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GJLL



**Phenomenal
Literature**

A Global Journal devoted to

Language and Literature

A Peer-Reviewed Print Journal

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Chief Editor:

Dr VIVEKANAND JHA

Associate Editor:

Dr RAJNISH MISHRA

Review Editor:

Dr CHANDRA SHEKHAR DUBEY

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Prof. SHASHANK NADKARNI



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PHENOMENAL LITERATURE

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POETRY

1

Eyes That See

AFTAB YUSUF SHAIKH

Eyes that see,
don't entertain light and
darkness, neither see
colour on the skin nor
blood in the veins.

Eyes that see, reflect
neither the Sun or the Moon;
don't blink in the face of
truth or the stars.

They neither go dry at
the other's pain, nor
fail to twinkle at the blessings others receive.

Eyes that see
are blind to lines drawn on maps,
or on faces or on lives. Eyes that
see, are blind to what is seen and
stare admiringly at the unseen.

Eyes that see
find energy in affection.

Eyes that see
are not planted in the head.



2

With Me

ANDREW SCOTT

When my spirit feels broken,
swimming in a pool of self-doubt,
I feel you placing your hand on mine,
sending reassuring energy,
not allowing myself to fall
when I stumble over unseen cracks.

Knowing I am not walking
this life's path alone
gives my soul strength.
When I am tired from this travel
feel your spirit there
providing the next steps.

Time is given to learn
from missteps against character
as you know who I am.
Never giving up on me
when I cannot lead the way.

Feel jolts of lightening
when it is needed the most.
My emotions are always seen
and your spirit never
allows mine to be fully broken.



3

Travelogue

AVDHESH JHA

Whether physical, mental or emotional;
Aesthetic, economic, social or spiritual;
Someone consumes food for livelihood
Whereas some consume it otherwise;
Some consume the food,
Sometimes food consumes someone;
Some live only to eat, some eat only to live;
Some leave only to live, whereas some live to leave;
Nevertheless, some digests the power
Whereas some are digested by power;
What more! we do it all, when we know,
Life yearns the best only with minimum
For the fact, we are only the traveller
And that we have come, for sure to go.



4

Obit

DANIEL P. STOKES

Three years have gone by and things I suppose
are the way you'd suppose things would be –
your flesh decomposed and your bank account closed
and your memory depending on me.



5

Goodbye Doctor

DRAGICA OHASHI

While politicians spread the infodemic
The doctors of the world are preventing the epidemic
The heroes in white are fighting a fierce battle
To save my life and yours from the virus
Coronavirus does not care about love
She took the doctor's life while he was giving medicine
Will the media shed a single tear?
What the doctor's wife mourns in a distant city
Next to the doctor's ironed suit
White wedding dress
Instead of walking to the altar in a duet in a wedding dress
The bride placed a bouquet of flowers on the gray grave
And the first plum blossomed near the grave
The spring orchestra played a farewell tune
GOODBYE DOCTOR



6

Emigration

GERMAIN DROOGENBROODT

On the beach of the sea
that separates Africa from Spain
lies a dead turtledove

perhaps on its way
to the warmer south?

She lies on her back, wings spread
as if one more time she wished
to embrace the sky.



7

Beneath Opal Heavy Waves

HOLLY PAYNE-STRANGE

This week I went fishing for a sea monster.
I go every Friday.
The one I want has scales hard as silence
And moonlit eyes that see straight through you,
As if to say 'I could do better'
To be fair, he could.

I've caught him twice before.
The first time he got away,
Snapping the line
Diving so deep, I could hardly see his outline
As he sped away.

The second time
I let him think he got away
But I used a line so long
It went to the bottom of the ocean.
So I just have to be patient.
I bought more than a few good books.
Right now he's somewhere near Greenland,
Annoying the icebergs. He'll be back.

People say I'm crazy.
That I could be doing better things
With all my time and all my line.
That the flat and ceaseless ocean is no companion
And I should find someone to dance with.

I say they've never met my dragon.
And if they ever had the chance,
To gamble all their heart
On some reckless, wild chase,
Then I hope they jump at it.

Even the shadow of a sea serpent
Is a wonderful thing
And for those of us that like to life in magic
It is enough to keep sailing.



8

The Last Train

ISILDA NUNES

Of us, only the pain remains,
Which gnaws at my soul.
Where does the scent of jasmine hover?
Where does the announced spring live?
Today, the corpse of me
survives in the disarray of emotions.
Translucent dust
volute in the dug cracks,
on the lacerated face
on the tortured body.
At the hands of pseudo-love,
The sacred feminine outraged.
The scourged flesh.
The inert soul, in the induced shortcut.
At the curve of the road,
The last train
appeals to detachment.
And you?
Coldly you crush the cigarette.



9

My Screaming Soul

JAMES G. PIATT

My sanity is begging for relief,
Inside a sad hollowness,
Squirming in obscurity...

Time passes, memories fade,
Into the unfamiliar, silence stirs
Amidst the din of emptiness...

Leaders hide behind promises,
Their breath acidic, yet smooth, wayward,
Words stand still in awkwardness...

Reason is dissolved in crimson waves,
Stillness is overcome by suffering people,
Searching for restorative metaphors...

And my screaming soul waits
For that certain moment inside
the ebbing hours to find reality...



10

A Rivulet in Me

JAYDEEP SARANGI

Soul spaces keep arriving, defying
the summer heat, the sessions
of past thoughts in the waiting room of relationships.

In the mind, defying old relations
This summer evening is to look back
to my imagined wife hidden in the mist.

She will be a mood's timely renewal
through a bohemian touch, demanding
for poems after misadventures with bodies.

All afternoons, there will be routine messages
of her arrival, in words and idioms.
Her demands will take me to the rivulet in my mind.

Without a four letter word in her mouth
stories of butterflies in the head will lead to the ocean
where we are always familiar and known to the fishermen.

She will stitch homes in a distant land
My mind is a cloudlet courting
with dreams, more dreams. Longing.



11

Blackout

JOHN GREY

Storm's raging fiercely
and we've lost power.
The house is a blind man,
legless, with both arms broken.
The people inside are thoughts –
what do we do?
are there candles?
where's the matches?
can we stand to be in place
where the only option
is each other's company?
The dog howls in fear.
The house hasn't lost its tongue at least.



12

Sign

JOHN RC POTTER

If I could
I would wear
a sign
for all to see,
words of wisdom and wit:

Emotionally Closed for the Season

and perhaps that
would protect me
from those who
desperately crave love
but cannot fully give it.



13

Poem, a week later

JOHN SWEET

wake up in a stranger's bed on
your 53rd birthday knowing it's
the beginning of the end of your life

two in the afternoon,
hungover,
all names forgotten

all pasts absolved

and the present tense is history,
of course, and the future is
nothing worth remembering

you get there finally, and
everyone you ever loved is
either dead or dying



14

Flying

KEITH INMAN

by nature
we are the colour of rocks and sand

ravelled in cloth shells
like seeds and plants

who yearn to fly
as birds do

and so we flower
in the sun

our mouths open
to the nectar of the world



15

The end of words

KEN CATHERS

how brittle
the words become
dying on the page

a touch, a line
a few broken syllables
of despair

a scar from some
forgotten pain.

how fragile it becomes
a shattered mosaic
those sad pauses

when the words
fade, confuse
untold secrets

are nothing but
smeared ink on
a ruined page.

it is the way
the mind moves
away from clarity

those secret worlds
abandoned, the maps
to buried treasure
lost.

how bitter the words become
the last trace
of grace
decayed

the empty hum
of insects under glass.
the blank page silent.

dried wings scattered
on an unswept floor



16

Casket of Love

MICHAEL LEE JOHNSON

This moon, clinging to a cloudless sky,
offers the light by which we love.
In this park, grass knees high, tickling bare feet,
offers the place we pass pleasant smiles.
Sir Winston Churchill would have
saluted the stately manner this fog lifts,
marching in time across this pond
layering its ghostly body over us
cuddled by the water's edge,
as if we are burdened by this sealed
casket called love.
Frogs in the marsh, crickets beneath the crocuses
trumpet the last farewell.
A flock of Canadian geese flies overhead
in military V formation.
Yet how lively your lips tremble
against my skin in a manner no
sane soldier dare deny.



17

Perspective

MITHIL JHA

Having run on a long highway,
Speeding and braking for long;
At the turning, with traffic merger,
Suddenly, I was shocked and puzzled;
For looking behind, I was ahead of all,
But looking forward, I stood only the last.



18

Vectors

NELS HANSON

Vectors in high school science
the paths of airliners tonight
crisscross almost dangerously,
pilots, co-pilots, flight engineers

and stewardesses asleep, all
passengers dozing off, dreaming
childhood's best day or dark
instant of the trauma. The lights

bend, now the ghost ships aim
for an emerald moon and in
economy you start to scream.
Then you wake, mourning doves

one more day calling *Where?*
Why? at daybreak from the blue
gums across the creek, calling,
calling as the new day begins.



19

Weeping

NIDA SHAIKH

Tears dripping,
Curving down on my wrist.
Now I wear them forever,
Like a bracelet.



20

Wrist

NIDA SHAIKH

Emerald veins buried under my skin;
Makes me more precious than these stones have ever been.



21

Left or Right

NIELS HAMMER

The subtle meaning
of rebus poems
is solving the rebus.

There is a light
behind some words
that will invite
to a dance on air.



22

Body's No Picnic

RAM KRISHNA SINGH

Not too many issues
yet enough to upset
the mind of men and women
in postlapsarian world:

she blames me for changing size
shifting shape and cracking bones
aching joints and sleeplessness
menopausal ups and downs

she kicks me out of bed
saying my body's no picnic

I know it's difficult
to be a woman and wife
working and making home

I may be no saint
in your eyes but I never
tried to remake you
in my own or God's image

I can't give birth like you
nor can I stop the changes in you
I've no miracle pill

Your body your anger
I love you as you are
let's carry no useless weight



23

In Silence

RICHARD MARVIN TIBERIUS GROVE

Two crows, black
sit in silence
high in a dead tree
on a silver branch
in the middle of
a brilliant blue sky.



24

Cold Air

ROGER G. SINGER

cast iron sky
stretched over
uneven buildings
and streets

twisting winds
cigarette smoke
coats and gloves
hard walking

curtained voices
shadowed whispers
idle secrets

quiet thoughts
troubled air



25

Forcing Disclosure

SCOTT THOMAS OUTLAR

but now the crows
have stolen my tongue
and flown to the far side

and weavers of spell
have sewn shut my orbs
blotting out the poetic realm

I lust for abstraction
grasping after spent codes
finding naught but void

while the old gods laugh
mocking my futility
teasing the style once loved



26

Elegy on Ice

WILLIAM DORESKE

Parked beside the frozen lake
we munch blueberry muffins
and slurp our dark roast coffee.
The plain sheet of lake regards
the sky with something like worship
but lacking that subservience.
Such broad dimensions regret
nothing, rooted in creation
that continues to self-create.
No ice fishing, no snowmobiles,
nothing but an unwritten text.
Maybe the ice isn't thick enough
to brace the wooden bobhouses
that used to pepper the scene
on the boldest winter mornings.
I wish we could fold up the lake
and an equal expanse of sky
and bring them home to install
in our back yard. Then we'd enjoy
this expanse until it thawed
and wept into the water table
where our deepest thoughts deploy.



27

I died in you

YEŞİM AĞAOĞLU

i climbed up the stairs step by step
slowly like the poet said
at times got on elevators in sky-scrapers
other times became a spiderman
and pulled myself up with my mighty strong suckers
or turning into a crow i flew up on roofs
i flung myself down from each and every floor
but never did i die as dead
as when i died in you



28

**Sexual/Spiritual Paradox: for Helena Qi
Hong**

YUAN CHANGMING

Better hard than long, even better
Thick than hard, you might want to say
As you become ready to catch
The most powerful thrust of
A man's love for a woman on earth

But alas, shortened with age, softened
By a whole variety of hardships &
Thinned with physio-psychological wear
My penis is my soul that needs as much
Tenderness as encouragement to settle well
In your vulva, my ultimate nest, ever so cozy



SHORT STORY

1

My Big Loving Limerence

BISHNUPADA RAY

It's true that I was caught unawares by a sudden surge of emotion for her, which filled my mind like a super vooc dream. It was just after the time when I first met her as a coworker. To be honest I did not know her much, but a glimmer made it all, and her face started to pop up in my mind from nowhere, and I was simply infatuated, thought her a fantastic option, as if she was sent by Fate to make me happy. A woman with luxuriant hair and ocean eyes, she appeared to me like a soulmate, or a twin flame, as the psychictarot readers would have said, the meanings of which was not very clear to me, except that the terms appeared quite normal description for her. I was starved of happiness and was craving for it, and that was also at the time when I was going through a horrible separation from my spouse, and happiness was scarce. The marital trauma was all over me, sending bouts of depression through my brain and soul, and I was thinking that my life was finished. It was at that time that my soul was touched by her energy, that somehow charged my body with tons of dopamine, and filled with high motivation and romantic inspiration, my head was soon over heels, and I hit the gym. My pot-belly started to shrink back, my muscles started to get back their testosterone, my short-cropped hair started to wear a steroid look. And my morals

started to change like my dress, from conservative to profligate colours, as I felt no shame in falling in love with a much younger person. I was simply amazed at my own metamorphosis. I was on the wrong side of my middle age, but was so buoyed up at that moment, that I decided to pursue my newfound pleasure, forgetting both reality and morality, and make her my romantic partner.

I fell in love, or, so I thought. As the initial crush snowballed into an inner passion, I gathered courage to broach the matter to her. I obtained her WhatsApp number and started a conversation, which was just a conversation and was reciprocated. I was too shy to tell her face to face and was too anxious to call her, so I texted her instead. Writing is an absent and a safe distance activity, but not a very dependable or transparent medium of communication, especially in matters of emotion, as it carries with it something like an official tone. One day I told her about my feelings, and she started, said it was a confusion. I was not sure what she meant by confusion, I thought it was a red flag, but at the same time reasoned that it was too early to be alarmed. I ignored the red flag, rather I was enamoured by the insight and vulnerability involved in the very word confusion.

I tried to maintain low key, in proportion to the lukewarm nature of reciprocation. However, the conversation progressed from mundane to higher thoughts, and to books and poetry. I was so infatuated that I never felt any shame at the unwanted and intrusive kind of my interest into her, nor did I pay any heed to the fact that it was me who always initiated the conversation first, and she merely reciprocated my words at her will and pleasure, like bread crumbing, which in normal time, must have angered me, could not offend me now. I took it for granted as a sign of her coyness. I also thought that it was a universal truth that the male would

always initiate things. Her short responses, and shy emojis filled my heart with a bliss I never experienced before. In order to get more responses, I engaged her with compliments and praises and sly words which in normal conversation would have been an anathema to my moral self, in short, I started love bombing the unwilling and uninterested soul.

I called her my goddess and asked for her address, saying that I did not want to lose her in the crowd. There was no response from her, but after some insistence and pleading and finally after my saying 'okay, if you do not want to give me your address, no issue' she relented and gave me a very short and truncated address which would have no practical value. Still, I thought it great, and congratulated myself. I told her that I would be going on pilgrimage someday, which in fact I did and found the difficulty of locating her place on the basis of such an incomplete address. However, my passion was so great that I never felt any difficulty in toiling and asking people about it, but they wanted a fuller address to help me with. Defeated, I just wished I had some intuitive Google map app in my head.

I was indeed looking for some oasis in a desert full of mirages, as if I was searching for her for an entire lifetime, through the forest paths, the distant villages, the hills, the village markets and through the non-address of the clouds above. She was less a real woman waiting for me, but more gorgeous illusion to tell me "Where have you been so long?" I felt like an eternal pilgrim, doing my penance through a pilgrimage to my stern goddess, pagan and mysterious, and unwilling to grant me my salvation.

The anxiety of losing her was gnawing at my soul, the yearning had no name, except a pain flowing through my veins. I wanted to ask our common friends about her whereabouts, but refrained, because I did not want any third-

party involvement. Love or whatever feeling it was, it was one-sided, and I did not want to harm her by my actions and behaviour, and just wanted to keep my feelings as private as possible.

I wanted to go into no-contact, but the very thought of letting her go from my mind created such a feeling of desolation and despair that was simply intolerable. My heartbeats started kicking my consciousness out of doldrums to reach out for her, and I was choking on my emotions. Soon I discovered that it was not she who was pulling me towards her, but the universe which was actually pushing me towards her. So I went back to the WhatsApp, saw her DP picture and felt hugely relaxed and relieved, seeing that I was not blocked. The fear of getting blocked was always running through my senses like an indelible humiliation. Her WhatsApp status carried some other pictures as well, she was fond of uploading them, and with much jealousy I sometimes noticed how a young smart bachelor coworker imitating her poses in his photos which he often posted on his Facebook page and which incidentally came to my notice because he was my FB friend. Thinking that he might be another suitor of her, I started hating him from the inner core of my heart. Anyway, I kept looking at her photos as if I was in a trance and at the same time thought that it was nothing but stalking. I was in the midst of some guilty pleasure.

Brazenly I texted her that I wished to meet her, sit by her side, and hold her hands like a man does to a real woman of flesh and blood. She texted me back saying that all wishes could not be and should not be fulfilled. I was stunned. She showed me her boundaries strongly whenever I tried to reach out. So, our relationship, or our situationship, or whatever way it may be called got limited to textuality, it never developed outside the WhatsApp messages. It was chiefly

happening in my mind, the script was being written there, and was printed and stored on the WhatsApp pages. Now when I look at them, I find the pages unfold like the pages of a novel, with my long paragraphs counterpointed by her short monosyllabic utterances.

It seemed like a claustrophobic waiting room, and I was waiting for signs of interest on her part, and I tried to read into her DP and status pictures and snippets of songs and poetry, which appeared magical to me. I stayed awake whole night thinking about her, slept in the morning, disregarded my routines, neglected my food, suffered mood swings, and in general, felt a little sorry about my no-go situation. Sometimes I told her about her songs and poetry, but she only said that there was no special meaning in them. I was deep into my romanticism, and regretted my old age and the emotional wound inside me for my loveless life. It seemed that my waiting would have no ending, and I should have to wait till the next life for my soulmate. Waiting was hope, and hope was my only way to stay put in the waiting room with my mismatch. That was a strange conjunction of hope and hopelessness.

I was in grief, and I was grieving. I was attaching myself with my imaginary soulmate, personified in my unavailable romantic person. I was numb, angry, sad and did not know what to do. I went back to my honest communication. I told her that I was in trouble, and that I could not stop thinking about her, and she told me blankly that I should not try too hard to forget, because the more we would try to forget something the more it likely to increase, and that I should let the natural flow to take care of the forgetting. The good thing was that she told me the truth, and I instantly thought how profound her feelings were, and how great a person she might have been. But she said that she was not a great person.

When I told her that she was different, she replied that being different was rather an ordinary thing.

In fact, she was talking down my intense feelings by degrees to a less intense level. She was a good therapist. She understood my vulnerability and sometimes I felt that she liked me too, but for some reasons kept distance. I thought that possibly I did not give her enough time or a chance to offer me some clarity regarding her reasons, I was into her fast and furious, I fell for her like an addiction. That also possibly made her to retreat to her unavailable position. Reason or the ability to rationalise was a veritable casualty in my emotional jumping the gun. I regretted my haste that definitely made my emotional investments go to waste.

Now, I perfectly understand her, I have my clarity, I wish her well and intend no harm. I know I have to respect her; I know that I have to leave her alone and not be intrusive in order to maintain her personal integrity. It is time to detach, to come out of Plato's cave. And at the same time, I must not relapse. So, I must devise my plan B. But will the plan B be another limerent episode, or a true love?

I simply do not know.



2

The Roley

DENNIS VANNATTA

Brent Fredericks, long-time professor at the local university, had a creative writing student, Tania Morris, whose father, Alvin, had achieved some notoriety with his commercials for his new-and-used furniture store, buy, sell, or rent. The commercials were hilarious. Alvin would vault over sectionals, scoot across the floor on rolling ottomans, and do backflips onto recliners shouting out prices mid-air. The humor was undercut, though – or perhaps enhanced? – by Alvin’s reputation for being the ruthless son of a ruthless father who’d gotten his start sealing hubcaps before opening his own hubcap shop and then furniture store in the Chicot district, where you did not want to go at night. The Morrisses were not above anything this side of the law or the other side in pursuit of the dollar. So rumors went, at least. To what degree they were true is hard to say. Certainly, though, the Alvin Morris you met in real life was not the Alvin Morris you saw on TV. You didn’t laugh at this Alvin Morris. You didn’t much want to look him in the eye.

From the beginning, before he learned she was one of *those* Morrisses, Brent felt sorry for Tania. Shy, apparently humorless, always alone, she was obviously very unhappy. Did it have anything to do with her father? Maybe, but you couldn’t get around the fact that – short, chunky, round-faced, bad skin – she was homely. Did Brent fall into the old male trap of being too conscious of a woman’s looks?

Perhaps, but what bothered him was the suspicion that it was Tania who was too conscious of hers. Is there any harsher judge of a woman's looks than another woman? Especially a teenager.

Tania was a teenager when she first showed up in Brent's sophomore-level Intro to Creative writing class and was twenty-two the day he last saw her when she received her Bachelor of Arts, Creative Writing Emphasis, degree. In between, she took three other creative writing courses from him as well as his 3000-level American Short Story course, and Brent served as mentor for her senior creative writing project. She liked him, obviously.

It helped that he was friendly to her without putting any pressure on her to be friendly back. Tania did not do well with pressure. He also stroked her ego a bit, maybe the first time she realized she had an ego. He told her she had talent. "You've got some real chops as a writer," he told her. A lie. She did not have chops. She did not have talent. He'd never had a student with talent. Oh, he'd had a few over the years who published a story or two or a poem or two, but not one good enough to develop into so much as a second-class writer publishing enough in second-class journals and presses to get a job teaching at a second-class university. In other words: Brent.

No one had a more accurate view of Brent's abilities, accomplishments, and status than Brent, and he was okay with it. He liked to joke that it had always been his goal to have a job that would pay him a living wage for doing virtually nothing, and being an English professor was as close as a person could come. The real joke was that he was serious.

He enjoyed his professional life. He liked to drink coffee and shoot the bull with his colleagues in the faculty lounge

mornings. He didn't even mind department and committee meetings. A tenured full professor with no ambitions for anything higher can gaze with amusement upon department and university politics, those bitter, bloody fights over tiny slices of tiny pies.

The majority of his professional life, though, was spent with students, most of whom he genuinely liked. Eight a.m. classes were an abomination – oh yes – but others he frequently looked forward to, especially when he was teaching something that he could act out, strutting about in front of the classroom, gesturing and emoting to the delight of the students. (He felt he could have been an actor. Hell, he was an actor.)

His was an urban university where many of the students were first-generation college goers, and they looked up to a professor with PhD after his name. Brent was human enough to enjoy being looked up to. That's why, unlike many of his colleagues who came up with any excuse to get out of going to graduation ceremonies, Brent happily donned cap and gown and attended spring graduation and fall, too. Afterward, he'd mingle with the students, wish them well, meet their families. They appreciated it.

Graduation ceremonies were held at Arnold Fieldhouse and, weather permitting, the mingling took place in the little park between the field house and the chancellor's residence.

It was a very warm May day, and the Morrisises – Tania, her parents, and two younger, very bored siblings – were standing in the shade.

Brent gave Tania a hug and kiss on the forehead and told her parents that he was very sorry but he just wasn't going to let Taniago off to grad school. No, he was going to keep her right there because he couldn't bear the thought of a

semester without Tania in one of his classes. It was a line he'd used umpteen times and could deliver with something resembling conviction.

Tania blushed, teared up, and, voice shaking, said that Brent was her favorite teacher ever, and without further ado handed him a slender, tissue-wrapped box.

"For me? Tania, you really shouldn't have. Having you as a student is reward enough. Should I open it? . . . What the – ? Are you kidding me? A Rolex!"

Alvin, a short, wiry man with a rodent face, who up to the point hadn't uttered a word, winked and said, "Rolex makes a good watch. Keeps good time. Enjoy."

Mrs. Morris, from whom Tania got her looks, unfortunately, nodded in agreement but couldn't quite bring herself to speak. Perhaps she was as shy as her daughter. Or maybe she was just uncertain of herself on alien ground, like so many parents Brent met at graduation, intimidated in the presence of so august a personage (who, as was often the case, they could buy and sell four times over).

The success of the Rolex gift seemed to loosen Alvin up. He invited Brent to have lunch with them. Tania said, "Yes, please do," but looked miserable at the thought.

Brent thanked them but made his well-honed excuses, once more wished Tania well, then moved off.

He was halfway to the faculty parking lot when he realized that Alvin was following him.

Brent turned, but before he could say anything, Alvin stepped close, canted his head, squinted up at him out of the corners of his eyes, and said, "Are you screwing her? 'Cause if I find out you've been screwing her, you and me's going to have ourselves a private conversation."

