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**Phenomenal
Literature**

A Global Journal devoted to

Language and Literature

A Peer-Reviewed Print Journal

Volume-6, Issue-2 | Jan-Mar 2022

Chief Editor:

Dr VIVEKANAND JHA

Associate Editor:

Dr RAJNISH MISHRA

Review Editor:

Dr CHANDRA SHEKHAR DUBEY

Assistant Editor:

Prof. SHASHANK NADKARNI



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AUTHORS P R E S S

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

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PHENOMENAL LITERATURE

*A Global Journal Devoted to
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POETRY

1

Wind

ALAN GARVEY

ruffles branches and leaves
of a stag's horn sumac
as if ruffling the fur
of a favoured cat

winds up dandelions
and their clocks
into spilling
innumerable seconds
into futures of yellow

tears sheeting
from bales of bricks
to lift in a gust
and slap against
the windscreen of a car

will only witness
the driver lose control
the woman as she presses
the 'Send' button on her phone.
Mean it. Love you. Come home.



2

Rock the Boat

ALAN GARVEY

I'm doing fine here
and stand a chance
of doing better

if only I learn
to put up, shut up
shut eyes and ears

zipper my mouth
speak in a whisper
when I should shout



3

The Dark Along The Way

ANDREW SCOTT

To feel and embrace the light,
the dark along the way
must be taken into the soul
to haunt the fragile spirit.

The devils are to be taken in,
absorbing your very skin
until there are cracks
for the light heals the scars.

Never be afraid
of what the dark provides.
May never see surroundings
until the light guides the path.

The body will feel like
a shocking execution
when trying to dig out
of the damp, gloomy tunnel.
The relief in the end
is the newfound strength.

To feel and embrace the light,
the dark along the way
must be taken in the soul.



4

Signs and Symbols

ANDREW SCOTT

Sitting here, staring at the sky,
Wondering if this is it
or if there is more.
There is a yearning
that will not go away.

Not sure what I am missing
in this beautiful place called life
where breathing is a gift.

Maybe searching is in my blood
even when there is nothing to be found.
My head may just be missing
with the mind's thoughts.

Perhaps I should stop,
breath in what I have
however, I see them everywhere
signs and symbols
in the air
of a fulfilling place.



5

The Ghosts in the Attic

ANDREW SCOTT

Sitting in the mind's attic,
buried under a dusty place
lays ghosts of years gone by.
The ones that are constantly there,
eating way at the new person.

Sometimes the shadows
are quietly hidden
though a person
can feel them creeping,
moving, creating conflict.

The cobwebs in the attic
will create conflicted confusion
that will run all around the heart.

The war is a win, lose,
as we become anew.
Evolving into who we are,
carrying the ghosts in the attic.



6

Survive, being quiet

ARNO BOHLMMEIJER

For ages you've seen
that I am forever writing
and relishing every phrase.
No letter may be misplaced,
my soul is worn on a sleeve.
A crow will never be raven
or malevolent bird of prey.

I'd like to swear or curse
and burn from word rage,
to fight the venomous cry
of a sly or defiant serpent,
but all that has worked
is the raving silence
of the paper.

I don't
do anything,
so if this kind of poem
comes to me of its own accord,
won't you call me a fanatic anymore,
please, or driven, obsessed,
teeth-clenched?

Because you see,
writing is *receiving*,
it wipes more fear in me
than reading – entire books on life.



7

No need for the cheat sheet

ARNO BOHLMMEIJER

From someone I can learn
to sleep on the wind side.
Someone will teach me:
know bounds, be patient
and limit frustration. Self-
esteem is nothing haughty.
All may be trained for long.

Once more you've taught me:
clear the house, yard, and heart,
speak my mind without a shame,
leave doors open, cope with noise.
I won't need to be afraid every day,
or together, and no testing is necessary.
See: those bears are more scared than we!

No one can 'belong' to me in the wrong sense,
but when I get it right, someone is there and will share.



8

Want and But

AVDHESH JHA

Want to say but don't know how to say,
Want to convey a lot but fail express it;
Want to help myself but I fail to do so
Want to extend my feelings for you and
Want to say I remember you, I miss you;
But I don't know when to say, how to say?
By being a part of me, playing hide and seek,
Ruling my ideas, mind and heart, you hail
Wheresoever, you always prevail with me,
Want to say that I find you – here, there, everywhere,
And that you are not only a part of my life, but my life
Want to say a lot but I just keep with wants and buts.



9

I want to live a little

AVDHESH JHA

As if influenced with something.
These days, I am different
Although crystal clear and audible
But I keep the heard just unheard
Although understood but I love
To live the misunderstanding
Being different I am lost
But I love to loose myself
With this untrodden way
The fearful mind screams to stop
But the beating heart, beats higher
it says, come on, lead a step forth, for
I want to walk this path in his company
Although only a little,
But I want to feel that joy of life
With him, I want to live a little, love a little,
If not more, maybe only with words
But I want to listen from him about me,
As if unknown and ignorant about myself
I want to know myself as he finds
Don't know, what has happened to me
Maybe, I guess, I want to live a little with him.



10

Desiring Milkweed

BRUCE MEYER

My student asks me which one
is correct to write about: the weed

or the milky blood for her mind
has been martyred by a binary

system of learning where right
and wrong offer no place for poets.

I tell her I don't know. The choice
is hers and hers alone. She worries

she will be wrong. In a poem there
are no rights or wrongs, just choices

why can't milkweed have both?
Having said that, I won't tell her

there are phoebes perched on wires
overhanging the gravel road

and sometimes the birds descend
to for hours in the swaying breeze

of a ripe pod, while at other times
balance on their shadows

(if the birds cared to claim them)
and there is no right or wrong way

to describe their song when only
singing matters or if the birds care.



11

Responsibilities

BRUCE MEYER

We were once a couple who would fall asleep
wrapped in each other's arms and legs
the way a vine embraces a house.

Now, I'm up late, sleep in a separate room,
not because we've grown apart
but because the world has grown too heavy
and going to bed is a struggle to break free.

And having spent my life preparing for this,
what made me think it would be easy?

The older we grow the more the world
is a shadow
balanced precariously on our shoulders.
What it would mean to let it fall
or hand it to someone who wants the moon?

It is difficult to know how to weep for sadness
and the feeling of shedding tears of relief,
and so many things just cry for us.
Come to me now. Let's spoon together.
We can cry or be each other's shadow
knowing shadows never make a sound
but are the perfect gift that fits our skins.



12

Immortality as Essence

DANIEL THOMAS MORAN

There
once
was
a
gardener.

But
still,
there
is
the
garden.



13

On the Matter of Writing a Poem

DANIEL THOMAS MORAN

You sense
something
moving
in your
closed palm.

You open
it
to find
a
tiny bird.

You sprinkle
it
with
commas,,,,,
and

You toss
it
up
into
the air.

Then you
hope,
like
hell,
it will fly.



14

Daily Wonders

DIANA LEE VELIE

January first, slipping on new underwear
fulfills the childhood delight of finding
new undies labeled with every day of the week.
I'd like to embroider (a skill I don't possess)
my new under garments with simple symbols
of daily wonders, recapturing that magic.

Sunday panties would wear a heart,
thanksgiving for waking up each morning
with your heart beating against me.

Monday's undies would sport a moose,
grateful for her continued presence
in our yard during these times of isolation.

Tuesday would depict my earthenware
coffee mug, so old it is worn in the spot
my lips kiss it each morning as I savor a sip.

Wednesday our well providing cold, clean
water, directly from the good earth to our tap,
that we so luckily to take for granted.

Thursday a key board because it keeps me
connected to the outside world and my inside
thoughts to produce pages of poetry.

Friday would be a fish, a constant symbol
of my Catholic upbringing that decreed
no meat, only fish, on Fridays and Holy Days.

Saturday would be a merry-go-round
completing the loop of the week
as I continue to ride the pink pony
up and down these last seven days
of my life, grateful for each revolution
and the joyful carousel music, never
knowing when this precious ride will end.



15

The Queen of Spies

DIANA LEE VELIE

Posthumously, I was labeled the Queen of Spies,
awarded a variety of medals. I served my country
of France during World War I under the guise
of Alice Dubois. For the English I was a devotee

to pass on information about the Germans.
Louise de Bettignies, my actual name
was not learned until my capture with contrabands.
My knowledge of five languages, the same

ones I was taught in the convent, served me well.
Also, my petite frame and ability to change
demeanors and costumes made me able to tell
lies, flourish as a spy and continually exchange

identities. My Alice Network saved many lives
and now you can read about me in WWI archives.



16

I am Gandhi

DRAGICA OHASHI

I am Gandhi
Advocate of tolerance and peace
I'm Picasso
I complain with a brush art
I'm Charlie
Cartoonist
I love Bob Dylan's music
I am an olive branch
Let me remind you that the world is beautiful
I am a multicolored rainbow from the wings of angels
Goodness is the cure for all evil
I am Antarctic ice
I'm melting because of global pollution
I'm a bee
I run away from incinerators and the revolution
I am an olive branch
Let me remind you that the world is beautiful



17

Chivalry-Spring Peace, Please!

DRAGICA OHASHI

Spring is the most beautiful word
Time when nature wakes up
Wars, conflicts and quarrels are not needed
Do not destroy flowers fairies
Spring teaches us, calls to ban all wars
Udumbara is blooming today
Peace happiness is no longer an eternal illusion!



18

In Battle Fields of Sand

JAMES G. PIATT

In battle fields of sand, hope will never grow
When leaden bullets leave ashen bones below.
In these dreadful times of lethal disaffection
Among inimical lies and actions of imperfection,
Death rises up from the burning sand below.

In the darkening sky, only missiles glow,
While mothers' hopes vanish like melting snow,
And a small nation no longer offers her protection,
In battlefields of sand.

Sighs of happiness will no longer flow:
Safe times the helpless will no longer know,
Only the icy touch of a brutal war's disconnection,
Sending darkness and an impending infection,
And dark omens of more blood to flow,
In battlefields of sand.



19

The Vegetable Garden

JAMES G. PIATT

Memories of tomorrow must wait for the day to end,
For dreams have yet to be born around the river's bend,

The garden is planted, odd types of vegetables galore,
Seeds waiting for summer's warm décor.

The sun is rising; a warmth covers the garden's bed,
A weathered brick walk leads to future vegetables ahead.

An old man stands among his plantings with pride, with
spotted, and wrinkled hands... his age implied,

He reaches into the earth of speckled loam and clay,
And prays that hardy vegetables will arrive someday.



20

Five Haikus Meditation on Nails

LARAINÉ KENTRIDGE LASDON

My burden box waits
Locked with a single steel nail
A gold hammer hovers

A rusty old nail
Once shiny, new and useful
Friendship now broken

A bottle of nails
Saved and stored for future use
Can time be repaired?

The bag was empty
The battle raged hot and fast
War lost for a nail

Sharp bang of hammer
Cold and dark welcome me now
Nail in the coffin



21

Gathering

LARAINÉ KENTRIDGE LASDON

When it rains the gutters
on the north side of the roof
are filled with a stew of wet leaves,
fragrant, curling, like the fresh peel
of orange hued carrots,
wrinkled red apples.

On a 12-foot-high aluminum ladder,
climbing up one foot at a time, I
observe the gathering of leaves,
spade poised to scrape, push, thrust or force
this melee down to the ground.
I stir the leaves.

Warm slurry soil sucks at my finger.
The wing of a drowned insect
floats by, like a fragment of lace
drifting, pierced by toothy nests of twigs.
A ladybug causes small whitecaps
to gurgle and splash against
the rim of the gutter as she kicks and flies free,
enlivening this gathering of nature,
a gathering of life.



22

Futile Consolation

M SHAMSUR RABB KHAN

You say I should not be pessimistic
Nor should I be sullen and worried
Never think of negative side of things
Of ruins, fights, terrors and wars

But there are leaders, so many
Everywhere, in different hues
Speaking, talking, debating
Of violence, threat and killing

Out in the open, or on the stage
Among people and before the police
Rabble-rousers, hate-mongers
Breathe poison, spew abusive venom

You say I should not be cynical
Nor should I be defeatist
Never think of darkness ahead
Of hatred, grudge, guns and goons

But there are saints, in holy robes
Growing in numbers, at different places
Shouting, exciting, igniting
Of revenge, blood and murder



23

Deadly Thoughts

M SHAMSUR RABB KHAN

But why I think that way I should not
day and night, morning and noon
I would kill someone, someone tall
if I get the chance, or have the occasion.

But why I believe the way I should not
month after month, year to year
I would stab like Shivaji
if I happen to reach the big-bellied monster.

But why I plan the way I should not
on the paper, or in the mind
I would spot the bearded devil
if I throw a bomb like Bhagat Singh.

But why I vow the way I should not
by holy books, or sacred temples
I would wage an all-out war
if I possess some crazy people.



24

Angel Among the Demons

MELANIE FLORES

Surrounded by demons
with hidden agendas
I find the lone angel
who soothes with reassuring words –
truths told with kindness.
Embraced by your invisible wings,
warmed by the glow of your halo
I turn my back on the darkness
and the atrocities contrived by the demons
who revel in the agony and turmoil
they've stirred up.

I allow your goodness to wash over me.
It's thirst-quenching and satisfying
like a crisp cold glass of water
on a scorching sun-drenched desert.
Revived, I continue.



25

The Immigrant

MELANIE FLORES

Vague images traverse his memory –
mother and father shearing wheat,
sisters chasing him through golden fields
under a cerulean sky.

Ethereal echoes of childish laughter
silenced by the death of each parent.

The struggle to survive
launches him into uncharted territory –
taking odd jobs, stealing garden potatoes –
then bombs, blood, indistinguishable limbs –
unlikely friendships made and lost,
youth and innocence erased.

After a long sea voyage on a “Viking Boat”
he’s an outcast in a foreign land,
capitulating to bombastic bosses
who deride his accent and “ethnic” ways.
Manacled to the moniker “Displaced Person”,
that’s what he becomes.

Cerulean skies grey, golden fields tarnish.
He labours with the rest, just another number
yet memory begets memory
as he breathes a heavy sigh.
Resigned to live in yesterday
until his day to die.



26

Music Appreciation

MICHAEL KESHIGIAN

He asked them
to take the music outside,
listen as they held it toward the sky,
let the wind rattle its stems,
or place the sheet against an ear
to hear a tune
through the hollow of its shell.

He told them to jog
the parameters of the staves,
walk the winding road of its clef
and imagine living there.
Perhaps they could drop a feather
upon the music's resonance,
follow its float among the timbres,
or ski the slopes of musical peaks,
gliding unencumbered into its valleys,
then thank the composer
for varying the landscape
when they left the lodge.

But the class was determined
to stalk each phrase,
analyze chords for manipulation, cunning
and seek the hidden form.
They handcuffed the notes
to the music stand,

even flogged the melody
with a drum mallet,
until it whistled a meaning
never intended.



27

Landlord

MICHAEL KESHIGIAN

The tenants left him a bar of soap,
two rolls of toilet paper,
shredded paper towels,
and a ripped sponge mop with bucket.
He tried to rub the white wall clean,
discovered it impossible,
realized they tried as well.
He decided to paint it over.

Hair choked the bathroom sink,
long hairs, male and female,
they both wore ponytails,
short of acid, nothing else would work.
The hardwood floor
wore rubber scuffs and high heel turns,
no doubt they danced and laughed,
but only broom swept it clean.

He began to know who they were,
seldom did he speak to them,
the check always arrived in the mail.
They breezed through, a great wind,
leaving behind a trail of dirt,
a thank you of sorts,
the residual continuity of broken leases
and painstaking interviews.

He seized their soap,
a green veined, marbled bar,
curved like a woman,
took a bath
after he cleaned the tub,
and dried with no towel,
in the air
with the walls and floors.



28

Morning Trek

MICHAEL KESHIGIAN

He rarely has those nights
when he can sleep
deep beneath the comforter
and curl himself back into childhood
upon the twin bed next to his brother,
a life he can barely remember.
His parents have long departed
for that permanent slumber
in a room with no view,
touching hands forever
as they once did in the confines of privacy,
now distant and deaf to the whimper
of nightmares that occasionally
still startle him awake and make him restless
in the milk white light of dawn.
The trembling rays of sun
split the pines on a cool summer morn
then splinter his shaded bedroom
and on the days when calm abandons him,
he rises to walk.
It soothes him to see the giant pines
still asleep in their bark,
the dreamless vegetation, unscarred
by human steps, swaying in the early breeze
as the huge ball of fire ignites
the watery horizon with flames

that abruptly shatter the darkness
about the sleeping lake homes.
The loons have ceased lamenting.
Silently, he thanks the crystal spirit of summer
for the comforting yellow gift of morning.
Soon houses blink their shades open,
a motor roars across the lake and in the distance
a chimney raises its smoky arms skyward.
The forest absorbs night as light walks
the mulch paths toward day.
He turns homeward, listens to his own footsteps,
no longer in search of himself.



29

Poets Die

MICHAEL LEE JOHNSON

Why do poets die;
linger in youth
addicted to death.
They create culture
but so crippled.
They seldom harm
except themselves—
why not let them live?
Their only crime is words
they shout them out in anger
cry out loud, vulgar in private
places like Indiana cornfields.
In fall, poets stretch arms out
their spines the centerpiece
on crosses on scarecrows,
they only frighten themselves.
They travel in their minds,
or watch from condo windows,
the mirage, these changing colors,
those leaves; they harm no one.



30

Deep in my Couch

MICHAEL LEE JOHNSON

Deep in my couch
of magnetic dust,
I am a bearded old man.
I pull out my last bundle
of memories beneath
my pillow for review.
What is left, old man,
cry solo in the dark.
Here is a small treasure chest
of crude diamonds, a glimpse
of white gold, charcoal,
fingers dipped in black tar.
I am a temple of worship with trinket dreams,
a tea kettle whistling ex-lovers boiling inside.
At dawn, shove them under, let me work.
We are all passengers traveling
on that train of the past—
senses, sins, errors, or omissions
deep in that couch.



31

Ghosts

NELS HANSON

Someone must find the bones
of Tu Fu, follow the river to the sea
and net a silver lock of hair, Li Po

who held the moon's reflection.
Set out the cups for tea, rice bowl
and jug of wine. An alchemist can

summon spirits, only the dead will
help us now, the way sunlight falls,
dry steady rain. Maybe heaven is

on fire too, in another world still
failed vagabonds they wander
over all the petty kingdoms for

a place to rest, madness, madness
everywhere. Lost as we are they
wait for the living to save them.



32

Better than your dreams

NILAMADHAB KAR

You could've lived a different life.
But you didn't.
You lived this life as it turned out to be.

You could've chosen a different life.
But you didn't.

While you live this life,
You still have a choice,
To change
There is still time to change,
To amend, to take a different trajectory

It can be a different life
If you wish, and try
Slowly but steadily, you can be,
What you wish to be, and beyond...
You can be, better than your dreams



33

Tomorrow

NILAMADHAB KAR

Tomorrow is something wonderful
Bringing yesterday forward and
Transforming today to a new day
For an unseen beginning

Trying to patch together
Fading memories, and to create
A mosaic of emotions
A sense that still binds the times
Tight together

No one has seen the tomorrow
Never will. One can only guess
Imagine and wish

Tomorrow is an infrequent happening
Not everyone arrives there
Some will be there in person,
Some in others' heart and mind



34 Silence

PARINITA RATNAPARKHI

Whereas silence is in the deep prayers,
Simultaneously silence is in the serene beauty;
Sometimes turbulent and sometimes erotic,
Drowning are the flooded tears full of Silence.

Killing, empathetic, exotic, exquisite or sarcastic,
With every smile exists the communicating silence;
Between the nodes of music exists the silence,
As if in love with silence, In YOUR silence I heard my silence.

Often, I heard you the most, only in your silence,
It is just as if in love with the silence, just like you,
So do I let the silence express speechlessly, just like you,
for, the Silence within is the source of peace, just like YOU.



35

The Death of a Rose

PRAMOD RASTOGI

O rose! Though wilting and helpless,
And yet gracious, you do not even lament.
Your hardship makes me weep,
As it has rained only in trickles
And the sun has shone hot.

You look ailing white. The smell
Of your heart slowly ebbing away
Makes it painful for you to exhale
Your aroma in the sleepy garden,
For its inhabitants to share in its joy.

Gone is the gleam on your petals
And drooping is your proud face.
You look ready for your last journey
After your dance, marked with poise,
Enthralled all the passersby.

You used to be lovers' choice.
They took vows of love, you as witness.
You swayed in the sensual breeze
To rock their hearts. You were an eyeful,
Your identity compares to mine.

None of us, be it the king or the lion,
The peacock or the lotus,
Is exempt from death's decree.
So, light up the last embers of your life.
May heaven welcome you in its arms.



36

Flying Kisses

PRAMOD RASTOGI

Life is a landfall of flying kisses.
They rain in from all sides,
From parents and siblings,
From aunts and uncles,
From friends and girlfriends,
From sons and daughters,

And from the resplendent wife.
They can be aimed on the cheeks,
The eyebrows, the forehead,
The lips, or they just fly around.
Kisses are symbols of love,
So much love it rains on the shore

As it might never rain in a monsoon.
Its raindrops are full of emotions
And carry the nectar of blessings.
When young, this love is in bounty.
As age creeps up, clouds are few
And these might rain only sparsely.

Wiser is the one who lives simply
In reminiscing about the rich past,
And bathing in this dense foliage
Moves forward on the path of life
While waiting for the unfading rays
To bathe one with a shower of eternity.



37

Madras Airport 1970

REES NIELSEN

Ditching the Madras airport
and most of the sophomore class
the plane was delayed
so we found this deserted beach
outside of town
only the bootleggers
knew it was there
we stripped to our shorts and dived in
where the flying fish and their squadrons
patrolled that no man's land
between the green waves
and the omnipotent blue skies
of the Bay of Bengal,

Bear witness
For we embrace
This enchanted kingdom
where even the fish
believe they can fly



38

The Silver Sky of Yesterday**RICHARD MARVIN TIBERIUS (TAI) GROVE**

Today the sky is as silver
as my grandmother's polished platter,
reflecting the vast white
of her dining room ceiling, infinity's glow
of endless memories
on the verge of being forgotten.
In every direction I see
time-feathered hues,
subtle strokes of white
turning to grey, turning to silver.
I take a directionless walk
into the past where I find
hidden memories buried
behind our grey old barn
from when I was only thirteen.
More memories are revealed
as I follow a spring-fed creek
into a hike with my little brother Peter.
More memories flood
over the silver polished platter
of my morning sky.



39

Give and Get**RICHARD MARVIN TIBERIUS (TAI) GROVE**

As a teenager
I used to get angry at father
for bellowing to my mother
sometimes in a whisper:
 “bring the butter”,
 “bring the relish”,
 “bring my whim of desire”
whatever was not on the table.
What I did not realize then
was the agreed upon relationship
 that was based on
 the love of give and get
 the elasticity of want and need
tired and will be tired, was too tired.
The please in the plead,
the please in the request,
the please in the demand
would sometimes, hopefully always
he said later in a private caress
out of sight of teenage eyes.



40

Rhythmic Tyranny

ROBERT L. MARTIN

Earth forever marching to the thunder
In submission to a rhythmic wonder

Of human response to the commanding sound
Domination of the mind and body all around

Strings of the tyrants of the core controlling
The emancipated spirit flying out and strolling

Driving human limbs and hearts to and fro
With dynamic pulses always on the go

Hammering new sounds inside the soul
A fresh awakening and triumphant old

The power of rhythm unleashed and applied
An impulsive submission, a freedom ride

A new look at the free-flowing winds
And the dancing of the mystic Cherubins

The loosening of the all encumbered
The flowing of the hidden streams asunder

As freedom rides on the backs of rhythms
It owes its soul to the pulsating hymns

The drums, the liberation, the spirit renewed,
The syncopation, the timing, emotions imbued,

The inhibitions cast out, the bindings gone,
A new man walks a new freeway upon

An ode to the power of the driving drums
And the tyrants of rhythm and all their sons

A booming boom and a ride out into space
A renewal of the enchanted human race
Tyrants of rhythm play on and on.



41

Calico Mountain

ROBERT L. MARTIN

White to green to red to brown
To bare branches all around,
Changing colors from the sun
As seasons march to nature's drum.

Calico mountains are never the same,
And the seasons go by a different name.
But what if the colors never changed?
A stationary sun would be so strange.
Thank Mother Nature for many reasons.
Thank God for the change of seasons.



42

The Best Part

ROGER G. SINGER

a moment
of movement,
up the stairs
with cross pollinating
thoughts
desiring space,
yet needing
to connect
as they
invade oneself
to find
the other side
while on a roof
looking up,
knowing,
that even a
three quarter
moon
dreams of
being full



43

The Voice Within

ROGER G. SINGER

what lasts beyond yesterday
becomes the sober vision
of a new beginning

piano notes
blend with the stars
on an autumn evening
where memories
number more than
scattered leaves,
unlocking, uncovering,
forgiving what was flawed,
earning a new part
of comfortable
where the best is
revealed



44

My Bloated Self

S L PEERAN

As the journey is advancing
And age is gripping my ailing body
The cruel thoughts of old and yester years
Add to the woes of the living.
The loneliness, the creaky bones
Is more like a rickety bullock cart
Moving at snail pace in this fast life.
I feel I am left behind
As the fast moving caravan has moved away.
I am bogged down in myths
In ancient superstitions
In deep fears and past regrets
My best of times were fraught
With umpteen unrealized dreams.
With unconquered peaks and mountains.
With dry rivers without cultivation.
With bitter fruits and an empty stomach.
With confusion compounded.
With scarcity in paltry living.
My mind reeling with unfounded ideas
With plenty of pleasures, some fulfilled
Yet many left unsatisfied.
Plagued by grievances, grouses
With complains many, hopes melted
Having lost all my humour.
Being a cynic, a critic of other's work

Lamenting on my progeny's indifference
Parrot like repeating again and again
Same old rigmarole, unpleasantries
Irrked every moment with quick temper
Yet with all this slipperiness,
My bloated ego boost of my callings.
I keep looking at the citations
Awards, appreciations I found my way.
Boasting myself of my poesy
Of my umpteen works, unreal,
Undiscovered by any reader.
I float like a butterfly,
Keep my sting ready like a bee
My lashing tongue has driven
All my friends and well-wishers away
I am now deserted to fend myself



45

First Grandson

STANLEY H. BARKAN

Jeremy Benjamin Barkan is
our first grandson. At age 16,
he has grown up to be the tallest.

