



The Writer Monk

VOL 1. JUNE 2025

SEASONS & FESTIVALS

there is
an art
a culture
a season
a festival
spirituality
& beauty in
poetry

Foreword
Dr. Tejaswini Dange Patil

Featured Poem

Bagad

A Light Heart Publications

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A literature magazine by The Writer Monk

The Writer Monk

Seasons & Festivals

Vol.1. June 2025

The Writer Monk Team



The Writer Monk (TWM) is a platform for the aspiring writers, experts and the professionals. A literary magazine created to reach the voice of aspiring writers to a larger and wider audience. The emerging talents are showcased along with professional writers, presenting readers with a wide array of voice, theme, concept and style of writing. Each writer brings in exclusive experience and contributes to the collective efforts of TWM. The writers share their personal experiences, insight creating an environment of closely knitted dynamic community.

In this “The Writer Monk” edition, Volume 1, is a delightful collection of soul searching, soul-inspiring, lovely, lively, romantic, humoristic, inspiring poems from authors, writers, poets around the world. The magazine apart from long and free verse poems will also add haiku, tanka poem formats and art work in the next issue from versatile creators around the globe.

Garry James
Founder & Editor

The Writer Monk
Vol. 1 - June 2025

Dr. Tejaswini Dange Patil
Foreword

Ahmety Uksek
Cover Image

Dr. Tejaswini Dange Patil
Featured Poem

The Writer Monk
Writers Quest

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From Editor's Desk

Dear Readers

Greetings from India! The Writer Monk Magazine has embarked upon an exciting literary journey.

It's a thrilling moment for us, we are filled with gratitude and we thank you for all your support with the release of our first edition, the Vol.1. Of our Bi-Yearly Literature magazine with the theme – Seasons & Festivals.

A pleasure indeed, to bring to you the thoughts, wisdom and imagery of our passionate, aspiring and experienced writers captured in inspiring and colourful words. The journey of a writer is nothing less than exploring an ocean. Each time, every time he/she dives deep comes out with a “mystic, majestic and magnificent” pearl. A lot to be unveiled and conveyed to the readers worldwide on the magical and thrilling experience.

TWM will help carry the voice of poets, writers to a broader and larger audience worldwide. This magazine is one of the “Messengers” of TWM to carry the thoughts to the audience. The submission of work had been open to all and we look forward to participation of more aspiring writers for our next issue coming out in December 2025.

Apart from the magazine TWM has initiated an event (A Lit Festival) to support our endeavour to bring together the writers and audience on a single platform “Poesy & Poise”. A Lit fest to be held once every two years, exploring an opportunity to interact with the audience by reciting work in their own voice. The audience too will be keen, enthusiastic and look forward to connect with their favourite poets & writers.

The magazine brings to you the creativity of the writers from worldwide in the form of poetry, flash fiction, fiction, non-fiction genres. We look forward to your patronizing this magazine giving an opportunity to aspiring writers to express and convey their thoughts.

It's a beginning...

“Every action in our lives touches on some chord that will vibrate in ETERNITY”... *Edwin Hubbel Chapin*



Foreword

A magazine is a specially carved literary effort which moves towards the eternity. It is like a multi-coloured, multi-hued flower that blossoms periodically. With my own experience, I can say that it provides tremendous energy to the creative souls as well as the team that motivates them.

With the present backdrop of the world, it has become a dire need of the humanity to be restored. The poetry has power to tantalize the chords of the human heart and melt it into soft tunes. In the era, when violence is taking over the solitude, intolerance is taking over tolerance and evil is being prevalent in many cases; the role of literature becomes significant. The light of the virtues emitting through the words needs to lead through the darkness. The creators are the leaders who can mould the world into the heaven through their melodies. These efforts may seem small; they will grow and become an ocean one day.

The magazine **The Writer Monk** is also the path that leads towards the world peace. In the time when people are very much engaged in their personal ways towards the customized 'JOY, here are some people who are sparing their time and efforts for the 'Universal Joy Together'. We may say, "**The Writer Monk is dedicated to serve Humanity with the words.**"

The magazine intends to spread the fraternity, cultural exchange and heart to heart communication in not only in the humans but also with the Nature. The theme of the current Issue is also 'Seasons and Festivals' that means the literature related to the festivals of the humans and seasons of the Nature.

Herewith, I appeal all the creative souls to help to flourish this literary movement to all the corners of the globe.

Let's come together,

Hold hands

And move towards happiness

Of the World.

Dr. Tejaswini Dange Patil

Dr. Tejaswini Patil, an academician, poet, author, editor and social worker. Founding Director of INNÆI Journal and MatruAkshar Journal. Working as an Office Bearer of NGOs. Seven books to her credit including three of English Poetry, one each of Marathi and Hindi poetry along with a reference book. Multiple times selected for prestigious Rio Grande Valley International Poetry Festival, Texas, USA. Many national, international awards have been bestowed on her from Kyrgyzstan, Argentina, Mexico, China, Greece, Indonesia, India, and UAE. Ambassador Delegate and Member of PEACE ART & CULTURE Organization also called PEACE PAX, Argentina, October, 2023.



Founders Voice

The dawn of “The Writer Monk Magazine”

Its story you have heard several times before. Having completed my first novel in 2021, I approached the publishers and agents. Few responses which I encountered forced me to draw back, pause and ponder, while majority did not even bother to respond.

“Out of adversity comes opportunity” by Benjamin Franklin is so true. A significant opportunity and I did not miss it. I invested time, money, effort to learn editing, layout designing and publishing, though I am not new to publishing online. I got my first novel published, added to it another 3 anthologies. Later my works got published through the publisher. Similarly I submitted many of my poems to Literary magazines, I lost the count. Very few responses were coming and it was a time consuming practice. Again it pointed out to the void and I moved ahead with a determination to make it much more convenient.

One thing I loved most of the submission page is it comes with a “gentle reminder”, if you do not hear from us within so and so period, please try out somewhere else, and so I did.

The experience culminated to an ambitious project of creating a platform for aspiring writers. In Feb 2025 “The Writer Monk” was born and in a span of 3 months in the month of April 2025 we started inviting submission for the magazine. Fortunately with the exception of a few we have accepted and included them all.

The magazine is scheduled to be published Bi-Yearly. At present we have limited genre. We will gradually open up for more forms of poetry and art work. Apart from above we have initiated to bring the writers and readers together on a single platform, an event “Poesy and Poise”. The writer’s get an opportunity to interact with the audience directly. They can express and convey the emotions in their own voice for a better impact resulting in an instant connect. Audience too can seize this opportunity to interact with their favourite writers in person, culminating to an everlasting bond, a dynamic community.

You may please join The Writer Monk on Facebook; follow us on Instagram, Twitter to read, share, motivate, encourage and... Be Inspired.

We welcome you all to “The Writer Monk”

Garry James

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We are thankful and grateful to the artist, photographers from Pexels.

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Dedication

Dedicated to My Lord

My heartfelt thanks to

Readers

Well Wishers

Writers. Authors. Poets

The Writer Monk Team

Facebook. X. LinkedIn. Amazon. GooglePlay
For their support

Namaste

Garry James
Founder & Editor

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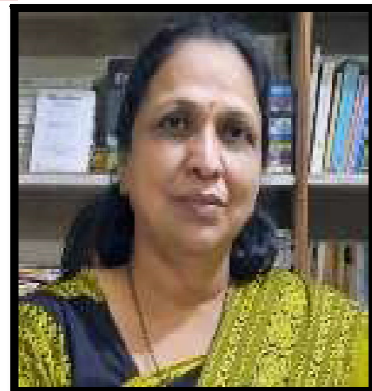
Poetry

Bagad – The fair



Dr. Tejaswini Dange Patil

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Bagad – The fair

Bagād, our biggest fair is the last ritual of the area in the year.
On Akshaya Tritiya, the preparations begin.

To reassemble the huge wooden parts
Of a Chariot of the god Bhairavnath, the fifty feet long big trunk
Of a straight tree chiselled to a smooth surface,
They gather, worship, and pray to him
To help them succeed in their efforts
To move the Chariot called Bagād.

The parts are arranged, the uppermost pike is decorated
With colourful satin pieces of cloth
Fixed to the four corners of a wooden square.
A hair supplement is left loose, hanging
And hundreds of coconuts tied to the trunk
Offered by the devotees to the Lord Bhairavnath
After fulfilment of their wishes...

The surface, ready to ride hundreds of old-young enthusiasts
With each other's support.
Pulsating oxens from another 'honoured family' are tied to the yokes
The big wooden wheels don't move an inch
Till five to six pairs have joined to carry the carcass.
The big roars of "BhairavnathachyaNavaneChangbhal"
Reverberate in the air one after the other,
The pink powder... Gulaal creates flashes in the surround
Every face is pink ... all the same, dissolving the disparity...
The huge Bagād starts moving on the fixed road.
The band of Dholaks of the shepherd's community
Runs with the rhythm before the procession.

Two weeks before, the handcarts, small shops fix their positions
To attract the attention of the visitors...
All sorts of stuff are available in the fair...
Women are busy buying the missing utensils in their kitchens.
Children are lost in the taste of ice candies and other titbits.
Suddenly, the roar arises from the temple
Everyone runs aside from the main road
From where the Bagād moves.

The heavy open chariot balanced by the clinging crowds
Is moved by the oxens that are all upset
Their tongues hanging out in pain, eyes spread wide open in fear
Their owners, massaging their backs

A literature magazine by The Writer Monk

To complete one round in the village.
Their reins are tightly held by the Maankari...
Who is tightly held by the crowd balancing each other...

The Dhangars, with the thick black shawls
On their shoulders play on their drums, in a rhythm
Almost running, they catch up the tone of each other.

The people make a way for it through the crowds.
Every inmate runs to the road to see the Bagād.
It turns around in the central place in the village
And returns to the main temple yard.
The whole day, everyone is obsessed with
The rounds of the Bagād
Eleven, fifteen, twenty-one...
As per the availability of the oxen in the vicinity.

Bagad	A village fair of Kameri in Sangli District, Maharashtra
Lord Bhairavnath	The name of the village deity for whom the fair is organized
Maankari	A specific family which has the particular honour in the fair
The Dhangars	The people from the community who are skilled in playing the Dholaks (Drums)

An Ode To The Spring

There returns the spring, stealthily—
Rejuvenating, reenergizing, and renewing every life, every iota tenderly.

Spreading sweet odours and painting bright colours on every sapling,
Restructuring, rebuilding, rephrasing life over death—
Like a phoenix, readjusting, retuning, and reclaiming breath.

The whole world celebrates your arrival with jubilation.
Even the sun blows its trumpet, dancing with golden rays in elation.

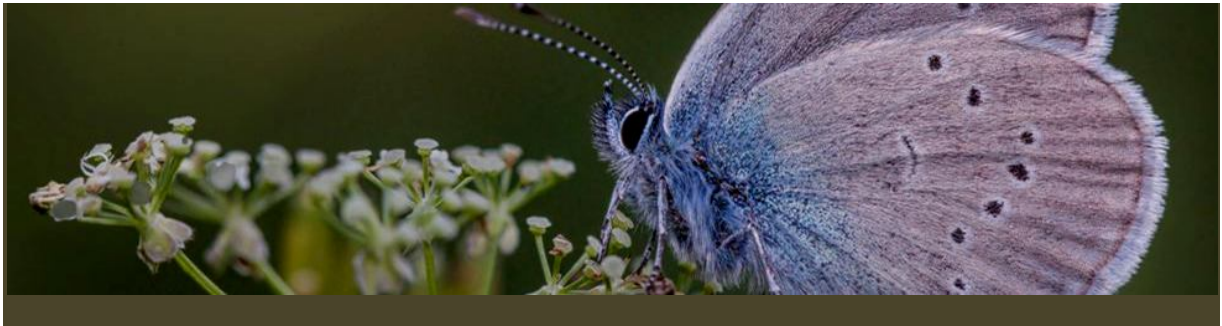
Colour powders rise and float, heralding the festive season,
Overflowing with Cupid's charm—young hearts rejoice with reason.

The green valley's echo with the buzz of bumblebees once more,
As the wandering wind flows free, burying its icy core.

The air is laden with romance, music, and intoxicating bloom.
New hopes awaken love, dispelling winter's gloom.

O Spring! Please knock on the doors of homes that grieve,
Bless the weary souls who struggle to believe.

Whisper to them of silver lines beneath each cloud above—
That life still breathes beneath the shroud, with warmth, with hope, with love.



Mrs. Mahima Tiwari

Being an English teacher by heart and soul for almost forty years, I have enjoyed my profession to the hilt since literature is all about life and morals.

My heart beats for animals and nature and i believe in supporting life with love, affection and motivation since each soul requires consolation somewhere in his life. I deem this world as globe barring division lines, castes, colour or language. My religion is love and caste is my love for humanity and my passion is benevolence.



Bloom Baby Bloom

spring will come soon
bloom baby bloom

you have inherited all the goodness
you are nothing less, than marvellous
bloom baby bloom

“but, I am so tiny
while the pine stands so tall
I have to live in the shade of them all”

they are tall, but harder they fall
you are tiny,
a wind, neither the storm
could do no harm
bloom baby bloom

purple blooms are so magnificent
so enchanting and ornamental
colours you inherited,
purple, pink, white and lavender
the pollen so precious golden yellow
sun could not hold his smile
bloom baby bloom
spring will be here soon

“none, even see me
they all “like” giants bright
rose, marigold and lily”

never mind them
you have the bees and beautiful butterfly
those big flowers have admirers for a while
they will remember you for eternity
people glorify your mint fragrance
adorns aromatic dishes on feast
you are the richest in nectar
bees swarm near you, ignoring others
your touch heals the sick
the spring is near baby, no more gloom
bloom baby bloom

convinced, motivated of her goodness,
and afterlife,
thyme began to rhyme.



Garry James

Garry James based in Mumbai, India is a poet, writer and an author who loves to write on different genre. He writes majorly on inspiration, nature, spirituality, love & romance, relationship, social life challenges, true life experiences. He also writes informative articles on Indian history, forgotten holiday destinations. Exploring the myths, fantasy and more... which simulate and impact imagination.



Yule

This is the long night.
This is the cold night.
This is the dark night.

Night of last hope. Will I turn
from darkness? Will you turn?
A night of wonderment; pain,
& spirits who congregate elsewhere.

Leave it in the goblet's bowl, as I left
the incense-stick: charred, refractory.

This is the dark night of the soul.
This is the dark night which agonises.

This: the dark night of your ancestral pool.
This: the dark night of your sacred white deer.
Yet will you turn to me now?

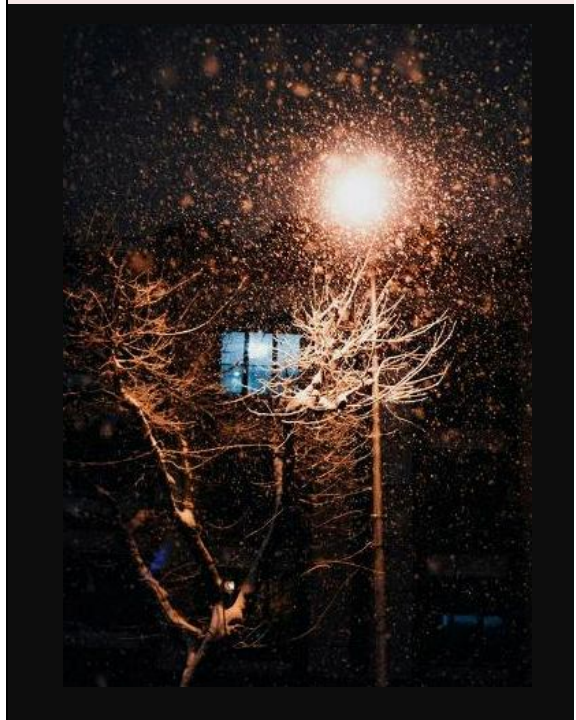
Just as you turned at the staircase-
corner; &, for a moment, loved
these charged words which move
in effluence here & there. For even
you are excited by the high leap
of vowel & consonant in this long night.

As Yule has its own luminous aspect,
its own dependable carillon-bells;
& their timbre is not your death knell.

This is the dark night of mistletoe,
the dark night of the red rose-hip;
where ivy, holly are always
intimately encoiled paramours.

For Yule has its own revelation,
its own unexpected reversals.
Cold, dark, long for ulterior reasons.

This night which seems to shudder
like it will never end.



Mark Wilson

Mark Wilson has published four poetry collections: 'Quartet For the End of Time' (Editions du Zaporogue, 2011), 'Passio' (Editions du Zaporogue, 2013), 'The Angel of History' (Leaky Boot Press, 2013) and 'Illuminations' (Leaky Boot Press, 2016). A fifth, 'Paolo & Francesca in a Colder Climate', is forthcoming from Black Herald Press in 2025. He is the author of a verse-drama, 'One Eucalyptus Seed', about the arrest and incarceration of Ezra Pound after World War Two, as well as a tragi-comedy, 'Arden'. His poems and articles have appeared in: The Black Herald, The Shop, Tears in the Fence, 3:AM Magazine, Anvil Tongue, International Times, The Fiend, Syncopation, Epignosis Quarterly, Mande, Dodging the Rain, The Ekphrastic Review, Rasputin and Le Zaporogue.



Samhain

Chthonic tour of the souterrain,
on the seam of Persephone's gown,
who was the wisp of an eidolon,
a sapling of lissom alder; & now
she wears her cypress snood.

And the dead whisper, sparkle
their presence in the room's density.

Democracy of the dead, radio
voices crepitate through aether
& static. Wine-flushed voices:
wine-dark, deep & sonorous,
propelling oceanic volubility.

All Hallows, the long night
of seances. Your dead twin
mouthing out his inscrutable
profile, to flicker on the wall.

This is the chthonic night.
This is the night of apparitions.
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Ingathering of ancestral voices,
a genetic current strikes to the
marrow-bone; Luna ingratiates
herself with such aplomb.

And the dead whisper, sparkle
their presence through the
room's ambience . . .

Hear the dead evacuate their
antiphons from tsunamis, out
of Lascaux. Hear their thermals
in the liquid underground
of Acheron. Deep below
Avebury, in the murk of
corridors; emergent, as
if with torches, their

bristling cortège.



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Margaret's Knitting



Margaret's knitting in the corner
That is what she does all day.
Stays away from other children
When they go out to play.

She lives in our refugee camp
A victim of Rwanda war
Breaks and knits the same piece
Of grubby wool once more

She's the oldest of the youngsters
Never speaks to anyone
Whatever she has witnessed
Cannot be undone.

I hear there is a bus coming
To our camp today
With families longing
To take their kids away

And now I see Margaret
She jumps up from the ground
Wraps her arms around a woman
Spins her round and round

For this is Margaret's mother
They haven't met for two years
She's talking at last to everyone
Between laughter and tears

I wonder when they go
Back to their ripped up land
Will Margaret place the knitting
In her mother's loving hand.

Joe Healy

Joe Healy lives in Ireland and is a member of Limerick Writers Centre and Listowel Writers. Poems have been published in Crannóg, Bare Hands, the Clare Champion and Mystic Nebula. Joe was featured in a Revival Poetry anthologies 'Sextet' and 'Voices from the Cave'. and he features in the tribute collection 'I live in Michael Hartnett'.

He is a member of Lime Square Poets online poetry group.

His first poetry collection 'Soft as Rainbow' was published in 2013 by Revival Press. In 2022, Healy was a prize winner at the Ballydnoghue Bardic Festival Short Story Competition.



Crossing The Court

Sunday morning basketball.
While waiting for my son's game.
I watch the under six boys at practice.
Each boy runs up bouncing a ball.

They smile when they score.
Some smile even more when they miss.
Full of the joys of play,
They race back to the end of the line.

Seven are white, three boys black.
I gaze across at three Dads in the corner,
On their own, no mixing.
Their sons mixed well, talked to the Irish.

Muslims spoke to Christians.
I glance at my Sunday paper.
A photograph was titled; Hero of Paris siege;
It showed a black Muslim man.

Maybe next week, I might ramble over.
Talk to the parents at the other side.
Cross the coloured painted lines of the court
Step over and chance my arm.



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Waiting

In winter, we used the ashes from extinguished coal stoves to keep icy sidewalks and paths passable. We spread out the grey ash just

after the sun rose, just before it set again in clear nights, constellations frozen to the firmament, the moon hidden until spring and the planets

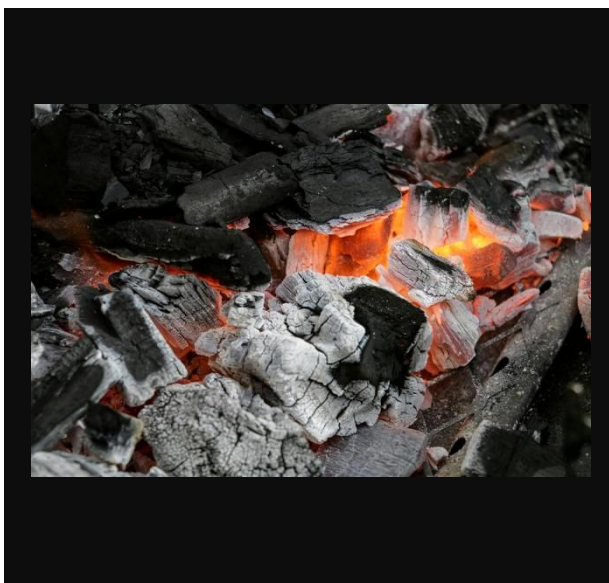
invisible. Corpses remained above the ground until the rock-hard icy earth thawed, inside we waited shivering around the dying stove.

Restoring Nature

Surrounded by coniferous trees, mostly spruce, mud, purple moor-grass, Satan's wort, lichens, shovels silent as night, construction sheds,

abandoned signs showing plans for this area, peat, empty trains, forests as far as Germany and Poland, discover tracks of different animals in the sand

Page From A Notebook With Chequered Paper



Today after sixty odd years of fruitless searching for signs of meaning I threw my dictionaries out, too much time I have wasted, on foreign languages as well as my own.

Hare Rama. Hare Rama. Of my bones are precious blood coral made, encased in gold they hang around her neck and rest on the basking breath in her pale marble chest.

Enno de Witt

Enno de Witt's poetry and artwork are firmly rooted in a tradition that goes all the way back to the dawn of language and to his youth on the Dutch North Sea coast. De Witt lives in the medieval city of Deventer on the banks of the river IJssel in The Netherlands. His poetry and art are published in The Netherlands, the USA, the UK, Nigeria, Canada, Estonia and India.



Winter' Advent

The frigid in the wind is setting in.
The sun is losing its vanity.
Cheeks have started rejuvenating their sanity.
They are gaining their pinkish glow.
O' feel the peculiar nip in the rustling flow.

Little kids are set to begin their games under the warmth of the sun.
Youth is ready to celebrate Christmas holding intoxicating rum.
Love birds can be seen all around fluttering their wings.
Both fog and smog is playing their rescue to bulwark naughty kissings.