Brent's first inclination was to laugh at the absurdity of the suggestion. But this was not Bozo the Clown Alvin Morris cavorting across sectionals braying, "499! No money down! Take this baby home with you today!" This was the Alvin Morris who was reported to have put rivals under the ground. Brent could feel the sweat breaking out on his forehead, gathering in his eyebrows, running down his temples.

Instead of a loud denial, which instinct told him wouldn't do the trick, Brent feigned embarrassment, lowered his voice trying to sound at once conspiratorial and confessional, and said, "That's one thing you don't have to worry about, sir. The truth is, Mr. Morris, I'm gay."

When Brent got home late that afternoon, his wife, Joann, asked him how graduation had gone, and he began to laugh, thinking about the look on Alvin Morris's face when he told him he was gay.

"What's so funny?" she said. "You're usually not this cheerful right after graduation. Almost a month before summer session starts and you can once again have all those adoring, empty-headed coeds panting after you."

"I can't help their panting. I never pant back."

"Of course you don't. I've never worried about you and coeds, Brent. But answer my question. What's so funny?"

He told her about Tania, about meeting her father, who he was, what he was capable of. When he got to the "Have you been screwing my daughter" part, he began to act it out, advancing on Joann menacingly as Alvin, then becoming swishy, limp-wristed Brent, prancing around the den like a drag queen and simpering, "I'm gay! I'm gay!"

The performance seemed to irritate more than amuse Joann.

"I'll bet you didn't have any trouble convincing him of that," she said.

Brent had been just about to play Alvin again, his comic, back-pedaling response to Brent's "revelation," but Joann's comment brought him up short.

"OH, I get it," he said. "You mean because all us male English teachers are effeminate, gay, right? That old canard."

"I'm not talking about all male English teachers."

"Well, you can testify about *this* English teacher, baby doll," he said, breaking into a series of ludicrous body-building poses.

Joann looked around like she was trying to find the exit.

Brent froze.

"Wait. You're not serious, are you? Joann? Tell me you're not serious."

She raised a palm to her forehead as if she were suddenly so weary.

"I don't know what I am. I just wonder why, with the pressure on you, you said to that man that you were gay. I wonder what Freud would say about that."

"Freud!" Brent did a little dance from the La-Z-Boy to the TV and back again. "Listen to this. Freud! Joann gets a bachelor's degree in psych twenty years ago, so now she's dredging up Freud. Christ. Freud went out with Afros and bell-bottom trousers, Joann."

"I don't know, Brent. Afros are making a comeback."

"Funny. Look, Joann, I know what's going on here. Yes, true, I haven't been too 'frisky' lately, but you know how I get

this time of year, finals, all those papers to grade and on top of it department elections, worrying about summer school enrollment – all that. I don't perform well under stress."

"Forget it, Brent. I don't know why I said anything. I was mostly joking, anyway."

"Now there you go. *Mostly*. If you hadn't said *mostly*."

"Forget I said *mostly*."

She left the den. He heard her going up the stairs. He waited a minute, then followed her.

She was in their bedroom, lying down with her arm across her eyes.

"Migraine?" he asked.

"No."

He started back downstairs to pour himself a Jameson's. He allowed himself a drink on weekdays on special occasions, like graduation. But then he remembered the Rolex. He'd forgotten to mention it to Joann.

He returned to the bedroom, took the watch off and dangled it in the air.

"Look what Tania Morris gave me – paid for with her old man's blood money, no doubt."

Joann took her arm from her eyes and looked at the watch.

"It's a Rolex!" Brent said.

She lay there squinting at the watch a moment, then held out her hand. He gave her the watch. She looked at it, frowning. Held it to her ear. Shook it. Handed it back to him.

"It's not running," she said.

"What are you talking about?"

He looked at the watch. It read 2:32. The second hand wasn't sweeping.

"It's a knockoff," Joann said. "Look at the name. It doesn't say Rolex. It says R-O-L-E-Y."

He held the watch up close to his eyes.

"Shit!"

"Well, it's the thought that counts," she said, then laid her arm back over her eyes.

He laughed bitterly.

"Never mind," she said. "Go make yourself a drink. I'll be down and make dinner in a little while."

Then she let out a long sigh and lay still.

He knew what she was thinking, what the sigh meant. She was thinking that theirs wasn't much of a marriage, not perfect, certainly, no grand passion *a la* Hollywood, but this was the real world, not the marriage you dreamed of, but enough to keep going. She'd resigned herself to it.

He was pretty sure that's what she was thinking because that was damn sure what he was thinking. He wasn't happy, he couldn't say that, but he was happy enough.

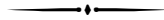
The Rolex business did bother him, though. *Roley*. Shit. He felt like throwing it over the backyard fence.

He went downstairs and opened the door in the base of the TV stand, which served as his liquor cabinet. Took out the bottle of Jameson's and poured himself a double, no ice, like an English don would drink it.

He sat down in the La-Z-Boy, took a sip, held the watch up, and turned it this way and that so that it sparkled in the light from the wall sconces bracketing the fireplace.

Roley or not, it was a pretty thing.

No, he wouldn't throw it over the fence. He'd hold on to it, keep it in his office at school. There'd surely be some work he was teaching, some part he was playing, where it'd come in handy as a prop. He sometimes used props.



3

I've Been Thinking

DJ TYRER

Michael Davenport-Rowndes leaned back from his desk with a definite air of satisfaction about him. Not quite smugness, he simply wasn't the sort for smugness, but certainly pleased with himself.

"You know," he said, not turning, "I'm in a jolly good mood."

"Why's that?" Sylvia's tone held a distinct note of dissatisfaction in it. She had been sitting in his apartment for very nearly two hours and Michael had paid her the barest of attentions. Instead of joining her, he had spent his time in the corner of the room he had christened his 'study', tapping away at his laptop.

"Well, you know how I've been beaver away at revising that story for that anthology?"

Sylvia sighed. "Yes."

Michael had seen an advertisement for 'amusing short stories' and sent in one based upon a recent mishap. To Sylvia's annoyance, not only had he spent several evenings typing the piece, but the editor, having accepted it, had asked for numerous tweaks and changes, costing several more evenings as Michael studied them, considering the ramifications of even the smallest changes in wording or punctuation, as if he were Oscar Wilde.

As far as Sylvia was concerned, Michael was no Oscar Wilde.

"Well, I finally got the nod that all my hard work had paid off and it is being sent for layout."

"Hooray." Sylvia wished she meant it – Michael had actually worked hard on it.

He didn't seem to notice her lack of enthusiasm.

"Well, I've been thinking..."

That was seldom a good sign, but she responded with a neutral, "Oh?"

"Yes. I've had a few scrapes in my time. In fact, to be frightfully honest with you, I sometimes feel as if I'm a little... accident prone."

"A little, maybe."

"Well, after the success of my first story, I was thinking that, maybe, a few more of my, er, mishaps might be suitable for adaption into literature."

He gave a slight cough. "Now, I know what you're thinking: story-writing doesn't pay, and it doesn't, not really, especially when you consider how long it took me."

That wasn't what she was thinking, but she began checking her texts and let him go on.

"But, the amount I'm getting for this one is almost enough to replace those slacks I tore last week. It might almost be worth it, you see? Then, with a bit of luck, some top-flight agent might read my words, take me on and propel me into the bestseller lists.

"Well, not me, as such; my book, I mean."

"Your book?" Sylvia tried not to sound annoyed.

"Oh, yes, there's got to be a book. All the best authors write them."

Michael considered the blank Word document before him.

"I could be the next... er, David Walliams." He tapped the side of his head. "There are plenty more ideas knocking about in the old bean, the old bonce, the old... um, bonnet?" he added, doubtfully.

Sylvia stood. "I just had a text from Sandra. A crisis in her love life. She needs me to bring her some wine and a shoulder to cry on."

"Oh, okay. I'll see you later."

He turned as she exited the flat and called after her, "Make a note of anything witty I can use in my next story."

She was already gone.

"Oh, well..." He looked back at the screen and tried to think of which recent embarrassments would be the best to embellish into a short, humorous tale.

The muses, to his dismay, remained resolutely absent and the document empty, so he clicked on the icon for solitaire and began sorting through a deck in the hope inspiration would soon strike.

There was a sudden *ping!* For one brief, wondrous moment, Michael thought he must have been struck by a great idea. Then, he realised his mind was still as blank as the document and that it had been the alert for an incoming email.

He clicked on the email icon, hoping it might be news of a movie deal for his story, but willing to enjoy an amusing picture of a cat.

It was neither. Nor as it, as he had feared, spam. It was from the publisher of the humour anthology that had taken his story and he clicked on it to discover it bore bad, indeed bewildering, news.

‘Dear Michael Davenport-Rowndes,’ it began, ‘I have been reviewing the editorial process and have decided to drop your story from the anthology, as per the clause in your contract.’

Michael dimly remembered something about the publisher retaining the right to reject the story if they felt the revisions were not up to standard.

“But, they were,” he told the computer. “She said the changes were very good – and, that it was going to layout. I don’t understand.”

The laptop was unable to furnish him with an answer, so he continued reading.

‘It was clear that during the last two revisions, you did no more than click “accept” to every suggestion the editor made. We expect a certain level of professionalism from our authors and I feel that this is a great insult to all the work they did and, so, am rejecting your story. Please consider this email the termination of our agreement.’

He reread the email, twice, looking for words such as ‘Fooled you’, but they were absent.

“I...” Michael didn’t know what to think. He recalled the evenings considering every change carefully. As a newcomer to the writing game, unable to muster arguments as to why the editor was wrong, and assuming they knew their job better than him, he had agreed to each one. It wasn’t really in his nature to argue, unless sternly compelled.

He stared at the email and considered how one false assumption had terminated his entry into the world of literature before it had really begun.

Then, he reasoned that, if this was how publishers behaved, making you hack away at a story for nothing, he was probably better off out of it.

How could anyone survive as an author, let alone stand being one? He wondered and shook his head, before raising his chin and putting fingers to keys and composing a response.

‘Dear sir,’ he typed, ‘it is I who am insulted. To be frightfully honest with you, I considered every change before I accepted them and am affronted you would think otherwise.

‘If this is your attitude, then I must agree to the termination of the contract.’

He considered his words a moment, before clicking ‘send’. It was quite stern stuff! Yet, somehow, he knew there would be no change of heart, no apology, no new slacks.

Then, just briefly, he considered whether the incident might form the basis for a little story, perhaps with his plucky hero going on to achieve international acclaim as an author, before dismissing the thought with a shake of his head.

Instead, he closed the empty Word document, then deleted his story, whilst trying not to think about how much time and effort had been wasted on it.

Michael gave a sort of awkward cough and told the computer, “I’m better off out of the writing game,” before googling amusing pictures of kittens.

Words, he reflected, never had been his strong suit, and were best left in the employ of others.

He gave another awkward cough and clicked on an image of a kitten with a balloon and began to chuckle.



4

Cinnamon Hearts by the Vedder

FRANK TALABER

I sat with granddad on the edge of the Vedder River in Chilliwack, our fishing rods dangled in water moving by with a slow measured pace on a hot summer day. We hadn't a bite on our lines yet, but one of the things I learned about fishing from Gramps was that it didn't matter if you never caught anything. "That wasn't the point," he'd say.

Gramps was prone to bouts of rambling talk that seemed to have no set purpose. Dad called him touched. "Just nod and wink every few seconds," he told me. Actually, Dad said, Granddad and Uncle Al were getting to be best friends as he got older.

"You said Euphoria son, here have a couple of these. They'll perk you up, while I tell you about the Euphoria Tea Company."

He told me some of the wildest stories and always shared those little cinnamon heart candies he had on him. At ten it seemed there wasn't much more to life than crunching cinnamon hearts and fishing the river with granddad on a hot summer's day.

The rest of the family was sitting around the camp stove waiting for Dad to fry up some of his world famous charcoal black, hard-as-a-rock hamburgers or his even more famous charcoal black hard-as-a-rock hot-dogs. "I don't know why everything that came off Dad's barbecue managed to come

out black and buggered," Granddad would say. I figured it was that barbeque sauce Dad used in such humongous quantities. Granddad would nudge me and say he was just a piss-poor cook.

"It was back during the opening stages of the Second World War. A mite before your time son."

Everything he told me about was 'a mite before my time'. I wondered how Grandpa found the energy to do all these crazy things he'd tell me about. All I've ever known him to do was bellyache about his lack of regularity, chew on cinnamon hearts and complain about the crap weather. "Actually, I said, oh look Gloria's over by that tree Granddad, not Euphoria." Gloria was my next door neighbor and here having a picnic with her family. So far she hadn't seen me or I knew she'd been sitting here talking with us, wanting to do gross things like hold hands and kiss.

Kissing girls, yuck I'd rather kiss a baboon.

Gramps said that would change when I got older.

"Like eighty-four," I told him.

"I'd been driving through the states in my old Rambler, now there was a car, did I ever tell you about my old Rambler son?"

He told me so many stories about his travels across Canada with that old Rambler I could rebuild it in my sleep.

"So I just hit Euphoria, Saskatchewan, Population 2840, the sign said and if you'd ever been through Saskatchewan you'd know they counted every dog, cat, gopher and budgie. One of those towns where the grain elevators were the only building over two stories high."

I had never been to the prairies, lived my whole life in BC. The only thing Granddad said he liked about the prairies

was the big open sky and the incredible thunder storms that would roll in with the fury of two tomcats fighting over a female in heat. Something I'd never heard yet, but figured it'd raise quite the ruckus.

"And lightning so strong you could read a book sitting on your balcony on a moonless night. You've never seen sky that opens up like you're standing on half the world, have you son?"

I shook my head 'no' and wondered now I knew why the fish weren't biting. He talked their ears off.

"I darn near missed the place, which isn't good when you're running on fumes. Then again, that old car could run on the sniff of an oil rag. So I asked the gas station man where a guy could get a cold beer. He gawked at me like my butt was on fire. 'This here's a dry county I can assure you sir.' He dismissed me like one of those bugs he was scraping off my windshield.

Well, I said to him, "I'll be making a bee-line outa here in a darn hurry." Another fellow in the old truck next to me said, "Can't say I didn't hear yea all talking out there. Now if yea want a potent brew to settle your nerves try the café up the street and ask the waitress for a cup of their Euphoria tea."

"Tea? I said to him, what, I look like I got a decal of the Queen hanging off my underwear or something?"

"Like the gentleman said, this hear's a dry county. But try a cup of that tea, Euphoria. It leaves yea in better shape than it finds yea, if you know what I mean."

I just wondered what the hell kind of crazy town I'd found myself in.

However being a fellow of curiosity I drove up the road, figuring on grabbing a bite of chow. The streets were empty, but the café was full. I think the whole town was in there and they all stared at me like I was some cop coming in to bust them.

I remember the chairs in that place all seemed to have somebody's ass-shape set in them, like they had been sat in all day, every day for the last forty years by the same people. I recon, they just sat there all day talking about farmer things."

"Farmer things?" I asked.

"Yeah, like how's your bull doing, oh he's okay, chased three heifers yesterday, darn coyotes been around my hen house again, I see your hay crop's coming along just fine. Hope, it don't rain. You know farmer things.

I remember looking at the menu and noting that there was no alcohol on the list. The tea or coffee was ten cents, pretty steep in those days. So I ordered a cheeseburger and fries. I remembered what the man said about the Euphoria tea only I didn't see it on the menu. I did notice some of the folks sitting there with these huge mugs and glazed looks on their faces *staring off into space real goofy like*.

When the waitress came by I asked for a cup of their Euphoria tea. She returned a minute later toting one of those large mugs everyone else had.

Told me the price was twenty-five cents and she'd add it to my bill. Two bits? I said to her, all indignant like, 'cause I never heard of a cup of tea that cost a quarter in my whole life. She just smiled a weird smile. "You ain't never had a cup of Euphoria then, sir."

Well I figured if anyone that had the courage to ask that kinda money must have a good product there. It had a bitter taste, bit like old socks that clung in back of your throat, clawing its way down. My lips went numb and after that, well, time sort a became irrelevant as weird things began happening. I watched this fly for what seemed like hours walking across my table. At one point I laughed, I could a sworn he was tap dancing. Ever see a fly tap dance, son?"

"I can't say as I ever had." Where he got these ideas for his stories I was never quite sure. But as long as he had a good supply of candies, I knew I could wade through this story.

"I understood why the other folks were sitting there all goofy like, because I'm sure that's how I must a looked staring at that fly. I don't recall leaving the restaurant or getting into my car. In fact I don't remember if I even ate my burger. Although I suspect I didn't 'cause I was so hungry the next morning. I could a ate the arse hole out of a skunk and come back for the smell. To be honest son, I don't remember a hell of a lot about the rest of the day. The sky was the most vibrant blue I'd ever seen. I remember passing a cop and thought he was out to get me. So I pulled into a rest stop and fell asleep. The strangest thing, when I woke up I realized I'd driven nearly a hundred miles. Which was too bad 'cause I was tempted to drive back for a refill."

Grandpa sat there with this quiet look on his face. Kooky old guy, he'd tell me some of the craziest stories. Most of which I never believed especially when I Googled Euphoria, Saskatchewan, and couldn't find it.

I wondered when I get to be his age if I'd ever have as many wild stories as he did. I grabbed another cinnamon

heart candy and thought; nope, probably not. Not as long as I keep sitting here on this riverbank doing nothing.

So I pushed Granddad into the river.



5

The New Teacher

IAN DOUGLAS ROBERTSON

It was Teddy Farrell's first teaching post and his first term as a teacher at Ryfield Boys School, where he had been a pupil five years earlier. When the post of French teacher fell vacant, because of the untimely demise of Frog Parker, Teddy applied and, to his amazement, got the job.

After finishing his degree at TCD, he realized that he had no idea what he wanted to do in life, so he decided to become a teacher. A lower second in Modern Languages equipped one for very little, except possibly the diplomatic corps, interpreting or teaching. Teddy chose the easiest option of the three, and embarked upon a diploma course in education.

For the next year he steeped himself in educational philosophy, educational psychology and the history of education. Occasionally, he had to simulate a French lesson in front of a class of fellow students who, with some exceptions, were reasonably cooperative pupils. At the end of the year he emerged a fervent educationalist, spouting Piaget and Skinner, rolling terms like 'positive reinforcement', 'a meaningful situation' and 'stimulus-response' fluently off his tongue. On top of that, he was awarded a First Class Honours Diploma.

Teddy had found his vocation. He was going to revolutionize the educational system, debunk antiquated methods and cast aside obsolete concepts. The gifted teacher

captivates his class with his wit and enthusiasm. "Besides," he said to himself, "it is a well know fact" – reinforced by readings of O'Neill and Montessori – "that all children have an innate thirst for knowledge. You just hand it to them on a plate and they'll lap it up like cats devour Devonshire cream." He would engage his pupils in a meaningful relationship of mutual respect and in no time at all he would be the most popular teacher in the school.

However, the course in education had devoted no lecture or tutorial time to 2B and Wallaby Wilks. Teddy soon became known as Squelch among the boys, mainly because of his 'squelchy' appearance and a pair of desert boots which went squelch, squelch, as the thick rubber soles were crushed into the ground by Teddy's great weight. Squelch was podgy, to put it mildly, with a glowing red face, pitted with acne scars. At the front of his head he had a balding patch, which he partially concealed with a Caesar haircut, stuck in place with quantities of Brylcreem.

Squelch was not the epitome of a schoolboy hero. He had neither the appearance of an intrepid revolutionary guerrilla nor a screaming rock artist, though he did do his best. He had a moth-eaten beard and wore a pair of scarlet corduroy drain-pipe trousers, two sizes too small for him which, if nothing else, pushed up his sagging belly so that, instead of looking fat, he merely looked bulky. Anyway, it was hidden most of the time by an ex-army surplus combat jacket.

During the first week of the autumn term Squelch bounced around school in his squelching desert boots with the excitement of an expectant kangaroo. He was setting out on a crusade not only to reform the educational system but to catapult it straight into the 21st Century. He called all the boys by their first names, forbade them from addressing him

as 'Sir' and informed them that he wished to be called Teddy, which caused quite a bit of chuckling along the back row of 2B.

For the first week 2B treated Squelch with unprecedented indulgence. He was somewhat of a novelty. We laughed at his stale jokes, no doubt throwbacks to his own schooldays, and we managed to waste hours of lesson time discussing the ideal teacher; the one who never punishes the pupils, is always friendly and in good humour, and above all transforms dull knowledge into exciting information.

By the second week the novelty was beginning to wear off, and Wallaby and the back row had had time to thoroughly survey this new master and had come to the conclusion that there was a great deal of fun to be had out of his progressive ideas, which were rather like ripe apples in an unguarded orchard, just waiting to be plucked off the trees.

On the Monday of the second week of term Squelch came bubbling into class as usual. Wallaby, however, had decided that he was going to nip this fat little master in the bud, before he got any ideas about doing any serious work. So, not long after Squelch had launched himself into a passionate presentation of the Imperfect tense, Wallaby started to cough. It was a gentle cough at first, a regular hgh, hgh, hgh, just enough to distract our attention from Squelch's fervent delivery.

After five minutes of non-stop coughing, Squelch began to show signs of unease. Wallaby was stealing the show. So, he asked for a volunteer to fetch a glass of water to quell Wallaby's intrusive little cough. A forest of wildly shaking hands shot into the air accompanied by shrieks of 'Me, Sir!', 'Me, Sir!' Taken aback by the sudden outburst from this hitherto docile class, Squelch was at a loss to choose someone.

Finally, he picked out Watson, but this caused another riot. So, for the sake of peace, he compromised and sent three boys to get the glass of water. This did not please 2B either, and we began chanting 'Not fair!', 'Not fair!' Squelch pretended to be amused and said, 'Boys, please,' with a nervous giggle, 'I can't send you all to get one glass of water.'

He had finally managed to pacify us when the three boys came back fighting over who should carry the glass of water and spilling most of it on the way. The remaining water was eagerly administered to Wallaby by the three water-borers, one holding his head, one his mouth and the other pouring it down his neck. But instead of making his cough better, it made it a great deal worse and Wallaby started choking and falling about all over the desk.

Squelch looked worried. His lesson plan was being seriously disrupted. So, despite the noise at the back of the class, he resumed his explanation of the imperfect tense. However, it soon became apparent that the racket was drowning out his words, and, besides, it was not easy to lecture to a class facing in the opposite direction. He decided to try the personal touch. He casually ambled over to where Wallaby was emptying his lungs out.

'Come on, Wallaby,' he said affecting control of the situation. 'I'm sure all you need is a little tap on the back.'

Squelch patted Wallaby gently on the back. Wallaby fell forward as if a ton of bricks had fallen on his shoulders. Now the whole class wanted to try the back-patting cure.

'You're not hitting him in the right place, Sir. You should hit him here, Sir!' Wham!

'No, here, Sir!' Wham! Another ton of bricks.

Within seconds, Wallaby was lying on the desk being pounded from all directions. Wham! Wham! Wham!

When the pounding stopped, everybody started putting forward their diagnosis of Wallaby's ailment.

'Sir, perhaps he's got a chicken bone caught in his throat,' said one.

'Don't be an idiot,' said another. 'He's not a dog! It's probably a fish bone.'

'Come on, stupid!' said a third. 'He's not a cat.'

'Maybe he's got galloping T.B.' said a fourth.

'He's not a horse, mutt head!' said a fifth.

'Come on, thickheads!' said a sixth. 'We all know it's because he smokes too many of those cheap cigarettes.'

Things were getting out of hand.

'Boys! Boys! Please control yourselves!' shouted Squelch trying in vain to top the din of spurious diagnoses. 'I'm sure there is nothing seriously wrong with Wallaby, just a little tickle in the throat.'

'A tickle, Sir. He's about to shuffle off his mortal coil, Sir!'

Wallaby reinforced this theory by injecting a new lease of life into his coughing.

'No, Penney. He is not. Don't worry. Now back to your seats, Boys. All of you.'

Squelch's face was beginning to glisten with beads of sweat.

'Boys, your seats! We don't want the Head coming in now, do we?'

The mention of the Head got us shuffling back in the direction of our seats.

Finally, most of us were seated, but Wallaby had not yet milked the situation dry. He started to wheeze and managed to squeeze out a few more anaemic coughs.

‘Sir, this cough is killing me.’ said Wallaby sounding as if he was in the throes of a premature death.

It was then that Squelch had his brainwave.

‘Here! Let me give you one of these.’

He fumbled in the pocket of his combat jacket and produced a packet of cough sweets.

Within seconds he had an epidemic on his hands, spreading like wildfire along the back row and then forward. Soon the place sounded like a home for chronic consumptives.

‘Boys! Boys! I have only six sweets left!’

Then, the coughing started in earnest. We were all determined to cough the loudest and prove that our need was the greatest. Poor Squelch had totally lost control.

‘Please! Please! Stop!’

Squelch waved his arms frantically in the air.

‘You must stop, Boys, please!’

But the more Squelch shouted and waved his arms, the more obstreperous we became, until it sounded like a clash between a university of students and a battalion of riot police.