Fulfilling his father's broken
desire to have a baseball player
in his daughter, Jeremy plays.

He also is a basketball player.
Prior to now, the shortest on the team,
and now wrestles as well, perhaps

like his great-grand uncle Sam, who
was champion wrestler stationed among
the US Army during WWI in the Philippines.

The fact that Jeremy is now the tallest
in our small family, no doubt is from
the DNA of his maternal grandfather, Ralph.

Jeremy helps me a lot when I ask
him to come over and reach up to
the top shelves of my poetry books.

What he plans to do as a career
is not yet clear, but whatever it
will be, no doubt, he'll excel at it.



46

Bookends

UTE CARSON

My book of life is wedged between bookends.
I search for mories I want to keep.
There is a chapter on my beginnings,
several about my middle years,
and one, in progress, anticipating the end.
A few are marked "special,"
many are dog-eared,
others tear-stained.
Some are written in indelible ink,
many dashed off in pencil.
A few pages are blank.
I leaf through the stories,
slow down here and there to reread.
On the whole though, how colorful the script,
how pregnant with meaning the manuscript
from one end to the other
as years rise from the pages.



47

Autumn and Old Age

UTE CARSON

Autumn and old age both teach of letting go.
Glowing Indians summers
and rich harvests usher in closure as nature wanes.
Grandchildren no longer whisper secrets in my ears,
and my aging body yearns in vain for praise.
But there is a melancholy pleasure
as leaves burst with color
and flashbacks rich in recollection flit by.
Lullabies and bedtime stories
echo through my dreams
and I quaver with joy
recalling bygone evenings
when snuggling was a childhood ritual.
My deep wrinkles tell many happy tales,
and my carved walking stick
let's me wander once more into a meadow
where I behold spring's eternal recurrence.

The spidery rope of memory, long and durable,
connects the accumulated affections of a lifetime
from generation to generation.



48

Top Down

WILLIAM CONELLY

The sun is bright; the sky is flying.
What of that *thump*, that pigeon hit
by the steel grillwork of your car?
What of that cow, collapsed on its
green hillside, calf still at the teat?
Who courses Cotswold lanes to see
such creatures struck or plainly dying?

The sun is bright; the sky is flying.

The learned say be single-minded.
A plus means thwarted minuses.
Prepare to sport a sunny mood,
and Light is anywhere you find it.
Between the hedges, rolling home,
the road itself is gratifying.
Through flailing shadow, sky is flying.



SHORT STORY

1

Big Galoot

DJ TYRER

The sound of an ambulance's wail attracted me to the window of my front parlour and I looked out to see some paramedics assisting my neighbour from across the way, Billiebob, into the back of the vehicle. His leg was mightily-badly torn-up.

Luckily, my neighbour, Jimbob, knocked a short while later to update me on what had befallen Billiebob. The two were good friends and Billiebob had sobbed the details to him as he was carried to the ambulance. It seemed his porch step had given way. Although Billiebob was a big guy, it seems this was no weight-related accident, but sabotage. Apparently, somebody had hidden a stake beneath the weakened step.

"A stake like you use to kill – uh, rekill – a vampire?"

Jimbob shook his head. "No, sirree. A steak," he spelt the word, "like you have for dinner. Seems someone used it to lure a wolverine under the porch. Billiebob's foot came through straight down on the critter's tail and it took a mighty exception to this and tore up his leg."

"But, who'd want to do that to Billiebob?" The big galoot was widely acclaimed 'a nice guy.'

“Sheriff reckons it was his wife. After all, he was a real burden to her: They’ve been through two new beds a month this last year.”

That made sense.

“I did hear tell he found a rabid polecat in his spare jockeys, the other day. So, I’d say it was an open-and-shut wotsit.”

I agreed. Winona was good with animals, and the use of food to try and kill him had a certain poetic justice to it. But, at the same time, until we heard she’d confessed, I decided it was better safe than sorry: after all, I’d found that rattler in my bathtub the other day. Best to step gingerly out onto the porch, just in case.



2

The Wrong Way

JAMES MULHERN

Every couple weeks, on a Sunday after church, my father picked Martin and me up for a visit. That day, though, Martin was at swim practice, so I would be with him alone. Any hope of my parents getting back together had diminished a few weeks after Mom's release, when they had seemed so affectionate.

"Stop hovering," my grandmother said. I was peeking through the sheer curtain of one of the bay windows in the living room.

"He makes me nervous."

"Why would your father make you nervous, Aiden?"

"I never know what to say."

"Sit down on the couch next to me." She wore a hairnet and sipped a mug of coffee. Her face looked drawn. My mother, who was still asleep, had been acting strange, she said. "She saw that ghost man again," she told me the day before.

She put her warm hands over one of mine. "Tell your father about school, your friends. Ask him about work. He loves to talk about that job." She lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply, then exhaled. "*Dry shite* to me."

"What?" I scratched my cheek.

"Boring. I find your father boring." She pushed my hand away from my face. *"Stop scratching yourself. It's a nervous habit."*

"You don't like Dad?"

"Of course I like him. He's a good man, just dull. Or maybe I'm dull." She laughed. *"We have nothing in common is all. He's the total opposite of your grandfather, God rest his soul. He was curious about everything and had the gift of gab. Sometimes I would pretend to fall asleep."* She smiled, closed her eyes, and leaned back.

I laughed.

A car honked.

I smoothed my sweatshirt and straightened my jeans.

"Do you think they'll ever get back together?"

She tamped her cigarette, stood, and kissed me on the forehead. *"I don't think so, darling. Some things are not meant to be. It's nobody's fault."*

He honked again.

"Go on. You look fine. Relax. Talk about the weather. They say we'll have snow today. You're a smart boy. You'll think of something to talk about. Don't forget your coat."

The sky was gray and the air brisk. I was glad my father had the heat on.

"Where's Martin?" he said.

The hot air blasted from the dashboard vent. It felt good.

"He's at swim practice."

"The miracle of heated swimming pools. At the YMCA?" He smiled.

I nodded.

"It's just you and me then."

I thought he sounded disappointed.

"If you don't want me to come, that's okay."

He put his hand on my head. "Of course I want you to come. We'll have a great time."

"What will we do?"

He checked his mirrors and turned into the street.

"You wanna watch the game?" He rubbed beard stubble and smoothed his dark hair. The skin under his eye looked bluish.

"What game?"

He laughed. "Football. The Bears and the Packers. We can order pizza."

"Sure." I knew nothing about football and hadn't any interest, but watching TV would suck up time. The games lasted at least three hours. We wouldn't have to say much.

When we passed the roundabout by the police station, he said, "So how's school?"

"It's good."

"What's your favorite subject?" He glanced at me, then turned on the wipers. The snow had begun to fall.

"English."

"I was never any good at English. What are you learning?" A red truck whizzed past us. "Did you see that asshole? I almost hit him. Too many irresponsible drivers. They don't give a shit about other people. Always in a hurry to get places."

"Maybe he's late for work."

He laughed. "On a Sunday? I doubt it. . . Hey, I interrupted you. Tell me about your English class."

"We're reading *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens."

"He wrote *A Christmas Carol*, right? Never read the book, but I liked the movie. The ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future."

"The Ghost of Christmas *Yet to Come*."

"Huh?" He wrinkled his nose and rubbed it with the edge of his leather coat sleeve.

"Dickens calls the Future Ghost *Yet to Come*."

"I get it. So what's this book about?"

"A boy named Pip. His parents are dead and he lives with his bitchy older sister on a marshland in the outskirts of England. His uncle is nice, though."

"That's a weird name for a kid. What happens?"

"I just started it. I'm at the part where Pip meets an escaped convict in the graveyard. This scary man in rags jumps up from behind a tombstone in the marshes and grabs him. The guy orders him to bring food and a file so he can saw the chains off his legs. He threatens Pip if he doesn't follow through."

My father nodded. "I like crime and suspense." He turned the heat down. "You comfortable? I hate the sound of that fan."

We passed the Arnold Arboretum, where Nanna took Martin and me. The snow was falling softly on the spruce trees. My father put the wipers on high. I liked the swooshing sound. Snow collected on branches and the grass below.

"How's your mother?"

"She had a vision of that old man again."

He shook his head. "I thought she was getting better." The car slid to the right and he slowed down. "I know you think she's psychic, but I still find that hard to believe, Aiden." We were on the Jamaicaway, a four-lane parkway, one of the curviest roads in Boston.

"I think she *is* better."

"For Christ's sake, Aiden, your mother thinks she sees ghosts."

"Scrooge sees ghosts."

"That's a made-up story." He turned into the parking lot next to Jamaica Pond. We pulled into a space in front of waves rippling in on the wind. The snow swirled outside the car.

"Made-up stories can be based on real life."

"There *are* no ghosts, Aiden." He took a cigarette from a pack in his shirt pocket and lit it. "We shouldn't have released her from McCall's. Schizophrenia is a serious mental illness. The nurses and psychiatrists said she wasn't ready." He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

"Are you and Mom ever gonna be together again?" I felt my eyes tearing up.

He slid closer on the seat and put his arm over my shoulder. A few ashes dropped on my jeans. I brushed them off. "No, Aiden. Your Mom and me, we aren't meant to be together."

"Why not?"

He tightened his lips and paused, as if thinking what to say.

"I'm moving to Arizona."

"Why?"

"I met another lady and there's a good job for me out there."

"What about Martin and me? And Mom?" I pushed his arm from my shoulder. "You're dropping ashes on me."

He cocked his head back and raised his brows. "Sorry, buddy."

"I'm not your buddy."

"Fuck it." He looked in the rearview mirror and put the car in reverse. "Someday you'll understand."

"I understand now."

He laughed. "Aiden, you're just a kid. When you get older, you'll realize that what I'm doing is the best thing for all of us." A shiny blue car sped by the exit of the parking lot. "People are crazy. Don't they realize they could lose control in this weather?" My father looked both ways before starting to turn.

"You're going the wrong way."

"No, I'm not. My place is in that direction." He pointed.

"Take me home."

"You don't want to watch the game?"

"I hate football and I hate you."

"You don't hate me, Aiden. You're angry."

He turned right. We passed the arboretum again. The pine branches seemed to droop with the snow. A father and his son shoveled their walkway.

When we were in front of my grandmother's house, Dad said, "Are you okay?"

I opened the door and stepped onto the curb. "You're irresponsible. You don't give a shit about us and you just want to hurry away."

"You're pissed, Aiden. I still love you. We'll talk about this again when you're not so upset. I planned to tell you and Martin over dinner. I was gonna take you out to a nice restaurant. Sorry it happened like this."

My grandmother and mother, on a scheduled visit, were shoveling the front steps. They stopped and looked up.

Mom shouted, "You're home so soon. What happened?"

"Nothing," I said.

My father waved to her, then whispered, "Please don't tell them, Aiden. Your mom's not ready to hear the news."

"Dad, I'm sure she already knows. That's the difference between you and her. You think she's crazy, but she's not. Mom has the ability to see things you can't. You'll never understand. I think you're a sad guy, like that Ghost of Christmas Past." I kicked some snow. "Maybe I just expect too much, or maybe I'll understand someday like you said."

"You won't say anything, right?" He looked like a child and an old man at the same time.

"I won't say anything, Dad." I shut the door and walked towards the steps.

"What the hell happened?" My grandmother wrapped her arm around me. Mom kissed my cheek. I heard my father drive away.

"The streets were getting icy. The snow was falling harder. Dad wanted me home before the roads got bad."

My mother stared at me. "They already are."

Nanna said, "My ma used to say, 'Never dread the winter 'til the snow is on the blanket.' Let's get inside."

We learned the shovels against the side of the house and walked up the steps. I felt the beating of my heart and the passing of air into my lungs. The smoke of my breath rose, and dissolved like eddies in a careless sky.

My father drove onward, streets glistening, snow like piled linen, and Arizona far, far away.



3

Tree of a Thousand Years

JEVIN LEE ALBUQUERQUE

The fire warms my naked body, clothes smoke away spirits obtained at sea, memory returns: my car abandoned days ago? weeks ago? months ago? west coast fires left behind for a journey at sea, a glimpse of my wife Makara in ocean dungeon, the visit of a manananggal—I flee—listen: wise words, mentor Alon, from the sea, buddha-bellied angel, “Joao, follow your path to the tree, your answers are there”; his words dance in flames below bridge I sit, in dirt, skinny, forlorn, with thoughts of our deceased child, nameless, breathless, under the watchful eyes of condors circle, guide path forward; breath of manananggal on neck, his shadow swarms, bends around pillars holding bridge in place, wind picking up, scolding the flames.

Sleepless night behind, weary, I wear wet clothing, inevitable rash, damp clothes to skin in wind, walker, cars whizzzz, by and by, no hitchhike in me, only the long walk; my hat afloat somewhere at sea, mind concuss to ring of choir on hillside, tall pointy hooded hymns pierce thoughts, thirty strong, staffs in hands, chant from eroded hills steeped in umber, glare, awake to those who see...I look in their direction, sad eyes gleam me, to a stop, mouths wide to music of church, march on, march on to the tree.

Wind tears through my spirit, gusts up to 40 miles per hour, hints of manananggal leaves sulfur in air, suffer in air, I step, step, step, plant step, walking stick weapon poised for

manananggal in black swirls through air, guts, out, disappears over mountain peak, wicked away in the wind. Heavy breath, up, around, roadside slither along, looks of those on a hike, hang me, out to dry, my clothes rub against skin, rash between legs; pain easing my mind, each fiber cut, clearing the air, allow antiquated thoughts to enter, pre-disease thoughts to enter, a time when my family was whole, together we march on.

Honking cars, one after the other, narrow road, stride, pinned between cars rush by; waist high guard railing, look over edge, hundreds of feet down, all the way down in mind, the curves batting me into submissive stumbles, on I march past Portuguese Ridge, past coves where dormant memories of family, rod, reel, fish-full days, on edge of sea hum at low frequency; unable to soothe, but drive this mental train around next bend, on past thoughts of eucalyptus trees flutter to desires of witches, pointy sticks, prickly chins, moles, hairs in wind walkers, uncut, pubic, unsettling laughter in wind I move on, on with birds in sky, hung by puppeteers, gods at play, my record broken: skip, skip, skip, walking stick step onto begs-me-bridge; no donkey to the lighthouse, lightless in the fog; no HOWL; no *Fado*: Amália Rodrigues' voice buried in sea dungeon—only the rattle of a cop car, winding down the snake.

The library will work for a night. I sneak around fence, fire in my trousers, rash around groin, feels soothing; pain, a night of pain, I walk past cabin, see tents of workers off to side, living outside, in exchange for life outside, the norm; a library for the abnormal, feeling normal I settle in the far back, behind library, in the sticks, settle beneath a redwood tree, moonlight spider webbed around me, I'm in need of prayer: "When in doubt you must pray," words of spirit around, the man around me, offering up soup, "have a sip,

hell, have a kummel, cheers!" Clink, I look away. "Troubled?" he asks, ripping into laughter, picking up a sledge hammer, driving it through a TV screen, more laughter. He continues: "I know trouble, trust me, you will be fine. Where are you headed?" I sip kummel, warm to man's bald head glimmer in moon, beaming with life, misery, mystery, concern. "It's all the same," he says, "land, sea, the other." After lighting a cigarette, "lighten up, have an orange, have madness!" Sleep.

"Wake up, you must eat with me," he says, weathered hat, striped shirt, baggy black pants, sandals worn. The cast iron sizzles, eggs, bacon, slide onto plate, handed to me, his eyes worn, warm, to the touch of bacon, "Ahhh, fat, I need it," I tell him. "We all do, son, something to keep us going, poverty, suffering, misery, death is too easy, it falls upon us all, but a breakfast like this will keep you moving, you will keep moving, now get out of here! Oh, and take this," he says tossing me a bottle of powder for my rash. "You will find your muses, go to the tree, let it flow...your family awaits."

He turns inward, a last wave of cancer tropics, torment reaching him as I make way through gate, cop car pull into library lot, but I'm back on the road. I don't look back, tuck powder into pocket after groin cool breeze to powder I ponder curves, speeding cars, touch of sunlight in atmosphere without wind, "Get out of the road!!" I continue on, stare thousands of feet down to hues of blue-green ocean, bull kelp tight to bottom, swaying on surface, sheltering rock creatures, secrets wafting up to join vertiginous thoughts; onward I go, sweating to sun steps, walking stick steps into avoid fall, final fallout with the void.

"Where you headed?" out cop car window.

"Away from you," I tell him, "don't have time, my child, my wife."

“Well, I’m glad you have a family, but we heard a lot of complaints about you sleeping near the library, you know that’s illegal?”

“Don’t know that I do, plus the old man...”

“There’s no old man, just some folks who work there, said you were hanging out in the sticks, gave them a fright, and used the restroom, and to be frank, drank too much, talking to yourself, ‘chanting’ is what they said. Look, I’m not here to judge, don’t need to know where you’re headed, but get your focus back, and perhaps get some new clothes, understand?”

“Yeah, no problem, officer.” And on down the snake to harass another, head shaking all the way, engine rev in the distance, quick turnaround, stare, back, I’m watching you he signals with hand, but back toward the library he goes, good, I meander on, waiting to see the blue-black checkered flannel of a man, certain to see him, but my focus is on the tree of a thousand years; wind on, onward down the snake, until stopped at sight of big tow truck, towing on, north; walking south, head up-up-up, past ditch site of my car crashed, the hybrid box all busted up; the tow truck driver unaware it is my car, it passes, this too shall pass, passing out on side of the road, I look up for condors.

Eyes open, a cumulus cloudy mind, kicking imagery across sky. “That’s good you see, hey, how about a cigarette, Mac?” he says, all flannelled out, good lookin’ kid, football shoulders, dirty faced. He walks on past, rucksack on back, disappointed, mumbling to himself, the blues. I don’t follow, just keep moving: one foot in front of other, step walking stick step into madness; dust bowl melodies kick out of guitar in the wind, I on to tree, reach there eventually, night: full moon scale cliff, condor cries from hollowed out bark seals

from below, thousands of feet below; Makara, sending messages from sea to continue, answers are in the tree, our son is waiting. I hike tired legs all the way up to cries, moonlight flowing gently through hollowed out tree, rustling inside.

Through moonlight, face is cleansed; soul tick to cries of my wife Makarahhhh. Baby condor back away as I poke head inside tree, stare at tiny camera—livestream—staring back at me; adult condors circle above, dive down, pluck locks of hair; beaks penetrate skin, neck, ears, shards of spirit in moonlight linger. A quiet. A siren below; a second siren below. I look out over sea, breathe end of journey: flashlights approach, lights dance, fireflies in the night.



4

A Prince from Kano

(From the unpublished manuscript Lucia Means Light)

LOUISA CALIO

Much had passed, unspoken and powerful like waves in the ocean. Sometimes she knew a stranger from these waves with a greater intimacy than people she had known for years. After the stop, they felt rejuvenated and seemed to arrive at Kumasi quickly. The cool mountainous city was readying for a national dance competition that gathered tribes from all over Ghana under colorful tents, to dance in their unique traditional styles. They were surprised by the tartan plaids in West Africa's tradition and dances that ranged from highland flings to delicate ballet movements with bells, as well as more familiar rhythms and styles around the drums. Lucia had little idea of the wide range of drums in existence before or the variety of sounds and styles in African music. She loved African dance because people seemed to dance for the joy of dancing as well as performance.

Will wondered how Africa had become so stereotyped.

"Was the white man blind or was it pure malice that created the negative images I was taught to associate with Africa?" He said to Kwame, "Growing up black in America in the 50's was an identity crisis. There were few positive images for us. The best I could hope for was to dye my skin white and straighten my hair. It's taken me this long to discover the richness of my roots. I had to reach college before I heard of Timbuktu, Kano or Benin. Africa is beautiful, rich,

everywhere I look I see a positive mirror of who I am and not the negativity, hate, fear or rejection I grew up with," Will concluded.

"There are probably many reasons for the distortions. Shame and greed over the slave trade must have haunted those early Christians. Also, Africa is so varied and complex, that many Europeans may have just dismissed it rather than try to understand it. After all, they came to conquer, convert and not to study or learn. Besides, there is the fear of what is different, the basis of racial and religious hatreds and wars we've inherited. That's real enough. The Europeans don't accept their own darkness. They won't accept that light depends on darkness to exist. Christianity gave them too literal a view of light and dark and our dual nature. The Europeans have much to learn from the darker peoples," Kwame explained.

Later that afternoon, they attended a coronation, African style. A new chief was en-stooled. He received his ancestral stool, not a crown, to carry on his rule. In the dazzling sunlight sat a man of power; his whole body radiated power. He wore a specially woven cloth to signify his leadership and a brilliant red turban to express his royal blood. In his left hand was the black scepter of order.

When the festival ended, Will took Lucia to watch a weaver working with his hands and feet to create the traditional gold cloth, a famous Ashanti weaving. The art of weaving was soothing; the young handsome man's hands caressed each thread, a young man with curly hair who looked Ethiopian. He smiled at her openly. The hypnotic movements of his hands and feet were rhythmic, the way she hoped to work one day, without struggle or strain.

“This is yours,” Will said, “He's making your gold cloth! It's my wedding gift to you, my new wife.”

They were renewed and more contented than they had ever been. Joyfully they headed on to the next leg of the journey. Will was so impressed with the Ashanti, he decided that he was from that tribe after all. His mother had carried herself with the same pride.

“Kwame, your God doesn't teach suffering or martyrdom for its own sake. Your God teaches people to bear pain, but dances and sings them alive. I feel I'm home at last,” Will said, as his eyes welled with tears.

“You are one of us. I know your ancestors were Ghanian like mine. You are my brother,” Kwame said and with that, Will let go and wept.

The travelers headed by taxi to Togo and Benin, cultures so rich with history. In Benin, they visited a village on stilts and tasted the different flavor of a former French colony before heading to Nigeria. Despite Ashneen's warning of a potential coup in Nigeria Will and Lucia had come too far to give up their dream. Will was eager to finally reach Nigerian soil and imbibe in the richest culture of all, the Yoruba. Yet, at their hotel in Benin, other people also warned them of an impending Nigerian coup. Both Will and Kwame hesitated to leave for the border, but Lucia insisted they go.

As they observed Benin recede into the distance their taxi sped toward their next destination. Each was imagining what it would be like to finally see Lagos, but when they arrived at the border, they saw many men in army fatigues carrying M-16's approach each car and then systematically turn them around. A scowling soldier approached their vehicle.

"Papers," he commanded, leaning into the taxi to carefully scrutinize each passenger.

"You'll have to get out of the car and wait for me over there," he said, pointing to a small wooden house a few yards away. Helplessly, they watched as he disappeared into another building in the distance with all their passports and travel documents. Patiently, they waited for his return.

"Your papers are in order," he said, handing them back to Kwame. "But we aren't allowing any visitors into Nigeria. We've had a change in government. You'll have to turn back."

"Ashneen was right," Lucia murmured sheepishly filled with guilt for having insisted they make the trip. They searched for their taxi and happily recognized the man who brought them there. They scurried into his car. There were taxi drivers everywhere and hunting for fares before the border closed entirely. An agitated group swarmed their car, peering into the windows. They shouted, "Come out I'll take you. Where are you going?" Will, Kwame and Lucia cringed in the back seat as the men began rocking their car to and fro shouting in Yoruba. It was dizzying, terrifying.

"They want your fare," their driver said nervously. Beads of sweat collected on his brow. "Don't get out! I'm not sure how we'll be able to escape."

Lucia was truly frightened for the very first time on their journey and broke down into tears and sobs. She felt responsible. Like angry hornets, the mob of men kept hitting, pushing and shaking their taxi as they sat frozen within. Kwame was afraid too and wasn't sure what to say or do. Their driver shouted back at the men, but that only agitated them further. The soldiers ignored their plight. If this continued the car would overturn.

Seemingly put of nowhere a very tall, slim and astonishingly handsome brown man appeared in a crisp, powder blue robe made of pure silk and an embroidered white skull cap. He made his way straight to their taxi. Like Moses he parted the sea of madmen who walked backwards in a slight bow in deference to him and the young boy he was with.

“He must be royalty,” Kwame whispered. The stranger opened the door of their taxi and asked them casually, “Where would you like to go? I’ll escort you. Is back to Benin good enough?”

“Oh yes, yes, yes,” the grateful travelers responded breathlessly. When he entered the car the atmosphere shifted to pure peace and tranquility and Lucia knew he was a guardian angel and she was still being guided and protected on this marvelous journey.

Later they learned they were in the company of a Prince from Kano a province in northern Nigeria and his heir. After the long trip, they headed straight to Ashneen's village in the south of Ghana with no intention of trying to visit Nigeria again, at least not this trip.



5

Opal Dusk

MELANIE FLORES

Opal Dusk wakes to the sound of banging at her door and the glare of sunlight streaming in from her tiny east-facing window. Realizing that her alarm is wailing, she checks the time. Not too late. Turning off the alarm, she wraps herself in her bedsheet and makes her way to the door. Opening it she feels at once excited and embarrassed. It's Lola. Lola of the heavily lashed amber eyes and melodic voice.

"Opal, can't you find an alarm that will wake you up?"

"Sorry, Lola. It won't happen again. Hey, do you want to come in for some tea? I've been triple using my bags, so I still have plenty before my ration runs out for the month."

"No thanks, Opal. I have to hurry off to work. The transporter will be here any minute to pick me up."

