

THE SILENCE.

september 2024

these writers' voices
issue i

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founder's note.

These Writers' Voices came into existence one fateful June night. June. Three months ago. This has been an insane journey, one full of trials and tribulations that brought us to our first issue. Originally, **These Writers' Voices** was created to promote social issues in our world, like the Palestinian genocide that is still ongoing. This literary magazine was meant to bring a voice to the otherwise marginalized and let them know that we hear them.

Now, I'm sitting in a boat with nowhere to go. I don't know what the future of **These Writers' Voices** looks like. In August, I announced that this would be the first and last issue of this magazine. I had, and still have, no direction. For mental health's sake, this will be our last issue. Thank you to everyone who contributed and to everyone who helped me on this journey.

To everyone who submitted, I thank you. To the staff of TWV, I thank you. You have made this journey one that will remain with me forever. I hope that this magazine will produce a second issue. When that will happen, I'm not entirely sure but I hope soon. Thank you for making this magazine one worth running, even for as little as it has.

Your Founder and Editor-in-Chief, signing out.
Molly

poetry.

*poetry is the spontaneous overflow
of powerful feelings: it takes its origin
from emotion recollected in tranquility*

— william wordsworth

Memories

by: Asteria

trigger warnings: mentions of blood and blades

White snow, noises
Although hypnotizing
The gestures dictated by his acrimony
There is nothing surprising

These red pearls
Which fell from his face
Colored by the cold
A Vociferation

I can't hold back my tears
When the blade on my body
Leaves a scar from my throat
To my swelling heart

In a last breath where he whistled,
The blood was scattered
And finally,
In an eternal dance
You acquiesce to its existence

RAISES AWARENESS FOR:

Inequality, the injustice & cruelty done to minorities (i'm an aboriginal), late recognition of past acts and nothing to repair what have been done

My friend in the Middle-East

by: O.P. Jha

I've a friend in the Middle-East
in fearful nights he stands alone
in furious days he watches alone
in the beginning no one heard him
in the end he couldn't hear anyone

my friend looks rough-tough
with thick skin and thorny leaves
but he's the treasurer of sweet fruit
he gives me jaggery and juice

he fought against the noises of arms
he saved himself from flashes of missiles
he showed his guts against insolent gusts
but he couldn't face shrieks crossing the
fence

he witnesses many things
but in his loneliness, he knows a thing
to describe the taste of dates
you must have some sweet words

O Date-tree! O my dear friend!
break your silence before these sand-dunes.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

O.P.Jha's works appeared in Rigorous, Mantis, You Might Need To Hear This, Punt Volat, Zoetic Press, Discretionary Love, The Indian Literature, In Parentheses, Shot Glass Journal, Lothlorien Poetry Journal, ANTHRA Zine, The Interwoven Journal, The Cry Lounge, The Odessa Collective Magazine, Backchannels Journal and other journals. He is the author of an inspiring book "Management Guru Lord Krishna". He has a Doctoral degree in "Translation Studies". Email: opjha189@yahoo.com , twitter: @OP Jha17

Hold your breaths

by: O.P. Jha

Some birds flap their wings
some birds escape with a hint
some birds fall with the wind
some birds burn in flashes

for erasing an inclement weather
from the memory of innocence
thousands of springs die
then blooming, dances and songs

escaping from missiles falling in Kiev
some love-birds are hidden in bushes
holding their breaths
watching the Dnipro
that flows slowly with frozen tears
crossing the barriers of countries
sipping screams of half burnt souls
with unbearable pains,

O darling bushes! hold your breaths
otherwise, some birds will fall
some love-birds will die
some bent sunflowers will cry.

A Testament

by: O.P. Jha

In the evening
an agitated fellow enters a house
walls stand stunned
a prayer hums in tender hearts

frustrations of days become
the furies of nights
such days and nights become
a misguided testament of life

for ages man has been carrying
this testament with passion
for posterity
to be read from dawn to dusk

some lines of this testament are struck
in innocent throats
but birds never twitter this book
from their hearts.

Ukrainian Time

by: O.P. Jha

Some flowers wither
some leaves fall
some stand for tonight
some bloom for tomorrow

here charred houses are the epitaphs
of beautiful towns
broken window-panes compose elegies
on the brows of whispers roaming around

the war spoils the land
but the soil surpasses the night
to lick the frozen tears falling
to brush the bent sunflowers in the morning

treading through fire and smokes
Ukrainians surpass the nights
prepared to bloom
into a day of their own

for the much-desired day
the Dnipro dreams in her jittery nap
the brackets of war will break
into the droplets of calm in Kiev.

RAISES AWARENESS FOR:
Against wars, against domestic violence

Condemned

by: *Louis Faber*

RAISES AWARENESS FOR:
The burden of speaking truth to power

He wondered if the moon this night
would concede the sky to dawn, or
would simply be his final sight,

nothing, he knew, could change his plight
they would be knocking on his door.
He wondered if the moon this night

knew that his crime had been to write
the truth of war, that his cell door
would simply be his final sight.

Some asked if it was worth the fight
to speak against what they deplore,
He wondered if the moon this night
would cast a slightly brighter light
on those seeking peace or if war
would simply be his final sight.

His death would bring them rare delight
until they passed through Hades door.
He wondered if the moon this night
would simply be his final sight.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Louis Faber is a poet, writer and blogger. His work has appeared in *Cantos*, *The Poet* (U.K.), *Alchemy Spoon*, *New Feathers Anthology*, *Dreich* (Scotland), *Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, *Erothanatos* (Greece), *Defenestration*, *Atlanta Review*, *Glimpse*, *Rattle*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Eureka Literary Magazine*, *Borderlands: the Texas Poetry Review*, *Midnight Mind*, *Pearl*, *Midstream*, *European Judaism*, *The South Carolina Review* and *Worcester Review*, among many others, and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. A book of poetry, *The Right to Depart*, was published by Plain View Press. He can be found at <https://anoldwriter.com>.

RAISES AWARENESS FOR:
Lack of food yet it is so abundant

The Land of Plenty

by: Dennis Williams

Half-starved, weak, and naked
While food aplenty at a finger's tip
Leftovers thrown to the dogs.
How can a child go hungry in a land of plenty?

Who hears the children cry?
Neglect and turn a blind eye
Lazy and non-caring
How can a child be malnourished in a land of plenty?

Milk speed down the gutter
Creating an environment mess
Task because of low price
Economics at play
Capitalism at its worst
Greed showing its ugly face
While a child goes hungry in a land of plenty?

Neighbors at their worst
Laughing while eating roast
While a child wrench in pain
To bed hungry yet again
Mathematicians solve this one
How can a child be hungry in a land of plenty?
Child neglect
Parent regret
Little hands grasp but nothing held
Yet, he smiles
To unearth the good that should exits
Exhuming from a willing heart
Destroying the voracious greed
That makes a child go to bed without food in a land of plenty.
End

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Dennis is a poet/writer from Sandy Hill, St. Catherine, Jamaica. He is blessed and humbled to have his writings published in the Agape Review, the American Diversity Report (ADR), Alchemy Spoon issue #7, the Health Line Zine #1, the independent literary magazine, Adelaide #54, EgoPHobia # 74, livina Press issue# 3, Blue Pepper Magazine, entropy2, five fleas itchy poetry magazine, Blue unicorn, Dry River issue 2, and Roots and resettlement Vol.3, Taj Mahal Vol.24#2, Wave of words Lit.

RAISES AWARENESS FOR:

Continued discriminations

Then and Now

by: *Lynn White*

Once we were free
somewhere else
or so they say.

Then we were slaves
somewhere closer
or so they say.

Then we were freed
somewhere near
or so they say.

And now,
what are we now
here?

And what am I now
a young woman
here?

I don't feel free
here
whatever they're saying
now.

I listen out for them still
but now
they have nothing to say
for me
here
me, a woman of colour.

RAISES AWARENESS FOR:
Theft of people and artifacts in Africa

Power Man

by: *Lynn White*

The figure bristles with power,
unmistakable
untouchable
the spirits and demons
held close inside him
to be released at his command.

But only in Africa.

When he leaves,
stolen
taken
then
he's powerless
like all those other
stolen ones.

So much power
left behind
in Africa.

Things They Say

by: *Lynn White*

They say that goldfish have no memory
but the ones in my pond
still hide from me
in loving memory of their friends
disappeared from the overcrowded pond
many months ago.

They seem to blame me and they are right.
They were re-homed without consent.

They used to say
that Alzheimers was a pre-senile dementia
not afflicting the elderly.
It wasn't true
and They don't say it anymore.

The used to say
that IQ tests were an accurate measure
of intelligence.
It wasn't true
but sometimes They still say it.

They say a lot of things that aren't true.
Even goldfish know better
than to believe
the things They say.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Lynn White lives in north Wales. Her work is influenced by issues of social justice and events, places and people she has known or imagined. She is especially interested in exploring the boundaries of dream, fantasy and reality. She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net and a Rhysling Award.

RAISES AWARENESS FOR:

Breakdown of civilisation, human-induced climate change

Love in the time of climate collapse

by: Allan Lake

One-night stand, over-crowded sharehouse.
Forget marriage, forget mortgage and interest
only loans that outlast the unspooling of
uncivilisation. Forget reversible and forever.
Billionaires heading for mansions on Mars
where there is ice for drinks and bleak Eden
to foul. No apples, no snakes, only memories
of a paradise trashed as lethal security surveys
an emptiness while listening for a ping.
But you and I, my love, are earth-bound
for the drawn-out finale so let us stick
together until the cock crows and the hen
sings opera. After that, we can head off
together or in opposite directions in search
of coffee and any old thing to soak it up.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Allan Lake is a migrant poet from Allover, Canada who now lives in Allover, Australia. Coincidence. He has published poems in 20 countries. His latest chapbook of poems, entitled 'My Photos of Sicily', was published by Ginninderra Press.

RAISES AWARENESS FOR:

The poem characterizes the people that resist progress and how change would have to come from within to be effective

Hinterland

by: Simon Kaeppeli

We wander arm in arm, half blind
Our hands stretched out, grasping at the air
Our feet slip and stumble, struggling to find
purchase
On the polished mirror floors

We count our blessings and find some missing
Our memory yielding to nostalgia
The hours compressed
To accommodate the good old times

We are carried forward, pushed and pulled
By the relentless march of progress
Refusing to leave us behind
As we anchor ourselves to our own downfall

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Simon Kaeppeli is a scientist and writer. His work was published in Better Than Starbucks, Down in the Dirt, Spark to Flame, Discretionary Love, and Carmina Magazine, among others. He currently lives in Scotland with his senior cat.