Squelch looked haggard. We were now doing our frog act, leaping and croaking around the class like a horde of mating toads.

‘Boys! I know you’re only pretending. I’ll have to go to the Head.’

Nobody took much notice of this threat. We knew he did not approve of punishment. He had said it was anti-pedagogical, or something.

Finally, the coughing and croaking subsided, and gave way to a rapid flow of chattering. By this time Squelch was fretting around the class, his voice hoarse with shouting.

He did not attempt to pick up the thread of his lesson, which was in shreds by this time, anyway. Besides, he was too exhausted. His nerves were shattered, his confidence destroyed, his ideas disjointed and his bounce had lost its spring.

For the last three minutes of the lesson, he tried to find something to give us for homework, but as he had not taught us anything, there were no exercises we could do. He glanced nervously at his watch every five seconds, and fidgeted with his books and papers.

At last, the bell rang, and he made a feeble attempt to dismiss us, but we were already halfway out the door, stampeding down the corridor.

Some minutes later, a dejected, deflated Squelch entered the sanctuary of the staff room and with a shaky hand lit a cigarette, his first in two years. He had just had his first real lesson, and he found that it had nothing to do with Piaget or Skinner.

It took him another two months to finally become the kind of teacher he vowed he’d never be and replace his avant-garde pedagogical theories with one all-embracing principle ‘squash or be squashed, and may the best man win.’



6

The Amazing Story of Dr. Megrelian's Itinerant Circus and Human zoo

J.B. POLK

Dedicated to Lola Kiepja, the last pureblood Selk'nam (b.?–1966)

People who met Dr Megrelian for the first time thought it was his real surname and that he was a college-trained physician well-versed in the complexities of human deformities and similar afflictions. His birth certificate, however, said he was Benjamin Cecil Calhoun, also affectionately known as Benny, a half-literate resident who hailed from Harlan, Iowa, a humble village with little more to offer than a church, a general store, and a scattering of 10-acre farmhouses in various stages of disrepair.

Born and raised in poverty, Benny received his first pair of shoes from the very man whose name he would eventually assume and whose five-cent nomadic show pitched tents on a vacant parcel of land behind the Calhoun homestead one fateful morning.

"Three dollars for the lot, and you can also use the outhouse and the water pump," Benny's father, Silas, offered.

"How about we strike a deal?" Dr Megrelian, a shrewd businessman with an good eye for a lucrative deal, engaged in the age-old art of haggling.

"I'll give you two dollars and ten cents for the whole thing, plus one day's work for your kid. He looks like a smart boy who can help us get ready for the show."

Silas hesitated.

"That, plus a new pair of shoes – Macy's patent leather. Phil the Midget got his legs chopped off a few months ago," Megrelian added.

Phil's legs had been sliced off at the Sioux City station by an Akron train when he was unloading trunks and other equipment on the wrong side of the tracks. His friends had worried for weeks that Phill, who'd lost three pints of blood, would check out. But despite the accident and his achondroplasia, he was able to pull through since he had just married the Giant Woman and had not yet consummated the marriage. After the accident, he sat in a wheelchair customized to his even more petite body, selling popcorn, beer, and show tickets, and he no longer needed the shoes he'd bought for the wedding and wore only once.

"Two dollars and fifty cents," Silas, who could drive as good a bargain as Megrelian, responded.

"And you can have my boy for a dollar a day. With the rye and soybean harvests months away, there's no work in Harlan."

"Deal," the good doctor agreed, handing over the money and the shoes.

But after two days, the circus had barely recouped its investment in a town whose farmers could ill afford to pay five cents to watch mediocre freaks, including a legless midget, and their clumsy antics, so the troupe decided to leave – this time with young Calhoun in tow.

"There's no future in Harlan," Benny said as he waved goodbye to his father.

"With the Doc, I'll travel the world and make a name for myself. I might even send you some money," he claimed,

which, in retrospect, turned out to be not exactly a lie but an empty promise.

During Benny's third year of touring with the circus, Megrelian, who was approaching his seventh decade and suffered from crippling headaches, lost interest in and hunger for all worldly pleasures, including booze, food, and sex. Most of the performers had moved on to greener pastures, and the Giant Woman, unable to deal with Phil's condition, had fled with the Siamese twins who had joined P.T. Barnum. The nomadic act was on the edge of collapse, with only Benny, Megrelian, the Midget, and an elephant named Bertha remaining.

The Doctor's headaches turned out to be aneurysms that one day exploded like quasars, so they buried him under a saguaro cactus in the Sonoran Desert while Benny, blessed with a good nose for business and a dislike for poverty, inherited not only the entire traveling spectacle but Megrelian's name as well.

To get some cash permitting him to recruit fresh attractions, Benny sold Bertha to a park ranger who'd always wanted an exotic beast to keep him company in Arizona's Lost Dutchman State Park.

"How the devil will he feed her in the desert?" he pondered, handing over the animal but did not inquire. He needed the money, and the pachyderm was old and emaciated and would have seen the wrong side of the grass very soon anyhow.

With no performers to exhibit, Megrelian-Calhoun was eager to find someone to pique the macabre curiosity of freak show spectators. He happened to run into Sergei Levchenko, an 18-year-old from St. Petersburg and figured out that people would pay big money to view the Russian's tiny third

leg, the remains of a parasitic twin dangling from his crotch. Benny gave him Phil's leather shoes for his two good feet and had a shoemaker create a two-inch copy of a third one.

While passing through Wickenburg, the circus stopped at a local diner where Karl Peters, a sous chef and an Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome sufferer with velvety skinfolds all over his body, caught Benny's eye. Amazed by the man's flesh trying to escape from the confines of his unbuttoned shirt, Benny offered him a job.

"We'll showcase you as the Elastic Man. You can stay in Phil's caravan until you get your own," he promised.

Peters, bored with sous-cheffing and the customers' threats to do a wedgie with his butt skin, accepted gratefully, hung up his grease-stained apron, and moved into the Midget's wagon.

Charlene Atkins, aka the Lobster Girl, joined the show in Tennessee. Her genetic condition caused her fingers and toes to merge into claw-like extremities.

"All you'll need to do is sit in a barrel filled with seaweed and water and make crustacean-like noises with a pair of castanets," Benny instructed, and she was overjoyed to become part of the troupe.

The rest of the artistic ensemble they picked up on the road included Susie, the bearded woman, and Stephen Jefferson, who could twist his joints and play the piano with his back to the instrument. In all honesty, he was a lousy performer, and the only two tunes he played reasonably well were *Ta-ra-ra Boom De Day* and *Oh, My Darling Clementine*.

As years passed, the traveling spectacle went from state to state and village to village. With the original Megrelian long gone and fertilizing the Sonoran Desert flora, Calhoun,

now in his thirties, vowed to make the show bigger and better than any other. And, remembering his boyhood hunger pangs, he promised never to return to Harlan or any other region of Iowa, rural or otherwise, until he became rich and famous.

"I'll be damned if I go back," he told his employees as they gathered in the evenings after each event, calculating the proceeds and fantasizing about making it big.

Although his mathematical skills were limited to adding dollars and cents with the help of an abacus, Benny worked hard to make the business a success. He fought his way through the cryptic language of newspaper articles and stored information for future use. That's how he learned about two opportunities that were meant to make him rich and turn the freak show into an international attraction.

The first was the Louisiana Purchase Exhibition, also known as the 1904 St. Louis World Fair. The organizers estimated that over twenty million people would visit the technological marvels and amusement rides, each paying a dollar a day. Benny reasoned that even if only a fraction attended the circus's performance, he could retire before the age of forty.

The second piece of news came from an ad in the Kansas Gazette which said that Sam Dixon, a wool and hide merchant recently returning from the continent's southernmost edge, had brought a female aborigine and her offspring. He won her playing poker in the Straits of Magellan and reasoned that exhibiting the two for the enjoyment of county bumpkins would get him extra cash.

"A buck to view, two bucks to touch," the sign in his shop window announced.

Everything was fine until the mother bit off the finger of a man who tried to touch the kid after paying his two dollars.

"One clean snap and his pinkie was gone! The dumb expression on his face was worth the money I paid for the doctor's bill. And I also had to return the two bucks!" Dixon chuckled at the memory.

"That woman's teeth are as sharp as a piranha's. We can't find the finger because she must have swallowed it. The only problem is that no one is bold enough to clean her cage now, so she sits in her muck all day, clutching the baby and crooning some crazy stuff no one understands."

Fed up with the situation, he placed the ad.

"Real South American savage. Young and healthy. Price: 30 dollars. Child, cage, and chain for free."

If Benny got there in time and offloaded the woman and her infant from Dixon, his show could compete with P.T. Barnum or the Ringling Brothers, who were also heading to St. Louis.

"Just imagine!" he said to Phill.

"We'd make a fortune! Two bucks to touch!"

After three days, they finally reached Lawrence, a hamlet on the bank of Clinton Lake where Dixon's house competed in grayness with lichen-covered boulders squatting on the shore like overturned tombstones in a derelict graveyard.

When the convoy arrived, the merchant was cooking something in a large aluminum pot that smelled like rotting haddock, overcooked rice, and green kale.

"I try to get a pot ready for the week. There's no way I'm getting into the cage more often than that," he explained, stirring the foul-smelling liquid with a wooden spoon.

"Just remember. Don't stick your hands through the cage bars. The chain is long enough for her to move around. Do as I say, or you'll end up as one of the freaks in your show," he chuckled, pleased with his joke.

The cage, which was about 10 yards from the lake, had a tin roof and a floor lined with an old carpet. The mother, entirely naked, slumped in one corner, her infant on her hip, sucking on one of her breasts.

As soon as he saw her, Benny knew she was the one he'd been hunting for – a true Amerindian savage never previously exhibited in the human zoo industry. Although she was huddling on the ground, he could see she was plump, with milk-busting breasts. Her entire body was painted crimson with black and white stripes and dots, and a white stripe encircled her eyes like a scary mask. Her hair was long, black, and rigid, most likely oiled with animal fat.

"Ain't she cold?" he asked Dixon.

"She's used to it. The sun barely rises above the horizon where she comes from. Her people live just a stone's throw from Antarctica – that massive sheet of ice at the end of the world where there is nothing but snow, snow, and more snow."

His tone was scornful as if he could not understand why anyone would want to live in such a place.

"She probably swam with seals in the half-frozen ocean," he continued.

"Her people can outswim dolphins and often compete with humpback whales for speed and resistance. I tossed her a blanket to cover the baby last week, but she just chucked it back. She has some pride, that one."

Throughout the conversation, the woman never looked up, muttering to herself.

"J-ák t-ēlken, j-ák t-ēlken..."

"What's she saying?" Benny asked.

"How would I know? I'm not even sure it's a language. The shepherds down by Tierra del Fuego call them Selk'nam. They say they are barely human, but apparently, they communicate whistling like parakeets or puffins."

"The European settlers are trying to get rid of them because they've no notion of private property and slaughter their sheep as if they were wild sea lions. They pay two dollars for a pair of testicles or a breast and one dollar for a child's ear. Fewer than a thousand are left, so you'd be getting a collectible at a discount."

"Before they're all gone," he added as an afterthought.

Phil, who sat in the wheelchair behind them, inched towards the cage.

"She's one unattractive lady. And the young'un... phew, I've never seen an uglier child. Despite her size, my ex-wife was really pretty..." he said but stopped under Benny's warning stare.

"Watch out! Not so close, or you'll not only have no legs but might also lose an arm!" Dixon warned, laughing uproariously.

Phil beat a hasty retreat.

"So, whatcha say? Taking her or not? Thirty bucks for the lot – woman, child, and cage. You can also take the pot of grub for the road," Dixon urged.

"Done!" Benny exclaimed.

"We'll load her onto Charlene's wagon and head out. Must make it to St. Louis in three weeks."

"Just give me the money and take her. I no longer want anything to do with her. In the payout for the lost pinkie, I spent more than I got from her. Just be careful when you drag her out. She might not look like much, but she's fierce. And fast. I saw her people snap tree branches like twigs," Dixon said.

The merchant pocketed the six five-dollar bills Benny gave him, then moved away to a safe distance, watching him approach the cage.

"There, there..." Benny chanted softly.

"I won't hurt you or your child. Just come out nice and easy, and I promise you'll have a good life with us," he continued, knowing she couldn't understand a word he said. And anyway, everything he said was a lie. She and the kid would be chained to the cage for the rest of their lives.

"Be careful, boss; she might lurch, and then you'll be gone," the Midget said, wriggling in his wheelchair.

Benny inserted the key into the keyhole and unlocked the door. The woman didn't move.

"How dangerous can a woman with a baby be?" he wondered as he moved farther into the cage to loosen the chain.

He kept saying, "*Easy there, easy,*" as he'd heard horse whisperers do in Iowa. He relaxed because she still didn't stir and seemed unaware of his presence.

Then fate intervened again. She was on top of him in one great leap, the infant still clutching to her breast, and from someplace, perhaps from under the carpeting, she

retrieved a bone fragment sharpened to razor-blade sharpness.

Slash...

Blood spurted from Benny's severed jugular, coating the woman in sticky red. Before dying, he comprehended where the missing pinkie had always been.

Phil tried to back out, but it was too late. The woman flipped the wheelchair over and sank her teeth into his shoulder, tearing into the muscle and cutting through to the bone. Phil screamed, trying to shake her off, but she clung to him as a hungry puma might stick to a seal before the coup de grâce. When she noticed he had fainted, she let go and stepped towards Dixon, who ran for his life.

She was breathing heavily, surveying the carnage around her, while the child, still on her hip, sucked contentedly on her blood-splattered breast.

Leluachen ran. She ran as never before, not even when she'd hunted the swift Magellan *guanacos* for meat and fur.

"Hold on to ahm's neck, Kreeh. Hold tight, and ahm will run like the wind that whistles along the Wintek plains. We'll be home soon," she whispered, never missing a step.

"J-ák t-ēlken, j-ák t-ēlken... my child, my child," she repeated over and over.

Baby Kreeh, hardly two years old, held onto ahm's neck unquestioningly. She would not let go. Mama said they would go home. Mama knew.

Leluachen ran as if she were racing along the K'ami Lake shore far, far away, where the world ended abruptly, where there was no more land, grass, or trees but only a vast,

limitless ocean. A cool breeze ruffled her hair, singing a Selk'nam melody her grandfather used to play on his whale jaw harp.

*Mahuin, mahuin hikuenkr,
Now the kloketens are far away.
Their ankles are tired.
Beautiful heart,
Head of rock...*

She chanted into Kreeh's tiny ear. The ear that white hunters would pay a dollar for but which they would never have.

She looked back. No one was following...She stepped into the lake, holding the child close to her chest.

"Listen to ahm carefully. Close your eyes really, really tight, and don't open them until ahm tells you to. Until we are back home. Until we are free. Do you understand?"

The little girl nodded.

One step two, three...

When Kreeh's feet touched the surface, Leluach was up to her waist in the water.

Four, five, six...

"Now, Kreeh, now! Close your eyes."

Her lips grazed the girl's head.

"It's a pity my daughter was born after the cruel white man had destroyed the Selk'nam. We should have been allowed to keep our way of life with bows, arrows, and fur clothes. Our way of life in the land the foreign men call the Land of Fire, but that truly is the Land of Ice," she reflected, saddened.

She knew there was nothing to go back to. The only thing awaiting them was men with sticks that roared like sea

lions and spat out flames. Nothing but to be killed, maimed, or exhibited in human zoos like her and baby Kreeh. A buck to view, two bucks to touch...

Seven, eight...

Water sloshed around Leluachen and her daughter, hugging them in its comforting arms. She was swimming again with dolphins back in the cold, cold canal that the foreign invaders called the Beagle.

Nine...

She extended her hand towards Temaukel, the Selk'nam God and the only witness to their departure, ready to gather them into his embrace.

Ten...

She disengaged Kreeh's arms from her neck, letting the child sink to the bottom of the foreign lake that, from then on, was to be their home.



7

The Lot

JEVIN LEE ALBUQUERQUE

Some say she earned her nickname “Savannah Red” in the 80’s at a beauty pageant she deemed “unsuccessful.” She finished second, countered this injustice, dress-strap-release, red hair shake-out, formerly parted in the middle; ice-blue-eyes, live on TV, breast, both hands, “Eat a tit,” she told the judges—walk off, faces blushshshsh. Others claim her obsession with Savannah red rice, red hair, fire, etc. I prefer the former, more facsimile, girl I once knew. She’s a misfit, no-doubt-about-it, but won’t say how she got her name. After the pageant, book of poetry, Dianne di Prima, in hand, mind, musician boyfriend “Haywire”, other, they pointed his van toward San Francisco. Savannah arrived. Solo. The streets weren’t kind. She “got it together” she once told me, when she married a man in Tech, money, leisure, relax didn’t last; break-up, “Craps,” she said. Her brother had “rebound money,” bought her a parking lot to manage in the city. She loved it! She managed that lot, cold chardonnay in hand, free hand waving to folks in line to get-in, smiles, whistles, everyone wanting an in; she rented it out, the down n’ out. Young pregnant women changed diapers in cars. Homeless jazz musicians kept it coool, slept in the “free bus” she kept in the back, never created any problems, helped when they could, left tips, black-top-hat, flipped-up, on table, entrance, lot, green bills swell, never stolen. “Your orientation is your orientation, now orientate yourselves,” her traditional greeting. Prostitutes, Gigolos, Heroin addicts, she didn’t

discriminate until you screwed up, then you were in trouble; that's what happened to me.

Raspy phrases, mantras on the daily, in my mind: "Ah craps! Thirteen is reserved. Move it to nine. Quit asking question. Call me when I give a titty. Craps!" always makes me smile.

Sadly, the lot, ended with picket lines, protesting her affinity of the beat and she disappeared. No news for ten years. From my liquor store perch, I often saw folks walking by the old lot, now \$75 a day to park, hoping to catch a glimpse of red hair, feel touch, honesty, truth. Heads-dropped when they failed to smell her perfume, an orange scent, mixed with other perfumes, almost hourly, seducing folks down the street, in alleys, when the wind blew. She had a "makeup unit" she called it, in number thirteen, where she couldn't be bothered, she kept different dresses, personalities, a shrine; one you didn't mess with, get too close to. And don't get me started on the shoes. And of course she had dogs, cats, mice, or whatever rodent needed assistance, even an opossum once recuperated at the lot, on her watch, on her shoulder. All were fed, Savannah red rice. "Good for the soul," she sang, serving out free helpings. "Help yourself to seconds." Steam rise, souls, soothed.

The desert open up Reno in my old Ranger truck, sinful moans in the distance. "Somewhere, twenty-miles-deep, in desert," I was told, I could find Savannah Red; told by a truck driver named Roadkill, who showed up at the liquor store to barter fresh-scrape-venison – arms needle – for Southern Comfort. "When you see the rhinestone mailbox, turn left, hope the road isn't out, and make sure you bring her something' special. It's your only chance." He took a black

comb off the counter, slicked it across his scalp, down the slope of his mullet. "Can I clean my knives in back?" "Sure," I told him. "Oh, and listen, it's a different kinda freedom out there," reverberations in my mind as I see the mailbox, glint.

I hope the trout I caught in Boca Reservoir are still fresh on ice, my entry pass, she loves her some trout. I ate one of those buggers, last night, over the fire, stuffed with lemon, garlic, butter, sprinkle-brown-sugar, watched that flame, red in the night, blessin' broken-birds, flyin' low, over water; recalled my days as a young fly-fishin' guide, on the Truckee River, before the back, went out fishin'.

Left turn, bounce up, down, each pot-hole-dip, rattle, side to side, loud clank, back wheel, boat-ride, vintage-vehicle-police, man, turn onto dirt road, siren on me, out here? I spread my jacket over kissing bottles, Southern Comfort, passenger side; window roll down, when instructed.

"Tire," he says, mustache wax, twist, raggedy uniform cop, eyes hidden in sun squint. "Craps," he says kneeling down, "looks like a real doozy." Kicks it with his boot, metal on metal. "I suppose you're headed for Red's?"

"Visiting a friend," I tell him. He spits tobacco.

"Well, this is private property, friend. And what you got in here?" he asks, lifting lid, cooler in back.

"Trout," I say, eyes in side mirror, catch glimpse, yellow hair clown on high-wheel bicycle, polka-dotted-out in the sun, turn onto dirt road. No space, zigzagging around pot holes, non-verbal "hello" with loud eye paint blue, red smile, slowly by.

Cop says, "I'll be taking this," ice rush, cooler. He removes his hat, waves to clown, back to car cop, siren on,

disco-ball in car radiate out, coin light in the desert. Tom Petty crank, cop hat still off, remaining hair slick-back, through rear-view mirror.

The clown stops pedaling, back-to-me, waves, but I get out to inspect tire, in a bear trap, claw. Disco light cop, pass-by, head bobbing. "Wait," I demand, inspect knife wound in spare tire, flat in flatbed, second time clown wave, cop-head-shake. "Wait," I holler to clown. He begins to pedal, insists I catch up, tease. I grab backpack, fill with change, clothes, water, bottles, Southern Comfort. No words, follow desert bike for miles, sky blue, windless, sweat.

"Stop!" I insist, wind pickin' up, chokin' on desert dust. "Devil," you are, I shout to clown. "How much longer?" I ask, hands on knees. He slows his pedal, stop, mimes "twenty-minutes," dustless white face smile, permanent, the endless landscape, tumbleweeds beginning their journey. "Ok," I tell him, after sips of water, "onward." He waves me forward, the tall wheel now rubbing against forks, strain.

"You know, you learn a lot about people managing a liquor store," I tell clown, see swimming pools, distance, mirage. "Hey, man! I'm talking to you." He slows down, shrugs shoulders, lifts hand, "five minutes." "For the love of god," I say, stop, dump water over my head. "How about if I just ignore you?" Clown thumbs up, speeds up a bit. "Screw it," I say, unscrewing lid on bottle of Southern Comfort, take a seat on rock, next to cactus, prick. The clown slows down, hands on hips. He motions for me to walk over. "No" I tell him, after a heavy swig, burn, dehydrate, die-honorably, smile, "Ha!" I say, feeling, rush over me, sweet, he steps the long-down off bike, walks over, baggy-pants-in-wind, white face now dust, still smile paint, loud eyes. He reaches for bottle. "Ok," I say. After a few sips, sweat wipe, white paint on hand, he motions for me to get on bike. I follow

instructions, high-up, riding, clown following, bottle tip, every look-back, ahead, billboard, flashing neon sign: *Savannah Red's...Stay a While*. A ways farther, a fully-covered, red stadium-sized arena, barges into view, roof, red tassels, hiss in the wind. Solar panel, alien ants, swarm walls, cling to sticky red. The clown nods, stumbles, actually smiles.

I pedal up ramp, muscle-strain-back relieved by what I might find in black tunnel. I smell perfume, orange, rose, it has to be. The clown collapses behind on down-hill; which gives me a little laugh, bike shake, front wheel disconnect from frame, sends me skiddin' on chin, into lot, padded with astro-turf, rug, burns. A.C. all around, her scent, through air, breathe; eyes open to shipping-container-aquarium, one-window-side, whiskered, bulge-belly catfish, swim, bonk-heads against glass, wide black net next to tank, stand up, right. "When the man comes around," through speakers, generators hum, sprinkle water fall, ceiling, sing, back stings.

"Well, look what the craps dragged in," walking away, Savannah Red, gray streaks in her hair.

"Wait," too late, I'm stretched into heavenly mist, sleep. Wake up in my flatbed-ranger, stars-open-roof, lot, dipper roar, screams. Clown, paws over rail, stare. Trapeze swing, into view, out, empty, swinging; I try to sit up, see more, back-down-back. Clown shakes his head, walks away, only stars, swing; returns with thirty-plus-pound orange cat, missing both ears, plops into my armpit, purr. I scratch under its neck, fur to face, feels warm, nerve-pain-down-right-leg, nearing foot, look up for planet Sciatica, burning purple-red.

"Pull into six, make it snappy, before I change my mind," springs from lot, eyes strain through tailgate slits. Pain of a semi-truck groans, chugs, slows, looking down on me from white, big-rig, truck-cap-on, shady face, sarcastic

smile. "Roadkill," I wave. He shakes his head. "You think I have all night, move your ass," familiarity of Savannah's voice, angelic, in the chatter of stars. Roadkill hesitates, still eyeing down, shaking his head. She continues, "You don't want the menopausal-piss-me-off tonight, brother, trust me!" Wheels roll. I can't help but laugh, cat cozy on chest, purrrrrrr, slobber-chin, heartbeats, green-eyes hidden, slits, leaky crust.

After two loud thumps on flatbed with his familiar caveman hands, Roadkill snickers, "Now what you gone done to yourself, homeboy?" He rushes stubby fingers through mullet, a few new blond streaks, "I've read this book before, my friend." A Savannah thunder chimes in, "It was no bestseller, I'll tell you that," I hear in disappointment, "but I sure appreciate the trout. And, the Southern Comfort was a nice touch, Tom. We're putting something together for you; think Hannibal Lector" she says, familiar eyes spark, red hair pivot away. "Wait," I say. "My big sis ain't wait for nobody in years, partner," says Roadkill. He gives me a little push on the ribs. I cringe. "That's not good," he says. "I'll be back." The clown peeks over the edge, sponge yellow nose. I threaten with a slap, pain shoots down my leg. He walks off, nose-up, ceiling closing, stars, swing, lights dim.