"Ok. Maybe another time."

"Sure." Lola turns away and walks off silently in canvas shoes. The sweet woodsy scent of sandalwood lingers in Opal's doorway. Lola's scent. It reminds her of something, but she can't reach deep enough into herself to figure out what.

Opal closes the door and sighs. After brewing her tea, she checks her notebook and finds a dozen or so new posts. Some of them remark on her latest literary success and her beautiful penthouse suite. They envy her success and her loving family. Opal posts something about her going on tour through Australia to promote her new book. But then she

realizes she has some “big fans” in Australia who might want to see her “when she’s there” and decides to change that to Europe, more general that way too. No one will ever know. Opal decides to leave posting about her two other avatars until she gets back in the evening.

Opal takes her clothes to the shower facility down the hall. She steps into one of the tiny cubicles and turns the water on. Tepid as usual. She turns it off to lather up before her meter runs out and turns it back on for a good rinse. Opal quickly dries herself, sticks a Nutri-patch on her arm, dresses, and heads back to her room.

When she opens the door, Opal hears her guitar, Pearl, weeping softly. Opal rushes over to Pearl, propped up on a stand in her usual corner, the only uncluttered spot in the tiny one-room apartment.

“Pearl, what’s wrong?”

“Dunno. Just feeling kinda sad, I guess.”

“Why?” it breaks her heart to see Opal so distraught.

“Something bad is gonna happen. Maybe we shouldn’t go out today.”

“We have to go out, Pearl. We have the designated busking spot in front of the Marketplace. That will nearly pay the rent for a month. I’ll probably even get some free Nutri-patches. Don’t worry. Everything will be alright.”

“Well, alright.” Opal smiles and caresses the mother of pearl inlay on Pearl’s face.



The Marketplace, the hub for government offices, retail outlets, and the Fresh Food Treasury, is bustling with people. Opal settles in with Pearl at her designated spot. It’s a lucky thing the government opened this opportunity for buskers. A

good audition was all that was required, but the competition was getting fierce, and a busker's successful audition only landed them two years of monthly busking for which they were paid a set amount based on the number of passersby. Another perk was that passersby would toss trinkets and Nutri-patches into her empty guitar case; that alone provided a substantial haul.

It was almost like getting presents on her seventh birthday, the last one she could recall. Presents in brightly-coloured paper that she tore off, eager to find out what was inside. She remembers a cake, heavy with rainbow frosting, sweet and creamy, smoky hot dogs with tangy ketchup and crunchy potato chips. She misses their salty crispiness. In fact, Opal misses all the flavour nuances of real food.

Her parents disappeared shortly after that birthday, nearly twenty years ago. That's when she became a ward of the government. She missed her parents terribly, even worse than the food which had become a bowl of cereal for breakfast, watery broth for lunch, and a baked potato with some mushy indiscernible green thing on the side for dinner. As she grew older, they started to replace meals with Nutri-patches, but they soon realized that people could not subsist on Nutri-patches alone and needed one meal of real food, ideally protein-based, at least three times a week for optimal health. As it stands, most weeks, Opal is lucky if she can manage two real meals, as these are of the discounted variety, scanty on the protein, high on the filler. Still, it's real food and non-GMO (or so they claim) and brings back vivid memories.

Somehow, she always connects real food with her parents. They'd both been scientists, working on secret projects for some corporation or the government. What little memory she has of them and what they were doing before they disappeared is skewed by a seven-year-old's sunderstanding. As far as Opal knows, she could have been

making all of that up, about them being top-level scientists. But it would make sense because scientists have been quietly disappearing for years. First, it was the journalists, but they only uncovered stories, and their details were not always accurate. Scientists, on the other hand, knew the truth, all the details of government or corporate schemes.

Opal plays Pearl, hardly breaking, and sings songs of long ago, today, and some original material. She doesn't particularly like contemporary songs; they don't have enough nuance, musically or lyrically, but it's part of the busking protocol, and her busking privileges would be removed if she didn't follow protocol. She's glad Pearl has settled down from the morning; Pearl loves to be busy and does her best to be pleasing and productive.

Pearl's empty guitar case fills up quickly, and Opal has already stashed some of her haul into her backpack twice to make more room in the guitar case. Soon enough, she feels the sinking sun of the afternoon. She's done for the day. Opal had promised herself that she would visit the Fresh Food Treasury today for the first time in her life. She has to buy some fresh food for once, even if the prices are exorbitant. Surely, she can afford *something*?

Opal polishes Pearl gently with the soft cloth Pearl loves so much and gingerly places Pearl in her case. Then she dons her backpack and makes her way to the Fresh Food Treasury. The heavy doors are made of dark glass, the kind that you can't see into but can see out of. The edifice is covered in abundant vines weaving a mantle of green. Opal allows the scanner to scan her iris, and the doors slide open. She feels an adrenaline rush. Her heart races as she steps into the treasury.

The first thing she sees are tomatoes, beaming bright red, behind a glass case. She remembers them being juicy and distinctly flavourful. Next to them are zucchinis, broccoli, sweet potatoes, and vegetables of every colour. The adjoining

glass case holds fruit, from lemons to berries, melons to plums; so much choice, so much freshness. Opal looks at the prices and begins to figure out her budget. A familiar scent disturbs her calculations. Sandalwood. The scent of Lola. And then she sees her, stacking fresh round oranges into a vibrant, citrus-scented pyramid. Their eyes meet. Lola looks unpleasantly surprised to see Opal. "What are you doing here, Opal?"

"I was busking outside and decided to come in for some fresh food." She looks around her beaming. "I didn't know you worked here." Opal adds.

"Well, you know too much for my liking. Look, Opal, I'm going to need to delete you. You're just becoming too real."

"What are you talking about, Lola."

"You're merely an avatar I created, Opal."

"No, Lola. I have a life. Memories. My parents were scientists. They disappeared when I was ..."

"Those are my memories, not yours, Opal."

"But I can see all of this, smell it, touch it." Says Opal as she reaches out for an orange, expecting to find firm orange peel. Instead, her hand fades as it passes through the mass of the orange.

A tear glistens in Opal's eye before she disappears.

Lola picks up the guitar case with Pearl inside of it. "Come on, Pearl. I'm done for the day. Let's go home." As they leave through the doors of the Fresh Food Treasury and into the growing opal dusk Pearl plays a soft sorrowful tune.



6

The Banker

P. A. FARRELL

The morning air is heavy with the sticky heat of summer. The window shades refuse to move, not refusing but unable, crippled. Not a single breeze. Quiet gloom, hot. Sweat is the sole relief.

Stealthily, she moves as a thief toward the dresser. A white envelope stands out in its starkness in the heavy wooden drawer as she slowly opens it. The envelope lies atop the carefully tatted, gifted hankies and the half-empty box of Fatima cigarettes.

On the envelope's front, in clear, unmistakable penciled Palmer script, are the words, Don't Touch.

An emotional shock jolts her as she hesitates while the blankets behind her rise and fall in slow rhythm. The years have been ones of never refusing an order, never asking, "Why?"

She knows she is now about to disobey the rules by which she was raised. Her heart is beating faster. The sweat beads transform to small rivulets on her face.

She must push the penciled mandate out of her mind. Years of unquestioning acceptance is willfully erased with force from her mind. She slips the envelope open carefully, not knowing what to expect.

Inside, ten slightly crumpled hundred-dollar bills. Where did she get this money and why was it to be left untouched?

Unexpectedly, the familiar yet feeble voice behind her asks, "What are you doing?" Riveted in place, she is stunned, and in a panic, freezes, her hand still on the bills. The voice fades. The medications are working.

Was this what her sister was talking about? Their mother was holding money for a neighbor's funeral expenses. Mary, the indigent neighbor diagnosed with a fatal illness, hid her money until she found a "banker" whom she could trust, someone who would never reveal her secret.

The envelope is her burial money, now safe in an old, wooden second-hand dresser in her dying mother's bedroom. It must not be touched but kept until needed when the neighbor's family will know to call for it.

Emotion is a black pit in her stomach. How empty she feels. Months of suffering and nights of watching life slip away have eroded all feeling. What is left is a yearning for it to be over for everyone, but primarily for her mother who was always there for anyone who needed her. Now, her mother needs her in a way that most may find unacceptable; she wants her mother to die.

Only an hour ago, she was making what some dark humorist might call her drug run. So clear in her mind, she could pull it all back now.

The car is slowly moving along, creeping. On the dashboard a rusty tire iron lays, waiting and serving as a signal, a warning. Keeping a distance that allows for a quick turn, she drives with resolve.

A small red canvas bag has two carefully wrapped brown bottles containing the precious liquid. She must protect it. People would kill to get it. She knows this like she knows a mother will protect an infant. Now, she is protecting her mother. She clutches the wheel tighter and stares straight ahead, neither looking right nor left. No sign of weakness or wondering must be given should anyone be watching. It's important to look strong, tough.

With a prayer for protection there is also one for death, a release from pain and from a life of emotional twists. Not for herself but for the person awaiting her delivery.

The delivery is made, the extra-strong potion prepared and soon there will be relief in a coma that pushes all sounds into the darkness of eternal sleep. It won't be long now. The nurse has come and called an ambulance. The hospital room awaits. The ambulance leaves in haste as though on an emergency call, but this is no emergency. It is the last car trip her mother will make.



Hospitals are formidable fortresses that promise relief and life, but today a group of daughters assembles for a different kind of relief; one that promises an end, not a continuance of life. Silently, the women are led to a small room outside the nursing station. It is the room assigned to those who are dying and require immediate attention for their final moments.

The circle of quiet women, almost like strangers, without a word or a touch between them, gathers; all eyes are on the woman in the bed. The chest moves almost imperceptibly with low, rumbling sounds signaling life, but only barely. The next deed will have to be done as quietly as the breathing.

“She’s got pneumonia, do you want me to treat it?” The young physician looks at the women for an answer and one signals nothing is to be done. No words, no muffled discussion, nothing, and it is done.

“All right, then, I’ll make her comfortable.” The unnerving, almost imperceptible sound of a needle being prepared and pushed into the IV tubing hits everyone’s ears as loud as a drumbeat.

The physician slips silently out of the room as though by magic. She vaporizes down the hall in the shafts of very early morning light. Barely a hint of dawn is showing as the floor-to-ceiling diaphanous curtains lift in a bowing gesture as she passes.

Minutes seem like hours as they watch silently. Not a move, not a word. All eyes are on the bed where the raising of the chest slows, until it stops.

One eye is closed, but one remains starkly open, staring straight at the daughter who is the red-bag courier. The light hazel orb continues the fixed stare. The task of holding the thousand dollars for burial of the neighbor has been passed.

A nurse glides into the room, extends a steady hand, one finger outstretched, and brings the open eyelid down. The warm room is stirred by a cool breeze.

A mist is sweeping over the bed, or is it a figment of imagination? Out the doorway it trails down the hall past the curtains that begin to fly up, French doors opening and shutting suddenly. In moments it passes, the curtains fall back against the panes, but the courier feels a coolness in her nostrils, filling her lungs.

The others seem unmoved as though they saw nothing. The sweat glistens on their brows as they sit like statues.

But from somewhere in the hollows of her soul, the red-bag courier feels the stirring of life as an unmistakable keening begins. Her throat refuses to contain it. Unnerved, the women glimpse at her momentarily, shuffle a bit and return to stiffness once again. Then, all is quiet.

But the red-bag courier knows she is the banker now.



7

Broadway Par Excellence

RENÉ VAN DER KLOOSTER

Certainly, something has changed since ‘panem et circenses’, since ‘give the people bread and circuses’, because to everyone who lives in our modern age – within our advanced civilisation! – and who does not realise it yet, I announce: we tell ourselves that we do not accept ‘bread and circuses’ unceremoniously, but I say unto you, *we became* the subject of ‘bread and circuses’, *we* are in the thick of it, *we* are the gladiators, and we do not notice it, we do not notice that we are on the stage, because we have long passed the phase of indoctrination, or, a long time ago we were already manoeuvred into this new position, and now we are defenceless and lazy in our artificial habitat, formed by skilfully orchestrated precaution and imposed ideals, but, mind you, maintained by ourselves! Because we don’t want it to be different in reality, that the reality is different... and it isn’t, we claim with certainty!

This is how we maintain ourselves and our ‘world’, and The Psychopathic Masters look down upon us, they lean back in their comfortable chairs, because we are their ‘bread and circuses’ and they laugh because of us, they laugh at us, calling us stupid because we never saw it coming. But not me, not me, they have not taken me into account, although I have to ask myself whether they have not foreseen this reaction, my state of being, and that they also laugh about that, they laugh about me the loudest! Their greatest built-in, incorporated in the system, constructive joke: the reluctant comedian!



8

The Purpose of Tears

TIKVAH FEINSTEIN

He spreads the newspaper open on the wooden table, turns to the society section and stares at the photo on the upper left-hand corner. Laura's face is smiling back at him. Aaron finds himself transfixed, just as the lights are dimming, pushing visitors to leave. The library closes early on Fridays. He smiles.

She'd made a beautiful bride. He smiles, but he is surprised that he feels happy for her.

Aaron is unexpectedly tranquil, as he backs slowly away from the library table. He inhales deeply and allows himself a lingering last look at Laura's picture on the page of the New York Times. He folds it and returns the paper to its position in the news stacks.

The young man is confounded by pleasant feelings, albeit mixed with a sense of loss, as if it had been a photo of his sister on the bridal page, he'd been gazing at – not the face of the woman who broke his heart. *Could this mean I'm finally at peace? Decidedly,* he thinks – but it's really weird. *How can I be pleased?* He turns away in a fiercely brisk and somewhat graceful movement, as if in triumph. He's feeling mixed emotions. This is not like him at all. *Aaron, tone it down; after all, you're in the Carnegie.* Feeling slightly silly, he leaves the building. *You are losing it, Doctor.*

Heading home, however, Aaron begins to brood. I will never love like that again, he ruminates, trying to remain

positive, trying not to wallow under a cloud of contemplation and what ifs. *What is love anyway?* He speculates: *There's no substance to it. It can't be measured, photographed. An MRI can't detect or capture an image of love.* He cannot answer the question of why then does one feel that oppressive emptiness when love is taken away? It felt for so long like an organ was missing and his wounded body was trying to recover.

It is December. Each breath makes a mist that congeals in the cold air and stings against his cheeks as he walks. He still prefers to be clean shaven. But now it occurs to him that he might start a beard, as a symbol of breaking free of the past. He brushes his hand against the stubbles, a five-o'clock shadow, and wonders if a beard would make him look shabby. No, he decides.

Facial hair is in style, most men are sporting some whiskers on their faces. A beard could be sexy.

Shaking off the cold, Aaron continues on.

After their romance ended his third year in med-school, Aaron tried to fill his emptiness with memories of Laura. He would remember her voice, her scent, the feel of her dancer's body in one of those legs-wrapped-around-him embraces. It's been two years. Aaron recalls how her chestnut hair spread over his hand as he held her close to him, and the moist softness of her mouth, her whispered "love you" breathed into his ear that last morning.

Aaron now knew that last 'love you' really meant goodbye. Laura just couldn't say it.

That was the cruelest part of losing her, the not knowing
.....

There was a time Aaron thought he'd implode in a tormented burn in his desire for her.

Today, he felt kind of proud and satisfied at her choice of a husband. She was a successful lawyer's wife. Just what was expected of a girl like Laura, who grew up in East Manhattan, attended Harvard, and transferred to Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh to study music and dance. Her summers spent in the family home in Connecticut.

Growing up in the Bronx, had not offered Aaron as many opportunities. His choices diminished dramatically in July of 2001 when his father, Jeff Bloom, who ran a gym and was a volunteer fireman at one of the smaller fire stations in Bronx County, was killed on duty as a first responder in a six-alarm tenement apartment fire. He had entered the third floor through a broken window, rushed through the fire to rescue an infant. He threw the baby to safety, as the floor collapsed, trapping him in the flames. Aaron and his twin sister Eva were fourteen when they lost their father; that's when the emptiness that hollow feeling began for him.

Aaron and his handsome athletic father had a tight bond. Aaron had gravitated to his father as anchor and role model. He helped out at the gym on weekends. His father was always laughing, making jokes and kept things lively with his good humor. What stood out was his father's kindness, his always looking out for people, taking care of others. Aaron wanted to be just like his father, except he did not want to die a hero. He wanted to help others without putting himself in danger.

His father was suddenly gone, and Aaron was dealing with crushing grief and, unexpectedly, anger at his father for abandoning him. Aaron was at an awkward age, still trying to figure out how to fit inside his growing body. He wanted to ask his dad how to deal with becoming a man. He would soon tower over his mother and sister, but he found that he couldn't hold himself up, let alone be any support for them.

He refused to cry.

After the ceremony, after all the testimony by the public officials, the police force, the fire department, all the media coverage, the Bloom family was left without a husband and father. A little over a month later 9/11 happened – the terrorist attack on the World Trade Towers. With so many deaths, it was a raw awakening to a sense of vulnerability as relentless as the smoke and smells that penetrated for weeks into the New York suburb. A close friend of Aaron's family had leapt to her death, as many first responders, along with almost three thousand people were caught in the fire, crushed in the wreckage when the towers collapsed. Evil and horror had struck from the sky and as the United States responded to the unimaginable; his fire-fighter father's death was overshadowed, forgotten. The entire country changed that day. Quickly came the anthrax deaths by letters and going to the post office became a scary nightmare, everybody scrutinizing everywhere for suspicious white powder in the mail.

All the confusion and fear about the future and Aaron had no dad to talk with about it, no more bad jokes about how he was finally growing into his nose.

Aaron's mother Marion was grief stricken, and he couldn't help her because of his own grief. The family sold the gym. His mother took a position as secretary at the high school, which was a major embarrassment for Aaron, who was in ninth grade at the time. It was a sign that his family was in a lower financial bracket – made public. That was not entirely true, and his mom working in a school was nothing to be ashamed of; he knew that now, but a lower status in society was how the teenaged Aaron had seen it.

Aaron's sense of abandonment still remained. Everyone told him he resembled his father.

But he knew better. Aaron was not charismatic, exuberant and charming. He was quiet, gentle and studious like his mother. His was a lean, muscular frame, six feet tall exactly, but admittedly he was a bit of a klutz. He was a sports fan rather than a player. And although he was appreciative and supportive of the firemen, of all that they do to keep the community safe, he would never consider joining the fire department. Aaron's decision to go into emergency medicine was an outcome of his father's untimely violent death. He couldn't catch a ball. But he could make a cast for a broken arm, treat an infection and suture a cut with delicate stitches that often healed without a trace.

It was fourteen years after the horror of 9/11 changed everything. Aaron presently was serving a medical internship at the University Medical School's main hospital and still had a year of residency ahead of him, plus more than half a million dollars of debt to deal with. He had been honest with Laura about his finances; although now he suspected that's why she had left.

They'd met at a chamber music recital at Carnegie Mellon University. Aaron watched, mesmerized, as Laura played the piano, thinking her movements were exquisite, her hands danced across the keys powerfully and gracefully like a ballerina, her hair cascading over bare shoulders. Afterward at the reception she was surrounded by admirers and friends. He watched her laugh and chat, hug and receive hugs. He found the nerve to talk with her. Just being in her presence felt to him like being immersed in a beautiful dream state. There was energy between them. When she agreed to go out with him, he felt his chest enlarge, and hoped she'd noticed.

What a feeling! The young man of science had entered into the realm of infatuation, as unscientific a domain as ever

there was. As an advocate of science, he'd always tried to put feelings into biological or rational terms. An introvert, it was easier for him to understand cause and effect that way. That habit became a point of contention for Laura, the intuitive, sensitive artist.

They had two spectacular years as a couple. Aaron's life had revolved around Laura. He passed everything by her, every thought, feeling and problem. Together with Laura, he felt he'd become someone entirely new, someone better. Then she was gone and there had been no explanation, no fight, and no goodbye.

The young doctor fancied his case of getting-over-Laura was at half-life, the time it takes for the atoms, such as in a radioactive substance, in this case, attachment, to lose half its potency. His feelings for Laura had been deep and he was less a man without her. Or so he'd thought until today.

Today surprisingly, walking along Pittsburgh's Oakland section, past universities and hospitals, he finds himself filled with a mild pleasure, remembering only the love they'd shared. The past was past. The hurtful feelings had diminished into a subdued memory, like an almost win, an almost victory, a trace of a once-familiar scent, like the way the fragrance of basil floats over a garden.

He picks up his pace, grins as he spots a young couple, thick-jacketed students, hands clasped, engrossed in conversation walk past him. *That was us.* Forbes Avenue is busy with cars and pedestrian traffic, as usual on Friday evenings. The sidewalks are filled with professors, medical center staffers, students and shoppers rushing to their weekends. *I just needed to know that she was okay,* Aaron tells himself. *I've moved on, certainly.*

Diana enters his thoughts. That comfortable, easy warmth she gives off is just what he wants, what he needs. He continues on in a purposeful stride, hurrying to the apartment he shares with her, a first-year pediatric resident, his new love. Diana is more like him. A brilliant girl from a working-class family, she is his age, 28, but skipped a year of school and earned scholarships to Smith and the University's Medical School. She graduated a year ahead of him, but never made a deal of it. Aaron is suddenly overwhelmed by a longing to be near her.

Aaron contemplates how Diana is easy to be with, sweet and comfortable, cozy and safe.

But it's not as exciting as it was being with Laura. He catches himself. *I should not compare.* Aaron decides to stop at a state liquor store. He sees one with blinking colored lights in the window, and enters to buy a bottle of white wine. With a bottle of Chablis bought on sale wrapped in a paper bag, tucked under his arm, he continues down Forbes.

He can't wait to see Diana.

He enters the stone high-rise apartment building. The lobby is empty, except for a bored – looking guard. A Christmas tree brightly lit with blinking multicolored bulbs and candy canes on its pine branches sits in front of a long window. Aaron fidgets with his keys and hums while riding up the elevator. It stops at the seventh floor with a ping. He proceeds to door number four, puts his key in the lock. Turning the doorknob, he pauses a moment to marvel at his life. *Ah, he muses, the passage of time is a source of grace.*

He opens the apartment door to the welcoming fragrance of vegetable stir-fry and joyous music, a symphony he identifies as one of Mozart's early works. What a welcome.

"I'm home, honey, Aaron calls out, expecting to hear Diana's cheerful voice from the kitchen. "How was your day?" Nothing. No greeting.

Aaron closes the door and walks through the living room into an empty kitchen. Two places are set on the table, alongside a bowl of stir-fry and one of rice.

He removes the bottle from its bag and opens it, glad he had purchased the chilled.

Taking a sip, Aaron remembers he'd had to turn his cell phone off before entering the library and he hadn't turned it back on.

He switches on the cell phone. There is a voice mail from Diana. "Aaron, I'm sorry, there is an emergency at the hospital and I'm on call. Enjoy the dinner. Please don't wait up for me.

Love you."

Aaron stands in the kitchen and feels a familiar chill. He's been abandoned again. But this time he knows it's not forever. Being on call has no half-life – it's a doctor's life.

He adjusts the music, refills his glass and takes a seat at the table. His thoughts return to his father. *I miss you Dad. I'd like you to meet the woman I hope to marry. You'd like Diana, Dad. She loves football, the symphony. And she can cook!*

Aaron opens his cell phone to a picture of Diana. He takes in her open smile, her friendly wave, the feeling the photo gives him, smiles. "I love you back," Aaron says to the picture. The words jolt him. He has never said 'I love you' to Diana. Stunned, he lays the phone down.

I might as well eat, he thinks, taking another sip of wine.

He kicks off his shoes, remembers that later there's a Steelers game to watch.

Love. I can't explain it, examine it or describe it. But I'll definitely take it. His thoughts continue. *My life is pretty damn good. I've moved beyond the goodbyes.* He turns off the music, puts his phone in a pocket.

Aaron carries his plate into the living room, turns on the television. As he sits on the couch, the broadcaster announces that a shooter had broken into an elementary school across town, left three dead and many injured. *Damn, another shooting.* The injured students, between the ages of six and eight, and two teachers have been rushed to area hospitals.

He thinks of Diana, wonders if some injured kids were sent to UPMC's Children's. Aaron won't get comfortable, just in case he's called to help out. His heart aches as he pictures children, scared and bleeding, rushed to surgery, the unspeakable grief of the parents.

Suddenly he needs to ring up his mother. After they talk awhile, he asks about her job at the school. Is she scared for her kids?

"Yes, we are all scared."

"What would Dad want me to do, Mom?"

"He'd tell you to keep on doing what you're doing, Aaron. All any of us can do through this is to try to stay safe and hold on to the good in life. Just help those precious little ones – save the ones you can. Diana will need the biggest hug when she gets home. Let her cry if she needs to."

"I will." Aaron says. "I will always be here for you too, Mom." It's the first time he has told her that. He feels something change between them, a shift in the relationship, him now taking charge. He clears his throat.

"Thanks, love." His mother's voice cracks, as she says "bye."

He is anxious to do something to help out. Aaron has medical skills, but there are doctors handling this more experienced than he. When he checks with the hospital, he's told the situation is heartbreaking, but under control.

Aaron decides that he understands nothing. He's an educated person, but he can't grasp the violence. It's evil, that's all he knows. The news caster reports there's no motive yet for the shooting. Aaron is incredulous. The shooter turned his weapon on himself and is dead. Aaron, still holding his cell phone, watches the carnage. He searches for answers to why would anyone harm innocent souls? He is flooded with compassion for the suffering, feelings of helplessness, and a sudden jarring fear for his mother's safety, Diana's, his sister's. I love them more than life, he realizes. Aaron understands suddenly why his father would risk his own life by entering a burning building to save a child.

With eyes stinging, Aaron knows that murder can't be understood using reason. He will wait up for Diana. He will take her in his arms, tell her how very much he loves her, and hold her while her tears wash away the pain of this heartbreaking day of helping to repair the broken bodies of children whose only offence was being at school. It'll help her to heal. He has never let himself cry, but Aaron knows the purpose of tears.

