger to insure security
 and safe passage for those nesting
 within the domain,
though the threat diminished with passing years
 as did the proportions
 to a mediocre backyard,
displaying a frail fruit tree

in grass no taller than ankle height
with no visible reminders of intense conflicts.

The enemy had disappeared,
deployed, no doubt, to younger battlefields,
accompanied by the imagination
now desperately clinging to creative output
to preserve a degree of youthful enthusiasm
for an aging warrior.



21

The Projector

MICHAEL KESHIGIAN

Upon the old film projector
a few revolutions remain,
moaning as it casts
paltry images of black and white
upon the portable screen,
enabling us to visit a bygone era.
Rapt, we stare at the curdled frames
of lost memories, departed parents
and us, their offspring,
squinting at our younger selves,
we frolic under the glow
of ancient lights,
carefree lunges beneath
the cold water sprinkler
that emanated from rusty faucets
attached to a three-decker abode,
the summers unfaltering,
we gathered, smaller, more flexible,
clowning, our parents, so young,
no wrinkles, more hair,
all of us summoned
for a group pose
by the off-screen director.
How silently time runs its course,
with strange, peculiar hints
if the changes are noted.

We yearn to climb back,
recapture innocence and joyfulness
the calm, silver light exudes.
Then it ends, the old reel flapping,
the brief nostalgic rekindling
has also run its course.



22

Leaves in December

MICHAEL LEE JOHNSON

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

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

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



23

Sweet Love

PRAMOD RASTOGI

Love baffles with its luster.
It has belied many hopes,
Has staked hearts aplenty
To its glowing multicolored warmth.
Yet, scant are its harvests after.

Is love not a spin of illusion?
Sudden qualms blossom with no end,
But the heart once swarmed
Gets flooded with its psalms.
Ornate are the alleys of love.

A commodity rare to own is love.
It is a fortune that eyes the windfalls,
To get its glass full is a hard toil
As it seeps through false starts
With its dead-end never far off.

Love lives in its scores of hues,
Glass half-full or half-empty.
Both are bounties compelling
Breathing in the dilemma of love
As it mixes tears with joy.



24

Death of love

PRAMOD RASTOGI

In fragments, I can see my plea
As if fallen under a sharp knife,
No meaning for me has your word,
You were my only love in life,
Yet I was the only true flirt
Whom you ever loved in your life.

Dreams of love knitted with dissents
Need two to row a boat gone weary
In tandem to face the torments
And the sun on the open sea.
Not far is the isle of laments.
Nor far is the storm heavenly.

The love I offered you was endless
The dreams you sold me were ruinous,
I must purge your love with verses.
A love and a dream that were porous,
But with the dream now in bruises,
I leave its pain to my canvas.



25

Desperate

ROGER G. SINGER

the lost
know how to
be found

they are
the dust of
failures and
the chance
for success

they court the
sun
worship the
moon
and question the
shadow following
behind

they hum an
unfamiliar song
remembering parts
and the parts
offered up
for another
try
at something,
anything



26

Washing It Out

ROGER G. SINGER

sharp lizard eyes
within me
search my
landfill of
memory fragments
and unused winds
as I walk
off the moonlight
or a summer,
leaving,
taking the keys
to the next season
as my legs
like angry scissors
cut the dark
under tall pines
and star faces
on my way
to a familiar
place



27

Atmosphere Song

ROGER G. SINGER

moon eyes
under a star blanket
stretching with desire
to gaze aloft
into dark horizons
beyond the
nightly embrace
of grand beckoning's
under a stirring universe,
a platform of time
without time knowledge,
as you offer up
the sins of day



28

What Have I Become?

SOHAM BHATTACHARYA

It's hard to define what's left inside.
The tears shed off the skin, my sorrows won't lean.
I've missed myself for the very first time.
I killed a soulless man last night.
Don't overwhelm me, I can't even speak.
What have I become? It's not more than a brick.

My eyes don't lie,
The air is poison, you can't breathe it in.
Upsides down, ultimate mess to try,
Dealing with a constant feeling to find.
I don't have the will to tear the scars.
Lining in with hell, the nights are too dark.
Take one more shot on me, I'd rather be dead.
These unseen memories won't get out of the head.

I've missed myself for the very first time.
I killed a soulless man last night.
Don't overwhelm me, I can't even speak.
What have I become? It's not more than a brick.
I've lost my dignity to you,
I'm scared to realize.
My days are few,
Come, wash me with the pain, I've no backbone to fight!

Don't tell, you know me,
Don't say, you owe me.
This is something you shouldn't believe,
That it's over.
And it's over!



29

Cosmic Dance

SUSAN P. BLEVINS

There is no doubt. It's been proved.
We all are one. We share the molecules
of saints and sinners alike each time we
breathe in and out, Jesus and Gandhi,
Hitler and Stalin. They are us and
we are them. No escape.

And we come together now with
Science as our heavenly father,
Spirit as our divine mother,
and their troublesome offspring,
the Universe, expanding and flourishing
just like any other growing thing in nature.



30

Cosmic Thoughts

SUSAN P. BLEVINS

I know that there's another world beyond the dark mantel of
night sky,
I know because I peer through the moth-holes in the black
velvet fabric
which allow light to stream in from other worlds. We call
them stars.

I study the cracks in the night sky, that allow the music of the
spheres to
stream down upon me to fill my head with heavenly tones,
the original
sounds of our creation, the universe both instrument and
music.

They allow us a glimpse of where we go when we die, a
return to whence
we came into this world as new borns, with wisps of heaven
still clinging
to our innocent forms, composed of the same elements as the
stars.

Call me crazy, but I have the insane desire to swallow the
night. The next
clear, star-filled night we have, I'm going outside, opening
my mouth, and
swallowing the entire firmament. Ultimate oneness with
creation.



SHORT STORY

1

My Three Cities

ALBERT RUSSO

I miss Italy; I miss strangers who speak to you, even when they are nosy. Ok, sometimes they get on my nerves. Is it better to be around these Parisians to whom you are invisible and who turn to you only when they have something unpleasant to say or to mock the way you dress? Compared to Rome or Naples, Milan is supposed to be a cold city. Compared to Paris, it's the sunny Mediterranean. In reality, the sun is often veiled by pollution, and the climate is perhaps the worst in Europe, Venice, *la Serenissima*, coming close, with its damp winters and its suffocating summers. Ah, *la bella Italia!* But how about *France, mère des Armes, des Arts et des Lois!* (France, Mother of Arms, of Arts and of Laws), which is the title of a beautiful patriotic poem by Joachim Du Bellay, who lived in the 16th century. Isn't France also known as the Catholic church's eldest daughter? Didn't Albert Méras, who passed away in the first half of last century, call his country *La France éternelle*? President Macron recently canceled the latter phrase, to avoid offending I don't remember who, for political reasons. Oh là là, all this could make me feel humble. Yet, it doesn't, for I'm just as proud to be Italian and American. Yes, I now have three passports. Does it make me a freer person? I think not, but they come in handy, especially when I travel to

'sensitive' countries that are hostile to either of the three countries I am a citizen of.

I shall now do an exercise using a balance sheet. Let's face it, statistics about cities' or nations' quality of life, though helpful, will never satisfy me in assessing what I deem important. A town may be clean and secure, yet cold and dull. Another can be messy but 'cooler' and more exciting intellectually. So, I have devised my own chart. These are only my opinions: no yardsticks or even an implication that they should be followed. The three cities I shall confront are, naturally, those I have lived in and know best: Milan, Paris, and New York. Let's first off discard the notion that Paris is not France, New York is not America, and Milan is not Italy, meaning that these cities do not represent the countries they are located in. In the sense that life in the provinces is much quieter and maybe more *petit-bourgeois*, it is true. But New York could have never existed in any other country than in the USA, and so it goes for Paris with France and Milan with Italy.

I shall tackle each one of these cities with their oft-repeated clichés.

The Milanese are much colder than the Romans. They live to work and have no time for *la dolce vita*. They look down on those they call, patronizingly, lazy and idle *meridionali* (southerners), while they – the industrious Milanese – bear the brunt of paying the country's heavier taxes. Milan's climate is awful, and it reflects on the character of its residents, who are closed, severe, and humorless. All that counts is their jobs and their careers. And, on top of it, they are snobbish.

New Yorkers: They run, run, run, for Time is money. Wall Street is the world's economic barometer. And that mass

of skyscrapers that make you dizzy and feel like an ant! If you make it in New York, you are the most desirable person. But at what price? You have been blinded by the lights of Broadway, broken up with your spouse, who has then left the city with the children. In spite of this, you throw yourself headfirst into your brilliant career, with the urge of expanding, becoming even bigger, more prosperous, buying a property in Florida and elsewhere, where you wish to spend your vacations. When would that be? And in any case, wherever you go, you will carry your computer, tablet, and cell phone with you, to follow, at all times, to make sure your business runs smoothly. You will even take your phone to the beach. You are unstoppable.

Parisians: they are the rudest and least helpful people of any civilized city. If you don't speak French, tough luck, you will get nowhere, and don't expect to be guided. If at all, you will be directed in the wrong direction. The way the Parisians weigh you up, with their scornful looks, can give you an inferiority complex, for not only do they know better than anyone else, but they are the brightest people in the world. Even Einstein, who tried to ask his way in his poor French, was rebuked like a bum while in Paris to be honored. The most outstanding scientist that ever was had an unkempt appearance And, *oh sacirlège!* in Paris, *l'habit fait le moine* (the way you dress defines your personality), The so-called capital of gourmet food is also cursed with the worst greasy spoons of Europe. Then too, did you know that it rains more in Paris than in London?

Here is the flip side of Paris, as far as I am concerned: no matter the weather, that city has character. Except for the Pompidou Center and the ugly residential skyscrapers in the 13th and 15th arrondissements, or Tour Montparnasse, Paris seen from Montmartre, which itself is magical, offers the most

coherently beautiful perspective any large city can offer. Baron Hausmann should be thankful for transforming a messy place into the world's most loved capital. He was also criticized for having destroyed some quaint historical buildings. Eiffel was denigrated for erecting his iron tower, considered an eyesore by some of the more famous artists and writers of the time. Milan's Scala is THE opera house to which all the others measure themselves. But I believe that the most aesthetically lavish one, both outside and inside, is Opera Garnier, designed like an authentic palace, with its gorgeous and luminous ceiling painted by Chagall.

Paris is probably the city that welcomes the most significant number of foreign artists, playwrights, musicians, and performers anywhere. This is also where films from all the corners of the world are shown in their native tongue. This is NOT the case either in London or New York, at least not to the extent Paris is. Parks here are splendidly manicured and a pleasure to rest or stroll in. As for the museums, not mentioning the Louvre, their offer is incredibly rich and satisfies every taste. To the famed obnoxious Parisians is opposed the new generation of well-traveled young men and women who are as nice as the youth you find in Milan or New York, even though they form but a part of the population and can't, unfortunately, offset the former.

I love to hear the French language recited in classical plays or sung by the likes of Brel and Aznavour, and of course, the great Edith Piaf. But also the biting humor of the satirists, performing in the few café-concerts left. To wrap up that far from the complete list of things that endears me to the French capital, I shall mention some of the places that are only within a half-hour drive or less from it: Chatou and Giverny, where you are plunged in the era of the Impressionists, breathe the same air, sit at the same café

terrace; the Chevreuse Valley, the castle of Chantilly, the grandiose Chateau de Versailles, with its incomparable park and fountains designed by Le Nôtre, which I visit more often than the palace itself, for the famous Jardins à la française give way to the woods, where you can stroll for hours and even get lost, as I have several times. When I'm tired of the car, I take the bus or the métro to either the Bois de Boulogne or the Bois de Vincennes, the two forests that are within minutes from Paris-intra-muros (the city proper which includes the 20 arrondissements). I can also spend hours perusing old or rare books at the *bouquinistes* (book-stall owners) along the Seine. No, I never get bored in Paris. I don't know what boredom is, and I feel sorry for those who do. Imagination must be a factor here. But, let's face it, living in Paris, one would lack more than fantasy. I would call it aesthetic and intellectual blindness – enough rambling.

'My' three cities: the good, the bad, and the intolerable.

I deem New York to be the Center of our world, not because of its geographical position or because of Wall Street or its skyscrapers. Shanghai has a more significant number of such buildings, and the tallest ones are now in Dubai. By Center, I mean the concentration of peoples hailing from all the corners of our planet. London and even Paris contain the whole gamut of the world's nationalities. But what they don't have is the extent to which these people mix either socially or at work, in a single space, and I'm not thinking of the United Nations, representing around 200 nations. New York is the perfect example of the melting pot. Nowhere, at work or socially, have I met groups as mixed in the same room: a Russian, an African-American, a Puerto-Rican, a Chinese, or a white Californian, a Mexican, a Senegalese, and a Native American. When one is not used to this regimen, it can get

dizzying, for, at the end of the week, one can feel as though a whole month has been spent meeting people.

This doesn't happen in Paris. Social gatherings in the French capital tend to be almost exclusively of one group, except when one attends a Unesco conference. This is a cultural event, not a social one. I would say that London stands in between. I also think of Brussels, the capital of the European Union. People there meet at work and usually separate once they leave the Institution grounds.

I don't like the screeching noises of the New York subway or its ugly stations. Although Paris' métro may be the world's best for work and visits, it is antiquated. There are few escalators and even fewer elevators. The city's mayor wants Parisians to use public transportation as often as possible, but does she think of the millions of seniors who cannot climb the dozens of stairs of the métro and have to pay taxis when the buses are full? The same applies to the subway in the Big Apple.

Milan's metro is much more recent, cleaner, and more comfortable, but there are very few lines.

New York the ugly, New York the beautiful. There are some areas like the Bowery in Manhattan and in three of the other boroughs that can give one the creeps, and where it is better to avoid at night. But then there is Greenwich Village, Brooklyn Heights, Queens' lovely homes, and Staten Island, where one may believe he or she is in the country.

I was riding the C train going to Brooklyn where I had to see a friend, when opposite where I was seated, a young woman, seeing that an elderly man – he appeared to be an Orthodox Jew – asked her neighbor, a middle-aged black lady if she could move a little to let the man sit. The black woman started ranting against 'those fucking Yids who poisoned

everybody's lives and who only brought mayhem wherever they settled.' The young woman told her, trying to remain calm, that she should stop being so nasty. The black woman retorted with increased rage:

"I have no orders to receive from you; this is a free country. I am a Muslim and proud to be one. So just shut up, or else ..."

"No, madam, I won't shut up; you are in a public area, and you have no right to insult people."

The black woman slapped her neighbor and scratched her left cheek. That is when someone pulled the alarm, and the train stopped at the High Street station. Minutes later, the police came and ordered the three people involved to get out of the train and started interrogating them. The Orthodox Jew was trembling, white with fear, the young woman still shocked and dabbing a tissue against her bleeding cheek, recounted her version of the facts. As for the middle-aged black woman, she sat on the stairs, in front of them, and continued to cuss against "that race of cockroaches, Hitler should have wiped out completely."

I couldn't understand why the police stood there, letting her continue to hurl such abuse. Maybe they were waiting for some medical assistance, for that person was acting hysterically and needed to be forcibly silenced.

The doors of the train closed, and we left the station.

I felt awful. Why was that woman so full of hate? She indeed must have been extremely unhappy. Then my mind roved to the horrible tweets one came across the social networks and blamed Facebook, Instagram, and the rest for doing nothing to halt that noxious logorrhea. Freedom of expression, ha! What utter nonsense. That only leads to more violence and murder; the statistics prove me right. They should at least force the users to write under their names. It

would force them to be more responsible and, consequently, become vulnerable targets themselves. It is too easy to hide behind anonymity and repulsive. The Internet is still a work-in-progress needy of a moral code.

Then I ask myself: is there still on this planet of ours a place where the word love prevails? Or is the human being bound to get nastier as we evolve? I fear that this dilemma will remain unresolved, preventing us from getting an answer to the only question that philosophers have asked themselves in vain ever since man realized that he had a conscience: what is life all about? Why are we here on earth? To fight each other or to live in harmony? If it is for the former reason, then we are a total failure, and since I am an agnostic, I don't believe any god has anything to do with it. Bless the hearts of all ye believers!

