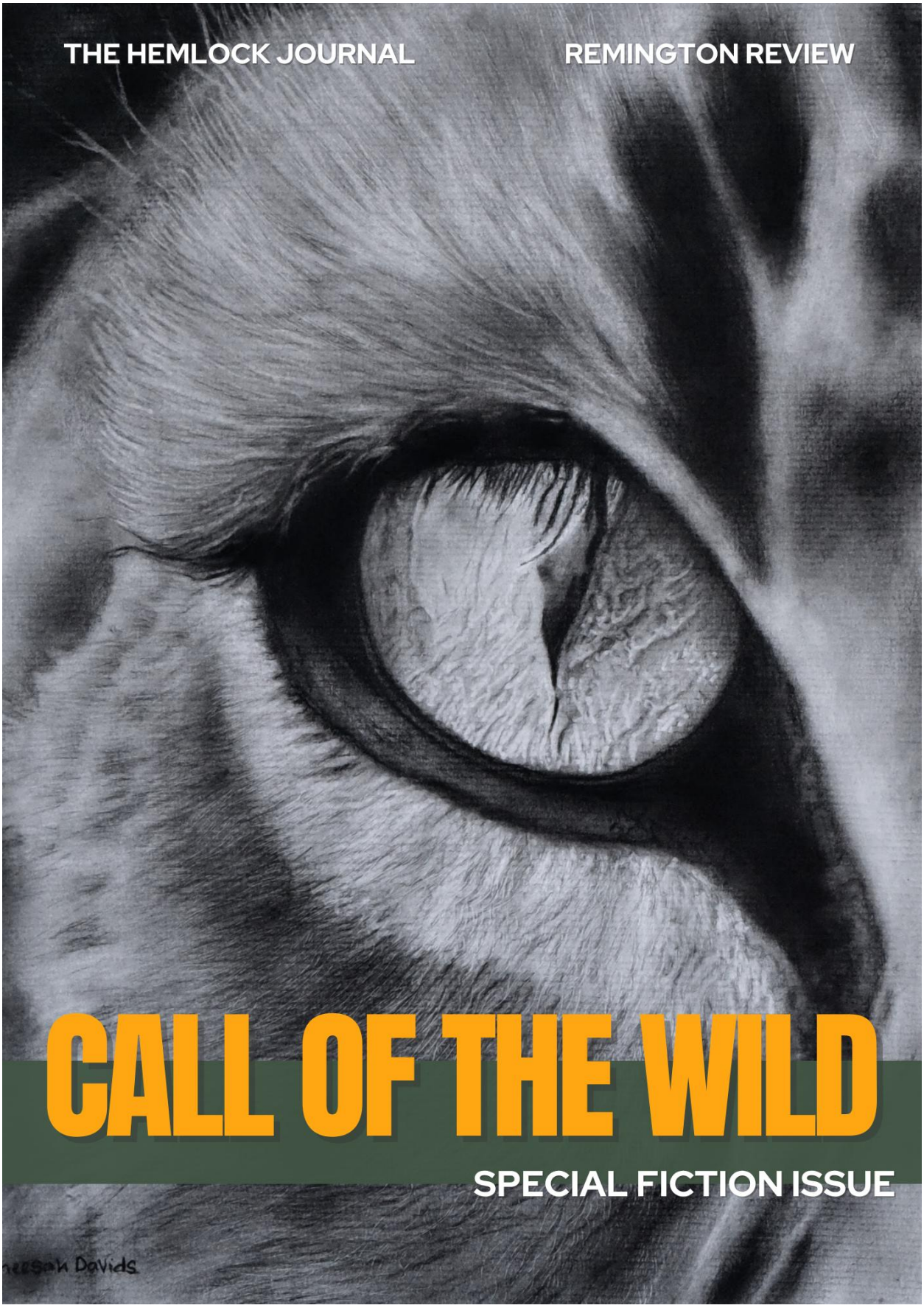
THE HEMLOCK JOURNAL
REMINGTON REVIEW
CALL OF THE WILD
SPECIAL FICTION ISSUE

This special fiction issue was published in collaboration with *The Hemlock Journal* for a fiction writing contest. Thank you to the editors for inviting us to be a part of their issue! Congratulations to all of the winners, and to everyone selected for the issue!

From on High – 1st Place

Amita Basu

I ride down the winding trail, muddy from spring melts, hugging the curves of the lake. Weeks into my gig at Nature Conservation Foundation, Spiti's landscape still surprises me. Snowcapped mountains, jewel-blue sky, algae-green water reflecting the sky stained green-gold – everything's colorful here. Only the earth is colorless, still barren in April. Was it always so, or is this climate change?

I spot the cottage, park my old black-and-orange Hero Pulse, and clamber up the slope. On the rim, pausing for breath, I gasp. The meadow is lush and speckled with daisies and poppies.

But empty. No sheep in sight.

Taapas awaits me outside his cottage. It's immaculately whitewashed, the roof piled with hay – he must've stocked extra hay this winter. Inside, a single spotless room.

Taapas is short and wiry. Sun-narrowed eyes glimmer in his deeply tanned face. He offers me tea and clears his plywood table for my sheaf of papers.

"I lost both my sheepdogs last week." He's standing, deferentially declining to sit down with a big-city person. "If it was distemper, it was lightning-fast." His hands are clasped before his groin. His *pahaadi* Hindi is languid and rolling. "That's how the beast got into the barn."

"Terrible luck," I murmur.

Snow leopards are threatened: only 700 left in India. Deforestation, poaching of their prey, and the retreating snowline are driving them down into the pastures. It's not their fault. We know that. We build relationships to prevent the escalation of human-wildlife conflict.