Aaron also knows that love is stronger than evil. He'll hang onto that. He turns off the television. When he picks up his plate to return to the kitchen to finish his meal, he finds there's moisture on his cheeks.



9

Roosevelt Island

VANDANA KUMARI JENA

“Serenity had a new name,” I said to myself, “Roosevelt Island in New York.” I stood by the railing, looking at the East River. I could feel the wind blowing my hair away from my face. This was my favourite place on the island. I could see the Manhattan skyline from here. I loved watching the skyscrapers. I could even see the United Nations Secretariat from here. I watched the boats cruise on the river and gulped fresh air, so different from the polluted air in Delhi. I was lucky to be here. After all, how many people got to see New York?

I turned around and smiled as I watched saw a man sketching furiously in his sketch pad. Suddenly he looked up and my smile froze. He was brown-skinned. He was an Indian or someone from the Indian subcontinent. I smiled once again, but he looked through me. For a moment I was disconcerted, but then I realized that he was not being deliberately rude. His eyes were looking ahead, perhaps he was focusing on the scene before him. My fingers itched to snatch the sketchpad from his hands and sketch the scene before me. Why hadn't I thought of sketching while coming to New York? Why didn't I bring painting materials from India? Now I would have to ask and my brother and bhabhi for them.

I returned to our apartment and shut the door behind me. As soon as I entered the drawing room, I began to feel

claustrophobic. The flat was small and I longed for big open spaces that I was used to, in India. I yearned for charcoal and paper, for oil paints, linseed oil and turpentine. I missed my easel, the smell of turpentine on my overalls, the aquamarine smudges on my kurta, the streak of Prussian blue, my favourite colour, across my face.

I ran a comb on my hair, locked the apartment and walked towards the school where my niece and nephew studied. After the school was over, I brought them home. They walked slowly beside me, a trifle warily, and I realized that it takes a great deal of effort to win the trust of children. "Rice, dal anyone?" I asked brightly, once we returned home. My niece Nina pouted. "Chicken nuggets," she said. "Same," said Joy laconically. I microwaved the chicken nuggets obediently, served the children, put away their school bags and meekly tried to dissuade them from using their iPads. After lunch I dozed off. I woke up an hour later and realized that it was time to take them out to play. After that I was busy preparing dinner. We Indians liked home-cooked meals, rice, dal, vegetables, chicken and rotis. I was exhausted after cooking the meal.

Deepa bhabhi and Varun bhaiya arrived a little later, smiled mechanically at me and went into the children's room. Later that night Deepa bhabhi came into the drawing room, where I slept on the sofa-cum-bed, and put her arms round me. "Hitesh's passing way is so heartbreaking," she said, "I am sure you must be shattered." It had been three years since my husband Hitesh died. Varun bhaiya and Deepa bhabhi had not been able to come to India at the time of his death. We were meeting only now. Hitesh was just a memory now. Deepa bhabhi did not know that when one has been married for just five months, one hardly knows one's husband. And when he passes away in an accident, what one grieves for is

not so much a husband, but a young man whose life is cut short in its prime.

Later that night, I went to the closet Deepa bhabhi had cleared out for my clothes, and crossed a day off the calendar that I had kept there.

The next day, after waking up the kids and giving them cereal and milk for breakfast, I walked down with them to their school and then returned to my favourite spot. A cloak of tranquility seemed to drop on my shoulders. I decided to make the most of it. I knew that it wouldn't last forever. I revelled in the beauty of the scene before me. After a while I turned. I found that the artist I had seen the day before was once again on the bench, sketching furiously. Fortune favours the brave, I decided and went and sat beside him. "Hi," I said, "may I see what you are sketching?" He raised his eyebrows and then shoved the sketchbook towards me. Looking at his sketches I realized that he was a maestro. He must have heard my indrawn breath. "These are fabulous," I said, "you are in a class by yourself." "You really think so?" he asked a trifle wistfully. "Do you sketch too?" he asked. "I did when I was in Delhi," I said. "You are from Delhi?" Animation crept into his voice and his demeanour changed. Suddenly he became friendly. I realized that we were two lost souls in New York.

The next day he asked me if I had seen much of New York. I shook my head. I had not been out of Roosevelt Island ever since I had come. "There is enough time," Varun bhaiya had said when Deepa bhabhi had suggested that they take me to Manhattan during the weekend. "She is here for six months. We can take her around the city some other time."

I knew why I was in New York for six months. It was not Varun bhaiya's brotherly love which had plucked me

from my home in Model Town and brought me to New York. The truth was that Deepa bhabhi was doing a short-term course in journalism, after having been a stay-at-home wife for years. Child minders were frightfully expensive in New York. The creche in Roosevelt Island was fully booked and there was a long waiting list for a seat. For Varun bhaiya bringing me to New York for six months was the cheaper option. Of course, they did not tell me this. They pretended that I needed a change after the tragedy which had destroyed my life. I wanted to tell them that three years is time enough to grieve for someone. Of course, everyone else in the family was grateful to Varun bhaiya for his gesture. Fortunately getting a US visa did not prove to be a problem for me.

“Are you a painter by profession?” I asked him. He laughed when he heard me. “It’s just hobby, although I had wanted to make it my profession. I make my living crunching numbers in the bank.” “That’s soul destroying,” I said. He laughed aloud and said, “You’re candid, that’s refreshing.” He told me that his name was Rohan. “Don’t ask me what it means,” he chuckled, “I don’t know.” “I won’t,” I smiled. I told him that my name was Naina and he said, “That’s appropriate. You have almond eyes.” The way he said it made me blush.

Then he asked me if I had seen Roosevelt Memorial. I confessed that I had not been outside Roosevelt Island. “Roosevelt Memorial is on the island itself,” he reassured me. We walked to the Memorial and I was astounded by the beautiful surroundings. The statue of Franklin Roosevelt was magnificent as was the verdant green surrounding the memorial. Rohan began sketching seriously on his sketchpad while I gazed at the beauty around me.

After that we began to meet every day. We didn’t speak much. He was busy sketching while I just sat and watched

him sketch. At times I sketched as well. "You have a lot of promise," he said, when he saw my sketches. "You just need to practice." I glowed upon hearing his words. They bolstered my confidence.

About a month later he said, "I am going away the day after tomorrow. I came to see if there any takers for my art but my sister Monali would not introduce me to any of her friends. She is a doctor you know. There were times when I was out sketching and she forgot to hand over the house keys to me before leaving, locking me out of the house. I wonder if she suspects that I will steal something from her. I am a Senior Manager in a nationalized bank you know." "Oh my God," I said, "In that case what did you do the whole day?" "Oh, I always kept a pack of sandwiches with me. And I bought myself coffee from Starbucks," he said. Although he did not say anything else I could make out the sense of hurt in his voice.

"Before I leave this place, I would like to take you out for lunch," he said to me. On hearing him, my face turned pale. "I am afraid I can't, you know I have to pick up my niece and nephew from school every day." He smiled and said, "Then will go to the Japanese restaurant on the Roosevelt Island itself." Someone could see us and tell Varun bhaiya or Deepa bhabhi about it, I thought nervously. Then I said to myself, "What the hell, I am an adult, why shouldn't I do as I please?"

"Have you been to a Japanese restaurant before?" he asked me suddenly. I shook my head. "Well, there's always a first time." The next day he took me to the restaurant on island. I walked beside him, which made a welcome change. I remembered that I always walked behind Hitesh in India. Rohan introduced me to sushi and tempura, edamame and miso soup, food which I had never tasted before. I found

everything delicious, perhaps because I was with Rohan. I wished the afternoon would stretch on. Rohan asked me about myself and not merely out of politeness but as though he genuinely wanted to know. It was then that I told him about Hitesh. "You are a widow?" he exclaimed, his eyes wide with shock, "You look too young, I thought you were unmarried." I chuckled, trying to stop my tears from flowing. I too wished that I was unmarried.

He left me at my apartment building and smiled wryly. "I have to leave now, I must look for a washroom, Monali has again locked me out!" "Come inside," I said, "you can use the one in our flat." "Are you sure?" he asked hesitantly. I nodded as I led him inside the flat. When he came out, he walked towards me and gently took me into his arms. My heart began to pound loudly. I wondered if he could hear it too. Hitesh had passed away three years ago. I had almost forgotten what a man's touch felt like. As he looked into my eyes, my lips parted of their own volition.

Monali came to our house a month later. Deepa introduced me to her as her widowed sister-in-law and Monali murmured words of sympathy. "What do you do?" she asked me. "I paint," I said, a trifle apologetically. I wish I could have said that I was a software engineer or an oncologist instead. "So does my brother Rohan. Perhaps you saw him sketching on the island," she said. I looked at her with interest. So, she was Rohan's sister, the one that often locked him out of the house. "Yes," I said, nodding my head vigorously, "we are both painters. We had much in common." "I hope not too much," she said sardonically. I was intrigued by her silence. Perhaps she sensed my curiosity. "My brother," she began saying, and then stopped. A little later she continued, "My brother, I am ashamed to admit, came to New York only to get away from a scandal in India." Seeing the look of curiosity on my face she said, "He was

about to marry a girl, when one of the countless girls he had been with, appeared with a baby, which she claimed was his. Naturally his engagement broke, and to get away from the scandal he came to New York. I knew that no girl was safe around him, that is why I did not introduce him to my friends. In fact, I often kept the house locked, so that he could not bring women into the house." I looked surprised on hearing her. Rohan had told me something entirely different. Then she looked at me and said dismissively, "He would not be interested in you, if he knew you were a widow. You are not his type anyway." "You are right," I said, "I am not."

After she left, I thought of that day on the Roosevelt island when he had come home. A shiver ran down my spine as I remembered the time when he took me into his arms and that heavenly hour when he held me and led me into the bedroom. He had transported me to a world of delight. I thought it was because of his feelings for me. Now I knew better. I smiled as remembered the interlude. It didn't matter that he was only looking for a good time. I had not expected a lasting relationship anyway. I could not pretend to be devastated by what had happened. We had been two consenting adults. The tryst with him had made me acknowledge my needs, both physical and emotional. I realized that I was not a ball to be thrown among relatives. Rohan had shown me that I had my entire life before me, to do as I pleased. He had taught a lesson, one which I was unlikely to forget. I was disappointed no doubt, by Monali's revelations, but not really heart broken. I knew that in time I would recover.



NOVEL EXCERPT

1

Airbag Lodging

ALBERT RUSSO

At first I wasn't sure whether the fact of having to remain in Israel would bother me or not. But seeing that my uncle had turned from Feta white – is that where the expeshun 'chalk and cheese' comes from? – to the color of Brussels sprout, I got a lil cheeky. Coz if I don't nudge him a bit firmly (I usually slap his thigh so's to straighten him up), he might veer to crocodile green, and then he pouts for hours on end, with his mouth half open like them disgraceful prehistoric beasts that look petrified, when what they really want is for you to come near them for a quick bite of raw human flesh. Brrr ... another failed invention of goddess!

"Don't worry," I said, getting happier by the minute, but pretending to be annoyed, "I'll help you buy the food, even though you know I hate supermarkets."

Bonka squinted at me – this is what happens when he comes out of a nightmare and touches ground, like a plane that's just lost one of its wheels as it lands. Yeah, he gets all shook up, and I need to give him a good loud bark for his two eyes to resume their normal place. Only then can we start having a ci-vi-liiized conversation. He's the one who taught me that even if we disagree we oughta discuss with calm and compowwwsure.

Between you and me, sometimes you have to be fast and furious to stop *growlups* shenanigans, coz it can go on and on, with preface, introduction, convoluted (yeah, I know that word too, which has 'con' in it) explanations and epilogue, which, when you get there, becomes a whole fookin' *epischmuck* and you've lost an *uncoushy* (unconscionable, ha ha) amount of precious time during which you could have built a castle in the sand.

"Now, now, Unky dearest," I sweet-talked, forcing myself to be nice – this is when my jaws start hurting, coz it ain't natural to be kind when you are boiling inside – , "why don't we look for a nice lil airbag place overlooking the beach?"

There were quite a few offers on booking.com, but my Unka the Bonka said that those were for the likes of Angie Jolie, Meryl Strip or Lenny Di Capricorn, meaning they were much too expensive for us.

After searching for maybe two hours – I had to contain myself not to bash his head – we found a cosy apartment in the South of Tel Aviv. We had to take three buses to get there to meet our landlord.

Wa wee woow, we had never been to that area. It looked derelict and smelled of *garlicky* food and piss at the same time. Only later – it was already too late – did I learn that it was mainly inhabited by poor Israelis and immigrants – many of them illegal. You could see that some of the people around were either slightly drunk or stoned.

South Tel Aviv

When Mr Ravioli – the landlord's real name was Ravi – gave us the keys after we had visited the place – it was ok, just ok, not fabulous – , red with rage, I croaked:

“How many old ladies get raped and killed every week here? Is there a police station nearby?”

Ravioli gave me a puzzled look and then smiled:

“Oh, *ma petite*, this is not France,” he said, “we haven’t had a murder in years here. There is nothing to worry, you’ll see for yourself. Even at night you can stroll peacefully along the avenue, with your dear uncle by your side.”

Aha, so I couldn’t be on my own at night! He only half reassured me, coz when we got out, I watched the people walking in the street or entering stores, and saw no eyes that looked like they belonged to killers – some already had their faces covered with masks, like it was carnival time. They were just attending to their everyday business, like all and sundry, hoping that they would be as aloof and woof woof on Sundays too.

As everywhere in Tel Aviv, young guys and gals were walking their dooogs, which was comforting, especially since the dooogs here are very friendly and often come and lick your hands.

Still I could have twisted my uncle’s neck and something else too, which is unladylike to describe here, I was so disgusted by his stinginess.

As soon as we settled in our *airbagoon* – no, it wasn’t a bungalow or a rondavel (that’s what they are called in South Africa) – my uncle said he was tired and if we could have a rest, giving me his beaten-up look with eyes that were swimming like frying oysters in their orbits. Before resting his head on the pillow of his bed, he managed to *udder* in a squeaky voice:

“Admit it Zupetta, this is a nice studio, it is clean and we have a well-equipped kitchenette where we’ll both be able to

cook the things you like. I've already spotted a grocery store 50 meters from here. Did you see the ice cream parlor too, and the Burger place just opposite? We won't be lacking. And on top of it all, our windows at the back give onto a lemon tree and shrubs of bougainvillea. What better could we ask for?"

I umphed like a puffed-up frog, like in Jean de La Fontaine's tale in which the *froggess* (me) wants to become as fat as the ox (Bonka) and then explodes. In my revised story, Bonka gets barbecued in *lekker braavleis* (South African beef cooked over an open log fire) and his tougher pieces are *biltonged* – the jerky you eat down under in Africa that is so hard you can keep it a whole day in your mouth, with the taste lingering at the back of your tongue, giving you the impreshun that you have gorged yourself.

Biltonging

What I will now suggest will drive the *pharmacuticle* industry beserk (they certainly ain't cute), coz my idea of a start-up is bound to give them fits of *diary-ahh* and *ratatata* machine-gunning farts.

To save the lives of future cattle, them clever Israeli scientists have just invented a way of obtaining beef meat, without killing animals. How's that for a miracle, coming from the *Holier-than-Thou Land*? By growing cow cells, they succeeded in producing lab-grown burgers, as *lekker* as the best-tasting meat in the world. Are you following? Wake up, this is *wowingly* important for all of us, and particularly for those of you who gulp down food like *hippopotamissus*. Coz, due to your compulsive eating, you cause many more cows to be slaughtered. There is one big problem that still has to be resolved though. Did you know that cows and bulls are the

greatest whoopee fartars of our planet, depleting the ozone even more than cars and planes? The same Israeli scientists oughta take care of this before we begin to wallow in and start fainting from the stinkstorms of bullshit that will reach our cities.

Back to lab-grown burgers and their enormous benefits. There will be no more cattle holocaust and bloodletting.

The labs will grow prime natural low-cal beef.

No more crying over sweet lil calves being industrially butchered and whose meat is so mmm ... ten ten ten der.

But here comes the best (for us consumers) or the worst part (for the *pharmaceuticles* and the greedy surgeons).

When I was in South Africa, my Bibendum-shaped Boer cousin Kif kept chomping on something that was dark red and stringy. When I asked him if he was chewing gum, he guffawed and minutes later he came back from the pantry with what I believed was a piece of bark. He then handed it to me and said:

“This is the best *lekker biltong* you will find in the country. We make it right here at home, using the finest rump beef. After you get all the blood out, you cure and smoke it and then let it dry for at least three days, sometimes even a whole week. Come on, taste it and tell me what you think.”

It looked a bit disgusting to me, especially after his explanation. I hesitated for a while then started munching on it very slowly, and the more I munched, the more I liked the stuff, tough and stringy as it was. You soon get addicted to it and keep chewing *cowwise* like there's no tomorrow, which gets on your bloomin' nerves, so much so that I felt like pinching my uncle every now and then, as a preventive

measure, coz he always eventually comes out with some *cocky bulldog* story that drives me up the wall.

First cowvid shot

I had to accompany Unky Berky to a clinic, waking up at an *uncushy* hour – 6 a(nger) m(ongrel) – , so that he could get his first *cowvid* shot. We needed to take 2 buses and then walk half an hour to find the friggin place. Once there, we waited for 53 minutes 12 – yeah, I even count the seconds, which saves me from looking at all the patients surrounding me, some of whom give me the jitters, especially the old grouches who grumble and drool at the same time, sticking their tongues out like bitches out of breath, as if by doing so, it would quicken the procedure.

Before a nurse could receive us, Unky Berky asked a very cute looking guy if he could help us retrieve a numbered ticket, on account that everything was written in Hebrew. He must have been 17 or 18, had beautiful long curly hair and eyelashes, with a pencil-thin round-about mustache which made me want to draw a circle around his mouth, it was so perfectly designed. Wow, I'm waxing romantic and *powetic* at the same time.

Yo, anyone of you who dares pull faces at me will have them twisted for good! So, if you don't want your mouth to be permanently stretched in a ridiculous position, making you look like the hunchback of Notre Dame, with eyes resembling two dangling oysters, behave yourselves ok! Yeah, I have ESP and outlandish powers, like that old Israeli magician Uri Geller who can bend spoons just by concentrating on them. So, if you try anything funny, watch your back ...

When it was my uncle's turn to get his shot, he was atrembling like a bloomin leaf slapped by a tempest. I had to kick him in the shins to stop him from shaking. He gave a lil shriek then kept quiet.

Fortunately the nurse spoke English. So Bonka, pink of fright, stuttered, while dribbling like a pregnant ewe:

"Pee ... pee ... pleez, don't hu hu ... hurt me."

I gave him my bad woolf look, so that he would cut out his shenanigans and stop making me feel ashamed to be with such a sissy of an uncle.

"Waaah!" he screamed just as the needle got out of his arm.

"It's finished, it's finished." said the nurse, sporting a quizzical smile, as if she had been rehearsing a line for a play.

When we got out of the clinic, Bonka was still all shook up and couldn't udder a word.

Apparently, I will soon have to be vaccinated, on account that the young, though they do not suffer *cowwise*, can trasmit the virus to the *growl-ups* – upsy daisy, so I say. Of course, when my turn comes, I won't be braying like my donkey of an uncle. I would be so ashamed, then too, lil injections don't scare me. Am I not a felinist? It's the waiting that will get me huffing and puffing, and, when it's too long, I gurgle moronwise.

Beach stuff

Every second day I force my uncle to go to the beach. What's the use of getting stuck on a forced vacation, when the only thing you are allowed to do is to dip your toes into the sea, which here is quite *loverly*. Even though it's not really Bonka's thing, on account that he has the skin of a plucked ostrich, too

pale for his own good. If you remember, he has carrot-color hair, so thin that the least lil wind makes him look like an albino golliwog. That's not what bothers him though, coz it reminds him of when he was young, spending part of the summer vacation in Montauk, while he was studying in New York. Then, he felt like a bobo hippy, coz someone told him that he was the spitting image of Montgomery Clift – poor Monty who apparently was a nervous wreck in real life and hated acting.

Yeah, my uncle has all the oldies of the 1950's, and he runs them every time – at the turn of each new season – he has pangs of nostalgia – , which I have to look at, if I want him to take me to the movie theaters on the Champs Elysées, where they feature the newest movies. No, what gives him goose – I should say ostrich – pimples, is the bald pate which then resembles an airstrip for critters, specially that, I dunno why, mosquitoes love to land on it, leaving their pinpricks. Then you should see how he scratches himself, making it worse, as if suddenly a bottle of ketchup had accidentally fallen on his head, spreading its goo down to his ears. And he has to use a whole box of Kleenex tissues to wipe out the mess ... too disgustingly *sis*s for words. When he does that, moaning and grumbling under his breath, I slip away, tiptoeing, pretending I don't know him. I go and hide in the shade of a tree, two blocks away. He catches up with me, on account that he has the flair of a Labrador, but there at least, we don't risk encountering people.

One bright afternoon – the skies here are always so blue – we were sitting under a beach awning, shedding our city clothes, under which we wear our swimsuits, when, hearing us speak French, two hunks, who were lying on the sand, twenty meters away from our shelter, greeted us in their Hebrew-accented English with big smiles.

“Which parrrrt of Frrrance do you come frrrrom?” asked the blonde stud.

Taken aback, coz when my uncle undresses, he is so *purr-nickity* and takes so long that a grenade could be rolling near him that he wouldn't see it. When his eyes roamed in their direction, his face turned radish-red, and all he could *udder* was a bleating behhh, which I had to immediately cover by saying, with a sudden and unwanted bark: “Parrris”, imitating their accent, even though it wasn't my intention to make fun of them.

Supermarkets, butchers and delicatessen, everywhere, oughta sell *biltong* to all and sundry, on account that you can chew the same piece of meat all day long and have the *impreshun* you've had a good and lasting meal, sans the calories. They even make it using ostrich meat, which is even leaner. mmm mmm and you ... lose weight too, so triple mmm! And the poor people all over the world would have something good to chew on, for *vely* little money.

Apparently we could eliminate famine by feeding people algae and grasshoppers – yukkier yuk, – but it's better than starving to death – , of which there are billions and billions in the seas and on earth. In specialty restaurants they grill them critters, serving them as delicacies ... and you pay like it was lobster, shucks!!!!

So, where are you, sleepy donkeys, and you, monomaniac moguls, who only think of making money the easy way, instead of helping your fellow humans?

Two new friends

The swarthy guy whose muscled body shone as if dipped in a thin layer of olive oil – yeah he looked scrumptious – chuckled and said:

“Mademoiselle has a nice sense of humorr!”

In the meantime, my uncle had difficulty opening his mouth, he seemed awestruck by the sudden apparition of these two splendid Israelis, who, there could be no doubt about it, were gay buddies, or even partners. For every now and then, they would wink at each other all the while pursuing their lips in mock kisses.

There was nothing sissy about them, which, I believe, made Unky Berky feel even more spare. Unlike in Paris, when, on my insistence, we join the sun-bathing August crowds on the banks of the Seine, everybody keeps to his/her *quant à soi* (meaning, ‘to each his own’), and if someone happens to give you the once over, he/she pretends that you are not the target of *hir* (his/her) curiosity, as if you were totally transparent. This is so very *parisien*. And that is when I prefer being American, even if you smile at people you don’t know, *hypocratically*, for, at least you exiiiist! Then you can pull faces back, pretending you are a bit retarded. I know how to do that, and people, who at first want to insult me, end up saying “the poor soul, she’s a bit deranged”. But when some of them conclude that I should be locked up in a looney bin, I retort, cackling like a chicken ready to lay an egg, “Kot kot kot, go look at yourself in the mirror, your face has gone all funny, you must have caught the cowvid!” And they freeze like Lot’s wife in the Bible, turning into statues of salt.



Note

CORONA ZAPINETTE, the 15th adventure (novelette) of the award-winning series GOSH ZAPINETTE! by Albert Russo, the previous 14 episodes having been published in the author’s own English and French versions around the world, with an Italian translation too. Zapinette has been studied at the Catholic University of Paris, France (dept. students of English).

PLAY

1

Betty and Jane Decide What's Best

DAVID JAMES

Characters:

Betty: a character who's a bit of a rebel, an anti-establishment type, self-reliant

Jane: a goody-goody character who can't keep a secret; not sure of herself

Playwright: man's voice only, like God but with a lower case g

Setting: Anywhere

JANE: Betty, you're gonna die. I can't keep it a secret anymore.

BETTY: Well, you're gonna die too, eventually.

JANE: I know, but do you know why you're gonna die?

BETTY: I get into an accident? (JANE shakes head no.) Terminal disease? (JANE shakes no.) Because you're going to kill me?

JANE: Technically, no. And my death has nothing to do with your death. We're two separate entities in this play.

BETTY: Then I'm stumped. Tell me.

JANE: You're dying because...that's how the play was written. I've read ahead. Your character just dies in this act. Author's discretion. Pure and simple. I had nothing to do with it.

BETTY: A frigging playwright is killing me off?

JANE: Yeah.

BETTY: I object. I won't do it.

JANE: You have to: "It is written."

BETTY: Have you ever heard of "revision"? He can just rewrite the scene. He can wound me, if that helps.

JANE: You mean like chop your arm off or lose an eye?

BETTY: I was thinking more like a scratch on my hand, ten stitches in my leg. No deformities. That could hurt my career.

JANE: Maybe we can talk some sense into him. He's killing me off in act III. The guy's a sadist.

BETTY: Aren't they all? Give them a pen and paper, a stage and actors, and they think ruining people's lives is "theatre."

JANE: Who wants to see that?

BETTY: I don't, that's for sure.

JANE: The audience wants optimism, hope. People want to laugh and learn and laugh some more.

BETTY: Then why are playwrights always trying to kill us?