Milan has its *immigrati* and *sbarchi* (illegal migrants) who hail from Romania, Albania, North Africa, and Asia mainly. These new immigrants leave their home countries, thinking they will have a better future here, and suffer inhumane treatments, first by the smugglers, then by the more settled migrants who despise them. Milan has one the most diverse environs anywhere. In less than an hour's drive, you can bask in the sun in the Dolomite's ski resorts, or sail in any of the splendid lakes of northern Italy like Como or Garda, and even in Switzerland's Lago di Lugano. Indeed, all of this in less than an hour's drive. How many times have I spent an afternoon or a weekend day in those dreamy sites, walking on Isola Bella or eating gelato in the serene gardens of Villa d'Este (not the beautiful historical site outside Rome)? In an hour and a half, I would get to Genova and from there to the Liguria.

Someone asked me If having those three different identities didn't confuse me, in other words, if I, as a person,

wasn't mixed up. My answer was not straightforward. I told him that I had a first cousin of mixed-blood. My Italian uncle, his father, married a Congolese woman during his stay in RDC, where he worked as an engineer. Ugo-Kin, my cousin, and I are very close, and he feels perfectly integrated into Italian society. He juggles with languages – Ugo-Kin speaks Lingala, French, Italian, and English, all fluently – like mathematicians do with formulas and equations. He is as rooted in his languages as he is in his countries of residence. To me, he is a model of what the man or the woman of the future ought to be. Ugo-Kin has been an inspiration all along the years we have known each other. That being said, however erudite or not; no human being escapes life's challenges and vagaries.

Meanwhile, life goes on, with my heart split between Margo, my lovely Parisian wife, and Flavio, my dashing Venitian lover. *Entre les deux, mon coeur balance.*



2

Dodging Bullets

KEVIN BROWN

I remember the day my school bus crashed, because I wasn't on it. The day the fire department ripped the bus top into metal ribbons, I was in the counselor's office, talking about my feelings since my mom ran away.

I liked the counselor's office. I'd eat hard candy and hold a stuffed teddy bear three times my size. With the counselor asking if I feel it's my fault, I'd rub its tattered fur and trace the busted threads along the seam lines. That afternoon, I told her how I used to see Mom and Dad's reflections washing dishes in the window above the sink. Smiling, blowing soap bubbles, leaning in to kiss. I wrapped my arms halfway around the bear and said how one day, the reflections weren't smiling. How one day, Mom's reflection was gone.

Then, we heard sirens scream by like the world was ending.

That night at home, after the news poured in—how many lived, died, and might not make it through the morning—it hit me that I took that bus every day. At the kitchen table, eating a baloney sandwich, I said, "Dad, if I was on that bus, would I have died?" He twisted a glass of whiskey back and forth in half-arcs, leaned on his elbows, and said, "Don't know, son. Either way, you dodged a bullet." His eyes were raw and red-webbed. A framed picture of Mom beside him. He took a sip. "We're all dodging

invisible bullets," he said. "They zip by our heads, every second of every day."

"Who's shooting at us?" I said, and he said, "God."

He drained his drink to the ice. "You turn left and live. Another guy turns right, and..." he slapped the table, "dies." He stood and walked to the sink. His reflection looking back at him. Thick raindrops popped his face in the glass and slid down in clear streaks. "The same store you were in Monday, burns down Tuesday. A guy gets shot, the doctor tells him another inch to the right or left and he'd be gone." Lightning fluttered, whitening his face out a moment. Then it returned, his reflection looking down. "At any given moment, we're all just an inch to the right or left from tragedy."

Munching my sandwich, the crust arced in a smile, I pretended Mom left so I'd have to see that counselor. Hug that bear, while up the road my bus was rolling off the road. Maybe she pushed me out of the line of fire. Sacrificed their marriage for the better me. Now, I wonder if she took a bullet herself. If she was shot down, or is still moving through the world, bullets popping divots in the ground around her.

But Dad was hit, and the whiskey got him years later. In the hospital, I held his purple hand as he twitched and shook from the bullet that found its mark years ago. From the wound that never healed.



3

Re-Emergence of Fear

JASON CONSTANTINE FORD

Jessica looked at her watch to see that it was already ten o'clock in the morning. She lifted herself out of bed as a single thought penetrated all levels of her consciousness. In the span of a few seconds, she realised that it was her first morning of the year without experiencing harassment. The relief she felt was immense but tinged with a certain level of doubt. *Will this last?* All that Jessica could do was look out the window as she tried to find an answer to this question. Her inability to see beyond her present circumstances, persuaded her to simply be herself as she picked up Gemini from the cupboard and placed him on a chair. With Gemini motionless, Jessica unpeeled a banana and started eating it. She made faces to her toy cat while she ate the banana in the hope that he might become jealous of her. She held out the banana peels in front of her for a few seconds before pulling them back away from Gemini. She did the same thing again without a response. Gemini's state of simply staring into emptiness did not make Jessica happy with him. She gave him a stern look and put the banana peels in the bin.

"Aren't you going to talk to me?"

Jessica did not like Gemini's silence. Despite her disappointment, an idea came to Jessica. The best remedy for boredom was not far away from her. She switched on the CD player that stood against the wall and chose a CD of nursery

rhymes with *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* as the first of the songs within a children's collection.

Twinkle, twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are.

Up above the world so high,
Like a Diamond in the sky.

When the blazing sun is gone,
When he nothing shines upon,
Then you show your little light,
Twinkle; twinkle, all the night...

The merriness of the song was suddenly interrupted by the sound of a cane hitting the rail of the stairs. Jessica's brief experience of peace was now dissolved into obscurity and replaced with a clear understanding of what was to come. Alan Cramer, her stepfather was angry. Jessica immediately switched off the CD player. The sound of footsteps coming up the stairs filled Jessica with fear. She immediately huddled herself into a corner of the room as she smelt the scent of whiskey. Alan entered the room with eyes that radiated a form of rage she could not see in other human beings. In one hand, he held a cane while in the other hand, he held a bottle of whiskey. He took a sip of the whiskey which remained in the bottle and then dropped the empty bottle on the floor. He briefly gazed at Jessica before turning his attention to the sight of Gemini on a chair. He looked back at Jessica.

"You stupid girl! You put a stuffed toy on my chair."

Jessica was trapped in a state of complete silence, unable to move. She knew that the worse thing she could do would be to answer Alan back when he was in this state. As she was trembling, Alan walked over to the chair and grabbed Gemini. He dropped the cane and used both of his hands to tear Gemini's head from his torso. Both the chair and the floor were littered with a broken toy and the stuffing which came

out of it. Alan picked up the cane and turned his attention back to Jessica. He swung the cane down with one hand onto the open palm of his other hand which gripped it with the authority of an intoxicated egoist.

“You’ve been a bad girl. I’m going to punish you.”

Jessica immediately woke up to find herself in her own bedroom. The dream she had was of an event eleven years ago. That was the first time Alan physically abused her. The return of the most painful memory of her life made it hard for Jessica to get out of bed but she willed herself to resume her morning routine. Making her way to the kitchen, Jessica was surprised to see that her regular breakfast meal of wheat flakes with banana slices in a bowl of milk was already prepared, with her mother standing near the bowl. She was smiling at Jessica with an envelope in her hand.

“Good morning, sweetie.”

“Good morning, mum. You made my breakfast. How nice of you!”

“I made it for a special occasion.”

“What’s so special about today?”

Her mother handed the envelope to Jessica. “You need to read this.”

The envelope was addressed to Jessica with the sender being the Family Court of Australia. She opened the envelope and read a letter from a representative of the Family Court, stating that a presiding judge this court reached a decision to impose a restraining order on Alan Cramer, requiring him to be at least five kilometres away from Jessica for an indefinite period of time. Jessica dropped the letter and hugged her mother.

“Thank you so much.” Jessica said.

"I've only done what I've had to do." The two of them let go of each other. "It's the first day of school holidays. Are you going to spend the day with me or with friends?"

"I've already got an appointment with Karen for lunch. I'll spend the next day with you. You have my word."

At midday, Jessica had lunch with Karen at the Punjabi Diner in Subiaco. From there, they went to the markets where they bought various perfumes and jewellery from a variety of stores. Out of all the stores, one of them stood out among the others. It was the pet stall. It featured a collection of animals which Jessica had never encountered before such as wombats, parrots and llamas. All of the animals were secured behind glass enclosures with the price tags listed below them. Jessica checked the price for owning a llama. The recommended retail price was three thousand dollars with no credit card options. Jessica simply shook her head in disappointment. Karen placed a hand on her shoulder.

"If you save your student allowance for the next four months, you'll be able to afford your own llama. Are you willing to make that kind of sacrifice?"

"We'll see what happens. In the meantime, I'll look for another animal."

"While you're busy looking around, I'll buy a drink. I won't be long."

The tendency of the two teenage girls to be abrupt with each other seemed so normal to them that it was almost second nature. They went their separate ways without any other thoughts on their minds. Karen made her way to the nearest grocery store outside the market, collected a bottle of energy drink and waited in line to be served by the next available cashier. She did not realise that as she waited in the queue, a man was watching her from inside a car across the

road. The man left his car and positioned himself at the entry point to the market that was closest to the grocery store. He held a basket and was handing out pamphlets to people. After leaving the grocery, Karen encountered the man. He held out a pamphlet to her.

“Would you like to attend a free seminar for wealth progression?”

“No, I’m not interested.” Karen turned away from him and was about to walk in the other direction but the man continued to look at her as he held out another piece of paper.

“I’ve got another free ticket. It may interest you.”

Karen turned towards him. “What is it?”

“It’s a free ticket to a professional healing session.”

“What kind of healing is it?”

“It’s an advanced form of therapeutic healing that uses virtual imagery from a central machine to cure the mind of bad thoughts and memories.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“How does it do that?”

“The patient wears a wireless helmet that gives the mind a virtual experience of being in a place where one is healed of painful memories from the past. Are you willing to give it a go?”

“Yes, I’ll give it a shot.” She accepted the ticket from the man. “Thank you for that. Have a nice day.”

The man waved Karen farewell and she returned to the pet stall to see Jessica cuddling a chinchilla cat. Karen patted it on the head.

"How much did it cost?"

"He was ninety five dollars." Jessica noticed the piece of paper that Karen held. "What have you got there?"

"It's a ticket to a therapeutic healing session."

"How much did it cost you?"

"It was free. A man at the other end of the market gave it to me."

"Are there any other tickets available?"

Karen looked to the area where the man was standing to see that he was no longer there. "No, I've got the last one."

"Would you be willing to let me have it?"

"I don't know."

Karen took a step back and waited to see how Jessica would react. For a few seconds, they simply looked at each other without saying anything.



With that man having already returned back to his car, he carefully observed the teenage girls through a heavily tinted windscreen. He waited patiently to see what would happen as Karen held the ticket out to Jessica. She was dangling the ticket between her forefinger and her thumb. For several seconds, the man wondered what Karen would do with the ticket until he saw her hand it to Jessica. A smile formed on his face as he turned his car around and drove off.



Jessica looked at the ticket in detail. The place where the healing sessions took place was called Maharaja Healing. It was located on the corner of Roberts Road and Catherine

Street, a few blocks away from the market. Each session was listed as running for approximately half an hour and the proprietor's name was Hitesh Kumarasamy. Jessica was filled with a strong sense of optimism that she could be healed from the emotional scars of Alan's mistreatment of her.

Having read the rules and having been inside most of the therapeutic rooms that were available at Maharaja Healing on a brief guided tour, Jessica and Karen concocted a plan to circumvent the rules for a patron attending a healing session. The main rule that would be broken was a restriction preventing pets from being present during a session. After Jessica gave her free admission ticket to an attendant at the counter, she was led to a vacant room located underground. Jessica waited for the attendant to leave the room and made her way to the top of a flight of stairs. Several minutes passed until the sound of an alarm could be heard. Jessica knew what it was according to the plan that was devised earlier on. She was fully aware of how Karen hid an unwanted old model mobile phone among some pot plants in the foyer with the ensuring result of it going off with the sound of a real security alarm. Jessica opened the door and looked in the corridor to see Karen walking towards her with her pet chinchilla in her arms as well as a bag.

"Wow, you did it!" Jessica said.

"Of course I did it. Nobody outsmarts me."

"Thank you so much."

"When it's over, give me a ring."

"I won't forget."

Karen exited through a back door as Jessica closed the door leading to the lower ground floor in such a way that it was slightly ajar. By the time that security arrived in the corridor, the guards were complaining to each other about the alarm without any idea of how it went off. As the guards

were talking to each other, a voice called out to them and they headed in that direction. Jessica was relieved. Holding her cat, she went down to the bottom of the stairs and entered the room for her therapeutic session. The room was lit by a screen at the far end with a CD player, a remote control pad and a helmet below it. In the middle of the room, there was a lamp burning beside a cushion. Having read through the instructions booklet regarding the procedure for a therapeutic session, Jessica already knew what she was required to do. She used a remote control pad to choose the scenery of a forest among the two other options of either a valley or a plain. She took the helmet with her and turned the CD player on. Images of the forest appeared on the screen. Jessica held onto her cat despite instructions in the booklet that the session could only be effective without any physical contact with another person or thing. As Jessica's rebellious nature kicked in, she could not see how any alteration of rules could change the result of the session that she would undergo. A prompt appeared on the screen for her to close her eyes and begin the session. She sat down on the cushion in a lotus position and obeyed the prompt with a slight level of reluctance as she pushed the down onto her head.

Jessica imagined herself in the forest with her cat in her arms. Ambient music could be heard. She looked around to try to find the source of this music but could not see anyone else around her. Assuming that the music originated from the direction in front of her, Jessica walked straight ahead, searching for a sense of meaning. Rays of the sun penetrating through the trees reminded her of the first time she went to the forest with her mum at the age of nine. During that time, Alan was away on a business trip. It was the happiest memory of her life. Jessica felt that she was reliving that experience without her mum. She passed into a section of the

forest containing thick shrubs. Manoeuvring through the foliage, she was of the opinion that the source of the music was now closer to her. She was about to call out when she noticed that her cat was no longer in her arms.

Jessica woke up to find herself holding her cat with a helmet around her head as she sat in a lotus position inside a therapeutic room. She took the helmet off with one hand. The same scenery that she saw in her visualisation was on the screen in front of her. The session was not working. The futility of taking part in a bogus healing session was too much for her. She made her way to the screen and the CD player and switched both of them off. The solitary source of light from the lamp made her feel better. She sat down near the lamp and placed her cat on the floor.

"It's just you and me now, none of this other rubbish."

Jessica took out a bottle of perfume she bought from the market. She sprinkled drops of it into her palms and felt like someone special. She rubbed it into her face and inhaled its' scent with delight. A sense of obligation to give attention to her cat, impelled her to share her perfume. Being careless, she split half of the bottle on the cat's head. It reacted by running in the opposite direction, hitting the lamp and knocking it over. Jessica was surrounded by darkness. She reached out her hands to try to grip something but only touched empty air. This state of being deprived of her cat, brought back memories of Alan tearing Gemini apart, as all forms of stability were replaced with a fear of Alan. All the negativity associated with him was entering into her mind like a phantom refusing to leave a place it had intruded. She attempted to shut him out of her consciousness but could not do so.

"You've been a bad girl."

That voice, that terrible voice was back. She curled into a ball with every ounce of her rebellious nature subdued. She covered her face hoping that that the voice would disappear. Suddenly, that voice was replaced with another sound. An object hit the rail of the stairs. That sound imprisoned her in silence. Within this silence, another smell quite distinct from the perfume was emerging. It was the scent of whiskey. Jessica felt like crying out for help but fears from the past prevented her from even contemplating the utterance of a single word. Another sound replaced the thud. Jessica could hear footsteps going down the stairs. Closer and closer, someone was coming to get her.



4

The Void

KELLI SHORT BORGES

I'm standing at the edge of a small, rocky precipice, deep in the heart of the Washington Cascades. Fear courses through me like a vise, squeezing so tightly it takes my breath. Crusted with ice, the yawning gap stares up at me with cold contempt, challenging me to leap.

I know I must. After spending hours traversing the glacier below, I'm exhausted and shaking. The day is waning, the sun just beginning to make its descent, bright light slowly giving way to milky shadow. In the mountains, time is not on your side. I know this.