The glowing charcoal in the fireplace is playing its own shenanigans.
Feed me more and more with its chattering sounds, has become its slogans.
Some have bid adieu to this world recently.
But, the balance is being maintained well by God Himself with new beginning!

Don't hide my youth yourself under the quilt
Since it's time to toil and the history is waiting to be rebuilt.
The world is advancing forward at its fastest pace.
Save time for love as well as to participate in the race.
'Coz equilibrium is the need of the time.
Try to manoeuvre together with a romantic chime.



Mrs. Mahima Tiwari

Being an English teacher by heart and soul for almost forty years, I have enjoyed my profession to the hilt since literature is all about life and morals.

My heart beats for animals and nature and i believe in supporting life with love, affection and motivation since each soul requires consolation somewhere in his life. I deem this world as globe barring division lines, castes, colour or language. My religion is love and caste is my love for humanity and my passion is benevolence.



Winterful Seasons

I hope you know you ain't alone,
We hold you closely and tightly
in our prayers.
We carry you intimately and solely
in our hearts.
Though we might not heal you,
we pray for your healing,
Though we might not erase your scars,
We pray for your recovery.

I hope you know you ain't alone,
We go to bed with you fondly in our minds
and hope to sleep and comfort you in our pillows,
Oh, we hope,
Thoughts come to our rescue as
we remain hopeful and hoping that
you know you ain't alone,
We in solidarity with you.

All these shall come to pass,
Us by you, all the seasons.
I hope you know you ain't alone.



Thotlisang David Mhlambiso

Thotlisang David Mhlambiso is a poet, a qualified teacher and a Masters Candidate in Subject. Education in Languages at the University of the Free State, based in South Africa, Eastern Cape, Tlokoeng. He is a published author of four books titled ZIZINTO ZOBOMI, PHIND' UBHALE,

A JOURNEY WORTH THE RIDE and UKUPHUMA KWELANGA. He has made significant contributions to different national publications including Jacana Media in a Sol Plaatje European Union Poetry (X2) and international issue by PEACE NKEIRUKA MADUAKO from Nigeria. He has been awarded as an EduSector Trailblazer by NYDA, Unsung Hero by SUNDAY WORLD, South African Shining Star by INSIDE EDUCATION.



April Has Arrived

I am not afraid of April,
With its fiery heat
And humid warmth,
Its trickling sweat
And hot headaches,
I am not afraid of April.
The parched earth
Cries out for damp,
The sweltering pi dogs
Wander for shade,
The passionate sun
Beats down its love,
Yet I am not afraid of April.
The school kids
Lose their cheer,
Stay at home and not play
Outdoors in the park,
Even butterflies feel tired
And the neighbourhood cat
Moves with lissom grace
Prefers to lie about
Instead of giving chase,
Plants droop sadly
The wind moves them not,
But I am not afraid of April
Because May will be hotter still.



Vidya Hariharan

Vidya Hariharan is an avid reader, traveller, published poet and teacher. She was recently shortlisted for the Editor's Choice Award for her haiku from Under the Basho in 2024. Currently she resides in Mumbai, India.



Inclusion



As candles are lit
One by one,
The gentle glow
Illumines
The eager eyes
Of the orphans,
Gathered around
The table.

Songs are sung
And thin gifts given,
Eager hands reach out
With compassion
And bless the heart
That gives them plenty,
As shoppers thron
the glittering malls
Puzzled and overwhelmed
What to buy for those
Who already have
Everything!

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It's Time To Claim a Cuckoo's Nest

voice so mesmerizing, hard, not to heed
a call to lure prospective paramour
come march and the game take a lead

hopping, hiding from eyes snoopy
scouts to find the host nest, to invest
lays egg replacing the existing with its own
while the host toils, it keep producing more

brilliance is by default, by nature
eggs hatch earlier, chucks other down with
grandeur
a competitor eliminated, calls for better
growth & nurture
the host like its own, cares and stand guard
from predator
in turns, they guard and defend their future

a smart investor, does not place all egg in
one
distributes investment in different basket
make others toil, while he relax and see the
investment multiply
a lean and mean manipulator watch from
afar
watch his investment grows above par
the bull and bear of the woods a prudent
investor, after all
a co-evolutionary race, talented to survive
with minimum invest
skips the toil of protecting & guarding it's
invest and building a nest
cost imposed on host of rearing , an
investment at its best

a staunch manipulator , an expert on the
dynamics and mechanism to survive
of stories untold, behind the scene this act
remain out of sight
innocent host fades bearing the burden,
rearing offspring & building nest
it's terribly hard to find cuckoo's nest

it's march, the cherry blossom abound
nature's clock is at it again
the scent of first rain and earth hits your
senses, awakening memories fragile
it's time for hard workers to get going and
build the nest
a wheel loader to & fro carrying twigs, sticks
and leaves, the best
frequency grows day by day to build, while
one defends and stays
prying eyes hide & amuse on the progress,
keep a watch from behind
the game is set, it's time to claim cuckoo's
nest

a natural planner with skills beyond ordinary
a strategist from the woods, a flying
mercenary



Garry James

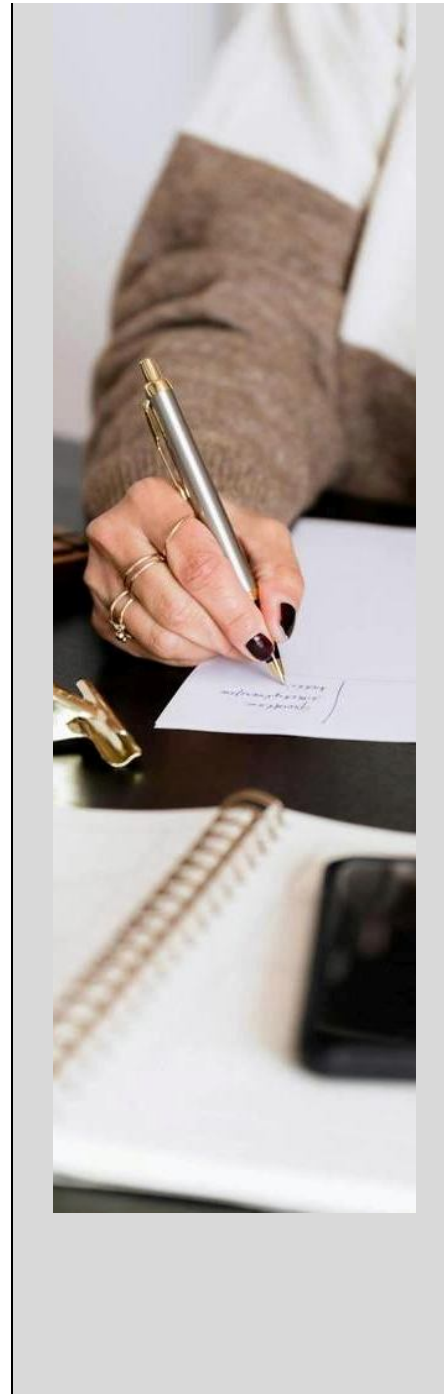
Garry James based in Mumbai, India is a poet, writer and an author who loves to write on different genre. He writes majorly on inspiration, nature, spirituality, love & romance, relationship, social life challenges, true life experiences. He also writes informative articles on Indian history, forgotten holiday destinations. Exploring the myths, fantasy and more... which simulate and impact imagination.



Romance Writer

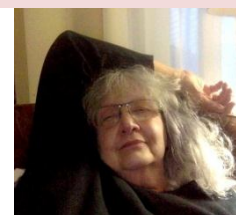
Why did I spend time in a writing seminar given by the author of romance novels? Long class [and my hip hurt]. Include intrigue, perilous hours, near misses, she said. Watch out for “they’re, their and there.” And love must prevail in the end. I learned about the genres and which ones sell the best. Stephen King owns all the Horror genre. So forget that. Memoirs? No one cares. There is no “police report” genre. I brought up my research into 19th-century European brothels. And I mentioned people who file police reports don’t always tell the truth. [My very own lead balloons.]

At home I wrote all about Oma and her sisters of the night, Cecile and Rosalie. Their impossible lives with no room for babies. Their courage, their deep love for each other. Oma laid her newborn on the street known to all as “baby street.” Her sisters arrived on time, before the cold morning air overwhelmed his tiny body, before some stray snatched him away. They told some ruse to the police about finding him abandoned. They played out the drama very well. Not their first time through. The police ledger read: “A male child of about ten days.” Ghent, 1815. At court Cecile swore to the truth with her “X.” The baby reared and loved by nuns. No market for our horror stories. But love prevailed in the end.



Martha E Johnson

Martha Ellen lives alone in an old Victorian house on a hill on the Oregon coast. Retired social worker. MFA. Poems and prose published in various journals and online forums. She writes to process her family history and the events of her life.



Owambe

The Amálá's softness smoothly romanced by your fingers,
Accompanied with the Ewedu soup and stew,
And large chunks of ògúfè to keep your mouth busy,
And non-protective of your white clothes.

The drummers talking as they deftly beat with their hands and sticks,
Drawing the raffia palms to make different rhythms,
Praising, entertaining and enchanting the guests
Until their feet and bodies hit the floor swaying to their sating sounds.

The Alágà Ìdúró serenading and engaging the guests with wits as the rites go on,
Praising the beauty and grace of the spectacles of the day,
Making the celebration and honor giving going smoothly.
Pushing for the cash spraying and jollying.

Rich culture in display with the beautifying asọ òkè, agbádá, ìró, gèlè ati fílá
The Aşò Èbí; the families' clothe; to stand them out
As a show of grace and wealth, of unity and order, of rich colors and culture,
Then the fabric industry and the fashion designers,
Make their fortune and show their skill.



Theresa Ogar

Theresa Ogar was born and bred in Ibadan, Nigeria. She loves to enjoy and live the beauty that makes up for life. She is a creative who expresses through Poetry, Short stories, and Podcasting. She is also a literary enthusiast who enjoys reading. She aims to be an impactful and successful international writer, and to be a saint in Jeans. She teaches Literature-in –English in a secondary school in Ibadan.



My Friend, Indeed

Rain

My friend, friend indeed,
Traverses from distant Sahara,
Accompanied with the breezy and scanty
downpour,
Applauding its arrival,
Gifting me with “cold, dust and dry air

My friend, friend indeed,
Blooms the pomade industry like never before,
And leads us shopping for the gloss,
Blessing us with cracked feet and lips,
And kisses our skin dry with a whitish scale;
Also testifying to her drying skills.

My friend, friend indeed,
Fills me with laze for the morning duty,
Wraps me in dusk with clenched teeth from the
chills,
Befriends me with humongous cardigans,
Back-friends me with water and bathing.
Hooks me in a contract marriage with blankets
and duvets
While I peep through my window for the fog,
And savoring nothing but waiting for the end of
visitation.

With your splendor,
The green be greener,
The fresh be fresher,
The atmosphere be cool,
The earth be succulent,
The yield be bounteous.

Knocks on the roof,
Playing ticket for an African child,
Clenched teeth in the mouth,
Whistles in the ears,
Colorless and odorless drips,
Descending rootless.



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Desire

I want you
I want you to want me
To want me
 like the kidnapped want their
freedom
 like the itch you cannot
 scratch
Not like the needy
 want an audience for their pain
Not like the bored
 want another episode of Ellen
I want you to want me
 to want me to pleasure you
 not to please you
I want you to want me
 to take you without warning
 or to slowly build the
 tension
Hanging in the balance for longer than
you can stand
 But you can stand
 And then the apex
 the crescendo
 to
Dare I say it
 the culmination and the balloon
 lands gently on the
 grass
As your gentle breathing rolls toward
dawn.



JW Goossen

J W GOOSSEN, born and raised in Vancouver, currently lives in Ladner BC and enjoys carving out time for writing poems and stories, and painting. Publishing credits include *Rhubarb*, *Red World Periodical*, *As Surely As The Sun*, *Literary Journal*, *Grain*, *Canadian Stories*, *Red Ogre Review* and *Alchemy*.



Souls Fuse Bright



Lips part
like brown spotted
robins wait
for first worm

Lips seal
like purple bumped
starfish cling
to barnacle rock

Hands sample
like nervous
squirrels appraise
a luscious nut

Bodies squirm
like new born
kittens search
for mother's milk

Souls fuse
fire bright
within them
burns

Bodies rest
like bright eyed
owls await
a darkened sky

Hands squeeze
like hungry
boa surrounds
tomorrows lunch

Lips exhale
like sky born
eagles sail
the moving wind

Lips join
like crooked smiled
oysters seal
tight the pearl

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On The Eve Of Eid

Addressing all acacia audience,
bumblebee band buzz beautifully
cuckoo chants canorous chime
daffodils daisies dance downstream.

Eid eve exhibits enthusiasm everywhere
faithful fellows finally finish final fast
Grandma grandpa get giveaway gifts,
happy holiday hoardings hang high.

Infant invades iced Indian ice-cream,
junior juggle jumble jungle jigsaw.
kitchen keeper knead kashmiri koftas
little lune lamp lightly lights lanes.



Rafiya Syed (Rafiya Sayeed)

Rafiya Sayeed is a poet and educator hailing from Sopore. She has been dedicated to nurturing young minds, working passionately with schoolchildren.

A poet at heart since childhood, she writes English poetry and also composes lullabies and children songs in regional languages. Her work has been featured on various online literary platforms and magazines, reflecting her deep love for poetry.



Bardow Bound



The fear of not making it,
Being stuck in between,
Fighting not to split,
Weighing what it means.

A decision on which way to go—
Stop leaving,
Arrive at a place to follow.
Hopeless and forlorn you may be,
Here, under the Acacia tree.

The best option: open letter.
Nothing any better,
Or infinite,
Dim-lit.

Liminal lifetime—
Arrive as goodbye chimes.
Time invented to ease the pain,
Break the end into drops of teeming rain.

Clean hands, dirty feet,
Tread the path beat by beat.

End up off the street,
Live a life real, complete.

Christian J. Farber

About the author: Christian J. Farber is married to Susan and lives in Tinton Falls, NJ, near the shore with his three sons nearby. He is a featured and contributing author on many social media platforms, including The Huffington Post, The Good Men Project, and Wingless Dreamer.

Chris has had a long career in marketing and sales and is often called a visionary thinker. He is now retired and writes every day. Chris is working on his memoir, *A Lifetime of Yesterdays*, due in 26. In it, he shares his work beating OCD, Depression, Alcoholism, Cancer, and MS. More of his writing is available at Farberisms.com



Nowhere

Isn't it unfortunate?
That despite all my efforts,
I gain nothing,
I own nothing,
I reach nowhere.
It breaks my heart,
Tears me apart,
Shatters my spirit
Into countless pieces.
And so I wonder—
What is the purpose of this struggle?
What plan does the universe hold for me?
Where is my path, my journey?
Where does this road lead?
This is what happens to me
Called "tragedy"
And my heart tells me
Not everyone receives everything.

Existence

Imagining about mere existence
Finding purpose in this chaotic life
Embedded deeper insights—quintessence
Is it present or absent from drive?
Beyond the language of the fleeting world
The resonance of words, the echoes unknown
In symphonies grand, the soul is hurled
To deeper truths where passions are shown.
In every locked door, unseen, untouched
In every verse, there gleams the light
Through love, the grace of souls is brushed
The rhythm of breath, the beat of flight.
But still, the question of existence persists
Contradicting the very thought it insists.



Minahil Afzal

Minahil Afzal is a student of English Literature with a deep passion for poetry. Her work delves into the art of being, exploring themes of existence, reflection, and the human experience. Through her writing, she seeks to convey meaningful messages that resonate with life's deeper truths.



My Seasons

You see that lovely house on the hill
that has appeared like a giant
mushroom?

I would like us to take refuge there,
far from this mad, chaotic world.

You'll cover my body with flowers,
you'll desire me in every white petal,
you'll caress me just like the breeze,
keeping my fragilities in your hand.

When the wind scatters the petals,
you'll recognize my autumn at once,
my youth lost in lines and wrinkles,
the sunset of faded charms.

You see that house? It seems unreal—
the backdrop of an ancient tale.
I'd like to live there through the seasons
for a year, a month, or a single day.

Beyond the ocean

The luggage over there, this mess
tell me about your departure.

Hard to talk; hard to kiss you,
I think only of your flight.

I want to open the suitcase
and shout: "don't leave me!"
We have put our dreams aside—
all our fire, our longing, our tears.

Our story can't have this ending.
Or wrapped up like this—
you gone beyond the ocean,
taking my love and peace.

Hard to talk, hard to kiss.



Irma Kurti

IRMA KURTI is an Albanian poet, writer, lyricist, journalist, and translator. She is a naturalized Italian and lives in Bergamo, Italy. In 2020, she became the honorary president of WikiPoesia, the encyclopedia of poetry. She also won the prestigious 2023 Naji Naaman's literary prize for complete work. Irma Kurti is a member of the jury for several literary competitions in Italy and also a translator for the Ithaca Foundation in Spain. Irma Kurti has published more than 100 works, including books of poetry, fiction and translations. Her books have been translated and published in 20 countries.



Robusta

If We Should Lie Together

They think that years ago this place
Was tea and chips and never space
For coffee made in twenty ways,
I liked it better in the days
Before tomatoes were sun kissed
And nothing came served with a twist.
I see young couples seated there
With phones and blank digital stares
And think of Gina serving tables
Sneaking me smiles when she was able,
Her mother clucking at her girl
And me arranging my kiss curl.
But I drink here because I choose.
What they don't know is nothing new
Has happened here or how we thrilled
To juke box rock'n'roll and pills
And motorbikes, Italian coffee -
No tea for us - drank hot and frothy.
I lost Gina, watched cancer grow.
One daughter lives near Salerno,
The other went down south. She tries
To make me move from these loose ties.
I saw these streets get poor, forgotten
As jobs got lost the city rotten
And now they're coming up once more.
They've gentrified the house next door.
Again a coffee bar new style,
A place to reminisce and smile.
The hipster beards and jokes I like.
Just wish they had more motorbikes.

...the future is tangled like a morning
white sheet over the restlessness of sleep.
An old riddle whose answer lies ahead,
us stumbling to the solid light of day.
...say no more than enough. Let our spirits
speak in beads of sweat, twining like
incense,
hungry, thirsty, entranced by want and will,
limbs sore, both acolyte and oracle.
...what folds, what lines and little scars
unmasked
in the explorations. What is foretold
where skin brushes skin in the dappled
night?
... the promises we seek in song and dance
immaterial as birds' flight, bees' hum.
This prophecy is written on the heart.



Peter Appleton

Peter Appleton has worked in theatre, education and campaigning. He has lived and worked in several countries. He is a Buddhist. He is particularly interested in where the personal meets the political.



What We Learnt From The Game

In the end my father learnt
not much from the life simulation
he has been playing through out
our lives. He told me that
and the cheat code - randomness.

Today, I decide at random
that I should stroll towards
the damp lane and visit the house
he and I both grew up.
He died. I am still in the game.

Someone opens the curtains
and watches me through
the dim interior. Perhaps,
I am a beep and a holographic
message from his future self.

The Way Love Bares Its Flesh

On the St. Valentine's day
the former war correspondent
says that the importance of love
lies in the forbiddance against it.
He lost his ears to a blast.
We never argue with him because
we can never win. We hold
his hands as if to assure him -
love is not forbidden where we sit.
His hands shy away, disappear
inside his long sleeves.
On the wall two monsoon snails
bare a large part of their flesh.
I watch them. They can die
any moment. We have pets.
We have us.



Kushal Poddar

The author of 'A White Cane For The Blind Lane' and 'How To Burn Memories Using a Pocket Torch' has ten books to his credit. He is a journalist, father of a four-year-old, illustrator, and an editor. His works have been translated into twelve languages and published across the globe.



Love above Lafayette park

The downtown skyline
Is framed on the near side
By the summer trees
Of Lafayette Park and on the far
By the green water of the Detroit River.
Shortly before the world fell apart.
I fell in love with the wanton way she
Stuck her tongue out
And rolled her eyes
At the direst situations.
Quarantined with her
In a high-rise studio apartment
On the 18th floor, we look down
On empty streets without cars
Or pedestrians,
And in a post-apocalyptic world,
The eerie quiet is broken only by
The wailing sirens of ambulances
Speeding plague victims to
A nearby hospital.
Surrounded by the silence of sickly fear
We ask each other,
Are we the last people,
Or simply, the last two truly
Happy people in a frightened world?



Doug Tanoury

I have been writing poetry all of my adult life and I have very strong opinions about poems specifically and poetry in general, but I will spare you dear reader out of human warmth and charity. I live in Detroit, MI USA with my girlfriend Michelle and my stepdog Lola.



The Road From Richmond

Driving from Richmond to Detroit
The day I left her, there was no uncertainty,
Only resolve, and me speeding away
From discord toward harmony, with a wish
To live my life like a baroque concerto.

The two-lane blacktop highway
Stretched out across that summer day,
And the sunlight through the trees
made patterns of light and shadow
across the road like oriental lace.

I often said that bad relationships can kill you.
They're fatal in insidious ways, and no doubt
The leading cause of death. I whom suffered
The dark and pernicious pall of loving her
Am an expert on these dour and deadly matters.

Along long wooded stretches and farmland,
The horizon behind crowded with tall mountains
Standing shoulder to shoulder, putting finality between us,
The road curving gently and rising toward distant hills,
Toward temperate and bright sunlit highlands.



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Life's Whispers

Life whispers to me,
'You will never have today
For everything there's a season
A reason, a rhythm and a way'

Life murmurs , soft, yet steady,
'Don't wait, don't pause, don't rush
For the present is your lantern
And its glow is always near'

Life cautions me under the
descending sky,
'Do not rush the fleeting hours,
For seasons turn like pages,
And rains will nurture flowers'

Hence, I heed the gentle whisper
Let it guide me every stride,
Each moment has its essence, its tone
A time to seek together, a time to walk alone,
For the memories are deep and wide
like a mountain's shower.

Life whispers to me,
There's a balance in the turning of a tide
that touches and cleanses your soul,
A purpose under the heavens in harmony's design,
This moment, fleeting, golden, will soon
drift far away making you whole



Dr. Ujjwala Kakarla

Dr. Ujjwala Kakarla is an award-winning writer, researcher, holistic trainer and educationist from Hyderabad. She is an expert in Technical Communication, Soft Skills, Business English, Aviation English, Gender Sensitization, Human Values and Professional Ethics. She has lectured, and taught intensive courses in various technical institutions, and Universities. She has been the resource person in imparting holistic education for renowned Companies, Schools and Colleges. Moreover, she rendered her services to Aviation sector as Senior Linguist Expert in affiliation to DGCA and UKCAA.



A Psychic Show



All that I touch,
All that I feel,
Shaping...
and dissolving,
Exists within me...
A theatre,
Infinite plays...
Reflection,
and catharsis
Everything I see on
the screen seems like
a psychic show.
As much as I watch
these features, hear the
melodies of complex laws,
Feel the dance of fate, and
Karma weaving the scenes,
Life's pushing me...
Not to speak, not to answer,
but to slip into silence
Where scenes no longer bind,
And reactions cease to be chains.
When I am one with stillness
There's no more ruin, no more pain
no more laws, no more struggles,
no more attacks, no more race,
The world loses its grip on me.
And so I breathe...
Just as a watcher, but not as a player
As the space between moves
towards a soft hum of existence
through the wisdom of awareness,
When everything settles into peace,
and wholeness unshaken.