- JANE: Dramatic conflict?
- BETTY: Conflict sponflict. Death is the END of conflict.
- JANE: I don't know. Maybe playwrights are just stupid.
- BETTY: A bit out-of-touch with reality, I'd say.
- JANE: Well, if you refuse to die, I'll refuse to die.
- BETTY: And if we both refuse to die, maybe the playwright will kill himself! Yes, and then we're free.
- JANE: What a great idea.
- BETTY: We simply do what we want, ignoring him, and then watch the writer self-destruct. He'll fume to death.
- JANE: You're a genius.
- BETTY: Just thinking on my feet, like any good, well-developed character.
- JANE: They want us to be real, three-dimensional, so they can't complain when we start to "act" out.
- BETTY: That's right. Or, if they do complain, they're not real playwrights. They're playwrongs.
- JANE: You're on a roll, girl.
- BETTY: Yeah, I'm feeling it tonight, playing off the audience.
- JANE: Kind of like improv.
- BETTY: That's it, Jane: let's improvise ourselves into a better play, written by a better playwright!

PLAYWRIGHT (voice only, from above):

What are you doing here? Betty, weren't you supposed to die by a gunshot to the head?

BETTY: Yeah, well, I'm not down with that. I have no motivation to kill myself.

PLAYWRIGHT: Hey, I'm the writer here. You have to do what I tell you to do.

JANE: Sir, I'm sorry, but we don't like dying. We'd rather...

PLAYWRIGHT: Shut up! I wrote, "Betty pulls the gun out of the drawer, puts the barrel to her temple, and shoots." You have to do that.

BETTY: I'd prefer not to.

PLAYWRIGHT: You don't have a choice.

BETTY: I'm not doing it. I don't know how. I've never used a gun before.

PLAYWRIGHT: It's easy. Take the gun, hold it up, and pull the trigger. What could be hard about that?

BETTY: Show me.

PLAYWRIGHT: What?

BETTY: Show me how to do it. Then I'll know how. I'm a "visual" character.

PLAYWRIGHT: Look, you take out the gun, point it here, and... (Loud gunshot heard. Long silence.)

BETTY: You're right, Jane. Playwrights are stupid.

JANE: Now what?

- BETTY: I think we're on our own...but as long as we have an audience, we'll be okay. We can feed off their energy. That's what characters do.
- JANE: But what if they leave? They have to leave sometime.
- BETTY: Then...we...hang around until they come back.
- JANE: Oh my god. They're gonna leave us here. By ourselves. I just know it.
- BETTY: Settle down. We have each other, remember.
- JANE: What are we going to do? How can we talk without a script? Hey, how am I talking now?
- BETTY: Jane, take a deep breath. Don't overact here.
- JANE: Oh sure, smarty pants. Then we're free. Why do I even listen to you? Free to sit around frozen in time in some damn little play that'll never be finished...
- BETTY: Come on, we're round characters; we can survive this little inconvenience.
- JANE: ...with a future of ten-minute play festivals, a future of community theatre, oh my god...
- BETTY: Get a hold of yourself, girl.
- JANE: A future of final projects in Intro to Acting classes at the local community college! Oh shit...
- BETTY: STOP IT!
- JANE: We'll be left in the dark. I hate the dark. Sitting all alone in pitch black silence. (whiny) Betty, I want my playwright back. (Lights begin to dim.)

BETTY: Don't worry, now, it's alright.

JANE: Oh god, it's ending... Hey, turn the lights bac
(JANE's dialogue is cut off in mid-word when
the lights go black.)

THE END

(When lights come back on, the characters remain FROZEN on stage
until most of the audience leaves before they move.)



2

Caged

GARY BECK

SCENE: An urban zoo, with an outdoor cage and a door leading to the indoor cage.

(Ambient zoo sounds throughout the play. Zookeeper enters. Unlocks cage door and sweeps, whistles, does a short 'broom dance'. Visitor enters. Watches.)

Visitor: You look real happy in there.

Zookeeper: Well I'm used to it. This is my 3rd year in the big house. And I'll be leaving soon.

Visitor: That's a funny thing to say. The big house. It sounds like a prison.

Zookeeper: It is for them.

Visitor: Don't give me that. They got a roof over their heads, good food, medical benefits. So what if they can't go for a bus ride. They don't get mugged.

Zookeeper: How would you like to be on public display for eight hours a day? Everyone gaping at you. Yelling, cursing, spitting, throwing things, treating you like an animal. . . .

Visitor: They are animals. You've got a real identity problem for a guard.

Zookeeper: I'm not a guard! Except to protect them from people just like you.

Visitor: Me!

Zookeeper: Yeah. Don't you talk to them? Give them peanuts? Taunt them? Dare them to come out and go a few rounds with you?

Visitor: I don't do anything like that!

Zookeeper: Well something else then...? Do you have fantasies about walking a wild beast on a leash and attracting beautiful women?

Visitor: You're a weirdo. I don't think about things like that! Besides, what business is it of yours what I think?

Zookeeper: You started this conversation, not me.

Visitor: That wasn't an invitation to analyze me. And I'm not like that at all.

Zookeeper: Then why are you here? It's probably for something cruel or perverse. That's why people come here. That's why the animals are in cages. So everyone can tease them and gloat how superior they are.

Visitor: We are superior! We're people. That's why we're out here and they're in there.

Zookeeper: If we were superior, we wouldn't torture these poor brutes with life imprisonment, just for our entertainment. Especially when almost two million Americans are in prison for real crimes. We don't make a sideshow out of them

- Visitor: What are you talking about? We're not barbarians. That's why everyone's against capital punishment. That proves we're more civilized than the animals.
- Zookeeper: If we were civilized, we'd put these poor beasts out of their misery and show movies or television, instead of letting people gape through the bars. But no, people have to see what they really look like, live and miserable.
- Visitor: But zoos are building natural habitats, so the animals can live well. They'll be happy and our children can learn about them.
- Zookeeper: Why don't you step into this habitat for a minute and see what it feels like.
- Visitor: No, thanks. I don't want to get my clothes dirty, and I've got an appointment soon.
- Zookeeper: Didn't you ever wonder what it would be like, looking out at all those people? Hoping you could get your claws on them.... Losing hope as the years go by.... Fading away.... Coughing.... Getting sick.
- Visitor: That wouldn't happen to me! I'd exercise regularly and eat the right way.
- Zookeeper: It's not like that for them. They can't ask to speak to the warden, or request library privileges.
- Visitor: You're blowing it out of proportion. They're protected at least. What do you think would happen to them in Africa or Asia? Someone would be making them into rugs or coats.

Zookeeper: It might be better than this. Try it. (He beckons to the visitor.)

Visitor: What are you, nuts? (encouraged by the zookeeper, he hesitantly enters and starts inspection.) It may not be the Waldorf, but they got a roof over their heads and they get lots of attention.... (cage business.)

Zookeeper: Why don't you jump up on that perch and see what it feels like?

Visitor: That's crazy (He starts to exit.)

Zookeeper: You're here already and nobody's watching. You'll never get another chance like this.

Visitor: I feel stupid.

Zookeeper: Try to imagine what you would feel like if you were a tiger, curled up there, watching, waiting, twitching your tail.... Springing down on the weak, helpless men.... (the visitor slowly mounts the perch, assuming a cat pose.) Sinking your teeth into them.... Tearing off a piece of meat.... Padding off to a quiet, concealed place, to eat without anyone watching. (The zookeeper slowly goes to the cage door and slips out.)

Visitor: What're you doing? (He starts to get up.) I don't want to stay in here.

Zookeeper: Neither does the tiger.

Visitor: He's just an animal!

Zookeeper: I know. (He locks cage.)

Visitor: This isn't funny!

Zookeeper: I know.

Visitor: Let me out!.... (The zookeeper starts to exit.
The lights slowly fade.) Come back here!....
Help! Somebody get me out of here. Help!
Where are you going?

Zookeeper: Inside. To see if the tiger wants to visit you.
(Blackout.)



3

A Conversation

RENÉ VAN DER KLOOSTER

- the father:** I feel better now than when I was alive, more decent
- the son:** why is that?
- the father:** because of the short
- the son:** what is the short?
- the father:** like now
- the son:** in which everything is?
- the father:** short not in the sense of duration
- the son:** the short in which we are speaking? no duration?
- the father:** short in the sense 'for a moment without duration in which we are speaking'
- the son:** and why more decent?
- the father:** the short leaves you in peace
- the son:** the short is not, because where you are now everything is short, but because the short 'is'?
- the father:** the short is eternal
- the son:** and the decency?
- the father:** decency not in the sense of being more decent...
- the son:** ... but in the sense of feeling more decent?



MEMOIRS

1

Recovered Memories

FELICE PICANO

Several years ago, I found myself accompanying a friend on his visit to a Hypnotist. Lung cancer ran in his family and he wanted to stop smoking. This would be the final visit he made. The Hypnotist was a certified psychologist and asked if I'd ever been hypnotized. I said no, I didn't know if it was even possible. He asked if I were willing to try. To what end? I asked. He asked was there anything puzzling in my past I'd like clarified. He did regression hypnotherapy too.

I didn't have to ponder long. I had very early memories going back to when I was two and three years old that I'd been able to verify by facts. I recall waking up in a large darkened movie theatre filled with people. I'd been sleeping standing on the seat, at my mother's side. I turned around and watched the screen. Two women were arguing over and then physically fighting over a man. One of the women was in a gypsy costume and it was set in a fortune teller's tent. I understood what was going on, and then I got bored and turned around and fell back to sleep.

Only a few months previous to the visit to the hypnotist I'd come across the film on a TV station. It was *Golden Earrings*. A hit film released in the summer of 1947. I was three and a half years old. It starred recent Academy Award winner, Ray Milland, as British spy in Germany during the

1930's hanging out in a Gypsy camp pretending to be Romany. His love interest was Marlene Dietrich, still alluring. I watched the film on TV and then the movie arrived at the fight in the tent scene and there it was, exactly how I'd recalled it as a three and a half year old.

There were a few other early memories from three to five years old. This period was more active for me than most toddlers. When I was two years old, I became an infant model for Macy's Department Store's children's catalogues. I only found this out in my late 40's when my Aunt Adrian opened a photo album and there was a full page catalogue cover from Macy's, Fall 1946. On a deep brown background spattered with colorful autumn leaves, was a Famous Flyer red wagon. In the wagon sat a little boy wearing a tan Jodhpur outfit. "That's you!" Aunt Adrian said. "Your father met you and your mother at Macy's, right after that photo shoot, and then you all drove up here to Rhode Island." My aunt then showed me a Kodak b/w photo of us sitting on Adrian's front steps, that her husband Al took: my father and mother in the back row; my sister, brother Bob and me in the front row. I'm grumpy looking and adorable. I'm wearing the Jodhpur outfit I wore for the catalogue cover.

She explained how my mother had met a friend from the time before she married. She was working as a floor walker-mannequin in Providence's Peerless Company and Boston's Filene's department store. He had moved to New York City too and was art director for Macy's children's catalogue. The original plan was for my older brother Bob to be a model. But he wasn't interested, and anyway, he always photographed frowning or scowling. My sister Carol was a far sunnier model, and so she was used for Macy's advertisements. Since I was there with my mother at the time, I was put into a "playpen" photo with several other children and the

photographer got my attention with Teddy Bears. I had dark eyes and a round face, abundant blonde curls – and the camera loved me! At the end of that first session, I was asked to model alone, and they hired me for that first catalogue cover, and used me thereafter.

My parents were asked to dye Carol's black hair blond so she could be in more photos, but my parents refused. However, I modeled for Macy's catalogues right up to the age of five, getting a teddy bear each time. While I don't recall the shoots themselves, I do recall having many Teddy Bears, even if I never saw a dime of the money I earned. I also recall going with the family to Manhattan's Lower East side where we donated a lot of the clothing that Carol and I had modeled, kept, and had outgrown – and I donated all but one Teddy Bear – to a Jewish Orphanage on, I believe, Rivington Street. After that, we went to Katz's Deli nearby and I tasted my first potato pancake and Knish, both of them favorites ever since.

One item I could not keep was from my last photo shoot for Macy's: a complete Hopalong Cassidy outfit. He was a 50's film and TV cowboy star with a gorgeous outfit complete with a white Stetson hat, a holster, and two golden revolvers' I got to model it for ads and catalogues, and I could even bring it home to show my friends. Someone from Macy's retrieved it the following evening to put it on a store mannequin. By then I was going to work modeling alone with my mother while my siblings were in school. I recall that my mother and I ate Nesselrode pie at an elaborate soda fountain after that shoot and I enjoyed showing off the outfit to my little pals. But I was okay with not keeping it. That was the only childhood modeling I remembered.

Only a few years ago, I learned from a cousin that Carol's and especially my own greater earnings as a model

had aided my father in a difficult time in business and brought needed income to the family. So I never heard the parental refrain, "What makes you think *you're* so special." I was special.

Besides the two memories above, I had two other early ones that were sketchier and that I wanted to know more about. One was very early. The second was from the same age as the one just mentioned. I was most likely just a little over four years old, because it concerned a visit my mother and I made to her aunt and uncle who were living in a suite at the Biltmore Hotel in downtown Providence, and she was pregnant with my younger brother, Jerry who was born at the end of June.

It was a warm, spring day and the windows were open. Mom's Uncle Sunny and Aunt Bess lived in the hotel only part time because they spent a lot of time visiting friends. They were childless, and Sunny's family was well off, so they didn't work and had free time. At one point in the visit my Grand Uncle asked me to fetch something for them.

In that memory, I'd seen many of photos on his bedroom wall and atop the bureaus and chests of drawers, so after I got what he wanted, I'd gone back to look more closely. In doing so, my memory found something very interesting but as a grown up I wasn't sure exactly *why* it was interesting. So when the psychologist asked, I requested a hypnotic regression to that day to find out what I'd seen.

I lay down and he said some mumbo-jumbo stuff but did not use any shiny swinging object like they do in the movies. I obeyed but I wasn't aware of any change at all. Then, suddenly I was in a large hotel room, with the curtains snapping in the breeze. I was with Bess and Sunny and my very pregnant mother. I was only tall enough to look over the

window sills and down onto the city of Providence, compact but striking because of the Capitol Dome, the railroad station, and the arm of the Providence River that ran alongside the shopping area.

My mom called me over and said to her uncle, "He'll get it for you. He's smart." Sunny told me in detail what he was looking for, what it looked like, and where to get it. —a leather pouch with photos he wanted to show my Mom. "Go into my bedroom." (He and Bess had separate bedrooms) "One closet has black shoes. One has brown shoes but the closet I want has white and mixed white and brown shoes," he specified, and sent me to look. Three clothes closets for one person in a hotel suite they lived in less than half the year: that's how wealthy they were.

In my trance state, I left them, went into Sunny's bedroom, went to the third closet, and opened it to an overwhelming fragrance of leather. I noted all the white and two-toned shoes, and I found the pouch and brought it out to him.

"See," my mother said. Aunt Bess gave me a Tootsie Roll.

"Now," the Hypnotist directed, "Go back into Uncle Sunny's bedroom, like you did the first time."

As the grown-ups chatted, I returned to Sunny's bedroom to look at the framed photos on bureaus and chests that had caught my eye.

"Tell me what you are seeing," the Hypnotist asked.

"Black and white photos mostly. Only one or two color ones. I'm seeing yachts, sailboats, boat docks, restaurants and fancy clubs on the shore. I see people against the railing and deck of a larger vessel. The people in the photos are all in

white, in tennis shorts, and skirts, or in summer clothing. I see a lot of palm trees and beaches.”

“Can you read anything in the signs or on writing on the sides of the boats?”

I could, faintly, I told him. I read off the names of boats which meant nothing to me. Names of places too, that were penciled below with dates: Bermuda, 1938. The Bahamas, 1940. Nassau Island 1939. Then, at the photo with the railings on the bigger boat, I read a sign behind their heads: “To Lifeboats & Lifejackets. H.G. S. Endeavour.”

“Do you recognize anyone in the photos?” the Hypnotist asked.

I told him that I recognized Sunny and Bess (usually much younger) in a lot of the photos. I recognized a French movie star, Arletty, in one photo, and as I continued looking, I said—and I remember saying it—“Oh, look! There’s the Duke and Duchess of Windsor.”

“Where?” The hypnotist asked.

“With Sunny and Bess and a woman who looks like the actress Jan Sterling and a heavysset man on that big boat.”

The Hypnotist took notes, but I was fully awake and aware throughout. He took me out of the trance and we went through the notes and he asked what I recalled. All of it. It was indeed worth noting. My mother’s aunt and uncle, people my father called “pampered, decadent, do-nothings” had constantly vacationed with their friends in the Caribbean and on the Riviera, and in what looked like the Greek islands.

Some of those friends were film stars and the two Royals were among the most famous people in the world in the 1930’s and 40’s. We later found out that the biggest boat, “His Grace’s Ship,” was owned by Lord Mountbatten, the Duke of

Battenberg, who was part of the Royal Family of England, and by marriage, Queen Elizabeth's uncle.

Years later, reading biographies and reviews of biographies, it was revealed from several sources that the Duke of Windsor was at least bisexual and had many gay relationships, and the Duchess –whom the Royals called “The Black Duchess” – was also bisexual. Maybe that's the real reason he gave up the throne; maybe that's what my father meant.

I still had one more memory to recover. It was my earliest and my dimmest: I was being lifted out of a crib by my father, while other people ran into the room, and all of us went to the windows looking over the street, one floor below. The windows were thrown open and I could see people yelling, screaming. I kept hearing them all happily shouting “Weezzbabaps! Weezzbabaps! Weezzbabaps!” That was it.

What was going on? Why were they celebrating? What were they saying?

I let myself be hypnotized again and again I was awake and aware but suddenly I was also in a crib. My father rushed into the room, happy, and my mother was behind him, pulling along my older brother and sister. My father lifted me and took me to the window and opened it wide. The others went to the other window and threw that open.

“What's going on?” the Hypnotist asked me.

“I'm standing on the ledge of the window,” I told him, “Looking out. But it's okay. I feel quite safe in my father's arms. We're looking out and down and everyone is very happy. My father, my mother. All the people. All the windows on the street are thrown open and I can see people hanging out of their windows and doors, and out on the sidewalks one floor below and they are yelling, screaming,

banging pots and pans with big spoons, whistling, some are playing brass musical instruments.”

“Why are they so happy? What are they shouting?” the Hypnotist asked.

“It’s easy to understand now,” I told him. The people celebrating are all shouting ‘We beat the Japs! We beat the Japs! We beat the Japs!’.”

It was V-J day, Victory Over Japan Day, in the late summer of 1945, and I was one and a half years old.



2

On A Day Like This

PATTY SOMLO

The sun was out, brightening the living room. Drops from the previous night's rain caught the light and sparkled on shrubs in the back yard. I looked up at the sky from the window next to the kitchen sink. Not a cloud. When I stepped into the living room, it was so quiet I could hear the whoosh of the waves, either pulling back to the horizon or rushing toward shore.

On a day like this, I knew the ocean and bay that framed this peninsula, along with its two rivers and one lake, would be ribboned in varying shades of blue and green, reflecting the cloudless sky, and the fir, spruce and pine trees dotting the landscape. Outside, the air had become a close-up lens, bringing everything into sharper focus.

A sunny day was what I blamed for my standing in this board-and-batten-sided beach cottage on a Saturday morning, feet from the narrow path leading through grass-covered dunes to one of the widest beaches I'd ever seen. That first time my husband Richard and I set foot on the Long Beach Peninsula, a finger of land in Southwest Washington, the sun was out. Crazy as it seems, we decided right then and there to shop for a vacation house, something we'd never considered or discussed. A few months later, we drove the two and a half hours from our home in Portland, Oregon, to tour a handful of beach cottages our realtor had picked out. That day too, not a cloud dared emerge in the sky.

In the journal chronicling his famous journey with Meriwether Lewis and the rest of the Corps of Discovery that ended on the Long Beach Peninsula, William Clark described his time here in 1805 as the worst winter he'd ever spent. Clark referred to the last place the Corps camped before arriving at their final destination beside the Pacific Ocean as "that dismal little nitch." Feet above the Columbia River's north bank, the famed spot is now known as Dismal Nitch. After the storm passed that prevented the Corps from sailing further up the Columbia River to where it joined the Pacific, they moved to a site today called Station Camp. Clark variously referred to this as "blustering point," "Stormey point," and "Point Distress." Keeping up the dark theme, more than a dozen years before when the English fur trader, John Meares, failed to find the Columbia River he sought, he dubbed the promontory, now part of Lewis and Clark National Park, "Cape Disappointment."

As William Clark discovered, and Richard and I came to learn, the Long Beach Peninsula is frequently stormy. Reached by a high bridge that spans the Columbia River from the town of Astoria, Oregon, the peninsula sports weather as contradictory as everything else about this place. Many mornings, my husband and I would wake up in the largest of our beach cottage's two tiny bedrooms to clear, sunny skies, only to be disappointed moments later when a dark, blustery downpour started.

In the two years Richard and I lived in Oregon before visiting the peninsula, we became aware that any day the sun emerged was a time to head outside. So, on a sunny April Saturday, I pointed to a thin line, just above the Oregon border on the Washington map, and said, "Let's go there." At the end of the long drive, we found ourselves alone on a beach, steps from the main town of Long Beach. Sand

stretched forever, deserted on a perfect spring afternoon. It was, of course, the off-season. But I knew tourists flocked to the Oregon Coast in the depths of winter, to revel in the wild wind, slashing, horizontal rain, and towering waves, along with discounted hotel rooms.

Like many California transplants who discovered Oregon in the past two decades, Richard and I assumed the constant rain wouldn't bother us, when we moved north from our home in San Francisco, a city we could no longer afford. After two soggy years, I understood why waterfalls and creeks around Portland never went dry, as they do in most of Northern California before June or July. Except for a short window starting after the Fourth of July, rain in Portland barely stopped. I now knew living in such a rainy place could be hard.

While we didn't love the weather, but rather endured it, Richard and I were enamored with two qualities we found in both Oregon and neighboring Washington – authenticity and wildness. By the time we moved to Oregon in 2000, San Francisco was well along the path of its transition into a city primarily for the well-off. In and around Portland, neighborhoods varied, from ones with sprawling homes that attracted upper-middle-class professionals to others with modest, affordable bungalows. Many of Washington and Oregon's small towns retained the character they'd had when logging, mill work, and fishing were the principal occupations. These places sported weathered buildings, cafes serving food that went out of style in Northern California back in the seventies, and no-frills taverns sporting stuffed deer heads on the walls. All this and more we happily discovered on the Long Beach Peninsula.

But the area's beauty initially attracted us. The April morning we first crossed the Astoria Megler Bridge, sunlight

bouncing off the Columbia River parallel to the roadway was so bright, when I looked away, diamonds flashed before my eyes. In subsequent visits after we'd bought the beach cottage, Richard and I became intimate with the small towns, parks, bodies of water, and cafes found up and down that strip of land. Lovers of old homes, we never tired of strolling the quiet streets of Seaview and Oysterville, with their stately turn-of-the-century former sea captains' residences and barely any cars. We'd walk the bleached wooden docks at Ilwaco, where I once met an old sailor who taught his colorful parrot to bark like a dog, gazing at the rusted salmon boats. We hiked the forested trails of Cape Disappointment State Park, taking in wide views of the coast and glimpses of two historic lighthouses.

Having grown up as a military child, moving once a year or every other year to a new and unfamiliar base or town, I am deeply affected by my surroundings. Places I've lived, and even visited, can worm their way into my heart. That's what happened with the Long Beach Peninsula.

Some days, standing on the shore of Willapa Bay, feet from an abandoned cannery and a mountain of bleached white oyster shells, watching a Great Blue Heron peck in the mud, I would wipe tears from my eyes. This also happened at Waikiki Beach, named after the wreck of a Hawaiian ship there, while watching harbor seals playfully dive in the waves.

Unlike so much of the United States, which is segregated by class, the Long Beach Peninsula boasted a wide mix of residents and visitors. Large, cedar-sided vacation homes, many owned by people whose principal residences were in Seattle and Portland, nestled behind the dunes. Not far away, moldy trailers rested on lots shaded by pines, where folks with questionable pasts resided. Feet before our street dead-

ended at the beach path, a narrow dirt road curved back inland to a collection of trailers. Here, some of the peninsula's Latino population lived, men who worked on nearby oyster farms, and women in local motels.

By the time our realtor pulled up in front of the blue batten-and-board-sided cottage, we had gotten a taste of the living situations that existed on the peninsula. One cottage we toured deep in the dark woods sat next to a mobile home with so much junk piled in the front yard, it looked like a landfill. I practically gagged on the mildew smell when we stepped in the door of a second house and felt queasy at the sight of the bubble-gum pink shag carpeting in a third.

In addition to being a nice place, with that enticing path to the beach only feet from the front door, our cottage was located just outside the hamlet of Ocean Park. Once a Christian summer camp, Ocean Park was dotted with picturesque vintage cottages, lining the silent streets Richard and I loved to stroll. Among the handful of businesses was a takeout place that served teriyaki chicken as good as you could get in Hawaii, made by a woman born and raised on the Big Island. The town also boasted the wonderful Jack's, a store that carried everything, from groceries to clothing, hammers and saws, and clam guns, used to snag the local delicacy, razor clams. Best of all was the Crab Shack, where two elderly women wearing red crab-claw hats sold fresh seafood at bargain prices.

Our neighbors in the large oceanfront house next to the path were retired teachers. They had a wine cellar in the basement, and Ann, the wife, was a gourmet cook. She organized occasional wine dinners to raise money for local schools and charities, at one of the handful of good restaurants, the 42nd Street Café.

In many ways, the café, which exemplified much of what we loved about the peninsula, would be difficult to imagine any place else. The interior was cozy, with small tables set next to lace-covered windows, a look you might expect to find in a small town. The food, though, could easily have been served in one of the hip, new restaurants opening practically every week in Portland. The owner, Blaine, acted as maître d', guiding you to your table and bringing water, while his wife, Cheri, presided over the kitchen. Our favorite waiter, Claude, was originally from France. The food was varied and excellent, portions generous, and prices reasonable. On Sunday evenings, Cheri emerged from the kitchen to play the harp.