The summit, a stony, jagged gray peak, is just out of view, beyond this craggy spot. I'm here with my partner, Mariano, and our guide Margaret. Both have already bounded across the void before me, Tigger-esque, feet like springs. They made it look easy despite the crampons we wear, metal "teeth" strapped to our boots, meant to give traction on sloped snow and ice. On rock, they have the opposite effect, making me feel unsteady and unsure. Cold sweat begins to form, beading above my lip. Trembling and on the verge of tears, I make my case to Margaret.

"I can't do this with crampons."

"It will actually be *more* dangerous if you take them off. Come on, Kelli, you can do this."

I push back, glaring. "I don't like this. What if I fall and get really hurt, break my leg or something? We're so far from help."

I picture myself helpless, seriously injured, waiting for a rescue that may not be possible this far up the glacier.

"Sometimes you just need to do it, even if you're scared, right? Push yourself, let's go!"

Margaret's eyes meet mine, firm and direct. A flash of annoyance washes over me. *I've climbed to the top of this glacier, I think, and that's what she says? Haven't I already pushed myself, proven I can do hard things?*

Every cell in my body is screaming "NO," my most basic, primitive instincts kicking into gear. As I stare, frozen, unable to move, Margaret's voice rises an octave:

"GO!"

I glance at Mariano, searching his eyes with my own. An unspoken communication takes place within a fraction of a second. I breathe in, the sharp, icy air filling my lungs with oxygen, muscles tense and ready.



I had met Mariano the year before, the summer of 2007. At the tail end of a heartbreaking divorce, I felt ready to meet someone new, but I was also colt-skittish, wary and slow to trust. The foundation of my failed marriage, built upon what initially appeared to be firm and level ground, had in actuality been poured over hidden, vast sinkholes. The entire structure inevitably collapsed, the void below swallowing us whole. Now, I scrambled to gain purchase, the dust settling around me, testing the earth beneath for the solidity I craved.

Set up by a mutual friend, Mariano and I met over iced coffee on a warm Arizona Friday in June. As I pulled up to

the coffeehouse where we were to connect that day, I was nervous. I had never been on a blind date, and wasn't sure what to expect. My worries were quickly pushed aside as soon as I spotted Mariano, who offered a wide, welcoming smile. Soon realizing we had many of the same interests, minutes morphed into hours that day as we talked endlessly about our common passions. Mariano, a single dad with a grown daughter, had devoted the previous years to family and career. Despite this, he also found time to challenge himself, becoming a triathlete and eventually completing a full Ironman, an impressive feat by any measure. I was raising two daughters, then six and ten, and was a reading specialist in the Arizona public school system. Additionally, I had just earned my black belt in Tae-Kwon-Do alongside my eldest daughter, after years of hard work and commitment. We bonded over these commonalities, our first date leading to many more. It felt like Kismet.

A year later, we found ourselves planning a new adventure: a privately guided four-day long intensive mountaineering course in the North Cascades National Park. Mariano had summited Mount Shasta the year before, a towering, glaciated mass standing at 14,180 feet in northern California. Shasta is a challenging and technical climb, and Mariano had enjoyed this endeavor so much he was itching for another. This time he wanted me to join. I was nervous, but reflected that we had agreed early on to regularly challenge ourselves in new ways as a couple, and here was a chance to make good on that commitment. I took this pact seriously. Nerves aside, I was in.

We flew into Seattle-Tacoma International on a beautiful and sunny August day, the bright, cobalt sky welcoming us. Mount Rainer, royally majestic, hovered in the background reigning over its subjects, wispy cotton candy clouds kissing

its tip. As we drove northeast toward Marblemount where we were to begin our adventure, we rolled down the windows, breathing in the fresh air, the spicy scent of sagebrush lingering. We would spend the night in Marblemount at a small inn before heading out early the next morning to meet our guide Margaret at the ranger station. From there, we would head to Boston Basin Trailhead, the launching point for our adventure. That night, sitting fire-side at the inn, accompanied by the crackle and dance of the flames, we toasted the challenge with earthy red wine, our excitement growing along with our nerves.

The following morning dawned crisp and clear, the first rays of buttery sunlight peeking through the window, beckoning with promise. The aroma of crisp, sizzling bacon welcomed us in the dining room as we grabbed our last hearty meal, knowing it would be freeze-dried food on the mountain for the next several days. Heading out, packs in tow, driving toward the ranger station, my stomach twisted in knots as I considered the challenge ahead. Mountaineering would be a completely new experience for me, and I wasn't sure what to expect. I glanced anxiously at Mariano.

"How far did you say the hike in was? These packs are really heavy."

"Just a few miles. We'll be fine."

"But our backpacks are 50 pounds! It's only a quarter of your weight. It's almost half of mine."

"You're strong. You'll be ok. I'll help you if you need me to."

Margaret was patiently waiting at the ranger station. Six feet tall, with closely cropped. Blonde hair, broad shoulders and an athletic build, she smiled and shook our hands with firm confidence. She certainly *looked* capable, and, reminding

myself of her outstanding credentials, I felt reassured. We double checked our gear, and with a thumbs up from Margaret walked to the trailhead. Hoisting our packs with a grunt, we headed out, Margaret taking the lead, the whooshing sound of distant streams providing a musical backdrop.

Boston Basin Trail is an unmaintained climber's route, the first mile or so gently following the overgrown and eroded remnants of an old mining road. *No big deal*, I thought, as we trudged our way up the trail. Breathing in, I closed my eyes, the woodsy scent of local pine and cedar carried by the wind. Heaven.

My moment of bliss was quickly interrupted when we turned a corner and caught a glimpse of the path before us, which ascended precipitously up a rocky, brushy gully. An avalanche chute in the winter, it was the only way up. Boulders and fallen trees littered the path, and I turned to Margaret, confused.

"Is this the trail?"

"Yep."

I stared ahead, eyes widening.

"How do we get up it?"

"We climb, pull ourselves up."

I watched as Margaret tackled the challenge, at times on hands and knees as she ascended. I was next. Hoisting myself up a boulder, pulling with all my strength, I suddenly lost purchase and fell with force, my pack pulling me backward like 50 pounds of wet cement. Heart pounding, I yelped in fear, the possibility of broken bones, a concussion, flashing through me like lightning. I knew this was going to be bad...it was a long way down. Suddenly, I felt a firm weight

pressing against me, stopping my fall. It was Mariano. Sure and steady, he pushed me forward until I was able to grab hold. Leveling myself, I pulled back up using the thick, gnarled root of a tree for leverage. Shaking, adrenaline sprinting through my veins, I turned to Mariano.

“You ok?”

“Yes, fine.”

I smiled at him, still trembling, and breathed a sigh of relief.

Crisis averted, we continued up the path, which finally wound through a sloped, gentle forest, the lush, leafy canopy above providing a welcome break from the heat of the day.

The rhythmic gurgling of rushing water beckoned as we came around a final bend and caught our first glimpse of Boston Basin. Relieved to have arrived and easing our packs down with weary gratitude, we stopped and reverently took it in the ethereal beauty of what would be base camp.

Rimmed by spectacular, snow-capped peaks on all sides, Boston Basin is wide and expansive, with dozens of streams and sparkling waterfalls cascading gloriously toward the main creek, which lies a short distance from camp. Lush greenery and wildflowers abound, sweetly floral lupine and Indian paintbrush washing the valley in riotous color-blush, magenta, deep crimson red. Huge slabs of speckled granite litter the valley below Quien Sabe Glacier, which lies north of camp and just below Sahale Peak, where we would make our summit attempt in just a couple of days. Taking it in, mouth agape, I reflected on the Zane Grey phrase “Climbin’ up through hell into heaven.” It seemed an apt description for our grueling trek to the paradise before us.

Setting up camp that afternoon alongside Mariano and Margaret, I hummed to myself in relaxed content while we worked. Local marmots, abundant in the area, chirped along with me as the day waned, welcoming us to their home in the wild. That evening, work complete, we sat around the campfire talking with Margaret, trading stories and laughs as we shared our first dinner in the basin. At last, blanketed by the glimmer of what seemed a million celestial fairy lights, woodsy smoke from the fire lingering, we crawled into our tents and collapsed, exhausted.

The Boston Basin has been called a compressed version of the Swiss Alps due to its moderate altitude at 6,000 feet, and easy access to the surrounding peaks and glacier. It's the perfect outdoor classroom, and the next morning found Margaret headmaster, teaching us our first new skill: how to build a snow anchor, used to provide stability and safety when descending a snow couloir, a steep gully in alpine terrain. Snow anchors are created using an ice axe, climber's rope, locking carabiners (oblong metal rings used as connectors), and a metal picket.

Margaret began the lesson, showing us how to use the ice axe to dig a capital T into the hard-packed snow, at a depth of about 8 inches. Next, she embedded the metal picket horizontally and securely along the top of the T and attached a carabiner. Threading rope through this metal ring, she connected the other end to her harness using a figure eight knot. This creates a pulley system that provides leverage for climbers on steep descents.

Mariano and I were next, each digging our own snow anchor, practicing the necessary skills again and again, then checking each other for accuracy and safety. As we worked alongside one another, I realized we were truly a team out here on the mountain. Mutual faith was not only necessary,

but vital. Successful in our endeavor, we high fived and wrapped up the day, heading back to camp as the sun set, framing Johannesburg mountain to the west in its honeyed, celestial glow.

“Good morning, guys!” chirped Margaret as we crawled out of our tent the next day, wearily rubbing sleep from our eyes.

Margaret explained that today we would be learning a technique called “glissading,” when a climber sits, then slides down a steep slope of snow or ice with the support of an ice axe.

“Margaret, that sounds a little dangerous...I thought we were supposed to build snow anchors on steep slopes?” I interjected.

“Yes, but this technique is used when the slope is a bit gentler. It’s another choice for descending, and much faster than building an anchor.”

Curious now, we grabbed our day packs and headed up the mountain, crampons crunching as we made tracks in the snow alongside those of local critters, a chilly breeze biting our exposed faces. Pulling my woolen beanie a little lower, I shivered in anticipation, wondering if I had the nerve to slide down the icy glacier, relying only upon myself.

Arriving at the glacier’s base, then climbing up a bit, we finally set down our packs and grabbed our ice axes, the only glissading tool required. Margaret demonstrated, sitting first, then holding her ice axe firmly, right hand just under the base of the blade, left hand crossed over her body, securely holding the wooden handle. She began sliding, slowly at first, then faster, suddenly flipping her body over, chest to the slope, swinging the pick of her axe squarely into the dense snow on top of the glacier, arresting her fall. Mariano was

next, making it look effortless as he started to slide, then quickly turned and struck his axe firmly into the snow, laughing as he completed the exercise.

It was my turn. I picked up my axe, white knuckled and palms sweaty despite the chill. Shaking visibly, I sat, gripping the axe tighter. The slope looked steeper from this angle. Biting my lip sharply, gathering courage, I pushed off, quickly gaining momentum as I slid faster and faster, heart pounding wildly.

“Now!” yelled Margaret, my cue to self-arrest.

I flipped over onto my belly, heaving the axe in an adrenaline-fueled burst, planting the pick deep into the snow and quickly coming to a halt.

“Perfect!” encouraged Margaret, as I whooped with joy.

I felt a burst of pride as we practiced again and again, trusting myself a bit more with each attempt. Day by day, here on the mountain, I found my confidence growing, the wounds of my past healing with each reminder that I was capable, strong. I felt a rush of joy as I acknowledged this unexpected shift. Glancing at Mariano, elated, I laughed with glee, feeling like a kid on a playground as we slid. Finally, forced to pack up by the setting sun, we headed down the slope toward camp, ready to tackle what would be our big day, tomorrow’s summit attempt.

We awoke to the sun’s first fingers just reaching above the eastern peaks, sky bright and clear, a good omen. Huddling around the campfire, we wolfed down peanut butter sandwiches and slugged steaming mugs of coffee as we discussed the day ahead. It would be a long trek, Margaret explained, nine to ten hours total, and we would need an early start to make good time. Donning our packs, we set out for our final push.

Nearing the glacier, we pulled on crampons and securely tied rope to our harnesses, each connected to the other for security. "Roping up" is an important part of glacial traversing, each climber acting as an anchor for others. If a team member slips, others immediately self-arrest using their ice axe, which is always kept in hand. I reminded myself of the arrests we practiced successfully the day before while glissading. The stakes were high, but I knew I could do this. Determined, I stepped onto the slope, 30 feet behind Margaret, Mariano trailing at the same distance, a measure of safety.

Hours passed like minutes as we crossed the glacier in tandem, our steady breath and rhythmic footfall a moving meditation, the sun's warmth welcoming us in its gentle embrace. As we came around a final bend the lull was broken as we approached Sahale Col, a narrow ridge we would need to successfully navigate before reaching the peak just beyond.

Stepping onto the rocky ridge, uncomfortably exposed, the mood shifted as a frigid, howling wind suddenly pushed against us with force. Shivering, we turned and viewed our last obstacle, a gaping precipice rimmed with ice. Deep and too wide to step across, we would need to jump, crampons on.



Frozen, legs unsteady and trembling, I stare at the chasm before us. The summit lies just beyond, taunting in its proximity.

"Almost there!" encourages Margaret, leaping gracefully across, followed quickly by Mariano. They turn, beckoning.

My breath quickens. Can I do this, take this final leap? Squeezing my eyes shut tightly, reflecting on the previous

days and all I have learned, I deliberately, consciously, push fear aside. Blocking vision, light, and sound I slow my breath, place a hand over my heart, feeling it beat, slower now.

I open my eyes, glance at Mariano. He nods, eyes warm and reassuring. Suddenly, I know. In that split second, that fleeting moment of time, an undeniable truth, one that has been building day after day, crests, washes over me, engulfing me in its certainty. Despite the icy void before me, my trembling legs, the crampons I wear, despite everything, the ground below has never felt so solid and sure. I see Mariano on the other side, patiently waiting.

Breathing in, I leap.



5

Awareness

KIM FARLEIGH

Piot was at the table beside the red pot beside the white, timber pillar. The blue, stained-glass ceiling suggested heaven. Marble-topped tables with black, iron legs covered the white floor.

"Lawrence!" he said. "Are you seeing the film?"

We regularly went to that cinema café, the nicest cinema in the city.

"Yes," I replied. "And you?"

"Yes."

The Rioja I ordered matched the bar's red leather stools.

"Butts raised," I said, as we clinked glasses.

A thin woman, with a drawn, white-powdered face, and painted red lips, who only ever wore black, was at another table with a weary looking man, whose unkept, swirling, grey hair represented the cyclonic feelings that his tense, sad eyes revealed. He tried selling his drawings on the street. Nobody ever bought one. Beside him was a double-chinned, wiry-haired woman whose banter intentionally destroyed conversation.

"Some of the life members are here," I said.

"What do you think are the requirements for life membership?" Piot asked.

The cinema's cheapness, and the obscure films it showed, attracted eccentrics.

"Incapable of having a relationship," I replied, "plus panic when having to communicate to strangers."

The joy shooting from Piot's face sprayed my mind with pleasure.

"Being unemployable also helps," I added.

Piot's eyes became polished pellets of titillation. Given he was Polish, polish was appropriate.

The only person I knew who carried everything in supermarket bags appeared.

"Pedro," Ian said, shaking hands with Piot.

Ian was holding a supermarket bag.

"Mister Richardson," he then said, referring to me.

He called me "Sir Lawrence Richardson."

We shook hands. Ian went to the bar. Piot grabbed a spare seat from another table. Ian returned with a beer.

"We've been discussing life membership," I said.

"Of what?" Ian asked.

"This place," I replied. "You qualify for associate."

"Great," Ian said. "And what are AM's requirements?"

"Repulsing women," I replied. "But, at least, you're employable. That disqualifies you from life membership."

"Wonderful," Ian said. "I've never felt happier."

"Paqui!" Piot said, getting up.

They hugged.

Paqui introduced someone called Ana. I grabbed the last two available seats. Ana's brown eyes contained bar-light

reflections. Her nose sloped down and curled back up above plump, red, symmetrical lips.