RAISES AWARENESS FOR:
Body positivity, transness, anarchism

queer forms

by: *mk zariel*

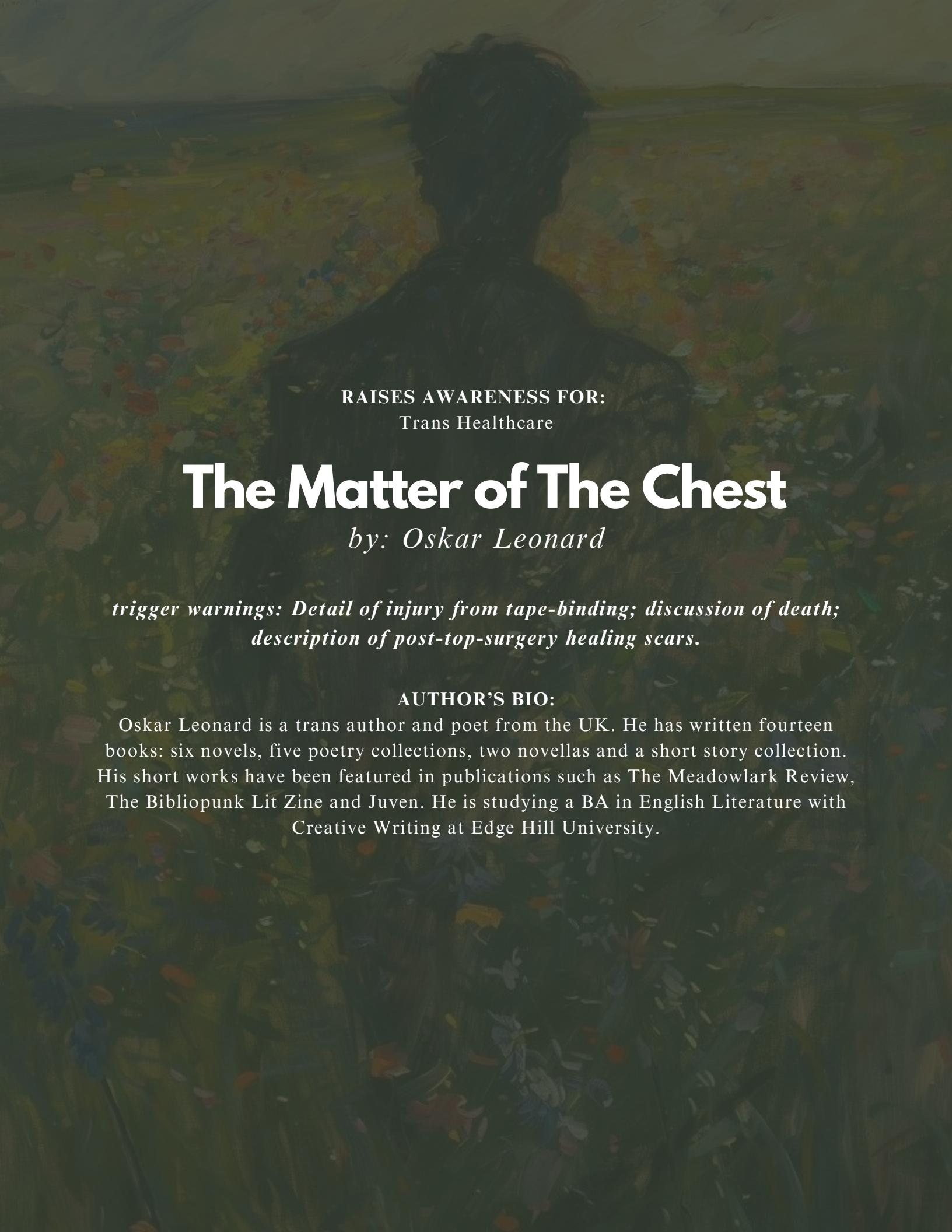
you tell me all the reasons you hate
the soft edges of your body, all of which
mostly amount to preschool taunts
and bigotry. and both of us are convinced
that we'll never be desired, craved, ached for
that we'll stay lost in this queer oblivion
of a collective jouissance-negation of desire
that you read about in a BashBack zine
that may or may not be practical

that our bodies can be amorphous
as our theories of liberation, if only we ignore
and treasure them enough. and at 1 am we discuss queer forms of care,
of relating, of gender— aren't queer forms of self more powerful
than any framework of transformative justice
any dog-eared book by a dead white man? our

queerness encircles us like the flame of our
desire that is *here* and *alive* and can never be defined
and your queer form may never be a symbol
of resistance, but we are an ecology of care
a rewilding. *isn't anarchy the queering of everything?*
says a friend, and we all have to agree
but by that logic, aren't our bodies anarchy?

AUTHOR'S BIO:

mk zariel (it/they) is a transmasculine lesbian anarchist. influenced by the Queers Bash Back tendency, it hosts the podcast THE CHILD AND ITS ENEMIES (about being in high school and organizing), writes for the Anarchist Review of Books, and writes the blog DEBATE ME BRO (a y2k style advice column about anarchy-101 stuff). its poetry is published (or forthcoming) in Unfuturing, Free Verse Revolution, What We Think About When We Think About Love, Not Your Poster Child, Chasing The Storm, A Rose By Any Other Name, Suburban Witchcraft, and MyrtleHaus; its photography is soon to be featured in Coin Operated Press's queer photography zine. it also organizes trans liberationist spaces across the great lakes region, performs poetry and theater, does graphic design for social movements, and vibes to classic queercore. find out more about its organizing and art here: <https://linktr.ee/mkzariel>



RAISES AWARENESS FOR:
Trans Healthcare

The Matter of The Chest

by: *Oskar Leonard*

trigger warnings: Detail of injury from tape-binding; discussion of death; description of post-top-surgery healing scars.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Oskar Leonard is a trans author and poet from the UK. He has written fourteen books: six novels, five poetry collections, two novellas and a short story collection. His short works have been featured in publications such as The Meadowlark Review, The Bibliopunk Lit Zine and Juven. He is studying a BA in English Literature with Creative Writing at Edge Hill University.

I. A Summary Of Two Round Decades Of Discontent

There are holes in my chest
and they are weeping,
leaking transparent tears
onto blisters, biting flesh
that only wishes to be hidden:
this is the price, paid in cells
ripped from epidermis –

call it madness to engage
in a daily ritual, knowing
the result is red and raw and ruthless,
and so miserable that even it
cries clear tears at night. **II. A Snapshot Of The Quaking Moments Prior To Relief**

Time mimics my heartbeat,
hanging on the wall, thrumming
like a ridiculing parrot, sending
vibrations through the inked pages
intended to distract me. They do not.

I will die here. I will not. Yet I might.
Who is to say, in this sanitised crypt,
that I have not already gone? Did I blink,
disappear, forget, and return? Is this...
what do you call it? Purgatory?

Maybe I am mistaking my heartbeat
for a death rattle. There is a knock—
the heart stops, the clock continues.

‘The team are ready for you now.’

III. A Realisation Of Joy, After The Fact

It is the second car journey,
not the first. My brain echoes
itself, softly, until I understand
the words: *now I know what it is,*
this trans joy. Now I know.

A glimmer of a tear trembles,
not quite overflowing. Yes,
now I understand. Lightness,
held together by scabbing lifelines,
causes the motorway greenery to glow.

RAISES AWARENESS FOR:

This piece draws from personal experiences as well as recent world events, especially the overturning of Roe v. Wade. It emphasises how a woman's autonomy is constantly threatened by societal tendencies to only identify women in relation to men, to blame young women for supposedly 'inviting' unwelcome attention from men, and to restrict a woman's freedom over her own body. While women are pressured to remain silent about these threats to their wellbeing, this piece highlights how they still continually make their voices heard and, through their public outcry, empower future generations to do the same.

we're not mad

by: *Amanda Pompilii*

trigger warnings: mentions of child abuse

we're not mad
no
that would be silly
to say we're mad at you
when to you a woman's body
is her privilege
not her right
when to you we're people
only when we're first your wife
first your daughter f
irst the mother to your firstborn son

no
don't say i was mad
that you took offence at my budding breasts
buried so deep below my training bra
yet still your hollowed eyes dug them out
how distracting they must've been to you
a man double the age
of a girl who'd just come of age
yet still
you think we'd be mad at you
who finds us so heavenly

you worship us on your knees
just to light the pyre beneath
our feet

no
we're not mad
because mad doesn't begin to
cover it.
we are livid,
we are seething,
we are burning
with the rage of every ill-
behaved woman
who'd breathe her last before
she'd bite her tongue.

but mad?
no,
that would be silly.
we're not mad,
never mad.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Amanda Pompilii recently completed her English major at the University of Toronto. She has always loved to be moved by the stories she reads, and hopes to one day move people with a few stories of her own.

fiction: prose.

*the poet gives us his essence,
but prose takes the mould
of the body and mind entire*

— virginia woolf

RAISES AWARENESS FOR:

Homophobia, racial prejudice, intolerance

The Blue Swan

by: Matias Travieso-Diaz

"But don't you remember what happened ... when a goose built her nest in the swan's territory? She thought she was enough like them that they wouldn't mind her. Only her neck was too short, and her legs were too long, and she didn't have the right sort of feathers, so the swans kept attacking and chasing the poor thing until finally she was driven off."

"You're not a goose."

Pandora's mouth twisted. "I'm an awfully deficient swan, then."

Lisa Kleypas, *Devil in Spring*

Delwyn, a male mute swan (*Cygnus olor*) was hatched a cool spring morning, by the waters of the cape at the south end of the island of Öland, in the Ottenby Nature Reserve ("the Reserve"), a haven for many species of migratory birds and other forms wildlife. He was the middle cygnet in a clutch of seven eggs laid by his mother (Elara), the pen, in a nest built on a large mound that she and her male spouse (Orin, the cob) had built with waterside vegetation in a protected location approved by Delwin's mother after rejecting three less defensible others suggested by Orin for in the Reserve there were several hundred swan families surviving cheek by jowl, fiercely competing for breeding grounds and living space.

Delwyn was unremarkable at birth. He was of average size and weight and, like all mute swan cygnets, had a dull greyish-black bill; his body was covered in a gray/buff down. One year later, the down on Delwyn's wings had been replaced by flight feathers, and regular feathers were appearing throughout his neck and chest; his beak had turned bright orange, with black around the nostrils and a black knob at the base of the bill.

Delwyn's parents and siblings always traveled together on the waters of the Reserve, a tiny armada that swam as a group, feeding on submerged aquatic plants which they reached with their long necks, as well as aquatic insects, fish, and frogs. They supplemented this marine diet by grazing the vegetation that was available on the land near the shore. Thus, their left throughout the area the imprint of their passing in various ways.