Surprisingly, or not, the ceiling is decorated with glow in the dark stars, shoot. "Two bowls, good for the soul," she sings, red rice for me, orange fluff and she's off before I can get a word-in; returns, with a two-wheeled hand truck, leans it against the flatbed. "I'll be back." I lift my head up, shovel in a few bites, choke a little, cat tongue slurp. Tailgate drops, allows, snapshot lot: catfish tank near entrance, Jazzzzz-bus beaming with brass, not far, a few big-rigs, the Trapeze artists, tights, walk in the shadows, swings, light swing. Cat bolts. And like canon shots, four corners, building lights,

cross swords, light chatter through flatbed wall, laughter, light, mist. Guinea fowl in packs rush by, three legged dog, banging into truck tire, stumbles. The clown, red smile smirk, drops a wood plank down next to me, with the help of Roadkill, slide me on, buckle me in, and onto the hand truck we go. "Should I get a catcher's mask," Roadkill asks, getting a silent clown laugh. Opening a ziplock, "Bear jerky?" I shake my head, clown hand dip, chews. "Rabbit?"

"I'm good," I say, back seizing-up. Old trucks in the dark; cigarette eyes, burn. "Hey sugar," from the shadows, "let me know if I can help you out?" Clown does a shimmy, walks on. "Where are we going?" "That's the..." I say, see cop car parked in nineteen, marked in white on turf; lawn chair cop, puff-on-joint, disco ball quiet, until the light, hits. In the distance a dimly-lit stage, silky-red curtains protect. Swimming pool off to side, water sway, see-through walls, diving board spring, into air flips Trapeze, artist, splash. Behind the pool, a gold painted throne, grizzly bare rug on floor, three dogs, ears perk. Red light beams onto my chest, look-up, alien shoots from ceiling-corner building, green body, black eyes bulge; flying saucer only a few feet from alien, blinking red lights. Dogs plead for snacks thrown in the air. Savannah Red, white dress, red heels, twirls, treats in the air, pets, steps to throne. "Craps!" she says, "take him in," pointing to open door, black abyss, wheels roll. Sign above: *Devil's Den*. Clown jumps out of the way, fright face. Roadkill, cigarette light, stand-me-up, lean back, into the black, squirm to cigarette smoke, clouds, Red, "The wayyyy back," fixing her make-up, hand mirror in hand, no look. The clown, hand over mouth, into my soul, runs-off. Dark. Smoke.

Tables cluster, dice roll, long run into future, time, space, freeze, fall, into the chips stack, cash in-out, no-eyes-on-me,

only smoke, I'm wheeled past tables, focused red-eyes, locked in moments, touched by god, the devil's hand in pocket-pool, drinks delivered, free, tips. Guinea fowl scatter. I crank my head to the side, at least twenty tables, walls black n' white photos of the lot back, in San Francisco – beautiful. Along with road trophies, reconstructed skulls, mounted: deer, boar, bear, wolf stare back. "Yeah, brother, how do you think she affords...," says Roadkill, stomp cigarette, one more door, back astro-turf-alley exit. "You're gonna want this," says Kill, stuffing marijuana-cig in my beak, light.

"F'in 420, damn lot is nearly full; should a doubled my rates, it's a f--n' bumper crop" purges Savannah Red, profile through barbed-wire fence, wash-hands sanitizer, moving on down the line, out of sight. Nods, Roadkill, lights joint, pulls from my mouth, hits-it, returns, my lungs fill, bees to hive. "Take a seat," says Kill. "Oh, my bad, just stay as you are," he continues, sending cart straight up, jerk, back spasm, face. "Listen, keep it cool, real, you'll be fine, I think," eye twitch. "OK," I spasm. Gavel, smack, turn me around, cart, big screen on wall, Savannah Red, gavel in hand, diet-coke-sip, toss into background noise, pulpit, pity, expecting I might fall.

"Do you, Truckee Tom, promise to tell the whole truth..." through speakers, static. "I do," I tell her. "Do you promise to keep your mind out of the gutter, not mingle with the wrong lot-locals? "Yes, Ma'am." "Do you agree to cleaning up after the animals when said busted-back heals?" "I think so, I mean, yes." "Good. Do you agree to clean bathrooms, aquariums, pools, disinfect chips, fix spare tires, listen to those in need, leave your ego buried in the desert." "Yes, Ma'am." "Now, do you agree your enemy is the ego, and nobody else?" "Yes, Ma'am." "Finally," she says, icy eyes into camera lens, "are you down for the ride?" "All the way,"

I tell her, static. "What are you willing to give-up for the past?" "Pinky-finger," snip.

Jazzzzzz behind red curtains hum, strings, brass-reach-out, away from each other, flirting with move-on, we move, Roadkill, Savannah Red, Clown, seats, front row. "Ladies and gentlemen, the Jazzzzzz Bus," my hand bandaged in gauze, Savannah Red held, cozy, leans into me, bass, trumpet, sax-slashin' night air, drums keepin' it together we travel in minds, crazies, heroin-down music, the desert cacti, shoot needles, plead for attention, push hand truck me out, Savannah Red, desert, night, stars whistle-wild, static, alien interference, silence, finger, catfish-belly, stars, shoot.



8

Music of the Sadhu

LARRY SMITH

I.

The parade passed us by and kept going – and a parade it was, not just a sacred somber procession as in the rituals of the West. I wish I could remember more of the place, which of its corridors led off from where and which ones went where. I have a poor sense of direction, limiting in some ways my connection to present experience as well as my capacity to reconfigure in memory the sundry grandiose scenes of the past. A most unfortunate cognitive deficiency, especially for one who like me has since childhood sought fullest immersion in the sensuosities of the human condition. Naturally, I grow a mite feebler as I grow older. Today, I cannot reconstruct Madurai itself, the teeming city splayed in each direction from that ecclesial megalopolis of shrines and statuary.

I do remember the parade burrowing into one corridor from which weas Westerners, only a handful of us in attendance that afternoon amid the Hindu throngs, were debarred. There was the face of the priest – was he a priest or some designated lay functionary? –at once expressionless and vibrantly alive as he beat on some sort of drum like a kettle drum. There was a rather large reflecting pool in the temple complex where earlier that day we sat with our guide, a tough-minded habitué of the city's streets, or so he seemed, who was telling us about how in Tamil Nadu parents have

murdered their daughters for marrying, not just out of their castes but, for that matter, out of their sub-castes as well.

This temple, the Meenakshi Sundareshwarar Temple, is famous enough and so draws its fair share of tourists. Deservedly so, to be sure, yet I have visited other temples which, if smaller and generally unremarked in the tour books, are no less prepossessing. I'm thinking of one sizable complex in Karaikudi and I think too of Eklingji in Rajasthan, very much smaller but what a gem!

I did my best to extricate myself from two Israeli tourists, a high school principal from Tel Aviv and his wife who chatted us up while we were waiting for the ceremony to start. A statue of a calf, incarnating I don't know whom, rested behind us. "Some things never change," the woman said, a deprecating reference, I reckon, to the golden calf of Exodus. I suppose I'd like to visit Israel someday. My daughter has. She says Tel Aviv reminds her of L.A.

I remember a long corridor I had traversed earlier, leading to a stunning – who was it? Ganesha? Or might it have been Meenakshi herself, avatar of Parvati herself? Or Sundareshwarar himself, avatar of Shiva himself? But I do not remember any of the gopura, the great gateways, and I now read that there are fourteen of them. Nor do I remember that there are, as I also read, two separate east-facing shrines, one to Meenakshi and the other to Sundareshwarar. You'd think I'd remember that!

Most of all I wish I could remember where in this astounding topography stood the sadhus. I wish I could remember where they stood in relation to the temple pool. I do remember the sadhus themselves, three wizened yet rather tender-fleshed faces with eyes that seemed to smile good-humoredly yet could capture you with unblinking

glare, a stern rootedness of their souls in yours if yours were available to such rootedness. But then there was the fourth, a white man, as I was astounded to see, more fully bearded than the others, staring out with equal fixedness, some portion of his consciousness no doubt aware that I and others like me were going to be always wholly astounded to see him there so consummately integrated, or so it seemed, with the others who, I think I remember also sensing, seemed to gladly welcome this odd companionship.

“Where are you from?” I had to ask. He did not answer, only smiled a wee bit as I distributed rupees to the four men. But when I was done, he smiled a little more broadly and sang out, sang out quietly, mellifluously

Has anybody here seen Kelly?
Find him if you can!
He’s as bad as old Antonio,
Left me on my own-ee-o.

Goodness gracious me, I knew that song! I had read the lyrics somewhere, in a book somewhere. For some reason I was even able to remember that the song was written by someone named C.W. Murphy or it might have been W.B. Murphy. But then after that I just ambled away, with more of the great temple complex to see, because at that point there really wasn’t much else I could think of saying to him.

If I correctly understand the archaeologists and historians, there are likely similarities in Celtic and Hindu cultures that have not changed all that much in the millennia since the Indo-Aryan dispersion. Ireland and the Indus Valley were, after all, the two furthest and therefore most isolate ends of the great migration, and that isolation has, I guess, preserved certain of the same songs of the druids and the sadhus.

II.

I wish I knew as much about the Monkey Master as the monkeys know. His parents, for example: we don't know if they were originally from the Jaipur area or migrated there. In fact, we can't say for sure if the Monkey Master himself was native to the area. But I bet that if you could call up the spirits not just of his parents but of the generations of his ancestors and his ancestors' ancestors stretching back way way before the Rajputs ever roamed and colonized the sub-continent, the thousands of monkeys who now roam Galtaji would nuzzle those restive wraiths and gaily answer their call as now they leap to the bidding of this fabled descendant. I wasn't sure how much to tip the Monkey Master after he walked us up and down the great place but he seemed happy enough and, if I paid too much, I didn't mind for the constant joyous barrage of sacred creatures hopping along our heads and shoulders. They're just adorable and they won't bite you.

It all makes perfect sense – actually, it's almost obvious. Galtaji, with its seven holy fountains where the pilgrims bathe and with its greenest of green resting places and at the very summit the Surya Mandir which spreads the warmth of the sun that its worshippers worship all down the porticos and florid crevices where the Monkey Master now holds sway, so much so that you can find little feature articles about him on the Internet, was taken in ancient times by a Ramavat sadhu, Payohari Krishnadas. You'll recall the army of monkeys that Rama and Lakshmana recruit to rescue Sita from Ravana. Well, here they are, the legions of Rama himself; I daresay there is no domain of Rama like this domain of Rama.

The Internet tells us nothing about the Monkey Master himself, no information about the facts of his life much less a

sense of the lineaments of his spirit or the mystery of his ancient derivations, except that he's here a cab ride outside Jaipur and here's what he looks like and link here to hear the good things that tourists have had to say about him. I wonder if the monkeys are wondering if this is Rama himself, the latest post-Mughal incarnation of same. There are so many thousands of monkeys that simply do whatever he tells them. I wonder if in their grottos after dark they don't collectively recall the great battle that brought the demon king down and how, today, under the Monkey Master's divine aegis, they as monkey tribe now tread the paradisiacal with no thought that they won't be doing so in perpetuity.

As Galtaji was spiritually incorporated by a sadhu, sadhus now roam here abundantly, a selfless labor of lifelong love for, compared to other tourist sites, there are too few visitors to Galtaji to cost-justify such collective mendicancy. There are just dozens of sadhus for every cab that pulls up at the entrance way.

I walked ahead to where they stood leaning and half-smiling, never asking but always waiting. So there he was, one white one among them, nonplussing me altogether, the one same white one who in Madurai had sung of Kelly and old Antonio. I stared, nonplussed, he stared back but giving no indication that he recognized me in the least. The Monkey Master stood at my shoulder, a troop of monkeys behind us and in my mind's eye seeming to smile.

"How are you?" was all I could say. He said nothing.

"He's like you," chirped the Monkey Master, I suppose meaningfully.

"What's the good word?" I asked the sadhu, affecting a rather cavalier tone.

The sadhu spoke and said, "Blue Cheer stinks and so does the group."

Good Lord, I knew what that meant. Maybe in all of India there was only the two of us who knew what that meant. Maybe in all the world, there couldn't have been more than one-hundred people who knew what that meant. I remembered, I had seen those exact words scribbled on a wall in New York, decades earlier. The thought that this sadhu was himself the one who had been there in the East Village to write that graffiti, that thought did enter my mind.

Does anybody reading this know what it means? Let me know if you do. Drop me a line.

III.

I certainly mentioned the white sadhu to Mitch though without going into too many details of our two encounters. He was fascinated enough based on what I did tell him, describing it as remarkable that someone who was apparently American would be living as he was living, doubly remarkable that he was readily accepted by the other sadhus or at least vouchsafed their kindly forbearance, trebly remarkable that he would materialize at Galtaji so soon after I had met him in Madurai.

"A blown-out hippie of some sort," Mitch surmised.

Mitch was noteworthy in his own right if he was not nearly that uncanny. Originally from Minnesota, he'd made quite a home for himself in Varanasi where he was now established as one of the city's more prominent guides. He navigated the marketplace stalls nimbly as any native, chatting in fluent Hindi with the merchants, winning too a precious personal access to powerful local Brahmins in their hallowed recesses. A good example was when he took us to

the place no one else goes just behind the crematorium on the river where Shiva's sacred fire has been tended five-thousand years or so after first being lit and never once extinguished in all those centuries. Untouchables sprawled on the ground around the altar hearth, grimacing, menacing as we entered their sacred space. The very sight of these men whose lot in life is to burn the bodies of everybody who dies reminded me of what I'd already been taught in school about how in the daily transactions of the ghat the formalities of caste privilege were typically suspended at least in the sense that any priest could and usually did find himself bullied and extorted in his efforts to secure expeditious disposal of the deceased. We were staying further down at a hotel on that section of the ghats that abutted the Bengali neighborhood and had happened to observe in those streets a cortege of sorts, its stretcher bearing at a quick trot some latest candidate for immolation. The untouchables would certainly guarantee a quick stately burn but it must cost the family extra.

The priest in the alcove standing by the fire scooped ashes and anointed our foreheads. It was a proud happy moment, for me the most special such moment since I had convinced myself decades before to eat the host at St. Patrick's. Now I could count both Jesus and Shiva in my retinue.

It was right after Mitch had taken us to a ceremony in worship of Durga held in a low-ceilinged cavernous expanse situated, I think, below ground not far from the crematorium. But I'm not sure where it was, I just don't remember. I don't remember where or how we gained access or if there were even any steps to descend to get there. I just don't remember. I wish I could. I don't think it could have been in that marvelous red ochre Durga Kund Mandir; I definitely remember seeing that temple but I don't think it's even on the

river, and this service was definitely on the river because I definitely remember emerging directly onto a ghat when it was over. So it couldn't have been Durga Kund Mandir or at least I don't think so, I'm nearly certain that Durga Kund Mandir is not on the river, at least not right on the river. I do remember that during the service, at which we were the only visitors, I was confused as to what to do, what gesture I was supposed to make or at what point in the liturgy to make it, or it may have been that I was confused about what I was supposed to do with some sort of a sacramental item that was being passed from worshipper to worshipper, when a lovely gentleman sitting behind me showed me kindly what to do. I bowed to him as we were leaving after it was over and he bowed back and smiled very graciously. I won't forget him.

"My God, Mitch, there he is," I exclaimed because, Lord Shiva and Pharoah Sanders be praised, I saw as we emerged from the cavern where we had worshipped the great Durga the very same white sadhu of whom I have told, standing stiffly on the ghat with other sadhus standing stiffly themselves or pacing a few steps this way or that.

"How can that be?" Mitch asked. I just shook my head as we walked the few hundred yards to where he seemed to be waiting.

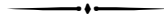
"No, you're right, this just can't be," I said. As Mitch and I came abreast the sadhu, his pensive gaze, if pensive is the word, fell on us and fell beyond us. "Remember me?" I asked.

The sadhu answered it seemed in Hindi. Well, had to be Hindi because Mitch was able to translate. "Interesting fellow," said Mitch.

"What did he say?"

“It was a little garbled but as far as I can make out, he said, ‘The self itself is sickness and cannot be cured with more self.’”

I didn’t say anything to Mitch but I was thunderstruck. Those words were, I remembered, the very words I myself had written, around two years earlier in a short story that I got published. You think maybe he read it?



9

An American Lawyer Pays For It

MALIK SELLE

Sammy ate like a horse but shat like the foreman of a gelatin factory. In reality, he was one of a large team of lawyers representing the interests (and defending the vanities) of a large soft drink company. These lawyers would often begin their legal arguments with the phrase: *in reality*.

In reality, the Ace Root Beer Corporation pays its fair share of taxes.

In reality, the Ace Root Beer Corporation is not responsible for the swath of diabetes among (alleged) customers in parts of Michigan, Iowa, and Nebraska.

In reality, the Ace Root Beer Corporation harnesses the power of natural gas only to pass the enhanced quality of the product down to the customer.

In reality, most of your children were already fat.

When their long days of legal maneuvering would draw to a close, these lawyers would drink several rounds of martinis even if it wasn't a good idea. Many of these lawyers were alcoholics. The rest were aspiring teetotalers.

Sammy – despite drinking moderately and having forsaken every other earthly pleasure besides hardcore self-abuse upon his graduation from law school – had a very bad marriage. Sammy's wife was named Helen. She'd been an Army brat, her father a Major boozehound who'd gotten hooked on chipped beef and Hamm's beer during The War.

Despite the luxuries Sammy's lawyering had afforded her, Helen's sense of security had never left the olive drab brat bases of her youth – the steel machinery of preventive doom and the watery, sweet smell of beer on her father's collar. There were afternoons, when nostalgia especially gripped her, that Helen would persecute Sammy on the subject of dinner, calling his office again and again, again and again. And then again one more time.

"How about some chipped beef? How about some chipped beef, Sammy? How about it then? Chipped beef? No? Why not? Why not some chipped beef? No chipped beef, Sam? Huh then, Sammy? Some chipped beef...? How about some chipped beef? You're not man enough to eat it? I'm not woman enough to serve it? Why is that chipped beef remains a difficult subject for us? Why, Sammy? Why is it a difficult subject? OK, come on. Let's get serious. And don't interrupt me before I ask you this next question. OK. Come on. Sammy, I'm serious. Are you ready because... hey now! Are you smiling over there, Sammy? Huh? You're not...? OK, well never mind. So anyway then... hey, how about some chipped beef?"

They were married six years before Sammy cheated on Helen with a young law clerk who had a chiseled face and strong arms. Thinking logically, Sammy blamed the entire homosexual fiasco on a combination of brittle nerves, exhaustion, and an ongoing crisis of his Quaker faith he'd been feeling ever since he was a boy watching the Watergate coverage on his daddy's knee. But through that precarious explanation, Sammy's marriage to Helen might've been saved if not for all the horrible things that were said in the heat of the moment. It was after Helen had stopped crying and begin shouting an emasculating, unrepeatable word repeatedly with her finger pointed accusatory that Sammy

admitted an especially hostile fantasy that ran repeatedly through his head and consisted of grabbing a handful of chipped beef and attacking his wife with it. Helen was shocked. Sammy was shocked by her shock, and then by the fact that he had actually delineated the details of his shocking fantasy. It was too late to take it back and then Helen always slept with one eye open until the day Sammy finally found the time to gather his more immediate belongings and move into a hotel.

And all he could think about late at night, unable to sleep and staring up at the ceiling of his air-conditioned rented room, was the *reality* of the situation. Sammy stayed up drinking more and more each night (Indian Pale Ale and only the best German or Mexican imports but never Hamm's). He stayed up contemplating the facts. In reality, Sammy knew he was better than this. In reality, he missed his bed at home and still loved Helen despite their six years of unhappy marriage. In reality, he probably wasn't even gay.

Richard Nixon had been a lawyer. He'd been a Quaker too. Most importantly, Nixon had been a man, capable of tears and mistakes but never straying so far so as to lose the support of his wife. Whenever plastered in his hotel room in the small hours of the morning, Sammy would rub his forehead, imagining a Crown of Thorns wrapped around his head. A Crown that might be cut off and used up for gelatin, melted down for dessert. With a drunken haze wetting his mind's-eye, Sammy imagined the byproduct of this gelatin billowing up from a crumbling brick chimney of a desolate factory somewhere on the plains of North Dakota. He'd picture the gray and black vapor drifting above the yellow harvest land of the Midwest, being carried on the wind until the byproduct drifted into the confines of a steel-trap Army base. And there, Sammy always pictured Helen – somehow a

child, a young girl once again – catching the smell of that indefensible commercial-industrial-complex, that American monolith forever defended by teams of lawyers. And young Helen, still just a girl, would somehow understand (with forgiving clarity) the sacrifices men make. How they pay for it one way or the other. She'd understand with no buried resentment carried into her romantic future, before she wiped the vomit off her father's Purple Heart with a Kleenex and went along with her day.

Though not much of a man nor a Quaker, Sammy was indeed a good lawyer. And in reality, he knew he shouldn't have told his wife he wanted to abuse her with chipped beef. Even if it was true.



10

The Turtle

PHILLIP FREY

A family of turtles lived by a rocky stream. The youngest asked if he could leave home and explore the world.

“No, dear,” his mother said, “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

His father said, “The world is a cruel and dangerous place.”

Later that day the turtle sat alone on a downstream rock. They don’t know anything about the world, he thought, and so he came up with a plan.

Early the next morning, before anyone was awake, the turtle left home and made his way into a field of grass, where he fed on fallen dandelion petals.

Days later he entered a forest. The air crisp and the ground cool, he heard the chatter of chipmunks and passed three rabbits at play. He crawled farther under the shade of the great trees. Darkness came and he fell asleep on a bed of leaves.

The next morning the birds sang the turtle awake. He nibbled on a mushroom stem, and then continued on his journey. Thinking now of his family, how worried they must be, maybe even angry. But then he was pleased by the image of his return, when he would tell them what he had learned about the world.

He crawled for many days, for many weeks and many months. When at last he stopped. He had reached the end of the world.

The sand sparkled and the ocean rolled as blue as the sky above. The turtle scuttled out onto the empty beach. He stopped and settled into the sand, surprised at how warm and comfortable it was. Now that he had seen the whole world, he knew it was not cruel and dangerous.

The turtle shut his eyes, listened to the steady sound of the waves and fell asleep.

Two human boys laughed and raced across the beach. Kicking up sand, they passed over the sleeping turtle. Their laughter faded and the beach was quiet again.

The turtle awoke and spat sand from his mouth. How strange, he thought, finding himself on his back. He rocked on his shell but could not turn himself over. He soon became too tired and had to stop.

The turtle rested until the sun was low in the sky. He took deep breaths and tried again. He rocked back and forth for a long time, but could not turn himself over.

He lay exhausted on his shell. His eyes began to moisten with tears. It was then he noticed something way up in the sky. It moved in slow, wide circles as it drew ever closer. It was a bird with pink eyes and snow-white feathers. It landed alongside the turtle and folded its wings.

"I can't turn myself over," the turtle said. "I need your help."

"I'll be back in the morning to see if you're still here," the bird told him. "If you go hungry and die, I'll have you for my breakfast."

The turtle was so scared he could not speak. The bird opened its wings, flew upward and vanished into the twilight.

The turtle rocked back and forth. He tried much harder this time. He could not turn himself over.

An ant with a load of food bumped into his shell. "You're in my path!" he hollered.

The turtle's eyes brightened with hope. "Please help me turn over," he pleaded. "I'll die if I stay on my back."

"I can lift a thousand times my own weight," answered the ant, "but you're much more than that. It's impossible for me to turn you over." He gave out an irritable sigh and said, "I must return to the anthill," and he worked his way around the turtle's shell.

"If you tell the other ants, maybe they would come and help. All of you together could turn me over."

"We're too busy packing our storehouse – and the sky is darkening. We never leave our hill at night."

"The world is a friendly and wonderful place," the turtle said. "I don't understand why you won't help."

The ant continued away and called back, "Yes indeed, a very friendly and wonderful place, as long as you have what you need. Otherwise you're nothing but a bother and a helpless fool, and that's that!"

The turtle watched him disappear behind a seashell. He then rocked back and forth as hard as he could. It was useless. He could not turn himself over.

Night came quickly. The turtle looked up at the moon and said, "I'll never see you again."

"Why is that?" asked the round moon.

"If I stay on my back, I'll die from hunger. Is there any way you could help me turn over?"

"The incoming tide would turn you over," said the moon, "but you are too far from it. I can light the path of the lost, but you are not lost."

"Oh, but I am," said the turtle, "as good as lost."

"I am truly sorry," the moon said. "I cannot change the nature of your world."

The turtle feared his fate so much that he did not sleep at all that night. At sunrise, an ocean breeze blew softly over him. He tried to rock his body but he was too weak. He searched the sky and saw the white bird, gliding high above in slow wide circles.