Ian, ignoring his AM attributes, thrashed his right arm up and down while imitating Piot's accent: "Ver ott do zue means by dat?"

Piot's eyes lost their amiable glints.

"I no understands diz," Ian continued, Ana laughing.

Her insensitivity matched his.

"Time to go inside," I said.

Piot and I sat in the front row.

"If he does that again," he said, referring to Ian, "I'll hit him."



I saw Ian at a language exchange. His shirt matched his blue eyes, his jeans his reddish facial skin. Allergies made him rub his face, skin falling, blood where skin opened.

"I witnessed a classic case today," he said, "of failure to join dots. I had a class with three women who claimed that height is irrelevant for women when choosing men. After that denial we talked about the actors they found attractive. I suggested Benito del Toro and one said: 'He's too short.'"

Ian stared wonderstruck.

"Five minutes after the great denial," he said, "she said that."

"Every event," I said, "is isolated to protect self-perception. Hence the contradictions."

"Some contradictions are so contradictory they're surreal," he replied. "One of the company's receptionists imitated my accent when I asked her for the class attendance

sheets. She looked at the other receptionist when she did it and they both laughed."

His eyes became blue fires of disgust.

"I leant over the counter," he continued, "and said: 'When you learn to speak English as well as I speak Spanish, let me know. Go on, say something in English.' She looked worried then, especially when I said her boss is one of my students. She didn't find that funny."

I told Piot what Ian had told me.

"Good," Piot said. "Now he might think twice before doing the same to me."

"I doubt it," I said. "Only his feelings matter. This helps him see himself as a victim, which is, of course, wonderfully gratifying, especially as he feels he was victimized by his mother."

"What happened with his mother?" Piot asked.

"He was supposed to be the substitute for the things she wanted to do herself. He was the golden boy, the top of his economics class at Oxford. He didn't go on with it, refusing to bow to her will, so she tries making him feel like a failure. He knows he should be more successful, so he constantly tries to get snippets of success. Sometimes the snippets are silly."

The next time Ian imitated Piot's accent (there was an attractive woman with us), Piot and I smiled at each other.

"I even now feel sorry for him," Piot said later.



6

Epilogue

PHILLIP FREY

What a way to spend the night, stuck here at the city dump on a mound of God knows what. The filthy green trucks are gone now, and the smell isn't as bad as it was this afternoon – I must be getting used to it.

I landed close to the top and have a clear view of the river. Beneath the full moon, its water shimmers like a path to liberation. It gives me a hopeful feeling.

Before they carted me off, I was asleep on a warm shelf, dreaming of those who have read me. The woman who had found solace in my pages; the man who had discovered something new about himself – forget it, it doesn't matter anymore. I am no longer important to anyone. Thrown out with the trash to suffer in the middle of nowhere.

It is a good thing you can't see me now. My binding is broken; my pages damp and torn – damn wind! – and I know things are not going to get any better. I may be an old book with time trapped between my covers, but that does not mean I lack a sense of the future.

Those trucks will come back up here tomorrow and empty their insides over me. Each day I will find myself buried a little deeper. The moonlit river will vanish, and all my printed words will follow.



7

The New York City Street Preacher

RENÉ VAN DER KLOOSTER

Come closer, come closer, you, the hurried people, come, don't pass by indifferently; I am aware of my precarious ludicrous position in which I did put myself; you must understand how much effort it took me being here, at the crossroads of your lifecycle, this crossroads my standstill, but at the same time it is your hope for a new road to take! Because you have been betrayed, people! For sure! But you were not present where the betrayal took place, I was, I was there, and even if you had been there, none of you want to witness anything anymore, not even the things of which you sense that they have been placed in the most grand and glorious moment of your existence, because you are afraid of being punished, aren't you? But punished by whom? By those that control you, yes, you are under control, but the controllers you don't know, but I do, I was one of them, from birth, I didn't know better, but now I do, listen to me, gather around me, yes, like that, and you, and you, better one word from me for some of you than a lot of your own words in the wake of a normalisation imposed by those who have stolen words like omnipotent and omnipresent from God, and thus deforming God... they have transformed God into a fear in this city, an urban fear, a global fear, that runs through you, that is why you pass by obediently, laughing at those who have stopped, because at least I understand the art of enchanting these people with my words, that my carrying voice invades ears, inadvertently, yes yes, you too, even you have stopped, the intellectual superior type, with your self-

righteous intellectual narcissism, you stopped despite it's against your nature, or against your worldview, which implies that you despise someone like me, calling me a mad man, still, you did stop, at this crossroads, even you, and now you want to run away, don't you? And you, you with that face, you have been acting all of your life, but rest assured, that is not necessarily wrong, it may be your contribution, of which others have yet to determine whether they benefit from it or not, yes, that's how the system works. You are also running away? Yes, I chase you down the path which I call: run-run-run-after-yourself!

Verily I say unto you, you must grow according to your talent to grow, not according to the extreme ideals that are proclaimed, for sure, you guessed it, by those who are in control! And you must understand that any occurrence, like this one, in which I am admittedly the center, but rather I am a symbolic crossroads for anyone listening, that the nature of any occurrence depends on the obedience to the cause *and* the effect of the occurrence. Isn't that huge? After all it's all up to you whether what I say you can reconcile with a degree of obedience that can easily be close to zero.

Am I not now spontaneously freeing you from some change in your thought pattern that I may have already caused? And did nothing really happened? That there is nothing to tell your loved ones when you will get home tonight, no story about that rascal on Times Square?

Actually, why did you even stop? Why did you pause? Well? You and you, you were the first! You have been listening for a while, but you have not wasted your time, I think, just out of the blue I understand how you see me, how you see me completely, from your point of view, which is apparently self-evident, and that surprises me, something new, something, and it's a lot, what I never saw in myself, you see now in me, and for that reason I have to reconsider myself, or, because that's how far it goes, I have to destroy

myself completely, to be for you the one you are seeing! Because isn't that what love is? Who tells me that's not love? Because you, over there, you must know; I have seen many faces today, but you have a friendly face! So I consider for you to be the one you are seeing, if you consider to be the one I see, yes, I mean you, madam, with your beautiful eyes, with that look that comes so in handy, why shouldn't I express my love for you? Spontaneously, just like that, on this street? I promise you in anticipation that from all the time that I will love you I will cry only three minutes! Oh, don't suddenly hide behind others, don't run away, the dearest part of me! And... just like that she's gone, dissolved, her face swept away by thousands of other faces, well, luckily you are still here, enough people left to teach, to listen to my life crisis lessons for all the children in the world!

My children, what else can I tell? What more can I say? The whole world is opening up for me, now I can see everything, which is too much, but that will no longer restrain me, that will no longer obstruct me, I allow that everything sees me too, I allow it, I smile at it, I am too tired to push back, so I allow it, come on, come on, take me, leave me, take me, leave me, I give what I receive, I receive and give it away, and remain steadfast, I remain present in my task, here and now, at this crossroads, my task, that is all I see as a necessity for the existence of my being.

My task is done, I have done my part, not for this city, not for a nation, not for a homeland, not for our world, but for our species... thank you, thank you for your attention... don't spread what I have said, spread yourself... more than ever the search for God is synonymous with the search for the essence of man! The essence of yourself! Because everything you are not plus yourself is God!



8

Cracked

RICHARD LEISE

The egg splits on its seam, jelly beans rattling and spilling across the sheet. Mallory can't believe it. She sits up, calls in a loud voice, "Honey, I just think I figured it out."

She falls back into her pillows.

"Mallory, I'm right here." Sitting, Justin pushes up from the floor. Plastic eggs halve and clatter. They fall from his lap. Candy and coins everywhere. "Seriously. Please. You've *got* to quit shouting. You're going to wake the kids."

He kneels beside their bed.

"Can you see this?"

"What am I looking at?" Justin says.

"Right?" Mallory closes her eyes. "That thing's called a ewer. No one really knows. But the word is that it's at least a thousand years old, and that it's not Indian. Like, U.S. Indian. It could be from India, for all I know. But it's not Native American, is what I'm saying. And they found it right here. In Endwell."

The ewer – which looked like a jar, the sort genies came from – was beautiful. Clearly dirty, the glass was still bright, glowing a sort of –

"It's like it's glowing," Justin said.

"Right?"

"And not orange, but more –"

“Tangerine.”

“Yeah,” Justin smiled. “It’s so cool. Is there something inside there? It’s like – Wait. You know what else?”

Mallory didn’t. Mallory is asleep, she hadn’t been fully awake. Half of a plastic egg is on her belly. One hand is on her forehead, palm to ceiling, as if affecting having fainted. If only. In her other hand a jam jar full of Franzia. A purple jelly bean fell to the bottom of the glass, and tiny bubbles rise from the candy, furiously, with great alacrity and force, popping atop the surface of the white wine. Her eyelids flutter.

If it wasn’t Easter, Justin would leave the glass in her hand. Eventually, she’d roll over, and the wine would spill, waking her, and she’d force herself to get up and undress, to put a towel on their mattress, and she’d probably catch a foot and fall, she might or might not bump her head, or crack a rib (they’d discover the extent of her injuries in the morning), but, after climbing back into bed, there’d be a decent chance for sex. Fun sex. Only, and Justin checks his phone Yup. It’s Easter. Madeline and Abigail will be awake – if he’s lucky – in five hours. Probably more like four. He needs the sleep. Justin takes the glass from Mallory’s hand and sets the wine on her nightstand. Some other time.

Outside, Justin walks down the street, he holds an Easter basket by its handle. Its plastic eggs percussive. It is dark, for the sun has stopped shining. All is calm, the stars are bright. It’s seventy degrees. This isn’t the worst neighborhood, but there isn’t much to recommend, either. There is one cause for concern, though, and Justin makes for this house first. Fearing some unknown reprisal, he can’t chance leaving these people out. Alternately, he’s afraid of spooking them.

Along the way he makes a show of placing the eggs on the small squares of those neatly manicured lawns fronting

each property. At the roots of Redbud trees and against the bases of No Parking signs and along metal fencing and next to fire hydrants Justin and his eggs. This city street a little like a forest floor with its canopy of trash, of litter, and how at this hour this world is still, absent sound, just a bit of grass and the sidewalk and the cracked city street, Endwell's understory a cluster of buttercups their yellow browned and faded, the richness of color inherent in other things, tan and black and grey and white fading one into the other, life in death intangible, and all around Justin this junk, plastic wrappers and faded labels, and cellophane, and paper scraps, objects absent shape or shame and these bleeding colors informing a collage chthonian, one that of this world in equal measures cannot be anticipated or recorded (for these things, and others like them, exist only when you are present, when you look further and see). And so small blasts of color, Justin's eggs. Of cheer. Day-Glo blues and yellows and pinks and greens and these filled with money he collected throughout Lent, something like eighty-four dollars in fun two-dollar bills and loose change.

Yes, this takes a while, but it's worth it. Considering the number of step-this's and step-thats who come and go? The street, come any day of the week, fills with a dozen kids – Maddie and Abbie among them, the children running, riding their bikes, screaming, laughing, and playing some physical variation of a computer game. The kids stop and pet the cats. To point out squirrels. The others – almost eleven – almost flirting. Filming, and then editing, their afternoons. Come breakfast time tomorrow morning (it's surprising the number of people who still go to church) this block will be bustling.

The House. 220. One of two on Constance (they squat, side by side, a pair of ugly eyes) that is not owner-occupied. Last Saturday, more people than the structure seemed

capable of containing spilled from the door, off the stoop, and on to the street. The fight was between a man and a woman, a pair of drug dealers, the properties' principal tenants. They had to be.

No one called. So, in the twenty minutes it took police to respond, the shouting and screaming woke the girls. Justin put them in his bedroom and turned up the TV. Mallory was nursing a hangover, but adrenaline kicked in. She motioned for him. He went to his office, and they crouched by a window. It was difficult to make out much of the action, which made the implicit violence more visceral. Amplified. The woman hit the man over the head with a beer bottle, she spit in his face. The man pleaded with someone to get his gun. There was pushing and shoving. Like a teardrop a little boy slid from the porch and pulled at the man. His dad? The woman's son? Someone dragged the child inside. A thud, then the twinkling of more breaking glass littering the street. For one moment no one moved. Everyone waited. The breeze stilled. When the man punched the woman in the face, her nose exploding, Mallory went back to bed, Justin's office filling with blue and red lights, revolving, pulsing along his four walls.

Justin knows that someone in the house is watching him, but he doesn't falter. The place is blacked out, its windows covered with blankets. Bass disrupts the silence, makes thick the air with thin textures, and snares and kick drums in triple-time, offset by hi-hats similarly divided, complete the trap. He doesn't want to appear anything other than casual. He places two eggs on their lawn. They sink into the overgrown grass.

Home, the front door locked, Justin gnaws on a baby carrot, drops what remains on the floor, and does the same with a couple celery stalks. He fills, and then hides, the girls'

Easter baskets, double-checking to ensure they received the same number of gifts. This, here, is a time Mallory will regret missing, a moment, twenty years from today, the girls away at graduate school, or married, she will not be able to look back upon and smile. But if Justin – like debt – accumulated the moments of their lives that his wife forfeited, he would be broken, bitter, and resent her, and because he doesn't want this, any part of this, he tries to understand what she's going through, and he doesn't want her to apologize because he knows that she is, in every sense of the word, sorry.

From the refrigerator he removes the dozen hardboiled eggs he dyed with the girls before bed. They are organic, and it's difficult to brighten brown shells, but they had fun, the girls using white crayons to draw thick, waxy hearts and flowers on the sides of their eggs before dipping them in mugs containing concentrated primary colors. Cool, but dry, he combines the eggs with forty or so of the plastic variety, hiding them atop bookshelves and inside sneakers – several of the plastic eggs containing clues as to the whereabouts of the girls' Easter baskets – too tired to make note of where he's hiding what, let alone to pen a list. The girls will argue, and Mallory will complain, but it will do. It has to. He carries what remains through the darkened kitchen.

Out back, double-checking to make sure he locked the privacy fence, he hides the rest of the plastic eggs, tossing another, much larger carrot, near the gate. All is still and good. Tomorrow will largely be terrible – they must travel two hours to see Mallory's family – but the morning will be fun.

There is a gunshot. *Fuck*. Justin hurries inside, locks the backdoor, kicks off his sandals, and makes for his office. He steps on an egg, the plastic shattering and cutting his foot, the jelly beans unmistakably malleable, like dogshit. Upstairs,

kneeling, peering through a space between the curtains, he hears another shot. Only it is not gunfire. It was the couple's – the drug dealer's – screen door slamming open against the house's cracked siding.

The man pulls the woman down the steps.

In the event of this particular event? Justin resolved to do nothing.

When he was an undergrad, he lived in Buffalo. Drunk, he sometimes stood at his kitchen window and tossed slices of American cheese towards a bay of oversized garbage bins. The slices, like orange Frisbees, arced to the earth, smacking flush against the concrete, and rats, big as raccoons, rocked the bins in mad dashes for the food. It was disgusting, and fascinating, *sort of* like the other night, when, as if somehow capable of inciting, or controlling the action, Justin, from his window, willed no particular outcome.

Only he wasn't in Buffalo any longer. He, as observer, played no part in anything. He will watch. But he will not bear witness.

The woman shouts a blast of gibberish. The man shoves her free and makes for an egg, grabbing it from the grass. He shakes it, smiling. Justin hears the change rattling. It's a good one, a few Sacajaweas. The man points to the spot where Justin planted the other. The woman drops her hands from her hips. She cusses when, shook, the egg doesn't make a sound. The man laughs when she pops it open. A two-dollar bill.

It's as though the man made a map. He takes the woman up and down the street, lets her find the others. They pocket the money, dropping the eggs like cigarette butts. Smiling, their faces, their eyes bright beneath the moonlight, the man and the woman seem happy.

In front of Justin's house there are two pink eggs. Each contains a twenty. The woman knows Justin's family. She has children, and the kids play together, and she wants to leave the eggs alone. They stand in the middle of the street.

The man says, "Let's just check them."

As they approach his house, Justin (somewhat dramatically) flattens against the floor. Listening. If the couple is speaking, he cannot hear them. Learning what they do? (as they approach, Justin leopard crawls from and office and slides into bed) he'll wait until morning. It's not a big deal. If the eggs are open, he will distract the girls, slip outside, and replace the money. There are many things which, if recorded, even the world itself could not contain the number of books written. If so? Let this be one of them.