"The government compensation is paltry," I say, "and often delayed. But we'll do our best to get you any available help."

Taapas stands motionless, blank-faced. In the mountain silence, my ears strain for lambs bleating, sheep teeth tearing juicy grass. Nothing.

"How many sheep did you lose?" The community coordinator only told me Taapas had lost 'some.'

"Will you come see?" says Taapas. "You should see the evidence, no?" Shyness notwithstanding, he speaks with the conviction of a man who, in his own sphere, knows what's what.

I rise. I follow him out along the rim of the saucer-shaped cavity containing the flower-strewn meadow. We approach the barn. I catch the first metallic whiff in the air.

He pushes open the heavy barn door. Like a demon crouched, the stench springs out and jackhammers my forehead. It jumps into my gasping mouth, taints my tongue, and forces its way into my nose. If the demon were holding my head down in a boiling sea of blood, the stench could not be stronger.

The barn is concrete. Narrow windows, iron-barred, run horizontally fifteen feet above the ground. Hay stands piled in the corners. Hay lies mattressing the floor, thick and cozy. And on the hay, sheep lie staring, their golden eyes wide. They lie on their sides with their heads far askew, on their backs with their stomachs open, guts spilling out, the intestines looking, to me, as I scramble to make sense of this, too narrow. I'd thought intestines would be thicker. Substantial.

My knees buckle. I clutch at the wall. Round and round spins the world.

Taapas's eyes spin past me. Steady eyes. I hold onto them. Slowly, the world stops spinning.

Back indoors, Taapas pours me more tea. He doesn't apologize. Why should he?

The effort of getting Taapas's story down, scribbling notes, bolsters me. His voice deliberate, his face impassive, his words well-sequenced, he tells me he'd been away at a wedding on Tuesday. Returning early on Wednesday, he sensed something was off.

"I approached the barn. The silence was complete. I opened the door. He sat there, in the center, covered in blood. He had eaten only two lambs, incompletely. But he had killed them all. Killed my whole flock." Henhouse killing, we call it, or surplus killing: when a predator, surrounded by prey, kills far more than he can possibly eat.

Who knows why they do it? "He sat panting, motionless, staring. After his blood fury, he was too exhausted to budge."

"How'd you know it was male?" I croak. I ready my pen. Our tracking team must find the leopard and relocate him safely.

Taapas turns away to fetch a fresh kettle. "I discovered, afterwards… From the size, I mean."

Afterwards? After what? A chill runs up my spine.

I blurt, "Have you got any other income?" It's too early, I know, for this question. But I'm eager to shrug off the truth I've just half-glimpsed.

Eyes on the teacup, stirring in sugar, Taapas shakes his head.

"Or any other skills? Is there anything else you can do?"

Taapas shakes his head, strangely calm.

"I'm so sorry."

He shrugs. "Everything is God's pleasure."

I peer into his eyes. They're gray-blue and opaque. I picture the snow leopard, exhausted after his hike down from his home above the tree line, and then from his blood fury: sitting there, jaws drenched in blood, golden spring coat pooling around him: a fat-looking puddle of fur, hateful, helpless, and unnaturally calm.

"Where did he go?" I whisper.

"Here, there… What does it matter? What's done is done." Taapas sips his tea. His averted eyes are opaque as the lake, opaque as a snow leopard's: the eyes of a killer.

I drop my pen. I slacken in my chair, the one plastic chair in Taapas's cottage.

I long to rebuke Taapas, challenge him, force the truth out. I stare at my papers. Forms for compensation, which will do Taapas little good, which will do the snow leopard no good.

I've worked in conservation for eight years. Lately, all I see everywhere is selfishness and death. Why did I expect any better from this illiterate little man? He must've already buried the corpse, maybe sold off the skin.

I must be better than Taapas: mustn't let anger master me. I'll get the forms signed and get away. To avoid being angry here and now, you must, I've realized, get far away. As I walk Taapas through the forms, my mind's already far away.

***

I remember Amma, a WWF ecologist, coming home after midnight, after inspecting, perhaps, another hoard of confiscated ivory – which she'll tell Abba about, tomorrow, when she thinks I can't hear, tell Abba about greedy merchants and corrupt officials. I hear Amma dropping her handbag on the dining table, gliding past Abba's closed bedroom door, to her own bedroom, and putting on, softly, on the record player, Fateh Ali Khan, music brightly sorrowful, to lull her asleep. I sneak up to Amma's bedroom. Amma lies on her side, facing away from me. I know she's awake. She knows I'm here. I long for her to turn towards me. I wait, leaning against the door, growing angry. It'll be years before I'll see that there are some states of mind in which you refuse to face people, especially people you love.

I remember Sitara, the baby goat I rescued from the market before Id, white as cream, speckled with chocolate stars, fleeing from me across the garden, leaping over rocking chairs and brick piles, as I pursue, *chappal* in hand, screaming curses, tears streaming. Amma snatches me up and sits me down. She tells me Sitara didn't mean to upset me. She had warned me, hadn't she, about goats and flowers? I hadn't listened. I'd thought my Sitara loved me too much to hurt my flowers. So, Amma had let me learn for myself. Sitara was hungry, says Amma, so she ate your flowers. You're angry, so you want to beat Sitara. But you mustn't let your needs master you. You're not a goat, are you?