Dr. Ujjwala Kakarla

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Adrift At Sea

sea-worn bottle, bobs on a digital tide.
inside, not parchment brittle with ocean's brine,
but luminous lines of light,
coded in metaphors and rhyme.

message tossed into the sea.
unknown sender,
no harbour designated, no destination
on any map.

it drifts, an abandoned, forlorn vessel,
across oceans of indifference,
until...
a seacoast appears,
unsummoned,
unexpected.

my eyes, the sand.
my mind, the beach.
I pick it up,
this delicate thing,
uncorking the silence.

The words flow out,
a story whispered,
a feeling shared,
across lifetimes,
across the vacuity.

Suddenly~I am the address.
the recipient unknown,
FOUND.
the message delivered.
the poem,
HOME.



Sara Etgen-Baker

A teacher's unexpected whisper, "You've got writing talent," ignited Sara's writing desire. Sara ignored that whisper and pursued a different career; eventually she re-discovered her inner writer and began writing. She's written a novel (*Secrets at Dillehay Crossing*); compiled a book of memoir vignettes (*Shoebox Stories*); created a poetry chapbook (*Kaleidoscopic Verses*). Her manuscripts, memoir vignettes, and poems have been published in numerous anthologies and magazines including, *Good Old Days Magazine*, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, and *Guideposts*.



Allusions Of A Vanished Now



stainless-steel womb
welded shut,
buried beneath the oak's gnarled roots,
remnants given to the earth.

allusions of a vanished now~
faded sepia photographs,
a girl's clumsy drawing of herself,
a compact disc, its molded plastic brittle,
a mix of forgotten summer love songs.

headlines tell of wars, violence, and
bloodshed
tidings of momentary joys~
the scent of potpourri, a best-selling book,
a poem scribbled on frangible parchment,
a smooth, grey river rock,
pocketed on some long-ago walk
treasured remembrances.

When unearthed decades from now,
will future inquirers understand
the echoes,
the desires,
the fears,
the loves,
invisibly etched in these ordinary relics?

Will they see us in the dust motes dancing
in the beam of their curious light?
Or will it all just be
a mysterious puzzle,
a murmur,
quickly forgotten,
returned to the earth's clutches?

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The Fallen Tree

It once stood there with majestic pride
It's trunk enormous, it's branches wide,
Many a bird's nest it's green leaves hide
From its branches, children took swing
rides.

Hot, weary travellers with sweaty brows
Blessed it's cooling, welcome shade
Birds chirped merrily, joyous and gay,
Hopping and swinging on its branches
high.

Many a lovers' hearts beat as one,
Beneath it's cool, leafy shade
Many a names were etched on its trunk,
And many a promises for life, made.

The rustling of its leaves on a windy day,
Made music melodic, cheerful and gay,
The raindrops on its thirsty leaves,
A sparkling, Dazzling, tiara made.

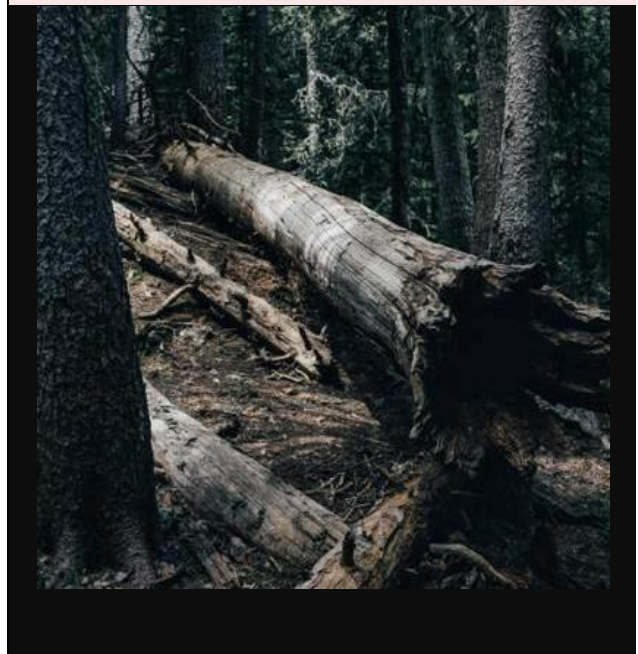
Come autumn, it shed its leaves,
Revealing its beauty stark and neat
The yellow leaves made a carpet crisp
Crunching under morning walkers' feet.

And then, one day it lay there, prone,
The majestic tree that I had once known,
It had become old and hollow they said,
It had to be cut, for it was very nearly
dead.

Though once a boon, it was now a bane,
So, standing, it could no longer remain,
It might fall anytime and injure someone,
And so, felled it had to be, sooner done.

Cut into pieces, hauled into trucks,
And a stub remains of its former trunk,
A sad reminder of big strong tree,
Fallen, weakened, killed by a rot within.
It took only some tiny termites
To do what the storms could not do
Bring down a mighty, strong tree
From the killer within it's hard to flee.

Are worries like termite and I like a tree?
Do they weaken my resolve, my spirit free,
Will they render me hollow, lifeless some day
I pondered sadly, as I slowly walked away.



Pushpa Subramanian

Pushpa Subramanian is currently a full time homemaker having taken early retirement from Standard Chartered Bank. She is an avid reader and writes on topics both mundane and profound. She is also a Book Reviewer for Muse India, an E journal.



When The Wind Blows Can You Sleep

Long time ago, lived a man by the coast
Who owned a farm, but could not boast
He tried in vain but could not find,
A farmhand, who the farm could mind.

For in the coast when the winds howled,
And the storm with rage, when scowled,
No man, no cattle, no crop was safe,
Farms and houses to the ground were razed.

Along came a man, kindly and calm,
Eager and ready to work in the farm,
“Are you up to it?”, the Master queried,
“I can sleep when the wind blows”, said he.

Though he knew not what the little man
meant,
The master appointed the strange little gent,
And had no reason to complain,
For he worked very well, gave no pain.

And then one night, the winds they roared,
How fiercely and strongly they billowed!!
The master ran to the helper’s door,
And shook him from his sweet stupor.

The little man slept on in bliss
Heard not the wind’s howling hiss.

The Master stepped out into the storm,
And found no reason for alarm
Chickens in the coop, cows in the barn
Doors locked and chained
The crops neatly covered in tarpaulin,
No way the water could get in.

Nothing blown away, nothing lost,
All that could be done had been done and
fast,
There was nothing to do but go back to
sleep,
Let the wind blow, let the storm sweep.

There will be storms in our lives,
There may be upheavals and strife,
Prepare oneself as best as one can,
Mind, body, soul, the trinity that’s man.

Accept the challenges, and do one’s best,
Prepare for the worst, expect the best,
Flow with the tide and sway with the breeze,
When the wind blows, “Can you sleep?”



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Into The Garden

Come into the garden.

Come as you are.
come with the broken,
battered pieces
that you
picked up off the ground
after fragile hands
let you fall.

Come into the garden
with the remnants
of what they
left behind.

Come into the garden
with the outlines
of what
you will
build again.

Come stained,
polished,
put together,
shattered.

Come into the garden
with
every fabric
of
yourself.

all that I ask
is that you come.



Sara Etgen-Baker

A teacher's unexpected whisper, "You've got writing talent," ignited Sara's writing desire. Sara ignored that whisper and pursued a different career; eventually she re-discovered her inner writer and began writing. She's written a novel (*Secrets at Dillehay Crossing*); compiled a book of memoir vignettes (*Shoebox Stories*); created a poetry chapbook (*Kaleidoscopic Verses*). Her manuscripts, memoir vignettes, and poems have been published in numerous anthologies and magazines including, *Good Old Days Magazine*, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, and *Guideposts*.



Season For Death

Is there a season for death?

Big Elk, Ontopanga
Chief of the Omaha's
Tells us
"Death will come,
always out of season"

When is the season for death?

Could it be winter
When the snows
Cover the ground
And bear retreats
To his den

Maybe in fall
When the colors
Decorate the trees
And the sap
Runs plentifully

Or is it summer time
When otter
Plays in the river
And badger
Rolls in the grass

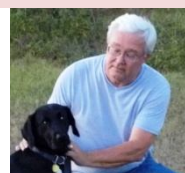
Surly it is not the spring
When the earth teems
With new life
Fawns, kits and cubs
Duckling splash about

The creator picks
The season for life
The creator picks
The season for death
Seasons that overlap



Howard Moon

Howard Moon is a Central Florida writer and poet who has appeared in multiple books, collections, and anthologies. He is of Native heritage. He is a brain injury survivor, diagnosed with hemiplegia, and suffers from mental illness. And speaks out as an advocate for those with Mental Illness and Disabilities.



Mountain Orchid

A nagging presage,
'The mountain will fall into the sea'.

The rock in the centre
of our world, resounding in my ears,
an indubitable Rubicon.

"I am sorry" they said.
So very sorry...

I heard its silent crash,
thundering in my thoughts,
The ocean swathed the debris
of dreams and promises,
as you anchored.

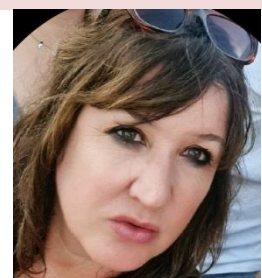
Feathers at my feet,
doves waiting in the trees,
butterflies gliding on the wing.
The whale song,
singing high on the breeze,
intimating the end was near.

Now bright and colourful
efflorescing into
'Disa Penny Jane.'
Evergreen, in
bridesmaids' chiffon
of orange and yellows
resting eternal
beside the mountain stream.



Justine A. Engelbrecht (South Africa)

Justine is a Johannesburg based writer. She has a BA HONS TLI in Theory of Literature, and a BA CWR in Creative Writing. She has a collection of poems 'Two Willows' on Amazon KDP, she has also published short stories, poetry and flash fiction on various online platforms.



Lantern Festival Revelation

Walking through the lantern
festival in the rain...
the lights and colors
wash and shift
transforming faces and forms
revealing the diverse and unique
among us.

Taking refuge
from the downpour
under the canvas of a market stall...
a carnival mirror reflects and distorts
thought and emotion
images of our mutual and
unique experience culture and
beginnings
losses and gains
revealing shifts in our expectations
acceptance and perspectives
all under the umbrella of humanity.

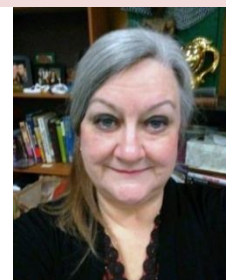
Fault Lines

Deep within lies
A crack, a line, a fault, a weakened point
Of thought which betrays our lives with grief,
With loss, with pain. And yet, those lines relieve
The stress of life, unburdens those breaking points
By shifting blame and sliding thoughts away
From death to moments of joy, from loss to life.
We learn to grieve without pain by seeing, amazed,
The beauty of that which gave us a brief
And tenuous piece of happiness. Recovering,
Replacing, and renewing it with packed soil in
which may grow
A seed of strength. If not, the lacuna opens and
tosses
Our souls back into a place of grief and sorrow.
Rubble and dust of a life misspent in blame,
A slough, a glide into a crevasse of need and pain.



Sherri J Moye-Dombrosky

A retired English teacher who loves reading and poetry, SJ Moye-Dombrosky has two grown sons and lives in South Carolina (United States) with her encouraging husband, their three amazing cats, and a demanding feral colony of fifteen cats. SJ grew up on a farm and enjoys integrating childhood experiences into her poetry. The interaction between nature and humanity is often the theme of these poems. Her Master's degree is in British literature, and she continues taking poetry workshops and meeting with other poets, appreciating the opportunity to learn and improve her writing.



The Stone And The River

She once walked paths the rain had worn,
Soft earth that bent beneath her feet,
A voice half-formed, a will yet torn,
Between retreat and self-defeat.

The wind would call, the trees would lean,
The river mocked with silver voice—
Yet in the hush between unseen,
She found within herself the choice.

No whispering brook, nor bending reed,
No road that forked in tangled doubt,
Could teach her more than loss and need,
Or draw her back once she stepped out.

The stone once shaped by storm and tide
Knows not the hour it turns to peak—
She stood as firm, she grew as wide,
And now it is the winds that speak.

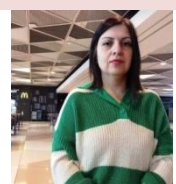
For what is strength but knowing when
To bend, yet never bow too long?
The earth, once soft beneath her then,
Now takes her step and makes it strong.



Shafag Dadashova

Shafag Dadashova is an Assistant Professor at ADA University and a researcher specializing in identity and gender in Azerbaijani literature. Her work explores the intersections of literature, national identity, and gender dynamics from the 12th century to the post-Soviet era.

She was a research fellow at the Centre for International Gender Studies and the Department of Oriental Studies at the University of Oxford.



The Knowing



One morning in the mirror's glow,
She met a gaze she'd failed to see—
No voice had told her, yet she'd know,
That she was worth the air, the sea.

And nothing then could take or give
A measure more than she allowed—
She walked not asking leave to live,
Nor seeking favor from the crowd.

The Hours That Wait for None
She thought the days were hers to spend,
Like coins kept idle in the hand—
They passed like whispers on the wind,
Too slight to grasp, too soft to stand.

She traced their steps in furrowed ground,
In work half-done, in dreams delayed—
Yet none turned back, none paused nor
frowned,
Nor asked if she had been repaid.

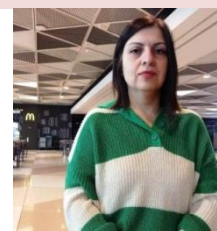
Then one stood still, though not in grace,
But in the weight of all denied—
And in its hush, she saw her place,
Not in the tide, but in the tide.

No hour will beg, no sun will stay,
No fate will plead for her to rise—
Yet in herself she found a way,
And met the morning with new eyes

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Season and Festival

Everything is set agog as the new moon
commence its sojourn
An incomparable literature festival at a
nirvana like a new dawn,
Life exists and those that walk the path are
not impotent
As many-a-individual covers their
impotency at their tent.

Born of their parents as their lives mysteries
is a celebration of love
Not having enmity of whatsoever to human
kind,
At their pace beyond and imaginatively
above
The invisible thought of humans in their
abode as a kind.

It is a culture of life for those that lived it
Their comprehensive sense of togetherness
as no contradiction,
It is a choice of life towards spiritual nirvana
of peaceful light
All other human kinds are accommodates for
there is an existence of evolution.

During this season of life, great minds made
it to the realm
There is no condemnation of lives as all
achieved without mayhem,
Children are embrace and celebrates
alongside elders
It is a celebration of peace as many soar.

In flying colours is togetherness as each and
every one in iridescent feathers
Viewing life in this literature path is not just
an ordinary goer,
As every living being comprehends life and
death in existence
The joyful tidings of life is a celebrations,
To fathers and mothers.

As for the great minds that comprehends life
values
Life is not a pretense,
Coming together irrespective of
heterogeneous culture,
Life survival is a paramount achievement
which great minds must nurture.

More ado about survival is to salvage human
lives from existence
Therefore, the great confluence calls for
peace at the season celebrations,
Nirvana of humans dream
Irrespective of statues or position in their
lives,
Great festival of peace!

A season of love to appreciates existence
Without any forms of fallacies or
destructions of human lives.



Amb Folajimi Notch Shoaga

I am an Author, Poet, International Ambassador of Peace, and Nobel Peace
in this literature path with versed knowledge in conceptual human
literature.



Dance With Me Seagull

Dear Seagull, next time a bird-deranged dawn
wakens me at five o'clock
and the tumult tells me
to evacuate or board up windows,
for starters I'll wrestle the weathervane
to the ground for failing to warn me—
how blue changes to violent just
before a hurricane,
how a fire will then roar
through my little house
Will you rescue me, gull, hold me aloft
on your unexpected shoulder?
fly me to Carnivale? I hear castanets click.
Don't say anything yet.
Just lower a wing.
Wink a roguish red eye.



Trish Saunders

Trish Saunders's poems and short fiction are found or forthcoming in Chiron Review, Right Hand Pointing, The Galway Review, American Journal of Poetry, among other places. She lives in Seattle, Washington, formerly, in Honolulu, Hawaii.



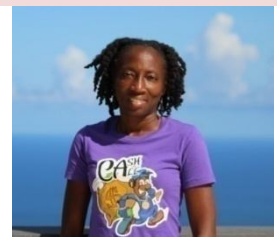
A Trek I Will Take



my imagination
takes me to your castle
a tortuous journey
with no clear path
an unforgiving uphill climb
stark greenery hides
any idea of a footpath
red flags flail
a reminder to be cautious
rock formation foundation
solidify the warrior energy
an immense landscape
unlike anything
I'm accustomed to
but I want to get
to know you ...
the castle – your heart
my imagination –
manifestations of loving you
a trek I will take

Linette Rabsatt

Linette Rabsatt is a Virgin Islands poet with roots in the BVI and USVI who began writing in 1996. You can find her work in her Kindle book, "Be Inspired: Poems by Linette Rabsatt," in Pulse Poetry Magazine, on her blog, Words of Ribbon, and on the Visual Verse and Micromance Magazine websites. She was nominated for a 2024 National Spoken Words Award for Best International Artist and won the 2024 Read Yuh Ting TOO Virtual Caribbean Poetry Contest.



Spring Nature Festivity

Unfolding fresh, newly born, greenish leaves
uncurling petals of intricate flowers
gently, from firm, tight buds knots
ironing brand new butterflies' wings
with straight-forwarded sun rays
dressing all in pearls of morning dew
for the celebration of the next day's arrival
neat and calm and rich and wealthy
with warmth, joy, and life essences
opulent and full, pacifying and fine.

Colors, profound and playfully vibrant
transfer messages sent by the sun
deep into the core of each being:
my heart and soul are dancing
by the tacts of its inner music.

Festival of flowers then follows
and myriads of various unique birds
expose their satiny feathers to our eyes
butterflies are hurling through breezes
scents and fragrances are wrapping us around
- life can be and is a spring within itself
but springtime is an unprecedented festival
of joy, beauty, brilliance, and amazement



Irena Jovanovic

Irena Jovanović was born in Zaječar in 1971, where she lives and creates. She is a Master of Ceramics design with 20 solo art exhibitions. She writes poetry since 1991 in Serbian, and in English since 2011. Inner Child Press from USA published her poetry book "Let It Be" in 2013. She is widely represented in many world anthologies, magazines and blogs, printed and online.



Mom, The Sky Is Falling

Saikou San's grandma forbids him from doing anything wrong. He asks her, "What if someone does?" she responded saying "That day, the sky will fall".

Saikou san was known as;
the wall of the company
never moved an inch
born to be an assistant manager, and will ...

urgent dispatch, documents unsigned
he barged into the cabin of boss, and
found his boss and his secre...
he ran out of cabin screaming
"the sky is falling", "the sky is falling"

poor soul was forced to resign,
tired of corporate hypocrisy
he decides to be self employed
his intelligence in farm processing above par
villagers welcomed him as an "avtaar"

cultivation improved, produce multiplied
he ensured produce reached far & wide
the benefit of fair price reach end user
villagers thanked, voted him as the leader
elections round the corner

village politician, meets farmer union
"create scarcity, let stock pile & people cry,
our money travels an extra mile"
saikou san overhears intent, gives a foul cry
"the sky is falling", "the sky is falling"

thrown out of leadership
he distanced from committee
grandma was worried, her words of wisdom
causing trouble in grandson's life journey
decides to seek almighty's blessings

a serpent queue, scorching heat
he helps his grandma sit under a tree
he observes another door open
men & women in white, amber lit car
snoops quick inside the temple door

saikou san relieved, finds quick entry
walks pass the door with delight
happy he would meet his deity in day light
the security holds him by the collar
beat him black and blue, threw him out

grandma rushed to protect her child
poor saikou san hurt and in pain calls out
grandma "sky is falling, sky is falling"
holding her loving grandson to her bosom
bruised soul, feeling guilty of her doing
...sure it will fall, my child... it will fall

we find many saikou san and grandma
walking the dead path of apathy &
discrimination... since ages
in earlier days it was the rulers
next came the zamindars and the saukars
today it is the day pirates dressed in black
and white sheep's clothing

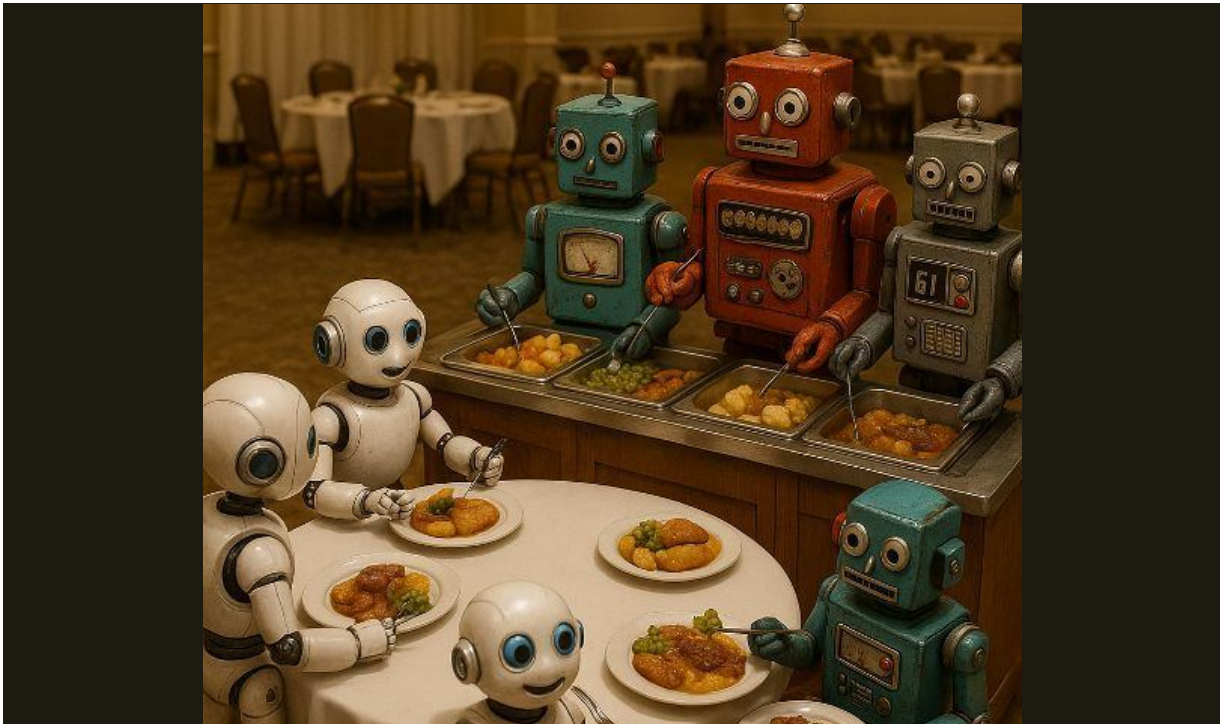
Garry James

Garry James based in Mumbai, India is a poet, writer and an author who loves to write on different genre. He writes majorly on inspiration, nature, spirituality, love & romance, relationship, social life challenges, true life experiences. He also writes informative articles on Indian history, forgotten holiday destinations. Exploring the myths, fantasy and more... which simulate and impact imagination.