Mallory is talking in her sleep. She is dreaming, and what she pictures isn't pretty. Justin adjusts her pillows, waits until she's no longer agitated, and then gets comfortable, staring at the ceiling, listening for sounds of the couple, and waiting for sleep. Mallory snores. It's irritating. He pulls the pillow from her head. Wonders what life would be like if she choked in her sleep. If she goes ahead and dies.

Between what's real and what he invents, people always give him something to do. This makes life interesting, and easier. (For Justin hates boredom.) And there are his girls. Like him – only much, much differently – they believe in everything. At some point tomorrow they'll spy the eggs in the front yard, and they'll be delighted. They will scramble to slip on sneakers and, still in their pajamas, scour the street, running from one point to another, picking up the discarded eggs and leaving them in place, certain that the *next* flash of color will have yet to be discovered.

Disappointed? Of course. But only because they slept past six o'clock and other kids beat them to the eggs. But still – Twenty dollars! Each! And when they come inside they'll turn on the television and, eyes bright, sit on their knees, staring at everything, waiting for their mommy to enter the living room, face puffy, holding a cup of coffee, affecting happiness, lowering herself to the floor, and assuming her place in the family.



9

Etiquette

WILLIAM MASTERS

I Ride Elevators.

To reach my office in downtown San Francisco I take the escalator from the ground floor to the mezzanine. From the mezzanine, I ride an elevator from elevator bank A to the 21st floor. From the 21st floor, I switch to elevator bank B and ride to the 33rd floor on which my office is located. If I arrive in the building between 8:30 and 9:00 AM, multiple stops at various floors extend my ride by six to ten minutes.

I rely on gearless traction electrical thrust to deliver me to work.

In order to arrive on time, I must also add elevator travel time to my bus commute: eighteen minutes plus twelve minutes equal thirty minutes. Of course, I still add an additional six to ten-minute wait for the bus which, theoretically, follows its 2016 schedule, but in reality, (with a couple of early morning exceptions) runs on its own maverick schedule based on breakdowns, weather conditions and driver disposition.

In 1857 my great-grandfather rode in New York City's first elevator, an Elisha Graves Otis design, and a steam-powered car moved by a system that used a belt-driven winding drum. When great-grandfather arrived back home in Rochester, he was met by the editor and photographer of the *Rochester Gazette* who took his picture and asked him whether

or not he thought he would go to hell for riding in a hoisting device which offended God.

"Only birds and angels have the right to move that high," the editor proclaimed.

My great-grandfather politely replied that angels had a great deal farther to go than five floors. "Elevators will not become a path to reach heaven," great-grandfather authoritatively replied.

The next day, after his picture and short interview were published, he became a local celebrity, though shunned by the more pious portions of the religious community until 1873 when a Presbyterian minister from Rochester attended a religious convention in New York City at the Gabriel Arms hotel in which he rode the elevator to his room on the ninth floor.

In my grandparent's day, every elevator had an operator, usually in uniform and often seated on a polished wooden stool, to run the technological marvel. Men took off their hats inside elevators while most women still wore hats and gloves. No one even considered eating or drinking between floors. At each stop, the operator called out the floor number. Men would automatically step aside to allow the women to exit first.

In my parent's day, some elevators still had operators who may or may not have worn uniforms. A passenger's disapproving glance or lifted eyebrow might embarrass a man into removing a hat or prevent him from unwrapping a candy bar. Women still grudgingly followed the nod of a man's head or the hand gesture signaling *permission* to enter or exit the elevator.

Today almost all elevators, save the elegant Hotel car located in a major city or express run in a corporate

headquarters building, operate as self-service transportation. Still, such elevators often boast richly polished wooden panels, occasionally carved up by a bike messenger or marble inlays adorning polished stainless steel interiors, infrequently marred by the grease pencil of someone wandering around in the building who managed to evade security.

Fashion conspires with bad taste to encourage hat-wearing in elevators while vanity encourages the application of fragrances in amounts far exceeding any limits of propriety, or in some instances, of safety. I personally witnessed a fellow elevator passenger overcome by the fragrance from a perfume while the other passengers merely suffered in silence. I have observed the combination of misplaced hipness and sloth encourages both eating and drinking in elevators.

Repeated exposure to the smells of fast-food lunches carried by passengers has increased my level of olfactory sensitivity enabling me to identify the various brands of fast food while riding the elevator. I can smell the difference between fries from the Scottish fast food joint and fries from the toy box joint; between the cheese used for the nachos from the joint named after Peter Pan's housekeeper and the cheese used in the stuffed potato from the burger joint named after a reigning monarch.

Tact and consideration to fellow passengers have diminished to a whisper. Completely oblivious to my presence, I overheard one employee pitch to her boss the termination of another employee whose work was consistently careless, causing grief to other employees.

"Have you documented the mistakes?" asked the boss. The other employee shook her head. "Then you can't terminate her, but if you have the corroboration of other

employees you can put her on probation. Ninety-six percent of employees on second probation perform below acceptable standards. Then you can terminate her."

"She's African American," the woman added. The boss shot her a hostile look.

"Then you will have to give her some retraining or switch her around to another job and hope it works. With another wrongful termination suit in this company, I'll be gone."

Recently, while on the long ride on elevator A, the young lady next to me was listening to her headphone set. Although turned to the lowest setting, the music sounded so loud that I politely asked her to turn it off while riding on the elevator. She responded with surprising venom, using language that would make a sailor blush, to inform me that I could not abridge her personal rights. I responded that a public space of such small dimensions warranted my request. Still, she refused and stalked off at the 19th floor.

On the following morning, I had an 8 A.M. emergency dental appointment located in the 491 Post Street Medical building. Although my dentist's office was located on the 13th floor, I hit the 14th-floor button since most buildings do not use a number 13 and skip from 12 to 14 on the numbered floors. These days such methodology derives from habit rather than superstition.

At almost the 11th floor the elevator stopped. The lights went out and then flashed on at a lower wattage. An alarm rang three times. A voice from a speaker on the left panel of the elevator spoke. "Hello, can you hear me?"

I replied that I could.

"My name is Anna." The woman's voice continued speaking to me, "Are you OK?" "Please tell me your name."

"Glen Hanson," I replied. I complained that I had a toothache and asked her to contact my dentist, Dr. John Noren, and tell him I was stuck in the elevator and would not arrive on time. I laughed out loud.

"We are working on the problem. Please open the panel on the left side of the elevator door and check to make sure a flashlight is there and that it works." I followed the instructions and replied that it was and it did.

"We have called our elevator person to diagnose and repair whatever the problem is. Can you breathe alright? Is there enough air in the car?"

Before I could respond, I heard a hissing sound. Oxygen blew into the car from somewhere in the right panel. "I am in pain, I said annoyed, "Pain from a toothache, but I can breathe fine. From where is the elevator repair person coming," I asked trying to create an estimate of how long I might remain here?

"He's already on his way from Vallejo."

"What? From Vallejo," I responded really annoyed! "Why the hell do you employ someone who lives over 32 miles away and needs a 45-minute drive plus a possible further delay to cross the Bay Bridge for emergencies in a San Francisco elevator?"

There was a period of silence pierced by a deep sounding female voice, authoritative and condescending, unquestionably from some management type, most likely the archetypal Human Resource person.

"The building has a contract with this person."

"In Vallejo?" I repeated. Does the City permit you to have your elevator rescue person live that far away?"

"We can alert the fire department," the deep voice responded.

"Yes, please do that immediately and I want you to alert the Bay Area Regional Elevator Company which is the brand and installer of this elevator. I read this information from a panel: *We are proud that you are riding in a 'Regional Elevator Company product'* I want you to do this now. Got it?"

There followed a few minutes of silence during which I pondered how many times a day I had to step into an elevator. So many other City residents lived and worked 10, 20 or more stories above the ground. Yet I seldom thought about the complicated electromechanical systems that moved me up and down. Five or six minutes stranded alone in an elevator eleven stories up in a downtown building in San Francisco, while I waited for the emergency elevator repair person to arrive, seemed far longer than waiting the same minutes standing in line at a Starbucks or Pete's coffee house. My mind wandered to thoughts of a Tower of Terror like plunge into the subbasement below, followed by blunt trauma and death.

"I am here, Mr. Hanson."

"Don't let them shuffle you away Anna." I had decided that I should treat Anna as a friend. "As soon as the elevator person arrives, I want to speak with him. I don't care if you don't have an emergency maintenance contract with him. And I want to speak to the Fire department person as soon as he arrives. Tell your boss that I marked the time I made the request to her and if she delayed calling them..."

"Mr. Hanson, the fire department has arrived. I am putting him on the line now."

"Hello, Mr. Hanson. My name is Jack Stock, the emergency fire department elevator response person (EFDERP). I am waiting for the elevator people to arrive. I just talked to them on my cell. They are on their way using a police escort moving their vehicle through the traffic like an ambulance. All I can really do is to give you first aid, should you need it."

I tried to stop looking at my watch. I pictured a police car with the siren on, clearing the way for the elevator company's emergency response vehicle (ERV). I was sitting on the elevator floor and imagined the ERV had collided with a California Street cable car stopped by a car stalled on the cable car tracks. I sneezed. The continual rush of fresh, cool air into the elevator cabin had reduced the temperature, although I felt beads of perspiration dripping down my forehead, I felt chilly. Or maybe I was going into shock?

Nonsense. Suddenly I remembered my toothache. "I am in pain," I complained. "Remember I am here because I have a toothache."

"Mr. Hanson, this is Ed Forester from the elevator company. We are checking the mechanism right now. In just a few minutes we will find a solution and get you out. Trust me."

"OK. Ed. You've got my trust and I hope you brought the luck and the know-how."

"I'm still here," said Anna. We called in a psychologist to speak with you as soon as we get you out after the fire department person examines you to confirm you don't need medical attention."

"But I do need medical attention. Remember, I have a toothache and I am still in pain," I lied. My toothache pain

had temporarily stopped, getting ready, no doubt, to abscess and then make me pass out from renewed pain.

About five minutes later Ed spoke to me through the elevator's speaker. "This is Ed, Mr. Hanson. We will have you out in two or three minutes. Sit down on the floor.

"I am already on the floor."

"Good, you will feel the elevator make three short drops on its way to the tenth floor. At the tenth floor, the doors will automatically open. Don't try to get up. Stay on the floor and we will remove you out ourselves."

The elevator moved down and abruptly stopped, then repeated the move twice. The door to the tenth floor opened and Ed and Jack lifted me off the floor and sat me in a waiting wheelchair.

"Thanks to you guys," I said. An old, grey-haired woman appeared. "Anna?" I asked.

Then I requested the use of a bathroom, skipped the psychologist interview session and rode another elevator to my dentist's office. Later, after I had been redirected to an endodontist on the 15th floor and endured the first part of a root canal, I called Ed on my cell using the number on his card and asked him to tell me what problem he had found.

"Mr. Hanson, the problem with your elevator was that it had an old, leaky single bottom jack placed directly in the ground. Those in-ground cylinders are prone to corrosion and electrolysis which can lead to small leaks or catastrophic failure of the entire hydraulic system. The elevator you took did not have the update in the elevator safety code requiring that replacement cylinders have double bottoms, which minimizes serious safety and environmental risks. The building will receive a citation, pay a large fine and, of

course, replace the old with the new system. Between you and me, I think some inspector got paid off. The building management hired us to replace the old system, and make all the necessary California State five year load tests, etc. to ensure that your elevator can lift its rated load at its rated speed. These tests also ensure the integrity of the hydraulic system, including the cylinder, oil line, and valve and tank unit.”

I called the *San Francisco Span*, (as compared to the morning paper that chronicled the news and the evening paper that examined the news more closely) to report the incident. After fact-checking my story, the paper sent a reporter to my home for an interview. I related my misadventure to the Span’s ace reporter, Anita Skeeter, older sister of Rita Skeeter, reporter and gossip columnist for The Daily Prophet. To my surprise, on the next day, the Span ran this front-page story.



10

Elevator Scare in Downtown Medical Building

ANITA SKEETER

How safe are you riding in an elevator? Do you defy the odds each day when you step into an elevator car that may have skipped its mandatory scheduled testing? Do you have enough life insurance to protect your family should the elevator fail and plunge to the bottom of the building resulting in your premature death and necessitate a closed coffin at your funeral? How many bribes have building managements dished out to inspectors willing to look the other way?

Yesterday on May 7th, 46-year-old paralegal Glen Hanson, aching from the pain of a toothache, pushed the 14th-floor button for his dentist appointment in the 491 Post Street Medical Building. On the way up, the elevator failed and stopped between the 10th and eleventh floors. For thirty-two minutes, Mr. Hanson trembled with fear and suffered from pain when he found out that the elevator emergency response person was coming from Vallejo, 32 miles away and at least a 45-minute car trip. How can the city of San Francisco allow such a preposterous back-up period? When interviewed, management admitted that the further away the EFDERP lived, the cheaper the rate! Finally, the building management succumbed to pressure from the San Francisco Fire Dept. and contacted the elevator company for assistance. Only after the elevator company arrived, was the problem located and Mr.

Hanson rescued. Building management refused to discuss alleged shortcomings in elevator maintenance discovered by the elevator company.

Will you be the next victim?

(No one else contributed to this article)

The day after the article appeared, the San Francisco supervisors (in a precedent-setting single vote) unanimously passed an ordinance requiring building management to update elevator protocols and employ emergency response persons located within the downtown area.

Local radio stations and T.V. networks picked up on the story, usually mentioning that for once, the overheated, yellow rhetoric of the *San Francisco Span* might have done some good: inspectors examined hundreds of old elevators across the country mandating that deficiencies discovered be brought up to current safety standards. The article was picked up by the AP and the UP and reprinted across the nation in Los Angeles, San Diego, Chicago, New York, Atlanta, and Philadelphia newspapers, not to mention various other local T.V. network news stations.

Building managements all over the country updated their elevator maintenance schedules and reviewed their protocols to confirm that all mandatory testing had been conducted and necessary changes made to meet current building codes for elevators.

Finally, the subject and story faded away but were not forgotten. Afterward, the results of the article were always referred to as *The Hanson Effect* and for a while, I was a hero in my own city. But, alas, every hero eventually becomes a bore.



NOVEL CHAPTER

1

Dustbins

(From the novel, “Pursuit: A Victorian Entertainment”)

FELICE PICANO

I was about to fall down right there in some doorway to sleep when I spotted a few boys hurrying in a particular direction and I followed them to the Bishopsgate Railway Terminus. Adjacent to it, via a little wooden doorway, turned out to be an enormous construction site, of what would in a year or more become The Liverpool Station, the grandest in all England. There, the boys entered, then slid under some wooden hoddings and were quickly out of sight. I followed and entered into a Herculean excavation. I saw the lads walking, headed toward one particular area and I followed them and soon came to where early building of what would be the lowest portions of the new railway terminus was already in progress. Of course there was a night watchman and a dog. But they were old and half deaf, and anyway the place was gigantic, bigger than all of London, I thought, I who had seen so little of it. So I did what I saw other young boys doing – I climbed up until I was on a high rafter, out of sight of watchmen and dogs, and then I wedged myself into a wall space – and there I slept.

Soon my food gave out and my money and it was then I remembered seeing a little knot of the dirtiest boys all gathered about in one portion of the terminus site which was that best covered with canvas against the weather. These were called by the others Grimmins Lads. Unlike the other boys and men who scattered like so many black beetles at the approach of dawn, these lads remained as they were, in a group of ten, and were met by a horse drawn dray at morn which took them away, and after nightfall I was told it brought them back there to sleep. Unlike the rest of us too, they were a compact and unified group, staunchly defending their little territory and sharing drink and vittles amongst themselves and even lighting a fire for warmth. How they had treasoned the watchman and dog I never found out: those guardians never went near them.

That one morning as they gathered where they were used to meeting the dray, hunger sparked me to dare approach them, and I asked if they were going to work. Two of them my age looked me up and down slowly, and one said, "Dustbins!" Before I could utter more than, "Might I come work there too at Dustbins?" we heard the clopping of a well shod horse and it pulled up, and they all clambered up into the open back of it, behind the driver. He turned round seeing me standing there and said, "What's this then?"