I remember Amma, sunken into the hospital bed, skin thinned to translucence, beckoning me, as I lurk in the doorway, racked with guilt for having stayed away, racked with fury. For it's because of Amma that I've stayed away so long. The vein pulses gently, playfully on her cheek. Her hand reaches up towards me. Her eyes meet mine. Her hand gives up midway and falls back. So, you still haven't forgiven me, Meher, says Amma: you're unhappy as a teacher. How are you, Amma, I say sullenly. Go then, Amma says. Go become a conservationist. I tried to save you from it. The work was hard enough then. It's harder now. I thought you'd get used to a normal job. Maybe I was wrong. Whatever life you choose will have its hardships. But I don't

want you to look back, asking yourself *What if*, hating me till the end. So, go! Follow your heart. And then, when you've reassured yourself that it's not too late, come back to me with different eyes. I remember going away, fighting my own fight, and coming back to Amma, with love, this time, coming back too late.

***

"And here," I recite, half-awakening from my reverie, "you certify that you've got no insurance money incoming."

I keep my eyes on the dotted line. Taapas signs. I turn the page too quickly, giving myself a papercut.

"All done." I restack my papers. My third cup of tea stands untasted, grown cold and filmy. "We'll follow up with the Forest Department to get you whatever we can."

I rise. Taapas stays seated. He doesn't even gesture politely at rising.

"I know you want to help, madam. I will keep my faith."

"Yes," I say. "Well…"

Taapas blows meditatively on his fifth cup of tea. "Life is a series of tragedies, madam. It's rare that anyone takes an interest and allows us to speak of our sorrows."

"Oh?" I can barely contain my anger. It's only fear that restrains me, fear that he'll take his poaching full-time.

"For we hesitate to burden our kin, who've got their own troubles, with ours." He looks at me, almost appealingly, his eyes, finally, almost warm. "Outsiders, madam, come and go. You'll forgive us if we take our time to open up."

"Not at all," I mumble.

"Do you like your work, madam?"

"Pardon?" Nobody's ever asked me this. Not since Amma died. Not my colleagues, who are underpaid, dismissed by government officials, distrusted by locals, written off by old schoolmates with cushy jobs. Not our community members, who are caught between industrial lobbies and free-falling agricultural prices. Not Abba, who's ensconced in his second family. "Yes. I do." Taapas is watching me. Amma's

words tumble out of my lips. "To ask and to listen – it's such a little thing, that makes so much joy. Like a shower in midsummer."

"You understand me, madam," says Taapas.

I sit back down. For Amma was right: I'm not a goat. I mustn't let my anger master me. I brace myself to hear a veiled confession of guilt, which can, perhaps, keep Taapas from further misdeeds. I twist my face into a sympathetic smile. My heart thuds.

"But you're wrong." Taapas cradles his teacup, head bent, eyes searching the tea for the right words. "To listen is no little thing. Today, everybody is in a hurry to get places. Even the conifers are packing up and moving north." He puts down his cup. He flexes his hands, scrutinizing their knobby joints and callused fingers. "I was so angry, madam. So angry."

My heart roars, deafening me, protecting me from the truth. It's become a habit of mine: dissociating, or retreating into memory, at the first hint of unpleasantness. What's done is done. Taapas said so himself. What good is the truth now?

Taapas bends towards me across his table. His hands clench and unclench. "I locked the beast in the barn. I came in here to fetch my axe." He nods towards the far corner. I spot the axe, big, heavy-looking, gleaming. "I'd sharpened it last week, to chop wood, to build my lambs a new house, a wooden house. For my ewes lambed prolifically this year. But I cannot afford another cement house. Not yet. I thought, perhaps, two years from now, I could… I re-entered the barn. I locked us in. Either he would live, or I would."

My blood waterfalls against my eardrums. The pressure builds. Taapas's voice grows faint. The whitewashed room spins, darkens, and vanishes, leaving only Taapas's face.

"I grasped my axe. I prepared to raise it over my head. Then, I looked at the beast. The hell-demon sat gazing at me. Like a sleepy housecat." Taapas's eyes, narrowed from three decades of squinting in the sun, narrow further. They're almost closed, now, meditating. But his voice rises and grows. "I could've killed him, and he wouldn't have moved."

"What?"

"If he had flinched – if I had raised my axe before I looked him in the eye, surely then he would've flinched. That little motion of his would've erased my last scruple. I would have done it. And would you have blamed me?" His voice is almost roaring now. "Everybody stands by, clucking their tongues, looking sheepish. The educated people, who've turned their cities into deserts, into gold to fill their own pockets with, come and tell us that conservation is our job." My cheeks burn. "If the beast had made one move, by God, I would've brought the axe down and split his skull."

"I don't understand," I stammer. "I thought you did –"

Transformed by the relief of speaking, eyes big and burning fixed on the wall behind me, Taapas speaks over me. "But he didn't flinch. He sat staring, looking done for. I could've petted him, like a housecat, had I been so minded… The axe slipped from my hands. It was just sweat. I could've stooped to pick it up. I didn't."

Briefly, he meets my gaze.

"To kill in rage is one thing. But that beast might as well have been asleep. Asleep, as my flock probably was when he came… But now he looked so innocent, not guilty at all, just done for… So, I swore. I swore the beast would not make me like himself, like all the people who stand by clucking." He laughs a short, bitter laugh. "Arrogance, madam! It was arrogance that stayed my hand… I left the barndoor open. Next morning, he was gone."

He's still staring at the wall. The fire in his eyes glows then dies. I stare at this illiterate little man slumped in his cottage.

"I've spent," he says, "these two days in darkest thoughts, wishing my fate upon all… Enough of that. You must warn my neighbors. And catch the beast, and send him elsewhere. You cannot mistake him. He's got one golden eye, one blue. Never have I seen such a one."

Eventually, I emerge from Taapas's cottage. The late afternoon sun gilds the barren dun-colored slopes to bronze. My heart peeks over the horizon. I scramble downhill to my Hero Pulse.