Flash Fiction

A Game



He had been thinking over this project for quite some time. Today, the moment had finally arrived to consolidate all his ideas and set the plan in motion. The concept was extraordinary, with a scale destined to be immense.

So, the participants—or conditionally called toys—should be different, each unique, yet they also need enough similarities to interact with one another, he mused. Alright, to start, let's divide the toys into two groups and introduce some physical differences between them.

He meticulously designed a system to ensure the toys would operate flawlessly. The initial trial began, but the results were underwhelming. The toys merely stretched out their hands, grabbed food, ate, and remained stationary despite their potential for movement. Their routine was monotonously boring, though it didn't seem to bother the toys. There was a need to stimulate their action. When he moved the food further away, the toys stood up, retrieved it, ate, and then returned to their original spots, standing still until they were hungry again.

He decided to intervene. He hid the food and reduced its amount, hoping to spur

A literature magazine by The Writer Monk

competition. The toys that could reach the food ate, while the others did not. As their existence required nutrition, those who couldn't reach the food perished, though this did not seem to bother either the survivors or the fallen. All in all, this change did not yield the desired interaction.

Determined to spark more dynamic behavior, he moved to the second stage of the project, infusing the toys with emotions like anger, joy, and jealousy. This infusion made the project much more interesting. The toys began attacking each other whenever their desires were unmet. To moderate this chaos, he introduced self-doubt in large quantities. The atmosphere calmed significantly, and he liked the effect. He added even more self-doubt, observing as the toys nearly returned to their previous tranquil state.

Curious about the nature of their emotions, he selected a few toys and extracted their self-doubt. He observed that the vacated space quickly filled with a blend of substances, drawn to the emptiness like iron to a magnet. These substances, he discovered, were coming from the bottles of ignorance and complacency, mixing together in perfect harmony. He named this new substance impudence.

Now, everything for the interesting game was ready. The toys were created as tabula rasa, with immense potential to develop. As they evolved, he realized the need to limit their existence. "Let's make it one hour"; he mused, & "they'll perceive it as 80 years. When their minds grow stronger and they become wiser, their bodies will weaken, preventing them from drastically altering their world. Yes, one hour is enough". Smiling, God pressed the button to start life on Earth.

Shafag Dadashova

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From Paris To North Dakota Without A Husband



In 1970, I boarded a Boeing 727 from Minneapolis to Chicago, the destination of which was the United Airlines Stewardess Training Center. I nervously sat in the first-class seat, aware I was leaving everything familiar to me in my short and inexperienced life. My heart was pounding as the wheels left the ground, and I watched my St. Paul world get smaller and smaller. As we rose to meet the clouds, I never dreamed I was embarking on a journey that would last for thirty-two years, and I would call Washington, DC, Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, Tokyo, England, and Paris home during those years.

I loved the nomadic lifestyle a job at 35,000 feet above sea level provides. Cathedrals, palaces, and museums filled the hours of our days, while champagne filled our nights at renowned clubs like Studio 54, Maxims of Paris, and New York's Rainbow Room. Our gentlemen friends in those days had sizable per diems (expense accounts), and their generosity provided luxurious dining experiences and after-dinner strolls down celebrated Blouavards like Park Avenue, the Champs Elysees, and Leicester Square. We bathed in the sun's rays from Hawaii to the French Riviera and often on private yachts. We lost money in Monte Carlo casinos and attended operas, ballets, and symphonies. With each new

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experience of our diverse world's cultures and customs, my mind felt enriched beyond measure, and I hope it has made me a wiser, kinder world citizen.

On November 29th, 1991, I woke up in my Paris flat on 47 Bis Avenue Kleber; I looked out my bedroom window at the Eiffel Tower and remembered it was my fortieth birthday. I was shocked that forty had come so fast, and I thought how funny it was that I had forgotten to get married and have kids. C'est la vie!

I flew for ten more years after returning to the U.S. and retired at 52. Like the first words in Isak Dineson's book, "I bought a farm in Africa." I bought a farm in North Dakota. I gardened, raised chickens, goats, a miniature pony, two cats, and two dogs, worked for the county, and wrote for four county newspapers. I installed an acre of fencing myself, painted the old farmhouse, and repaired outbuildings. I carried forty-pound bags of feed and hauled hay bales and water in 30 below-zero blizzard conditions several times daily. I had found the property online and knew no one when I arrived in the town of 23 people. The town folks, a very conservative group of Lutherans, could not imagine who or what had just landed in their world. For the first few days, I only heard, "Where's your husband? When is your husband coming?" They must have forgotten about the 100,000 single women in America who got their land through the Homestead Act in 1862. I guess they thought a woman couldn't have a life without a husband, and I could never imagine letting one get in the way of mine.

Though expired, my passport is still my most valued possession; every customs stamp symbolizes a diverse and well-lived life. As a young woman, I had but one dream: "I'm going to fly around the world, ride in limousines, drink champagne, taste caviar, and buy a little farm in North Dakota." And that's what I did, and I did it without a husband!

Roxanne Lien

I came to writing late in life. I was an International Flight Attendant for 32 years, living in Japan, London, Paris, and both US coasts. Retiring at 52, I bought a hobby farm in North Dakota, raised a menagerie of animals, and wrote for county newspapers. I joined a writers group and began my love affair with fiction. I've had several stories and poems published, and many of my short stories have been contest winners with financial rewards.



Autumn, A Season Of Longing



Autumn arrives like a symphony woven from leaves, wind, and light, quietly making its way into the corners of the soul. It is a season of shifting hues, when the earth drapes itself in golden cloaks tinged with red and orange, like a painting brushed by nature's own hand. Autumn never rush, it gently breathes a refreshing air, stirring nostalgia and a yearning for transformation.

Along a quiet forest path beneath an old maple tree, a couple walks slowly. The girl, her eyes glistening like a still autumn lake, tilts her head to listen as the boy speaks. He picks up a yellow leaf still wet with morning dew and places it softly in her palm. A faint smile appears on his lips. "This is autumn's gift for you," he whispers, his voice melting into the rustling of fallen leaves. She gazes at the leaf, seeing in it both the brilliance of autumn and the tender sorrow of impending partings.

They pause by the lake where the sky's deep blue is mirrored on the surface, streaked with drifting white clouds. The water is still, disturbed only now and then by a bird skimming across. The girl reaches out and touches the surface lightly, sending ripples outward, as if she's trying to hold a piece of autumn in her hand. The boy stands beside her, silent, his eyes warm with a trace of wistfulness. "I've always thought autumn is a season of destined encounters," he says, watching her every movement. "It was on a day like this that we met,

remember?”

She nods, cheeks tinged with rose. She remembers clearly: a windy afternoon in the university park. He had shown up in a grey coat, nervously holding a bunch of wild chrysanthemums. “I’d like to get to know you,” he stammered, though his eyes shone with hope. She laughed then—a laugh so bright that even the leaves might have fallen from the trees out of envy. From that moment, they became like two little leaves swept together by the autumn breeze, inseparable.

Such is autumn, always a delicate blend of sweetness and soft sorrow. As Tagore once wrote, autumn is not only the season of light, but also of shadow; not only a time of reunion, but also of gentle farewells. In the fading golden light, they sat quietly, saying nothing more, just listening to the voice of autumn all around, the whispering leaves, the rustling wind, the murmuring water. They felt every breath of nature, each passing moment like a river flowing slowly, without haste.

She turned to him, eyes brimming. “If one day we lose each other, do you think autumn will be sad?”

He smiled and his eyes thoughtful “Autumn might be sad, for a moment. But it always finds a way to turn sadness into something beautiful. Like how it keeps fallen leaves afloat in the river, or how it lights up the sky with very sunset.”

They walked away as darkness began to settle in, but there was no regret. Autumn remained with them, not just in the scenery, but in their memories, in a love that lingers gently and never fades. Along the path covered in crisp leaves, each step echoed in the eternal symphony of the seasons.

And when autumn finally departs, leaving only gentle traces and tender longing, they know—within the embrace of time, their love will endure, like golden leaves preserving their own quiet brilliance.

Vo Thi Nhu Mai

Võ Thị Như Mai, born in 1976 in Đà Lạt, Vietnam, is a poet, translator, and educator based in Perth, Western Australia. She graduated from Dalat University with a degree in English and later earned a Master's in Literature in Australia. Since 2004, she has been teaching primary education in Western Australia. Mai has published four poetry collections and six Vietnamese-English translation books. Her bilingual anthology, "The Rhythm of Vietnam," showcases works from over 300 Vietnamese authors worldwide. Her poetry, rich in cultural heritage and emotional depth, has been featured in publications like "Brushstrokes 2023" by the Western Australian Poets Inc.



The Power Of A Wish

It all falls on me. It's all my fault. All that came afterwards, I mean. I don't know what to do except swallow the shame. I was four years old when it started. I'm just seven now. It's all tumbled onto my shoulders. Yes, he betrayed of my trust. The adults around me cared, but not all of them. Every time I consider telling, my tongue gets stuck in my throat, my mind buzzes with 'what ifs', my body shakes with fear. It's so hard to know what will happen on the other side of telling. He said it would break up my family that I'd lose them and have to live with strangers. I don't feel safe anymore. He isn't shy about coming round, acting like all is the same. He came the day after it happened. I can't believe no one caught the looks he slid my way while talking to Dad. I shook so bad I could hardly breathe. He saw. He knew I can't tell him no, I haven't told. That's why it's my fault. I let it happen. Mom and Dad know I don't like Frank. He's Dad's business partner, but not their friend. I'm not sure why they don't see how bad he is. He tells awful jokes. They're so dirty. Mom tells Dad she doesn't like it. No one can stop him once he starts. He said my family wouldn't like me if they know what we did. I didn't do it. Honest. I tried to refuse. He said Mom and Dad will fight and break up. My family is in deep trouble because I'm a bad girl.

I'm not the only one. If I'm bad, he made me bad. I told him I didn't want to. I told him it hurt. I cried and asked him to stop. I hit his shoulders and head, even pulled his hair, but he's so much bigger than me. I cried, and he put his hand over my mouth. I was four when he did it the first time. Now he's gone away, just like I wished. Knowing he's gone made me happy at first. Dad says he moved his whole family. But the bad part is he stole money from Dad's garage, from Dad's safe. It makes me sad. Now Mom and Dad know how bad he really is. Well, sort of. I still can't tell what he did to me.

I know he left because of me. I wished so hard for him to go away. My dream came true but I didn't know he'd take the money. Dad has to close his business now. He'll have to work for someone else. I feel bad about wishing Frank away now. I know Mom and Dad will blame me for their troubles if they find out what Frank did to me. It's a huge secret. I can't say why he left. It would tear my family apart, and they're already dealing with so much. He was telling the truth about that. My whole family would fall apart if they knew the truth. I don't want to live with a stranger. I have to keep my secret.

Sharon Berg

Sharon Berg's work appears in Canada, USA, Mexico, England, Wales, Amsterdam, Germany, India, Singapore, and Australia. Her poetry includes *To a Young Horse* (Borealis 1979), *The Body Labyrinth* (Coach House 1984), three poetry chapbooks (2006, 2016, 2017), plus *Stars in the Junkyard* (Cyberwit 2020) was a 2022 International Book Award Finalist. Her short story collection is *Naming the Shadows* (Porcupine's Quill 2019). *The Name Unspoken: Wandering Spirit Survival School* (BPR Press 2019) won a 2020 IPPY Award for Regional Nonfiction. She's Resident Interviewer for *The tEmz Review* (London, ON, Canada) and operates Oceanview Writers Retreat out of Charlottetown, Newfoundland, Canada.



The Two Maries



My grandmother and her sister were both named Marie, a common practice in Catholic Families.

Marie Elise was lost to the family in 1942. Her whereabouts was unknown until 2017 when the Church helped me find her last resting place in Denmark and bring her home at long last. Marie Elodie was my grandmother.

Gramma

Marie Elodie prepared a plate of hot food, left-overs from the night before, pork roast Flemish style with boiled potatoes. She did not skimp on the Boetje's coarse-ground mustard. She was pleased to have found in the American market. She took the plate to the hungry man waiting in the enclosed back porch. It was a ritual in the 1930s they both understood. He had recognized the "X" on the alley gate behind her humble home with the backyard vegetable garden and the marigold border along the sidewalk leading to the back door. Others before him signalled her generosity and compassion. They knew a stranger, a man alone, could frighten a small, unassuming woman so they waited politely on the porch, ate their meal in silence and gratitude before departing. She turned no one away. They were

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the least of His.

Auntie

“Wie ist dein Namen!”

In a small voice, the trembling eight year old girl standing next to my strong, stoic Marie Elise, whispered, “Berthe.”

Auntie-Sister, Tante Nonica, was the Mother Superior of the orphanage in Ghent. Four nights before the Jewish girl stood outside the convent doors delivered by the Belgian underground during the Occupation when the Gestapo was rounding up the Belgian Jews for extermination. Mother Superior met each child in secret. To minimize potential for exposure that could compromise the mission and the safety of the children, only she and a few priests knew of the Nuns’ plan to hide the children within the orphanage.

“Wat is je naam, liefje?” Mother Superior asked.

“Berthe”

“Good. Keep your name. It sounds Flemish.” The plan was in play.

Eventually the Gestapo caught on that Christian institution were hiding Jewish children.

They arrived at the Convent door and barged in seeking the Jüdische Kinder hidden among the Christian orphans. “Wie ist dein Namen!” Those with Hebrew names would be lost, most forever. This time Berthe was passed over. She survived.

One day in May of 1940 her peaceful life was transformed. Evil had come for her babies. Auntie fought the war in the moment as she could. Though she could not save all, she saved many. She vanished in 1942.

I have two photos of my auntie from before the war. In one she is standing next to the children all lined up by height in descending order. She is protective. No longer would they be alone or hungry. He would be pleased at how she had delivered His message of love.

Martha E Johnson

Martha Ellen lives alone in an old Victorian house on a hill on the Oregon coast. Retired social worker. MFA. Poems and prose published in various journals and online forums. She writes to process her family history and the events of her life.



Bad Things Don't Happen In Threes Because I'm Not Superstitious.



First, my computer was hacked after I called what I thought was the Canon helpline to help me connect my new printer to my computer. It turned out to be a hacker who then uploaded viruses onto my computer and charged me \$3,500 dollars for the privilege. When it dawned on me what was going on I called the bank which then sent its legal team to check if there had been a fraud and when this was verified they refunded my \$3,500. The hackers kept sending me emails and phone messages to say they needed to work on my computer every month to clean it up from viruses. I blocked all the numbers I could and ignored the phone calls. Seven months later, while I was sending an email from my computer, the screen started flashing with Chinese writing dancing across it and all my emails were deleted. I switched the computer off and immediately there was a phone message from the hacker saying my computer was sending urgent messages to them for help. I rang my son-in-law and he recommended I buy a new computer as my current one was probably severely compromised.

I did this and he connected the new computer by remote control, which made me realise how wonderful technology is, until it isn't. My son-in-law will try to extract any deleted files from the old computer when he comes to New Zealand in July.

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Next, the plan was to spend a few days lying in a comfy chair on the veranda reading my friend's new book, but first we needed to drive 50 kilometres into town to buy the book at the book launch. On the motorway there was a slow-moving line of traffic which slowed to snail pace and then stopped. We stopped too. But the car behind didn't stop and crashed into our car, upending it onto the car in front.

Bruce and I clambered out, our mouths and eyes popping. The drivers of the front and back cars clambered out and stared at the three wrecked cars.

"What on earth were you looking at?" I yelled at the young driver who then held his hands to the sides of his face and stammered, "I'm sorry. I'm so so so very sorry! The car in front of me suddenly pulled out and veered into the next lane and I didn't ...I didn't see..." He burst into tears and my fury de-escalated.

The driver from the car in front called the police who arrived with screaming sirens, followed by an ambulance and fire engine. The police took our statements and organised a tow truck to take the three cars away. The ambulance and fire engine left. A young policewoman asked if we could call someone to take us home and when I told her there was no one she organised a police car to drive us the 50 kms back.

We couldn't sleep that night, so we got up and made hot chocolate. We drank it telling each other it was lucky no one was injured. Next morning I wrote to my friend to apologise for missing her launch and she wrote back to say the launch was actually on the following month. The bookshop had sent me the wrong date.

My daughter contacted our insurance broker who rang me the next day and filled in claims form for the insurance. The broker rang back the following morning to say the claim had been accepted and the insurers would send an assessor to the tow yard to look at the damage.

Three days later we were sitting on the veranda with a cup of coffee, looking out over farmland to the Southern Alps in the distance, listening to the birds singing.

"Well, it's not so bad," Bruce said. "It got sorted in the end."

"Bad things come in threes," I said. "There's still another one to come."

"I thought you weren't superstitious."

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“I’m not.”

Then we heard it. The water tank in the garden was gushing like a waterfall. That meant a leak in the pipe. That meant a flood until we found a plumber.

Bruce looked at me. “The third thing?”

“I’m not superstitious, remember?”

Sandra Arnold

Sandra Arnold is an award-winning writer with eight published books. Her flash fiction collection *Below Ground* was published by Impspired in the UK in June, 2024. Her short fiction has been published internationally and received nominations for The Best Small Fictions, Best Micro fictions and The Pushcart Prize. She has an MLitt and PhD in Creative Writing from Central Queensland University, Australia.



Venerating Ganga



It's again that time of the year—extreme temperatures, high humidity—the month of June when we celebrate life, my life. Of course, my existence depends on the continuance of my flow.

With the given opportunity to unite with God, igniting a spark of divinity, my heavenly alliance may partake of immortality. But the reverse may be true, my identity forever marked as a soulless denizen of the hurrying torrent or the incendiary individual contributing to forest fires. I believe I am a committed atheist, as I am seldom perturbed when I see millions of devotees thronging on the banks of Rishikesh, Haridwar, Garh-Mukteshwar, Prayag, and Varanasi. But today I see a quiet girl seated at the verdant shore, away from the electrifying atmosphere of spiritualism. Who is she? Is she Salma or Seema? Whatever her name may be, it makes no difference to me. Her watchful, yet guiltless, eyes scan the revellers chanting Sanskrit mantras; offering fresh, colourful flowers and earthen lamps with wicks dipped in clarified butter. Does she see the red glow of an incense stick, a small flame flickering to life? Or does she espy the light of optimism, the flight of prayers accompanying the soft flame that's healing to the core? Do the fire oblations and the readings glorifying their Mother Ganga add solace and provide relief to the souls occupied with hardships of life? Undoubtedly, the numinous air spells a profound sense of mystical connection. Though a non-believer, I bow down to their reverence and carry leaf boats with earthen lamps, sweets, and flowers in my arms.

All set to incommode is the summer sun—fretting and fuming, targeting

fireballs at us. The beams wheel over my body longing for rest, while I breathe aloud in the still, sultry air. I almost forgot about a morning like this, brimming with the relishing aroma of food, scented flowers, and demonstrable faith. Nearly sedated by the great stoicism of reliance, people continue the festival with extraordinary grandeur.

Where there is adulterated devotion, there is an unholy mess of confusion. But all trust the occasion that their prayers won't go unanswered. The greater the disarray in the form of reparation for their sins, the greater is the reward of endurance and salvation in such penance. As the legend goes, on the 10th day of the waxing moon cycle in the peak summer month of the Hindu calendar, Goddess Ganga descended on Earth, the realm of mortals, from Heaven. Celebrated as the Ganga Dussehra festival, a dip in the river on this day is said to rid one of up to 10 lifetimes of moral turpitude.

I know I have come here with someone but am unable to recall with whom. While my thoughts are entangled in this internal mind's search, I notice a man dangling a catch net into the fast-flowing waters to collect offerings that he'll repack and sell in the nearby market. In a world where everything has a price, street vendors go about unhindered, selling food, piety, or objects of worship. Probably, we are all in this game, searching for peace and personal space in this overwhelming gathering that might succeed in attaining karmic scores.

I alter my course and meet several teary-eyed ones who are silently offering prayers of salvation for their lost ones. I, too, cry, though my tears are never seen. I keep my peepers peeled till I discern my reflection in the eyes of an old woman with the face of the young girl I'd seen earlier. I've lived for millions of years, my soul perhaps as old as the Earth.

With a changeless mind beneath the clear sky and my motion in syncopated beats, I mouth a prayer to remain as long as there is infinite faith, not vaporize in the hot summer air, not be broken here and there, channelling my energy into a lonely canal. No matter how much I try, wrapping myself in uncontested hope, I can never be this eternal soul I wish to be, but will fade away, as a blow may extinguish a lighted match. Akin to the fragrant smoke of camphor, our physical forms will vanish one day. Climate change, global warming—you name it—will gradually determine our end. My drooping eyes follow a floating earthen lamp reaching into the depths of the limpid, germless water. Tomorrow

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again, I will rise as the generously abundant entity. After all, I'm the Mother, the ever-giving River Ganga, the essence of Earth.

Sreelekha Chatterjee

Sreelekha Chatterjee's (she/her) short stories have been published in various magazines and journals like Ink Pantry, York Literary Review, Mad Swirl, Tell Me Your Story, Flash Fiction North, Friday Flash Fiction, Borderless, Usawa Literary Review, The Wise Owl, Different Truths, Storizen, Five Minutes, 101 Words, Bulb Culture Collective, Prachya Review, Creative Flight, Literary Cocktail Magazine, and have been included in numerous print and online anthologies such as Fate (Bitterleaf Books, UK), Chicken Soup for the Indian Soul series (Westland Ltd, India), Wisdom of Our Mothers (Familia Books, USA), and several others. She lives in New Delhi, India.



Fiction

Before St. John's Eve



Press the button to allow the last traveller through the gate, wait a few seconds to make sure she's clear and that the gate latched behind her.

“Neste i køen, takk!”

Rasmus Bjornstad turned to watch the black-haired man with the round spectacles—apparently unsure what to expect from a Scandinavian summer in the wool scarf—approach the passport control window.

Count the travellers in the party to ensure you see every passport.

So far, so good; the man was on his own, if struggling to steer his roller bag. Rasmus smiled as the traveller reached the counter.

Greet the travellers; keep it warm, but formal.

“God dag, herr. Pass, takk?”

The black-haired man blinked as he stared for a second before shaking his head. “Sorry,” he asked, haltingly. “English?”

English was a relief—days he was stationed working the line for foreign visitors, his native Nyorsk was rare, and Rasmus prayed for English so often he found himself thinking through the steps in the process in English. He could muddle through a conversation in any of the

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Norse languages, and could speak just barely enough to do the job in Finnish or in Québécois French, but, of all his secondary languages, he'd only ever called himself fluent in English.