"He wants to come." One of the boys I had been talking to said!

"Dustbins," said I, not knowing a thing of what I was saying, and thinking perhaps that it was a place of especial manufacture.

"Well, then, let's take a look." He leapt off and came down to look me over. If the boys were the dirtiest boys I'd ever seen, he was the very cleanest man. He was tall, and not

yet forty years of age, with yellow hair which shone as though newly washed. His face and neck were pale yet not quite pink, and so astoundingly clear they had a sort of glow. His jacket and coat were simple, his trousers equally so, but immaculately unsoiled. His gloves, albeit ecru, were the most unspotted I had ever laid eyes on. Coming up to me, he spun me about like a top, then pulled up my lip as one does a horse. He felt of my arms and legs. All the time making little comments. Of the teeth "straight!" Of the arms, "fat" of the legs "strong."

"I need employment, sir," I said the near-fatal words.

"Do you now? But does employment need you? Does ...," he paused for dramatic effect, and stared me down, "Does the Dustbins need you, you.... young Scallop?" He looked back at the boys gathered to watch. "Crayfish. How much did you earn last year?"

"Six quid to keep for myself," the filthy boy replied instantly.

"Lobster Tail? You?"

"Seven and Six."

"Prawn?"

"Nine and three."

"Nine and three!" the man remarked with a little whistle. "Now that's employment, my little Scallop, for you are fat like a Lower Thames scallop, isn't he, Oyster?"

"Fat as an oyster," replied little Oyster.

"We labor six days and rest the Sabbath," this very clean man said. The sixth day is your earning. All the rest, you labor for me. For this labor you shall receive ale, pies, broth, bread and tarts and stews. Is this satisfactory... my young Scallop?"

"It's satisfactory."

"Good! I am Andrew Marvell Grimmins, yes, yes, named after the great poet. You from henceforth are Scallop. And you are henceforth a Grimmins Lad. Welcome him all." And so doing he lifted me with one hand and tossed me atop the others. I tumbled and was pinched and pummeled in welcome by three or four lads. And soon enough our free-for-all was made even more chaotic when Grimmins got on the driver's shelf and started up the dray. Then we must hold on to either side as she bucked and cavorted all the way to the ...

I believe I've mentioned that I'd seen very little of London-town. Indeed, the previous day's sordid and difficult travels were the greatest amount of travel I'd ever done in my short life. You may imagine then how, once all the jostling was at last done with, how I sat and gaped almost open-mouthed at all about me.

"Catching flies is he?" said Lobster Tail and shut my mouth for me.

The dray headed directly south along Bishopsgate, colourfully crossing Threadneedle Street then Cornhill Street and suddenly becoming a new thoroughfare, this one called Grace Church Street surrounded by much older structures. To our left was Leadenhall Market: "A cinch to pinch," according to Prawn, though what he meant I only would come to know later. There ahead of us was the oldest part of the city, with Eastcheap Street's many shops, and the enormous – to my eyes – Monument sitting there on its own little island amidst all the dray, cab, hackney, omnibus, landau, closed-coach, horse and rider and pedestrian traffic. Soon we had attained to King William Street and there in the distance lay the amazing, the stupefying, the astonishing London Bridge and Tower themselves. I'd heard and read of

them often enough in my Reader. If only... But no we swung suddenly left onto Lower Thames Street. Buildings and events happened too quickly for me to make them out or follow the other boy's words and what follows is more a reconstruction from many such rides over many more months, allowing me to point out the enormous and greatly pungent Billingsgate Fish Market, and the equally elderly Customs House, put up by Sir Christopher Wren, that bird of beauty.

Our way lay just beyond those contrasting edifices: one so slapdash and seething with life, the older so starched and reticent. And there, in a tiny lane's cul de sac with only a few many leveled house-fronts, lay what would become the new centre of my life. The dray stopped, A.M. Grimmins slid off his driver's box, but not before checking the rutted street below his step for traces of ordure and dirty water. As he got down, he undid the whitest handkerchief I'd ever laid eyes on and wiped the driver's seat, then covered it over with sort of a canvas tarpaulin.

By now his Lads were fallen or leapt or pushed out of the dray and tumbling about and swotting each other before the middle and most dilapidated of three doorways that appeared to all lean in toward each other.

The Lads made way for Grimmins, who wiped off a substantial sized key before and after fitting it to the boy's-eye-high lock, and who then stepped quickly away as the lads stumbled, tumbled, leap-frogged and otherwise gamboled their way in through the narrow dark hallway. I had held back and A.M. Grimmins now swanned a languid hand bidding me enter. I could feel him darken the doorway and shut and lock it behind me.

From the moment I'd heard the word Dustbins, I'd developed certain preconceptions of what I might discover, naturally enough. First, and most foremost I expected to encounter a mile of dust, dirt, and garbage. Probably because the boys were so utterly unwashed, it would make great sense. Secondly I'd presupposed that it was a sobriquet for a particularly dusty and or dirty manufactory of some unknown household object – again accounting for their overwhelming physical offensiveness.

What I beheld, and all the more wonder that it opened out as rapidly and unexpectedly huge as a balloon does from its minute air tube, was a five storey high, partly celined, glass windowed, mountain of refuse. Well, official and domestic debris is more accurate. In the early morning sunlight, the cyclopean, irregular, vast mounds of it sparkled and glittered. And it was that very sparkle that we lads were most after. For this huge collection of locally residential, Court, and commercial wastage was dropped here untouched, unsorted, unlooked at by those who amassed it from out of back alley, side street, below street, and stable side refuse cannisters. Separated from the organic ilk of filth—for the greater part – it was primarily and overpoweringly dry! So dry, that within hours I would be sniffing (and not me alone) ; in a few more hours, my nose would suddenly erupt in rivulets of red blood to the cheers of whatever other Lads were nearby – "Look at, him? He's got a gusher," Dungeness cried in delight.

Secondarily, and this is connected with the first, the waste was essentially composed of paper products even though it was predominantly dove to dark gray en masse, not white like most of the paper itself. Thirdly, and most importantly, it was unsorted. Sorting or sifting through it was to be our own lovely work. For which our hands must have

gloves of a sort – One of our elders, Crustacean, tossed me a series of cloth ragstrips and displayed for me upon his filthy digits how to wrap them about my hands and tuck them in. “Be a mass of bloody ,ands, he’d be, without,” Crustacean sniggered at the for-him-evidently happy thought.

Each of us had our own unique territory within that Herculean accumulation: mine own was known as “Lesser Byward,” as it seemed to point in the general direction of that external lane. Of course this was, by the Lads’ standards, one of the more inferior locales. The latter being evaluated by the criteria of how much “acteral swag” according to Crustacean, was once or might be consistently obtained from any particular vicinity. As the pile-up varied from day to day, this seemed like purest mythology to me, but Lads had been known to have had each other’s noses broken in arguments over someone else taking their “cherce lanes.”

I soon discovered after we entered that our work was simply to enter our “lanes” with a sort of swimming motion, hoping to dislodge, disturb and otherwise loosen up that mountain of debris a bit, but not too much. Once “inside” which is to say some three to four feet deep, so we were barely visible from outside it, we were to begin picking through and locating treasure. We each wore a cloth bag across our front, much like a grocer’s apron, in which to place the “swag”, and out of which it would later be dropped and sorted more carefully.

As with any apprenticeship to any craft, no matter how peculiar or arcane, there were overriding rules as well as well proven taboos. One should not ever go so deep or so low, into one’s lane that one risked being trapped by a “fall over” or even worse, a “cave-in”. Such had once happened to poor little SeaUrchin, who had since that day never been located again. Vague rustlings and ever fainter cries for help lasting

nearly another week had been heard resulting from his disappearance down, down, deeply down into his lane, but the lad himself was never seen alive again and at last was given up for lost, his name a warning to all – or at least to me, as in “Don’t be an Urchin, eh, there, Scallop!”

As worse destiny was “holding back” on one of Andrew Marvell Grimmins’ five days. What one did on one’s own day mattered not. But that very clean man could become – I was assured by each and sundry boy – a veritable “demon outta very hell” according to Little Tarpon, who had witnessed one such ill-judged holding back of a discarded paste jewel tiara by the one unfortunate boy – Ocean Anemone. “Thrashed?” asked I, who’d only recently found out such a thing was possible in life. “Near skinned alive,” I was assured. “If Lobs and me hadn’t run inbertwixt him and Nemo get away, he have no rear left to ever be caned agin, never mind sit ‘pon.” Forbidden to ever again to reenter those holy gates, Anemone supposedly languished outside long enough to seen and then be dragged inside the next tall edifice by a very tall, elderly Old Maid, whom – and this was said with such horror it took me a while to make out – bathed the boy repeatedly and so assiduously that he was rendered unrecognizable. “‘Ereafter, E smelled like a flaking roose,” Tarpon wrinkled his nose in disgust at his fellow boy’s heartrending fate. “Schooled to this day, indoors and out. Wears a cravat.” And then, the most crushing condemnation of all from any true Grimmins Lad. E’ carries nothing greater in his pocket than a Ha’pence!” sneered Lobster Tail.

The first day, I shared Little Tarpon’s lane, he being the slimmest and lightest of weight, and he needs must show me how to obtain treasures out of the great heap of waste, which contained so many brightly false leads, and whereto and where how as a rule I might be assured of obtaining some

worthwhile object. In this manner did I quickly learn that sealing wax was of great use. One pulled out a letter and if it were waxed, as so very many official papers were, one determined by fingering it how thick the wax was. If were of a certain thickness, it was valuable and might be scraped off and re-melted, re-molded into tapers, and Andrew Marvell Grimmins – or one of his Lads – profit thereby.

Any metal whatever was to be retrieved, whether it be partial, scrap, sliver or whole; from chamber-pot to pen squib to ale tankard, it could be profitable. Similarly, any crockery or pottery, from porcelain down to grub-stone, was to be gathered. Fur, cloth, leather, quill, pencil-lead, any and all wood larger beyond a splinter was to be taken too. It soon became astonishingly remarkable to me what folk did discard. Toy boats with half-masts and parchment sails; paste pots still one quarter filled of glop; copper finger-rings missing only their inset stone; candle ends; foxed notebooks; girdled book spines without boards; pen nibs by the hundred-fold; rancid lamp oil – including a half litre once of quite redolent spermaceti; scrimshaw and uncarved ivory combs and knitting needles; canvas and other heavy sail cloths; wooden boxes of all sizes; unused stationery paper of the thickest, softest, weave and finish; little blackened metal tubs still holding a smudge of ink; iron nails, bent or straight; brass door fixtures, tarnished or not; sheared off crystal paperweights; teak and ebony wooden back teeth; half-wigs and demi-perukes – especially those days when the Holborn Courts dust-drays delivered to us; hair dye in little cyan bottles; carpet ends; bent to be woven basket osiers; folded-into-triangle papers of unknown pharmaceuticals – we invariably licked them off and gulped them down, and attempted to discern any specific reaction – usually putting on a great show of swooning, in pretence of a reaction.

I returned to the Grimmins choice construction site after we had feasted every night, our supper being of whatever unspoiled and unrancid foodstuffs any of had come upon that day, in addition to regular portions of small, yeasty meat pies and enough ale to get the younger of us sleepy, all of it ordered by Grimmins at a bulk rate from a local tavern known as the Deaf Hound.

That night I slept in surprising comfort and warmth, exhausted, surrounded and yet not overly bothered by the rank aromas of many dirty boys. By the second evening and onward, I would fall to sleep instantly and awaken in an hour or so to hear one or two of the older Lads telling stories only to quickly fall asleep again.

Within a week, I had made my first “find”, one that I might keep myself – a particularly handsome green marble lamp base, cracked neatly in half, “by some pox-daft nobleman” opined Crustacean, and ringed in brass – that Grimmins then bought off me for a Quid. That was more money than I’d ever seen.

Like the other Lads, I would pick up whatever bits of cloth or ornamentation Grimmins disdained and employ them to spottily embellish my increasingly dirty clothing;

One other Sunday when some of us were “taking the air” as a laughing young woman walking with a group of young people came up to me and while holding her handkerchief in front of her face, said “You are aware, young man, that the the brooch upon your breast contains a precious stone?”

I had found the brooch the day before, on one of my own days, but I hadn’t yet shown it to Grimmins, who had been otherwise occupied, and I was so surprised by the

encounter, that I replied. "I found it in a dustbin," so that she would know I'd not stolen it.

"Then you are fortunate indeed, although your appearance suggests that you actually rather a great deal rendezvous in dustbins," she added, with good humour. "The stone is real. It's called a Beryl. And that one looks to weigh five or six carats."

"Would you like it, Miss?" I offered to remove it.

She laughed "I don't have enough money to pay you for it, and as I am a proper young lady I may not accept a gift from a stranger," said she, then moved away.

"Is it worth a Quid then?" I asked, the amount Grimmins commonly offered.

"Five Guineas at least," said she, turning around to whisper it.

I unpinned it from my chest, wrapped it in cloth, and hid it upon my person. This act would prove crucially serviceable in later days, and I would thank that young lady for it.



2

At Raven's End

From the novel, "Note (*working title*)"

MEHREEN AHMED

At Raven's End the Blue Cafe hummed a note of non-rhythmic jingle. Mila Chowdhury, sat with a glass of sparkling water reading Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*; deep in reading, she took a sip occasionally. As it stands, the passages of infidelity bothered her more than the stylistic complexity of the book. It resonated something that she did not wish to remember. A wind picked up just outside the glassed window. Her attention diverted because of an intermittent, yet twiggy knock; a tall gum tree stood against the pane; a sudden blast tore off a branch and felled it on the sill. She looked at it briefly and resumed with her study of characters.

A sea of snow; the whispering winds of quietness. She reflected on a placid icy slope of a winter afternoon; silent like a still painting, her face stood out amongst the cafe crowd. Not a sore thumb, as there were others like her too, but with more sprightly, appealing demeanours. It eluded her. Carefree, she thought. Something tore her in the gut. She conferred with an inner self and tried to understand a joy colluded with despair. Not known to her, why had it always been like that? To not be able to separate the clashing emotions fused within the unmarked waves of the soul. Her soul never at peace, oscillated between here and there; between a temporary world of the body and elsewhere, a life

of the mind or of the spirit. Of the mind, she noted with care. An inner self of being, where dreams took place, more so in hibernation. Hibernation was the word. That was a long journey. It offered no reprieve from dreaming on a continuum. In awakening, the tall green grass now turned into straw. Dehydration caused hallucination. The letter way too late, Mila's fate could have turned. But no, that was not written in the stars. Love written off. She couldn't break someone's heart. Accepting the letter meant a defeat for Papri. Married, yes but she had married him, while his realisation of love for Mila came later. He was already married but full of dilemma. Papri never knew. She had nowhere else to go. He married her, then left her by herself. Long overdue. Forlorn, she didn't know what happened to him. Mila received his love letters, one too many. An imminent affair loomed at her doorstep; knocked her over. She read the letter but had not responded.

A marriage of the heart very well could have been. But the grass had been dehydrated by then. The dehydrated grass turned into straw. Then the brittle straw clung on to the earth for dear life. I went into quiet hibernation. Now there was a stream of straw whose tortuous roots lay rooted to the soil. The soil made of sand caved into its roots. Nurtured it not, the soil lay hollow. Then there was a hole. A hole in the soil where I slept in awakening and I dreamt of nothing. But hunger acted as fuel. A hunger she ate all day. She walked in a dream. Dream of life. Listening to the spring birds, broke the silence of the morn. There was silence in her heart. It whispered, but a dirge. It was spring. Love in the air.