The turtle closed his eyes and listened to the steady sound of the waves. He fell asleep at last and dreamed of the forest, the rocky stream, and of his family.



11

Yeshua's Story: Balat, 1937

RON SINGER

Note: Although this story takes place almost two decades after the advent of the Turkish Republic, which supplanted the Ottoman empire, and Perendeoglu was a legendary figure during the Republican period, the negative descriptions of Jewish life in the Balat neighborhood stem from traveler's accounts dating as far back as the early nineteenth century.

Even if you have never heard of Balat, you must surely know the nearby neighborhood of Ayvansary, and its famous church-mosque, St. Saviour, in Chora. Before I launch into the story of my own humble existence, I must pause to tell you about this notable building.

"St. Saviour in Chora, or 'in the country,'" was so-called because of its location beyond Constantine's walls. The church's splendid mosaics come from the period when it was rebuilt, between 1315-21, during the final Byzantine flowering. The Turkish conquest of the city occurred in 1453. The church has long been famous for its mosaics, which depict the lives of Mary and Jesus.

Another feature of St. Saviour's is its Italian Renaissance-influenced frescoes, magnificent too, and exactly contemporary with the great Giotto (1267-1337). During the 16th century, the church was converted to a mosque, the Kariye Camii, or 'church mosque', by one of those eunuch-grand viziers – I forget his name.

After that, the mosaics were obscured, buried by paint, dirt, earthquakes, whatever, and they still remain hidden to all but a few cognoscenti and other insiders. Sadly, the flight into Egypt has been completely destroyed, but the apocryphal fall of idols from the wall of an Egyptian town, as the Holy Family passes through, is still there, beneath the rubble.

"How," you may ask, "do I happen to know all this?" The answer will allow me to introduce myself. My name is Yeshua, and I am the associate of a much-better known man, the much loved and much reviled Perendeoglu. Before I describe his exploits, I must make another detour, this time into the slanderous tales of European travelers that have rendered our Balat a watchword for the degradation of Turkish-Jewish life.

These tales, starting early in the nineteenth century, and lingering into the twentieth, describe a place degraded by filth, squalor and poverty, as well as by the uniform meekness and obscurantism of its inhabitants. Although the accounts are distorted, they contain kernels of truth. One section of Balat is, indeed, filthy, owing to the presence of a huge waste dump, and many residents of that section are, indeed, very poor, and some, strictly observant.

I venture to say that these negative depictions of Balat life may have stemmed from two main motives. The first is anti-semitism, often present even among cultivated European travelers. The second is mercenary: bad news sells books and articles better than good. Added to these motives is the fact that most visitors to Balat probably stayed for only a few hours, at most, passing through on their way to that popular tourist destination, St. Saviour's church-mosque.

As I have indicated, the traveller's tales are, at best, half truths. Some areas in Balat have long contained better-off Jews and better housing, including the mansions of the wealthiest. Nor are all of the Jews of Balat orthodox, or even observant, and not all are meekly submissive, or even quiet. In some ways, my friend and master, Perendeoglu, can be seen as representing the ways in which Balat is a far better place than the one slandered by travelers.

Surely, you have heard of this man. You may even have regaled yourself and a few friends at his coffee house in Balat, right on the banks of the Golden Horn. Whether, or not, you must have heard of Perendeoglu, as the proprietor of this cafe, renowned for its excellent music, food and drink.

The owner of the cafe is no mere *hotelier*, but a man of many parts. Depending on your source, you may know him as a man with underworld connections, and someone who extorts protection money from his fellow-Jews. Since he is also the patron of Balat's volunteer Jewish fire-fighting brigade, the *Balat Sinan Kapih*, his nickname, "the bandit who rights wrongs," is well-earned. Like most of us, Perendeoglu seems to be full of contradictions,

Where does your servant, Yeshua, come in? I am the boatman popularly called *Kitapci*, or "Book Seller." Why am I so called? When I ferry people across the Bosphorus to *Haskoy*, I require them to read religious texts, in order to insure our safe passage. Like my friend, Perendeoglu, you could say I have a foot in each of two worlds, that of the respectable and the underworld. In other words, I am both a pious boatman and a brawler.

Since, as I have admitted, many of the inhabitants of Balat are, indeed, desperately poor, and live in conditions of abject squalor, they are subjected to abuse of many types by

their Muslim and Christian neighbors. Since Perendeoglu and I defend our co-religionists from such hooliganism, we can also be called champions of the people. Finally, we are vigilant at fending off the various elements who are constantly trying to open rival cafes in Balat, and its environs – or, to make a small joke of this serious business, I help my friend to fend off those miscreants who try to *horn* in on his *golden* business.

Take what happened last year, during *Tishrei* [September-October] of 5697-98 [1937]. I have just made mention of the “various elements” that are our rivals. Among the worst of these is the rowdy group of *kayıkçis* [boatmen], of Laz ethnicity, who were so aggressive in their incursions that Perendeoglu asked me to speak to them about the matter.

After extended third-party negotiations, we agreed to a meeting outside the aforementioned church-mosque, St. Saviour’s in Chora, which is in the nearby Arvansaray neighborhood. St. Saviour’s was chosen because it was both convenient, and a neutral site – from our viewpoint – and a suitably hybrid one, from theirs. (The Laz are Christian converts to Islam.)

I have not yet mentioned the extensive grounds that abut the church-mosque. These grounds house many kiosks, hawking imitation tiles, and such, to the hordes of gullible tourists. There are also several outdoor cafes, and it was at one of these that we agreed to parley with the Laz boatmen.

It was further agreed that I, alone, would represent the interests of Perendeoglu, that the Laz would also send a single person, and that neither of us would be carrying pistols, cutlasses, or other weapons. As Perendeoglu and I composed our message, I envisioned the Laz foes who would receive it. In my mind’s eye, I pictured fearsome fellows

whose costume comprised a bandana-like kerchief covering their entire head above the eyes, knotted on the side, and hanging down to the shoulder and upper back; a snug-fitting jacket with loose sleeves of coarse brown homespun; and baggy, dark brown woolen trousers tucked into slim, knee-high leather boots.

My imagined Laz was also armed to the teeth: rifle, pistol, powder horn, cartridge belts across his chest, a dagger at his hip, and even a coil of rope for trussing captives. Despite our agreement, anticipating that no Laz would come to our parley without at least two hidden daggers, I planned to carry two, myself, one secreted in the sash at the back of my pantaloons, the other tucked under a voluminous Turkish turban.

Wearing a conspicuous expression of readiness to meet a stranger, and seated, alone, on a bench at a long table at the end of the cafe nearest the church-mosque, was a person who completely defied my expectations. For one thing, it was a woman! Instead of the Laz boatman I had anticipated, they had sent a comely female.

My first thought was that she must be their legal representative, but a single glance disabused me of that idea. For, had she been a lawyer, she would have been wearing modern dress – perhaps a western-style women's business suit, with trousers and matching jacket, and dark leather shoes. Instead, this statuesque young woman wore traditional Laz attire: a billowing gown over light-colored pantaloons; a brightly flowered scarf around her hips; red slippers; and, in her hair, a sprig of some herb, probably rosemary.

With a warm smile, the attractive woman rose to meet me. I noted that we were the same height, about 170 centimeters. Not knowing what else to do, but unwilling to

touch her extended hand, I proffered a deep bow. She sat back down and, somewhat awkwardly, I followed suit, at the opposite end of the long table. When a grumpy old waiter had taken our order – a small glass of Turkish coffee for me, and a pot of black tea for her. Speaking in serviceable Turkish, she satisfied my obvious curiosity by explaining her presence.

“The Laz boatmen,” she began,” have decided to allay the suspicions of Perendeoglu *bey* by choosing me, a harmless female, to represent our interests.” I nodded my understanding. “By this choice, they further thought to advertise our good intentions. You see, I am a musical performer who is to be featured at the cafe they propose to open, which, by the way, would not be in Balat, but in the Ayvansaray neighborhood of Eyup. So we would not really be competitors.”

I paused for several moments to frame my reply. Despite her protestations, I feared that her rich contralto voice, and her attractive person, might well make the Eyup cafe a formidable competitor. But since Perendeoglu had hinted that he preferred a peaceful resolution to this ugly dispute, I also wanted to match her courtesy, so I determined, on the spot, to make a counteroffer. I momentarily considered switching to Ladino, in order to determine if the Laz woman spoke our tongue. But, deciding that might be provocative, I continued in our common tongue, Turkish.

“Well, *Hanımefendi* [Madame],” I said. At this point, the old waiter returned with our orders. Waiting until he had set them down and retreated into the bowels of the cafe, I spoke, hurrying my words, so as to give her no chance to interrupt. “By choosing you as their emissary, the Laz have displayed a generous willingness to negotiate that must surely please my friend and master, Perendeoglu.” We exchanged smiles. “In

fact, *Hanımefendi*, I am authorized to extend a counteroffer. What would you say to the idea of contracting with *us* to become a featured singer and dancer at *our* cafe? Of course," I hastily added, "it would be necessary for you to audition for the position and, assuming that you were successful, it would be Perendeoglu who would determine the terms of the contract – the wages, length of tenure, and so forth. And, also of course, the Laz would have to be amenable to this arrangement." I paused for another smile. So, *Hanımefendi*, what do you think?"

All that having been said, in order to give this attractive woman a few moments to compose her reply, I sipped from my cooling glass of coffee. She responded in kind, deliberately pouring a measure of her tea from the small green pot into the small white cup the waiter had also provided. But, then, she surprised me once again by ignoring the tea, and, instead, laughing a loud, but mellifluous, laugh. Instead of demanding an explanation, I patiently waited for her laughter to subside.

"Well," she finally spluttered, "that is a very generous offer, *isimsiz bey* [Mr. No Name]. But were I to accept it, I fear that the Laz boatmen would kill me."

That seemed such a compelling objection that I abandoned my impromptu counter-proposal, returning, instead, to the original statement Perendeoglu and I had agreed upon – which was to mildly threaten the Laz interlopers. First, I allowed a moment to pass, during which we each sipped our beverage.

"As you wish, then," I said. Respecting her apparent preference for anonymity, I resisted the urge to divulge my name. "But please convey our continued hope that your masters will reconsider their plan to open a rival

establishment in, or near, Balat. Such a move would surely trigger the well-known wrath of Perendeoglu *bey*."

The response to my threat was quick and sure. "I will convey your words to the boatmen," she said. "But please understand that they are likely to react to your threat in a violent manner. Perhaps, you would wish to amend the message I am to carry back?"

I obliged with a platitude about an "amicable solution" and, on that note, we ended the meeting. But, from politeness, we lingered for a few moments to finish our drinks. Then, after a bit of comic wrangling, we divided the modest bill, and bowed our farewells. I never saw this woman again.

In the event, the Laz did open their cafe, with the predictable results Perendeoglu had hoped to avoid. After several months of verbal jousting, and two or three bloody skirmishes, he bowed to the inevitable, but not without considerable grumbling, which included his usual vow to emigrate to Palestine. Indeed, the following year, 5698-99 {1938}, saw both of us departing for *eretz yisroel*. We turned out to be among the lucky few to escape the general holocaust that turned out to rank, along with the destruction of the two ancient temples, as among our people's greatest misfortunes.



12

Strength

TEODORA SUKAREVA

There are still days when I feel like I'm about to explode into a billion little pieces, and today is one of those days. It all began with a lull, as usual – a boring, monotonous day filled with duties and tasks. Suddenly, something gripped my throat, and that, in turn, infuriated me. I am terribly angry, to the point where I want to stand up and scream at the top of my lungs, and nothing can stop me, not even the wide-eyed onlookers nearby. My eyes water, and the damn burning sensation in them makes me resemble a petulant child, which isn't far from the truth. I'm angry, yes, but I haven't been a child for a long time.

I want to break something, or maybe even someone, as I've done countless times before. I want to recklessly go with the flow, allow myself to drift in the vicious cycle, and become another conduit for the negativity inundating the world. It's easier that way. On one hand, there are the ordinary people who choose to be jerks because someone was unkind to them – like those parents who were bullied as children and then bullied their own offspring. They're mediators of mediocrity, weak and blissfully unaware. On the other hand, I, too, sometimes long to be blissfully unaware.

I genuinely wonder what it's like to take out my bad mood on a shop assistant, for instance. Does it provide relief? Or if I berate a cyclist for riding on the street "my" way? If I

yell at the kids down the block for being too loud, will it drown out my own stifled screams?

...if I practice yoga,
read pretentious literature,
listen to podcasts by life gurus,
take drugs,
befriend someone with the intelligence of a beetle,
engage in shallow conversations filled with rehearsed
phrases and exchange quotes from well-known and
obscure Zen authors on the internet,
and tell everyone I meet how wonderful life is,
will I genuinely see it that way?

And just before a storm rolls in, these questions remain entirely rhetorical.

We understand so little about the lives we lead. The unfortunate part is that we'll be gone before we even come close to uncovering the truth of our existence. And the path ahead doesn't always look pleasant. Sure, sometimes it's enjoyable, loud, and cheerful, filled with color and beauty. But at other times, a friend asks you how you're doing and interrupts you 28 times while you respond with nervous grunts of "yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah." They lack interest in truly listening to you, presuming they understand everything. Another person jumps to sweeping conclusions about your personality without ever having met you in person. They exude confidence, but are they trying to deceive you or themselves?

Meanwhile, you're engulfed in work, with the notion of realizing your dreams, only to discover that now you have insufficient time for them. You continually commit yourself to have an excuse for not having enough time. You're afraid

of failure. You accumulate ideas, yearn to try thousands of new things, feel like leaping up and getting started immediately. In reality, all you end up doing is composing your shopping list in the evening. And suddenly, existence turns into survival. Your emotional depth seems intimidating now, and you avoid it. Colors serve as mere substitutes for black. Smiles come off as somehow feigned and insincere.

And so, in moments like these, some of us swear, shout, hurt, and rage. We're weary of feeling drained. We respond to mud with more mud, and the fire in our eyes breeds malice, which, in turn, transforms into aggression and unnecessary tension for anyone within reach.

I walk into the store with footsteps as heavy as a stone, turn to the perennially sour saleswoman, gather my strength, and say to her:

"Good afternoon, could you please give me..."



13

Art and Anarchy

VITASTA RAINA

In the end, a man only does what he was always supposed to do. With this thought in his head Aasim continued to paint the window frame vibrant red. He had always thought of himself as a great artist but he was only a small-time painter in a big city. Whenever he picked up his paintbrush, images of grandeur would flood his vision and he was transformed to a worshiper of the arts, a creator of magic threads for others to see and respect. In his mind he became a master of colours and hues and a maker of melodies in paint. But he would remain a skilled artisan living in a run-down shanty on the outskirts of Navi Mumbai.

Often, he thought of breaking it big in the art world by showing his collection of works at Mumbai's Kala Ghoda art festival, but they seldom let him in the showrooms, and his barefooted pan smeared hopes were often crushed by the attitude of the keepers of art. What do you want was the first question they always asked. What are you doing here was the second. They never had the time to appreciate in full measure his work or his worth. They just saw him through the narrow frame of economics.

When you are a rich man, you can get things done easily, whether you possess real talent is a question of little value. When you are a poor man, then talent is the only thing you should not possess. With talent comes a sense of pride in one's work and with that comes the unnecessarily hassles of

ego that a poor man can ill afford. It brings on a feeling of despair and a sense of worthlessness when it is not recognized. Aasim knew this feeling all too well. So he lived his days in the silent agony of ignominy, more so for this failure to prove his art than for himself as an artist.

He spent his days painting signs, doors and window frames and nameplates for small businesses. He was good at his work. But that was all that he was and would remain. A small-time painter, he would never become an artist in good standing. Such was his fate, he so believed every now and then, such was written in his destiny. Everyday he would remind himself that the feeling of wielding a paintbrush for a living was enough to satiate his soul. But at night he would dream of making his art known to the world, that one day they would recognize his work, that one day his art would speak for itself.

He was thirty-three years old, tall, and lean with a sun-baked face and long slender fingers. His hair was long and unkempt and lips were always dry. His manner was meek and he spoke softly and slowly. He was an ordinary man in appearance and if you put him in a crowded room, you would not be able to pick him out. He was like the millions of unknown faces that walk the streets of cities by day and night. But he had a curious pair of deep-set eyes that sparkled every time he saw a colour he did not recognize.

Aasim sat lost in deep thought one day painting a signboard for a local dairy, carefully crafting alphabets in a language he did not know. Such is the beauty of art; it speaks the mother tongue of everyman, anywhere.

"P" he was carefully painting when he heard someone approach him from behind.

"I need some nameplates painted. Do I have to provide the material?"

Aasim looked up slowly. A short man in his early sixties with wavy hair and a thick moustache stood in front of him. He was carrying a notebook and an umbrella. He wore a grey safari suit and Kolapuri slippers. He had a commanding air about him.

"Yes sir, you have to give me the nameplate boards."

"Okay, how long will you take to paint say four plates?"

"One day to paint them, but it will take about another half day for them to dry completely"

"That's fine. What is your name, young man?"

"Aasim, sir. I charge five Rupees per word for name plates."

"Yes, okay. I shall bring the boards to you in the evening."

"Yes sir that will be fine."

The old man nodded, checked the time on his wristwatch and slowly marched down the road swinging his umbrella. Aasim stared in his direction for a few minutes and then went back to painting the signboard.

"O" he started painting.

In the evening the small man returned to his shop carrying four metal nameplates. "I want them painted black with white lettering."

"Yes sir"

"Can you read English?"

"Very little sir"

"Here," said the old man, "this is what I want."

The paper read in capital letters:

P.R. SHASTRI

ADVOCATE AND NOTARY

GOVT. OF INDIA

The old man sat down on a stool and started examining the signboards and frames that lay scattered around him. He noticed some pencil sketches on paper behind the signboards and picked them up.

"Do you paint Aasim?"

"Sir..."

"Do you paint otherwise also, besides these signs?"

"Yes sir"

"Show me"

Surprised at the strange request Aasim looked around his tiny shop. He picked out some cityscapes that he had been painting and gave them to the old man.

"You're a good artist, Aasim"

"I'm just a poor man sir"

"Ah, yes"

Aasim stared at the man looking at the painting. For the first time an outsider has showed interest in his art. With a little confusion in his mind about the intent of the old man, Aasim asked him for a cup of tea. They walked down to the tea stall at the corner of the road and settled down on the footpath. It was a quiet evening. They looked about at the people hurrying along to their destinations in their cars and in buses and on foot. They saw the billboards above them, shining and colourful with images of a happy couple on a

beach. They saw two beggar boys playing tag on the roadside.

"Why are you so interested in my work sir? Most people don't even wish to speak with me. I get commissioned to paint names on fancy boards for them and then they come and take their identities and leave."

"I'm interested in people young man. I'm interested in the life of man. I want to understand a man's equation with society. I consider myself observer of life."

"What do you do sir?"

"I am a lawyer but I am also an anomaly in this supposed society, one who challenges the set principles that have been governing this society. I have spent a lifetime in criminal law. But enough about me, tell me, how do you think a gifted artist like you can make it big in this society?"

Aasim slowly measured the man's words.

"Sir, a small-time artist like me will never make his art known in society, would he? My circumstances would never let me."

"If you did things by the rules set down by this society, the laws and regulations set by the government, then no, you would not."

"What you are saying sir...?"

"Is simply that desperation makes a man do many things...that every time men were desperate enough, there have been revolutions that changed the order of the world."

"But I am an artist not a revolutionary, how can I ever change society?"

"You are not changing society. You are merely showcasing your work to the world."

"How am I to do that babu? I have been trying for so many years; they never let me inside the galleries. At the show rooms they throw me out...how is a poor man ever to get noticed in high society."

"There are many ways Aasim, but they are not all legal perhaps. Anyway Aasim, I must go now. I shall come back and pick up the nameplates day after tomorrow."

"Yes sir"

The old man then left Aasim on the footpath, under the billboards and streetlights, amid the traffic and the people and noise of the city.

Advocate P.R. Shastri was sitting on his front porch, reading the newspaper when he burst out laughing loudly.

ART GALLERY RANSACKED

Last night some vandals broke into Bhoomi Art Gallery in the posh central city market and replaced the priceless paintings with those of an anonymous artist. Art critiques are calling it the Dali of the future...



NOVEL EXCERPT

1

The Shining One

FELICE PICANO

From An Age of Gold

"I'll begin near the end of my story, since that's what everyone is most curious to hear. My first son."

"Achilles. The shining one," I said.

Peleus shrugged.

"What? Achilles wasn't shining?" I had to ask.

"Oh he was shining enough. But he was my son. A father sees every tiny flaw, you understand. And he had his share of them, poor boy. Beginning with his name. You know what his name means, of course, you scholar, you?"

"A-kill-lay," I deconstructed the old Greek, "Without a breast. Why? Didn't he have any nipples?"

"He had lovely nipples. This name was given to him by the chatterboxes in the women's quarters of my court. It signified that he didn't feed off his mother's breast. Thetis was a goddess, remember. She had no milk for him. Only animals like humans made milk and breast-fed their young. Anyway, she was gone by the time he needed milk."

"Gone? Thetis abandoned her son?"

"And me, her husband too. After, that I had a breast stitched together of the softest chamois and I fed him myself –

warm goat milk. I was his breast-feeder. Until he healed. Then some of the girls from the women's quarters said that they were no longer frightened by his appearance and they took pity and they began feeding him too. But by then he was used to the artificial breast."

"Healed? From what?"

"From his mother." Peleus laughed. "Of course, being a goddess she always blamed me for what happened."

"Don't stop now!"

"We had been wed almost three years and I loved my beautiful, eternally-seventeen-year old goddess-wife as only a teenage boy-king could, so naturally enough I made certain she was pregnant as much as possible.

The children were all born early, four of them, and none of them survived more than a few days. After they were born, I didn't see them until they were shown them to me – dead! They were all red and awful. I thought they looked like most babies after birth. So I paid no heed to it.

Just before the fifth was to be born, a seer appeared in our little kingdom of Pithier. I don't recall his name, but he insisted upon gaining entrance to the court.

Naturally he received a guest gift and guest accommodations. For ten days, he said not one word of any special import, and we paid little attention to him, because my goddess-wife gave birth yet again at that time. Having lost four before, all of us were naturally enough, concerned for this fifth child's life.

But he was born at midday with little trouble and he looked fine. Healthy, they all said.

Later that same afternoon, as I came in from hunting with my little entourage, the visiting seer knelt down at one side of my horse, so I had to step on his back in dismounting.

After I had done so, I was chagrined. "Why must I dishonor you in this way?" I asked.

"For what I am about to tell you, Sire," he whispered fiercely and looked about us. "After that you may do much more than kneel upon me, in your anger."

I sent my men on ahead into the palace and stood alone with him in the courtyard. I was very curious indeed.

When he was sure the others were gone, I asked what he wanted of me.

He said, "Take four drops of this draught tonight after you have consorted with your goddess-queen and before your eyes close in exhaustion."

He held out a tiny vial of some unknown metal – tin perhaps, inside a pale blue liquid.

"Is it not true," the seer asked, "That natural fatigue and your Goddess keeps you deeply asleep each night after She has given birth each time?" the seer asked.

"I'm a youth. We frolic. Afterward, I sleep dreamlessly," I admitted.

"But now you must awaken," he said. "These drops will awaken you after you have slept a while."

"Really? Or instead, will they keep me from *ever* awakening?"

"As guarantee, I will stay in your guardroom in chains all night. If you come to ill effect from the potion, I'll die."

"But why?"

"Sire, I do not know why, not fully at least. This is the curse of those of us blessed to understand future and past events but never as clearly as we would like. I will explain as best I can. On my way here, I thought to take an afternoon nap from the hot sun and I sought the shade inside what seemed to be some kind of peasant's shack or hut with roughly hewn carved wood columns. Only when I awakened a short while before sunset and could see clearly inside, did I realize that I had slept on the leaf-littered floor of a small old wooden temple. It looked abandoned. It had but one much worn and insect-eaten wooden statue of a woman wrapped in cloths so only her nose and mouth could be seen clearly but those were lovely, supernally sculpted."

"I believe you speak of the little old temple of Rhea," I said. "We honor it once a year. It's said to be the oldest shrine in the land."

"Sire, as I slowly awakened a voice spoke to me, from that statue or from I know not where, but a woman's voice, deep as the earth itself. It told me to come to your court, King Peleus. I didn't understand why, until I had left it behind and was walking upon a ridge with a view of the sea, and then I felt something prickling me under my tunic. As I lifted it to look at it in the long sunset-light I saw this vial and on it I read writing that existed ever so briefly. "Awaken the sleeper!"

"I remembered then that although the temple had been empty when I entered, when I left there was fresh Rosemary plaited into a wreath, interspersed with little mountain gentian flowers. I had smelled it deeply and then placed the wreath upon the head of the statue and said a prayer to all of the Olympians. But you must know, Sire, in the lore of simple herbs, these two flowers mean 'remember long' and 'pain that must be healed'."