During one of their foraging trips Elara noticed something peculiar about one of her offspring. By that time, the cygnets had developed proper feathers in the wing region, the shoulders, and the tail, to be followed soon by new feathers on their bellies and sides. Delwyn's new feathers were, little by little, taking on a light blue-gray hue.

Elara sought to pluck one of the unusual feathers off Delwyn's side, and Delwyn suffered the bites from his mother's serrated beak stoically. She succeeded in removing two feathers, and looked closely at them: except for their unusual color, they were identical to those she and every other swan had. She let the anomaly pass unremarked.

As summer turned to fall, the coloring of Delwyn's feathers deepened, becoming blue green, a color that rendered him unmistakable among the hundreds of snow-white birds swimming in the Reserve. His oddity had not gone unnoticed; the family's rounds were often greeted by grunts, hoarse whistles, and derisive snorts from other swans. Further challenges were only forestalled by the aggressive stance of Orin, who swam at the front of the entourage with both feet noisily paddling in unison, neck curved back and wings half raised. There were no overt confrontations, but tension mounted on the waters with each passing day.

As autumn marched in, the time for migration arrived. The cygnets had matured enough to be able to fly long distances and the family readied to move south before waters froze over. Thus, one morning in October, the nine swans took off in a vee formation headed by Orin, flying southwest in a journey that would take them to some island in a warm sea, weeks of hard flying away.

The trip, however, had to cross the expanse of water that they had known as home for the last months. The area was teeming with other swans, many of which were also getting ready to migrate. Before long, Delwyn's group was confronted by other birds who had become aware of their territory being trespassed upon and had risen to the air to challenge the interlopers.

One cob, and then another, got close enough to Delwyn's family to intercept them. They started throbbing their wings rapidly and issuing peremptory vocal challenges (mute swans are not mute; they just do not screech loudly, as other swans do). Orin faced one of the aggressors in what became a prolonged air encounter that lingered on until the combatants disengaged and the attacking cob fled away.

Meanwhile, the second cob went after Elara and lunged at the much weaker female. Both swans dropped onto the water; there, Elara sought to defend herself and her brood by swinging at the threat with the bony spurs in her wings, and attempting to bite at the cob with her bill; her larger opponent retaliated in kind and, taking advantage of his greater size and weight, climbed onto Selwyn's mother and pecked the back of the head, pushing her onto the water and then beneath it, seeking to put her to death.

Delwyn and his siblings were for the most part spectators to the fights in which their parents were participants; they attempted to assist their mother, but were swatted away by powerful sweeps of the attacking cob's wings. They were left unprotected and soon found themselves on the water, surrounded by over a dozen or more hostile swans of all sizes, all hissing and spreading their wings threateningly. It soon became evident, however, that the other birds' hostility was directly solely at Delwyn, who was corralled away from his siblings and herded some distance away. There, he was set upon simultaneously by several cobs and pens, who pecked at him viciously, beat him with their wings, and forced him beneath the surface of the water. Delwyn fought bravely but, after a few moments, was overcome and drowned.

Orin, fresh from the victory over his opponent, broke like a flash of lightning among the swans that still idled around the spot where Delwyn had been submerged. The cob twirled around furiously, but none of the other swans dared confront him; the angry crowd that had victimized Delwyn dispersed rapidly, leaving only a few bubbles rising from the depths and three royal blue feathers to mark the spot of the assault. Delwyn's corpse had dropped to the murky depths of the Reserve and never had reemerged.

Orin turned his attention to the area, a short distance away, where Elara had been subjected to a parallel attack. There, however, the final outcome had been less dire: Elara was injured and almost drowned, but had survived her encounter. Orin joined her, rounded up their surviving offspring, and together they retreated to their original nesting area, seeking to recover from their injuries and grieving for a long time for Delwyn's loss.

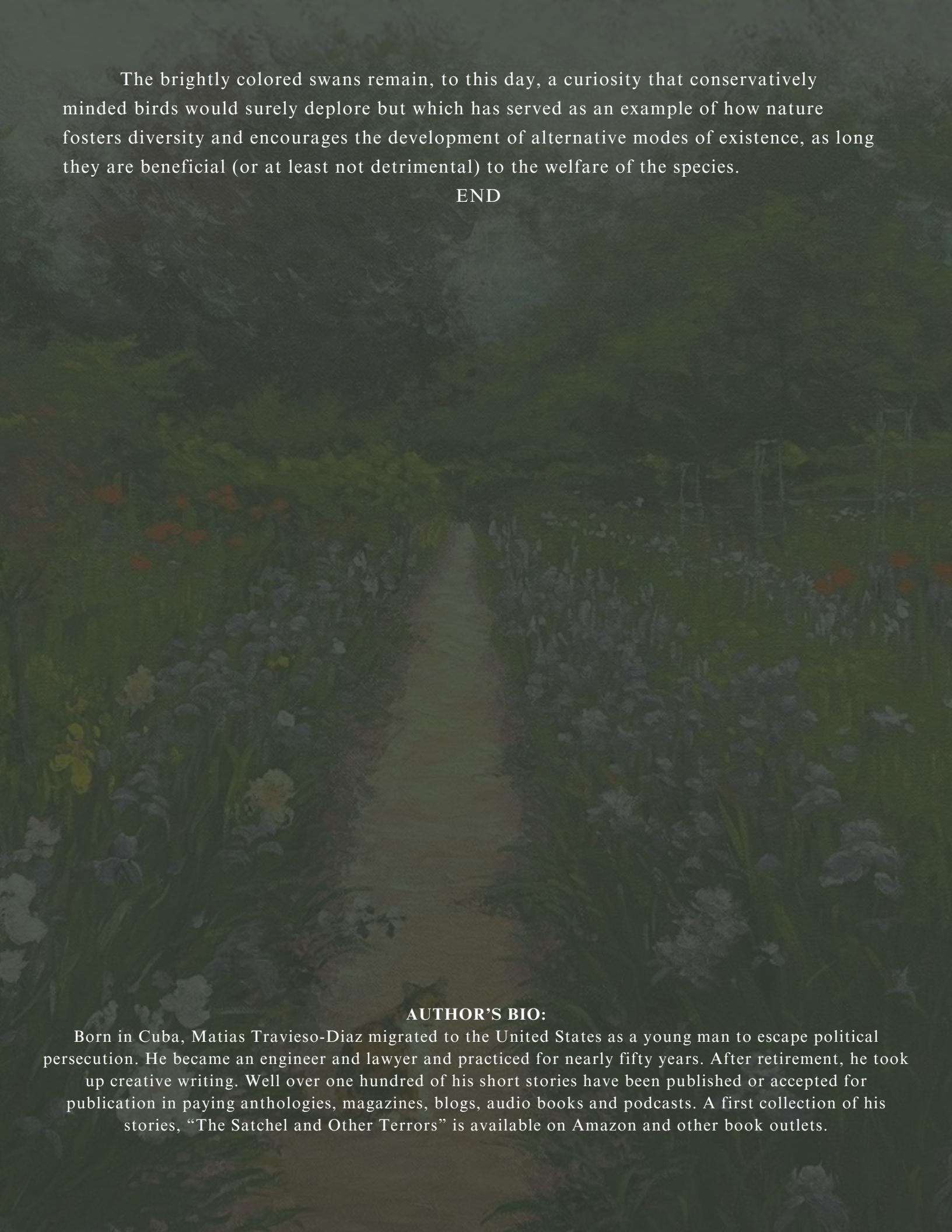
Delwyn had been an unexceptional young swan, neither stronger nor smarter nor in any way more enviable than any of his siblings. His lack of distinction made his demise most regrettable: what happened to him could, but for good fortune, have happened to anyone.

The family's understanding of what had transpired was very dim, but one thing was abundantly clear: Delwyn had been attacked and killed because his feathers exhibited a coloring that was different from everyone else's.

Time went by, and Orin and Elara bred more clutches of perfectly white, unremarkable cygnets. They had moved to another pond in one of the many islands that dot the waters of Denmark, a country where swans are revered. They never returned to their early haven in the Ottenby Nature Reserve, and would have been forgotten as if they had never set their grey feet there. But...

The vicious swans that had slain Delwyn had performed, unwittingly, a minor miracle. The blood of the slain young swan had filtered through the waters of the Reserve and had been absorbed by a myriad of plants and minuscule animals. His flesh, as it decomposed, had nurtured many of the life forms that thrived in the sheltered marine environment. Delwyn was gone, but his essence remained in a stationary habitat where changes occurred slowly, if ever.

Two springs after the fatal autumn that brought martyrdom to an innocent young swan, five pens in the Reserve laid clutches that included one or more eggs that, in the course of time, would develop into cygnets displaying all shades of blue, from blue-gray to almost indigo, including the royal blue that had led to Delwyn's demise. Because these abnormal births took place almost simultaneously, the offending birds could not be sacrificed and were able to grow to maturity, and bred with other cobs and pens in the general population, leading to a gradual increase in the number of multicolored swans that are found in the Reserve and, increasingly, in other points in the Baltic area.

A dark, atmospheric landscape painting. In the foreground, a path leads through a field of flowers, including purple irises and orange poppies. The background is filled with dark, indistinct shapes, possibly trees or distant buildings, under a hazy sky.

The brightly colored swans remain, to this day, a curiosity that conservatively minded birds would surely deplore but which has served as an example of how nature fosters diversity and encourages the development of alternative modes of existence, as long they are beneficial (or at least not detrimental) to the welfare of the species.

END

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man to escape political persecution. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Well over one hundred of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in paying anthologies, magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. A first collection of his stories, "The Satchel and Other Terrors" is available on Amazon and other book outlets.

RAISES AWARENESS FOR:

Grief and loss

Strangers

by: Sierra Whitney

I walk the forest every morning.

I love the feel of the cold air and the moisture of the mist on my skin.

Shards of light piercing through the barren branches.

If you stand still in those rays of light you can feel the heat of the sun for just a moment.

I regularly stand in it and close my eyes.

Unable to drink it in fully when utilizing the faculty of sight.

I pass you each morning, digging this hole.

I've never asked why but I have my suspicions based on how frenetic your shoveling is at times.

We've never spoken.

I continue my walks and listen for the birds.

One fog laden morning I notice the pit has grown sizably.

You're not a small man, much taller than I am.

The hollow is over twice your height, 13 feet in depth or more.

Insurmountable for even someone of your stature.

I listen for the familiar sound of the shovel hitting soil and rock, both soft and hard simultaneously.

Nothing.

A loud silence.

I approach to find you've realized this has become a prison of your own making.

No words necessary.

Your eyes convey your worry.

Their aperture denotes you are soundlessly and purely frantic.

It doesn't take me long.