I ride a long way before looking back. He's still standing there, seeing me off.

I'm going to get Taapas his compensation, however paltry, hook him up with retraining programs, and do for him whatever else I can. Not for his sake. For my own. For I keep forgetting that, even in this world, there's still always hope.

Amita Basu's fiction appears in 90+ venues, including *The Penn Review* and *The Bombay Literary Magazine*. Her debut, *At Play and Other Stories* (Bridge House), was released in 2025. She's won the Ruskin Bond Literary Award and the Letter Review Prize. She lives in Auroville and works in climate action.

Thalweg – 2nd Place

Theresa Wong

I want this to be an unnamed river. When I tell the story, I want this to be any river. A river at a tipping point, threatening to spill.

When I tell this story, you would have receded, just like the flood. How those weeks were filled with the ebb and ebb of the waters, and the ebb of our romance, or whatever you call this.

How we were each washed up on this shore, only to meet.

How, as we heard the news from people living upstream about the flood getting closer and closer, and that it would be here any day. How those villages went below, one by one, until the high water reached the very northern extent of our city.

How we were still having after-work drinks at the little grill shacks dotting the little promontory that jutted out onto the swelling river. How we speculated about the flood while eating sticks of chicken gizzards and spicy pork sausages glistening with fat. How the chatter would be followed by a pensive silence that made us all stop and turn as if on cue and glance out into the horizon where water and land raced to a vanishing point in the distance.

How beautiful it all was, the wood-paneled bars on stilts on water; the grey-blue dusk settling over the place and blurring sky and river until that line disappeared into the darkening. Even at sunset, the swollen river was heavy with feeling.

How these little bars too got sealed off when the waters finally reached them, and how the river road disappeared in the space of a few days, along with the little sandy parking lots in front of these bars, leaving the huts teetering alone on their stilts, as if tiptoeing gingerly above an inconvenient puddle. A mere fifteen-minute scooter ride from where we lived in town.

By then, the military trucks piled high with sandbags had moved into our city. Over the next week, the heavy bags were hauled to the edge of the concrete banks of the swelling river and stacked higher and higher, until they reached four-high in some places. We went out to see this one night, finding a spot where the bags had not yet been moved in. The water had come up to within an inch of the pavement. In one or two places, a bag or two had accidentally split open, and the contents had spilled out: lots of sand and broken off concrete—construction debris, but mostly sand. They

were rice sacks woven in plastic and paper and stamped with the logo of the National Rice Security Agency.

We stood on the concrete bank of the river watching the water, expecting a signal of some sort. As if the water would roll down from stage right in a giant wave. As if expecting farm machinery or a rotator blade or a cow carcass floating down from upstream. But there was nothing. Under the loamy darkness, the river looked peaceful, like a prosperous, generous motherlode. Presaging a good agricultural year.

The lights on the other bank glittered in the distance. How wide the water surface had grown and how much the river had swelled, how alarmingly far it had come up to meet the road.

Why, in the last dry season, you could walk across the bed of the river.

I had not met you then. Imagine if I had. This river—this same river—had dried down to its bare bones. You could walk down to the bed and across to the other side; the only thing stopping us was that the other side was another country, and the riverbed was itself an international boundary. Imagine the dotted line drawn right down the blue on the map. We had a picnic down there, on that line.

The thalweg.

Imagine a long, snake-like dotted line joining the deepest points of the great river. Standing on that concave, I had the feeling of being an extinct animal whose hunched skeleton was left on a seafloor, or a diver who had leapt off the cliff only to find herself on the surface of the moon.

A couple of us found a spot where we could walk easily down the slope, following what we realized was a well-trodden set of steps that were covered by water for most of the year. We climbed down gingerly and leapt laughing from the last step onto the dry, cracked riverbed. I took great pleasure in standing in the middle of an empty, wide salad bowl of a valley.

You said: "It's odd to have a flood without rain."

My eyes now foolishly sought that cracked, desiccated ground I remembered, now covered in all this water. The lights on the other bank seemed much further now.

There's been some, I countered. I asked if you believed the rumors that it was really the Chinese, releasing water from the upstream dams.

"Don't you?" he said.

"I don't know; we don't know for sure," I shrugged.

You let this one go, as did I. We enjoyed bantering, oh, that we did. I was expecting you to be a little exasperated. You would be getting me to say who should be verifying that it had been the Chinese all along. I would be saying that the rainy season wasn't over yet, and the records aren't all in, so we can't know if it's an unusual flood event. I would have added: just because we don't get rain here doesn't mean it hasn't been raining torrents upstream. You would retort that the *South China Economic Monitor* had already gone and said it, and it had been picked up by *The Financial Times*.

Your gold standard, I would pretend-roll my eyes.

But that night we did not speak much. Water stains had begun to appear—laminar puddles—a foreboding. Water had lapped onto the pavement where the river had breached the land and onto the bank where we were standing. The sight of these caught my breath—how close it was. Something that had seemed so far away had crept right to our doorstep seemingly overnight. Up to my well-worn Tevas and your Birkenstocks.

I wanted to hold your hand, but it is just not done.

I was thinking about the little ground-floor studio where I lived a few minutes away. For the last week, I had been slowly shifting my things off the floor, placing them high up on cupboards and tables. Even when I knew the flood was a hundred kilometers upstream, and it's only a matter of time before it will be here, I still thought there was a chance it wouldn't.

I said to you: "When we're done with this, I need to go back and finish moving my stuff."

You said nothing.

You could always tell when I was overcome by something.

Like that one night, just after you had told me you were going off to get married. We were huddled together in a corner at our usual place. I had been silent for a while, listening to you talk.