On Richard's and my first weekend at the cottage, we met our neighbor, David, and his wife, Amber. Like us, the couple lived in Portland, and ventured out to their cabin across the street only on long weekends and holidays.

After filling us in on the cabin's history, which had been built by his grandfather, David gave us a warning.

"Make sure you tie your garbage can lids down with bungee cords. Otherwise, the bears will get in the cans and strew the garbage all over the street. That will make Ann mad," he concluded, referring to our neighbor in the oceanfront house.

David then led us to the end of our back lawn, where a thick forest of scrub pine started.

"See this?" he said, pointing to a bare mud trail heading into the woods. "That's the path the bears take going back and forth."

We had heard rumors of small black bears living on the peninsula, but this was proof. The local paper, *The Chinook Observer*, printed summaries of often odd, and occasionally,

funny emergency calls received by the sheriff and police, which sometimes included bear sightings. As soon as we'd heard about bears traipsing past the cottage, and out to the street, we were primed. Now, every time the motion detector light above the side door flicked on, we scrambled over to see if a bear had set it off. After a half-dozen instances with no bear patiently waiting at the door, we sadly concluded it was probably a stray cat or neighbor's dog.

Some weeks later, though, we were in luck. I was driving out the narrow, deserted road to the westernmost tip of the peninsula, where Leadbetter State Park started, when I noticed what appeared to be a large black dog crossing the pavement. As we got closer, I could see this dog had an unusual shape, the body forming a rounded letter "n" as it walked.

"Oh, my God. There's a bear," I said to Richard.

"Where?" he asked.

"Just up the road. There."

Holding the steering wheel with my left hand, I pointed my right index finger forward.

"Wow," Richard said. "I think you're right."

As soon as the words were out of Richard's mouth, the animal vanished, perhaps slipping into the trees that began next to the shoulder.

Except for the rain, I loved everything about the peninsula. On sunny days, we hopped on our bikes and peddled the ironing-board flat roads, past sparkling Willapa Bay and through the tiny town of Oysterville, where we admired the charming hundred-year-old houses, picking out the one we most wanted to buy. We turned around near the tip of the peninsula in Surfside, where an odd mix of

spacious, cedar-sized houses sat feet away from rusted RVs. As my photographer husband liked to say, the peninsula had character, decidedly lacking in many parts of the United States, where big-box stores and chain restaurants abound. The Long Beach Peninsula couldn't claim even one national chain. The three grocery stores were locally owned, as was one of my favorite spots, the Cottage Bakery, with its fifties-era wooden booths and glass cases stuffed with fruit pies, turnovers, eclairs, and all sorts of cookies and doughnuts.

Of everything I loved, though, the silence topped my list. Every time I stepped into the cottage after the drive from Portland, I was struck by the absence of noise. The silence was so palpable on our dead-end street, I could feel myself instantly relax on arriving, as if I'd just gotten a massage, followed by a chilled glass of white wine.

The other thing I loved was standing at the kitchen sink, gazing across the lawn, to the forest of dark green scrub pine. So, the afternoon I noticed something different, my heart dropped.

I stared at the trees, trying to figure out what was wrong. Then, all of a sudden, I knew. Crazy as it seemed, there appeared to be less trees, as if loggers had snuck in the previous week and chopped a handful down.

"Richard," I shouted. "Something's wrong."

"What is it?" he yelled back, from down the hall.

"Come look," I replied.

I inhaled slowly, trying to calm down.

"Look," I said, when Richard joined me at the window. "The trees are gone."

Our neighbor, Ann, was the only full-time resident on our street that we knew. So, Richard called her. As expected, Ann knew everything about what had happened.

Unbeknownst to us, the property behind our house had recently sold. To reach the site, you had to follow a skinny dirt road that started where our street dead-ended, something Richard and I had never done. According to Ann, the new owner was a female detective with the Portland Police Bureau. She planned to build her retirement home on that plot. While the house was being constructed, she expected to camp on the property in her RV.

As if the loss of the trees wasn't bad enough, Ann had worse news to report. The new owner was in charge of the department's eight-member canine unit. Once she removed enough trees and built a secure high fence around the lot, she intended to bring all eight barking dogs out to the property with her on weekends.

Hearing this last part, I started to cry. Not only would more of my beloved trees disappear, but the silence was going to be snatched away along with them.

Hours after we listed the cottage, three offers arrived. That same afternoon, we accepted the highest one. The missing trees and news about the dogs had spurred us to sell the place. But we'd also grown weary of making the two and a half-hour drive from Portland, only to sit in the dark cottage and listen to the rain.

Since we were leaving the furniture for the new owners, it didn't take long to pack. After loading up the car with the last boxes, we decided to take a final walk on our beach.

Not surprisingly, it was a heartbreakingly clear day, with a cobalt sky only broken by a scattering of wispy white clouds. As we strode up the beach, admiring the reflections

caught in the damp sand after the waves retreated, I wondered if we'd made a mistake selling the cottage. But then, as I'd done throughout my childhood each time we packed up and left a place, I reminded myself that there was an entire world out there for me to explore and enjoy.



3

Former Yugoslavia

RON SINGER

Writers specialize in parallels and other correspondences. What could be more central than metaphors, which find striking resemblances between things otherwise as dissimilar as possible? Consider Othello's invocation of the sport of hawking to describe marital infidelity.

If I do prove her haggard,
Though that her jesses were my dear heartstrings,
I'd whistle her off and let her down the wind
To prey at fortune.

(Othello, 3.3.265-69)

Of course, the best metaphors (like that one) also uncover startling similarities. Was Desdemona supposed to be the pet of that arriviste aristocrat, Othello? Or closer to (and further from) home, consider the improbable story of how our small co-op apartment building has shared, both literarily and literally, the fate of former Yugoslavia.



"You Chew, me Serb. We same." These were the words of Peter (originally, I presume, "Petar"), an ethnic Serb from Montenegro. He chose a moment to assert this correspondence when I had no chance to object, although I found the assertion highly objectionable.

Peter and I were trying to heft a very heavy air conditioner from its metal frame, which hung over the street from my 11th-floor apartment. At that moment, the air

conditioner was in danger of slipping from our hands, and out the window. The problem (besides its weight) was that the thing was very hard to maneuver through the window, and back into the apartment.

Later, when the a.c. rested safely in the hallway beside the freight elevator, and sullen Peter had left without a tip, I reconsidered his assertion, deciding it had not been completely outrageous. After all, Jews and Serbs do share a sense of persecution based upon a fall from perceived former glories. In 1389, they saved Europe from the Turkish hordes at Kosovo. In the Old Testament, God told us that we were His people. Yet the differences between Serbs and Jews are obvious.

Peter was a terrible super, lazy, insolent, and unskilled. My wife and I imagined that, before striking out for the land of opportunity, this tall, sleazily handsome young fellow had been a beach gigolo in Montenegro. As our super, he wound up not doing any work for months, because of "personal matters." When he resisted Management's attempts to persuade him to leave the small studio apartment that is one of our supers' emoluments, it took an expensive, yearlong eviction process to rid ourselves of this odious fellow, whom we came to regard as a curse on the building.

I have no idea what happened to Peter after he finally decamped. (Count the spoons.) Years later, I reincarnated him in a long story. In my imagined sequel to his days in our building, he became a gunrunner in a fictional central African country that was rich in Coltan and ruled by a geriatric dictator. The story is called "Their Countries of Origin," and it also features a second ex-super (fictional), a genial African who becomes a dissident in the imagined country.

How, you ask, did our Board find Peter, in the first place? I don't really remember, but he may have been one in a string of supers from former Yugoslavia garnered through a connection of one of our residents. This resident was an elderly, semi-famous painter (artist, that is). Over the years, we also employed several Maltese supers, all of them good.



Probably at a family party, a cousin of my wife's recited this clever limerick:

Said the beautiful Magda Lupescu,
as she rode to Romania's rescue,
"Is it such a bad thing
to be under a king?
'Is democracy better?'
I esk you."

Why do I remember this limerick? Possibly because I have re-told it so many times. Or did cousin Harry tell it more than once (or twice)? Putting aside the multiple ways in which the limerick has become an eminent candidate for the cancel culture, it adumbrates a fascinating story from Romanian history. (If you don't know the story, you can search "Magda Lupescu," in Wikipedia.)

My point here is that both the limerick and the byzantine history behind it typify the kind of Balkan intrigue that is central to a very strong stereotype, a stereotype that became a staple of the spy thrillers of Eric Ambler and, you could say, of the WW II and subsequent Cold War thrillers of John LeCarre' & Co.

To ice this cake, Magda's forebears included Jewish convertites to Catholicism. And to put the cherry on top, "Magda" is Bucharestian slang for "prostitute." Oh, and once Lupescu had married her king, Carol II, and the couple was

forced into exile, one of their way stations was Portugal. Remember that!



Turning to what I understand better –that is, to some Yugoslavs I have known personally (not forgetting Super-Peter, whose name is eponymous with the keeper of the keys to heaven) – the roster begins with two cleaning women, Ana (“grace”) and Mia (“mine,” or “bitter”). At that point, we were living in a small frame house in an area of Brooklyn that realtors had dubbed “the South Slope.” Mia was initially loaned to us by my mother-in-law, in 1977, when my wife was pregnant with our daughter. Mia may have been six-feet tall, and she wore her dark, straight hair short. I remember how strong she was. To dust the ceiling, she would ascend our eight-foot ladder carrying our old Electrolux, canister in one hand, hose in the other.

After a few years, when Mia left our employ to return, I think, to Yugoslavia, she bequeathed her friend Ana to us. I remember Ana as being somewhat older –in her forties, whereas Mia was in her thirties—and as having curly, shoulder-length hair. She was shorter than Mia, and did not ascend ladders, with or without vacuum cleaners.

Ana also worked for my father-in-law, by then a widower. It was she who discovered his prone, unconscious body when she came to clean his apartment. Days before, he had suffered the stroke that, a few months later, would kill him. I don’t recall when Ana stopped working for us, or what subsequently happened to her. Would she, too, have returned to Yugoslavia, or was she more completely assimilated than Mia to life in the U.S.? Nor do I know either woman’s specific ethnicity. Since both names are Serbo-Croatian, it is less likely that they came from Kosovo or Bosnia-Herzegovina than

from Serbia or Croatia. In 1977, their identity would simply have been “Yugoslav,” but within another decade, it would have become anything but simple.



What I’m getting at is the complexity of Balkan history and culture. To jump to 20th-century Romania, that country is an important stopping point for Ambler’s criminal opportunist exile in *A Coffin for Dimitrios* (which James Bond reads on a train, in *From Russia with Love*).

Is intrigue what you have in mind when you think of Romania? Think again! Recently, my wife and I watched “Untamed Romania,” a nature documentary. Beside the splendid photography and surprising wealth of flora and fauna (which omits Lupescu and Carol II), the film rings changes on a basic theme, “Save the Carpathians.” Al Gore and the Audubon Society, move over! Why was I so surprised? Perhaps because the Balkans remains, at least for now, among the entities we still allow ourselves the pleasure of mocking with stereotypes.

Moving on to a second Balkan nation, also contiguous with Yugoslavia, consider Albania. Do you think first of gangsters in the Bronx? Or, perhaps, of Enver Hoxha, the mad Stalinist, then Maoist dictator, whose ludicrous bomb shelters, which look like concrete outhouses (“brick shithouses”) still disfigure the Albanian countryside, thirty-six years after their architect (figuratively speaking) was carried off, at age 76, by diabetes and heart disease? Speaking of shithouses, it was an Albanian plumber who caused a serious flood in our bathroom by dissolving the toilet ring, in the course of acid washing the tile floor.

But did you know that Enver Hoxha was a modernizing technocrat? And, if your image of Albania includes rabid

Islamicist irredentism, consider that, starting in 325, the country was the first in Europe to begin to be Christianized. Even today, 20% of Albanians are Christian (59% Muslim, and most of the rest, stubborn practitioners of the official state belief system since 1967: atheism).

Of course, Islamic irredentism brings us back to Yugoslavia, and to the cruel, bellicose Serbian irredentism that has driven Kosavars into the arms of their Albanian brethren (and sistren). And a large majority (how large, depending on whom you ask) of Kosavars are ethnic Albanians.



Which brings me back to the roster of superintendents in our Manhattan co-op building, to which we moved in 1995. Notable among their ranks were two generations of a Kosovar family. The parents, an older couple, were George (originally "Gjergi," he told me, when I asked) and Sara. Their sons, both grown, were Bekim and Charles. First, we hired Charles, an excellent super, the complete antithesis of Peter.

When, after several years, Charles informed us that he had been offered a grander position, our building mourned. Since, by then, he also had a wife and two small children, he had outgrown the super's small studio apartment. When we jokingly asked him if there were any relatives we might hire, we were thinking of Bekim, his congenial brother, who had operated our freight elevator a few times, when the passenger elevator was out of service. Tactfully, Charles informed us that Bekim lacked the requisite skills, which meant that, every time we needed a minor plumbing or electrical job, it would cost us extra money.

A few weeks after that conversation, and shortly before he was scheduled to begin his new job, Charles informed us that his parents had just arrived in New York from Kosovo, and that, if we liked, they could move into our building and serve as our co-superintendents. Without many questions (because we had such a high opinion of Charles, who had been so forthcoming about Bekim), we hired his parents, George and Sara.

The old couple wound up staying in the building several years, which turned out to be longer than we wanted. This was because George's skills matched those not of Charles, but of Bekim. Sara did all the menial work, like cleaning, collecting the garbage, and delivering the mail to our apartments. Meanwhile, George, whose English was not too bad, would stand around schmoozing with one or another resident, or with his colleagues on the block. Sara spoke no English; her response to our efforts to communicate was to shrug her shoulders and flash a warm smile.

Eventually, we tired of George (and Sara, who came with him). After that, each year the Board would ask pointed questions about when they might want to retire. Finally, they did, returning to Kosovo around 2010, which would have been two years after the Kosovars declared Independence from their Serbian oppressors.

Since then, we sometimes see Charles in front of his new building, which is a block from ours, and full of super-rich people. Trying not to sound either too glad or too anxious, we ask how George and Sonja's retirement is going. Charles's answers are blandly reassuring. Each time we run into him, he seems more urbane.



The famous architect of the Yugoslav nation was Josip Broz, known to history as Tito. A Croatian, but a nationalist, Tito led the Partisans in their resistance to the Nazis, then forged what was one nation until his death in 1980.

Of course, Tito was also one of the iron-fisted eastern European Communist autocrats that Arthur Koestler alluded to in *Darkness at Noon*, his expose' of the failures of Bolshevism. And the nation that Tito forged lasted less than four decades, soon after which incipient "balkanization" became a conflagration.



Our acquaintance with Yugoslavians has included not only people who worked for us: supers, cleaners, plumbers, electricians, and contractors. I have not yet mentioned two notable members of the "higher" classes, a publisher who was a passing acquaintance, and a painter who is a good friend.

The publisher, Marko Pavlovic, is a Serb, probably in his sixties or seventies, who came to the U.S. in 1987. Since his press operates out of New York and Lisbon, and his wife is Portuguese, did he stopover in Portugal on his way from Yugoslavia (or former-Y.)? Starting as a poet, Pavlovic turned to prose, both novels and non-fiction. He is said to be particularly interested in "arcane spirituality" (whatever that is) and, as a publisher, is known for nurturing some of his writers, and ignoring others. Money seems to dominate his business model. The reason I consider him only an acquaintance is that, a few years ago, he offered me a contract for a book that included a proviso that I purchase about \$800 worth of copies. This gave me the idea that his press was a stealth-vanity outfit, so I demurred, and never heard from him again.

I know much more about our painter-friend, Marta Novak, a woman in her mid-eighties. We consider Marta a talented and accomplished artist. Several of her pictures hang in our apartment, and she and my wife have shown work together.

Marta's origins are especially complex. Her father, a Croatian diplomat, defected to the U.S. when she was a child. Her mother came from Italian nobility. Her maternal grandfather was an anti-fascist scholar who chose exile in Switzerland during the Mussolini era. Marta has enough money to maintain a lovely apartment and a separate studio space. Does the money come from both sides of the family?



Did the Serbs really save Europe from the Turks, as their nationalists claim? Yes, they did drive the Turks out of Europe in the second Serbian-Turkish War (1878). As for the Nazis, the Serbian Partisans harassed them, and were later instrumental in their defeat.

What about Serbian animus toward Croatia? The *Ustase* – Croatian fascists – killed perhaps 300,000 Serbs during WW II. Italian and Bulgarian fascists were also involved. Border disputes and control of natural resources were important causes of anti – Serb violence during this period. Three decades later, the so-called “Croatian Spring” (1971) led to war with Serbia, which wanted to replace former Yugoslavia with Greater Serbia.



With Marta Novak and Marko Pavlovic, an artist and an intellectual-entrepreneur, we are carried back to former Yugoslavia. The life stories of our supers, housecleaners, and other workers seem simpler than those of their “betters.” But

the difference may owe as much to age as to class and education. George and Sara, at least, must have lived much of their lives under Tito, then de-camped when the country broke up, and chose to return when things settled down a bit. Of course, the couple may also have been property owners. But the other working-class people I have mentioned, emigrated during violent, unstable times, and show no signs of intending to return. Mia, the housecleaner, who emigrated while Yugoslavia was still “former,” would appear to have been an outlier.

What is missing from this account, so far, is the other half of the metaphor: how has our building’s history paralleled that of Yugoslavia? To adumbrate the parallel, or analogy, our building has gone through many dislocations and several types of bad governance. From a Manager who was here forever, then appeared to lose interest (and may have been on the take), we moved to one whose only line is the bottom one, a non-communicator. In the years since the old fogies on the Board were thrown off the Board (i.e. replaced, over the course of several elections, by younger, richer newcomers), transparency has gone out the window, and our apartments have become “financial assets.”

In a way our building, like former Yugoslavia, is an artificial entity tenuously bound by common interest. Not to push the metaphor too far, but the divisions in the building (old and young, rich and less rich, singletons and families, even gay and straight) bedevil issues ranging from lobby décor to ownership of multiple apartments. Not that I would hire Marshal Josip Broz as a building manager!

It was both the new and old Management that hired the Yugoslavian supers I have described. A decade has now passed since the last of them, George and Sara, decamped. It was not long before the (new) Manager replaced them with

an unmarried Nuyorican named Willie Benitez. (Willie speaks no Spanish, and has no family.) He had worked for the Manager before, in at least one other building, and he still works for us.

The man is a gem: skillful, friendly, extremely hardworking. It is he who is currently seeing us all through the Covid crisis. He keeps the building immaculate and spreads good cheer. Unlike Charles, his closest competitor for “Best Super,” Willie seems to be without upwardly mobile aspirations. He is enough to make me a nativist – sort of!



Soon after Tito’s death, in 1980, Slobodan Milosevic rose to power by playing the Serbian ethnic card. In 1989, he made a jingoistic speech commemorating the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, a heroic standoff with the Turks. Since, by 1989, ethnic Serbs and ethnic Albanians were already at loggerheads in Kosovo, some say Milosevic’s speech triggered the bloody wars of post-Tito Yugoslavia. Even “Gazimestan,” the portmanteau name of the venue for the speech, shows the linked fortunes of the incipient adversaries: *ghazi* (Arabic, “hero”) and *mesto* (Serbian, “place”).



Sources

Most of the sources for this combined fictional memoir/slice of history come from Wikipedia entries: e.g. Magda Lupescu, Gazimestan, Battle of Kosovo.

Note

“Their Countries of Origin” was published in *Transnational Littérature* (2014).

ARTICLES

1

Karnad's Plays: A Study of Man's Identity

DR. MANOJ KUMAR JHA

Thanks to the audio-visual medium of expression, drama has been a very powerful and influential medium in English Literature. As it is a truthful and mimetic representation of human life, it enjoys the combination of reality and fiction. It depicts the changes in social, political or cultural scenario of a society. So far as Indian English Drama is concerned, it has developed as an important and versatile body of English Literature and has caught attention of the global audiences. It finds its impetus from Indian sensibility, philosophy, myths and religious beliefs and attracted attention of the people beyond boundaries. Modern Indian English Drama has laid the foundation of a distinctive tradition in the field of drama by exploring new vistas through reinvestigation into history, legend, myth, folklore and contemporary socio-political issues. A whole new theatrical perception is evolved by the modern Indian English playwrights like Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar, Habib Tanvir and Badal Sircar.

Girish Karnad's genius lies in the fact that he draws a parallel between antiquity and contemporariness. His plays like *Yayati*, *Tughlaq*, *Hayavandana*, *Nagamandal*, *Tale Danda* and *The Fire and the Rain* are based on History, Myths, and legends. The present paper focuses on Karnad's understanding and deliberation on man's incessant search for his identity in modern society.

Keywords: – existentialism, alienation, isolation, Indian English Drama

Indian drama in Indian language and the drama in English translation have registered a remarkable growth in the recent decades under the scholarship of eminent writers like Badal Sarkar, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, Manjula Padamanabhan, and Mahesh Dattani. During the last five years, several plays originally written in the regional languages have been translated into English. Today a sizeable number of such plays are in existence inviting attention. English translation of classics in the Indian language forms an important component of Indian English literature. The translations have forged a link between the east and the west, north and south, and contributed to the growing richness of contemporary creative consciousness. Thus regional drama in India is slowly paving way for a national theatre into which all streams of theatrical art seem to converge.

Girish Karnad is the foremost playwright of the contemporary Indian stage for giving the Indian theatre a richness that could probably be equated only with his talents as an action director. His contribution goes beyond theatre. He has directed feature films, documentaries and television serials in Kannada, Hindi and English, and has played leading roles as an actor in Hindi and Kannada art films, commercial novels and television serials. He has represented India in foreign lands as an emissary of art and culture.

Girish Karnad is a master dramatist of existential philosophy which concentrates on man who is at the centre of the universe. He is free to choose his action which can free him but he is chained everywhere and seeks his salvation from the inescapable situations. He is captured in the trap of his problems and as a result, he becomes lonely, rootless and disconnected and searches his 'self' in the society like an

outsider, stranger, and absurd which generates a sort of frustration, despair and fear in his mind. The search for identity is symbolic, experimental as well as existential.

The publication of *Yayati* in 1961 and especially of *Tughlaq* in 1964 established Karnad as a master dramatist. Subsequently he published *Hayavadana* (1971), *Angumalige* (1977), *Hittina Hunja* (1980), *Naga-Mandala* (1988), *Tale-Danda* (1990), and *Agni Mattu Male* (1995). He wrote all his plays in Kannada. These have been translated into major Indian languages including the national language Hindi. Five of his plays – *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Naga-Mandala*, *Tale-Danda* and *The Fire and the Rain* – have been translated into English. The first three of these have been published by Oxford University Press in India and the remaining two by Ravi Dayal Publishers, New Delhi.

Karnad's characters are always in search for identity. His male and female characters try to find their roots and they want to set their real image in the mirror of contemporary society. The identity depends on the essence of existence which is controlled by the Purusharthas – Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha – of man as conceived in the Indian philosophy. According to Abhinava Gupta, drama should direct one's mind towards the realisation of Purusharthas. Karnad elucidates the concept to his contemporary audience as well as readers:

"The Purusharthas are the four ethical goals of human existence; Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha. Very roughly, Dharma relates to the spiritual sphere, Artha to realm of political and economic power, and Kama to that of sexual or aesthetic gratification. In these cases, what a person understands as his or her Purusharthas could vary according to his or her background, the stage of and station in life, sex etc, as well as the nature of the crisis he or she is facing. The fourth goal Moksha is released from the cycle of birth and

death and hence final liberation from human bondage. This is the supreme goal in the achievement of which relates the human being to the absolute. The concept therefore belongs to a realm beyond where the first three are relevant.”¹

In this way the identities of man are channalised in this world. In Tughlaq, Yayati, Hayavadana, Tale-Danda and Naga-Mandala, we find a constant search for identity of characters.

Yayati (1961), winner of Mysore Stage Award in 1962, has existential framework. In the characters of Yayati, Puru and Chitrlekha, search for existential identity is perceptible. The change of youth is a great setback to a man as youth is essential for creation. Though the change enriches Yayati, Puru is deserted and destroyed which questions his identity as a man. It projects the serious existential problem before Puru who is more sinned against the sinning. The wife of Puru is in the search of her authentic identity and Puru also seeks the context of meaning. Regarding Yayati’s case, it is Sharmishtha who reminds him to his sense in the following words:-

“Why should they accept the result of your actions? Sins and good deeds are not money which can be given and taken back... Do not beg any insane person or a hermit to transfer your curse to him. Let us quietly go to the forest.”²

She makes him realise the harsh reality of the life. Nobody will have to lose his identity willingly as one’s identity gives one an authentic existence. If one accepts to retain the identity, one is alienated from his own relationships. Yayati is perplexed, turns violent and refuses to accept old age. He craves for his identity and remains adamant:

“If I have to retain my identity then I should retain my youth, Sharmi. I should remain young.”³

The existentialists like Sartre and Camus put a great stress on choice and responsibility of man. In an interview, Karnad, therefore, says:

“I was excited by the story of Yayati, this exchange of ages between the father and the son, which seemed to me terribly powerful and terribly modern. At the same time, I was reading a lot of Sartre and the existentialists who were indulged in thinking up with the story of Yayati.”⁴

Karnad's second play *Tughlaq* (1964) explores the paradox of the idealistic Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq whose reign is considered to be one of the spectacular regimes of history. In connection with this play, Karnad has revealed in course of an interview that “he read a work of Kannada criticism which proved that many historical plays written earlier were costume plays and that no one attempted to relate a historical episode to modern sensibility like Shaw. This inspired me to write such a play in Karnnda.”⁵

The play is an abiding contribution to modern Indian English Drama. It has been remarkably successful on the stage as it appeals to audience most because of its dramatic excellence. The play is of a vital king who struggles too much to make his existence authentic and faces existential alienation. The greater part of the fascination and appeal of the play surely arises out of the complex personality of Tughlaq who has been realised in great psychological depth. Attention has been paid to the political theme of the play as it reflects the political mood of disillusionment in the sixties. In Karnad's own words, what stuck him “absolutely about Tughlaq's history was that it was contemporary”.⁶ In this play Karnad has depicted psychological state of Tughlaq. Very nicely, Tughlaq's determination and anguish are revealed. M. K. Naik feels “Tughlaq is basically concerned

with the tragedy of the limits of human power in a predominantly psychological context.”⁷

Initially, important incidents or happenings in the play are obliged to Tughlaq. He did what he wanted. But out of the burden of responsibility, Tughlaq falls to his knees, clutches his hands to his breast and desperately pleads with God to help him:

“God, God in Heaven, please help me. Please don’t let go of my hand. My skin drips with blood and I don’t know how much of it is mine and how much of others. I started in your path. Lord, why am I wandering naked in this desert now? I started in search of you. Why am I become a pig rolling in this gory mud? Raise me. Clean me. Cover me with your infinite mercy. I can only clutch at the hem of your cloak with my bloody fingers and plead. I can only beg – have pity on me. I have no one but you now.”⁸

In brief, Tughlaq is an existential character who decides his own fate and becomes a maker of his universe. He seeks his identity as an idealist and a realist and confusion looms large which makes him a lonely figure.