I come back with my rope and tie it to the nearest tree.

Knotting the line, I can almost feel my dad's hands on mine,

Guiding the strongest knot for the material I've haphazardly pulled out of my shed.

Then I lower myself down into the abyss.
It's dark,
A mixture of damp and cold in a way that only Earth can be.

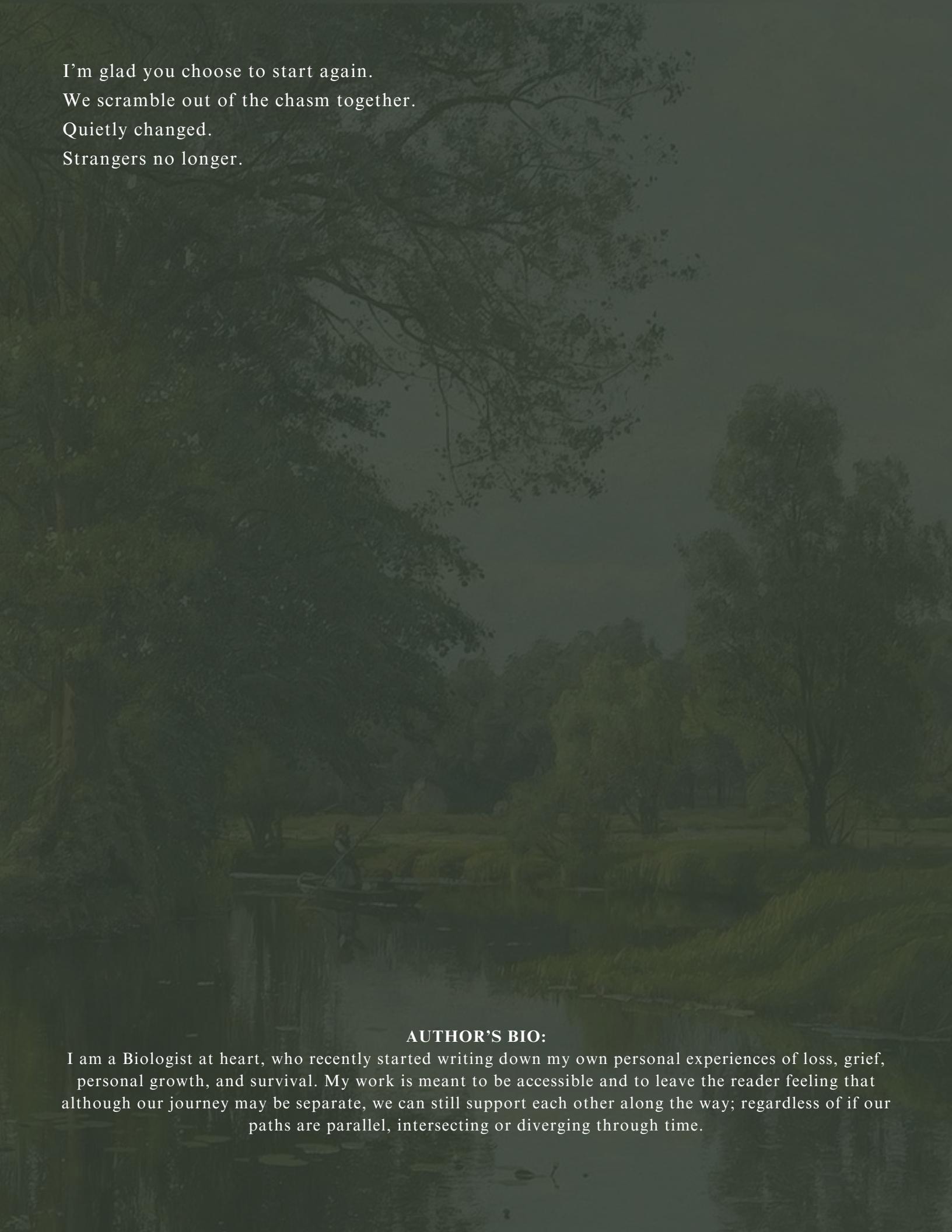
You're lying down.
Defeated.
Your reddish-brown hair splashed against the pitch-black ground.
Your hands are filthy.
Fingernails caked in mud.
How long have you struggled alone down here?

I lay down beside you,
My golden hair becoming ruddy.
I place my hand on your shoulder.
Dark as it is,
I can see a tear slowly slide down your cheek through closed eyelids.
Your breathing is deep and inaudible.

I lean over to kiss your forehead.
I return my head to the ground and wait for you to open your pale blue-green eyes.
We stare at each other for a few moments.

I can see you're exhausted,
In no shape to start the ascent.
I grab your hand in mine gently.
Suddenly, my physical form feels much smaller than normal.
How could I possibly be a source of strength here in this shadow?

In a hushed tone,
Diminished by the attenuation of this earthly enclosure,
I utter the only words that come to mind,
“When you're ready. I'll be here.”
We lay there for what feels like an era.
I know you can't see it yet, but this is not where you end.
Not in this grave you've built to grieve.



I'm glad you choose to start again.
We scramble out of the chasm together.
Quietly changed.
Strangers no longer.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

I am a Biologist at heart, who recently started writing down my own personal experiences of loss, grief, personal growth, and survival. My work is meant to be accessible and to leave the reader feeling that although our journey may be separate, we can still support each other along the way; regardless of if our paths are parallel, intersecting or diverging through time.

RAISES AWARENESS FOR:

The theme of the story is a symbiotic female relationship, in a backdrop of marital complexities, infanticide, and friendships that would have bloomed had it not been for social strata

Padmini

by: *Bidisha Satpathy*

Moving day had come. I wanted to call her. It had been over a year since I had seen Padmini. I am leaving behind some everyday items, I would say on the phone, bedsheets, umbrella, plastic stools and so, you can take it. My current house-help took nothing. Thrice, I attempted to give her food, clothes and utensils, but with her characteristic “double shake” – where she politely shook her head and her right palm in synchronized harmony, she turned me down. I got the double shake earlier in the day too, when I cleared her final dues and pushed into her wrinkly hands a box of store-bought chickpea and jaggery laddoos.

With Padmini, things had been different.

‘You should give these cushions to me didi, you barely use it’, she pointed at the four rectangular yellow-pink cushions propped on the overtly expensive teal Chesterfield, all of which I had custom made after my wedding. A broad column of sunlight glinted the velvety middle seat. We had moved the four-seater multiple times in the living room, before finally setting it in the corner closest to the balcony, ‘For the perfect amount of light and sound’, my ex-husband had said. We worried about the sun fading the elegant teal, and kept the drapes shut, darkening the expansive room in the process. After he left, on most days, I went straight back to bed after letting Padmini in every morning. The rare occasions that I moved around the house, she caught me with her entreaties. Take the couch too with the cushions, I told Padmini in my head, I don’t know what to do with it.

‘Haven’t you eaten yesterday, *didi*?’. Her eyes had taken in the empty sink. The kitchen was exactly the way she had left it the day before. ‘Should I make tea?’, she pressed, 2 in her sing-song Hindi. I ignored her. I’ll heat the food from the fridge later, I said. ‘Those brinjals will go bad, if I don’t cook it soon. It is of good quality. I will make stuffed brinjal with tomatoes and crushed peanuts, the way you like it. Let me....’, I couldn’t hear her anymore, she had popped back into the kitchen. With a very specific list of ingredients and measurements, my ex-husband had taught Padmini his mother’s brinjal curry. When she finally mastered it to his satisfaction, she requested to take some home to her family. She packed three stout pieces of the curried and stuffed brinjals she had made for our lunch. I reminded her to bring the stainless-steel container back.

The moving men had come. I asked the paunchy watchman if he had seen Padmini lately. ‘Doesn’t she work in the Desai’s house in E block now. I saw her yesterday’. He nodded with vigour when I instructed him to send someone to collect the pile I was leaving behind, ‘you can sell it’, I added, and headed upstairs with the packers.

Padmini’s husband was an office clerk. They had two pre-teen daughters. ‘He worked as a night watchman before’, she chatted as she moved around my living room to dust surfaces. Married in her early 20s, they had three children in quick succession. ‘Two survived and one was still born’, she explained, ‘The still born was a son’. Adjusting her green glass bangles speckled with gold, she suppressed a sneeze and complained again, ‘You should have purchased a closed sort of bookshelf, *didi*. The people on the 12th floor have one with glass doors. This one gathers too much dust’.

If I really was awake, I strained all my senses to eavesdrop on her phone calls from my side of the bed, connecting words of the unfamiliar Tulu to the notes in her voice.

She laughed a lot on the phone, while cooking my food. The other pillow lay snug in the curvature of my body. With the broom in hand, she came to the bedroom door. I heard her clear her throat and pretended to be comatose. ‘Are you up, *di*?’ I grunted something that could have been a yes or a no. It was eleven in the morning and the room was dark. ‘When my husband was a night watchman, he smoked a lot. He came home reeking every morning. I forbade him from touching my daughters if he continued smoking. You know what he did, *didi*’, she went on, without waiting for a response, ‘he thrashed me every chance he got, with whatever he could grab and said I had no right to order him about. But I was firm. I fought with him every day. Eventually, he stopped smoking and got a day-time job at an office’. She gave me a practiced smile. ‘Why have you started, *didi*? It’s very bad for the lungs’. I wanted to go back to sleep. At first, I disposed the soggy butts and tidied the house of cigarette ash before she arrived. I kept the ashtray out of her sight and washed the whiskey glasses myself. As I became more permanent on the king sized bed, flecks of ash dotted the tv remote, wash basin, arm-rests of the couch .. The sink smelled stale alcohol. When she moved the bedside table with tens of tiny forgotten objects atop it, it creaked. There was ash underneath it. I heard her clucking her tongue as I closed my eyes shut.

Every evening, Padmini's WhatsApp had status updates from her cramped house. She and her daughters took selfies with idols of various gods decked in finery and flowers. At times, it was school functions, amusement parks, beaches and large groups of people. In these spectacles from her life, she stood smiling with her mouth closed, next to her lean and moustachioed husband, who wore round neck t-shirts that my ex-husband had once donned. The maids I had had before, in other cities and other houses, had chaotic faces and smelled of stale air. When Padmini came, she brought with her the scent of drug store jasmine soap. Her long hair tied in a neat ponytail, with a wide middle parting. It swung like a pendulum when she moved.