I asked the questions and forced myself to hear it all. What kind of a wedding you were going to have, how many guests, the honeymoon. I invited it to come crashing over me, wave after wave of the truth.

After a while of this, you stopped. You're trying to read me, aren't you?

Later that night, after we had made love and you had turned to your side and fallen asleep, my mind gave over to mental calculations. A month-long fling does not break an engagement.

Another minus: you would never leave her. Subtract two.

Keep subtracting: the text messages, the dinners, the volleyball dates, longing looks, the sweet partings in the middle of a silent street at two in the morning. That sad little smile you gave me as you rubbed my back earlier that evening, saying how comfortable you were getting again.

***

The flood did not come.

It did not rain any longer, and I thought about how you were right. Ten times a day, I thought about you, about what you said or did not say.

I placed my things up on tables – my shoes on the top of the cupboard, the water gallon bottle on the refrigerator. I left the mat at the door. Each morning, I peeped outside to see if it was sloping about in river water. Bright sunshine streamed in every morning, and the ground remained dry.

Each day, I woke up, dressed, and looked for my shoes, which I kept forgetting I had put in a box above my fridge. The floor all along the walls had been clear of things for more than a week now. I thought about the vinyl curling under a layer of septic river water. I kept a pair of flip flops in my bag just in case.

The days were blazing hot. There was something incongruous about the high water, so high that the little waves were at eye level, constantly catching the sun. The sandbags still played sentinels, the last barrier between the great flood and us. Some of the bags were already fraying and tearing, the sand pouring out of them and spilling onto the street.

There was a particularly large heap of debris where the street turned into the institute. I walked past it today, but the spilled sand had accumulated into a small hill

that I had to walk around. Vehicles had begun to brush up against the sandbags, ripping holes in them. Nobody had come to move the bags or clean up the sand, even though it was starting to slow down the traffic, which would dissolve, every now and then, into a melée of honking and yelling.

The flood made all of us nervous, all of us looking up to the sky as if for some clue. The clouds were full—cirrocumulus—a threatening mass of white against blazing blue.

At my building, I swiped through the security gates and walked inside. As I waited for the elevator and checked my phone again. Another short, cryptic question from you. Still in purgatory.

***

I was fielding calls from the other agencies. An acquaintance I met that last time in the riverside restaurants wanted information. "Is it the Chinese?" he asked, point blank. Did they release the sluice gates, did they inform downstream?

I told them what I heard from the meeting last week, about the probabilities and the scenarios that had been totted out. "If it had been them," I said, "we would be seeing the tail-end of this. It meant that the release of the water from the dam had all but stopped, either planned or negotiated. We would be seeing a recession of water soon."

I could hear his shoulders droop in relief as he registered this. I added, "Of course, it's all we can see from here."

At five, I clocked off, swiping my card across the machine at the main gate. Over the last week, people had been gathering in front of the institute, where there was a sandy lane and a lookout over the river under the shade of some palms. The man who regularly sold drinks out of his motorbike cooler on the lane had a new bounce in his step. With all the business he was doing selling soft drinks to onlookers, his wife came along to help. Women in their sarongs, hips cradling babies, stood and chatted away, leaving for chores just before the end of the afternoon. The men stood around or squatted, smoking.

Sandbags were going for ten U.S. dollars a pop. There were truckloads of them, and men straining to heave them onto the new, temporary levee. Up and down they went. I could see them from the office window. Boys, men, women – they stood around chatting. Girls laughed coyly, their shiny, long hair swinging.

This curiosity was not nothing. Perhaps they were wondering what all this meant in the long term. The dams had been built a few years earlier. There had been whispers. How can we be sure that another country won't just do what they like, shut the sluice gates to fill the massive reservoirs? Or release them in a sudden move?

How their relatives living in the hundreds of villages might have to finally move into town. How, in time to come, there would be other dams, more dams built in front of these first ones, another in front, then another, creeping downstream.

"I'm watching the people," I texted you.

Almost immediately, you replied: "You're watching the people watch the river?"

A day or two later, you rang out of the blue. In rushed tones, you said you found a spot to make a long-distance call. You were on your way to collecting balloons. You said this with a sweet smile in your voice.

"No flooding?" you repeated, as if this were an everyday phone call, not the eve of your wedding.

"Nothing," I said. "Just every corner of this town is loaded with memories of you, my heart asunder."

"Listen," you said. "I just wanted to hear your voice."

I wondered what colors the balloons were.

***

You're too far away now. You're too far away to care whether we've reached breaking point, whether we tip over.

Dusk was falling, so traffic had slowed by the time I started my walk home. I stopped as usual on the bank after work, watching the river. The stillness hung heavy like a nauseating cloud of stale air over everything. The surface of the water brimmed loudly in defiance, licking at our heels. We suffocated under its immensity, the silence.

***

Finally, people stopped coming to watch. The sand was being cleaned up, usually in the early mornings. One day, the sandbag wall close to the institute where

the road swerved was gone. The protective structures had become a nuisance. The motorcycle drinks seller was there most days, a little deflated, now without his wife.

Your voice suddenly came over like a public announcement.

Clearly, it boomed, the waters are going down.

I immediately retorted: "We would need to see the numbers for that sort of thing."

"Not really," you said.

You were always right, of course. That it would end. Like the rest of the city, gone back to things as they were.

The problem with you, I had written in my journal the day before, unable to finish the sentence. The problem of intergalactic longing: Unreachable, verbose, profligate.

I imagined you floating away, carried by your balloons. Things as they were.

Theresa Wong is a climate change specialist who has lived and worked in Europe, Asia, and North America. She is published in *Brick*, the literary journal. She has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and was recently longlisted for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize. She currently resides in Singapore.