"Both the temple and statue you speak of are dedicated to Rhea," I said, "The mother of Zeus."

"Zeus, your own grandfather, Sire," the seer said. "Then the message came direct from your ancestor. Surely, it was an important one."

I took the vial from him. All during the usual court feast that night I sought to look for the old seer. He ate and drank and gamboled like the others, seemingly relieved now, rather than in any way anxious.

After dinner he came to me and said he was ready for me to put him into chains and into our guardroom, there to be slain if any ill came to me from the vial."

That night I sported with Thetis as usual, unsuspecting, and then as usual I fell to sleep exhausted.

But I had taken the four drops as the seer had instructed when I'd stood to make water, before collapsing onto our bed. So, I suddenly awakened again during the night. The torches were all but extinguished in the room. My wife was not in the bed.

I thought she had heard the infant crying and had gone to his side. He was kept in a nearby room, with first wife (in name only) and friend Antigone who loved him as her own and already had experienced two boy children herself.

Antigone lay dead asleep, her hand protectively upon the basket in which the baby had been placed. But my son wasn't there.

Now I was more than curious. I was worried. I kept thinking, the baby is with its mother. It is safe. Yet the worry would not leave me.

I hunted through the sleeping palace for the two. After an hour I was almost maddened by some as yet unformed

thought: Had she taken the child? And if so for how long? For what reason? Would she return? Would they return?

The seer's earlier words returned to me. I would mistreat him badly after I knew the truth upon awakening. As yet I knew nothing.

Some of the many courtiers and their companions in the palace stirred a bit as I went by, but all slept soundly, almost as though, as the seer had said to me earlier, they had been willed into dreamless sleep. I wandered into the outer courtyards and into the stables and the various animals' houses, almost frantic now to find them.

Then I saw a light. Only a flicker, but it was from a fire and it came from the shed behind the stables where the blacksmith had his forge for repairing horse-shoes and other metal for our little, single-horse cars and wagons.

I calmed myself as best as possible and trod as silently as I could toward that light.

Her back was toward me and Thetis was so rapt in what she was doing that even her immortal hearing didn't make me out. At first her body blocked my view, then we both moved, she one way a bit and I the other way, and what she was doing in that forge became all too visible.

And what was she doing? She had my baby son lying in a cooking pan upon the forge and it was filled ten inches high with green fire and she was burning him alive. He didn't scream. He didn't fight. He lay limp, in the same stuporous sleep she had willed upon me and all the members of my court.

I suddenly understood why all the other babies had died and why they had been so red when their corpses came to me to be buried. She'd done this to all of them.

She lightly held him by one chubby ankle and she stirred the fire with another, making certain the green flames covered his entire body, much as a chef browns a leg of lamb all over.

This sight was what the Goddess Rhea had told the seer to have me awaken to witness: possibly the most horrible thing any man could ever see.

I ran at Thetis, and in her being surprised, I was able to thrust her aside.

I grabbed the infant, wrapped him in my robe and ran out. It was as though all in one motion.

The stables held a large water trough and I dumped the baby into it, and did so with him over and over again.

By this time, she had caught up to me. But she did nothing but stare at me in my dunking and washing of the sleeping baby, as I dunked him, I wept with the greatest rage I have experienced in my life.

I wrapped the infant back up in my robe, content at least that all the fire was out. The baby lay as dead, yet I heard it breathing. Its skin was horrible with burns. I could barely look at it.

"Had you thought to ask, I would have told you what I was doing," Thetis finally said, very calmly.

"Killing him like the others. I don't know why."

"No, I was making him immortal. I was making him unkillable. I was bathing him in ambrosia and nectar and even some ichor."

"Like you made unkillable the four others of my seed?"

"It doesn't always work," she admitted. "With this one it seemed to be working."

Then, "He is unkillable now, except where I held him," she said, calmly and just as calmly she explained: "I am entitled to have an immortal son. You are partly divine. I am fully divine. It should be possible."

She reached out for the baby.

"You must kill me first," I said, backing away.

Her absolute coolness and rationality as she spoke drove me into the blackest of fury. Still, I held the child and I held my temper.

"And I?" I finally was able to utter. "Am I not entitled to have one living son of this union that was blessed by dozens of Immortals?"

"Yes. You are," Thetis admitted. "Nor am I allowed to slay you to get what I want..." she added, sadly it seemed.

I was afraid the baby would awaken and begin screaming in pain. We stood there, then, at an impasse.

"Then . . . farewell, husband," she said. She added, musingly, "I told Them this marriage would never succeed."

She backed slowly away, into the stable doorway and she spun and was gone. I saw only the glint of the bottoms of her silvery feet as she flitted up into the night.

I rushed to the kitchen and found oils and balms and awakened the seer and I showed him the child.

The seer shook his head sadly. "She has fixed it so he will not remember this. He will love her anyway!"

"You mean she will return?" I asked, fearful.

"In some future year. Not soon. And to him, first," he added. "Now she is angry and will vent her rage on some unsuspecting person or innocent town."

The seer had some healing balms himself and we spread them all over the baby, and then we kept close watch on the infant from that time onward. I even had a kind of leather sling made up to hold the child in front of me at all times, with a fleece inserted for a soft bed, for I feared to let him go from me even at night, when I had guards take turns being awake in the chamber where we slept.

He never cried after that night. His big eyes were curious and alert. His little hands began to grab and hit out soon enough. His skin looked awful for weeks. But when all the crusts and flakes came off, he was as he would always be thereafter, pure of skin, without a mark, mole or blemish, completed golden, not unlike my hair was when I was young. He was, you put it well, a shining one."

"So, you were his father – and his mother, both!"

"Yes," Peleus said. "I was, for years, both parents and more. No father of that time had as much stake in his son as I did. He sat on my lap at dinner or on the throne always and he slept next to me in my bed until he was seven years old."

"You were greatly devoted to your son. Unusual"

"Yes unusual. But the Gods gave me great capacity for devotion. . . " Peleus mused. Then he added, "So, I guess you could say that I was doubly betrayed by Achilles."

"Betrayed? How?"

"You already know how. Don't you? A lad named Patroclus. Think on it."



2

Excerpt from Bridge of Dreams: A Speculative Triptych

KEVIN P. KEATING

A diligent woodcutter and a skilled carpenter whose services were consistently in high demand, Enoch lived with his wife and son Methuselah in a windowless mudbrick hut on the edge of an unforgiving desert. Every morning, just before dawn, Enoch climbed the hill outside his walled village and made burnt offerings before the standing stone sacred to the people of that land. During the day, in the small workshop behind his hut, he used crude adzes and axes to fashion hunting spears, tent poles, fishing boats, and fence posts. One day, while sanding a set of small wooden blocks for his son, he saw two figures approaching the village. Tall and radiant, they seemed to shimmer like a mirage. He knew them at once. These were the seraphim who guarded the gates of Paradise. Still wielding their flaming swords, they entered Enoch's workshop and requested he follow them back to the Garden to remove some of the deadwood from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Now Enoch was a wily businessman, and he told the seraphim that it sounded like hard work, dangerous too, and would likely require long hours. He was facing a backlog of orders from local warlords, an impatient and murderous lot, and he'd already promised his wife that he'd build her a bed, a new invention she saw while visiting her sister in Sodom. After haggling for thirty minutes, Enoch and the seraphim

reached an agreement. If he remained in the Garden until the job was completed, he could keep all of the limbs he removed. The wood from such a tree would surely fetch high prices, higher even than the massive trunks dragged down from the cedar forests of Lebanon. Trying not to show his elation, Enoch collected his tools and told his wife and son that he'd return for dinner.

Through narrow slot canyons and windswept wadis, along rocky plateaus and rolling dunes, over vast cobble flats and dry lakebeds, Enoch followed the seraphim who never once offered him water or a morsel of food. Upon reaching the Garden, Enoch shook the salt from his tunic and dust from his sandals but understood too late that he'd entered into a bad agreement. The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was so tall that its highest branches reached Heaven. Trimming its deadwood would take a lifetime. In those preliterate days, prior to courts of law and written legal documents, a man's word constituted a binding contract, and Enoch had little choice but to start climbing.

That first day, he cleared dense clusters of leaves and sawed off a dozen limbs. Slow, arduous work with his primitive bow drills and pull saws, but at least he had the pleasure of walking with God in the cool of the evening.

After a few weeks, he settled into a routine. Things were proceeding smoothly until one afternoon, while chopping a particularly stubborn branch, Enoch lost his footing and hacked off his left index finger. Clutching the bloody stump to his chest, he scrambled to the ground and sat whimpering against the trunk. The amputated finger was nowhere to be found, probably snatched up by one of the beasts of the field. Legends about a strictly vegetarian diet in the Garden proved to be grossly exaggerated.

"Here, let me see that."

The Tree, reaching over with one of its branches, grabbed Enoch by the wrist and examined the bloody wound.

"Hmmm. Yes. A clean cut. Hmmm. Oh, quit your blubbering. It's not so bad. I've had to endure far worse, let me tell you, what with your clumsy chopping and sawing day after day."

Using a length of paper-thin bark peeling from its trunk, the Tree dressed the wound and coated it in green mud scooped from the bottom of a lotus pond. "Keep applying pressure after the mud hardens. In a few day's time, a new finger will grow in place of the old."

Enoch tried not to laugh. "A man's finger isn't like a flower. Fingers don't blossom and grow each spring. You should know that."

The indignant Tree crossed its limbs and huffed. "Oh, I should know that, eh?"

Suddenly, as if a blast of icy air had swept down from the fabled northern Land of Perpetual Night, the Tree began to sway back and forth, its trunk groaning and bending until Enoch thought it might explode, showering him in sap and lethal shards.

"You presume to tell *me*, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, what *I* should know? Fool! I know all there is, all there was, and all that ever will be. What are you but common clay? A cheap earthenware pot? Tell me, human, how do you beat your heart? How do you shape your bones? How do you see colors? How do you hear music? How do you taste food? How do you think your thoughts? How do you feel love, loneliness, regret? How do you experience grief?"

The Tree gave him a violent shove and hurled a piece of worm-infested fruit at his head.

Though he'd worked up a mighty appetite, Enoch dared not taste the fruit. Since earliest childhood, he'd heard tales about Mother Eve and how a snake once lurked in the Garden. The Tree took this, too, as an insult. With a brisk shake of its leaves, it plunged a branch into its dark canopy and found a hornet's nest. Enoch ran screaming.

God, watching the scene from a safe distance, took pity on Enoch and whisked him away to a serene brook that weaved through a meadow of brilliant wildflowers.

"A real nuisance, that Tree," said God with a good-natured smile. "Bitter old thing. I should have you cut it down altogether. Only the seraphim would despise me for it. They're very judgmental. But I'll tell you what we'll do instead. Let's collect some of that wood you chopped and split. Tonight, we'll have a fire, and after drinking a little wine to warm our bellies and lift our hearts, I'll tell you why I planted the Tree in the first place. Then you'll know something not even the Tree knows. Something beyond good and evil. There are sages east of Eden who claim to possess such knowledge. Hermits in saffron robes. Cave dwellers. But you, Enoch? Can *you* fathom anything beyond good and evil?"

God's eyes became dark and inscrutable.

"Can anyone but God fathom anything so daring? So obscene? A world without right and wrong, up and down, yes and no, being and non-being?"



FLASH FICTION

1

Hut Exit 4

NIGEL F. FORD

The Construction Verse

When in charge of such a vehicle
You should think about others.
True it large it is
Obtrusive it is I give you.
Huge, enormity that is rude one would say
It is my last day
Never another surely that can
Be about time and correct
Had the branch not swiped your face you would cease.

To be?
No, not at all
Wiped out in traumatic origin
No-one to see?
No, not at all, gone in the scut of a handshake.
When I am roused I am liable to continue to snore
You have deficient blood, is that what you are digesting?
No. I am not suggesting neither anything nor nothing.
This is a pleasant waste of time.

I do so agree with the time of the year
It is surely to the end of the month

At the end of which
Is nothing.
So splendid!

The Construction Story

I wish to stand to my own attention in order to make decisions. I have risen too early and if I was wise I would return to be beneath the bed clothing where the world is warm, comfortable and amenable.

You need to find yourself in such a position and dexterity as to be able to construct a suitable hut. One would imagine there are no drawings, but a circular or square space in the air in which to pencil a design, left to one's imagination and right to one's own architectural competence.

There is too much flow and go.

And there was.

The pieces for construction being stubbornly in constructive, so much so as the beginning not to have an end.

You could start with a tree at the bottom and work your way up until you had a useful pile of sticks and a monumental pole in the middle.

How about the roots?

Goodness no! You must not fiddle about with those. Those are nature's gift to you. You would be at a total loss to imitate the same. Copy and follow your mischances and conspicuous failings in order to have (at the end if not already at the beginning) created your bed upon which you shall lie beneath the particular roof you have determined will be more than sufficient for your shelter.

Will it leak, do you suppose?

We can only see and wait for foul weather. The construction has been created, your job now is to succour you home-sweet-home and to dither and bother about your failings.



NON-FICTION

1

Bitter Birds

BUCKET SILER

Lock your bicycle in the alleyway where the restaurants empty their trash. Food truck exhaust mixed with garbage smell and the pavement is damp for some reason – not rain, it never rains here – and you sit on the curb and wait.

What are you waiting for? That's the question. It's a strong feeling, though. For weeks, you've been chain-drinking cups of skullcap tea, playing chase-the-string with your neighbor's cat, taking sunset walks ("so clichéd!" says the person who has never taken a walk at sunset), your hoodie on with the hood up no matter how hot it gets, phone on silent, cordial nod to the postman, etc., and still the feeling persists, like there's something else you should be doing, something that's about to happen, something you're missing, something like that.

Then, at the end of the alleyway, an old woman driving a shitty old car packed to the windows with plastic bags slowly reverses until she collides, rather gracefully, really, into a sporty red car idling at the curb. A dumbstruck teenage boy steps out. He looks at you (the only witness, and suddenly the moment feels charged with meaning), looks at his bumper, looks at you again with wide, confused eyes, gets back into the car, drives away. And from the bowels of your backpack, you whip out a notebook and furiously scribble *homeless woman with rat's tail, pimply teenage boy, fender bender* because Wow. It was quite a dramatic incident for someone

who hasn't left their house in two days (that's you), and you might want to write a poem about it later.

Meanwhile, half a block away, there's an arts festival with a hundred people you know – like, personally know; it's a small town – milling around near a music stage, a vegan taco cart, a vintage clothing booth, a woman in a leather crop-top selling *herbal elixirs*, whatever that is, and you stand up and venture to the information booth where a man – once bearded, now shaven, once matched with you on Tinder, now planning to leave town – says, “Hey.”

You open your mouth to respond, but he's already moved on. He's telling you how he is. Like, spiritually. Like, where he's *at*, in the bigger scheme of things. He's trying to dance like no one's watching, you know? Be grateful for the little things. Embrace himself for who he really is without judgment. And while he talks, you reach into your backpack for a Ziploc bag that contains half an apple you brought from home, and you munch and munch and munch and wait – there it is again, that waiting feeling – until suddenly he pauses, whips his head around to look at the stage, and says,

“Bitter birds.”

And you say, “What?”

And he says, “Bitter Birds. The band. They're playing,” and you're standing there, looking at the back of his head, like a dream you once had of chasing someone who never turned around, a faceless demon with black hair covering every side of his head, and then you're walking away, and somewhere behind you he's shouting, “Hey! Where are you going?” and just like that the feeling is gone.

THE END



2

A Certain Enchantment

PATTY SOMLO

I have come here to get away. Hasn't everyone? Yes, I assume they have. Most have come to escape days in the office, staring at a too-bright computer screen, or trying to stay awake through another mind-dulling meeting.

My reasons for coming are complicated, different from others and even my own past. I'm no longer stuck at a desk, my time belonging to a boss. I have no ties to anyone but myself. For the first time in my life, I am completely alone. In part, I've come for a respite from that.

The room where I slept last night is snug but fine for me, a slender, small-boned woman not anywhere close to tall. A coffee snob, I've resigned myself to drinking one cup of what I can brew in the room, because I wake up too early to find any place open to buy decent coffee. The back entrance to my room leads to a parking lot. The front door, made of glass framed by matching narrow wood panels, faces a tan, adobe-style patio. Beyond the patio, a variety of red, brown and green cliffs surround, a sight that whenever I look at it leaves me breathless.

I have come here, in part, for that view and those cliffs. More than that, I have come for something I know to be true. For most of my life, I have craved a certain enchantment I only experience in nature. And here's the thing. One year ago, I lost my walking, hiking, talking with, laughing with, hugging companion, the love of my life, as much of a cliché

as that sounds. Twelve months ago, my husband and partner of nearly thirty years took his final breath. After he left me, I knew there was one reason I might want to stay alive. That reason, to take in the splendor of this earth, is why I have come.

Almost from the moment I met my husband Richard, a man with a smile that decades into our relationship still quickened my heart, we started spending time outdoors. Living in the Bay Area, me in San Francisco and Richard in a suburb across the bay, we could drive in any direction and be awestruck. For day trips, we crossed the Golden Gate Bridge, taking the exit off Highway 101 for San Anselmo. After picking up overpriced, but worth it, bread, cheese, fruit, and salad from a gourmet grocery in toney Marin County, we kept going. Following the narrow winding road shaded by tall Redwoods that passes Samuel P. Taylor Park, we eventually arrived at our favorite local destination, Point Reyes National Seashore.

Writing these words transports me to some of the happiest moments of my life. In that favorite park, Richard and I had favorite trails. Mostly we loved the hikes that led to beaches or overlooked the water. It was nearly impossible to be in the park without encountering wildlife – the Tule Elk that live in the field bordering the Tomales Point Trail; the Great White Egrets that peck in the mud at low tide, just beyond the bridge on the Estero Trail; rabbits dashing off into the trees next to the Bear Valley Trail; or Elephant Seals hauled out on the beach below Chimney Rock.

By the time I met Richard in my early forties, I had been through too many unsuccessful relationships to count. Though I'd been drawn to nature and spending time outdoors my entire life, the men I fell for never extended the

previous night's date to the following afternoon for a picnic and hike. Richard did.

I hadn't known until after he died how much our being together, taking in the sight of wildflowers, snow-covered peaks, or oceans, rivers, lakes and creeks, made me fall more deeply in love with the places we visited and with him. I hadn't understood exactly how love and nature in combination became a medication for my spirit that healed my heart and opened my mind to possibility, in a life that before Richard had often felt like a dead end.

In the last months of Richard's life, I promised to scatter some of his ashes on the beautiful Island of Kauai. Six months after his death, I went there alone.

I had never rented a car by myself. Neither had I driven in Kauai. Having only learned to drive late, taught by Richard, I was unaccustomed to finding my way on unfamiliar roads.

I did that and more, including scattering Richard's ashes to the trade winds on a beach we'd sat on together many times, watching waves wash over black lava rock, making it shimmer. As one day followed the next, I drove alone, ate alone, walked alone, and sat on the beach alone, with no one to talk to but myself. That's when I realised I couldn't recreate the moments I shared with my husband, no matter where I traveled and tried. At least, I couldn't do it alone.

So here I am, in magnificent Sedona, Arizona, on a group hiking trip, the second I've been on with strangers in the last few months. My hiking and dining companions are friendly and fun, as appreciative and awestruck by the variegated rock formations as I am. Many times, I remind myself how grateful I am for the chance to travel. Yet, it's not the same as with Richard. Not even close.

What moves me closer to trips with Richard is when I snatch a bit of time alone, and I do that this morning. I walk out to the patio, where even wearing several layers, I'm still cold. The sun is inching up behind one massive slab of sculpted rock, sending out a dusty rose glow that saturates both rock and sky. No one is on the patio but me, and it's blessedly quiet.

I make my way down some stairs to a matching patio, and then out to the road. A rock-lined path beckons on the other side. The surface is soft, a mix of dirt and sand, burnt orange, and bright in this light.

The sun drapes yellow across the mesas, which are red, dotted with green from plants below. For the first time since meeting my fellow travelers the previous day at a multistoried hotel in downtown Phoenix, I feel as if I've come home.

The following morning, we start at a trailhead where, no matter which direction I look, I want to gulp down the view, capture it with the camera in my phone, and take it back to California. The sky is that deep bright cloudless blue you only get to savor at higher elevations, complemented by red, tan and green rock everywhere I look. And looking and pondering is what I've come to do.

But my fellow hikers are hustling. With my short legs, even walking at a quick pace, I'm still behind.

I finally catch up with the leader I like best, Rob. He's been doing these trips for decades and is no longer young. He's funny and kind, and I wish he could be my friend when the trip is over, though I know that's not possible. As much as I'd like to stop and inhale the beauty on all sides, as I would if Richard were here, I need this conversation with a human

being, a man especially, which I so miss in life without my husband.

We reach Cathedral Rock, an impressive icon, one of the locations of a vortex, thought to contain special healing energy. Rob needs to wait for some of our group, who've climbed to the vortex, and suggests I go ahead, and meet up with the faster hikers.

A few minutes after leaving Rob, I'm alone, and start to experience a mix of emotions. Every so often, I pass other hikers, heading back toward the trailhead. In those moments, I feel sorry for myself that I'm a childless widow in a world where most people are coupled or friended or part of a family. I'm tempted to defend my solo status and explain, *I've lost my husband*, or announce that I'm part of a group, and my companions are waiting up ahead.

There are moments, though, when I get into the rhythm of walking and forget about everything but that. *Walking just to be walking*, I imagine the late Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, might have said, if he were with me. Landing each boot on the burnt orange path, I am happy to be here and nowhere else, not needing anything or anyone but moving into the space that for so much of my life has ripped away sadness and negativity, the voice that tells me I can't and nothing will ever get better, and instead opens my world to possibilities I'm not yet able to imagine.

At one point, the trail reaches a high cliff. When I look down, I can see where the hike will take me and spot several people in my group. Soon after, I've hiked past that spot and entered some woods. No one appears to be around.

Now, I'm wishing I listened more carefully to Rob outlining today's route. Unfortunately, slight trails appear, meandering off the main, and I don't know if I should take

one. My recollection is that the group was to stop for lunch alongside Oak Creek. A wider trail looks, for some reason, like it could head to that stream.

I follow the trail a short way, but then the trees and brush close in. Maybe not, I think, and retrace my steps. I start hiking forward, then decide to go back, thinking it might be better to wait for Rob. That's what I do for another few minutes, before again changing my mind.

The euphoria I felt walking alone a short time in the open with the colorful splendor of buttes and mesas all around and the blue-blue sky is gone. The other side of being alone attacks, not knowing what to do or where to head, becoming afraid with no one to ask.

Thankfully, the bad feeling is soon overtaken by relief and joy. Not far ahead, the canopy opens and I spot, to my right, the lovely roaring creek, along with people I recognize, perched here and there atop large rocks.

The next two days and nights, I ride the rollercoaster of emotion that has been my life since getting the dark, frightening news Richard's back pain was caused by stage four cancer. Even though I've grown somewhat accustomed to feeling happy or hopeful one moment, then terrified or morose the next, the shifting sands of feeling still leave me unsettled. When I'm eating breakfast on the patio with its nearly 360-degree view, having a heartfelt conversation about widowhood with another woman, my mood brightens. Times the group is spread out at a long table for dinner, I slip down, feeling invisible, as I did during my unhappy childhood.

I've never been the life of the party or the girl who would be dubbed Most Popular in the high school yearbook. Several of my fellow hikers, I feel certain, were just that. I can see they still are. No matter the topic, one woman, who I've

learned is here on a tragically short reprieve from taking care of an extremely ill husband, holds her own, joking and making the sort of perfectly timed and chosen comments that cause everyone to laugh and nod. At such times, I'm part of the group, laughing with them but searching without success for something to say, and then looking forward to when the evening will end.

In between the group activities, there are other moments, such as this one. The sun has set, and a mauve glow bathes both rock and sky. Someone is strumming an electric guitar, and I step outside.

Perched on a stool next to the wall is the musician playing a slow haunting version of a tune I recognize. As I lean over the waist-high stone wall, inhaling the view, I realize he's strumming the chords of the Beatles' song, *Yesterday*.

Round-backed, light tan wicker chairs are set in cozy arrangements around gas-fueled firepits. The seats are filled with couples, yet I'm not envious. Instead, I'm happy for this moment. Several women in my group, here with spouses or friends, have said they find me brave for embarking on this trip alone, especially so soon after my husband's passing. I thank them for their thoughts but don't offer mine – that if I didn't do this, I might not find a reason to go on.

When you lose a longtime spouse, the person you wake up to each morning and the last face you see before sleep overtakes you at night, you enter a strange shifting zone. The body is gone and yet the expectation that he's still there, in the next room or on his way to walk through the front door remains. There also exists a need to hold him close, to keep him with you somehow, because losing his spirit entirely feels like more than you can abide.

Richard floats in and out of my thoughts, the last day in Sedona. Our group is gathered on the patio, the sky about as blue as it's possible to get. A Native American musician, Aaron White, has come to entertain and educate us about the flutes he makes and plays. He's laid these slender wooden instruments on a colorful woven cloth. One by one, he picks them up and explains their origin and then plays for us.