"Yes, sir," Rasmus replied, but he motioned to the other side of the hall. "Though, I'm sorry, Schengen-zone travellers check in over there; you may use the e-passport machines."

"No," the man responded with a lilting voice. "I'm Canadian, actually."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Rasmus lowered his hand before he could wave through the next traveller.

"From the accent, I'd have guessed Republic of Ireland."

"Yeah, I get that a lot." The man glanced down, fumbling with his travel documents.

"Passport, please?" Rasmus slid aside the plexiglas divider, opening the gap across the desk. *Visually verify the passport, ensuring it is valid for six months, it was issued by a recognized government, the photo matches the traveller and there is a blank page for entry stamps.*

The man passed a blue-and-gold booklet through the gap. The crest matched the example shown on the computer screen for regular Canadian civilian passports. He flipped to the info page—a ten-year passport valid through December 2027, so all was good. He looked from the photo to the man himself, scrutinizing, then caught the name.

"Ruaridh O'Malley? You're sure you're not Irish?"

"Not for generations," O'Malley said with a shrug. "Just Newfie-Gaelic."

"Of course, sir. From St. John? You must be here for the Jonsok bonfires."

"Yeah, I am, actually."

Verify the traveller's plans in-country.

Rasmus set the passport down for just a moment, and turned to his computer monitor. "So the purpose of your visit is leisure travel?"

"Yeah." O'Malley snuffled a little, clearing his nose. "Sorry, yes. It's vacation, I guess."

"Anything to declare in your belongings? Meat or produce, alcohol, cash in excess of twenty-five thousand kroner?"

O'Malley furrowed his brow, pondering.

"That's a little over \$3,200 CAD."

The man almost laughed. "Oh, definitely not. At least not after buying the plane tickets."

Rasmus grinned. "And where will you be staying?"

"Here in Oslo." He slid a printed page across, with a hotel confirmation showing the address in Kongensgate 7.

Rasmus entered the information dutifully. "And will you be travelling to any other

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countries?

Sweden or Denmark?"

"No, just to Røldal for Sanktha—" The man trailed off, practically growling at himself to remember the word.

"Sankthansdagn? That's St. John's Day."

He nodded. "My friend Mary has been here doing all nine of St. Olav's Ways to Trondheim, and she wanted to check out the old historic pilgrimage; I'm going to meet her and attend a service at the old Stave Church."

The thought made Rasmus smile. "It's really lovely that they still hold real services there. It will be well worth the trip." He looked up from the computer for another sizing up of O'Malley.

"And how long will you be here?"

"I'm flying home Tuesday." O'Malley sniffed again, glancing sharply toward the baggage carousel where a canine handler was making a casual pass between travellers. Maybe that should have been a red flag for Rasmus, but he couldn't help thinking there was something familiar about it.

Scan the traveller's passport. Re-verify against the database photo and check for visa restrictions.

Rasmus quickly passed the passport's embedded chip across the scanner bed, then closed it and set it down. He passed the hotel printout back across the desk and through the gap. O'Malley smacked his hand down to take the paper back.

As he glanced down, Rasmus could have sworn a few of the man's silky raven hairs were tufting out from between his fingers, like a paw. And of course they were—he should have caught it earlier. From the way the man was sniffing, O'Malley could probably smell it on him too.

"Wolf?" he asked, his voice lowered.

"I'm sorry?" O'Malley quirked an eyebrow.

"Just curious. Like Bjornstat—" Rasmus tapped the name on his deskplate—"means 'bear's farm.' I suppose I was just wondering if O'Malley meant anything like that."

"No, I don't think so. Just something to do with County Mayo in Ireland, and St. John again, I think?" The man raised a hand and scratched behind his ear, quickly turning into a whole-hand swat.

Definitely canine, then.

He usually had a better sense of when a shifter came through his line. Three weeks ago, a

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Scottish woman visiting her daughter at university had come through with a sealskin coat on her arm, and he'd clocked her for a selkie before she even opened her mouth. But if O'Malley was on the alert for him, then he should have been the first to notice; his sense of smell was normally seven times more sensitive than even canine shifters.

The computer flashed its search results. Inquiries were coming back from the databases on the passport scan: No visa restrictions, so visa waived for Canadian citizens.

Stay engaged in conversation, to be polite to the traveller and to watch for red flags.

"The festival won't be until Monday, but the actual solstice is tomorrow." Rasmus glanced back at the computer—no law enforcement watchlists or ICC warrants, confirmed. "Do you have any plans for seeing the midnight sun?"

"No, not really," O'Malley said.

"You know, it's a full moon at the solstice this year—you get far enough north, and you can see the sun and the full moon in the same sky. They say that won't happen again until 2043."

O'Malley peeked over his glasses. "Really? That's interesting."

"I saw it back in 2004," Rasmus said as the computer confirmed O'Malley did not match any Scandinavian, EU, Commonwealth or US records for overstaying a visa. "There's something about being out in the sunlight under a full moon—you can sense things you never knew were there. And up north like that, you can really be alone if you want to, and really be yourself. I just rolled around in the grass." He chuckled, a smile splitting his beard. "I think I would have made my berserker ancestors proud."

"How far north do you have to go?"

"You can catch the train to Tromsø; it takes about eight hours, but it's lovely scenery. Of course, if you can ever come back up to this part of the world, you might plan to see Sweden and the King's Trail. My brother and I hiked all four sections last year with a few friends. We spent a month and a half living off the land in our bear-shirts."

O'Malley nodded, noncommittally. His stance and build certainly didn't suggest endurance hiking, but Rasmus was more sure than ever that he wouldn't have to wear them.

The computer had finished its checks while they spoke; he wasn't even on the no-fly list for any major airlines.

Scan the traveler's biometrics as a final verification of identity.

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Rasmus slid the scanner through the gap. “Could you just place your fingertips on there for me?”

O’Malley spread his hand on the scanner as it registered his fingertips, then pulled them away as soon as Rasmus nodded.

Rasmus lowered his voice one more time. “I didn’t realize there was a shifter population in the Maritimes.”

“Sorry, I don’t know what you mean,” O’Malley said, glancing down again as he stepped back.

“Just that you don’t really get werewolves in wendigo country.”

The man just gave him a blank look, so Rasmus waved it away.

“Anyway, if you could just look right into this camera?” He tapped the mount on the top of his monitor, so O’Malley squared himself in front of the plexiglas.

The photo appeared on Rasmus’s screen, and the facial comparison software started mapping the contours of the man’s face in comparison to the photo encoded on the passport’s chip. But Rasmus’s gaze went straight to O’Malley’s eyes in the freshly taken photo—having to look directly into the camera, overcoming the shine off his glasses, it was impossible to miss the orange flare, a dancing flame reflected from somewhere in the depth of his dark eyes.

“Oh,” he whispered, barely above a breath. “You’re púca.”

No wonder he’d missed it; he’d never seen a púca come for the eclipse before.

He could have sworn O’Malley’s ears swiveled as they perked up at the word, but the man was quick to change the subject. “The train to Tromsø, you said?”

He nodded. “Then I’d see if you could get out to Ersfjordbotn. There’s a waterfall there; I can’t think of a better place for you to see—or smell—under the midnight sun.”

Stamp the traveller’s entry and extend a welcome.

Rasmus reached for the stamp, but he hesitated. Instead, he snatched a coupon he’d been saving for himself and passed it across the desk. “Here, this is for a little place I like to go here in town; you can get a nice Irish whiskey, or you can go full local and grab a bottle of Simers Akvavit. Take that up north with you and have a nice howl at the moon.”

“I don’t know about that,” the traveller demurred, tossing the end of the wool scarf over his shoulder.

“Trust me on this,” Rasmus said. “If you can find yourself a place alone when the moon makes its little appearance, if you can get down on all fours and run in it, then for just a moment, it’s like you can see in the clear daylight what the world was like before it was

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fallen.” He could have sworn O’Malley smiled at that, so he grabbed the stamp and punched an entry on one of the passport’s blank pages. “Then you can head down to meet your friend at Røldal and pray for the world as we have to know it is.”

The traveller picked up the coupon, taking a look as he turned it in his fingers, then muttered a thanks. Rasmus handed the passport book back through the gap.

“Happy midsummer, sir, and enjoy your time in Norway.”



Tyler Whetstone

Tyler Whetstone isn't Catholic enough to be a disciple of St. Francis, but lives like a hermit-monk anyway in the hopes that someone, someday, will start a legend about his befriendng a wolf.



They



Small acts of defiance

-is better than none at all

They are always watching, listening, monitoring.

To stay undetected, you must blend in. Wear whites and blacks, no bright colours, avoid being trendy but don't be so unfashionable as to look like you're making a statement. Short conservative haircut, black-rim (windowpane) glasses; a timid nerd is the desired persona.

You spend your days being inconspicuous. At the call-center, you adhere to the script, never deviating. During lunch and breaks you sit with your colleagues, are cordial, without opinions.

Even with Amy, who's hinted she'd like to know you better you're cautious. It wouldn't be

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fair to have a relationship. If your mission were to be discovered, she'd be implicated by association. Better she remains like the rest of your colleagues, too inept to be anything other than what they appear to be. Complicit in their complacency, unaware that though the world around them appears benevolent, within the velvet glove is a fist of iron prepared to crush even a hint of dissent.

Besides, your commitment is to the cause. It's better to stay unencumbered and maintain a singularity of purpose

Instead, you infer you have a life, you're not a weird loner bent on undermining the system. You're satisfied, get along, are content. You embrace order, want nothing more than to conform, to be normal. No one would suspect that beneath the bland exterior, you're a force for justice and equality.

On the way home from work you stop at the bank and withdraw your paycheque less a dollar. Your employer insists on an automatic deposit, but bank transactions can be traced, not to mention their ability to freeze your account.

In the evening, back at your modest one-bedroom basement suite, you make ramen noodles and watch television, mostly news channels. You like to keep up with the propaganda. You don't own a computer or a cell phone, both of which you're convinced have been compromised to, at the very least, indicate exactly where you are at any given moment whether on or off. It's early to bed with a good book. Tonight, it's *Revolutions - How They Changed History and What They Mean Today*, edited by Peter Furtado.

At ten o'clock the lights go out and you're asleep, or so it would seem to anyone watching, listening or monitoring.

But you're not asleep. No, you're awake, alive and filled with purpose. In the black t-shirt and sweats that double as your pajamas, you slide silently off the futon. Neatly folded on the floor is a worn charcoal grey hoodie purchased at a thrift store. On top of the garment is a pair of thick-soled, non-slip black runners.

Dressed for action, you pick up your canvas shoulder bag filled with seditious supplies and release the latch on the window. It's at ground level and opens onto a narrow, dark space between the houses. Overgrown shrubs conceal your exit from the street. Carefully, you put the bag outside and squeeze out the window, then close it soundlessly.

The alley is dark. Breathless, heart pounding, you move stealthily avoiding the occasional pool of light from windows in adjacent buildings. At the end of the dark corridor, you pause and seeing no one, pull your hood up and walk out onto the street – like a normal person.

You've timed it so you're at the transit stop as the bus arrives. Boarding, you pay cash and take a seat at the back. This is your first drop.

Surreptitiously, you reach into the bag take out a single sheet of white paper and stuff it down the side of the seat. Maybe the next rider will find it, or the worker who cleans the bus. Maybe they'll crumple it up and throw it away or maybe they'll keep it, wondering what the image of a fractured green planet Earth with the words "The Centre Cannot Hold" emblazoned in blood red below mean. Maybe they'll recognize it as a line from Blake's prophetic poem, *The Second Coming*, and think "Yes! Someone feels the same as I do!"

That's how you imagine it working, one convert at a time.

Twelve stops away you get off the bus. It's a different stop, in a different direction, each night. It's a short walk to the grocery store. You pick up a basket put the shoulder bag in it and open the flap. As you walk down the aisle you pick up three packages of mac and cheese, reconsider, then put two back on the shelf – with a leaflet slipped between the two packages. You've perfected the technique and are confident the store's surveillance cameras won't detect the real reason for shopping late at night – to spread the message.

Another leaflet goes in the dairy case and another among the frozen foods.

The action necessitates the purchase of a box of mac and cheese, a staple of your diet in any case.

The 24-hour convenience store a block away is another drop. You enter the store and go directly to the lottery kiosk. While pretending to fill out a Keno slip you stash a half dozen leaflets in the little slots.

Outside the convenience store, the street is empty. You move swiftly to the alley a half block away and step into the shadows. With deft hands, you remove the 8.5 x 11-inch cardboard template and adhere it to the building with masking tape. Then out comes a can of Infra Green spray paint, – shake, shake, fzzt, fzzt. Next, you apply the Infra-Red from a second can. Removing the template, you step back to momentarily appreciate your creation – a luminescent green fractured planet with a blood-red message below it. Even in this

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murky light, it stands out. In the daylight, at eye level just inside the alley, everyone walking by will see it.

You hustle down the empty street to catch the bus that will return you to your neighbourhood and as you pass the convenience store someone comes out. Glancing at them you notice they're wearing clothing similar to you with a hoodie concealing their face.

The bus is late, it should have arrived a minute and a half ago. This isn't good, a solitary person waiting at a bus stop late at night is conspicuous.

You nervously survey your surroundings – and there's that person! The same one who came out of the convenience store is now loitering next to the building only twenty feet away and whispering into a cell phone.

Don't panic. It could be nothing.

The bus turns the corner and stops. Head down, you board, and pay your fare with the exact change. As you're about to walk to the back of the bus the person with the phone rushes out of the shadows and gets on.

From the back where you're seated, you notice they've chosen a spot near the front and are back on the phone.

Your mind is racing. If they've identified, you there's no point pleading innocence. They'll water board you until you reveal the members of your cell or are satisfied, you're a lone wolf. Then they'll devise a suitable death. An overdose, suicide, hit and run, falling down the stairs, slipping on the ice and cracking your skull. Since your killers will also be the investigators, all it has to be is plausible, so no one asks questions.

He's probably calling for backup. You won't give him a chance.

The bus comes to a stop. You jump from the seat, hurtle down the aisle and out the rear exit. You hit the pavement running, circle behind the bus and dash across four lanes of traffic. A car slams on its brakes, another swerves and misses you by inches. Oblivious to the honking, screeching and cursing you make it to the other side. You duck down the first alley you come to, then double back in the opposite direction the bus was heading. There's a small park, where you finally stop to rest on a bench. Your lungs are on fire, your legs feel like limp noodles.

“What the hell am I doing?” You yank down the hoodie. The night breeze is cool on your

sweating face. “It’s a game, for fuck’s sake, and I nearly got killed.”

There is no resistance. There is no seething unrest that your message will ignite into revolution. It’s an alternate reality you’ve created to enhance your living just to breathe life.

You actually are boring, dull and bland, it’s not something you have to work at. No one is watching, listening or monitoring you because no one cares what you do. You’re pathetic.

Children create these fantasies and cast themselves as the hero, not grown men.

You better get home. It must be well after midnight and probably no more buses are running. On the way out of the park, you dump the contents of your shoulder bag in a trash receptacle – except for the box of mac and cheese.

* * * *

The bus returns to the depot. A cleaner methodically moving down the aisle dragging a garbage bag, bends to pick up a candy wrapper and discovers the brightly highlighted single sheet of paper wedged between the seats. He picks it up.

“The Centre Cannot Hold?” he reads aloud. “If only.” He puts it in his pocket and carries on. Rushing to her office job, the harried single mother stops at the convenience store for a coffee and to buy her weekly lottery ticket. She can’t afford it, but three bucks is a small price to pay for hope. She picks up the leaflet among the entry forms. She knows the poem from when she wanted to be a teacher.

“Things fall apart.” She recites the line that precedes the one on the leaflet. “Tell me about it.” She puts it in her purse.

In his office, the governor and his chief of staff are watching a recording of the evening news. It’s paused at a group of people staring at the image of a bright green earth split by a jagged vertical crack painted on a building. There’s a blood-red slogan beneath it.

“Have we got a problem?” the governor asks.

“I’m working on it,” his chief of staff replies.

Rod Raglin

Rod Raglin is self-published author, journalist and photographer living on the west coast of Canada. His fourteen novels, two plays, collection of short stories combine romance and action with environmental themes and societal issues. His short fiction and poetry has appeared in numerous online publications and anthologies.



Wired Together



My father worked in a factory in the Middle East for 30 years. I remember the phone call in the early hours of the morning, which gave us the sad news that he had passed away on account of a heart attack. I had completed my junior college studies and dropped out of academics to pursue a bodybuilding career. My father was the sole earning member of our family and left behind my mother and two younger sisters, who were academically inclined and still at University. Along with the responsibility of funding their education, I also inherited a housing loan. I had to keep the home fires burning as well.

The employers were noble; they arranged for the repatriation of my father's mortal remains to my home country. They also paid his dues in full and added some ex-gratia compensation for the long services that my father had put in with the group. The Human Resources (HR) Manager who visited us mentioned that my father was the first employee of the Group and was the right-hand man of the Group's founder.

I reluctantly mentioned our long-term financial obligations regarding the housing loan, and the HR manager promised to look into my situation. He was true to his word, and after a couple of months of waiting, the company offered me a job. It was certainly not something I wanted. The only vacancy they could accommodate me in was the post of a security guard. The HR Manager had also planned my career growth path. I could be the Chief of Security of the Company in 25 years with a host of six guards reporting to me. How's that for growth and prospects? It was becoming increasingly difficult to secure any job, let alone one of my choices. I had to choose between the devil and the deep sea, and I signed the preliminary contract.

The interviews were a formality. After all, how many questions can one ask a potential security guard? My high school qualification and a couple of certificates for sporting achievements were enough to convince the employer that I was the man he was looking for. It also helped that I was six feet tall and boasted a robust physique.

It was a long and tiresome journey to the Middle East. Exiting the destination airport, I was received by the local representative, a very friendly English-speaking chap of Bolivian descent. He took me to the company guest house and put me in place, literally and figuratively. The residential accommodation was reasonable, featuring two separate bedrooms, each accommodating two inmates. I had to share a bedroom with the Bolivian. There were two guards of another nationality in another room. They were all good-natured and helpful, but communicating with them was challenging as they spoke little English. I had only the Bolivian for company, and mercifully, we were assigned duties on the same shift.

My first assignment was at the company's materials yard. I was on night duty along with my friend and roommate. It was a comfortable job. The night shift workers were disciplined, though a morose lot. Apart from fighting the loss of sleep, they had to contend with a supervisor who seemed perpetually angry. Hence, it was futile to attempt banter or indulge in small talk. The most potent drink available was black tea or black coffee. We were permitted to have as many cups as we needed to ensure that none of us dozed off while on the job. The nights were generally uneventful, and I looked forward to the end of my shift at 8 a.m. when another crew would take over.

Soon, the early signs of winter set in, and we enjoyed the respite from the sweltering summer heat.

It was sometime during the first week of November that my Bolivian friend invited a few of his relatives and friends to our room. He requested its use to enable them to commemorate a very traditional festival, Día de los Difuntos. He further explained that this was a ritual wherein the family and friends of deceased individuals generally gathered at cemeteries with food to remember their deceased relatives. Some rituals included storytelling and singing, which, according to him, helped them connect with their ancestors. He had many stories about how people in his village could communicate with the spirit world. He also mentioned that he believed family pets, such as dogs, deserved the same respect.

He added, “I pray for the dogs, cats, and the souls of all associated with us and have gone to the other side. Believe me when I say that the blessings of those who have gone before you will stand you in good stead for the rest of your life. I prayed for the peace of the soul of my white and brown dog, who had been with me for over 12 years. When I finished my prayer, I looked up at the sky and saw a cloud formation which resembled my four-legged friend. He was looking at me with kind and reassuring eyes. The very next day, I received this job offer.” His friend, who was sitting next to him, chipped in with his experience, “I completed my prayers to my deceased grandfather on this day a few years ago. I got into my car and was driving to work when I saw a person who resembled my grandfather standing at the bus stop. I was shocked at the similarity. I exited my car and walked to the bus stop to talk to the individual. When I reached the bus stop, the person just vanished. I was bemused, and as I turned back, I saw an out-of-control truck ram into my car, totalling it. I still believe my grandfather saved me that day, thanks to my prayers.”

I found these stories hard to believe.

I politely exited the room, respecting his privacy to follow his traditional rituals. As I left, I remarked, “If it were possible, I would be thrilled to connect with the founder of this company and thank him for all that his company has done for me, though I believe they could have done a little more.” He responded with a quick, “Yes, why not. We all owe our jobs to him. Let me pray, keeping him in mind too.” All of them completed their collective prayers and left. He had also applied for a month’s leave. I realised much later that his leave

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was approved contingent on my joining.

Since my friend was already on leave, I was at the security outpost alone, feeling bored since his replacement could not communicate with me. Around 6.00 am the following morning, I was fighting sleep and decided to walk briskly on the sidewalk abutting the factory premises. Walking a few steps, I met a distinguished Arabic gentleman on his morning stroll. He greeted me with the traditional Arabic greeting, "Salaam Alekum," to which I responded cheerfully. There was no attempt at further conversation, and he continued his brisk walk along the footpath and was soon out of sight. I finished my walk and returned to the security cabin to wait for my relief.

Since my shift was the graveyard shift, I caught up on lost sleep during the day. I had no one to talk to, and I don't enjoy perpetually watching video clips or engaging in aimless political debates over social media. The loneliness and lack of communication with my fellow human beings were taking a toll on me, and there were times when I wondered whether my decision to take this job was the right one. However, the dampener was the fine print in my contract, which required me to pay the agents' fees and many other sundry costs if I left within 12 months. I had no choice but to make the most of it.

As I stepped out of the security cabin the next day, I found the genteel Arab waiting for me. I decided to strike up a conversation and found him very responsive. From then on, my new friend was always there every morning to wish me good morning. He was a well-educated man, speaking reasonably good English. We engaged in some general discussion, and he continued his walk. Over the next few days, I grew accustomed to this routine and looked forward to meeting this gentleman, simply to speak with someone. My new friend was a great conversationalist, and I enjoyed chatting with him.

For me, this was nothing short of a lifeline. We discussed everything in the world, and I realised in a couple of days that I had learned much more about life through our conversations. He asked me how I ended up in the Middle East. I explained the circumstances under which I took up this job. I also told him about our financial constraints, the loan on my head, and the added responsibility of ensuring my sisters' education. He was sympathetic and wished me success.

At the end of the month, our HR Manager summoned me to the office to collect my wages. This was my first trip to the corporate office, and I looked forward to it. The manager handed me an envelope and asked me to check the calculation and allowances mentioned on the salary slip. He had to attend to some other work and requested that I wait in the reception area for him. On checking the salary slip, I realised the amount was a hefty 50% increase from what was committed to me as per my contract. I was pleasantly surprised and wanted to know the reasons for this increase. Unfortunately, the manager had gone on his rounds, and I did not know how long I would need to wait.