The Last Sigbins – 3rd Place

Bernardo C. Vidal Jr.

Hewing at her manuscript for hours, Myka Ramirez scarcely remembers the last time she has eaten. Her phone rings. Manny is on the line.

"Myka, sorry to call you again. They ran out of thigh pieces. Are you okay with just drumsticks?"

It still strikes her how Manny just now called her by her first name, even though he has been doing it for more than a month. When he was first hired as a research assistant, Manny used to address her as 'Dr. Ramirez', until he shifted (on her strong encouragement) to calling her 'Doc Myka'. Finally, he dropped the 'Doc' altogether.

"I'm fine with drumsticks. Also, if they have garlic rice, could you order one for me? Thanks, Mann!"

She realizes that she hung up too quickly and feels an urge to call back, but hesitates. *Well, if he's hungry, can't he just order for himself?* She slumps in her chair, unties her ponytail, and closes her eyes. Why is she straining so much with this thought, she wonders to herself.

It has started to rain. Droplets splattering against the windowpane, smearing a halo that has formed around a streetlamp. It's not the sort of rain a storm might bring—there's no belligerence in its beat, just a steady thrum, heavy and unhurried. *Well, I hope he brought an umbrella this time*–there, she thinks of Manny again.

This rain reminds her of that time they hiked up Cuernos de Negros searching for their second specimen, hoping to find a mate for the first. They had to rush at the start of the monsoon, before the sigbin's signal would drown in the forest's chorus. Unable to wait for their colleagues from Manila, it fell on her and Manny alone to scale Cuernos de Negros with haste. By midday, they were already at the trailhead a few hours' hike to the site.

What they hadn't anticipated was the unrelenting rain. Overflowing streams dumped mud and eroded the trails, bogging their every step. Then there were leeches getting under their pants and socks; they had to stop often to inspect their legs and carefully remove with the blunt edge of their knives any leech that had managed to attach itself, while retying the ends of their trousers to ensure others wouldn't find their way in. "It's getting quite late, Mann," she said, sounding worried, "maybe we should head back?"

"Don't worry, Doc Myka, I'm familiar with these trails even at dark," Manny

reassured her. They made it to the site and set their traps just before midnight. The rain had petered down by then, and the jungle had returned to its nocturnal ululations. They camped some distance from where they had set the traps, and Manny was able to build them a decent fire even in the damp surroundings. "Why don't you get some sleep while I keep watch," he said, tending to the fire.

"I don't think I can," Myka replied, "I'm too excited to think of sleep right now." She watched Manny's silhouette as he kindled the flame with the almaciga branches he had picked up on the trail; something about his movements calmed her then. She watched the fire cast a flickering glow on his face—plain except for the deep-set eyes with their relentless look of yearning. Then she averted her eyes lest he caught her staring at him; she didn't want any awkwardness between them to ruin a healthy work relationship.

"You seem very much at home in these forests," Myka said, lying on the sleeping bag she had laid on the ground, her head resting against her backpack.

"My father used to take me hunting in these parts when I was a child," Manny said, his voice trailing off while he turned his back to spread out their raincoats to dry. "The forest around here was a lot thicker then; there were more birds, which was mainly what drew him. He let me try shooting with his rifle once, but I never took a liking for it; being out here and seeing all the plants and animals and listening to the sounds they made, those were what I remember enjoying the most."

Myka could tell from the quiet that they had plumbed the deepest hour of the sylvan night. Not long, a faint gleam would emerge from the furthest visible ridge. Myka felt cold, zipped up her jacket and hugged her knees closer. Manny was slumped against a log on the other side of the dying fire, his knitted cap pulled down over his brow. Suddenly, the steady beeping of their receiver stopped.

The signal had been coming from microscopic vibrations in the sigbin's hair, which rendered the creature invisible while moving. But once the sigbin had been trapped, the vibrations ceased, and the sigbin's presence was revealed. Manny quickly doused the fire, while Myka picked up their things. Then, they rushed to where the traps were set.

There, shut behind a spring door in a cage barely able to contain it, was their second specimen: smaller than the first—judging from its silhouette—a hundred pounds at most, and hard to tell in the dark the color of its coat, although likely also black. Myka mentally jotted down her notes, careful not to shine the flashlight directly at the creature curled up so tightly that only its haunches were visible. As with the first one, they wouldn't be able to see its vulpine face for days, and even then, only as it half-peeked through the gap between its legs—a window the sigbin chose to open or close with its enormous tail. To the uninitiated, the sigbin's rump could easily be mistaken for its face.

In the following weeks, tests came back confirming that the second specimen was indeed female, of a reproducing age, thus a potential mate to the first—a male they had named 'Sigmund'. Her team didn't waste time and christened the female 'Sigourney', even though Manny didn't like the idea that the lead actress in the *Alien* movie would be implicated in its name.

Once again, the scientific community was agog; so was popular media. Editorials poured in containing all sorts of speculation: that this was not a sigbin they had caught, and the real ones were still out there; that some nefarious scientists, probably foreign agents, had engineered these creatures and introduced them in our forests to turn against us; that this could be our first encounter with an alien, somewhat validating Manny's earlier apprehension over its given name.

The publicity that followed brought in a surge of much-needed funds and offers for collaboration with Myka's team. An Australian expert on marsupial biology, Dr. Lisa Gavin, joined their lab as a visiting scientist. By then, the newly discovered species had already been given its scientific name, *Sigbinus negrinsis*. Scientists inferred that *Sigbinus* might have branched out from its closest relative, the wombat, some 40 million years ago. It was for this reason that Lisa was brought in to find ways for the pair to procreate. But so far, her attempts resulted in failures.