The loud young couple from the flat opposite mine, stood waiting for the elevator when I alighted on my floor with the packers. IT professionals who looked like models. The tall husband and the short wife greeted me a wide smile and asked after my moving arrangements. I tried in vain to recollect their names. The lift closed and went up. Padmini had worked at their place when their house-help was away for an extended period. She reported to me about their incessant food wastage, 'Ice cream from the night before lay melting on the kitchen counter, *didi*. Yesterday it was a barely eaten serving of butter chicken. God only knows what they'll waste tomorrow. And the stench in their kitchen! Young people are inexplicable. They waste their food, they while away their time and complain about life all the time', she looked at me with distaste. I sat upright on the couch, red-faced. I wondered what stories she carried about me to her other employers. She rambled some more, 'They have a fully functional fridge. How difficult can it be to store leftovers in the fridge. Butterscotch is my younger daughter's favourite'.

The thought made me smile. The young couple in front of me looked content. I asked them if they had Padmini's number. I want to give her some of the stuff I am leaving behind, I explained. 'Oh yes, Padmini. Always smiling and chatting. She was a bit slow, wasn't she', the wife said, and fed the number in my phone. I bade them goodbye and entered the house.

There were days when Padmini's silence was distinct. I knew from experience her husband had thrashed her the night before. 'Why does he beat you', my ex-husband had probed the first time. 'I miscarry each time'. But it's not your fault, I had reasoned with her. 'It's not his fault too, *didi*', she wrapped a few ice cubes from my freezer in a kitchen towel and pressed it to the sides of her swollen face. 'He just really wants a son', she continued with her various tasks as we retreated to a corner of the house, young and numb.

Every time she was pregnant, the pattern remained the same. ‘How old are you?’, I would ask, following her to the kitchen. ‘40 something’. ‘Are you keeping it?’, ‘It could be a son’, she shrugged. In a few weeks, she would miscarry, and the days following it, comply with the thrashing. Her limp became a permanent fixture. After the third miscarriage, I ordered for her a standing floor mop.

It must have been her eighth pregnancy. She was surprised she had reached four months. A pink hue occupied her face. ‘We will know if it’s a boy or girl today’, Padmini said as I walked into the kitchen to dispose an empty bottle of raspberry vodka. She knew it was illegal to have a gender determination test done. ‘We will abort if it’s a girl’. She frowned at the ceramic noddle bowl which kept slipping out of her hands as she picked it from the sink to soap. ‘It is just that, he doesn’t want another girl’, she looked at me squarely. ‘Do you?’. She didn’t respond, concentrating on a spot on the bowl that wasn’t there. Her developing baby bump pressed against the counter. Padmini didn’t show up the next day. Or the next. I didn’t call her. Her WhatsApp showed no updates, and her display picture – a daughter of hers in a dancing pose, with a bunny face filter and a toothy smile, remained uncharacteristically the same. I asked her other employers in my building. Whenever they called, her phone was switched off. I asked the watchman. Nobody had an update. In the fridge were tightly sealed containers of curries and one-pot rice, which Padmini had cooked. It would last me a week. After two months of waiting, I deleted her number and told the watchman to look for another maid.

With a grim expression, my new maid – the double shaker who took nothing, finished her daily task of cooking three meals, cleaning and dusting the house and doing the utensils in under an hour. Padmini had taken two, in between her phone calls and the gossip she recounted to me. It had been three months since Padmini had left. One Sunday afternoon, as I lay drugged, dozing and alone, the bell rang. Wobbly and secure, I opened the door. It was Padmini, in a faded orange kurta of mine. She started pleading.

I had given her everything. Blankets, sneakers, sarees I wouldn’t wear anymore, show pieces, nail paints, books for her daughters, lamp shades, everything.. The day the watchman had first brought her up, she introduced herself and asked if she could inspect the house. We told her it’s a two-bedroom two-bathroom standard house but she insisted. With her leatherette bag in hand, she looked around. Standing in the middle of the hall, she quoted her price for cooking and cleaning after two people. She would be our fourth; in quick succession, he had fired the others for sundry reasons. We agreed to her price without protest, disorientated from our fights. After he left, she

didn't enquire about the bespectacled second person who had lived with me, whose heavy regional accent I had to translate to rugged Hindi for her comprehension. Yet I alluded to his vague existence while handing over the items he had left behind and continued paying her for two people. At the door presently, her baby bump was gone and the kurta hung loose on her thin frame. In my mind's hazy sight, her eyes were watery and her contours hard. Where was she all this time? I banged the door shut as she said '*Didi*, please, listen to me..', and switched the bell off. With the phone in my hand, I went back to bed and awoke to the Monday day light, unsure if it was a dream.

I remember the day she told me to move. I remember the composed look on her face as her dupatta hung airily on her shoulders. She picked the crushed wrappers and packets of crisps and various ice creams I had strewn on the floor the night before. 'Don't mind me saying this, *didi*, but it's time you move'. I looked at her from the couch, where I sat smoking an orange burst cigarette. Ash fell on the keyboard of my office laptop. 'It has been a year *didi*'. I nodded with my head down, twisting the folds of my dress with my free hand. The doorbell broke my reverie. A runner boy delivered new packets of cigarettes and potato chips.

The Chesterfield lay dismantled, its seat cushions were packed. 'I am not taking the couch', I said as the packers wrapped the armrests in bubble wrap. The men shot me an irritating look before sliding the armrests out. I rang Padmini. 'Yes, *didi*', she answered almost immediately. I watched as the men took the drapes down. Sunlight flooded the room. I could feel her heart thud, or maybe it was mine. 'I am moving today', I said, 'can you come?'.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Bidisha Satpathy is a copyright lawyer in the Indian film and music industry . She is based in Mumbai and is forever in the quest to read less and write more. She has previously published with The Hindu, Out Of Print, In The Know Traveller, Juggernaut, Huffington Post India, Hindustan Times.

Skin

by: *Thalia Josephine*

On the 387th day, you get up from **his** bed and brush your teeth with too much toothpaste, you twist the faucet, steam rising to your face, seeping into your pores, gruffly rubbing a towel over your ashy skin; untouched by the sun's warmth, and wincing as the cotton passed over the cut near your mouth. And then you get changed into clothes you never enjoyed. But **he** did.

Your absence bothers **him**, so you climb back inside the cage that is **his** body as **he** ingests your mind. **He** put you together. After **he** disassembled you himself. **He** broke you. Broke you. Broke you. And then **he** molded you together again, **his** own construction, your soul fading away with **his** grip. And then you restlessly assigned yourself to your corner on **his** bed. **His** hands illustrated the shape of your body; **he** tugged at the delicacy of the fabric, the only shield guarding your purloin innocence from **his** lust. You release your power, free from the restraint of your consent, after all you are just a girl, never a person.

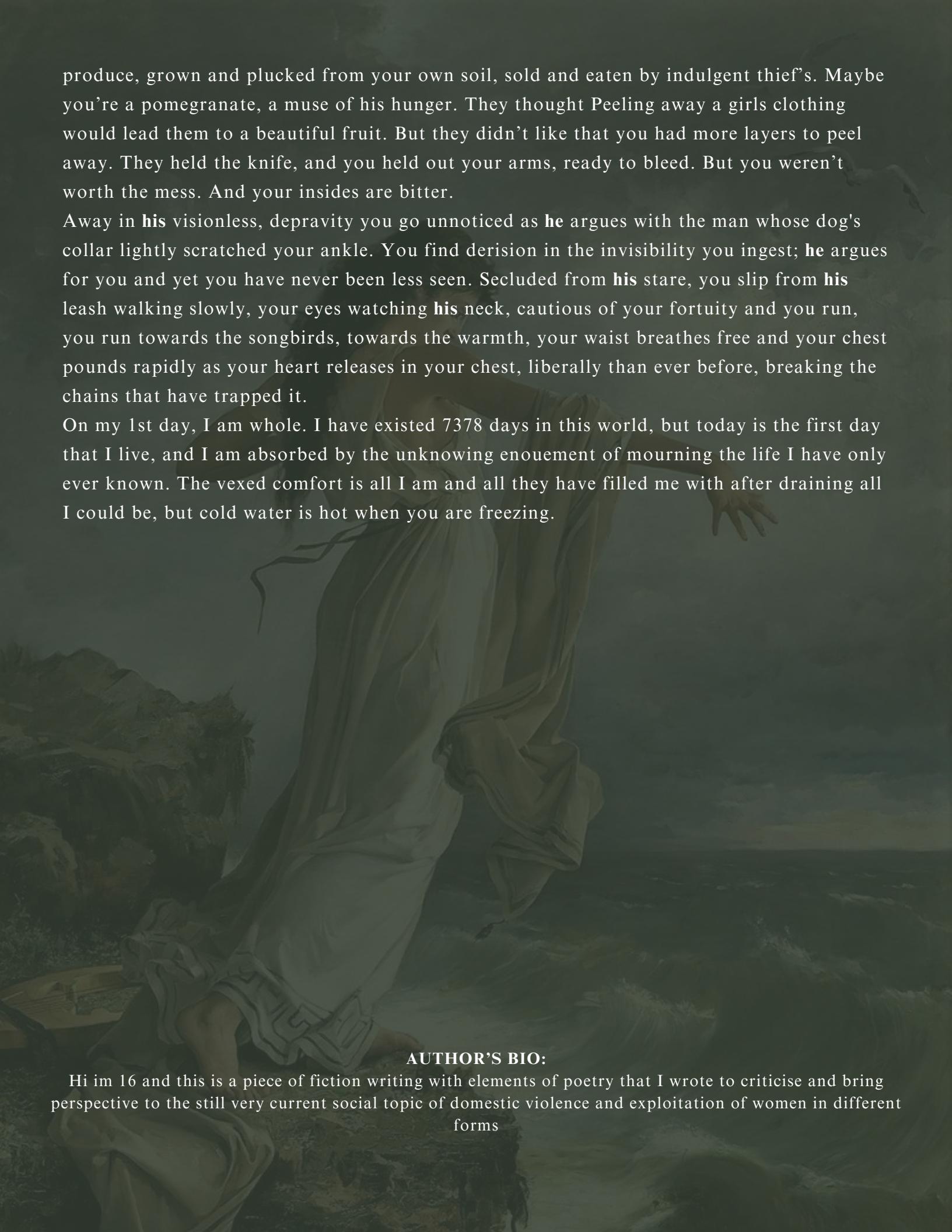
On the 388th day, you absorb your reflection in **his** bathroom mirror, taking in the rouge on your lips and blue by your eye. Your eyes look hollow, and you draw your glance to **his** trademark possessing your neck. Even your skin belongs to someone else. You paint your face the way you hope **he** likes. Coating concealer over the intricates of your skin, filling the cuts that dominate your face, you clump heavy black mascara over your eyes, weighing down the opening of your sight, blinding your ability to perceive your freedom.

He stares at your painting, and **he** calls you beautiful but your heart winces as **he** stares at your chest, not your face. **His** words are your deception, but I think you are starting to grow aware.