The air was fresh; she sat under an apple tree. Fresh red apples hung over. An apple tree burdened with fruit. Burdened. Her heavy heart burdened; so many memories. If one could paint them, then there would be many shades of

red. She buried herself deeper into the burrow. The hole which she clawed. She picked up the dirt with her own two hands. The dirt which slithered between the five fingers. It slithered right through. The waves of her thoughts flowed undulated. She wanted to see him now. After many seasons, she wanted to know what he looked like. She gave him up for Papri because Papri was a homeless orphan. Mila had given him away only to find him after all these years. Age and ageing broke her. Broken bones but not bad bones. Would it be bad to want him back in her life? She didn't have a single bad bone they had said. Alas! It was the paradox that killed her. The poisoned ivy crushed her unduly. Creepers, the poison, crept up the spine. The love potion, at its best worked like magic, at its worst a delusion. Maybe, it was delusion. She never really wanted him. She was better off without him, perhaps. Leave him to his nemesis, to his Papri, one that he married, then he had second thoughts and wished that he had not married for he loved Mila. That was what he thought. And his thought turned in a while, and then he took Papri back. She was soft and sensitive. She used to say, this world too harsh; far too harsh. Yes, it perhaps was for her, who never cared to do much. She dug deeper into her trench. Mila dodged a bullet. It could have taken its toll. He would never have understood. Much too much, far more engrossed, with money and matter. Mila on the other hand, soared on the wings of poesy. It would not have worked out for Mila. A realisation, it was better this way. Mila pulled herself up, out of the burrow. The leaves under the tree are crunchy and brown.

Brown, natural process of decay; brown, because they paved a way to new life. The dehydrated grass had turned into straw, when I hibernated. Now the straw turned back into green grass. I felt content. Shades of pink turned her reds

around. She felt not just content but young again. She was a sheaf of corn; the life giving properties of the sun; sprinklings of water. Back to the waves where life began as did hope and optimism. Optimism and hope replaced the drought of the soul, and the nihilism of her thoughts.

She left her unfinished book. She tried to concentrate and tried to feel engrossed. But her concentration failed her or the lack. She burst into Dhanmondi Lake. She waited for Papri, by the Dhanmondi Lake. It wasn't a date as such, for this meeting between two female friends couldn't be conceptualised as a date in their kind of upbringing or philosophy. They just planned last night that she would meet her here and that was it. But another accidental meeting surprised her. It was with him instead. It knocked her over. He was welcome, of course to join the party, by all means but he surprised her all the same because he wouldn't have a clue as to where to find them. But he did all right. Papri must have mentioned to him incidentally and he surprised me with his appearance.

These things happened amongst young people. More so, if someone was engaged to get married or something like that. Surreptitious meetings, often clandestine, took place in the dark alleys of Dewanjunk in old Dhaka, where lovers would kiss and unite at sun-set when the evening azan had imbued the atmosphere and heard from the tall minarets of the mosques above; the muezzin's coarse voice mediated through the high-pitched microphone at that time of the day gave distinct feel of emergency to the believer to scurry along for the evening prayer. For Maghrib was offered just before sun-set, when bats self-organise to fly together in choreographed dance towards an unknown mission or perhaps towards a destination which eluded everyone. Like a huge flying, alien ship down the ocean of a skyline, they set

off at this indeterminate hour of day or the night known as the dusk. Hence, the emergency, because Magrib had to be offered within that very short time of the afternoon, chasing the dim daylight into darkness.

She didn't know his name then. He sat down by her, and said his name was Rahim, Rahim Ali. Oh! What an odd name she thought. It wasn't one of those trendy names like Jubair, Sohail or Iftakhar, names that she thought left a mark. That was such an ordinary name, really had an old fashioned, and conservative ring to it. Rahim Ali? Rahim meant to bestow kindness. It was okay as far as the meaning was concerned but to think of the sound, what kind of a name was that? Well, it wouldn't be his fault of course, but his parents' who thought that little boy would grow up to be kind. She choked on a giggle thinking of how he, Rahim Ali, now that she knew his name sat down casually looking at her as if they had long acquaintance. But Rahim saw that she gulped a giggle. He didn't say much but smiled. He also had a skull cap that mullahs usually wear regardless of prayer times. She surpassed an urge to tease him by telling him that she felt like a smoke. Rahim would probably have a cardiac arrest and would perhaps leave her in peace in this tranquil moment by the Dhanmondi Lake. But she couldn't because he was also betrothed to her best friend Papri, the soft petal that she was. Rahim continued to look at her as though he was about to divulge something. It was getting a bit embarrassing for Mila who tried to avert her gaze. Averting my gaze was easier than recognising that someone was not right with this relationship. She looked at his skull cap momentarily, and knew straight away that he was not for her. Then he started on a conversation that confirmed her prediction of this character who had no sense of literariness about him. He struck a conversation about some house he owned back in the

USA. And how good his new job was. He was an MBA from the university of Urbana-Champaign. This new position of a professor was a great academic opportunity. Of course, it was but this conversation was stifling. It was good in the marriage market of a society where the notion of a good marriage hinges squarely on the salary of the groom and his job postings. He was a good catch for Parpi surely, or else who was going to marry her. An orphan growing up in his sister's home is no better than the stray down the alley who is a permanent binger of the open garbage bin. But Papri's situation was better. She had a roof over her head and three healthy meals a day. However, in the marriage market of the day, since it was difficult to find a suitable man for uneducated, orphan women, her low profile and lack of confidence didn't help. However, her fair skin colour and delicate features could be marked as high points in the bid for a suitable man.

"What if I never find a man," she'd said to Mila once over tea in the verandah of her sister's balcony.

"Well, if you never find anyone, you just never get married, I guess. You die an old maid," Mila answered.

"Old maid? In this house? My sister couldn't wait to marry me off," she said.

Mila thought of her many boyfriends, who would date her on a regular basis, but not propose to her. She wondered why that happened. Papri had many at different stages of her life and of different ages too. Some were vastly older than her, while others younger. Even as young as eighteen, when her age was at least twenty-five. Tender age always didn't mean, immature. At least she wasn't; she was pretty in that way. That, her heyday, certainly began early. When she went to school with a bag-pack on her shoulders. She walked down

the alley in black shoes, white dress wrapped over her like a pinafore. Trying to walk steadily, something that she never bothered, skipped lightly under the bowing bamboo bush. In rain, when the sombre clouds sat high over the same bamboo, she waited under to get drenched. Often soaked, but fever or not, she cared less. Rather didn't care much at all if she could take the tests on time or not. Yes, she failed quite a bit. Her progress report was always in the red. Green was passed, she never passed. Then with her parents' sudden death, she became an orphan overnight. She walked up to the bamboo bush and simply cried her heart out. The bush stood stooped. Stooped like a bent spine never to be straightened. Never to understand the pangs of her lonely heart but just listened. It listened because there was nothing else it could do. There was no movement in them. Life, but lifelessness more like it. Silent. It said nothing, did nothing, only wavered occasionally in the gusty winds. The rest was just nothing. Nothingness, well what of it? There was nothing in nothingness, truly, but something for sure was there. Truth was revealed in meditation, they said. What truth could the future hold? What was there besides empty meditation? A lot of questions. Some cosmic orders, others more mundane. Why? Why did we suffer so? What have we done to suffer like this? God punished us for no reason or reasons off-limits to us. The bamboo bush really meant something. A friend, who would only just listen and not talk. A friendship of a non-existent relationship, but a relationship nevertheless. The stooping bamboo bush listened, gave her a patient hearing and did not talk back. All these had a perfunctory function of some sort of an understanding counsellor. It earned a position of trust in her young mind, when she unburdened herself completely – crying to it, talking to it about a certain harshness of life she didn't quite understand. She didn't

understand why her parents had to die which caused her so much grief. Her elder sister, much older than her about fifteen years, could become a surrogate mother, yes and a loving mother at that but she was married and had a family of her own. If she became a burden at ten, then that would have to be a lifelong commitment, a burden at worse. The bamboo bush listened without a word, winds rustled nothings through and around. Satisfied, yes, she was satisfied. Her heart heaved less and less. She found her bearings here. This place which became a spot of solace, she couldn't stay away, summer, winter, fall or spring, the bamboo bush, an extension of herself, couldn't be parted with in the end. The rain water dripped down the bamboo bush. Skies above, far above somewhere the greyness matched. It matched not above or below but at the core, not the core of the earth, for it was all a connected cycle. It matched the colour of her mood, the greyness of the heart, of an organic interconnection. The rain, the bamboo bush, the grey skies, her heightened mood, all in one chain of a cosmic order. Separate, yet connected. Connected through a natural network. She loved her life, she hated her life, she just didn't know what to do with her life anymore, her purpled sufferings heightened like the jacarandas under a silent, grey sky.

She sensed a gap in her relationship with her parents when they lived. Now they are dead. A frightened little girl she was, stricken with grief, she hid under the bed, when her father lapsed into one of his bloody moods, throwing things around, breaking them and then crushing them under his two feet. His raging madness because someone in the house did something wrong. Perhaps, her mother did something wrong. Who knew? Who knew? But she saw them all, the deep dents in the furniture, the torn up books, the pages full

of words marked the corners of a mosaic hallway. Living words popped out of the pages and danced before her; she thought that was insane; the trashing, the yelling, and more importantly the permanent scarring of her. This frightened, young soul. Protection? No, her mother, a weakling herself did not even attempt to protect her. She just didn't know how to. But the mother felt she was being chided every time her daughter was. A weakling, she became a complicit by default. A zipper. It didn't zip. The zipper kept getting undone in the middle. Zipper no matter how many times, one zipped it up and down it just kept getting undone. There was a gap in between those two jagged lines. They could be traced but not mended. The zipper had to be thrown out and a new zipper had to be bought. A water-tight compartment for the grief to be housed. One lock and one key for the soul, and the grief. For her relationship could never be fixed. Time and time again, the sun set within its hollow of brightness. Futile, to mend a relationship that went far, too far out of reach.



PLAY

1

Date Rape

GARY BECK

Scene 1

(Sunday morning. The living room of the Bennett family.
Enter Jennifer. Distraught. Megan enters.)

Megan: "What's wrong with you? You've been walking around this morning like death warmed over. Are you sick?"

Jennifer: "I'm not sick."

Megan: "Then what is it?"

Jennifer (She looks around to be sure no one can hear her) "I was raped."

Megan: "Oh, no. (she rushes to Jennifer and hugs her) When?"

Jennifer: "Last night. At a frat party." (she cries)

Megan: "My poor baby. (comforts her) Tell me about it."

Jennifer: "A guy in my lit class invited me to the Lacrosse team party. Larry was away this weekend, so I went. There was a lot of drinking, pot smoking, I think some of them were snorting coke. I didn't like it, but it

didn't threaten me. People were dancing and having fun. Ron, the guy who invited me, offered me coke, but I refused. He got me a beer and we danced. I started feeling dizzy and he led me to another room. I guess I passed out, because the next thing I knew when I woke up was my clothes were off, he was on top of me and he was inside me. (Jennifer looks at Megan, horrified) He was doing it to me. I tried to push him off, but I could barely move. It was hard to talk, but I said: 'Stop. Get off me. Please stop'. But he kept on until he came in me, moaning like an animal." (She breaks down sobbing)

Megan: (comforts her, asks) "What happened after that?"

Jennifer: "He left. I found my clothes, got dressed and snuck out of there. I didn't want anyone to see me. When I got back to the dorm I was so agitated I couldn't stay there. I was afraid I'd go crazy. So I came home."

Megan: "Well we've got things to do."

Jennifer: "What?"

Megan: "First we've got to go the emergency room and get you examined and let them take DNA samples of your attacker. Then we got to the police and report it..."

Jennifer: "I don't know if I can deal with that..."

Megan: "You've got to. Monday morning we'll go to the school and report it."

Jennifer: "No. I can't. Everybody'll know."

Megan: "You didn't do anything wrong. He did. Let them look at him. It sounds like he gave you that date rape drug, then assaulted you. He's a criminal. You're an innocent victim. (Megan hugs her and whispers) If you don't have him arrested, the same thing that happened to me will happen to you."

Jennifer: "What do you mean?"

Megan: "I was raped when I was your age."

Jennifer: "Oh, Megan. I didn't know"

Megan: "I was so ashamed I didn't tell anyone. I started drinking, had panic attacks, became depressed and dropped out of school. When I finally told Mom, she took me to the doctor and he diagnosed me with post-traumatic-stress-disorder."

Jennifer: "I had no idea. Mom told me you were sick, but she never explained what was wrong."

Megan: "What did you expect? You were 12 years old. She couldn't tell you I was raped.

You were an innocent kid. You wouldn't have been able to deal with that."

Jennifer: "Someone should have told me something to make me understand what was wrong with you. All they said was you were sick."

Megan: "It took me a year to finally tell Mom what happened. By that time I was an alcoholic. I was miserable and had lost control of my life, which was a mess.

I was beginning to think about suicide. Out of desperation I told Mom. She got me help, but

it took two years and a lot of money we couldn't afford before I got back on my feet. Then I went back to school and rebuilt my life."

Jennifer: "I wish knew. Maybe I could have helped."

Megan: "There was nothing you could have done. Now we have to make sure the same kind of thing doesn't happen to you. I know what you're going through. I was there. You have to protect yourself. The only way to do it is by overcoming your shame and feelings of guilt that it was your fault, then facing what has to be done."

Jennifer: "I don't know if I can. It's so humiliating."

Megan: "That's why it's so important to get treatment, with proof that it happened, and have your attacker arrested. He'll be the one who's humiliated when he's in jail."

Jennifer: "Alright. I'll do it. But you've got to go with me."

Megan: "Of course, Jen. I'll stay with you every step of the way. First you've got to tell Mom and Dad."

Jennifer: "Do I have to?"

Megan: "Sure. They'll be part of your support system. We'll need them."

Jennifer: (Hugs Megan) "Thanks, Meg. Last night I thought I'd die of shame. As long as you're with me I can face it."

Megan: "All the way, sis." (exit Jennifer, Megan)

Scene 2

(Late afternoon. The Bennett family living room. enter Jennifer. Megan leads in Julia and Mitchell Bennett)

Mitchell: "What's up? We were about to take a power walk before dinner."

Megan: "Jennifer has something to tell you."

Julia: "I assume that's why you brought us here. What is it?"

Jennifer: (Megan gestures for Jennifer to speak. Jennifer stares at her parents for a moment)

"There's no easy way for me to say this. I was raped last night."

Julia: "No. No". (Rushes to her. Mitchell stands there stunned. Then slowly goes to her and hugs her. Julia and Jennifer are crying. Mitchell is miserable)

Megan: "We went to the hospital and they checked Jen thoroughly. They found some of his hair on her clothes and one of his pubic hairs. They also found his semen on her abdomen, even though he used a condom. They tested her blood which still had a heavy presence of Ryphonol. There was almost no alcohol level, which proved she wasn't drunk. Then we went to the police station, spoke to a detective and filed a complaint. We gave them the medical records and after they questioned Jen they issued a warrant for his arrest. Jen was terrific. You can understand how she was feeling, but she did everything right."

Julia: "Well thank heavens for that. We couldn't survive another case of a daughter keeping her mouth shut and going nuts."

Megan: "Mom! Don't talk like that. Jennifer did us proud. She actually asked the detectives if they could arrest the guy in class."

Mitchell: "Good for you, Jen. That took nerve. (He pats her fondly) We're here for you. Whatever you need we'll get for you."

Jennifer: "Thanks, Dad. I'm glad you're not mad at me."

Mitchell: "Of course not. It's him I'm mad at. If they don't send him to jail I'll get him."

Julia: "Don't talk that way, Mitch. Jen was smart enough to go to the police. They'll take care of him. You don't have to pound your chest like the righteous avenger."

Mitchell: "Are you telling me I can't hate the guy who violated my daughter?"

Julia: "No, Mitch. Just don't stir her up. She's going through enough as it is."

Mitchell: "I know this is hard for you, Jen, but you did the right thing going to the police. This way everyone'll know the scumbag'll get what he deserves."

(Jennifer nods, beginning to believe that she can deal with the nightmare.)

Megan: "I told her what happened to me."

Julia: "Did you tell her what it cost us because you didn't have the sense to speak up?"

Megan: "No, Mom. I thought it was more important to help her, rather than tell her about how much you spent on doctors, therapy and medication."

Mitchell: "We did whatever we had to in order to save our daughter. Just like we'll do for Jennifer."

Julia: "Judging by how sensibly she's dealing with this, she won't need addiction rehab, or hospitalization."

Megan: "That's a little cold-blooded, Mom."

Julia: "I didn't mean it like that. We're still paying off our debt from your treatment. We just couldn't afford another major treatment expense."