"I've tried every trick in our playbook to induce them to copulate," Lisa said, crunching up her forehead in frustration. "These creatures are too bloody shy!" Lisa was nearing fifty but pert for her age, with a sprinter's slim build and taut energy. But Myka found her coy voice and girlish mannerisms–like twirling her wispy blond hair with her fingers whenever she talked–distracting, if not downright annoying.

When Lisa decided to cut short her posting after just five months, Myka didn't dissuade her. In truth, she never really warmed up to Lisa's addition to the team. Maybe it was her brash confidence that Myka found overbearing. After all, Lisa joined as an expert, and she wasn't too shy in making that fact clear, often taking charge of decisions Myka felt might have overstepped her.

One time, when Myka urgently needed the service van to visit their satellite office, she couldn't get hold of Manny's whereabouts. Apparently, Lisa had been craving fish balls and had asked Manny to drive her to the boulevard to buy some from the street peddlers there. Manny had left his phone on his desk, so he couldn't answer Myka's calls. She had waited for at least an hour before Lisa and Manny entered the office, smiling and exchanging high-fives. Myka was so angry that she let go of a few barbs at Manny, even calling him irresponsible. Lisa scuttled out of the room, while Manny mumbled a half-assed apology, placing a bag of still-warm fish balls on Myka's desk, saying it was meant for her. They stayed awkwardly quiet during the entire trip to the satellite office until they got back later that evening.

"Sorry, Doc Myka, won't let it happen again," Manny said, as he stepped into

the office with her.

"I'm sorry too, I snapped at you like that," Myka answered. What she couldn't say was it was more at Lisa that she had seethed in anger.

Afterwards, Myka felt even more at ease around Manny, often asking him for simple favors. Whenever they were on the road, she would ask him to stop for her favorite rice cakes that they would partake together on the side of the road, with a view of the ocean, and the sweet fragrance of charred banana leaves mingling with the sea breeze. Myka unloaded herself of the pressures from work. In exchange, Manny confided his dreams to her. "Bird conservation, Myks, that's what I really want to go into." It was the first time Manny called her simply as 'Myks', the preceding 'Doc' left out, like a shifting tide that left no trace.

The one downside now that Lisa has left was all the work that Myka had to finish. There were results to write up, and with funds getting depleted, she would need to renew the grants to keep the research going. She often had to work late at night, leaving her exhausted, and found herself relying more on Manny for the day-to-day management of the office. Then there was the problem of getting the sigbins to mate, which continued to leave her dumbfounded. "I think we are close to running out of ideas," she confided once to the team in her exasperation.

But tonight, perhaps because of the rain, she has given herself permission to put away her work. She leans back and watches the shower outside cleanse the world of its weariness, letting the prattle of raindrops bear her away, further and deeper to her past. In there, she was a child (not nearly ten, in her favorite yellow dress with the laced sleeves) running towards their garden's bougainvillea hedges and shaking their branches with her net to flush out tiny white butterflies, while her mother watched and laughed from a distance. "Come, mama, come catch me!" she yelled out while her mother started running after her until…

The sound of the door opening yanks her back to the present. Manny has come back with their supper. "Goodness, what a downpour! Glad it subsided as I was coming out of the restaurant."

Manny places the carry-out bag on his desk and takes off his raincoat. He has on a dark-green polo shirt, tucked neatly into faded jeans that have turned dark from being soaked at the thighs downward. His hair is all tussled up and wet.

"Finally! God, I'm starving! You didn't forget to get something for yourself, did you?" she asks, a little guiltily for reminding him only now, while emptying the Styrofoam boxes from the bag and setting them on an empty desk beside hers.

"Nope, two of everything. I even got us a bottle of red wine, the cheapest I could find, hope you don't mind." Manny smiles, pleased with himself.

After they finished eating and clearing the table, Manny emptied out the rest of the wine into their coffee cups. They both remark on how good the food was; they haven't even noticed that the rain had stopped. Through the window, Myka sees a full moon gliding over a luminous cloud.

"How is your paper coming along?" Manny asks, settling into his chair and stretching out his legs in front of him.

"Oh, it's coming along fine," Myka says, "a bit stuck in the conclusion, that's all." She is partly leaning back against her desk, still looking out the window.

"As I was going through Lisa's notes again, I realized how many good ideas she has left us. Maybe I should have done more to discourage her from leaving. You two seemed to have gotten along well, whereas I was aloof towards her. I wonder now if that caused her to leave so soon."

"I wouldn't worry too much about it, Myks, if I were you," Manny reassures her. "I mean, she probably had her own professional reasons for leaving sooner. The fact she left you her notes tells me she left without ill feelings, or she wouldn't trust you with her ideas."

"And boy, are they excellent ideas! Molecular breeding techniques, all cutting-edge stuff worthy of publication in prestigious journals…" Myka pauses, hesitating. "But I don't know… I don't know if it's just the risk or something else holding me back."

Manny leans forward from his seat, his eyes pleading her to say more.

"What I'm saying is…why force it on them? What do we know about these creatures to think we can decide what's good for them?"

"But isn't it the whole point, though, Myks, to keep them around longer? So, we can study their kind? Perhaps better protect them?"

"Protect them from what, Mann? We didn't even know they existed until now. And that knowledge you speak of…who, who is it for? Ask around, either people don't care, or they do, but they'd rather believe in myths anyway." Myka straightens up and takes one last sip from her cup, suddenly feeling sorry for sounding so downbeat.

Manny assures her it is just a long day, and that she just needs some rest. He takes the empty cup from her to put in the sink, while she stuffs her tablet and papers in her satchel.