On the 390th day your time goes numbingly slow, or maybe your time has just stopped. Maybe that's what happens when you are born with paper cuts that infect and turn into wounds that gauge and stitch into your skin. When you were 8 and you spun in your garden, the indescribable smell of summer or maybe childhood lingered in the air, whatever It is, it's gone now anyway, a wave of nostalgia you manage to forget. The sensory tingle of the Velcro from your favorite shoes crept up your leg, and your pigtails swung in the wind as you danced as a princess in your own fairytale, away from the dull complexities of a world you were unwillingly brought into. Engrossed in the delusion of an escape of your world, you stumbled down into the dew of tall grass but unharmed, you felt your throat begin to close up and **he** stared at your tears in disgust, lacking the empathy of a father that you needed, your heart crumbled, and your worn-out sleeve was swiftly wet with your absorbed emotion. Your bare face clean.

You were 13, fresh into a plagued flash of exuberant solitude, 4748 days on earth. Your head raced at the excitement of becoming a teenager that came with the blissful ignorance of a desired chapter of escapism, the start of your illusion; that is your deceit. You were 13 sitting in biology class, your eyes digesting the window as snickers erupted in your ears. You pluck your mind from the mundane grey sky that you found more engaging than photosynthesis, and you joined in with laughing until you realized that it was you who's crimson poisoned your clothes that now belonged to your body and your voice numbed as the whispers got deafening. And then your watering eyes shamefully looked up as he stared into your soul, leading you to the toilets telling you not to worry, it was only a natural part of being a woman. The question of womanhood lingered in your mind, you found it cruel that your childhood began and ended with blood, you thought you were just a girl, a child but as his hand traced down your spine, too close to your predeveloped curves than you would've liked, you question how old you really are contradicting how old you really are perceived and your mouth goes dry, protest clinging to the tip of your tongue as your voice goes cold. Your rage is desperate, it is dire. It's a young girl in a man's world. It is trying it is tired. You become your teacher's subject instead of learning from his own and yet you stand alone, your textbook pages ripped and stabbed in sharpie, your cover fading with each touch it endures.

On your 394th day, he lets you escape the 4 walls that was once a welcome to something you thought would heal you, yet to know would be the inevitable imprisonment of all you had left to give. He clutches your waist tightly, his fingers entwined in the florals of your unseasonal knee length dress, your hands fall loose though, swinging past your hips. Your bare arms are resistant to the sharp breeze as they swing through the purities of fresh air and you take in the comforting rhythm of songbirds singing through your ears, they call for each other in jungles of trees, something you could only long for. As you drift down the path goosebumps poison your skin as his grip tightens on your body, pulling you away from the warmth of nature, the comfort of freedom. He is a python wrapping around your neck, his fangs sinking into your skin, stealing your heart, draining your energy, adding to the bites left by so many before tainting your innocence with their venom, your body is a graveyard of all the exploitation that has persisted you and you are left with your corpse. He pulls you through crowds of people and stacked up market stands, you tightly smile as he covers you past unsuspecting people, unsusceptible to your mask, you are dragged through so many different lives, any that you would take over your own. You trace the pebbles on the floor with your shoes, avoiding any eye contact with the sky, questioning if your sight would hurt if your world was brighter. You spot stands of fruit, and your eyes graze the rotting apples fallen under crates of vibrant produce but as he draws your attention to **him**, bright rosy pomegranates bleed into your glimpse, you think of yourself as



produce, grown and plucked from your own soil, sold and eaten by indulgent thief's. Maybe you're a pomegranate, a muse of his hunger. They thought Peeling away a girls clothing would lead them to a beautiful fruit. But they didn't like that you had more layers to peel away. They held the knife, and you held out your arms, ready to bleed. But you weren't worth the mess. And your insides are bitter.

Away in **his** visionless, depravity you go unnoticed as **he** argues with the man whose dog's collar lightly scratched your ankle. You find derision in the invisibility you ingest; **he** argues for you and yet you have never been less seen. Secluded from **his** stare, you slip from **his** leash walking slowly, your eyes watching **his** neck, cautious of your fortuity and you run, you run towards the songbirds, towards the warmth, your waist breathes free and your chest pounds rapidly as your heart releases in your chest, liberally than ever before, breaking the chains that have trapped it.

On my 1st day, I am whole. I have existed 7378 days in this world, but today is the first day that I live, and I am absorbed by the unknowing enouement of mourning the life I have only ever known. The vexed comfort is all I am and all they have filled me with after draining all I could be, but cold water is hot when you are freezing.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Hi im 16 and this is a piece of fiction writing with elements of poetry that I wrote to criticise and bring perspective to the still very current social topic of domestic violence and exploitation of women in different forms

RAISES AWARENESS FOR:

Gun Violence, lack of education, poor political representation

THE BOOMERANG EFFECT

by: J.B. Polk

“Our next speaker, Ruby Bieber, is not yet forty but already a successful Congresswoman. A mother of four, she has virtually pulled herself out of the gutter by sheer willpower. She is one of the brave people who dare to speak the truth. No cancel culture for the Honourable Lady! Today, she represents you and your unwoke values in Washington.”

Chewing on the end of a pen, Ruby evaluates the wording of the script for tomorrow's event at the local Riffle Owners' Association.

All of it is true. She is a successful (and popular!) Congresswoman. She is a mother of four, barely out of her mid-thirties. And she is not afraid of speaking up for her constituents, especially in defense of the Second Amendment. At all times. At all costs.

But she dislikes the “*pulled herself out of the gutter*” phrase. “Gutter” has such a foul-sounding ring to it. And although she has always admitted to growing up in a dirt-poor family, the word just doesn't cut it for her.

“We was so poor, chil’, that you and your Bubba had a tumbleweed for a pet,” her Ma used to say.

Ruby's dad was not in the picture—not ever. Amber, her Ma, left town to work as a pump operator at Oakdale Dam. Meanwhile, MeeMaw Opal took care of the kids. MeeMaw, a devout Presbyterian, taught them to brush their teeth, pray to God, and wait for him to speak. Unfortunately, he never responded when Ruby talked to him. She once asked MeeMaw if she was telling the truth regarding the little-known 11th commandment instructions: “*Thou shall only fornicate for the purpose of procreation.*”

And as he was mute on the matter, she did the dirty with Brandon at sixteen. But guess what? True or not, she was still in the clear because she got pregnant the first time around! Eventually, she stopped asking Him but kept the habit of brushing her teeth after each meal, which led to her having a set of pearly chompers a catwalk model would die for. So, on life advice, MeeMaw came up trumps on one out of two!

She keeps reading the script that Jasper Kendall, her young assistant, left on her desk an hour before. A Purdue graduate, he's been with Ruby for nearly a year. Given that she only earned a high school diploma at age thirty, Jasper writes her speeches, sees to the minutiae of her engagements, and runs errands, including fetching her daily pumpkin-skimmed latte with just a hint of vanilla. No sugar.

“You must keep trim and attractive when you are a popular Conservative Congresswoman,” he keeps reminding her.

“After you are introduced, an ovation will follow, and you will answer, Thank you, thank you very much.”

Ruby likes this part. She knows that “ovation” means clapping because she found the word in one of the previous speeches and asked Jasper about its meaning.

“In Latin, it means to rejoice and shout with delight,” Jasper explained patiently, like he always does.

After a brief pause, Ruby continues.

“I am standing here today to reassure you that we will not listen to the foolish folk who wish to trample on our Second Amendment rights. Our nation is governed by a constitution, a document that separates us from monarchies, communist regimes, and dictatorships. That same constitution protects our right to bear arms. Yes, people have died, and yes, it is a tragedy. But so did people in cinema fires and road traffic accidents. Yet we don’t ban either. All these tragedies are essentially anomalies (Ruby knows that word, too), and just because they occasionally happen, we must not sacrifice our constitution.”

“Followed by another ovation,” the script says.

Her eyes turn dreamy at the mental picture of the audience standing to the sound of her voice, clapping furiously.

“Yes, apart from the gutter part, the speech is perfect! Just as perfect as Jasper’s tight little ass,” she smiles.

“And don’t fear! We will not let those who want to tread on us do so without consequences. We will fight, and we will win!”

“Here, speak loud and clear and look directly at the spectators,” the script instructs. *“Why, you ask me? Because everything you do creates either a positive or a negative outcome. Because whatever energy you put out, you get back. Some call it karma, but I prefer the boomerang effect. It’s like gravity—there, but so unnoticeable that we don’t even know it exists. But it does!”* *“Another round of applause,”* the script indicates.

Yes, Jasper is a brilliant speechwriter, worth his weight in gold. She would have never thought of it by herself. But what the hell is a boomerang? She opens Google and types the word. The online dictionary explains that it is a curved, flat piece of wood that can be thrown so that it will return to the thrower, traditionally used by Australian Aboriginal people as a hunting weapon.

“A brilliant idea to mention a weapon in a speech about defending gun rights,” she muses. One thing she has learned since becoming a congresswoman is to check things before saying them out loud. She doesn’t want to make another gaffe on live TV, like when she said the former president, whom she hero-worships, was a “hexagon of virtue.” Jasper later explained that the correct word was “paragon.” He also explained that what happened to her on the show was... wait a minute! What did he call it? Malpractice? No, malpractice is careless professional behavior. It sounded like malpractice, but it wasn’t... It’s on the tip of her tongue! Yes! There it is! Malapropism!

Jasper reminded her of another representative who'd accused the "gazpacho police" of patrolling the Capitol. At first, Ruby wasn't sure what was wrong with that, but Jasper clarified that gazpacho was a cold Spanish soup made from tomatoes, peppers, and other salad vegetables, while the word the Honourable Lady mal-appropriated was Gestapo. Ruby laughed, hoping Jasper would not think she was an uneducated ding-dong.

To tell the truth, she was not a ding-dong, but she was uneducated. Not because she was not smart enough, but because she got knocked up in the ninth grade and had to leave her full-time education. When Tucker, her firstborn, was one, she started an apprenticeship in a hair salon and then got pregnant again—with Tyler. And then again, with twins—Todd and Tennyson. By twenty-eight, she and Brandon had four boys, all under twelve. At thirty, she was promoted to stylist and colorist, and Brandon started earning good money running his dad's sawmill. So they both relinquished the upbringing of their brood to MeeMaw Opal, who became their babysitter, cook, nurse, friend, and spiritual shepherd. Amber kept operating the pumps at Oakdale Dam.

A year after that, when she thought she would take over the salon and turn it into a spa with hot tubs, foot massages, body wraps, and mud baths, she was offered to run for a seat in the state legislature and, two years later, in the national one.