Regarding *Hayavadana* (1971) Karnad maintains, “I remember that the idea of my play *Hayavadana* started crystallising in my head right in the middle of an argument with B. V. Karanth (who ultimately produced the play) about the meaning of masks in Indian theatre and theatre’s relationship to music. The play is based on a story from a collection of tales called the ‘*Kathasaritsagara*’ and the further development of this story by Thomas Mann in ‘*The Transposed Heads*’.”⁹ The play is also expressive of Karnad’s mirroring the search for identity through his characters. Mann uses the story to ridicule the philosophy and holds the view that the head is superior to the body. For Mann, the human body is a suitable instrument for the fulfilment of

human destiny and even the transposition and transformation will not liberate the protagonists from their natural psychological demands. For Karnad, the confusion of the identities reveals the ambiguous nature of the human personality.

We witness a search for identity in Hayavadana's life. He has a man's body and a horse head. He has been trying to get rid of his head all his life because he is neither a horse nor a man. His frustration surmounts because of his own identity. The following lines are an instance in point:

"Hayavadana to Bhagavata: I have become a complete horse – but not a complete being! This human voice – this cursed human voice – it's still there! How can I call myself? What should I do, Bhagavata sir? How can I get rid of this human voice?"¹⁰

The plight of Hayavadana represents the human being with a mock existence in the world of responsible parents. He cries with anguish in lack of proper identity which questions his roots and makes him rootless and meaningless.

Naga-Mandala (1988) was written during Karnad's residency as a Fulbright fellow at the University of Chicago. The play is the reflection of two oral tales that the writer had heard several years earlier from his friend and his mother. A. K. Ramanujan, "The First story, about the lamp flames that gather in a village temple to exchange gossip about the households they inhabit, is part of the outer play and gives imaginative expression to the idea of community life. The second story, about the woman who was visited by a king in the form of her husband, is personified in the play as a beautiful young woman in a sari, and It "tells itself" (as the inner play) to an audience composed of the playwright and the flames."¹¹

The couple of the play – Rani and Appanna – lives a life full of a bog of dull and drab matrimonial relationship with mostly no emotion and love on the part of the husband. The writer presents a true picture of an exploited wife in the character of Rani, who is in the search of identity of her matrimonial life. Without a relationship between a husband and a wife, there is no future and no identity of the conjugal life.

In our society, a good woman has to be a good daughter, a good wife as well as a good mother. These are the touchstones of a good woman which establish her identity as a woman. Appanna treats Rani like a maid servant. Snatching her freedom he confines her in a locked house. She is not allowed to talk with anyone. She becomes rootless and stranger to her society. She craves for her authentic existence. Sudhir Kakar points out, “the dominant psycho-social realities of a woman’s life can be condensed into three stages. First, she is a daughter to her parents; second, she is a wife to her husband (and daughter in law to his parents); and third, she is a mother to her sons and daughters.”¹² It is through these three important relationships that a woman realises her 'self' as well as her 'identity' in society.

Rani is shattered into pieces after getting the blame of illicit relationship. She prefers death to humiliation. She does not want to be insulted amidst the people. But she faces snake ordeal before the people. Though nervous and frightened, she finds within herself a new courage and confidence. She takes vow in these words:

“Yes, my husband and this king Cobra. Except for these two I have not touched any one of the male sex. Nor have I allowed any other male to touch me. If I lie, let the cobra bite me.”¹³

In this way, there is no false vow and she succeeds to live a happy life. It is not the time of abuse by her husband

but now she is being worshipped by the villagers and Appanna himself.

In *Tale-Danda* (1993) Rambhavati and Sovideva's wife are in search of their identity. The drama has vice, presence and power of men whereas the female characters are silent, absent and powerless. They are devoid of their identity in the world of mankind. In case of Rambhavati, we find that she is a frivolous queen but in reality neither her husband nor her son gives value to her ideas. She does not dare to revolt against her husband, son and the system of society. She fully knows that escape is not a solution to any problem. Therefore, she compromises at every step of life. Bijjala, Rambhavati's husband, has unpredictable moods. His moods are expressive of his arrogant behavior towards his wife and it tells her suffocating state of mind.

The identity of Sovideva's wife is also under illusion. She does not find love and warm affection of her husband. She is discarded by her husband and is sent to her parents' home. Her husband does not think to bring her back home. She feels much humiliated. She does not exist in her husband's scheme of things.

In conclusion we see that Karnad's plays are the selected studies on the plight of man or woman in our society. His characters are best representatives of those who struggle very hard rather incessantly for their existence with meaningful identity in the modern society.

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2

The Political, Personal and Dissident in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*

TINA BORAH

“So, what I would like to say, that we are living in one world, dominated by the same system: the capitalist, patriarchal, military, racist...system against women” Saadawi said these lines as a part of her lecture on “Creativity, Women and Dissidence” in Gothenburg, 2016. Indeed, this statement cannot be truer at the present times than ever before. The narratives written by colonial, patriarchal and hegemonic discourses mark the woman’s body as site of corruption and hence justify violence on this impure objective self. It is against such neo-colonial and patriarchal tradition that Saadawi’s text *Woman at Point Zero* rails against; by giving an almost Shahrazadian subjectivity to the narrative of a female protagonist who is repressed not only because she is a woman, but also because she is a subaltern subject. She is relegated, literally to the margins of the societal structure by exploiting her lower class status and pushing her into prostitution and finally into the prison. The text represents a collective voice of resistance for all the subaltern voices in the Arab world generally and in Egypt specifically. In doing so the author uses the genre of creative nonfiction as a way to give narrative agency and space to the subaltern subject, while at the same time working as a medium for the dissemination of her story. In her role of being a medium the

author is ever self-critical of her role as a “traditional intellectual” (Gramsci 10), and elite who because of her privileged position can be implicated for the exploitation of the poor and disenfranchised.

Colonialism as a cultural phenomenon left deep seated impacts in the countries that were colonised. The colonised nation was symbolically emasculated and was seen as an exotic woman that was being made cultured and pure, with the penetration of the colonial power into it. Cultures were upturned and socio-economic relations were complicated in such a way that the reverberations of that are felt very strongly even till the present times. Colonised by the British the Egyptian nationalist movement was successful in gaining independence from the forces finally in 1954, after years of resistance against it. It, nevertheless, complicated relations more. Although, Egypt was able to gain political independence from the colonial forces, Europe and Britain per se was able to exercise dominion over it in an ideological, economic and hence neo-colonial way. This gave rise to complications in gender and class relations within the society and in the post-colonial context this invariably played out symbolically as violence against the body of the woman as it became conflated with the image of the nation.

This conflation can be seen in various kinds of representation of the woman’s body in the common literature of the Arab world. The image of the nation selling its beauty and resources out to foreign richer powers, for money and wealth can be seen represented in the microcosmic level as the female prostitute signifying the prostituting of the “body” for superficial rewards. The Nobel Prize winning Naquib Mahfouz’s *Middaq Alley* is one such example of the objectification of the woman’s body by symbolically equating sexual aggression on ‘lower class’ women with that of

colonial aggression (Saliba 133). The outside forces of neo-colonialism and the inside forces of patriarchy work together to subjugate the voice of the women, terming their bodies as "diseased" by the Western influence. More often than not, these diseased bodies are represented in the figure of a lower class woman (Saliba 133). It is this representation that Saadawi challenges in her text through the figure of Firdaus. The body is turned into a site of resistance by the writer. She uses the identity markers which places Firdaus at a marginalised position and the narrative of Firdaus's personal memory as tools, which not only help in self-representation but also at the same time helps in critical reevaluation of the history, be it the personal or political that has been responsible for materially shaping her life and by that extension the lives of all the women in her position. Firdaus in a way, through her actions ruptures the way in which her body is "gazed at" and objectified by the colonial and patriarchal discourse. She literally destroys the power and control of the male gaze by stabbing her pimp to death "I raised the knife and buried it deep in his neck,...I realised I had been afraid, and that the fear had been within me all the time, until the fleeting moment when I read fear in his eyes" (Saadawi 104). Also, this literal stabbing of her pimp and symbolic attack on the patriarchal social order has its consequences in the form of her death sentence. She understands this fact very well, that it is not the murder per se that lands her in prison, "I knew why they were so afraid of me. I was the only woman who had torn away and exposed the ugly the face of their ugly reality." and ultimately results in her death, but the fact that she unveils the ugly and cruel face of this regressive, patriarchal society that treats all women as commodities and by that extension prostitutes to be bought, sold, and used according to their

own discretion. She, hence, does not ask men in power to save her from her death sentence. Indeed, she spits at the newspaper pictures of men in power and through her vociferous indignation exposes the hypocrisy of men who claim to be saving women by helping them out for their own good, but in reality using them for self-gratification. "I spit with ease on their lying faces and words, on their lying newspaper" (Saadawi 112).

Saadawi's critique of this system of repression is achieved quite successfully, because she takes the figure of a heroine not from a high or middle class background but from the margins of the society. Firdaus's material conditions literally go into making her life the way it is. She is pushed into prostitution because of the lack of means to survive, but even when she tries to leave the profession and become a so called respectable member of the society, by taking up work at an organisation, she understands that all women and not just prostitutes are placed at a disadvantaged position by the men in power. And since she understands that her body will in any scenario be seen just as a commodity, she would rather earn money by using it than give it up for free exploitation at the hands of these men. Saadawi here overturns the notions linked to the prostitution as a profession which is seen as a shameful profession in most cultures, by presenting the story of Firdaus as a seemingly biographical piece of work. The creative nonfiction genre comes to play here by helping her to present a lived reality in a more poetic way.

While, critiquing the society she is very much aware of her own position as a member of the elite privileged class. She takes cognisance of that fact and indirectly criticizes her position of power and privilege in the hierarchical Egyptian society which is involved in disenfranchising members of the lower class. Saadawi plays the role of the guide that

symbolically saves Firdaus's story from dying with her. Hence, the narrative of Firdaus's story through Saadawi, gives life to Firdaus and makes her visible. But this visibility is not brought into play without being self-critical of Saadawi's own position in the society. As a doctor and as a psychiatrist, she belongs to the privileged class and by that extension is implicated in the subjugation of a lower class peasant girl. Saadawi resolves this by first delimiting her own voice and narrative space in the text and secondly by making Firdaus the centre of the narrative; she is the protagonist that the story is about, Saadawi is just the means. The power that she has as a doctor and the ideological power chasm between her and Firdaus is negated and both of them are brought to a similar position with the help of Firdaus's initial silence. Indeed, one can argue that Firdaus's story begins in silence. It is in this silence that her resistance towards the system lies. It is the rupture to the Centre. Firdaus embodies here, the space of a "native intellectual" in terms of Franz Fanon. She understands that "to speak is to exist absolutely for the other" (Fanon 17). So, she chooses defiance through the means of silence "She refuses all visitors and won't speak to anyone" (Saadawi 1). This fact unsettles the doctor/ translator to the point that, she has to shred her privilege and enter her cell to give voice to Firdaus's story "...her refusal to see me, the feeling that I was helpless, and of no significance grew on me... Since she had rejected me, did she mean she was a better person than me?" (Saadawi 4). Much like Spivak's postcolonial intellectual, who in the society holds the role of giving voice to the subaltern subject, Saadawi plays the role of the medium well, but she is only allowed in on the story after the reversal of authority between the doctor and the prisoner takes place. The doctor forfeits her authority and the authoritative voice comes out from that of the

prisoner/prostitute, as can be seen from the statement marked with command and urgency "Let me speak. Do not interrupt me" (Saadawi 9). Thus, by acknowledging Firdaus's silence and by giving it a dignified voice of power in the structure of the text, Saadawi critically allows for the reversal of hierarchy and privilege to take place.

Once she starts narrating her story, one can clearly gauge how Firdaus subverts authority with the use of her profession and her body. She is a master manipulator and she does not shy away from using prostitution as a method for liberation. Indeed, she enjoys having the power to reject men and having a choice about whom to make her customer. One can argue that this choice is not really a choice since she is still looked as the 'other' by the society at large. But, this very lack of choice is what makes her defiance even more prominent. In the lack of a language through which she can resist, she creates her own language of the body. "A man came up to me and whispered. I looked him straight in the eye and said 'No'" (Saadawi 73). While, on the one hand she thwarts masculine power by choosing her customer, on the other she resists with her bodily gestures. This becomes the language of resistance for her. By making her body "inert, passive, unfeeling" (Saliba 135), she refuses to pleasure the hypocritical men that come to her. "I refused to go with men of this sort My body was my property alone..."(Saadawi 99). Firdaus states herself to be "unpatriotic" unabashedly. "So I told the man from the police that I knew nothing about patriotism, that my country had not only given me nothing, but had also taken away anything I might have had including my honor and dignity"(Saadawi 98). In doing this, she on the larger scale ruptures the narrative of nationalism which is connected to exploitation of the weak and marginalised. She refuses to sell her body out to a nation that has never worked

towards the upliftment of the people from the lower classes, but has instead exploited them for their so called nation building process. So, the position that Firdaus carves out and occupies is that of “zero subjectivity”. This position is one bereft of ambition, “a final and, total vanishing point” (Saliba 135). The repressive forces of patriarchy, society, capitalism and neo-colonialism throughout her life has constantly tried to constrain her and delimit her space but in exposing these forces, showing their ugly faces and “returning to a zero point where all has been revealed and discarded, Firdaus constantly subverts this space into which she is forced.” (Saliba 135). Her narrative hence is the Supplement¹ that supplies the much needed Difference² to the over-arching Presence of the male-centric, neo-colonial narrative. Towards the end of her narrative she finally tears away the money offered to her by one of her customers and throws it down. This move symbolically marks her complete “rejection of the law of the Father and a challenge to the rationality of phallogocentrism” (Hitchcock 44). But it is exactly due to this defiance of hers to exist as a subjugated subject, that she is

1 Derrida’s concept of the Supplement acts as a challenge to the binary notions of thinking about language. Unlike Rousseau who saw the supplement as an extra added to an already complete concept, Derrida viewed the Supplement both as an extra and a complete and new concept, but which challenges and critiques the Centre in a binary setting of the signifier and the signified. It is hence a tool for deconstruction.

2 It is pun on the word difference using the French term differ and defer together. Against the metaphysics of presence, deconstruction brings a (non)concept called differance. Derrida uses the term “difference” to describe the origin of presence and absence. Differance is indefinable and cannot be explained by the “metaphysics of presence.” It is a potent tool of critique when writing back to the Centre.

being hanged. The personal is used very succinctly to make a very scathing political statement in the text about the lives of Arab women. This text hence, functions more than just an individualistic biographical account of one person. In many ways it is the story of a collective material reality of women in these areas.

This angle of the author in representing Arab feminist politics is however, ignored by some critics of the text and the author and instead criticizes it by seeing it as too self-centered and autobiographical instead of a collective account of a lived reality. This text in particular has been an apt commentary on the lack of societal freedom of women, which is a collective social reality. One such critic of the text is Georges Tarabishi. Who describes the character of Firdaus as being, “only interested in liberating herself and not her female sister” (Tarabishi 32) and on the other hand criticizes Saadawi for “her individualistic philosophy and her elitist attitude” (Tarabishi 33). These criticisms leveled against the text and the author can be easily dispelled by a close reading of the text and placing the text to be deconstructed within the feminist and postcolonial framework. First, the genre that the author chooses is creative nonfiction and not biographical. Herein, she infuses the collective narratives of many women’s accounts that she had a chance of listening to while her working on her research in Qanatir Women’s prison. So, Firdaus is inspired by a collective consciousness of the subaltern, marginalised women without a voice; trapped in the institutions of the state apparatus used to silence any form of dissent. Also, Tarabishi needs to take account of that fact that in voicing Firdaus’s story through the figure of the doctor, Saadawi renounces and abdicates her elite position of power before she can be her mouthpiece.

Another criticism level against Saadawi is that she panders to the Western feminist gaze by inculcating too many tools and signifiers used by Western feminists to gauge the lives of Arab women. One of the major critics who leveled this charge against her is Leila Ahmed. She also expressed doubts over how this text will be received by the Western feminist canon. But, Firdaus's and by that extension Saadawi's critique of class and oppression, cannot be termed under the Western canon of 'Feminism'. Indeed, Saadawi herself has explained many a times that Feminism is a very reductive word for the struggle that she has been a part of. She says and I quote, "Feminism to us is a very English word. We call it women's liberation [*tahrir al ma'rab*] because we don't have feminism in Arabic. Women's liberation means liberation from class and patriarchal oppression." (Saliba 144) Another thing that the text very importantly checks is the Western feminist's approach to read the texts of postcolonial third world countries with strong female leads who offer social and political commentary; in the light of victimisation of the protagonist. Firdaus's character in the text refuses to be victimised under neither the colonial nor the patriarchal gaze.

Gayatri Spivak argues that "the postcolonial bourgeoisie must most specifically learn to negotiate with the structures enabling violence that produced her." (Spivak 58) This is what Saadawi is seen navigating in the novel. Both Saadawi and Firdaus are punished by the state apparatus working under the dual ideologies of patriarchy and neo-colonialism. It tries to constrain both the protagonists within punitive institutions like the prison. Although, the author's material conditions are quite different from that of the protagonist, but still as a postcolonial bourgeoisie Saadawi constantly self-critiques her position and comes up with a work that proves as collective

commentary and resistance to the hegemonic hierarchical structures.

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BOOK REVIEW

Review of Karamat Ali's Poetry Collection, *God Particle and Other Poems*

KETAKI DATTA

(Karamat Ali "Karamat" [Urdu], Translated into English by Elizabeth Kurian "Mona", Educational Publishers [N. Delhi], Price: Rs. 200)

God Particle and Other Poems is the third book of Elizabeth's English translation of Urdu poems. Prof. Karamat Ali Karamat is an icon of Urdu poetry, being a Mathematics Professor by calling. His poems are subtle takes on life and reality coupled with divine feelings drive the reader understand that to Karamat Ali Karamat, love is supreme. In the three Forewords, the stalwarts like Atreya Sarma Uppaluri, Prof. Prafulla Kumar Mohanty and Prof. Sukrita Paul Kumar have praised Karamat to the *skies* and showered applause on Elizabeth for her deft translation.

Why is the title of the collection, *God Particle and Other Poems*? Prof. Sukrita Paul Kumar proffers a ready observation: It "...actually reflects the rather ambiguous coming together of faith and science in the poet's vision that runs through his poems in this book." [Elizabeth, 15] Writer and critic Atreya Sarma Uppaluri looks at Karamat Ali Karamat's poems as having "variety with a common thread of universal, spiritual and natural harmony". Humanist

Karamat points out religious discrimination, “views and feelings of the marginalised in the society” [Foreword: Atreya Sarma Uppaluri, 20], geo-cultural aspects of the land of Odisha and the original sanctity of human love. And, in the Translator’s Note, Elizabeth Kurian Mona writes, “Most of the poems that I have translated for this book are *nazms* or poems of free verse. The *ghazal* has a metre, a rhyme and refrain pattern that is almost impossible to retain in the English translation. I have translated a few *ghazals* trying to convey the thoughts therein while following the form to the extent possible.” [Elizabeth, 25]

The very opening poem “Toy” [Khilona] compares the toy’s laughter with the real laughter of humans pointing out the element of incising sarcasm in it.

But we do not ponder to know
Whether the toy’s laughter has, in fact,
A cut of sarcasm against all of us. [Elizabeth, 27]

“Brahma Satya, Jagat Mithya” [God is true, the world is an illusion] is once again cited in the concluding lines of the poem “Truth” [Haq]:

When the breath stops
And the heartbeat is still,
Then “I am” remains not.
What remains is Brahma or Haq.
God is the only reality,
The rest is all illusion.
[Elizabeth, 28]

Existential questions are raised in “Ruins” [Khandhar], “The Hours of Waiting” [Intezar ki Ghadiyan] “Departure” [Ravaangee]. A few lines may help us clarify:

The mansion will turn into a ruin some day
...This construction and destruction will continue to eternity..
[Ruin: Elizabeth, 30]

Why should I worry that I will one day
Merge in the dust, water and air
Or be scattered in the atmosphere
Like light in the space? [Departure: Elizabeth, 31]

In the poem titled “Entreaty” [Arze Tamanna], the poet touches the base of our oneness with God, our surrender to His will and his unfazed, unending gratitude, as he says,

For what you have given, I thank you;
For what you have not given, I thank you.
And also for what you have given and snatched away,
I thank you.

...

My prayer is this, and only this—
Make me a true lover
Of your messenger, the Holy Prophet!
[Elizabeth, 39]

“Acceptance” [Aitaraaf], “Pen” [Qalam], “Mobile”, “The Last Wish” [Aakhri Tamanna] touch the inmost chord of our hearts especially when the dead man’s mobile number cannot be erased despite repeated thoughts. “My fingers do not move/ To erase your name and number.” [Elizabeth, 44]

‘Glory to life and humanity’ as sung by the doppelganger of the poet’s self along with his real self bring out multiple ‘I’s to the fore in “Talking to my other self” [Zaate deegar se khitaab]

“God Particle” questions the very existence of God Particle which being the cause of creation of everything on this earth is itself a “creation and nothing else”.

He alone is God who has encompassed everything,

The whole gamut of time and space.

[Elizabeth, 53]

The Ghazals are superb in translation. Especially “Ghazal 8—Fear” lines up a slew of realities we fear to face,
Love is afraid of knowledge

It fears control of the mind.
 ...The air is so poisonous
 That man is afraid of man.
 ...
 Intellect complicates the things;
 It complicates even simplicity.
 ...how can man be happy
 When he is afraid of the sorrows of life?

[Elizabeth, 90]

The best poem of this collection is perhaps, "To Saaqi, the wine bearer"[Saaqi naama], which would better be called a paean of the purest emotion, Love:

Love is the flow of the Ganga;
 Love is the story of the Jamuna,
 It resonates in the flute of Murali;
 It resonates in the gesture of Radha.
 It is Savitri, it is Sita too. It is the Ramayana, it is the Gita too.
 Buddha got enlightenment through love;
 He taught wisdom to the world with love.
 It is the divine inspiration on Mount Sinai;
 It is the message of Jesus, the son of Mary.
 Love is the glimpse of the light of divine;
 It is the miracle of the Holy Prophet.

[Elizabeth, 100-101]

In the "Quatrains"[Qitaat], nuggets of wisdom, both worldly and divine stand juxtaposed. This section is really worth reading, enjoying, is to be felt and comprehended.

Many scenes exist, but vision is needed;
 Paths exist, but will to travel is needed.
 It may be very easy to shoot an arrow
 To face the arrow, courage is needed.

[Elizabeth, 105]

Haikus, Riddles—all are delightful to read. The concluding lines of " Diverse Couplets"[Mukhtalif ash'aar] tease us out of thought:

Karamat"! The misfortune of humans
Starts when pride is born in their hearts.

[Elizabeth, 110]

This bouquet of 45 flowers never will wilt and lose their petals but will keep spreading its fragrance among us. A book, worth collecting!



INTERVIEW

Death is Taboo: Interview with the Danish Poet Niels Hav

BY

JULIÁN ALEJANDRO & LC BERMEO GAMBOA

Tell us, How you do to see the poetry in everyday life?

Let's not be pretentious, life is a brutal circus, often we are surrounded by smaller or major disasters. No need to decorate this with poetry and metaphors. We all struggle against the ordinary insanity which threatens to invade our lives and flood the universe, while happiness walk hand in hand with grief and misery, monsters gnawing on the pantry door, and kids dancing along the street with spicy expectations. These elements are the normal conditions for poetry. That's where we are, that's the soil poetry grows in.

What do you think should be the position of the poet about social problems: war, environment, poverty, economy, etc?

To serve is against the nature of poetry. It's no obligation, but the poet should of course be involved in current problems as much he manages and orcs – like any other citizen. If the writer also wants to involve his poetry depends on focus, talent and opportunities. Literature can never be agitation, in its core poetry rejects any stranglehold. Poetry must first and foremost be art, it's a matter of life and death. But then: in good poetry on any topic there will always be an ethical and

humanistic undercurrent – expressed or implied – a commitment against social exploitation, violence and all kinds of political evil or destruction of nature and the planet.

What do you think of the current cult of health and the body that has prejudiced people who have preferences and worldly habits? Cigarettes, alcohol, etc..

Death is taboo. Physical health seems to be the official religion with the body as a temple for celebration. The hope for an earthly nirvana and eternal happiness is a secular illusion. A fragile fantasy, that's why the missionaries have to be so fanatical. Let us bear with them and hope asceticism and renunciations grant eternal life. Unfortunately I fear we are all on a suicide mission.