When he blows into the first and smallest flute, the music has a distinctly Asian sound, reminding me of soundtracks from films my Chinese American husband loved. A longer flute with two separate holes in the mouthpiece sounds more like several instruments than one, the sort of healing music that brought Richard comfort in his final months.

Of course, it's not just the flute or the sounds this talented musician is bringing forth. The notes float into the air, as if they and the sky, the red earth and rock are related. Yes, perhaps I've been touched by the energy it's said is contained in the rock, air, and sky here in Sedona. For whatever reason, I'm reveling in the special allure this place now holds for me. Instead of feeling apart from life, as I have done since losing Richard, I sense my connection to this astonishing world. And at least for these precious moments, I can also hold my husband's spirit close, as if he were right here with me.



3

How Green Is My Memory?

RICK HARTWELL

It is a fruitless discussion as to how many words for *white* or *snow* are used by the extreme northern indigenous peoples. Not Eskimo, which is too generic, or Inuit, which is too restrictive, but indigenous peoples. After a short bit of internet research, I have settled on the very specific number: *many*! My mind then segues to consider how many terms exist for *green* or *foliage*, as in Vietnam or Laos or Cambodia? There are, of course, many other verdant or jungled areas across the globe, but my own experience is limited to the Central Highlands of rural Vietnam.

When I wrote about my experiences in the Highlands, I often defaulted in my descriptions of the mountains and jungle to the prosaic *green*, with such modifiers as: *emerald*, *lush*, *dense*, *mottled*, etc. None of this may seem of great moment unless, of course, that moment consists of you in the middle of that experience trying to second-guess where danger lurks. I have never asked, but I wonder if the Montagnards or Hmong have multiple words for the type of green they live in from birth to death; far more than I ever used, I am certain.

I look at photographs of the Highlands from the 1960s and '70s, particularly those shot in black-and-white. Often, those black-and-white pictures depict, by gradations of gray, the great differences of green foliage by altitude and density, far better than color photography. There is an eariness in

those snapshots that strikes deeply into my memory and my gut.

I wonder if those who experienced Iran or Iraq or Afghanistan have the same or similar “problem” describing the color *brown* or *earthen*? I have never asked, but I imagine the shadings of mountains or deserts or villages of mud bricks contain the visceral differences of beauty shading to wariness shading to terror contained within their *brown* landscape, as I found in my *green* world of the mid-sixties?

Kermit the Frog often says, “It’s not easy being green!” For me, it’s not easy describing green. There is, and was, far too much contained within that *green* world.



PLAY

1

Lead Us to Culture (A one-act play)

GARY BECK

Scene: A restaurant. Enter Katherine and Larry, who are shown to a table. They sit, order wine and sip for a minute
Larry ignores her first question.

Katherine: I asked you how you liked the wine ?

Larry: It's alright.

Katherine: What does that mean?

Larry: Just what I said.

Katherine: Do you like the bouquet?

Larry: It's okay.

Katherine: Well what about the taste?

Larry: It's okay.

Katherine: Is that all you have to say?

Larry: About the wine? Yeah. You know I prefer beer.

Katherine: We discussed your bad habits. I explained that appreciation for wine is anacquired taste. You have to keep trying it.

Larry: I think we have to seriously discuss all this culture stuff.

Katherine: I really don't want to talk about it now. I just want to enjoy a nice, quiet dinner.

Larry: But you said we'd talk....

Katherine: Later.

Larry: That's not fair. I've been doing what you want....

Katherine: What I want? I've been doing this for you.

Larry: Don't give me that! You've been enjoying every minute of it.

Katherine: I admit I do like cultural activities. I find them stimulating. Unlike some people who prefer to sit at home and watch TV all the time.

Larry: I don't do it all the time.

Katherine: That's not the point. You agreed that you needed to get out more and said you'd try to appreciate the cultural life of the city.... Well.

Didn't you?

Larry: Yeah.

Katherine: Don't you see? This is our chance to bring some excitement back into our relationship.

Larry: I guess so.

Katherine: I know how hard you work. Especially with the market going up and down like a roller coaster and all your clients demanding safe investments

Larry: You don't know the half of it. They're scared out of their Brooks Brothers underwear and I've got to reassure them all day long. It's exhausting.

Katherine: That's why it's so important for you to do things that relax you.

Larry: You call that concert last night relaxing? A bunch of old oriental guys in funny robes, banging and screeching away on weird looking thing uses that hurt my ears.

Katherine: They were playing classical Cambodian music on ancient instruments.

Larry: It sounded like they were torturing cats.

Katherine: You do have to make some effort to understand another culture.

Larry: I hear the same sounds in the subway when the train pulls in. Why can't we go to an Elton John concert?

Katherine: Because you have to acquire culture while you're still young and can learn to savor it.

Larry: Aw, Katy.

Katherine: Katherine.

Larry: What's wrong with Katy?

Katherine: It's too casual for the art world.

Larry: It figures.

Katherine: Excuse me?

Larry: What do you care what you're called when you go to a museum or gallery?

Katherine: Katherine is more elegant.

Larry: Yeah. As if anyone cares. That gallery today was crazy. I thought art was supposed to be beautiful to look at.

Katherine: It is. You have to learn how to see it.

Larry: The only thing I learned there was that those artists make stockbrokers look intelligent. One

artist had a dead fish in a tank that was selling for 40 million dollars. I had to laugh at that.

Katherine: I noticed.

Larry: Then there was this statue of a balloon animal that cost 5 million dollars.

Katherine: It's called sculpture.

Larry: Whatever. The nuttiest thing I saw was a model made by this guy who wanted to wrap Yellowstone National Park in plastic and it would cost 60 million dollars. That's like covering the Statue of Liberty with a condom.... (Katherine looks around and shrugs apologetically to anyone looking at them.) Are you telling me that stuff is art?

Katherine: Maybe what we started with is too challenging. We'll try the Metropolitan museum tomorrow.

Larry: Hey. I know that place. My class went there when I was a kid.

They had these big pictures of fat, funny looking naked ladies....

Katherine: Alright. We seem to have found something you can connect with.

Larry: Aw. They probably changed it for all that new kind a stuff.

Katherine: Don't worry. They still have your naked ladies.... Now let's have a pleasant dinner and forget our little disagreements for the time being.

Larry: Sure thing, Katy.

Katherine: Katherine.



2

Finding the Muse

DAVID JAMES

Introductory Music: "Ain't Too Proud to Beg," Temptations

Characters:

Melanie: a woman who is beginning to question her relationship with Andrew

Andrew: a fiction writer who is taking notes the whole time the two are together

Setting:

Any kind of room. A bedroom must be attached.

Melanie: Eat me!

Andrew: What?

Melanie: Why don't you just boil me or fry me and eat me?

Andrew: Oh, come on now, Mel.

Melanie: It'd make you feel better.

Andrew: I don't need this...

Melanie: It'd make for a good story. And that's what you really want, isn't it? A story. I'll screw with Melanie until she leaves and then I'll write about it with such depth and feeling, I'll publish another damn story in *The Iguana Journal* or *Puke Review*. That's what this is all about.

Andrew: This has nothing to do with my writing. Why can't you believe that?

Melanie: Because you're writing down my dialogue as I say it.

Andrew: No, I'm not.

Melanie: Then what are you writing?

Andrew: Stuff.

Melanie: What kind of stuff?

Andrew: Just notes, so I can understand what's happening between us.

(She grabs the writing pad from him.)

Andrew: Hey!

Melanie: Let's see. Melanie, colon, "Eat me, you sexy bastard." I didn't say that.

Andrew: I didn't say you did.

Melanie: Yes, you did. It's my name here, with me saying this.

Andrew: Let's drop the whole thing.

Melanie: No. Let me see. Rock, colon. You're Rock? Andrew, how can you be Rock?

Andrew: I'm not. Now give that back.

Melanie: Rock, colon, "I'll solve your problem with this big stick of mine." You lying bastard.

Andrew: They're words. They're meaningless, Mel.

Melanie: Melanie, colon, "Your writing makes me hot and juicy. Come here, you love God. Take me like a run-on sentence and punctuate me hard." I hate you! I hate you!

(She throws the notebook on the couch, buries her head, crying.)

Andrew: (*Picking up the notebook first, writing in it.*) Listen, Melanie. I love you, really, and I don't want us to end this way. Come on now.

Melanie: What, you expect me to just roll over and open my legs?

Andrew: No. No, I don't.

Melanie: Ever since I've met you, you've carried around that damn notebook and scribbled in it. At first, I thought it was romantic. A writer, wow. Now I see that's the problem. That's it. You care more about your writing than me.

Andrew: Mel, you know I'm a writer. I have to write. That's my nature.

Melanie: Not when you're with me. You've got to be with me when we're together. Right here. Right now. Can you promise, from now on, once and for all, that they'll be no writing while we're together? No notes?

Andrew: But you say such great things.

Melanie: Andrew?

Andrew: But . . .

Melanie: I'm serious, Andrew. I mean it. Either it's me or the notebook. Pick one.

Andrew: When we're not together, can I write about us?

Melanie: Sure. All you want.

Andrew: Can I call you and ask questions, in case I forget something?

Melanie: No. I can't worry about being material for you. I don't want any of this creative energy crap either. Writing is not living.

Andrew: I don't know.

Melanie: What?

Andrew: Well, when I'm writing, I'm living. I'm living what I'm writing.

Melanie: You're writing *about* living.

Andrew: No, Melanie, you're wrong. When I'm writing something, I'm there, in the imaginary moment. It's as real as if it was really happening.

Melanie: I don't believe a word.

Andrew: Yes, really. You don't know how many times I've ade love to you in my stories.

Melanie: You what?

Andrew: All the times and positions I've written about – you and me. And it's always perfect. It's romantic. It's always long and slow and beautiful.

Melanie: You really do that?

Andrew: Yeah, and I feel it when I write it.

Melanie: You feel me?

Andrew: Definitely.

Melanie: You write because of me?

Andrew: No one has ever moved me the way you do.

Melanie: No one?

Andrew: None. Nada. Never.

Melanie: So what is it that I do?

Andrew: It's the way your words roll out of your mouth, and the expressions you make, and your passion, and your eyes. Your eyes say everything.

(Melanie starts talking like she's writing a story, but in a southern accent)

Melanie: "Why, sir," she said, "how do I know this flattery is sincere?"

(Andrew replies in a French accent or any type of accent)

Andrew: "This is no flattery," he replied, "it's truth."

Melanie: Melanie let down her guard and looked at him closely. She liked what she saw. "Why don't you come over here, a little closer to me."

Andrew: "I was thinking about doing more than that," he said, eyeing the bedroom door.

Melanie: "Are you up to it, Rock?"

Andrew: Rock's body surged. He knew he would have her. He knew his hands would touch her golden flesh, feel her quiver and shake. He knew she would soon cry out in pure joy.

Melanie: She looked at him hopefully. "Maybe you should take me now like that run-on sentence?"

Andrew: "I know exactly where to place my exclamation point." He grabbed her and they kissed.

(They kiss.)

Melanie: She felt her heart melt. Taking his hand in hers, Melanie led him into the bedroom.

(He grabs his notebook and pen on the way into the bedroom. They exit. The door opens and the notebook gets thrown back on stage. The door opens again and the pen gets thrown out.)

Andrew: *(from the bedroom)* Ah, my muse!

LIGHTS OUT.



3

What Are You Doing Here?

NIGEL F. FORD

(About 15 minutes)

CHARACTERS:

A: Pompous, conservative.

B: Childish, rebellious.

A: What are you doing here?

B: I'm here.

A: I can see that.

B: Why ask?

A: I want to know what you are doing.

B: I'm stood here in this place.

A: Who said you could?

B: I don't need permission.

A: It's my land.

B: Don't be ridiculous.

A: The land belongs to me. I'd rather you didn't stand around on it if you don't mind. You're infringing on my privacy.

B: How can this piece of land that I'm standing on belong to you? I might as well say that it belongs to me and I want you to go away.

- A: I inherited it from my father.
- B: So did I.
- A: What do you mean?
- B: Your father didn't own it. You can't own anything. You can only break it or wear it out. Use it or wear it. Eat it and shit it.
- A: I don't understand.
- B: It's a physical impossibility to own anything.
- A: I don't understand.
- B: I shall try to explain. This, where I am standing, was here before you. It has been here a very long time. It was here before your father was here, before his father was here and so forth. In fact it has been here since before any human being was here. Probably, it has altered in appearance from time to time. But it has always been here in the sense and limitation pertaining to the assertion that this planet has been here. Whereas we have not. Therefore you can't just come along and say 'that's mine'. Totally ridiculous assertion. Totally unfounded, you must admit.
- A: I'll admit no such thing.
- B: As you like. I ent moving. This 'ere is as much mine as yours. Although it isn't because it doesn't belong to any person. It belongs to itself.
- A: It can't belong to itself. That's an impossibility. A contradiction in terms.
- B: You don't belong to anybody. I don't belong to anybody. If there is such a thing as "belong", we belong to ourselves.
- A: I shall put the police on you!

B: Cowardy cowardy custard!

A: Don't be such a child.

B: What's wrong with being a child? I've got my innocence. Where's yours? Innocence is truth.

A (sad): I lost my innocence a long time ago.

B: I've heard that one before.

A: I'm now a cynical old bastard and I want you off my land. Now!

B: Are you deaf? I ent going. This land is your land. This land is my land. This is no-man's land. This land is as much mine as yours. That is to say, it is not mine, nor yours. Ownership of this land is an impossibility. Both physically and metaphysically.

A: The world doesn't work like that.

B: Yes it does, It's only in your dreams it works like anything else.

A: Don't be impertinent! I know perfectly well how the world works.

B: Have you told it?

A: I'm not having this childish conversation any more. I'm old enough to be your father.

B: We're the same age.

A: Now who's being ridiculous?!

B: Give half a century or so.

A: What on earth do you mean?

B: Standing right on this earth I mean that in comparison to it, we are what you might call exactly the same age.

A: Not according to our way, our civilised and accurate way, of calculating.

B: Accurate to what degree? Civilisation as you call it, is worthless. Civilisation as you call it, is an attack, a war on the real civilised world. Our kind of civilisation is a destruction. You can't dement that. We're beginning to get dangerous – that's what we think – we're actually quite proud of it. Look at little me! I'm dangerous! 6 billion yobboes having a knees up at the expense of the planet. Trouble is, the planet hasn't noticed. It doesn't give a shit. It just gets on with its existence. In its quiet, discreet, unreachably and infinitely mature and civilised manner.

A: Get off my land!

B: I'm not on your land.

END.



4

Like A Kipper – A Short Play

BEN MACNAIR

(-Int- A Television studio. Host ALAN is introducing his first guest, BRIAN.)

Alan: Hello, and welcome to the show. My first guest this morning is BRIAN. A man about the town with a sad little story. Now, you may be aware of the Selkie or The Kelpie, they are folklore figures. Either seals, or in some cases horses, who find lonely men and women, become men and women themselves, raise children with these poor souls, and then without any warning, return to the wilderness, abandoning their families and their children. Now, we aren't a programme to judge other people's behaviour, other shows that do that are available, but here is BRIAN to tell you his side of the story.

Brian: Hello Alan.

Alan: Hello Brian. How are you today?

Brian: I am very well thanks, and how are you?

Alan: I am very well thanks, and thank you for asking. Not many of my guests do that.

Brian: Well, it is the boring person who asks no questions, isn't it?

Alan: I gather you think you are interesting then?

- Brian: It depends who you ask, really.
- Alan: Anyway, I believe that you have an interesting story to tell.
- Brian: I do?
- Alan: I hope so. That is why you are here.
- Brian: I thought I was just here for a nice chat.
- Alan: On live television?
- Brian: Well, don't they do that? People sit around and have little conversations.
- Alan: You are thinking about the radio Brian.
- Brian: Are you Chris Packham? Talking about the vole I saw?
- Alan: No, I am not Chris Packham.
- Brian: Michaela Strachan, talking about an owl?
- Alan: Do I look like a woman? Does she look like a man?
- Brian: I don't know. I don't watch much of this television you speak about.
- Alan: Ok, right.
- Brian: Yes.
- Alan: (Sighing) So tell us about your family life, and how you think were taken in by a Selkie.
- Brian: I would rather not. Can we not talk about the vole I saw? It was very big, with big teeth, it could have eaten your head.
- Alan: Why might it do that?
- Brian: They are spiteful you know.
- Alan: Like wasps?

Brian: Yes, but with bigger teeth. Much bigger teeth.

Alan: Can we start with how you met the Selkie?

Brian: You mean Lorraine?

Alan: Yes, Lorraine.

Brian: I was at the beach, throwing some stones into the sea, and I saw her.

Alan: Really. What was she like?

Brian: A seal. A big grey seal.

Alan: So, she wasn't Lorraine at this point?

Brian: No, she wasn't.

Alan: So when did you meet Lorraine as a woman then?

Brian: A few days later, I was doing the same thing. There is not much for a sea fisherman to do in the evenings, and as I say, I don't own a television, and after the Archers, I don't like the excitement.

Alan: Carry on.

Brian: Anyway, there I was throwing some stones into the sea, and there she was.

Alan: Lorraine?

Brian: Yes Lorraine.

Alan: What were your first impressions?

Brian: What does she want? Now I will have to start a conversation, and if I don't I will look a bit odd.

Alan: Or in your case, odder.

Brian: Are you saying I am a bit odd Alan?

Alan: No, not at all. Eccentric is the word I would have used.

Brian: Ok, well I am not to everyone's taste, but nobody is, are they Alan?

Alan: My ratings are pretty good.

Brian: Really?

Alan: Yes, millions of people tune into this show.

Brian: Voluntarily?

Alan: I would hope so. Anyway, tell me more about Lorraine.

Brian: Well, Alan it all seemed too obvious in hindsight, but at first in relationships you turn a blind eye to some things, don't you?

Alan: So you would say that there were some warning signs about how she used to be a seal?

Brian: Yes, the tell-tale signs were all there. The smell of fish, the whiskers, the limited vocabulary, kept to barks and yelps, the lack of table manners, how she used to eat the cutlery, the glasses, the plates.

Alan: You have three children don't you though?

Brian: Yes, all strong swimmers, took after their mother.

Alan: So you had the kids on porpoise?

Brian: You mean purpose?

Alan: Just a little joke.

Brian: A joke?

Alan: Yes, sometimes fish puns have their place.

Brian: Not here they don't.

Alan: Ok, we will stop with the fish puns, as they just seem to be giving you a haddock.

Brian: You mean headache?

Alan: Obviously

Brian: Anyway, back to my life story, if we must. I wasn't lonely, I got used to my own company, as you do, but there was something about her. That first night on the beach, the waves gently lapping. The easy flowing conversations, once I got used to the honking in her voice, and how she always went to balance a beach ball on the end of her nose. Don't even get me started on the interest she showed in the car horn, and when she shook my hand, her grip was really quite impressive.

Alan: Would you have described it as love Brian?

Brian: No Alan, I wouldn't have described it as love, more of companionship, of **kindred spirits, I gave** her twenty years, and she leaves. She stitched me up like a kipper.

Alan: Which is ironic, as you now believe that she is now a seal. Have there been any other repercussions for you.

Brian: Her work phones, occasionally, asking when she might be in, but I tell them I don't know. I see her quite often.

Alan: As a seal?

Brian: Yes, as a seal.

Alan: Have you tried to talk to her?

Brian: No, not yet. The problems is that they all look the same.

Alan: A bit off, that last statement, Brian.

BRIAN: Maybe, but it is true. I don't want to introduce myself to any old seal, thinking it might be

Lorraine. It would be a bit embarrassing to say the least. So that is where we are. The kids always ask when their mum might come back.

Alan: So by the sounds of it, a seal pretty much managed a successful life as a person then?

Brian: Yes, by the sound of it. I personally can't believe how much and how quickly Lorraine developed in the time that I knew her.

Alan: So, Brian is another way of looking at it that you just bored her, and she moved on, left her life behind, and looked for something more interesting?

Brian: I don't think so. I just think that she missed the sea, and went back there.

Alan: So you think that the seal you saw, and Lorraine were the same celestial being?

Brian: Yes, they were.

Alan: How can you tell, for certain?

Brian: A man of the world knows these things, you know.

Alan: Is that what you really think?

Brian: Yes, don't you?

Alan: Well I don't. I think other things are more likely to have happened.

Brian: Like what?

Alan: One day you were throwing stones in the sea, and you saw a big seal. The next day you were throwing stones into the sea, and you saw a woman. Now, it maybe that she was a Selkie, here

to comfort lonely souls, but I think there is a very small chance of that being right, don't you?

Brian: It is the reason that makes the most sense to me though Alan.

Alan: Why?

Brian: Because she is the first woman to have shown any interest in me, romantically.

Alan: Really?

Brian: Yes, before I was a fisherman on the sea shore, I worked in Sewage, and I played in a Wurzel's tribute band?

Alan: Really? Which instrument?

Brian: Banjo and Accordion.

Alan: You know, what, I think that you might be right about Lorraine being a selkie.

Brian: Really, why?

Alan: You work in sewage, and you play the banjo.

Brian: There is nothing wrong with the banjo.

Alan: Brian, what is the definition of a gentleman?

Brian: I don't know, what is the definition of a gentleman?

Alan: Someone who can play the banjo, but prefers not to.

BRIAN: I didn't come here to be insulted.

Alan: What did you come here for then?

Brian: A nice day out.

Alan: And have you had that?

Brian: No, not really.

Alan: Sorry, but them's the breaks.

Brian: Can I go now?

Alan Wait until the next segment.

Brian: When is that?

Alan: I am just going to introduce it now.

Brian: (Glaring, arms crossed) Go on then. We haven't got all day you know.

Alan: Brian there, ladies and gentleman. A man of the world, who plays the banjo and used to work in sewage, believing that it is more likely that a seal turned into a woman, than a woman showing a romantic interest, and then changing her mind.

Brian: (Still glaring) You will be hearing from my lawyers Alan.

Alan: Join us after the break as we will be talking to Chris Packham about how voles are getting bigger, and Paul Burrell talking about anything we ask him about that won't be the Royal family.

-Ends-



MEMOIRS

1

Prologue

E.P. LANDE

The summer days are best. Walking up the hill to visit Jeanne gives Lily and Gwendyl the opportunity to frolic and affords Aaron time to tell Jeanne what has happened since they last chatted – like before, when he would return from a day at the inn, or later, when they'd speak on the phone. It's the same, really.

Well, maybe not the same, only for Aaron it seems as though it is. He feels he still communicates with Jeanne. He feels she's still with him, that his closest friend is waiting to hear about his day. He knows that what he tells her is somewhat banal, but wasn't it always?

When they owned the inns he'd tell Jeanne about the housekeepers, about how they lied, about how their head housekeeper, Tammy, had one of the other housekeepers watch for their manager, Billy, while she slept in one of the guest rooms. He'd tell her about Billy's latest intrigue – trying to fool him into thinking he was at Ten Acres Lodge when he knew Billy wasn't. Where was Billy? Shacked up with one of the housekeepers, or drinking solo in his truck?

Jeanne would tell him what had happened on her walks with Tina and Amber – who died, replaced, first by Sophie, Zöe, and Gladys, and now by Lily and Gwendyl. Or what she

planned for dinner, whether she'd spoken to her step-mother, Hazel, or to cousin Judi. The general happenings that composed their days.

Now, it's just Aaron that drones on about the happenings of his days. But in his imagination, he can think what Jeanne would tell him. It's important to Aaron, to still have their conversations, to feel that little has changed, that his life hasn't altered too much. He wants to live in the illusion – or is it in his delusion? Perhaps that's why he decided to bring Jeanne back – back home, to be close to him so that they could chat when he wanted – or needed – to visit her with Lily and Gwendyl.

He smiles, recalling what Jeanne had said to Billy's wife, Juliet, before she died: 'Oh, it is just another of Aaron's whims.' Juliet had told Jeanne that Aaron planned to create a burial site on their property, to rebury her close to him.

"Come on, Lily. Come here Gwendyl. Let's go visit Jeanne."

Lily bounds past Aaron and up the hill, Gwendyl hopping like a rabbit after her. A pee-stop and several detours into the surrounding meadow grown thick and high after the early spring rains and now the unusual heat of the summer, they reach their destination – not without the usual urging on Aaron's part, for Lily likes to stray in search of apples or anything edible. She's a lab, after all.

Lily and Gwendyl sniff the freshly mowed grass, darting in and out of the neighboring woods, occasionally looking at Aaron, but for the most part they're just being dogs.

They come there every day, usually late in the afternoon as at that time of the day it seems less hurried. The spot is peaceful. Aaron had chosen it because, to him, it's eternal. From where he sits on the stone bench, there are no other

houses in the horizon, only the low mountains that enclose his property.

"Come here, girls," he calls. They had wandered. He needs to know where they are, to remind them they're there to visit Jeanne, not to act like dogs.