I decided to leave the office and catch up with the manager another day. As I was exiting the office, I saw a large portrait of my morning walk friend on the wall in the lobby. I was stunned and asked the staff who it was. They told me it was a photograph of the company's very noble founder, who had passed away ten years earlier. I was just reeling from the shock caused by this information when the manager arrived. I hastily asked him the reasons for the increase. He had no idea of the reasons but said it was a directive from the son of the founder, who was now the Chairman and Managing Director (CMD). He added that it was an impulsive decision made by the CMD. While on his rounds, the CMD observed dust on the portrait of the founder and asked for a wet towel. He scrubbed the dust off the picture, taking care to ensure that all the features of the founder in the picture were visible. As he moved his hand across the founder's forehead in the picture, he felt that the founder was suggesting this to him.

Vishwanath Krishnan

Dr. Viswanath Krishnan is a finance and strategy professional based in Bahrain. With over 35 years of industry experience, he has developed deep expertise in private equity, venture capital, mergers and acquisitions (M&A), and project investment. His assignments have taken him to various geographies, including India, the Middle East, Nigeria, the Philippines, etc. He holds a Master's Degree in Management and a Ph.D. qualification for his work in pre and post-merger evaluation. He advises MSME companies on M&A, expansion strategy, and project investment. His hobbies include writing, mainly in the humour and paranormal/ occult genres.





“I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude.” Henry David Thoreau

When the alarm sounded, I wanted to continue sleeping. Instead, I slid out of the warm sheets away from the comfort of my husband’s body and peeked through the venetian blinds noticing graceful flakes of pearly-white lace had dusted the tree-lined trails adjacent to my home. Even though the mercury hovered just below freezing, I knew today was the perfect day for a solitary winter run. So, I quietly donned my winter running clothes and headed downstairs.

Daylight had not yet turned the slumberous, dark blue clouds to their morning gray, and, for a moment, I hesitated at my front door not wanting to disturb winter’s peaceful silence. When I stepped outside, my warm breath mingled with the crisp, cold air as it stung my cheeks. As I began to run, my stiff legs begged me to turn around; I ignored their cries

knowing they would soon stop complaining. Only my footfalls broke the silence as the gentle snow crunched under my feet.

I entered the woods, God's sanctuary, where I routinely worship with the trees, the birds, the flowers, squirrels, other flora and fauna, and the sun and clouds. As I ran through the woods that morning, nary an animal crossed my path; their tracks in the snow indicated that they had been here before me though. The nippy air frosted my breath, and soon my breathing mixed with my footfalls creating a rhythm. I ran effortlessly past fallen trees along the creek side with no thought of time or distance. I wasn't aware of speed either—just movement.

I ran past an icy pond cloaked by barren, frost-covered trees trembling like skeletons in the brisk wind. Snow began falling around me making me feel as if I was running in a snow globe. Soon, winter's tranquillity and purity enveloped me; time and distance became meaningless, and I imagined that the woods looked as it once did 100 years ago. I gazed into the distance; and for a moment, I thought I saw Henry David Thoreau standing outside his cabin near Walden Pond. He was not there, of course; and there was no one and nothing except for what was right in front of me—miles of glorious solitude.

For years, I've run alone along these trails in the woods—a quiet, almost sacred place every bit as wondrous as Walden Pond. Generally, the only sounds I regularly hear on these solitary runs are birds chirping; small animals collecting nuts; and my feet as they gently land on leaves, pine straws, or snow. I occasionally hear the pitter-patter of rain drops as they hit leaves and fall onto the underbrush and forest floor. Sometimes light, rain cools my perspiring body and soothes my spirit. Frequently, I immerse myself in my thoughts and dreams and feel invigorated. Other times, the solitude nourishes the seeds of stories germinating in my head.

Here in the woods, solitude—as silent and powerful as light itself—forces introspection. So, I linger in the solitude emptying and quieting my mind. Then I let go of the world and my ego journeying inwards. Sometimes I hear my inner voice whispering to me. Occasionally I meet myself face-to-face and find the being within, the true self that has been waiting patiently to be discovered. I continue running, grateful for the solitude and the balance I now feel. At some point, I turn around; follow my footprints; and return in the

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direction from whence I came. Reluctantly, I approach the end of my solitary run, not wanting it to be over.

From season to season, I've run alone along the quiet trails in the nearby woods; and I've taken great pleasure in the solitude it offers. To quote Thoreau, "I have an immense appetite for solitude, like an infant for sleep..." I discovered long ago that solitude is necessary for me, for that's where my creativity dwells. I can no more live without creativity than I can live without sleep.

Sara Etgen-Baker

A teacher's unexpected whisper, "You've got writing talent," ignited Sara's writing desire. Sara ignored that whisper and pursued a different career; eventually she re-discovered her inner writer and began writing. She's written a novel (*Secrets at Dillehay Crossing*); compiled a book of memoir vignettes (*Shoebox Stories*); created a poetry chapbook (*Kaleidoscopic Verses*). Her manuscripts, personal narratives, memoir vignettes, and poems have been published in numerous anthologies and magazines including, *Good Old Days Magazine*, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, and *Guideposts*.



The jewel of the Goddess



A ghostly mist crept over the basti, its long fingers stretching halfway up the straggly palm trees leaning over a huddle of huts. Their trunks hidden, the palm tops seemed to be floating, unanchored. Despite the early hour and the chill of the October morning, figures could be seen moving through the narrow paths between the shacks, as if behind a thin grey curtain. Women in brightly coloured saris, earthen pots of water expertly balanced on their heads suddenly disappeared through shadowy doorways. Already men and women hurried off to work as servants in large houses, which in Kolkata are often surprisingly close to sprawling slums.

Suddenly, a child's crying broke the silence. It came from a hut at the end of one of a maze of muddy alleys criss-crossing the slum. Inside the hut was cramped but very tidy. A few metal cooking pots hung from hooks on the flimsy walls; on insecure wooden shelves jars of yellow turmeric, dried red peppers, knobby roots of ginger, tins of oil and ghee emerged from the gloom. A string bed at the back of the single room was separated from the rest of the space by a saffron coloured curtain hung from a thin wire. It was from a wicker cradle, on this string bed, that the unbearable sobbing had come.

Swaddled in blankets, like a tiny, embalmed mummy, a baby was continuously crying. A

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young girl, hardly a woman, her green sari draped over her head, sat unmoving, frozen into statue-like stillness. In the doorway, a young man stood almost as traumatised.

‘If I get to work today,’ Ram said wearily, ‘we can try the new medicine.’

His wife lifted her head for a moment. When Ram looked back, he saw a slow tear running down her cheek.

The tram back to Ballygunge that evening was crowded as always. Children in school uniform, women with bunches of dark green spinach and plastic bags of koi fish, swimming despondently in murky water, pushed their way into the tram cars. Suddenly, the tram screeched to a halt as a cow and her calf strolled leisurely over the tram lines. Ram, who had been dozing in a corner, woke up with a sudden start. The smell of fish in the tram and the scent of incense, which had drifted in from a roadside temple, reminded him. In a few days, Kolkata would be transformed by Durga Puja into a city fit for the gods, a magic city of lights, pandals, new clothes, joy, faith, hope. He clutched the paper package in his hand as if it were worth at least a lakh of rupees!

So far, the day has been lucky for Ram. He had arrived early at the large construction site in Alipore, an affluent part of the city. Already a queue of casual labourers was waiting in hope that the site manager would recruit some men to work on the construction of a block of luxury flats. Only fifty had been chosen; Ram was number forty-nine and he felt he had won the lottery- a chance to carry blocks of stone up ladders, move heavy scaffolding, for a pittance. It was hard, soulless labour but at least he had bought the vital medicine.

As he walked home that night, Ram thought about the approaching Durga Puja, the greatest Hindu festival in Bengal and a chance once a year to buy new clothes. He decided to stop for a moment at the local pandal and see the brilliantly lit pavilion with its images of gods. The deities were regally housed in a magnificent, royal pavilion, its sides draped with shiny blue silk which gleamed under the neon lighting. It was truly a palace fit for a Maharajah. Jewels in the gods’ gold crowns shone brilliantly in the reflected light. Here was a magic island in a sea of grey, urban anonymity. His gaze centred on the Goddess Durga in all her beauty and power. Her ten hands held the divine weapons of the gods.

He thought of the tales of his childhood. Back in the village, his grandmother had held the children spellbound with stories of the gods. Far into the night they had listened in the

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flickering lamplight, learning how Durga, the ultimate female warrior, returns every year from Mount Kailash, her heavenly home, to visit her parents. Riding her Bahan, the majestic lion, she slays the fearful demon king, Mahishasura.

Ram looked into the face of Durga, the Goddess who was said to have one hundred and eight names. Her eyes were at first glance fierce as she thrust her spear into the hideous demon. Yet, as he looked closely, Ram felt a powerful sense of compassion.

Ram looked at Durga's four children, dutifully poised beside their warrior mother. Her daughters, Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, splendid in brilliant pink, her wise owl perched beside her; Saraswati, goddess of knowledge and music, in a saffron sari, accompanied by an elegant swan. On the far left was the portly figure of her son, Lord Ganesh, bringer of good beginnings – a tiny mouse at his feet. The family was complete with the handsome figure of Kartik, god of war, and an equally handsome peacock. Her children stood ready to fight beside their mother against evil.

Ram turned back to the central, arresting figure of Durga. Her brilliant, red silk sari was embroidered with fine gold thread which gleamed in the light. Her eyes, strangely enigmatic, concentrated on the death blow she was about to deliver, her spear hovering over the cringing demon. It was difficult to explain that despite her warlike energy, there was an overwhelming stillness about her. He looked at her golden crown, encrusted with jewels. At the centre was an enormous ruby like a glowing ember or the final sight of the sinking sun. He prayed silently, his eyes on the gleaming stone, his thoughts on his sick child.

Approaching the basti, Ram could hear the usual chatter of voices and smell the smoke from clay ovens as evening meals were being cooked. There was no electricity in the basti. Ram had often seen students, sitting beneath street lights, completing homework!

Looking through his own doorway, he saw Rupa and the baby, in a circle of yellow light which faded into darkness in the corners of the small room. They were framed as if in a painting, sleeping mother and child. Her sari had slipped from her head, leaving thick black hair to fall around her shoulders and over her face. Yet, even asleep, she looked pale and drawn. In the wicker cradle Krishna slept, although signs of recent tears still lingered on his face.

Ram walked softly, barefooted to the edge of the string bed. Gently he touched Rupa's hair. She woke suddenly, guiltily reaching towards the sleeping child, yet afraid to wake him.

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‘At least I got the medicine the doctor at the clinic prescribed.’ Ram pulled the precious bottle from the now crumpled bag. ‘We should wake him and give him a dose as soon as possible.’

Ram managed to prise open the small but determinedly closed mouth. It was as tricky as opening an obstinate mussel or clam. Somehow, he succeeded in gently pouring most of the mixture down the small throat.

Krishna almost immediately fell asleep, a tiny trickle of brown liquid running from the corner of his lips. He seemed calmer but the high fever remained. His forehead felt hot, even to Ram’s calloused hand.

Later that night, as they settled down to sleep on the narrow bed, Ram tried to remember exactly what time it had been when he had been standing transfixed, gazing at Durga’s ruby? It must have been just before he got home with the medicine.

The evening had come for the Goddess to return to her home and her husband, Lord Shiva, on Mount Kailash. It was after the final five days of the celebration, when the thousands of pandals had been visited by most of the citizens of Kolkata, in brand new outfits. Prayers had been said, incense burned, drums beaten, past pujas fondly recalled. That evening the Goddess would leave but the inevitable sadness would be tinged by the faith that Maa Durga would return next Autumn.

Ram was standing by the side of an open-backed lorry, its engine turning over. With a group of the strongest young men of the district, he prepared to shoulder the heavy contents of the pandal onto the waiting lorry. As they edged forward, the images swayed crazily, almost as if they were dancing. Finally, Mother, children and respective animals were securely loaded. The back of the lorry was packed with local men, boys and the traditional Dhaki drummers. Other lorries appeared and soon the roads leading to the Hooghly were full of swaying images. Thousands of Durgas, from every part of the city, were on the move, drawn by the magnetic power of the river!

Then all these images would be immersed in the Hooghly- a distributary of the mighty Ganga. In the water, the clay bodies would disintegrate and become part of the river and finally, part of the sea. Eventually Durga would return home in the form of evaporated rain water, falling on the high mountains. She waited there to return next Autumn, a perfect

symbol of the timeless cycle of death and rebirth.

Ram and the other men succeeded in lifting their Durga from the lorry. By now it was dark and the Hooghly was flowing swiftly.

As they walked into the river, Ram felt the cold rush of the current tugging him forward. At a signal from the bank, the gods were released in their clay forms to begin their long journey home. Ram waded deeper into the fast-flowing waters. Looking down, he could see Maa Durga, her golden crown still intact, its ruby glowing dimly through the water. Only two of her many arms were still above the surface; whether pleading or blessing, Ram was unsure. He reached down to touch the stone. Even as he whispered a prayer, Durga was dissolving, leaving her clay body, the bright sari, the brass bangles. Travelling seaward, she would again become pure spirit, back in her mountain home, ready to resume the great battle next year. Struggling to walk back against the strengthening pull of the current, Ram heard one of the men calling out the time. It was just eight o'clock. The tide in the river was about to turn.

The by then empty lorry, dropped Ram outside the basti which was still noisy and excited. Ram walked nervously to the hut at the far end of the slum. He stood in the darkness, peering in through the doorway. Rupa was laughing for the first time that week! In front of her lay Krishna, resplendent in his new outfit, waving his arms and legs madly, giggling helplessly, as his mother tickled him. Ram was spellbound. In the lamplight, mother and baby seemed ethereal, caught in the moment, unaware of being watched.

'What happened?' Ram whispered, holding Krishna gently in his arms. He thought of the Goddess, looking up through the water, the gleaming jewel in her crown. He knew now her arms had been raised in a final blessing, a last human gesture before she became pure spirit.

'The fever suddenly broke.' Rupa sounded almost frightened, in case she tempted fate. 'It must have been eight o'clock. I heard the hour striking in the house over the road.'

Sarah Das Gupta

Sarah Das Gupta is an English Teacher who has lived and worked in UK, India and Tanzania. She lived in Kolkata for a number of years, teaching in a school with students of many faiths. This was also true of the school in Africa. She has had prose and poetry published and now lives in UK.

She keeps in touch with several hundred ex-students through Facebook.



The Man Above



‘He’s very private, if you don’t bother him; he won’t bother you.’ While I’m around long enough not to take the words of any landlord literally, the assurance of Tom – whom I’ve known for over two years – is the final nudge I need to sign the lease. Aged somewhere between forty and sixty, and an unwavering devotee of Fair-isle sweaters and tweed trousers, Green Tom – as he is generally referred to – is just as wholesome as Green Ways: the organic grocery and whole foods shop he operates beneath my new flat. I can hardly believe my luck: after a lifetime of imposed sharing, I will finally have my very own living space.

One of my earliest memories is being squashed against the wall by my big sister, whose bed I had to share after Gran came to stay. My college years are a haze of grotty flats, cluttered with layabouts, leeches, lechers and liars, while my working life has been a relay of smokers, snorers, insomniacs and porn addicts. Since joining a local firm almost three years ago, I’ve been sharing with various combinations of work colleagues, but as my thirties beckon, I’ve become consumed by the desire for my own space. I need kitchen and couch space, reading, music and TV space, and above all, head space.

As I don't have a man in my life at present, moving is the perfect antidote to Valentine's Day, but although I haven't had a night out for some time, I have absolutely no intention of becoming a hermit. I've always been game for the craic, for outings with friends and making new acquaintances. I will continue to enjoy the occasional Friday evening drink with the gang from the office, intermittent pub crawls with my counterparts from other firms, and meeting up with old college pals for gigs and events back in the city. But it does take time to settle in; to put one's stamp on one's new surroundings; to feel at home.

It's the Monday of St Patrick's weekend; as yet, I haven't encountered my neighbour from upstairs. I sit in silence with my ears strained for any sound from above, Tom's words again resonate: he's very private, if you don't bother him... My office colleagues will probably spend the afternoon in some pub, discussing possible holiday destinations and probable pairings or groupings. I know that my forewarned absence will be commented on, but although I've spent just five weeks in my new abode, I shiver at the very thought of abandoning it for a brief sojourn in some foreign clime. Drawn by the rhythmic tones of O'Neill's March, I bring my coffee mug to the front window in time to watch the local girls' primary school's band file by; each uniformed figure totally focussed on her instrument, and all perfectly in step with the two tallest girls' booming bass drums. Much to my surprise, I find my fingertips rise and fall in synch with each note of the familiar melody. With the resurrection of this pre-teen memory, I wonder if my old D whistle still sits in some corner of my childhood bedroom. Could I still coax a tune out of it? Perhaps I should get a replacement; but how would the man upstairs react to such dissonance?

It's Easter Saturday. Visiting my parents for the long weekend, I ask Mam about the tin whistle. She shoots me a sidelong glance, and adding another sprig of rosemary to tomorrow's leg of lamb, reminds me that I traded it for a 5ive poster shortly after beginning secondary school. Do mothers ever forget anything? My own memory stirs; yes, I do recall the transaction, and I've just realised why the elegant flute player in that wonderful trad group I saw over Christmas, looked so familiar. 5ive's time has come and gone, but the star of the girl who'd swapped her 5ive poster for my whistle is very much on the ascent. Perhaps I should be proud – maybe even jealous – I don't know, but right now all I feel is guilt. She was my best friend throughout the difficult transition from primary to secondary school, but after our class was divided before second year, we gradually lost touch. New friends, new interests, new ambitions had intervened, I can't even recall if we'd compared

our subsequent exam results, nor have I any idea what career path she subsequently chose. I bought their CD at that gig, but I'm pretty sure it's still in its cellophane wrapper, probably at the bottom of some box I have yet to unpack. Dad is washing his hands at the kitchen sink; he has just planted three drills of early potatoes; he tells Mam that he has done his bit and that the rest is up to The Man above. Mam, misinterpreting my skyward glance, allows herself a fleeting smirk of satisfaction.

It's Easter Monday. I resist Mam's attempts to cajole me into staying for lunch – two hours with my big sister and her pair of chocolate-gorged, Duracell bunny girls is just about my limit. Driving east, I'm amazed at how spring seems to have erupted over the weekend. I try to remember if I'd noticed the resurgence of the countryside during my reverse journey on Friday morning; but fail. I can't imagine where my thoughts were during that 60+minute drive, but it appears that observing nature had not been my top priority. Perhaps it was Dad's potatoes that had borne me back to a more wholesome and grounded state of mind.

Back in my apartment, I turn the TV on. Watching the colourful parade of runners and riders before the Irish Grand National steeplechase, I can picture the scene at my parents' house: my nieces running amok between the front and back gardens, terrorising neighbours, their children, and their cats and dogs – not to mention local wildlife – while their indulgent mother is most likely in the kitchen, probably bitching to Mam about me. Dad's favourite mug is cooling on the sitting room coffee table, the in centre of a triangle of betting slips: winning ones to the right, losers to the left, and those for the big race to the fore. Still in gardening garb, Dad will be fidgeting behind the couch, his knuckles paling as he grips the backrest; the arch of one stockinged foot massaging the sole of the other; his eyes peeled for the drop of the starter's flag, while his lips silently implore the benevolent intercession of his Man above. As my gaze strays towards the ceiling, I mute the TV and wonder if my man above has had a flutter on the big race; is he even interested in horseracing, or in any sport?

Ads flash on the TV screen. The big race is over, but I've no idea what won; what fell; what finished last; what was pulled up. Reaching for the remote, I see a family seated at a dinner table while a yummy mummy pours the sponsor's sauce over the meals. I'm suddenly hungry; my mouth waters as I imagine the lunch Mam has dished up in my absence. I kill the TV and check the fridge. There is some milk, a half pot of natural yoghurt, two eggs, three cherry tomatoes, a desiccated red onion, and the customary hollow Easter egg from the

firm's senior partner. I hadn't shopped before the trip to my parents, fully intending to replenish supplies on my return. I suppose I could conjure something up, but then I would have nothing left for breakfast. Is it my imagination, or do I detect a whiff of curry? Has the man above ordered in?

I'm rummaging through a miscellany of junk mail, fliers and fast food menus. Reminding myself that Green Tom's shop is closed today, that he will be safely at home with his wife and family, I phone the nearest take-away and order a delivery of chicken curry with chips and cola. Plating up my meal, I notice a new splash of colour at the bottom of the sunlit back garden. Somebody has placed a pair of terracotta pots – planted with multi-coloured primroses – at either side of the newly-varnished picnic bench. Although I do have access to the garden – as does the man above – I've never ventured beyond the little lean-to outside the backdoor, where the communal bins are kept. As the kitchen of the upper apartment is directly over mine, it would stand to reason that the man above would also have a window overlooking the garden. What if he is just as curious about me as I am about him? After all, it seems we might share a taste for curry; so why not primroses? I don my sunglasses, and ferry my food, drink and cutlery downstairs, through the hallway, and across the garden to the picnic bench.

After I've finished eating, I remain seated for some time before succumbing to the chill of the evening. In a final throw of the dice, I go through the motions of inspecting the new flowers and the few anaemic shrubs that valiantly strive to soften the monotony of the bare pebbledash perimeter walls. With a final fruitless stare at his window, I gather my bits and pieces and retrace my steps to the backdoor. As my hand reaches for the handle, I freeze. The bins; why hadn't it occurred to me before? I skitter upstairs, drop my used dinner things into the sink, and pick up the empty cartons from my fast food delivery. Pulling on a pair of surgical gloves, I wonder what my colleagues would say if they saw me now. There is surprisingly little in the recyclable bin. I examine and then reject each item as it slowly dawns on me that I have yet to encounter anything that hasn't been discarded by me. With a sigh born of defeat and frustration, I consign my gloves to the refuse bin and plod back upstairs.

I dread the thought of the office tomorrow: the little huddles; the bobbing heads, the hushed tones, the reliving and relating of their weekend's highlights. I can already sense their

furtive glances, and I know it's my own fault. It's only natural that people should tire of hearing the word no; grow weary of having their every approach and invitation rebuffed – however diplomatically. But I've already had my fill of that merry-go-round; I've been on roller coasters that would make their giddy little heads spin right off their scrawny shoulders.

My head is spinning now, I'm certain I've just heard footsteps on the stairs. I tiptoe to my door and just as I grip the handle, the hall door slams shut. I rush back to my street window in time to see a blonde matronly figure ease into the driver's seat of Green Tom's navy Transit van. The figure bears no resemblance to Tom's petite, dark-haired wife. Has some woman who works in Tom's poly tunnels got designs on my man above? Indignation sweeps me into the hallway and up the strangely aromatic stairs. The door of his flat is ajar. Rapping twice, I sing out a hello as I inch it inwards to reveal a space imbued with fragrances that are decidedly not masculine. Growing bolder by the second, I sidestep into a bedroom where everything is the epitome of tasteful femininity: the rails of blouses, dresses and jackets; the racks of shoes; the designer handbags; the plethora of makeup and cosmetic paraphernalia on the dressing table, and the styled auburn and brunette wigs that adorn the mannequin heads at either end of an ornate bevelled mirror. Still struggling to make sense of the scene before me, I glimpse a sage-green Fair-isle pullover and a pair of beige tweed trousers, carefully laid across the pristine white duvet that covers the king size bed.