And here she is now: Ruby Bieber, who barely finished high school but who could write an encyclopedia about shampooing and conditioning and a dictionary of chemical coloring processes, getting ready to talk to some big shots about the Second Amendment and something called the boomerang effect.

She is unsure how it all happened because, born and raised in Middlebury, population 2,513, she barely noticed national and international calamities and triumphs before she became the Honourable Ruby Bieber. She voted Republican because MeeMaw and her mother did. But politics figured low on the list of things that mattered to her, somewhere between power tools and public libraries. Suppose someone had asked her about her ambitions ten years ago; she'd probably have answered that she was too busy just living and raising four kids to have any, never mind talking about them.

But as a quick learner, she learned that the Second Amendment was very important in her state, especially the part granting the American people the right to bear arms. If possible, concealed. So she made it her campaign slogan and, forever after, spoke about that God-given right at rallies, in Congress, and on talk shows. And to prove her point, she kept a collection of Smith & Wesson Model 10s and Remington Model 870 Pump-Action Shotguns in an unlocked cabinet in her now much more ample, six-bedroom, four-bathroom house. And, being a loving mother, she's taught her kids how to use guns, trusting that they will use them wisely. Hopefully, to shoot bears or defend our Great Nation's borders from foreign invasions.

Ruby knows she is right because she's convinced that good guys with guns have stopped bad guys with guns all the time, going back to the ole' Wild West. And besides, it is not guns that kill people, but people who kill people. So there.

She thinks about the boomerang effect Jasper mentioned in the speech. Was it the Aboriginal Australians' God-given right to carry concealed boomerangs? If so, where? She's seen pictures of the bushmen, and all they wore were strings around their waists.

"I'll ask Jasper," she thinks.

She is about to go back to the speech when the door to her office bursts open. Jasper, his hair disheveled, runs in. He is not wearing his customary Dries Van Noten navy blue jacket and tie. This fact alone indicates that something terrible must have happened.

"Ruby!" he shouts.

"Ruby! There's been an incident!"

The sheath of papers in her hand falls onto the floor. She stumbles, but manages to get up.

"Wheeeereeee?" The word is one prolonged gasp.

"The school, Ruby. Osborne Senior..."

Ruby's legs buckle. She is about to fall but manages to hold on to the edge of the desk. "Please, God, please! I will kill Tucker if he's taken one of the guns to school to show off. He's still waiting for his permit. It'll ruin my career!" She screams in her head and asks aloud, "What kind of incident?"

"A shooting, Ruby..." Jasper stammers.

Fear blossoms in her mind, its predatory fingers squeezing her heart and then creeping into her guts. If they squeeze any harder, the pumpkin latte will come out in a torrent.

"Tucker?" she whispers.

"Was it Tucker?"

Jasper is silent for a full minute.

"Tell... me...damn....you! Was... Tucker... the...shooter?" She slices the sentences word by word, intense panic marking each pause.

Jasper shakes his head.

"No," he says finally.

Ruby feels the icy claws loosen their grip on her insides. She can breathe again. A whoosh of air escapes her lungs as she sits down. The latte stays in.

Jasper looks at her with renewed dread, then says, "Tucker is one of the victims... And so is Todd..."

The arctic sensation she thought was gone unfurls itself from her inner core again. A pulse throbs in her ears, and a bitter tang of despair fills her mouth. Then comes the latte, completely covering the sheets with tomorrow's speech.

All she can think of is the boomerang effect... And her boys... Because it no longer matters if you call it karma or any other name. She is sure that damn thing has no menu, and in the end, one gets served what one deserves. And Ruby knows that she deserve it.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Independent/Hennessy Awards, Ireland, 1996. Since she went back to writing in 2020, more than 100 of her stories, flash fiction and non-fiction, have been accepted for publication. She has recently won 1st prize in the International Human Rights Arts Movement literary contest.

non-fiction: prose.

*a voice is a human gift:
it should be cherished and used,
to utter fully human speech as possible.
powerlessness and silence
go together*
— *margaret atwood*

RAISES AWARENESS FOR:

Israel-Gaza conflict: includes mention of war and death

DO YOU REALIZE???

by: *Hattie Logan*

Do you realise the UK government has committed £100 million to Gaza in aid?

That's what the headlines say. And it's lovely stuff. It's the stuff that keeps the electorate content and the government in power. But that's not all. Let's look beyond the headlines to what else is actually happening.

Do you realise that Israel accepts arms exports from foreign countries?

Do you realise that the UK is one of them?

Since 2015, the UK government has exported over £448 million worth of arms to the Israeli army. That therefore means that the government is committing aid to the conditions that it itself helped cause.

Do you realise how fucked up this is?

When the government committed to providing shelter to those displaced by the conflict, its arms were used to forcibly displace people from their homes.

When the government committed to delivering food parcels to feed 275,000 people, its arms were used to flatten a similarly sized town, wiping it off the map.

When the government committed to providing medical care to those who needed it the most, its arms were used to destroy the last remaining hospital, killing those at their most vulnerable.

Do you realise the hypocrisy?

But of course the government isn't going to jump in and put a halt to things, because the attacks are helping to line their pockets.

Do you realise the direct conflict of interest?

The people march for Gaza, for ceasefires, for increased aid, for the Palestinian people. But what people don't realise is that their own government is directly involved with the attacks. People don't realise that the government is using their taxpayers money to build these weapons, which are then being used to commit war crimes.

Do you realise that through the government's actions, we all UK taxpayers are involuntarily complicit in a genocide?

Thought not.

Perhaps you should. And then together we can do something about it. We can put pressure on those in charge to do the right thing, for once in their fucking lives. And when they don't, we can simply get rid of them. We are a democracy. We vote for the people in charge, the people responsible for where our tax money goes. The members of parliament, government ministers and secretaries of state. One simple cross in a box can change a lot.

Because the people of Gaza won't forgive and they certainly won't forget.

Because the people of Palestine won't forgive and they certainly won't forget.

Because history won't forgive, and it certainly won't forget.

Free Palestine.



AUTHOR'S BIO:

Hattie Logan also works as a Specialist Biomedical Scientist for the NHS. Originally from Up North, she currently lives Down South (traitor!) with her husband and many houseplants. Her work has been published in Ink, Sweat & Tears.

RAISES AWARENESS FOR:

The silent linguistic and cultural genocide of Deaf people worldwide due to the medical establishment's pervasive practice of implanting 90+ percent of Deaf infants and children.

Voice

by: *Paul Hostovsky*

Listen, my daughter is Deaf. Capital D. But she's hard of hearing. So she hears a lot, for a Deaf person. Which, to the uninitiated, sounds kind of paradoxical, I know. What if I told you that in ASL the phrase "very hard of hearing" means the opposite of the English phrase "very hard of hearing." In ASL, it means a person hears a lot. In English, it means a person hears very little. How can that be? It can be and it is because, as Whitman said, "What will be will be well for what is is well." Whitman, the eternal optimist. In other words, my Deaf daughter is perfect the way she is. In the Deaf world, *Deaf* is good. It's a good thing. It's no cakewalk, mind you, especially among hearing people who don't see *Deaf* as a good thing—quite the opposite, actually—but it is, nevertheless, a good and beautiful and blessed thing. In the Deaf world, *Deaf* has very little to do with how much a person hears. It has everything to do with language and culture. And ASL, the language of Deaf Americans, has very little to do with English, though it does coexist with English—the biggest bully on the world's linguistic playground—so English is always trying to push ASL around. But ASL won't have it. My daughter would probably say, "Dad, shut up, you're just confusing people." And she would be right. But it *is* confusing. It's complicated. It's complex, as are most things when you take the time to look at them closely. But *confused* is good, if it leads to *intrigued, fascinated, interested*.

So listen, if you're interested, my daughter is culturally Deaf and audiology hard of hearing. What that means is her primary language is ASL and she can hear a little. A lot, actually, for a Deaf person. But not enough to understand spoken English the way a hearing person can understand spoken English. But enough to enjoy listening to music. Also, her mother happens to be Deaf. Her best friends are Deaf. Her identity and allegiance are with ASL. Oh, and her father, yours truly, is an ASL interpreter, who learned ASL years before she was a twinkle in his eye. She was born with "a moderate hearing loss" in one ear and "a severe hearing loss" in the other. So said the audiologist. So said the audiogram. And what does that mean? That's the question me and her Deaf mother put to the audiologist. And being an audiologist, she said it meant that with amplification, hearing aids, possibly a cochlear implant, and rigorous and persistent speech therapy, our daughter could "probably function quite normally in the hearing world." Her Deaf mother and I didn't like the sound of that.

We didn't like the sound of "function quite normally in the hearing world" because we both knew that Deaf people are already perfectly "normal" and quite capable of "functioning in the hearing world." And there was no way on earth we would ever allow a surgeon to drill a hole in our daughter's skull and implant a metal device in her cochlea in order to "help her be more normal." Because that's what 90+ percent of parents are doing to their Deaf children. So we didn't do that. We enrolled her in the local school for the Deaf. And she wore a hearing aid for a few years, but then she said she didn't want to wear it anymore. And we said fine. And she had speech therapy for a number of years, but then she said she'd really rather spend the time spent in speech therapy on more interesting and important things, such as math class, science class, history class, English class—which were all taught in ASL—or basketball practice or soccer practice or track practice. There just wasn't the time—or the need—for speech therapy, she said. And we said fine.

My Deaf friend Hartmut Teuber, who grew up in Germany, told me there is a word in German that describes the choices we made concerning our hard of hearing Deaf daughter. I think he said the word was *ertauben*. Or maybe it was *vertauben*. My German is not what it used to be. In any case, it basically means "to make Deaf." He was implying that the choices her mother and I made concerning our daughter's speech and language and education—sending her to a school for the Deaf where the language of instruction was ASL, not insisting she wear hearing aids, not insisting she work on her speech, consistently signing to her in ASL even though she had a lot of residual hearing and could probably have learned to "function quite normally in the hearing world"—had effectively made her Deaf. Capital D. We had Deafened her.

And I suppose Hartmut was right. Because listen: if she were born to two hearing parents who had never met a Deaf person and who wanted more than anything for their child to be able to "function normally in the hearing world," she would have had a very different upbringing. She would not have attended a school for the Deaf. She probably would have had a cochlear implant, or at least worn hearing aids all day every day of her life, spending countless hours in speech therapy, attending public schools with hearing children—the only "hearing impaired" child in the classroom—and would probably not have learned ASL, nor met other Deaf children or Deaf adults, nor identified with them or their language. She would have seen them as "them," as "other," as "deaf-mutes," which is the way much of the world—most of the world—sees my daughter as she is today, because she signs and does not speak with her voice.