Mitchell: "Let's stop talking about money and do whatever we have to take care of Jen."

Julie: "Of course. That's what we all want." (exit all)

Scene 3

(Sunday evening. The living room of the Bennett family. Enter Jennifer and Larry)

Jennifer: "I have something to tell you."

Larry: "Let me guess. You're not going to sneak into my dorm room tonight."

Jennifer: "No. It's something serious."

Larry: "Like what?"

Jennifer: (She hesitates) "I was raped last night."

Larry: "What?"

Jennifer: "You heard me."

- Larry: "Are you joking?"
- Jennifer: "No. It happened."
- Larry: (Getting upset) "How?"
- Jennifer: "I went to a frat party last night..."
- Larry: (Amazed) "Why did you go to a frat party?"
- Jennifer: "You weren't here. It was Saturday night. I was bored, so I accepted an invitation from a Lacrosse player."
- Larry: (Indignant) "You went on a date?"
- Jennifer: "It wasn't a date. It was a party."
- Larry: "Some guy asked you and you went? Sounds like a date to me."
- Jennifer: "That's not important. I'm trying to tell you what happened to me."
- Larry: "So you went out with this guy and he raped you?"
- Jennifer: "I didn't go out with him. I met him there. He gave me a drink that was drugged and I passed out. When I woke up he was raping me."
- Larry: "Did you try to stop him?"
- Jennifer: (Outraged) "Of course I did. I had trouble speaking, but I told him to stop. I was so groggy that I couldn't resist."
- Larry: "Did you enjoy it?"
- Jennifer: "Are you crazy? How can you ask that?"
- Larry: "You know what they say. Most rapes are invited by the way women dress and act."

Jennifer: "I don't believe you said that. I was drugged and overpowered. It wasn't my choice. I was violated. Don't you understand that?"

Larry: "It wouldn't have happened if you didn't go to the party."

Jennifer: "Are you saying I asked for it?"

Larry: "What else should I think? You went out with a strange guy to a frat party. We know what happens at those kind of parties."

Jennifer: "I hoped you'd understand and care about what happened to me."

Larry: "What do you want me to do? Go find the guy and beat him up?"

Jennifer: "I expect you to be concerned that something terrible happened to me. Instead you're saying it was my fault."

Larry: "Well you shouldn't have been there."

Jennifer: (Crying) "You're just making it worse. Get out of here."

(Larry shakes his head angrily and stalks out. Jennifer exits.)

Scene 4

(Evening. The living room of the Bennett family. Enter Jennifer, then Megan)

Megan: "So how did it go?"

Jennifer: "Not good. He thinks it's my fault I got raped because I went to a frat party."

Megan: "Why the lousy bastard. What did he say?"

Jennifer: "That if I didn't go out on a date it wouldn't have happened."

- Megan: "I'm so sorry. I thought he was a nice guy, though I didn't know him very well."
- Jennifer: "I couldn't believe he blamed me. He was always so nice. It was a shock to find out how he really felt."
- Megan: "Just remember that guys don't always know how to deal with something like this. It can threaten their masculinity."
- Jennifer: "Are you defending him?"
- Megan: "No. I'm just trying to be fair."
- Jennifer: "Well don't. He turned out to be an insensitive jerk."
- Megan: "Better to find out now, when you have a support system and can do without him."
- Jennifer: "That's one way of looking at it."
- Megan: "You have to develop a different mindset now. You were victimized. That doesn't mean you're helpless. Someone took advantage of you, but you began fighting back today. That shows character. It may take some time, but you'll come out stronger from this."
- Jennifer: "It doesn't feel like that."
- Megan: "Give it some time. You'll see. You're a survivor. You'll come out of this alright."
- Jennifer: "I hope you're right. But how can I ever trust a guy after this?" (Exit Jennifer and Megan)



ARTICLE

1

Contextualizing Sense, Sensibility and Conflicts of Modernization in *The Door and the World*: A Study of Select Poems by Dr Chandra Shekhar Dubey

REEMA DEVI

Abstract

The present paper intends to study the select poems of a prolific writer Prof. Chandra Shekhar Dubey from his anthology *The Door and the World*. The selected poems share similar themes of man's unsatiated desires for worldly things. The poet reveals the ferocious aspect of humans toward nature and tradition. He portrays how man has become ignorant of his roots of existence in the face of modernization. His heart aches observing the man's hypocritical attitude in the context of cultural significance. The selected poems reflect the concern of the poet about the multi-level changes in the society whether structural, cultural, or traditional. They exhibit how modernization has permeated the core of traditional values and sucked the pleasure from man's heart. "Micro review" in TIMESOFINDIA.COM also testifies the poems as the portrayal of the poet's sentiments, sensibilities, and conflicts of modern life.

Keywords: Sensitivity, modernization, hypocrisy, traditional values, culture, civilization.

Introduction

The poet shows sensitivity towards man, culture, and nature by highlighting the invisible crumbling walls of human existence. He presents a gruesome picture of human life in a modern social setting. Through his poems, he highlights the poignant images of human action of exploitation and destruction of civilization. He indicates how modern man is hollow and hypocrite from within, deceiving himself with fake smiles concealing his loneliness. Isolation, alienation and conflicts with modernization are substituting ancient customs, cultures and civilization. Man has become slave to his own physical needs and desires; he has put his ultimate purpose of life at stake. His very existence revolves around the mundane routine and so-called modern life. The poet, through his poems, exhibits his concern and pain for the sake of culture and tradition, the core value of human life; the absence of which creates nothing but hollowness. This hollowness devoid of main components of traditional values would engulf the pleasure and prosperity of humanity.

Door

The poem 'Door' is an extended metaphor that connotes different meanings of the door. At a time, it serves as a gateway to both heaven and earth; and at a time, it remains inconspicuous to the human faculty. The poet depicts the concealed vision behind the door, which is mystic and majestic. This mysterious vision intrigues the human mind and stirs his inner self. It does not require any worldly sight but the transcendental sight which enables perceiving the ultimate truth behind the door. Swati Tyagi, a critic, reviews the anthology and observes that the poem holds the power of transporting the reader to a new world of enlightenment. The

world illuminates with a light of hope and brings delightful rewards.

The following lines connote the poet's power of perceiving the metaphorical door holding the key to the 'hidden and visible' reality.

"Door spans between heaven and earth
holding key to concealment and revelation"

Further, he gives an analogy between door and key. As a key is a significant and vital part of a lock, the door bears the similar value to the world.

"Door to the world is what key is to lock."

The refrain indicates how the mysterious world can be explored through the opening of the door. The panoramic view of the abstract landscape can be accessed through compassion, love and kindness. It reflects the poet's humanistic aspect of his personality. The poet vividly portrays images of an open door that underlies the significant, more comprehensive humanistic attitude. The closed doors represent the narrowed nature of modern man. His heart is sick with self-centred and self-absorbed perception. It seems as if the contemporary man has erected tall and wide walls around himself and has made himself captive to the insatiate desires.

"Closed doors of heart erect walls
Captive self with sickening heart."

On the contrary, the open doors set man free from mundane, senseless, meaningless, and wasteful life. The poet's thoughts fluctuate between the sense, sensitivity, and conflicts of modernization causing the hardening of hearts like stones of the modern man. The poet anticipates reconciliation with SELF and HIM through the metaphor 'door'.

"Open doors set us free from delusions
In tune with the world we live in."

He talks of two extreme worlds- one is full of conflicts, disparity, and gloom. The other is full of hope, positivity, compassion, and care. The poet's longing for compassion and kindness are true attributes of an altruist, which are significant for self-attainment.

Urban Jungle

Urban Jungle is another poem with a similar theme, highlighting the desolate state of mind amidst the high-rise tall mobile towers, symbolic of modernization. The title of the poem 'Urban Jungle' though an antithesis itself, is an antithesis on civilization. It serves as a metaphor for uncivilized civilization and an artificial image of self.

"In the perjury of closed walls
Standing against high mobile towers."

The urban man is captive in his high-rise constructions, surrounded by the hustle-bustle of daily life. Sense of alienation overshadows him. He feels lonely and aloof in the multitude of people. The poet finds city life uninteresting, unattractive and undone. The people are half alive and half dead, dragging their heavy mass with on their earthly structure. The poet's heart aches, watching his fellows struggling for invisible nothingness. The poet depicts a grim picture of man's reality and his uncertain existence. He also presents a comprehensive purview of changing relationship of man on account of changing needs and desires. He highlights the changing equation of relations with the change of currency flow. The position of a person is judged based on materialistic gains rather than mutual understanding and cooperation.

“... hyphenated with self and ruffling
Currency notes spelling modesty”

The meaning of life has been lost in a self-absorbed world, giving rise to fear, deception and uncertainty. The poet compares the land of a mortal with the land of the dead, where one can assume a deathlike petrified scene.

The ‘naked bodies, frozen limbs, parched wide mouths with wide monstrous Jaw’ depicts horrifying imagery of engulfing civilization and reigning uncivilization in the name of modernization. The poem shares a subtle resemblance with T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. The latter depicts barren, insensitive and infertile thoughts of the human mind. Dr Dubey’s ‘Urban Jungle’ and Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’ warn the readers of dire consequences in the coming future. Lack of spirituality may cause destruction, loss, uncertainty, insecurity, and distrust. Dubey, in his ‘Urban Jungle’, highlights the changed meaning of life, inner conflict and collided dreams against the walls of modernization.

In a state of gloom, the poet again exposes the hypocrisy of city life. He questions the polluted and corrupted minds of people who try to swallow the harmony, peace, and fraternity- the very backbone of a civilized society. He is reluctant in relating himself with the same land of barren thoughts and emptiness. He asks whether this city belongs to him as he feels alien in his own land.

Dr Rajnish Mishra highlights the intensity of the poet’s dismay watching the city’s ugly face. He perceives the poet’s agony, his pain, despair and heart-rending scream unheard to the common man. He relates the images of the heartless city to the dystopian images of the city dried of love and compassion. He justifies the poet’s feeling of alienation and sense of loss in his city.

Gloom

In Gloom the poet shows the concern of corrupting and polluting the environment. Pervading gloom makes him more anxious about spreading hatred and disturbing harmony in his city. He experiences alienation in his town and finds nothing but seclusion.

Dr Rajnish Mishra in his book review for the anthology, brings to light the poet's perturbed state of mind while he complains of the toxic air of his city corrupting the mind of the denizens. The critic asks rhetorically how sanity can be preserved while the atmosphere itself has been experiencing the flames of hatred and distrust. He perceives the poem as if asking the disturbing questions generated from alienated mind of the modern man. He also indicates how the poet contemplates over his affinity to the very city. He hints at the poet's inability of recognizing the city, the city which was his.

He portrays demon-like creatures with horns on their heads, ready to rip humanity through their razor-sharp canines. Here the poet evokes macabre imagery of ghostly power against the spiritual energy of preserving humanity. The modern man has become insensitive toward his inner strength, which causes him endless pain and suffering. He asks himself if this city is his own where lies, rumours, deceit, tyranny, and distrust have seeped into human life. The poet appeals to the urban man to give way to peace, love, harmony, and mutual understanding.

He urges the readers must identify such follies that disassociate them from the real motive of life.

"Fed on rumours, lies, unspeakable
Rites and blood drenched tides.

I ask myself –
Was this my city?"

Modernization is an invisible monster that would tear off civilization and traditional values into pieces creating an imbalance between good and evil. Anticipating such imbalance, the poet urges the readers to engage themselves in self-construction through love, affection, compassion, not self-destruction. He also implores them to take shelter of truth, the ultimate reality in creating fraternity and harmony in society.

In addition to it, he asserts them to suppress lies by letting truth take dominance over it so that love, peace, and compassion can take place as compensatory forces of retrieving lost legacy.

"Let truth prevail over
Transplanted lies and man-made fears."

Assi Ghat (Varanasi)

His next creation, Assi Ghat (Varanasi) depicts loss of the cultural legacy. The place holds a significant value as it symbolizes Hindu culture and its traditional values. It is widely believed that bathing in the river Ganga helps one repent their sins. Pondering over the antiquity of the place Assi Ghat, the poet categorically speaks about the corrupted and polluted face of the ghat, which used to be a holy place displaying cultural heritage. The poet compares the ancient legacy of the ghat with the present tourist attraction spot. The site used to be the place of salvation where people would gather to find solace through its eternity of sacredness.

"I muse at its antiquity
Its literary and cultural legacy lost"

According to the poet, the place has transformed into a tourist spot where modern dull lovers embrace each other. They are inspired by their fleshy desires, not by a spiritual force. The poet is nostalgic about the existence of the holy place. His subtle observation reveals the loss of a literary legacy that the bhakti poets used to sing in the quest for the spiritual union to their God. The poet expresses his grief in narrating its lost ancient significance for the people.

Children's imagery of begging and chasing foreign tourists has replaced the imagery of antiquity of the holy place. The sacredness of the place has been lost amidst the man-made modern weapons for self-pleasure and self-entertainment.

“... of tourists, small children and beggars,
Chasing them for money”

The poet compares the modern gadgets of holding images as testimonies of man's visiting the holy place with actual pilgrims who held images of the sanctity of the place in his soul. Extending his views, he points out that modern devices have taken the place of the ascetic visionary eyes of the pilgrims who sought solace in spiritual union with their own gods. The essence of the place has been replaced by the geographical pictures of the place.

The poet's heart wrenches in agony seeing the holy river Ganga in an ugly condition. The poet indicates that the modern man has polluted it in the name of oblation- self-cleansing. He also complains about the pathetic state of the holy river, which has reduced or bound to its banks from a vast free-flowing expanse. Its banks are muddy because she fulfils the endless demands of unburdening the man from his sins. The poet points to the hollowness of the hypocrites' mind, who seeks cleansing from the offerings for self-redemption. The poet brings to the notice to the reader the

exploited form of the river, which once shone like a bar of silver, means a sign of purity, love, and care. Now her water is grey and polluted, displaying her endless suffering through the hands of exploited man.

Dr Rajnish Mishra mentions that the disturbed soul tries to reconcile with SELF or spiritual solace at Kashi. Unfortunately, the place has fallen prey to lust of modern man. He laments, "Alas, even at "Assi Ghat" the all cleansing Mother Ganga flows defiled! Even their eyes can see nothing but "greedy wolves preying at innocents"."

Further, the poet depicts the imagery of Assi Ghat by showing dirt scattered near the river due to the leftovers and eatables.

"The Ganga has shrunk between its
two filthy, muddy banks"

Swati Tyagi also points out the grieving poet's thoughts. She observes that the poet laments over the loss of nature, cultural and literary legacy of Assi Ghat. She finds the poet in distress when he questions himself whether the city is his own?

The poet represents the historical significance of the place by relating it to one of the great Indian poets, Tulsidas, who gave shape to Indian Mythology through the glorious epics eulogizing God Rama. Sri RamCharitManas is one of the best epics by Goswami Tulsidas, which has been absorbed into the blood of Indians. According to Sri Swami Sivanada's Lives of Saints Goswami Tulsidas left this earthly abode and entered the Abode of Immortality and Eternal Bliss in 1623 A.D. at the age of ninety-one at Asighat in Varanasi. The poet laments over the lost ancient glory of the place. The poet reprimands the modern man, including himself, for what they have done to the sacred place. It has been defiled, polluted and exploited

for the sake of this so-called modernization which has made us forget our ancient old traditional values.

Conclusion

Dr Chandra Shekhar Dubey has strived to show a mirror to the modern man by highlighting his misdeeds toward ancient old Indian culture and its sanctity. The poems under study highlight a gloomy picture of modern man's interaction with his environment. They also represent the horrifying picture of corrupted faces with bloody teeth symbolizing the death of traditional values and their significance in a civilized society. Civilization cannot survive if not taken care of with utmost sincerity and respect. The poet indicates that the need of the hour is to carry over cultural legacy to the next generation so that humanity pervades in the world. Loss of cultural legacy would perish the feeling of mutual understanding and cooperation. The poet has used subtle imageries to warn the modern man and mind his business towards cultural values.

The gloom that he talks about manifests the lack of sense and sensibility towards nature and humanity. The poet reflects his sense, sensitivity, and conflicts of modernization with traditional values through the poems.

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