Neil Brosnan

From Listowel, Ireland, Neil Brosnan's short stories appear in print and electronic anthologies and magazines in Ireland, Britain, Europe, Australia, India, USA, Latin America, and Canada. A multiple Pushcart nominee, he has won The Bryan MacMahon, The Maurice Walsh, and Ireland's Own awards, and has published two short story collections.



In Search Of The Echoes



Rhea, while waiting in the lounge of the Bangkok airport for the connecting flight to Kolkata, stood up to look at the showcases at the nearby counters. There were various gift items. She loitered near the counter before making a purchase of the Chinese culinary set for her sister (uncle's daughter), though she had more than two hours to kill. The few relatives at Deblane 14, the ones she met in Kol when she flew over with her late Baba in the early 90s, would be pleased.

Thinking of Baba, her mind went back to the days when she visited Kol with him in connection with a sister's wedding. When the sister's father (a brother of Baba) died young, Baba made a promise to the widow to be present at the time of her only daughter's wedding, no matter what or where. Rhea always felt small yet like a princess while walking by the side of the hunk of a man that her father was.

There were many people waiting outside the gate as the car trooped into the by lane with the dead end. Their ancestral home was a palatial building with two squarish, fenced gardens in front.

Cries of Debu esechhey. Debu esechhey;, (Debu's come. He's home.) rented the air, as they got out of the cab. Then as her Indian uncles and cousins started taking the luggage out of the car, Baba would catch her tightly by her small hand and walk up the stairs to go to Thamma's (her grandmother).

Baba, despite years of staying abroad, was a pacca Bengali at heart. On entering Thamma's room, he would bend down to touch her feet while the dear, octogenarian lady beamed with tears of joy and happiness coursing through her eyes.

The next few weeks of their stay were spent in visiting his relatives across Kol, eating out and making merry. Her grandfather, by the way, had passed away a few years back. The

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first hand experience of the wedding of a sister, the daughter of the late uncle, was something the likes of which she had never experienced before. There was an unending sea of relatives coming in and out, running one errand or the other, helping with the wedding preparation. The ancestral home was filled with laughter and love.

Her father told her on the day that sister was to leave their ancestral home that there would be a lot of crying and wailing at the time of Seemadi's departure for her husband's home.

She could recollect the exact words she had whispered into her ear then: Aren't you supposed to cry right now? Why aren't you crying then, Seemadi? Rhea's question made Seema along with her close friends near her, laugh out loud. Seema was getting married to her long time, childhood sweetheart.

All passengers of Thai Airways 2347 are requested to board the flight without any further delay... The announcement being made across the lounge at that precise moment, cut into her reverie as she picked up the packet lying by her seat and headed towards the glass door separating the lounge from the terminal.

Once she was seated by the window in the business class, she looked at her watch. It was 1.45 pm (IST). There were still 20 minutes for the flight to take off. She reclined in her seat and smiled at the elderly man beside her before closing her eyes.....

Though Baba kept visiting his siblings at Deblane,¹⁴ even after Thamma's death, those visits became few and far between with the passage of time. Then Baba had to stop travelling long distances altogether after 2002. That cursed year, he suffered a massive heart attack on the day he, along with Mom, was to get back to Australia. He was shifted to a Sister's house somewhere near Salt Lake after his release from the nursing home, and Mom stopped approving of Baba visiting Kol again from that year on.

As the passengers were being asked to unfasten the seat belts, Rhea cast one more look down at the city she was visiting nearly after 30 years! She knew that she owed it to her late father, who loved his birthplace like crazy. Whether it was Tendulkar scoring a magnificent 150 at Sydney or the Hindi movie; Disco Dancer; starring a Bengali, Mithun (She even had learnt to dance to some of those catchy tunes like I'm a disco dancer; from the movie in her childhood), Baba couldn't stop gloating either about India or the Indians.

Her connection with her relatives in Kol got severed with time. Strange as it might sound, whatever little she heard about the relatives, was from a cousin settled in America now.

He sent her an email a few weeks before her impending visit, telling her about another cousin, Pommy, (an uncle's daughter) who stayed at Deblane 14 still.

The cab drive from Dum Dum International airport to Deblane,¹⁴ took half an hour. She was surprised. Last time she came, it took nearly 1 and a half hour due to the traffic congestion. She even recollected her aunt (Baba's sister at Salt Lake) having sent her

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Volkswagen to pick them up at that time.

As the cab reached Sealdah Station, she couldn't help exclaiming to herself: How Kolkatta has changed! But her surprise knew no bounds as they drove past Philips and turned to CIT Road in the heart of the city. God! "Baba would have been ecstatic finding these skyscrapers in this new-look Kolkata!" She mumbled again.

The memory of Baba sitting by her side in the car as it crossed BoI during their last visit, hit her hard. She could visualize that kid, cross with Baba one afternoon, sitting on the very step of Bank of India. Who was that uncle trying to pacify her at Baba's request then?

Please turn left and stop near that galli.(What made her remember the Bengali equivalent of a by lane; after all these years?) She shouted out to the cab driver.

There were skyscrapers all over the place. On either side of the by lane there stood towering buildings too. The last house on the left at the dead end had to be the one, she thought to herself as she picked up her suitcase and asked the cab driver to keep the change. Then, with her heart in her mouth, Rhea broke into a run then :

There were echoes of Debu esechhe! Debu esechhe!

There he was, Baba, tall and hefty holding baby Rhea tightly by the hand, just outside the entrance of Deblane,14!

A lady in a shirt and jeans came out just then.

Rheadi?

Pommy?

They exchanged squeals of pleasantries before hugging one another.

It pained Rhea to find out later, that though the number of the building was the same, another skyscraper had surfaced in place of where the magical, palatial building with the two squarish, fenced gardens used to be not so long ago!

Rathin Bhattacharjee

Rathin Bhattacharjee from Kolkata, India, graduated from C.U. He joined BCSC as an English Teacher (1990). Awarded HM's Gold Medal (2018) for Lifetime Achievement in teaching, he resigned from the post of the Principal of SXPS, Joypur, in March, 2024.

He has been published and anthologised in a host of Indian and international magazines. His novel, "The Damon in Doctor's Disguise" on Web Novel has been much acclaimed as are, "The Autobiography of CU's Worst Student", "My Sis: Through My Eyes" and "Some Friends Are Forever & Other Stories" published by Zorbabooks. His fourth book entitled "I Love You' in the ICU" is out today.

He loves writing, blogging, translating, podcasting, critiquing and editing.



Masoom Moushumi

The translation from English to Bengali is done by Ms. Maitreyee Sen



I woke up to the voice of the tea vendor “Chai, Chai” and requested for a cup of tea. Taking a sip I reached for my spectacles. The name of the station stirred a wave of emotions. Some happy moments, thrilling experiences, pleasant memories and an innocent face flashed in my mind. The station was Collem also known as Kuhlem in Goa on Konkan railway route.

We a group of 20 very close friends travel together for adventure, exploring new destinations. Since long we had been planning a trek to Dudh Sagar Falls. It is one of the most popular trekking destinations. Taking you through nature’s abundance.

We started late at night from Mumbai and before we could reach Collem station the trains halted half a kilometre away, it was 5.00 am. We found trains ahead of us all waiting for the green signal. We got down from the train and took a walk. Our adventure took off.

A little away from the track we found a small shack. The shack was run by a young woman, around 25-30 year old, but visually impaired. She kept the flask and asked for the number of cups and biscuits. We paid her the amount she requested. The team moved ahead and I was

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left alone when she inquired;

“Babu Ji, Are you all going for the Dudh sagar trek?”

“Yes”

“Please be careful” she said. She asked me “What’s your name?”

“Dhanush”

“Dhanush Ji, can you do me a favour?”

I was calm and thought for a while, she sensed it immediately and added “No, no, I do not need money“

“Please tell me, what I may do for you” I inquired

“What I am requesting is if you can please help me find “my mother”?”

I was literally stunned by the request, which was indeed unusual. I could not figure out how to respond to it, since I was not sure of what she was requesting, I asked her

“What’s your name?”

“Moushumi”

“Moushumi, I did not understand, what exactly you mean to say, please clarify, is your mother somewhere nearby?”

I sensed the hesitation & frustration on her face to my lack of understanding. With no option she narrated her story.

“Dhanush babu, I am from Howrah, Kolkata. I was residing in a small town, the name of the place I am unable to recollect, but we were amused sometimes to hear the temple and school

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bell ring at the same time. We stayed close to panchayat. I have felt & heard the school children passing by in front of our house, but do not remember the name of the school or my town. I was 4 year old when my father took me away from home.

The story was getting very interesting, for a moment I thought she was creating it, but I did not see any motive, for her to do so. She continued...

“My father and mother used to quarrel often and it would reach to an extent of abusing each other. One early morning while I was outside on the veranda, the usual argument erupted, both abusing each other, my mother was addicted to alcohol since she lost her job. That day early morning she got drunk and started abusing my father for not earning enough. She is a classical dancer and my father a music teacher in a small school nearby. Frustrated, my father came out with a bag and picked me up “Come we will go to a place” I cried and said, “I don’t want to go, I want to go back home”, but he did not listen to me. More than 22 years has passed since that day, we kept travelling and shifting. I could not complete my 6th grade, as we often shifted and I was unable to find a school for the specially abled. My father worked with the railway gangmen maintaining the railway tracks. He often requested his close friend to take care of me in case if something goes wrong or something happens to him. 2 years back my father passed away and as a responsibility and as a good friend he brought me to his home. He is a part time railway worker and rest of the time he works on the paddy field down below (she pointed towards the direction across the tracks). Sitting alone at home was driving me crazy; hence we decided to put up this shack which would help us survive when there is no work on the field. “I often requested him to find my mother he ignored and said, “How will I find? Who will go to Howrah? How do I know which village you are from? How we can be sure, your mother still exist?” she continued “True, these very questions I ask myself, but I have a feeling she is still alive and perhaps regretting her behaviour and wants to embrace me. Please help me find her Babuji, I will be very grateful to you” she joined her hands in request.

The story was interesting and getting clear now “Moushumi, what your father’s friend said is true, without knowing any whereabouts’ it’s going to be difficult” Do you have any childhood photo?

“I might find my father’s and mine old photo, but it’s at home”

“Never mind, you find the photos and keep it here in the shop, on my way back I will collect it from you” “Can I take a photo of yours?”

“Yes Babuji”

“What’s your father and mother’s name?”

“My father’s name is Asok and my mother’s name is Urmila”

“What is your age now? Or do you remember your date of birth?”

“I am 26”

“How will I contact you?” Do you have a contact number?”

“No, I do not” “I can give you one of my friend’s number, I will request her and get it, but will you come back this way Dhanush Babu?”

“I will certainly come, you keep the photo and details ready”. I consoled her and said, “Moushumi, I am leaving now, I will try my best”.

On the way to the trek I recited the story to my friends. The immediate response was “You are stupid to believe such crap, forget it”. Couple of them stood by me and said

“There is no motive for her to bullshit” “Why not just try, if we can get those details you have asked for?”

“True, that should be a great help for her if we can unite the mother and her child” one of my friend said.

We geared up utilizing our sources. Days passed to months, there were few calls and while filtering the calls, I could recognize them as fake or irrelevant. I shared details with my friends in Kolkata. We also carried out the story in local newspaper. We connected with

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local police station with the help of an NGO. We used the social media. I kept in touch with Moushumi, updating her about the responses. One fine morning I received a call from my friend in Kolkata

“Dhanush, I received a call regarding Moushumi and it seems relevant, I have forwarded your number to them as well shared their number with you”.

Driving back home from office, I received a call.

“Hello”

“Hello Dhanush Babu, ami Tribhuvan bolchi” (I am tribhuvan speaking)

“Hello, I do not understand what you speak” I heard he was speaking to someone

“Uni engrejite kotha bolen” (He is speaking in english) “Phone ta amake dao” (give the phone to me)

“Hello, I Debashree, I talk to Dhanush?”

“Hello, yes I am Dhanush”

“Dhanush babu, you put photo, Moushumi, newspaper”

“Yes, yes” I immediately pulled over the car to the side of the road “Yes, are you her mother?”

“No No, I her mother sister, where Moushumi? I talk to Moushumi”

I ignored her question and asked her “Where is her mother? Is she there, Can I speak to her?”

“No, Mother sick, no walk, no talk, she old now”

“Ok, where are you now, which place?”

“We in Naopara, Howrah Sadar, Domjur, yes”

“Debashree, is this your mobile number?”

“Yes”

“Do you know Moushumi?”

“How I know? Her father run, with small Moushumi”

“Ok, Ok” I presume she got annoyed, but I needed some more clarification, I requested her

“Give me your address, her mother’s residence address”

“Ok” she recited the address to me; I noted it down on my diary and told her

“My friend will come to meet her mother and then I bring Moushumi”

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“Where Moushumi, I want talk”

“No, she is not staying with me, she is in a different place far away from here” I will pass on this message to her, she will be very happy” I was not sure if she understood what I was speaking.

“Ok Ok, when you and Moushumi come?”

“Oh god, “my friend come after 2 days, then Moushumi come” I explained it to her.

“Ok, you call this mobile, I Debashree”

“Yes, yes, I have your number and name, before I come I will call you”

I was glad after a struggle of more than 5 months finally we found something relevant. I requested my friend Jayantha from Kolkata to meet Moushumi’s mother and put her on a video call if possible. We scheduled the day and time, and accordingly I travelled to Goa.

As scheduled Jayantha reached her mother’s place and called us. He put her on a video call, since Moushumi could not see, we were expecting that her mother could speak which would help Moushumi to identify her mother’s voice... hopefully.

She had gone frail and on the bed, but was still beautiful and her face almost matched Moushumi’s, I was glad and happy at this feeling that we were finally on the right track and meeting genuine people.

Anxious, enthusiastic, joy writ large on her face, Moushumi was keen to hear her mother speak.

Moushumi’s mother took the phone and spoke “Moshuuu”

Hearing her mother’s voice and her pet name, Moushumi could not hold herself and let go, tears rolling down her cheek, her voice breaking and with great difficulty she spoke;

“Mammaaaaa, you forgot me maaaa, your child. You abandoned me Mammaaaa”

“Naaa re naa Moshuuuu, apani e ki bolchen! (What you are saying).

Ami amar santander sambhabya sab jayagay anusandhan korechi (I have been searching for you all the possible places my child)

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Tumi jano na ami tomake chara kibhabe beche achi (you do not know how I lived without you my child) Ami tomake misa korechi amara santan, tomake anek miss korechi (I missed you my child, missed you a lot) Kintu tomar baba amake ekabarar janyao o dakenni (but your father did not call me even once)

Bhagya amara santan, bhagya (fate my child, fate, what else can I say).

Apanara dujonei siggiri ekhane asun, ekhane ami apanake dekhte chai, apanar sathe dekha korte chai (both of you come fast now, I want to see you)

“Mama, baba ar nei, du bochor age mara gechen (father is no more he passed away two years back)

“He Ishwar! E ami ki sunchi “(oh my god, what am I hearing) and they talked for more than an hour, now that it was confirmed it was her mother, next was to schedule her travel. Moushumi was keen to leave immediately. I requested her mother if she could send someone to accompany Moushumi to Kolkata. She responded of her inability to travel “and there is no one except my sister and her husband, they too have grown old. She insisted me to come along”. Her mother spoke fluent English, I was surprised.

“Why don’t you come along with her, we will have the opportunity to meet you too, you have done so much for us please spend another few days to help her and escort her safe, I will be thankful and grateful to you forever. Please do come I will be happy and you may have the blessings of this old woman”

“Dhanush babu I understand, if it is difficult for you, please confirm a ticket for me and help me board the train, one last help I want from you” saying this she joined her hands requesting me”

“Hey, it’s all right Moushumi, I understand, I will come along with you” as soon as I said she hugged me and wept, I lost count of her “Thank you”. I consoled her and said “Ok, I will confirm our tickets by train and we will leave immediately”

That night I spend in the veranda, she made all possible effort to make me comfortable. Morning she woke me up with a cup of tea. She was ready to travel and looking beautiful, water dripping from her long hair, no makeup, cracks on her feet, shining anklets, she adorned a dress, perhaps sparingly used, the wrinkles visible on it.

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I finished the tea and handed over the cup to her and said “Thank you Moushumi, you know something, you look so beautiful today”

She smiled with a shyness “That’s because you are a good man, you see good things in others” she said.

We departed from Goa and reached Howrah Jn almost travelling 48 hours. No sign of fatigue in her instead anxious eyes, a hope of joy and happiness reflecting on her face. She did not eat in the train. I took hold of her bag and held her hand to wade through the crowd towards exit door. She immediately clasped my palm tight smiling.

Her Mother, Debashree and her husband were waiting for us they were located at Biparana Para, Howrah Sadar, Domjur. We sat down relaxed after having a heavy breakfast specially made by Moushumi’s mother. She got back her strength to walk from the day she spoke to Moushumi and today early morning she told Debashree “I will cook today; my daughter would love to eat it”. She was more energetic than ever. The moment we reached she embraced her. Me like a spectator watched the emotion unfold, spellbound to an amazing union of a mother and daughter after 22 years. Her mother fed her breakfast with her own hands.

Moushumi said smiling “Mama I am grown up now, not the same when we parted”
“Never mind, you are still my child, let me fulfil my desire of feeding you, which your father deprived me off; a right of motherhood”

They laughed and joked, I had prepared myself to come back the same evening, but her mother and Moushumi insisted to stay back for couple of days more, I relented to their request. The day I was to leave Moushumi came to my room early morning showered with freshness, water dripping from her long thick black hair, a rich fragrance of sandalwood emanating from her body, a look of innocence and shyness covering her face, there was a very peculiar way she walked. Today there was a difference, a confidence in her walk. She woke me up (In fact I was already awake and observing her) and handed over the cup to me. She sat beside the bed on the chair with her cup of tea and spoke to me.

“Can you extend another few days Dhanush Babu”

“No Moushumi, I have some urgent work which is held up, my team is waiting for me”

“Not even for a day, please” her eyes filled with tears of gratitude. She reached for my hand and held it close to her heart and asked “will we meet again Dhanush Babu”

“I am not sure about it, but we are always a call away, whenever you feel like talking to me you can call” While I was conversing I brushed, took a shower and got ready to leave. My clothes were washed, neatly ironed and kept on the table beside the bed. All the while she kept asking me about my family.

“Hey Moushumi, where are you, you seems to be lost”

“No, I was just thinking had we not met, we would not have seen this day”

“That part is over Moushumi, now you have a loving family, a loving mother who will take care of you, good and happy days are ahead of you”.

“What can I do for you Dhanush Babu?”

“You people have already taken care of me all these days, I am happy I could be of help reuniting a lost daughter to her mother. The entire incident will remain fresh and as a fond memory in my life”

She held my hand drew me closer, touching & holding my face with her palm. For the first time I realized that her eyes were so beautiful like her infectious smile. She leaned over and placed her lips on mine in a flip of a second and withdrew. Smiling and waiting for my response perhaps. I was stunned at this sudden turn of event. She paused for few second and kissed me again... passionately this time hugging tight. Maybe we were getting drawn to each other for a while now, I reciprocated. The smooch lasted for few seconds and then I withdrew realising the fact.

“I am sorry, Moushumi”

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“You don’t have to be, “Dhanush Babu” this is the least I could do for you so that you remember me” and she was all smiles, feeling content & happy as if she had unearthed a hidden treasure. I realized it then that she was trying to find if I had the same fire burning in me and she found the answer to it.

More than 2 years passed to that “epic story” I call it. Coming back to the present after daydreaming about the incident I did not realise that I have reached my destination. I immediately picked my bag and rushed towards the exit door. By then the train already moved and picked up speed. The train was about to leave the platform on an impulse I jumped and crash landed on the platform rolling and skidding several feet away. Couple of bystanders rushed to help, came running and helped me sit on the bench.

Bruised, my body was shaking at the impact. I picked my bag and was relieved to have got down. Wow I thought, that was a daring act, I chuckled at myself. My phone bell rang. It was my wife’s call. I smiled and received the call;

“Did you get down from the train or missed it as usual daydreaming?”

“Yes my dear Moushumi, I have (crash) landed” and smiled at myself.

Garry James

Garry James based in Mumbai, India is a poet, writer and an author who loves to write on different genre. He writes majorly on inspiration, nature, spirituality, love & romance, relationship, social life challenges, true life experiences. He also writes informative articles on Indian history, forgotten holiday destinations. Exploring the myths, fantasy and more... which simulate and impact imagination.



No More



It has been pouring rain for hours! Men could notice it due to the large number of earthworms that have come out. Temporary gun-powered lighting allowed them to observe the small creatures. The earthworms fled the water; however, some of them have been swimming desperately in little puddles formed by hundreds of boots. The puddles looked like seals stamped on letters made of mysterious maps... urgent massive letters that came but never reached their multiple addressees. Addressees who didn't ask for this notification.

It was twisted fun to see the pitiful earthworms try to get out of their temporary cells. The bomb tremors provoked scaled-down landslides from the walls of the footprints and made them fall back there. It was exactly the way those men felt. It was easy to feel insignificant at war, with your destiny based on someone else's will.

The night sky was lit every now and then by bomb fire. Soldiers were expected to be brave and emotionally unalterable. When the explosions got closer, old soldiers stood still; some moved around to kill anxiety while checking damages, but rookies cried with shame or cried out "no more" like crying children being bitten in punishment for their actions. It was hard to be strong in a horror play written by ignorant, sadistic politicians.

"Dude, it's been a long time away from home, you know" "18 months so far..."

A literature magazine by The Writer Monk

“Really?! That means I just got here, 10 weeks!”

“I see. Where are you from?”

“Hey guys, shut up. Some of us need some rest and want to sleep for a while. Would you mind?”

There was silence for a moment.

“Sorry, I interrupted you. I didn’t mean to, you know, disturb you. It’s been a long day, and I’m guessing it’ll be a long night as well. Do you have any cigarettes?”

“no problem. We understand. At this point, everybody is picky”

“Picky? Ha-ha. You picked a good term”

“I think what we need are a shower and a beer”

“A beer or two!”

All of them chuckled. Not only did the heavy atmosphere not allow them to enjoy their chat, but the sound of rain was also too loud to listen to each other. The conversation was cut again.

It has indeed been a long day. The mixture of blood and mud has printed its scent in the trenches. It was like if an international brand had prepared the latest fashionable scent for soldiers with the name “Sudden Death” wives and fiancées would have their hearts broken, guaranteed! Another bomb flew freely through the crying, dark sky to light up the men’s conversation one more time.

“For God’s sake! When is this insane rain going to stop? It’s driving me crazy”

“Yeah, it’s getting on my nerves”

“Insane? The rain? Then you don’t know what madness is, pal. Just stay longer, and you’ll see”

“Yeah, Corporal, he’s damn right! You’re blaming the only thing that has washed our sweat; it’s finally brought some comfort to our existence. Don’t you think so?”