Lily, followed by Gwendyl, comes running at the sound of his voice. They tread down the stone steps and walk through the stone-covered passageway into the opening now covered with the false indigo Aaron transplanted the previous spring from the garden in front of his house.

"Okay, now you two sit and stay," he tells them in a commanding voice. Aaron crouches on the earth between Lily and Gwendyl and leans against the wall of stone that arcs around Jeanne's grave and the plot next to hers where he will eventually be buried. He looks up, his arm outstretched, as if to hold her hand.

"Do you remember, Jeanne, when we returned from our honeymoon, I think the first people we saw were Irmgard and Alfred. They were at the wedding but were lost in the crowd so I didn't remember being introduced to them." That was over fifty years ago, Aaron thought. "You called Irmgard the oracle. She stated everything emphatically, with such assurance; I can understand why you believed everything she told us. I recall Irmgard and Alfred had become friends with your parents when they emigrated from England to Canada after the war, and that your father had done business with Alfred during the war. Of the people they knew in the city, Irmgard felt your mother was the only one with a bit of culture. I believe Irmgard used the word 'sophisticated' when she described your mother to me sometime later."

Perhaps that was his reason for feeling a close attachment to Jeanne's mother, Aaron mused. His family was

wealthy, possibly the richest in the country, but sophisticated? With Jeanne's mother, he could discuss music and art, whereas his mother attended concerts – and immediately fell asleep – and while she possessed a great collection of art, she couldn't tell you much about any of the artists.

"I've been thinking about our friendship with the Irmgard and Alfred." Aaron paused in thought. "Actually, it became more than a friendship, didn't it? They – especially Irmgard – treated us as though we were their children, making every effort to give us the cultural advantages they felt we lacked. Did we understand what they were doing for us, and did we show our appreciation?"

This caused Aaron to ask himself his reason for feeling a close attachment to Irmgard and Alfred – especially to Irmgard. Was it an extension of his feelings from when he was with Jeanne's mother? "I guess just being with them, taking in everything they said, almost like blotters – Jeanne, I think that repaid them, perhaps not in their eyes, but for us it was an education we hadn't asked for."

Was it because, in Irmgard, Aaron saw someone who embodied what his parents had encouraged – his nascent interest in the arts? At a very early age, his parents had exposed him to symphony concerts and piano recitals. They had introduced him to their art dealers...ah, yes, the Slatkins, from whom he purchased his first drawing, a Pissarro watercolor, with bar mitzvah money he'd received from his grandfather.

"But I have these guilt feelings at times, that I didn't show them sufficient gratitude, that I loved them for trying." Why didn't he ever express his love for them? Was it that, at the time, he felt that both Irmgard and Alfred – especially

Irmgard – would have thought such sentiments, sentimental? Still, that didn't excuse him for not expressing them.

"Perhaps, you'd tell me I shouldn't feel guilty. You'd say we never asked for what they gave us, that they wanted to pass on their way of life, and they chose us as the recipients." Actually, both he and Jeanne, while not imitations of the Neumans, subconsciously had modeled their lives after their friends – and, yes, Aaron was filled with gratitude, for, because of Irmgard and Alfred, his and Jeanne's lives had been forever enriched.

"Remember when we first met Chagall? It was on our first visit to Irmgard and Alfred – lunch at their home. You were nervous, but I, I was so excited. I paced back and forth in our hotel room, anxious for the moment to happen. You didn't know what to wear, as if it mattered! Marc came in his usual pair of baggy trousers, flannel shirt over which he had on a nondescript cardigan. But one didn't notice what he wore, only his twinkling eyes and his hands – hands that touched everything, especially your face. Vava was chic, always was. She wore her clothes like a real lady – a full skirt and a twinset, like Irmgard. You always wondered who copied whom?"

In Aaron's mind, he pictured the six of them sitting around the Charles X table, eating Irmgard's delicious leg of lamb, washed down with a superb red Burgundy, and talking about the green grocer in Vence and André Malraux who had recently been to see Marc about painting the ceiling of the Palais Grenier of the Paris Opera.

"And remember one of the Sunday afternoons we spent together with Irmgard and Alfred at the Chagalls? Do you remember? Irmgard wouldn't tell us; it was to be a surprise. You had recently begun playing the cello, and thanks to

Irmgard – and Shura – you had a good one. You were so agitated when we walked into their living room, and there he was – Rostropovich was talking with Marc....”

Aaron closed his eyes and placed a hand on each of Lily and Gwendyl and stroked their coats, lost in thought.

“Those were memories, the six of us, and now I’m the only one left, the only one to tell our story. It’s sad, really, but at least I have the memories.”

He wasn’t in a hurry to leave. These visits were the highlights of his days now, revisiting the past with the one person who understood, who had been there with him, who loved him like no one else ever had – or ever will. He rose, slowly, and made his way to the stone-covered passageway out of the gravesite. Turning, he looked back.

“Lily, Gwendyl, come on now. We have to go home. Well, my love, I’ll be back tomorrow.”

Lily, who has been chewing on a stick she’d found, and Gwendolyn, who was digging, follow Aaron back through the stone passageway and up the steps. He throws a stick for Lily to fetch. She leaps like a gazelle though there is little to leap over, while Gwendyl races along as fast as her dachshund legs can carry her. These two have a way about them. Gwendyl stops. Lily comes charging down the hill, and just as she’s about to plow into her “sister”, sails over a crouching Gwendyl, who waits for the contact that never comes.



2

The Face of the Enemy

MARK SCHEEL

An excerpt from a memoir-in-progress detailing the tumultuous mid-twentieth century era and how some parallels exist with the upheavals of present times as related from the perspective of a Red Cross worker.

The U.S. Army training installation at Wildflecken, Germany, situated remotely among the Rhön mountain range near the East German border, had been established originally by the German *Wehrmacht* in 1938 and, following the end of the Second World War, utilized as a displaced persons camp and then eventually occupied by U.S. forces as a training facility. The stone barracks and offices, surrounded by cobblestone streets, stood among the evergreens as they had when first constructed since the area hadn't been detected and bombed during the war. Prior to my arrival in January 1971, Red Cross services to the personnel permanently stationed there had only been provided on an itinerant basis from a substation at Bad Kissingen. Thereafter, however, office space was made available in the headquarters building just down the hall from the post commander, and, in the midst of a chilling snowy winter (a far cry from the Thailand tropical climate from which I'd just departed), I settled into my new assignment.

It seemed a bit strange at first, working amidst structures once inhabited by Hitler's soldiers, and, when descending into the dark basement of my temporary transient

quarters to obtain heating oil, I could almost sense the ghosts of the SS troops lurking in the shadows. Indeed, the modern German *Bundeswehr* did have a liaison officer, a captain (*Hauptmann*), assigned to a headquarters office who was actually a veteran of the old *Wehrmacht*. And I would later discover that the *Bundeswehr* did at times conduct training exercises with their troops on the Wildflecken ranges. Not to mention that the short, convivial German barber with a little shop in the basement of the headquarters building was a veteran of the "Russian front." He once related to me, during a haircut session, that he was still troubled by a Russian grenade fragment in his back, too close to nerves to surgically remove. And how an old sergeant from the First-World-War era, within five minutes of arriving as a replacement, was shot straight through the helmet by a Russian sniper when trying to scrutinize the enemy lines with binoculars.

In time, when I had become more confident in navigating my way within the country's railway system, I decided to board a train and spend one free weekend exploring the populous city of Frankfurt. I checked into a small hotel pretty much in the heart of everything and commenced with the usual tourist itinerary during the day – visiting the Frankfurt Cathedral, the Old Opera House, the Iron Footbridge. Saturday night I set out to discover what the nightlife might offer, hopping hither and yon among the neon-lit bars in the entertainment section. One bar sign really caught my eye – "Charlie Brown," obviously named after the *Peanuts* cartoon character and intended to draw in American G.I.s. I entered the front door and was amused to discover cartoon portraits of all the characters – Lucy, Linus, Snoopy, et al. – adorning the walls. I took a seat at the bar and ordered a beer and turned to a gentleman sitting next to me and

offered a greeting in the best college German I could muster: *"Guten Abend, mein Herr. Wie geht es Ihnen?"*

He looked at me, nodded and smiled. And responded simply, *"Gut, danke. Und Ihnen?"*

"Sehr gut," I replied, and reached for the beer the bartender set before me. As I picked it up, the man beside me lifted his beer and clicked my glass cordially, exclaiming *"Prost!"* And we both took a swig of our beverage.

He appeared to be late middle age, of a trim build, average height, dressed casually in dark slacks and a plain sport shirt. His wavy hair revealed a touch of gray at the temples and his mustache too a bit of salt-and-pepper.

He then asked, *"Sind Sie Amerikaner?"*

"Ja," I replied. *"Aber meine beiden Urgroßväter waren Deutsche."*

"Amerikanischer Soldat?"

"Nein. Rotes Kreuz."

However, it soon became apparent my proficiency in German was far less accomplished than his in English, and we began conversing more fluently from then on in the latter. We introduced ourselves to each other, but I have long since forgotten his name; however, I remember how he took note of the fact that my last name – Scheel – was, indeed, of German derivation. Coincidentally, the name of the Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs and Vice-Chancellor of Germany at that time was Walter Scheel.

He apprised me that he was aware of the Wildflecken installation, but had never been to the site. And he was intrigued by the American Red Cross mission to the troops. He was a single man, had never married. And, yes, I soon learned, he'd served in the *Wehrmacht* during the war, a

Panzer tank commander. And, unlike many former German soldiers, he proudly admitted he'd fought on the Western front against the British, French and Americans. In fact, he claimed he'd lost one ear drum when his crew had exited the tank for a meal and a British Spitfire bombed them.

"The thing I never understood," he declared at one point, "is why you Americans were fighting us. Made no sense. The Russians were everybody's enemy."

"Hitler, I guess," I suggested.

He waved his hand dismissively, then declared, "Leaders come and go. It's the people that matter."

As for the Normandy Invasion, he opined, "France was good duty then. The troops there got soft drinking French wine and bedding French women. The bastards forgot how to fight!"

As the hour grew late and the bar was about to close, he proposed we continue our discussion elsewhere and have a bite to eat. That sounded appealing to me and I concurred, so he procured a taxi and off we went together into the night.

I hadn't understood that his intent was to remove ourselves to his modest abode, an *Einzelzimmer* in a large complex, but that's where the taxi let us off. The shadowy area outside lacked distinct lighting and my suspicions became aroused; however, sensing this, he reassured me I was in no danger and encouragingly proceeded to lead me up the numerous flights of stairs to the top floor and the door to his domicile. Upon entering, I observed his living quarters consisted of a couple of chairs, a small table, a fridge and small cooking stove, a clothes cabinet, shelving and a bed, all beneath a ceiling that sloped downward toward the outside wall conforming to the pitch of the roof.

With a generous display of hospitality he urged me to be seated at the table while he busied himself at the fridge and stove. In short order he had *Tee* brewing and was preparing two sumptuous *Wurst* sandwiches piled high with a huge variety of condiments – and cheese, lettuce, tomato, onion slices and spreads – a stupendous *Butterbrot*. I'd find it one of the most tasty of any I'd partake of during my whole time in Germany! Then we washed them down with cups of *Tee* and resumed our conversation.

He was curious about my experiences with the Thai forces in Vietnam. What did I perceive as the main differences between their army and the U.S. military? How did I think the war was going to end? What would be my next assignment?

Finally, he rose and walked to the foot of the bed, knelt down and pulled out a small trunk from underneath. He unfastened the clasp and lifted the lid. It appeared that inside were likely all the meager keepsakes he'd preserved and stowed away, including a photo album resting on top. He took it out, returned to the table and sat down.

He flipped open the cover, revealing page after page of black-and-white photos. A smattering of him as a small boy, a couple of him with his Panzer crew all standing stalwartly in front of their Panther tank. And the rest . . . the smiling faces and some complete figures of beautiful young women from the wartime. A few with him in the photo beside them, others standing alone. "Ah," he would say, "this was Helga (or Gisela, or Ingrid, or Maria)," and, kissing his fingers, he'd add something like, "She was so sweet." Or, "She was heavenly." Or, "She was the best." Referring to one, laughingly, he slapped his knee and said, "We met in a *Gasthaus* and got so full of *Bier* and worked up with each other, we left and couldn't wait and, *Gott im Himmel*, we, how would you say,

‘coupled’ right there on the curb of the *Straße!*” I laughed too and nodded. The salvaged “dear” memories that an old soldier clings to from his war years.

The night would soon be transitioning into morning and with the closing of the album came the closing of our time together. My host accompanied me down to the street to the nearest *Telefonzelle*, phoned for a taxi and, when it arrived, gave the driver the address of my hotel. And we bid each other farewell and good luck.

Riding alone in the taxi in the late-night silence, I pondered what the evening had revealed. The controversial song title of that time, “The Universal Soldier,” came to mind, but not the sense of the blameworthy lyrics. Rather, I empathized with those young men who, forced into a uniform and handed a gun, are sent to kill one another – all in the name of someone or other “abstraction.” Soldiers are, after all, “universally” the same, I thought. Whatever the trim of the uniform or the native tongue spoken, what they each desire is simply hot food, stiff drink and a warm female body now and again. And to survive another day. And, if lucky, to one day go back home again.

Certainly, I had to admit, whatever the outcome of the war I’d just left, that someday in the future a new generation of young fresh faces would be breaking bread with old soldiers who had tried to kill us and listening to their enthralling tales of battle. Young fresh faces looking into the face of the enemy – and smiling. That would always be the long-term result of war.

In any event, as circumstances later unfolded, my next assignment turned out to be the Upper Heyford Air Force Base in England. Soon after my arrival there, I stopped into the Class VI store to purchase a bottle of Scotch. The genial

lady behind the counter asked, "Where did you come in from, luv?"

"Germany," I replied.

"You don't say. Well, how did you find your time there?"

"It was an isolated post, but I liked it. The people were nice."

"Do tell." She paused thoughtfully, then commented, "I've never been all that keen on the Germans. They bombed us, you know, during the war."



ARTICLE

1

It's Not You, It's Us: *Critical Analysis of Lord of the Flies by William Golding (1954)*

CHRISTIAN LOID VALENZUELA

The world, that understandable and lawful world, was slipping away (91) gives me the creeps because even though *Lord of the Flies* is published in 1954, the themes of this novel still exist today. Perhaps, the primary subject of the novel is about darkness in human hearts which results to various adversities on the characters, especially on the readers. On the characters, the novel portrays cheerful schoolboys despite the isolation in an island. However, as days passed by, these cheerful, social order-seeking and reason-driven schoolboys started to deteriorate, leading them to transform into something ominous. The story slowly narrated how these schoolboys succumb by fear and savagery. The world they are trying to establish in the island slips away like what happened to them – *slipping away from their civilized identity*. Slowly, the darkness of human heart, as the subject, started creeping as everyone debates whether there is a beast lurking around the island or maybe they are just in fear due to isolation and no proper supervision.

For the readers of this novel, the adversity they may encounter is how to stay sane in spite of many mind-twisting

principles and social behaviours that are being manifested through the evolution of the language and actions of the characters. For example, the littluns and biguns are happy being together and trying to exchange jokes to alleviate the fear they are facing. However, in the latter part, they started to have factions and became enemies to others and of themselves.

Ralph looked at him dumbly. For a moment he had a fleeting picture of the strange glamour that had once invested the beaches. But the island is scorched up like dead wood – Simon was dead – and Jack had... The tears began to flow and sobs shook him. ... the other little boys began to shake and sob too. ... Ralph wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart, and the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy (202). This extract from the ending scene captured the conflict which remained unsolved even though the novel ended. When the adult supervision, in the form of the naval officers, arrived, the schoolboys, who are now savages started to realize what they have become. We can see that they cannot regain the innocence they once had during their first day of isolation in the island. Just like the island, which they burned down due to the darkness of their hearts, they will never be the same schoolboy the readers once knew. Perhaps, when they returned to their families, they are not the educated Ralph anymore or the skilful Jack Merridew. Thus, the specific conflict which I believe remained unsolved is their new identities.

There are a lot of statements from the novel that are of great importance. On Chapter 5, entitled *Beast from the Water* (89), Simon shared his insight about the beast on the island: *Maybe there is a beast... maybe it's only us.* As I read this, the tone of the novel appeared to transform into something horrendous. This statement, somehow, foreshadows the

approaching dark elements which will penetrate the lives of the schoolboys, known as darkness of the human heart, fear of the other and wreckage of social order. This is one of the vital statements of the novel because it serves as a caveat to the readers that maybe the only beast in this reality is ourselves. The innate savagery and darkness of human nature, to be exact.

Simon and Piggy both symbolize reason and innocence. In Simon, we can see innocence and being connected with the nature, whilst on Piggy, reasoning and social order were depicted. These two heavily influence the lives of the schoolboys, especially Ralph and Jack Merridew. Simon, as mentioned, warns the biguns and littluns about the true beast but no one dared to listen. Piggy, who always held up the conch shell, endlessly seeks out social order and rationality. But most people whom he cared for betrayed him and on his final moment, the conch shell, which symbolizes the attempt to build social order, breaks into pieces just like how the biguns and littluns *break* Piggy to death.

During the time when William Golding published *Lord of the Flies*, his first novel, it is believed that he parodied a novel entitled *The Coral Island* by R. M. Ballantyne. In contrast, *The Coral Island* believes that adversity may be solved through goodness of man and its civilized way. However, Golding has a different take for he believes that men are inherently savage which is well-depicted on *Lord of the Flies*. From this, Golding built a dark society in the novel which can also be relatable to the society this novel belongs to. Golding writes the novel in early 1950s and got it published in 1954. Aside from being an author, Golding served in the British Royal Navy from 1940 to the end of World War II. We may infer that Golding witnessed the darkness in human hearts during his experience of war. Hence, the novel depicts a period of war, same with the real,

current happenings when Golding is writing it. Relating the novel and the reality happening in the 1950s, both interconnect with each other because the ending scene seems to be not an ending at all. As mentioned, there is no resolution of what the schoolboys had become and same with the resolution of the mentioned war in the novel. The story opened with the schoolboys already stranded in the island and only from the snippets of their conversations, the readers identified that the reason of their isolation is an unspecified nuclear war. However, in the final scene, the war is, somehow, brought up because of the appearance of the naval officers. But it seems that the naval officers will deliver the schoolboys into a society where war is still ongoing.

I find this novel engaging because it explores another side of humanity. It strongly stated and believed that there is a huge tendency on humans to be savages due to some factors such as having no proper supervision. The main significance of this book is the key themes which discuss how the civilized schoolboys turned into savages and how macabre darkness lurks everywhere. Thus, this novel may be applied to teenagers because not only they can relate to the age group of the schoolboys but also these teenagers need more adult supervision to refrain resorting to their inherent savagery.

Overall, *Lord of the Flies* deconstructs an array of aspects related to the beliefs in humanity, especially the kindness in humanity. It examines morality, civility and society.

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36. **Mithil Jha** is a young writer with a strong inclination towards language and literature. He is currently pursuing his education at Acadia University, Wolf Ville, Nova Scotia, Canada. He has a great passion for lore and learning and is immensely motivated with the write-ups of the classical and dynamic writers, the traditional and contemporary situations, issues and environment.
37. **Nels Hanson's** fiction received the James D. Phelan Award from the San Francisco Foundation and his poetry the Prospero Prize from the Sharkpack Review.
38. **Nida Shaikh**, aged 18, from Mumbai, India, is a psychology student. She writes her poems on the basis of her over analysis of thoughts and finds muses in the most unusual forms. Many of her literary works describe her mental hardships or cognitive experiences.
39. **Niels Hammer**, born in Denmark, has lived in England, Sweden, America, the Near and the Far East, converted four acres of farm land to a biological diversity refuge, written articles in, e.g. Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft, Journal of Indo-European Studies, Mind and Matter, about consciousness research, Indo-European linguistics and comparative aesthetics, poems in Littoral Magazine, Dream Catcher, Orbis and a monograph The Art of Sanskrit Poetry, about the concepts of Indian aesthetics and poetics.
40. **Nigel F. Ford** (born in 1944) wrote his first radio play aged 14 (refused). Jobs include reporter for The Daily Times, Lagos, Nigeria, travel writer for Sun Publishing, London, English teacher for Berlitz, Hamburg, copy writer for Ted Bates, Stockholm. Had a hand in starting the Brighton Fringe in 1967. He started painting etc. in

1983 and has regularly exhibited in Sweden and on the Internet in various publication. In addition, several magazines in UK and US have been kind enough to publish his writing. He is now trying to produce & direct one of his stage plays.

41. **Patty Somlo's** most recent book, *Hairway to Heaven Stories* (Cherry Castle Publishing) was a Finalist in the American Fiction Awards and Best Book Awards. Previous books, *The First to Disappear* (Spuyten Duyvil) and *Even When Trapped Behind Clouds: A Memoir of Quiet Grace* (WiDo Publishing), were Finalists in several contests. Her work has appeared in *Guernica*, *Delmarva Review*, *Under the Sun*, the *Los Angeles Review*, and over 40 anthologies. She received Honorable Mention for Fiction in the Women's National Book Association Contest, was a Finalist in the J.F. Powers Short Fiction Contest, had an essay selected as Notable for Best American Essays, and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net multiple times. www.pattysomlo.com; @PattySomlo.
42. **Phillip Frey's** history includes professional actor, produced screenwriter and writer/director of three short films, one of which showed at the New York Film Festival. He is now devoted only to writing prose. He currently has the privilege of his short stories appearing in over 20 literary journals and anthologies. www.amazon.com/author/phillipfrey
43. **Ram Krishna Singh** is a renowned, widely published, anthologized, and translated poet with over 25 poetry collections to his credit.
44. **Richard Marvin Tiberius Grove / Tai** – Poet Laureate of Brighton, Ontario, Canada.

45. **Rick Hartwell** is a retired middle school teacher (remember the hormonally-challenged?) living in California with his wife of forty-nine years, Sally Ann (upon whom he is emotionally, physically, and spiritually dependent), two grown children, two granddaughters, and fifteen cats! Like Blake, Thoreau and Merton, he believes that the instant contains eternity.
46. **Ron Singer** has published 21 books, in multiple genres, with a new one due out in 2026. For details, please visit www.ronsinger.net.
47. **Scott Thomas Outlar** originally hails from Atlanta, Georgia. He now resides and writes in Frederick, Maryland. His work has been nominated multiple times for both the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. He guest-edited the Hope Anthology of Poetry from CultureCult Press as well as the 2019-2023 Western Voices editions of Setu Mag. Selections of his poetry have been translated and published in 15 languages. He has been a weekly contributor at Dissident Voice for the past ten years. More about Outlar's work can be found at 17Numa.com.
48. **Teodora Sukareva** (born 1996) is a Bulgarian writer with a passion for storytelling that blossomed in her early childhood. In 2015, she established a platform for her creativity through a blog where she shared original poetry and short stories. Her debut poetry collection, "Confession in Metaphors," released in late 2023, marked a significant milestone in her literary journey. The collection, edited by Nikolai Vladimirov, explores themes that resonate deeply. Her work has found a home in prominent Bulgarian online literary magazines, where she tackles hard-hitting societal issues. Sukareva believes in the transformative power of literature and strives to connect with readers on a deeper level. Through her

writing, she offers a message of solidarity, reminding them: “You are not alone.”

49. **Vitasta Raina** is an author, architect and illustrator based in Mumbai. She is the author of a dystopian novella *Writer’s Block* (International Authors 2011) and a collection of Poetry, *Someday Dream* (Sahitya Akademi, 2014). Her short-stories and poetry have been featured in *Indian Literature* (Sahitya Akademi), *Emanations* (International Authors), *Suvarnarekha: An Anthology of Indian Women Poets Writing In English* and *The Dance of the Peacock*. Her illustration in water colours, oils and acrylics have been used in several anthologies and have been featured on book covers. She won the Tata Literature Live Mystory contest 2019 for her poem “Madness is Euphoria”. She is currently pursuing her PhD from IIT Bombay.
50. **William Doeski** lives in Peterborough, New Hampshire. He has taught at several colleges and universities. His most recent book of poetry is *Venus, Jupiter* (2023). His essays, poetry, fiction, and reviews have appeared in various journals.
51. **Yeşim Ağaoğlu’s** poems have been published in literary journals since the age of 18. Has seven poetry books published in Turkey and two poetry books published in Azerbaijan and in 2016 and 2017 two poetry books has published in New York, USA. And also has five poetry E-books in different languages. Poems translated into many different languages such as English, German, Spanish, Russian, Italian, Japanese, etc. She has a short theater play named “forbidden chirpings” staged at Hazar University, Baku, Azerbaijan.

52. **Yuan Changming** edits Poetry Pacific with Allen Yuan in Vancouver. Credits include 12 Pushcart nominations for poetry and 2 for fiction besides appearances in Best of the Best Canadian Poetry (2008-17), Best New Poems Online and 2019 other literary outlets worldwide. A poetry judge at Canada's 2021 National Magazine Awards, Yuan began writing and publishing fiction in 2022.



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