So, yes, it was a conscious choice we made, me and her mother, to sign to her in ASL, which was already the language of our home, and to enroll her in the school for the Deaf, where at age 3—in the Parent Infant Program—she could already understand everything everyone was saying, and say whatever she wanted to say, and be understood by all. That was what we wanted for her more than anything else: to be able to understand and to make herself understood. Speech does not equal language. Speech does not equal intelligence. In fact, speech has historically been taught to Deaf children *at the expense of language, at the expense of education*. Her mother and I knew plenty of Deaf adults whose experience this had been. In fact, it was the experience of *most* Deaf adults. We were adamant that it would not be our daughter's experience.

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It may sound oxymoronic, but there is music in sign language. Even if you don't understand a word of it, you probably enjoy looking at it. Most people do. They say it's beautiful and expressive, that it kind of looks like dancing. And if you're like most hearing people, you probably also enjoy listening to music. In fact, you might say you can't imagine a life without music. Well, ASL has its own music, and when you watch Deaf people signing—and especially when you understand every word of it—you can *see* the music.

Sign language, in the hands of Deaf people, isn't linear the way spoken languages are linear—one discrete word following on the heels of the next. Rather, ASL is *symphonic*. It creates meaning simultaneously with the hands, face, eyebrows, eye-gaze, lips, tongue, head-tilt, shoulder-turn—all the various sections of the body's orchestra creating meaning *at the same time*. A visual-gestural symphony rising up all at once, like a controlled explosion.

ASL has its own rhythms, assonances, crescendos and decrescendos, riffs and repetitions, most of which have grammatical functions. For example, one beat versus two can indicate the difference between a verb and a noun; a single movement versus a repeated movement can be the difference between simple present and present continuous, or between modified and unmodified verbs. Additionally, much of the grammar of ASL occurs on the face, such as negation, imperatives, interrogatives, adjectives, adverbs, and something called 'sound imagery', a way of visually representing certain environmental sounds with the lips, teeth, tongue and eyes. Hearing people often comment that Deaf people are very animated. And while it's true that facial expression in ASL also expresses emotion, it's usually more about grammar than emotion, more about sense than sensibility. More semantic than romantic.

And the thing is, it feels good to sign. The physical pleasure one derives from signing and watching other people signing is not unlike the physical pleasure one derives from making music and listening to music being made. Interestingly, *sign* and *sing*, but for two inverted letters, are the same word. A happy accident? Perhaps. And yet, signing and singing are just two different (or maybe not so different) ways that the body expresses energy, shaping meaning and emotion out of thin air, putting it out there for the world to take in. And the manual dexterity required to play a musical instrument is not unlike the manual dexterity required to articulate the handshapes and movements of ASL. In fact, ASL teachers report that hearing people who have learned to play a musical instrument at some point in their lives seem to have an easier time learning ASL than those who never played a musical instrument. Go figure.

But silence, to Deaf people, who are intensely visual people, isn't lack of sound; it's lack of movement. Sound IS movement, in fact. It's energy moving in waves. Which is what music is, after all. And when Deaf people look into the faces of hearing people, what they usually see is silence. They see silence because hearing people, for the most part, do not use their faces to express meaning or emotion. Compared to Deaf people, they have very little facial expression when they talk. Hearing people are pretty poker-faced, if you ask Deaf people. And that's because their intonation is all in the voice, which is invisible to Deaf people.

But when Deaf people look into the faces of other Deaf people, what do you think they see? They see music! Movement, beauty, energy, meaning. They see intonation. They see gymnastic eyebrows, eloquent eyes, adverbial tongues, and all the risible muscles being put to good, resounding use. They see their language, a visually stunning and musical language, full of inflection, *anima*, soul.

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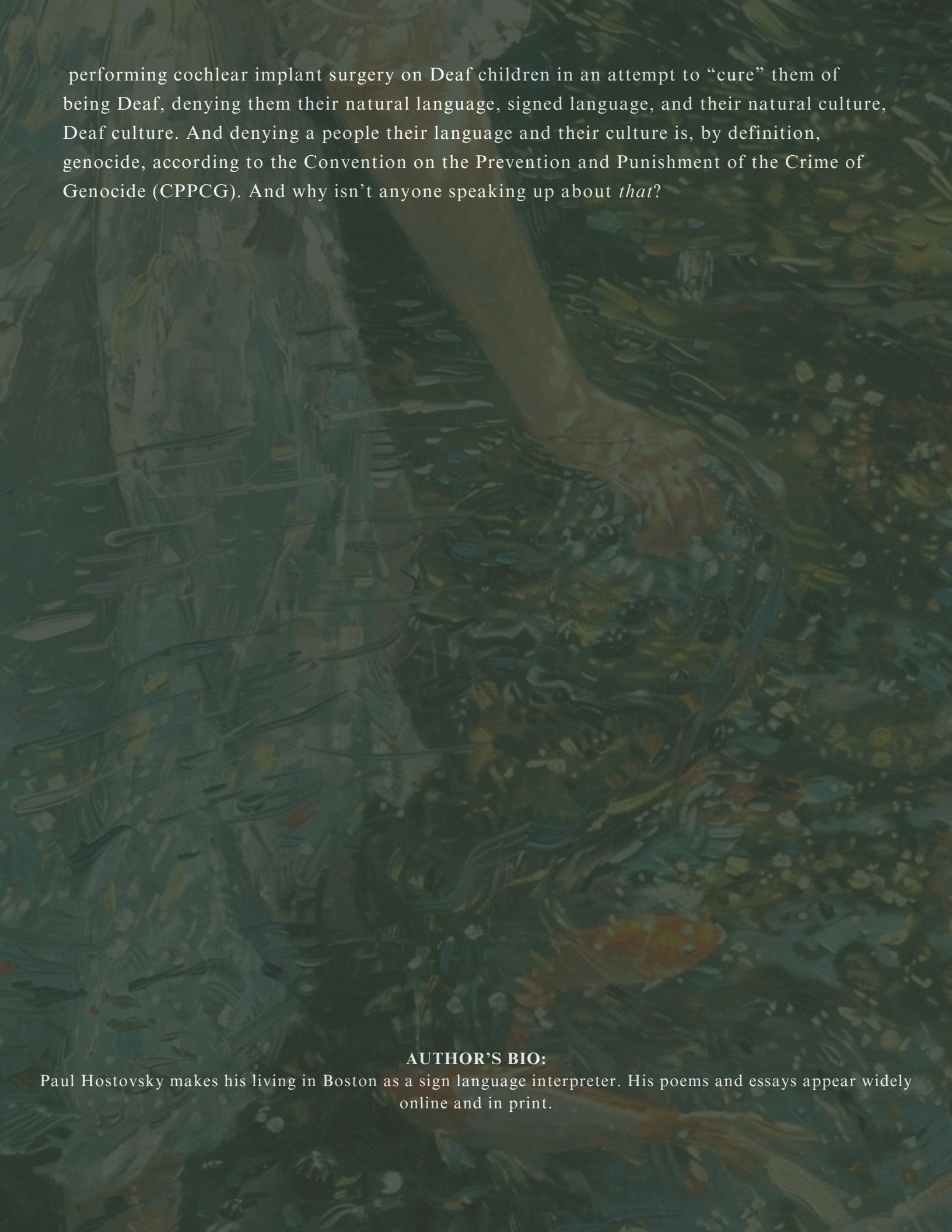
So listen: what would my daughter be like today if she had had two hearing parents who had never met a Deaf person, who followed the advice of the “experts” and opted for a cochlear implant or bilateral hearing aids, parents who used only spoken language with her, sending her to public schools where she was the only “hearing-impaired” child in the class? Would she be the same person she is today or a different person? That question intrigues me. And it scares me a little. It's a little like asking what she would be like if she grew up in Iran speaking Farsi. Wow, she would definitely be a different person. Culturally. Linguistically. And yet she would be the same person. She would look basically the same. The same height. Same complexion. Same shoe size. But psychologically, temperamentally, mentally and emotionally, she would be a very different person.

Listen, I like her the way she is. I *love* her the way she is. And I know she likes and loves herself. Which is just as important, actually more important. I remember when she was little (she's 32 now), and wearing hearing aids, and going to speech therapy (pulled out of class, in fact, in order to attend speech therapy) several times a week, mostly signing but occasionally using her voice with me, with her hearing brother, with her hearing grandmother. And one day when she was shooting hoops with her brother and the neighborhood children, she called out with her voice "I'm open" or "pass me the ball," and one of the kids laughed at her, pointed at her jeeringly and laughed at the sound of her voice. And it hit her hard. Harder than if someone had thrown the ball in her face. It hit her that her voice was not like the voices of the other children, that somehow it was different, noticeably, laughably, different. And suddenly she felt terribly vulnerable. And it wasn't long after that incident that she basically chose to stop using her voice.

And in spite of my reassurances that her voice was fine, that her speech was good—that if she worked on it, it would get even better—she chose to give up on speech. And I haven't heard her speak with her voice in many years.

Does that make me sad? No. What makes me sad is that she was hurt, traumatized, by someone laughing at her in a cruel way. What makes me sad is that she internalized that hurt, and allowed it to silence her. But I am not sad that she chose ASL over spoken English. After all, her mother and I made the same choice when she was 3 years old. And her voice is alive and well and I hear it when she laughs or sighs or sneezes or yawns or hums or uses it any number of other ways. But she is not her voice. She is her personality, her character, her *way*. And anyway, voice is overrated. It's the ultimate instrument, they say; the breath of God, the soul. Give me, please, a break. The souls of Deaf folk are fine and well and perfectly happy the way they are; their personalities are as rich and varied as all the notes on all the musical scales, and then some. And as for God, well, let's leave God out of it. After all, religionists and oralists have been infantilizing Deaf people for centuries in the name of God. Read the history. It's all there.

So listen, yeah, maybe we "Deafened" our daughter. But it's all for the good. Because the medical establishment and the so-called experts have been perpetrating a cultural genocide against Deaf people for generations, going all the way back to the Milan conference of 1880 and the proscription of sign language in deaf education worldwide, and then the eugenics movement in this country and abroad advocating the forced sterilizations of Deaf people, and A.G. Bell's lifelong attempts to pass a law banning marriages between Deaf people. And now, the greatest weapon of all in the erasure of Deaf people and Deaf culture: the pervasive practice of



performing cochlear implant surgery on Deaf children in an attempt to “cure” them of being Deaf, denying them their natural language, signed language, and their natural culture, Deaf culture. And denying a people their language and their culture is, by definition, genocide, according to the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (CPPCG). And why isn’t anyone speaking up about *that*?

AUTHOR’S BIO:

Paul Hostovsky makes his living in Boston as a sign language interpreter. His poems and essays appear widely online and in print.

ISSUE I

these writers' voices
september 2024