How can we detect that someone has this “horrible disease” as you have called: the poetry? What are the symptoms that characterize it?

Some of my friends were very upset about this formulation, not all poets are equipped with sense of humor. But the fact is that our passion for poetry is a terrible abomination; we spend our time hunting words – often I neglected doing more useful things in order to ponder the mystery, in the hope of catching a thought or the proper articulation in flight. The symptoms are legio, we are antisocial and switch between an absent staring and hectic activity. A little self-irony is needed.

Do you believe that poetry should now focus more on the everyday, leaving the abstraction of the big ideas?

Every poet has to find his own path to the waterfall, and he who write what occur to him naturally in the course of daily chaotic life is on a good track. The task of poetry is everyday life, but I do not think poetry should give up on anything,

and obviously big ideas are needed to guide us in this epoch of elementary confusion. What I do not like is when poetry swims along in conventional abstract sentimentality without contact with the realities of normal people's daily struggle. Private lyricism and unbridled emotionalism always threatens to drown poetry.

What do you think is the role of state institutions in the development of culture, what is the role of the state about the writer, and the writer about the state?

It is healthy for poetry – but maybe not for the poet – to stand in opposition to political institutions and those in power. Some regimes misunderstand the situation and offer poets free room and board in prison. Very generous, and completely idiotic. It's the poet's duty to be critical to the government, and the state's duty to support and protect art and culture, financial and in every possible way. A healthy society needs such a critical dialogue. Wise leaders and politicians understand this. When *Les Fleurs du mal* was published, Charles Baudelaire was dragged to court and charged with immorality and blasphemy. Who was the emperor or president in France at the time? No one cares, the politicians have slipped back into the shadow region, while Baudelaire's book stands as a masterpiece.

How do you think the culture promotion's contributes to the improvement of a nation?

Art should not only be supported at a national level; also cities, regions and municipalities can benefit from support culture and art. Good public libraries, concert halls, theaters, art galleries, and all the educational institutions that follow, are improving well-being of the citizens. It strengthens communities and contribute to a healthy and attractive

business climate, and thus cities, regions and nations will flourish. Culture is a good investment; Gabriel García Márquez maybe contributes more to the GNP and to happiness and welfare in Colombia than most drug lords.

Which authors have influenced you?

One of the first poets who ever mattered to me was Pablo Neruda. When I was a teenager I saw a portrait program with him on TV, and I was hit by a wild dream: I would be a poet. Our talk here reminds me of Neruda's importance, in my confused brain he is an old familiar friend. The great master, he is unique. About the same time I met Dostoyevsky in a schoolbook. But there are dozens of others who have influenced me, I appreciate Tomas Tranströmer, Czesław Miłosz and Elizabeth Bishop, and if I should mention a few Danish names it could be Per Højholt and Peter Seeberg.

Have you read any Colombian author? Do you value any Spanish language author? Have you read any contemporary author?

South American literature often comes to Denmark with delay. Currently I read Roberto Bolano's last novel *2666* with great pleasure. I've seen a few of his poems, which I also like. I am handicapped by not being able to read Spanish, it's sporadic what I know about the latest writers. Among the classics I appreciate César Vallejo – and Borges of course, I wrote a poem about him and Joyce, which borrows the title from Borges: *On His Blindness*.

Marquez is mentioned. There is Octavio Paz, Alberti, Aleixandre and many others. And let's not forget Julio Cortázar, about him Neruda says: "Anyone who doesn't read Cortázar is doomed. Not to read him is a serious invisible

disease which in time can have terrible consequences. Something similar to a man who has never tasted peaches. He would quietly become sadder... and, probably, little by little, he would lose his hair." Unfortunately little Cortázar is translated into Danish – we are in the risk zone for losing hair.

What is one of the words in Danish that you prefer?

(Please give the English meaning of the word and talk about that word)

I stagger between *ømhed* and *sødme*. Let me choose *sødme*. It's not just sweetness, but that someone or something is endearing or touching of personality, behavior or appearance – also about a sweet taste or smell. I appreciate when people have this quality.

There is a prejudice to consider Norse as little expressive on interpersonal affection. What can you tell us about it?

Like all prejudices this one probably holds a terrible truth we are trying to displace, but inside all Scandinavians burns – behind a cool facade – a roaring hot fire. So be careful not to burn your lips, okay.

In a society like yours in which there's consistency between the state and its people, where culture levels are highest, a society civic and peaceful, you as a poet what have for criticize about your system?

Already Shakespeare was aware of it, something is rotten in the state of Denmark. And still today not everything is perfect. Together with the European Union and rest of the world we are in the middle of a crisis, our current administration has a tendency to send the bill to the weak

and poor and transfer the proceeds to the wealthy. A reverse Robin Hood. And currently there is a nasty attempt to minimize migration of refugees from less privileged parts of the world.

Why do you think that one of the main characters in the works of Shakespeare and the whole literature was a Danish prince named Hamlet?

An interesting question. Shakespeare had a fabulous ability to find stuff for great tragedies and to express human emotions in simple and profound words. He may have met Danes in London, who told him about the mythical prince. Hamlet's madness and Ophelia's melancholy – perhaps this embodies essential Danish traits, but people everywhere on the planet find aspects of themselves in these characters. We are all grappling with some invincible dilemmas: “To be, or not to be: that is the question”...

In South American countries, Colombia by case where we have a readership of 1.6 books per year a minimum figure compared for example to the annual readership of the Nordic countries. Although these indicators we have readers and poets here, what would you attribute that in these poor societies despite these indicators exist readers and poets?

Yes I know the Colombian reality is complicated, and yet you have enthusiastic readers and strong poets who work intensively to reinvent poetry and redefining Colombia's cultural identity. My respect! I hope your government will find ways to support these intentions – especially in nations with such a rich diversity poetry maybe could be a unifying phenomenon. I hope in the future to have the opportunity to learn more about Colombian poetry. The continent has growing importance in the global economy, and South

American literature may have much to offer in the coming years.

In countries like yours where the state subsidises people who are dedicated to literature and writers receive pensions, culture is an alternative. Colombia does not have anything like that. How would you encourage young people who want to write poetry in these countries?

Maybe the best advice to give a young writer under these circumstances would be to commit suicide. Many of us have probably considered the possibility, but hesitates slightly. Let it be my advice: wait a minute. Go for a walk, play with the kids, see your friends, kiss when you get the chance. And in addition, write, write, write the best you can. Maybe it will miraculously turn out not to have been *completely* in vain. In any case that's all we can do. So let me respond with a poem.

Encouragement

Isn't it an uplifting thought
that in a few decades we
and this whole confused epoch
with its cynical presidents,
wornout arguments,
mawkish TV hosts, dim journalists,
and the complete crapitalistic jubilant choir
will be gone?
For all time!
We will disappear.
They will disappear.
I will disappear.
You will disappear.
It will all disappear.
Hurrah!

© Niels Hav

(The poems is translated by P. K. Brask & Patrick
Friesen)

CONTRIBUTORS

1. **Alan Garvey's** fourth collection of poetry, *In the Wake of Her Light*, was published at the end of last year by Lapwing Publications. A poem of his was placed second in the Gregory O'Donoghue International Poetry Competition 2017. His work has appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies.
2. **Albert Russo** is an award-winning bilingual author (English and French) of about 35+ books of prose and poetry, and 70+ photobooks, published worldwide and translated into 13+ languages on the 6 continents. He has been acclaimed by important authors, such as James Baldwin, Edmund White, Martin Tucker, Douglas Parmee of Oxford University, Adam Donaldson Powell, David Alexander, Richard Mathews, Joseph Kessel, Pierre Emmanuel, and Jean d'Ormesson, all three of the Académie Française, as well as by his African peers, Chinua Achebe and Maurice AMURI Mpala-Lutebele (University of Lubumbashi, DR Congo) www.albertrusso.com
3. **Andrew Scott** is a native of Fredericton, NB. During his time as an active poet, Andrew Scott has taken the time to speak in front of classrooms, judge poetry competitions, and have over 200 hundred writings published worldwide in such publications as *The Art of Being Human*, *Battered Shadows* and *The Broken Ones*. Andrew Scott has published multiple poetry books and one book of photography. *Redemption Avenue* is his first novella.

4. **Arno Bohlmeijer**, humble winner of a PEN America Grant 2021, poet and novelist, writing in English and Dutch, published in 5 countries – US: Houghton Mifflin, a dozen renowned Journals and Reviews, 2019 – 2022, and in *Universal Oneness: An Anthology of Magnum Opus Poems from around the World*, 2019. www.arnobohlmeijer.com
5. **Avdhesh Jha**, an author, poet, teacher and observer, is a strong critic with an inclination towards societal development. Presently he works with EDI of India. With ten doctoral scholars, being awarded the doctorate degree, the guide and mentor to Ph.D. aspirants, has presented several papers on different topics at national and international seminars. He has written about more than 200 poetries in English and Hindi. Associated with institutes of national repute, he has organised seminars and workshops and delivered talks and lectures at various seminars, workshops etc. He is awarded with Charottar Gaurav and Bharat Excellence.
6. **Bruce Meyer** is the author of 69 books of poetry, short stories, flash fiction, and non-fiction. A story for this year's Edinburgh Flash Fiction Prize received the Editor's Commendation from over 3000 flash stories. His poems and stories have won or been shortlisted for numerous national and international prizes.
7. **Daniel Thomas Moran**, born in New York City in 1957, is the author of fifteen collections of poetry. "In the Kingdom of Autumn", was published by Salmon Poetry in Ireland in 2020. He has had some four hundred poems published in close to twenty different countries. In 2005, he was appointed Poet Laureate by The Legislature of Suffolk County, New York. His collected papers are being archived by The Dept. of Special Collections at Stony

Brook University. He is a retired Clinical Assistant Professor from Boston University's School of Dental Medicine, where he delivered the Commencement Address in 2011. He is Arts Editor for *The Humanist* magazine in Washington, DC. He and his wife Karen live in Webster, New Hampshire.

8. **David James'** most recent book is *Alive in Your Skin While You Still Own It*, Kelsay Books. More than thirty of his one-act plays have been produced in the U.S. and Ireland. James teaches at Oakland Community College.
9. **Dianalee Velie** is the Poet Laureate of Newbury, New Hampshire where she lives and writes. She has taught poetry, memoir, and short story at universities and colleges in New York, Connecticut and New Hampshire and in private workshops throughout the United States, Canada and Europe. Her award-winning poetry and short stories have been published in hundreds of literary journals and many have been translated into Italian. Her play, *Mama Says*, was directed by Daniel Quinn in a staged reading in New York City. She is the author of six books of poetry and a collection of short stories. She is a member of the National League of American Pen Women, the New England Poetry Club, the International Woman Writers Guild, the New Hampshire Poetry Society and founder of the John Hay Poetry Society.
10. **DJ Tyrer** is the person behind *Atlantean Publishing*, was placed second in the Writing Magazine 'Mid-Story Sentence' competition, and has been widely published in anthologies and magazines around the world, such as *Apples, Shadows and Light* (Earlyworks Press), and *Marked By Scorn* (Solarwyrms Press), and issues of *Belmont Story Review*, and *Tigershark*, and on *Cease Cows*, *The Flash*

Fiction Press, Space Squid, and Trembling With Fear. DJ Tyrer's website is at <https://djtyrer.blogspot.co.uk/>

11. **Dragica Ohashi** is a poetry writer. She teaches English, sings English nursery rhymes, chants & songs with children, reads books and creates education materials and illustrations. Published Poetry Book ``Peace Harmony “ 2019, India. Ohashi participated in many festivals and art projects for children and her poetry is included in anthologies.
12. **Felice Picano** is the author of more than thirty books of poetry, fiction, memoirs, nonfiction, and plays. His work has been translated into many languages and several of his titles have been national and international bestsellers. He is considered a founder of modern gay literature along with the other members of the Violet Quill. Picano also began and operated the SeaHorse Press and Gay Presses of New York for fifteen years. His first novel was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award. Since then he's been nominated for and/or won dozens of literary awards. Picano teaches at Antioch College, Los Angeles. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felice_Picano
13. **Gary Beck** has spent most of his adult life as a theatre director and worked as an art dealer when he couldn't earn a living in the theatre. He has also been a tennis pro, a ditch digger and a salvage diver. His original plays and translations of Moliere, Aristophanes and Sophocles have been produced Off Broadway. His poetry, fiction and essays have appeared in hundreds of literary magazines and his published books include 31 poetry collections, 14 novels, 3 short story collections, 1 collection of essays and 4 books of plays. Gary lives in New York City. www.garycbeck.com

14. **James G. Piatt**, a retired Professor and octogenarian earned his doctorate from BYU, and his BS and MA from California State Polytechnic University, SLO. He is a Best of Web nominee and three time Pushcart nominee and has had four poetry books “The Silent Pond,” (2012), “Ancient Rhythms,” (2014), “LIGHT,” (2016), and “Solace Between the Lines,” (2019), over 1560 poems, five novels and 35 short stories published worldwide in over 250 publications.
15. **James Mulhern's** writing has appeared in literary journals over one hundred and fifty times and has been recognised with many awards. In 2015, Mr. Mulhern was granted a writing fellowship to Oxford University. That same year, a story was longlisted for the *Fish Short Story Prize*. In 2017, he was nominated for a *Pushcart Prize*. His novel, *Give Them Unquiet Dreams*, is a *Kirkus Reviews Best Book of 2019*. He was shortlisted for the *Aesthetica Creative Writing Award 2021* for his poetry. Two of his novels were Finalists for the United Kingdom's *Wishing Shelf Book Awards*.
16. **Jevin Lee Albuquerque** grew up in California, on the local pier in Santa Cruz, fishing for striped bass. He evolved into a fly fisherman, obsessed with trout and steelhead. In a former life, he was a professional soccer player. He has a degree in Latin American Studies from UCLA. Recent publications include *Confrontation Magazine* (Spring 2021), *Monterey Poetry Review* (Spring 2021), and *Phenomenal Literature* (Authorspress, India, 2021).
17. **Ketaki Datta** is an Associate Professor of English, Bidhannagar College, Kolkata. She is a novelist, short story writer, critic and a translator.

18. **Laraine Kentridge Lasdon** hosts a Poetry group in Austin, Texas and has recently issued a Collection of her work and has her work published in the Blue Hole Anthology, Texas awarded a prize for her work by The Austin Poetry Society. She is currently studied with acclaimed author and Poet Daniel B. Levin, Los Angeles. Ms. Kentridge currently lives in Austin Texas with her husband Professor Leon Lasdon. www.austinmarketing.biz
19. **Louisa Calio** is an internationally published, award winning author, performer and photo artist whose work has been translated into Korean, Russian, Italian and Sicilian. Winner Connecticut Commission of the Arts for Writers, 1st Prize "Bhari" City of Messina, Sicily (2013) 1st Prize "Signifyin Woman" Il Parnasso" Canicatti, Sicily (2017), finalist for Poet Laureate, Nassau County etc. She Directed the Poet's Piazza at Hofstra University for 12 years, was founding member & Executive Director of City Spirit Artists, Inc. New Haven, CT. she is currently member of the advisory board of Arba Sicula. Her works are in many anthologies and journals. The latest book, *Journey to the Heart Waters* was published by Legas Press (2014). She lives in the USA and Jamaica, WI. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louisa_Calio.
20. **M Shamsur Rabb Khan** is Assistant Professor of English literature with 24 years of teaching experience in India and abroad. He has written 9 books, scores of research papers and articles for journals, magazines and newspapers. His creative works have been published in The Statesman, The Pioneer, Business Standard, Muse India, The Phenomenal Literature, Verbal Art, The Children Book Trust, and many websites. His novel is due to be published soon.

21. **Manoj Kumar Jha**, M.A., Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor of English, Nandan Sanskrit College, Madhubani, K.S.D.S. University, Darbhanga, Bihar, India.
22. **Melanie Flores** is a Toronto-born writer, editor, poet and poetry judge. Her award-winning work has been described as provocative and has appeared online, in print journals, and in various international and national anthologies. Melanie is an editor for Montreal-based Subterranean Blue Poetry. Her poem “Nameless” will appear in the “(M)othering Anthology” published by Inanna Publications (Spring 2022). Melanie has been a member of the League of Canadian Poets since 2017 and a member of The Writer’s Guild of Canada since 2021. Visit her websites www.melanieflores.net and www.mdfcommsvcs.com to see her work and learn more.
23. **Michael Keshigian** is the author of 14 poetry collections his latest, *What To Do With Intangibles*, published by Cyberwit.net. Most recent poems have appeared in Muddy River Review, Bluepepper, Smoky Quartz, San Pedro River Review, Tipton Poetry Journal. Published in numerous national and international journals, he has 7 Pushcart Prize and 2 Best of the Net nominations.
24. **Michael Lee Johnson** lived ten years in Canada, Vietnam era. Today he is a poet in the greater Chicagoland area, IL. Published in 42 countries; 244 YouTube poetry videos. Michael Lee Johnson is an internationally published poet in 43 countries, several published poetry books, nominated for 3 Pushcart Prize awards and 5 Best of the Net nominations. He is editor-in-chief of 3 poetry anthologies, all available on Amazon, and has several poetry books and chapbooks. He has over 536 published poems. Michael is the administrator of 6 Facebook Poetry

groups. Member Illinois State Poetry Society:
<http://www.illinoispoets.org/>.

25. **Nels Hanson** grew up on a small farm in the San Joaquin Valley of California and has worked as a farmer, teacher and contract writer/editor. His fiction received the San Francisco Foundation's James D. Phelan Award and Pushcart nominations in 2010, 2012, 2014 and 2016, and poems received a 2014 Pushcart nomination, Sharkpack Review's 2014 Prospero Prize, and 2015 and 2016 Best of the Net nominations.
26. **Niels Hav** is a Danish poet, his books have been translated into Portuguese, Arabic, Turkish, Dutch, and Farsi. He has travelled widely in Europe, Asia, Africa, North and South America.
27. **Nilamadhab Kar** MD, DPM, DNB, MRC Psych, writes poetry, and occasionally stories and short essays, in English and Odia. His poems have been published in magazines and anthologies in USA, UK, and India. He has published three poetry books (*Tama Paain* in Odia, selected poems; *Reverberation and Tomorrow's Morning Sun* – translated poetry anthologies). He has edited a few literary magazines, currently edits *Srujan: The Creativity Journal*, and is on the editorial board of a few journals. He is a psychiatrist; besides clinical work he is actively involved in clinical research and charity.
28. **P. A. Farrell** is a psychologist/writer, published author of self-help books for McGraw-Hill, Demos Health, and self-published KDP, write his own *Substack* (Dr Farrell's Newsletter), former associate editor/editor of trade publications and a newspaper syndicate.
29. **Parinita Ratnaparkhi** awarded with UGC-NET/Junior Research Fellowship and 21stR. S. Tomar Best Researcher

Award 2018 bears the passion for research, academics and creativity. With several publications including papers and book chapters, she is a reviewer, analyst, author, poet, and critic and extends her services as an Assistant Professor at Waymade College of Education, Vallabh Vidyanagar, Gujarat.

30. **Patty Somlo's** books, *Hairway to Heaven Stories* (Cherry Castle Publishing), *The First to Disappear* (Spuyten Duyvil) and *Even When Trapped Behind Clouds: A Memoir of Quiet Grace* (WiDo Publishing), have been Finalists in the International Book, Best Book, National Indie Excellence, American Fiction and Reader Views Literary Awards.
31. **Pramod Rastogi** is an Emeritus Professor at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (EPFL) in Lausanne, Switzerland. He is a Member of the Swiss Academy of Engineering Sciences. He is the 2014 recipient of the SPIE Dennis Gabor Award. He is currently a guest Professor at the IIT Gandhinagar, India. His poems have been accepted in Indian Literature, Borderless journal, Muse India, etc.
32. **Rees Nielsen** spent 35 years farming stone fruit and grapes with his cousins on 175 acres of San Joaquin Valley loam. He has published fiction, poetry and visual arts over the span of these years. He is 70 years old.
33. **René van der Klooster** is multifaceted. Besides an author of poetry, prose and plays (in Dutch and English), he practices visual arts, including drawing, painting and sculpting, moreover, formerly he worked as an architect and in that capacity he is currently designing lamps. The writing and the arts mainly originate from a vast dream world, a certain grip on the subconsciousness and

frequent mystical experiences. www.renevanderklooster.com

34. **Richard Marvin Tiberius (Tai) Grove** – known to friends as Tai, 1953, Hamilton born, lives in Presqu'île Provincial Park in Ontario, Canada, where he and his wife, Kim, run a B&B. He is a photographer, writer, editor, publisher. His paintings and photographs are in over 30 corporate collections across Canada. He has 16 titles to his name. More than any other Canadian Photographer his images have been used as book cover art. Find his Writer's Blog at: <https://richardgrovewriter.wordpress.com/>
35. **Robert L. Martin's** poetry has appeared in Verbal Art and Phenomenal Literature previously. He has written four full length poetry books; *Wings of Inspiration*, *Rhymes of the Joke Machine*, *The Air Almighty*, and *Martin's World*, all published by Cyberwit.net. from Allahabad, India, All the books are available on Amazon and some in Barnes and Noble book stores. He also wrote two chapbooks. Mr. Martin's poetry has also appeared in many more anthology books, online publications, and journals. Some of the other publications are; "Poets' Espresso", "Mad Swirl." and "The Belt and Beyond." He also won two "Faith & Hope" poetry awards. His inspiration comes from the writings of Kahlil Gibran and Pablo Neruda.
36. **Roger G. Singer**, Poet Laureate Emeritus, Connecticut Coalition of Poets Laureate.
37. **Ron Singer** has published sixteen books, the most recent of which are a trilogy about aging, a thriller/travelogue, and a novel based on Nigerian history. For details, please visit www.ronsinger.net.
38. **S L Peeran** (b 1950) has completed eighteen volumes of poems in English besides works in prose, short stories

and books on Sufism and Sufi Wisdom. Peeran's works have been favorably reviewed by many Poet Critics. He has won Literary Prize 2017 of 'Naji Naaman' of Lebanon besides many in India. His work is well received and reviewed in India and abroad. He can be reached @ slpeeran@gmail.com Visit www.slpeeran.com to read all his works.

39. **Stanley H. Barkan**, editor/publisher of Cross-Cultural Communications, which in 2020 is celebrating its 50th Anniversary with 500 books in print, and as many broadsides and postcards and audio-visual productions in 60 languages (ranging from Arabic to Yiddish). CCC has also hosted numerous literary events throughout the United States and in many parts of the world (Argentina, Bulgaria, Poland, Puerto Rico, Sicily, Wales), at such locations in New York as the International Center, Poets House, the Yale Club, and the Dag Hammarskjöld Auditorium of the United Nations. His own work has been published in 29 poetry editions, many bilingual, including Armenian, Bulgarian, Chinese, Dutch, Farsi/Persian, Italian, Romanian, Russian, Sicilian, Spanish. Also, in 2017, he was awarded the Homer European Medal of Poetry & Art. Barkan lives with his wife in Merrick, Long Island, where his son and daughter and five grandchildren also reside. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanley H. Barkan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanley_H._Barkan)
40. **Tikvah Feinstein** has been widely published, including Friday Flash Fiction, Boston Magazine, VerbalArt, Loyalhanna Review, Leaves of Ink, United Israel Bulletin and others. She has earned awards in poetry and fiction and has coordinated international creative writing contests and award ceremonies. She has edited 35 books at her position with *Taproot Literary Review*. She is

recipient of a Jefferson Award for volunteers for 30 years of teaching other writers. A graduate of the University of Pittsburgh's Writing Program, she has repeatedly been listed in *Marquis Who's Who Registry of Outstanding Professionals in America* and is included in *Who's Who in American Women* since 2011. She worked as staff reporter on a daily newspaper.

41. **Tina Borah** is currently working as an Assistant Professor at the Department of English, Shaheed Bhagat Singh Evening College, University of Delhi. She is also completing her MPhil dissertation from the Department of English, University of Delhi. Her area of research is postcolonial literature, with an emphasis on area studies in the Northeast of India.
42. **Ute Carson** published her first prose piece in 1977. *Colt Tailing*, a 2004 novel, was a finalist for the Peter Taylor Book Award. Carson's story "The Fall" won Outrider Press's Grand Prize and appeared in its short story and poetry anthology *A Walk through My Garden*, 2007. Her poems have appeared in numerous journals and magazines in the US and abroad. Carson's poetry was featured on the televised *Spoken Word Showcase* 2009, 2010, 2011, Channel Austin. The poem "A Tangled Nest of Moments" placed second in the Eleventh International Poetry Competition 2012. Her collection of poems *My Gift to Life* was nominated for the 2015 Pushcart Award Prize. She received the *Ovidiu-Bektore Literary Award 2018* from the Anticus Mulicultural Association in Constanta, Romania. In 2018 she was nominated a second time for the Pushcart Award Prize by the PlainView Press and a third time by the Yellow Arrow Press in 2021. www.utecarson.com

43. **Vandana Kumari Jena** was a civil servant by profession and is a writer by inclination. While creativity took a backseat when she was in the Indian Administrative Service, she now hopes to make up for the lost years. She has published over 200 middles in all leading newspapers like The Times of India, Hindustan Times, the Statesman, The Indian Express and The Pioneer. She has published two novels, three collections of short stories, as well as a collection of middles. Her short stories have been published in a number of magazines and in over 20 anthologies. She has won several prizes for her short stories. She has published poems in several anthologies as well.
44. **William Conelly**, after military service, took a master's in literature from UC Santa Barbara. Unrelated work in research and composition followed before he returned to academia in 2000. Able Muse sells a book of his early verse under the title *Uncontested Grounds*, and it may be reviewed at their website or via Amazon. Retired from teaching as a dual citizen, Conelly resides with his wife in the West Midlands town of Warwick, England.



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