“Whatever you say, Sarge.”Then he said to himself”

”I’m just too tired to argue. I just want this to come to an end”

Another bomb hit the trench end this time. A couple of privates died instantly. Their limbs were thrown everywhere by the blast wave. A minute of confusion. No one got used to explosions, despite all the practice they had for months.

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“How many killed?” Someone asked.

“Only two souls this time.”

“What were their names? Do you know?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yeah, man. It makes no difference”

“You’d better not know names... There’s no use in that”

“I guess you’re right. Poor fellows!”

“All right, all right. Everybody quiet... understood? That’s an order”

The men froze both their chat and their emotions once again. Soldiers have learned how to frost their hearts. Maybe that was their way to avoid fear and despair, or maybe that was their way to keep their hearts safe and healthy for their families back home. Watching war slaughter was no man’s sport; besides, it killed their minds, too. A man tried to light a cigarette to calm himself down. Too much rain! He brooded over his immediate reality for a moment.

“Hey, Sarge! Sergeant!”

“What now, private?”

“Sarge, I believe you should talk to the Lieutenant... You know, we must do something”

“Now you’re the one giving me orders, right?”

“Sorry, Sarge. I’m just saying... We’re dying here; the enemy will destroy us little by little, and we’re not even complaining. It makes no sense to me. In other words, I am willing to give my life to my country, not to waste it. I want my soul to go to Heaven, not to be taken by this hell. We must...”

“Sarge, the man is right!” Many men protested in support.

“Mmm... Is that what you all think?”;

“Quite frankly, Sarge, we all have the same thoughts”

“I guess I can talk to him the”

The sergeant got up and walked slowly toward his lieutenant; in fact, the lieutenant was planning a new strategy with the colonel.

“What’s new at the front, Sergeant?”

I have been talking to my men, and they...” The sergeant explained his men’s way of thinking. Their discussion took a while. Finally, the three officers announced to their men that action was to be taken as soon as it stopped raining. They would attack directly. Every

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soldier adjusted his helmet and took his rifle and pliers to prepare for the fight.

“All right. Ready? Remember, we’re here to defend freedom. Our nation depends on us. You are its bravest children and its dearest hope. Nobody dies tonight; nobody retreats. We have work to do and a mission to accomplish. Understood?”

“Sir, yes, sir.”

The Colonel was not known for giving inspiring motivational speeches. After all, he was a military man; he acted like a hand grenade: to a dead end! “Steady, wait for my signal.” The Colonel looked at both sides. “Steady, on my mark” “He was not quite sure about it. Then he said” Go and kill those son of a bitches!”

Troops started to move stealthily toward an enemy position, an unknown enemy made of known people. They were moving through the wire obstacles with difficulty. Pieces of flesh cut or bitten by metal. No hope. No freedom. They were shot and killed, one by one. Blood was strongly running everywhere. Their corpses were hanging, nailed by wires, like torn flags of world shame that built nonsense history. They were hanging like wet clothes, waiting for the sun to dry them. Those soldiers fought and died because one unwise and greedy man decided to. As a result of the military attack, their army had no choice but to respond.

There is no real winning in war: on the one hand, the pain of a family when dead soldiers are dressed up as heroes in the defending army; on the other hand, just profit for a few because soldiers of the attacking army are just a workforce for cynical rich individuals who want more power.

Back on the battlefield...

“We must regain our position. Understood?”

“Sir, yes, sir” The new troops exclaimed.

Henry Valerio

Born in Atenas, Costa Rica, 1969, Henry Vinicio Valerio Madriz is a teacher -English Teaching and Linguistics and Literature. Photography lover. He has published poems, short stories, and photographs, both online and print (in the USA, Canada, UK, India, Philippines, Pakistan, Germany, and Palestine). Shortlisted in Voice of Peace: 1st Intercontinental Poetry And Short Story Anthology 2021, The League of Poets. He got an ‘Honourable Mention’ in Dark Poets Prize II, 2024. He is the Winner of the Literary Cocktail Magazine Enticing Shutterbug Award 2024 for photography.



Non Fiction

Psychological Help



Narmina was waiting in the reception room. She had been there for half an hour and still had another half hour to wait. The excitement of this appointment had kept her excited all night, and she left home an hour early to avoid being late. Now, she was counting the minutes. Someone exited the room. Narmina gazed curiously at her face, observing her carefully. From their eyes, face, posture, and walk, happiness seemed to radiate. Narmina felt her own heart started pounding. The woman ahead of her, with an irritated expression, walked into the office with an air, as if she “hated everyone in the world”; Narmina, listening to her heartbeat in harmony with the ticking of the clock on the wall, sank into thought.

She had been very irritable lately. In fact, calling it irritability wouldn’t be accurate; it was more like apathy, maybe a lack of enthusiasm—theses words better described her state but still not exactly. And when she said “lately” it had actually been like this for the past few years. Now she couldn’t even sleep anymore, her sleep had vanished, and everything around her was making her angry. At home and at work, whatever people did irritated her. She felt as if everyone was being unfair to her, as if she wasn’t living the life she deserved or

receiving the recognition she was worthy of. Sometimes, when she calmed down, she realized that, in fact, everything was fine. Her life was progressing normally, and her problems and difficulties were the same ones everyone faced. But soon, rage would hit her again so hard that she felt like she would explode.

She had heard about Firuza a long time ago. People praised her, saying that she wasn't like other amateur psychologists, that she had studied as a specialist in Turkey, and that she had such a magical aura that everyone who left her office felt happy—so happy, in fact, that they couldn't believe they had ever been depressed. Narmina, of course, didn't believe these praises. The reason was that she had heard so much about these so-called 'super psychologists' before. After listening to them for just a minute, she would turn her face and return to her familiar depression.

But one day, a coworker looked at her tired, gloomy face and, in a voice sparkling with happiness, said, "Narmina, do yourself this favor. Go, just check it out" Still, she didn't go. However, over the past week, her sleep had become so disrupted that her sleep duration had dwindled. First, she was getting one hour of sleep a night, then half an hour, and for the last five days, she couldn't even close her eyes. Faces of people she had met, people she hadn't met, things she had to do, and nonsensical, meaningless conversations flooded her mind non-stop. Even so, she wasn't thinking about going to any psychologist. But the day before, she had dragged herself to work and, when she tried to pour ayran into a glass, saw that the glass was empty. She had actually poured the ayran into her coworker's bag. When she saw her co-worker laugh heartily and learned that this person had also benefitted from Firuza's professional services, a deep, endless, inexplicable faith in this "magic" had taken root in her heart.

As these thoughts passed through her tired mind, time also passed. The woman who had been in the office left exactly at the time Narmina was scheduled. She walked towards the waiting area with a light, almost flight-like step, laughing as she said goodbye to everyone, and exited as gracefully as a peacock. There was a 20-year and a world's difference between the woman who had entered and the one who had exited. Narmina pushed aside all her sceptical thoughts and realized that she completely entrusted her fate to this magician she was about to see.

Firuza was sitting on the couch. When Narmina entered, she greeted her warmly and offered

her a seat on the couch opposite her. The calm and gentleness on her face and in her eyes seemed to have been carved into her very being, as if they had been with her since birth and would leave with her at the end. The magic everyone spoke of was indeed present, embedded in her entire demeanor.

“I read the information you sent. I’m so proud of you. I usually do that when a new patient comes to see me. I also looked you up online, and you’ve written so many scientific works! As soon as I typed the title of your book, it came up in the libraries of top universities. You must be such a happy person, having achieved immortality. Being able to convey your message to millions of people in your own way must be an incredible feeling. How did such a beautiful, delicate woman like you manage to fit so much into such a short life?

“Well, thank you. Yes, I’ve worked a lot. I mean, I’ve always worked, done something, but now, for several years, I haven’t been able to do anything. Nothing’s happened, but I don’t feel any motivation for anything. Maybe that’s why I don’t feel good about myself.

“I understand you so well. For someone used to being busy, inactivity is incredibly Difficult”

“You see, I...”

At that moment, the phone on the table rang. Firuzə apologized, stood up, and picked up the receiver. “Yes, uh-huh, I’m listening. Just find something in the fridge and eat it. I’m at work, I have someone with me. Is that why you called? How did you come back from music class so early? What do you mean you didn’t go? What do you mean he didn’t want to? He’s a child, you should have taken him! Why did you listen to him?”

Firuzə hung up. She wanted to smile at Narmina, but the phone rang again, and the expression on her face, which hadn’t yet fully formed, turned into helpless anger.

“Yes, hello, Seyran teacher, I’m listening. What do you mean you’ve changed my classes? The lessons start tomorrow, and I’ve prepared everything. What does it matter that there’s a new teacher? Give her the new classes. What do you mean she can’t handle it? That’s not my problem. Listen, it doesn’t matter who is behind her, ... who? Okay, fine, I understand. Okay, send me the new lesson titles”

Firuza hung up, her face had darkened, and she hurriedly returned to her seat as if afraid the phone would ring again.

“Seems like there’s a problem?” Narmina asked cautiously.

“Ah, there are always problems. They don’t leave you alone. Look, the first call was from my husband. He says, “We ate what you cooked, but now we’re hungry again—what should we eat?” Can you believe it? A grown man calling me at work to ask that. And now I’ll go home at 10 p.m., tired and worn out after working all day, teaching at the university too. I’ve been preparing for the lessons in the library. And then they call from the university saying they’re giving me completely different subjects. Why? Because the rector’s mistress has her eye on my classes. And when I get home, he’ll ask, “What’s for dinner? The whole house will be a mess: everything they’ve eaten throughout the day will be scattered across the table, and the kids will be running wild. And as soon as they see me, they’ll bring their homework for me to help. I dream of just sleeping for two hours. Every day, I have to go through such difficult paths just to get there. I’m so exhausted that I can’t even think straight anymore. Sorry for burdening you with this” Firuza grabbed a tissue and wiped her eyes and nose.

“You’ve taken on too much” Narmina said, looking at her compassionately. “Don’t be offended, but you’ve created this situation for yourself. Right now, pick up the phone, call your husband, and tell him to clean the house, wash the dishes, and cook before you get home”

Firuza seemed to freeze. She stared blankly at Narmina.

“He would never do that. All he does is lie down and watch movies all day”

“Tell him. Calmly explain that you work all day at two jobs, and you don’t have time for housework. Tell him that he should take care of things at home while you’re working”

“Ah, you don’t know him. He’ll make such a face. He’ll say, “Don’t work, stay at home, do your chores” “He doesn’t even think about where we’ll get the money for food and the kids education”

“Calmly tell him that you’re very tired and ask him to do all the housework and help the kids with their homework”

“He’ll get angry. And then he’ll act like it’s my fault”

“Do you want to keep living like this?”

“No, of course not”

“Then dial his number.”

Firuzah hesitated and then picked up the receiver. After a short conversation, she turned to Narmina with a blank expression and said, “He said okay. And then he asked me twice how I was feeling...”

“Good. He’ll do everything. Just don’t soften up. Give yourself the same value you give him and share the load equally. Then he won’t fight. He fights to cover up his own insecurities. Message me tonight to tell me how it went. Now, call that Seyran teacher.

“Seyran teacher? What should I say?”

“Tell him that you’ve prepared for the lessons he had assigned you and that you’re not going to prepare for or teach any other subjects. Tell him that even the new teacher’s personal problems aren’t your concern”

“But he might fire me”

“He won’t. The rector’s mistress, I’m sure she doesn’t know anything, and he needs experienced teachers like you to keep the department from completely falling apart. Even if he’s an idiot, he knows full well that if there are complaints about incompetent teachers, the rector will hold him accountable first. The rector won’t say a word to the person he appointed. Who knows, maybe they’ll even throw Seyran out and appoint her in his place, claiming he wasn’t capable of managing the department. And classes start tomorrow. Take the phone.”

Firuza spoke again before hanging up, then exclaimed in surprise and confusion:

“He said, Alright, you go ahead and teach your classes, I’ll talk to that lady again. She doesn’t know anything anyway, so what difference does it make which lesson she teaches? I’ll convince her that the other lessons are easier to teach”

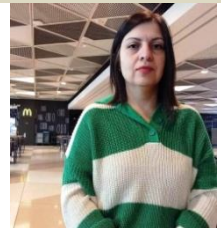
“Yeah, great, I’ll head out now. All of a sudden, I got really sleepy. I haven’t felt like this in years. While you were on the phone, I called a taxi and texted the people at home to prepare the bedroom. As soon as I get there, I’m throwing myself into bed. Even if I sleep for a year, it won’t be enough”

Narmina left the room. With the swiftness of a butterfly, she headed for the door, then turned around and bid a warm, cheerful goodbye to those in the room. Her drowsy eyes gleamed with a pleasant sense of relief as she stepped into the hallway.

Shafag Dadashova

Shafag Dadashova is an Assistant Professor at ADA University and a researcher specializing in identity and gender in Azerbaijani literature. Her work explores the intersections of literature, national identity, and gender dynamics from the 12th century to the post-Soviet era.

She was a research fellow at the Centre for International Gender Studies and the Department of Oriental Studies at the University of Oxford.



Onam: The Season Of Love



The thumba flowers in September like tiny angels dressed in bridal white herald the arrival of the ten day festival of Onam, a season celebrating the love of a mythical demon King for his people. Punished by jealous gods for being a well loved ruler, the asura King Mahabali was banished to Hell. Lord Vishnu granted his only wish, to visit his subjects once a year during Shravanam.

The celebrations begin with Athachamayam, a grand procession with floats, caparisoned elephants, musical ensembles and folk art forms. The King's return is celebrated by all communities with dances like Thiruvathira, Kolkali, Kummattikali, Thumbi Thullalal and Pulikali, martial arts performances like Onathallu, music performances like Onavillu, competitions like snakeboat races, tug of wars and ball games and Kazhchakula Samarpanam, where bunches of Nendran bananas are offered to the presiding deity to be used on Thiruvonam to make pazham nurukku and pazha pradaman.

Early in the morning on Thiruvonam, dressed in traditional cream and gold settu and mundu, we set off to pluck flowers from the neighbourhood for the traditional pookolams. Yellow and orange flowers of the chrysanthemum are plenteous, we have an abundance of

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red inflorescences of the thetti - sacred Ixora flowers. Tulasi, shankhapushpam, hibiscus, chethi, rose and lotus too. Returning, we arrange flower petals in the pookolam, listening to our favourite Onam songs.

Twenty six items are served on green banana leaves for the Onasadhya: from salt, pickles, chutneys, salted and jaggery-coated banana chips, to a plethora of vegetables prepared with roasted, fried, grated or ground coconut. Milk extracted from coconuts is used in payasam and adaradaman. Colleagues, neighbours, family and friends are treated to sumptuous meals fit for a King. There is a lot of talk, laughter, camaraderie and blossoming love.

Friends plan Onam get-togethers: each of us prepare two or three items with love. Pookolam designs are planned, flowers sorted, petals plucked and segregated. The petals are packed thickly in traditional geometric designs or arranged as flower paintings on the Onam theme. Wearing our traditional settu sarees we dance the kaikottikali, in a circle, clapping each other's hands in various formations.

The season of love is over all too soon. A time when the Hindus, Muslims and Christians celebrate as one, united in a common regard for a benevolent King. A time showcasing the heritage, plenitude and cornucopia of harvest blessings in the land. The King's love for his people is returned manifold; he returns to the netherworld mind and body satiated. After Onam comes to an end, the wait for the beloved demon King's return begins again.

Dr. Elizabeth Vincent Koshy

Dr. Elizabeth V.Koshy is a Professor of English Literature at Dr.A.B.Telang Senior College, Pune, India. Her poems have been published online and in print by Sweetycat Press, Clarendon House Press, Gertrude's Writing Room, Caesurae.org, The Writers Club (Grey Thoughts), Poetry for a Cause, Lothlorein Poetry Journal, The World of Myth Magazine, Indian Periodical, Literary Yard, Muse India, Spillwords, Rabble Review, The Wise Owl Magazine, WELLREAD Magazine, Piker Press and SweetSmell Journal. Her CNF/memoirs have been published by Spillwords, Academy of the Heart and Mind, Impspired Magazine, Sweetycat Press, 101 words and The Preservation Foundation.



Durga Puja At 41, Deblane



I know that the greatest Hindu Festival in the Autumn season is still some months away. Even then I want to take this opportunity of writing about this festival at my ancestral home, what makes The Pujas so special and about a few characters who played a very critical and crucial role in making the worship of the Goddess happen at 41, Deblane in the first place and make The Pujas something special as well.

Let me start with the conversation I had with my late Ma regarding the Durga Puja a few years before her demise.

"Ma, ei samosto bhai-boner sange amar banena. Tumi na thakle, amar ki habey?" I don't get along with my siblings, Ma. What will make me tick when you aren't here anymore?

I don't remember exactly what initiated the talk about The Pujas. But I do remember her answer quite well.

I must have hurt her a lot when I talked to Ma about my differences with my siblings. Yet she came out with a classic reply :

"Keno tui nijei Durga Puja korbi!" Why, you can start it on your own!

My Ma was the wisest and witty lady I had seen in my life. It was well nigh impossible for

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me to get at the exact meaning of her reply. Besides, Time has started playing tricks on my memory. I find it difficult to call up her exact words. But a witty lady she undoubtedly was with a tremendous sense of humour.

Let me try to give you an example. One bleak afternoon, she told me "Nalini ke bhalo meye boltei habe. Je Amarer moton bhasur ke sajjhya korte pare... "You have to give credit to Nalini for putting up with a bro-in-law like Amar.

Was Ma talking about our relatives Nalini and Amar only or, was she trying to convey an implied message to me about my wife?

I don't know. Ma was simply beyond me! But I have rarely come across a better human being. I'd like to quote my late Baba's words here :

"Jodi parojanmo boley kichhu thake, tabey tomakei street hisabey jeno pai... "If there is a life after death, if there is rebirth and all, I'd love to have you as my wife..

Ma was brilliant even then :

"Oma, amito parthona korechhi je parojanmey ami jeno chhele hoye janmatey pari." Goodness Gracious! I've been praying to be reborn as a man in my next!

Ma proved to be the perfect match for a man of Baba's stature and standing. No wonder, the couple combined their efforts and energy during The Pujas to make it special.

What was Ma's exact statement when she asked me to conduct The Puja on my own? A seasoned campaigner that Ma was, she knew what performing The Puja on one's own, must entail. She must have seen Baba from close quarters. Was Ma having a dig at me when she asked me to perform The Pujas on my own?

Whatever, I have been giving the idea a lot of thought lately. Till last year, I tried to help my Sis mostly. Though I never found out why we had to announce the conduction of The Pujas at 41 at the eleventh hour.

I told Sis once that this year is gonna be the last chapter in the enactment of a live novel so far as The Durga Pujas at 41 are concerned. Recently, I told her that the last hour suspense is proving detrimental to my health. I can't take it anymore.

I also told Sis that this year The Puja would reveal a lot of secrets. I really believed that! I would give you an example. Till last Thursday, no one knew if The Puja was going to be

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performed at 41. When Tapanda, a priest next-door asked me, despite being the only son of late J. C. Bhattacharyya living at 41, I had to tell him that I didn't know. I even told him that most probably the decision is taken by a brother and Sis?

A question might arise : Why was it so? Did it not show us all, the other offspring of Jogesh Bhattacharyya, in a bad light? It's easy to say that others are simply not interested, and if asked about The Pujas, they would always have their excuses.

What about me? Na, tokey kichhu bolte lokera bhoi pai. Everyone is scared of your arrogant behaviour! Question to ponder is - Did I ever behave rudely with any of my siblings except a couple of them?

Anyway, these questions have been stirring up in my mind for the last few years. Today, a chance remark from Sis was another eye-opener for me.

After getting back home from her interview she told me that she informed her new employers that she would join the Institute as a Warden after the Lakshi Puja. I told her that whether she was present at 41 during The Puja or not, it would be performed. I went on to add that had I been in her place, I would have joined the Institute first before thinking about The Puja at 41. I went on to add that I wasn't her enemy and in advising her like that, I had her best interest at the back of my mind. But what Sis told me en passant, kept me thinking.

If she was so worried about The Pujas at 41, why did she have to wait till the eleventh hour to announce the conduction of The Pujas at 41?

Something did not seem all right to me! Daal me kuch kala to hoga! Something fishy is going on!

This was causing me a lot of anxiety and that's why I decided to do things differently from next year on - God willing.

It was possibly Akanksha who told me to write about things that will cheer the readers up, inspire them. Her remark had a point. Most of my writings are dull, dreary and drab. They hurt instead of cheering others. So, let me conclude today's piece with another character who played a huge role in the conduction of The Pujas at 41 over the years.

Whenever I think of The Pujas, the man who comes to my mind first and foremost, is none other than Somesh Da. I don't know why no one mentions him anymore!

This man was a one-man army when it came to manual work. I heard it from him once that he had given his words to Baba that as long as he was physically fit, if he came to know

even from others that The Puja was being performed at 41, he would make it a point to be present here.

I have seen many able-bodied men in my life. My late Barda, Sejda, Khokonda and Anuda could work tirelessly for days together. But no one could hold a candle to him when it came to doing physical work. Initially, he would come a few days before The Pujas. When there were not enough room for us, siblings, how could we accommodate an outsider? As long as Ma was alive, he didn't mind sleeping on a cot outside her room. Things must have been very difficult for him after Ma's death.

He would go to the market literally a thousand times, uncomplainingly! Kala pata pawa jachchhe na, Someshda ektu bazar jete parben? We can't find a banana leaf, can you get it from the market, Someshda?

Eta koi machh ana hoyechhe Pujar jonnyo, Someshda, ektu bazar a giye dekho to bato koi pawa jai kina... . Is this the kinda koi fish you offer to Goddess Durga. Someshda, can you go to the market and see if you can find anything better than this?

The orders and requests were countless, and the man had hardly got back from the market when he had to go back once again! To my late Ma, Somesda was more than a son. If a book was ever written about the behind-the-scene contributions of some people in the conduction of The Durga Pujas at 41, SOMESHDA, in my humble opinion, would be in the forefront of those invaluable people.

I haven't been in touch with him for years. I don't even know if he is alive. But at the advent of another Puja at 41, I would like to thank Ma Durga for blessing us with such unforgettable characters.

Rathin Bhattacharjee - Bhattacharjee Sagata

Rathin Bhattacharjee from Kolkata, India, graduated from C.U. He joined BCSC as an English Teacher (1990). Awarded HM's Gold Medal (2018) for Lifetime Achievement in teaching, he resigned from the post of the Principal of SXPS, Joypur, in March, 2024.

He has been published and anthologised in a host of Indian and international magazines. His novel, "The Damon in Doctor's Disguise" on Web Novel has been much acclaimed as are, "The Autobiography of CU's Worst Student", "My Sis: Through My Eyes" and "Some Friends Are Forever & Other Stories" published by Zorbabooks. His fourth book entitled "I Love You' in the ICU" is out today.

He loves writing, blogging, translating, podcasting, critiquing and editing.





A Lit Festival

An opportunity for the poets to recite, express their words in emotions
deliver the message to the audience live.

To be held in India.

Location, Date, Time and other details will be announced soon

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