"You know what, it's a moonlit night and the air is cool outside. Why don't we have a walk before heading home?" Manny suggests the acacia-lined avenue from just

across their building.

"Actually, Mann, I do have a favor to ask if it's not too much. I really want to go home to my mother's house tonight. I know it's late and a bit of a drive for you, so I understand if you'd rather not."

"Of course, Myks, you need only ask. Tomorrow's Saturday anyway."

"But there's one more thing, Mann. I need you to stop at the Dauin slope on the way there."

"Isn't it a bit late for a hike?" he asks, puzzled by this last request. Dauin slope is well known for its slow and scenic ascent to the Cuernos.

"We aren't going alone, we'll take Sigmund and Sigourney with us," she says.

A long silence comes between them. The matter-of-fact tone in her voice must have confounded Manny, for he finally says, "You aren't thinking…but no, seriously, Myka, this is your life's work you are talking about!"

"Exactly! What could be more fitting, Mann? It's the conclusion I've been grasping for these past days and weeks."

"Are you sure about this?" Manny asks her one last time, after they have loaded the sigbins at the back of the van. As he climbs into the driver's seat, all that Manny can think of is the night Lisa asked him to sneak into the sigbins' confinement, a moment of weakness in which he acceded to her unusual request for a tiny clump of the sigbins' hair. "It's nothing, they won't even feel a thing. Please, Mann, pretty please!" Lisa pleaded, while clinging to his arm and pressing her cheek against his shoulder. It was to be her memento before leaving, she explained to him, but Myka couldn't know, or she would never allow it. Now he realizes that what he gave Lisa is all the genetic material needed to bring a sigbin back from non-existence.

"Yes, I've never felt surer," Myka says.

In an hour, they reach Dauin slope from where they can see the Cuernos peak thrusting up like a giant's horny head. After unloading the sigbins, Myka and Manny watch the pair begin to stir, gently stomping the ground with unfettered feet, their muscles throbbing from an exhilarating sense of freedom. Slowly, at first, the sigbins begin to trot, their coats shimmering in a luminescent wave; then they dart off, faster and faster, the colorful aura of their coats trailing behind them, until they become blurring objects hurtling towards the distant darkness.

Myka starts to run after them.

"Myka, wait!" Manny yells, running after her. He knows this is his moment to

come clean, if he is to face her again.

"Quick, Mann, let's follow them," she yells back, her voice trailing off into the void.

She runs as hard as she can until she loses sight of their quarry, until the sigbins have either merged with the grasses or dissolved into the moonlight. Then she slows down to a walking pace, listening for the shuffle of footsteps catching up from behind.

Finally, after a long time, she hears the sound of happiness closing in.

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First Principles – 4th Place

Alan Talevi

1.

The girl and the man share no blood. Between them, a fire; over the fire, a pot. In the pot, three potatoes and a carrot. The potatoes are small: each could fit inside the man's closed hand.

She has red hair, which is not good. Anything that draws attention in this rotten world, the man told the girl, is dangerous. His own hair is filthy and matted, the cheekbones sharp beneath the skin. One can still tell he was once a handsome man.

He found her three nights ago. She was wandering along the old avenue, drifting from one sidewalk to the other, dragging her feet. Sometimes she stopped dead, as if about to collapse. He watched her from behind a charred stump. He scanned the surroundings. fearing the girl might be bait.

The muffled explosion of a motorcycle's exhaust echoed five or six blocks away. The detonations rang day and night, the fault of the poor-quality fuel. Cars were gone: they consumed too much.

Was the girl bait?

He decided to take the risk.

Crouching, he ran through the dark; with a swift, precise movement, he slung the girl over his shoulder and crossed to the opposite sidewalk. She screamed and kicked. Once they crossed the strip of asphalt, he set her down behind a tree, wrapped his arms around her to pin her still, and clamped a hand over her mouth to stifle her cries. The girl bit him, drew blood. He bore the pain. Another explosion, closer. He loosened his hold, turned her so he could meet her eyes. With a finger to his lips, he made the universal gesture of silence.

Perhaps because the man, beneath the grime and despite hunger's ravages, was still handsome, perhaps because of that, he inspired a flicker of trust. The girl quieted, and the motorcycle and its rider sped past.

Now they wait for the potatoes and the carrot to soften in the water. Meanwhile, the man licks the wound she gave him. Then he stretches his hand toward the fire, as far as he can without burning himself. Malnourished as he is, an infection would mean death. The antibiotics available on the market have expired and still cost a fortune. Six amoxicillin capsules cost fifty food rations. A food ration is now whatever fits in one hand: a large potato, a small bag of rice.

He says to her: "We must do something about your hair. In this world, beautiful things are dangerous."

She looks at him with her large gray eyes. She must be eleven or twelve, yet her eyes already belong to an adult.

"No," she answers.

He asks again for her name. She remains silent.

They are sheltering in the backyard of a deserted house where he has lived these past weeks. He lit the fire in a corner where two walls meet, sheltered from wind and prying eyes. While he was preparing the fire, she watched every movement. Before that, he reached into his coat for the metal box where he keeps, like a treasure, the flint and steel. The girl had pressed one cheek to the ground to study the arrangement of tinder and wood.

The man holds a knife toward the fire and serves her, on a fragment of a broken flowerpot, two potatoes and half a carrot.

2.

He has named the girl Laura, though he never told her. It is a name he uses when he thinks about her.

In the morning, the safest hour, he roams the ruins of the city in search of anything that might hold value. Each time he leaves her alone in the house, he feels a pull in his chest. His forays grow shorter: he cannot bear the thought of returning to find her gone. He doesn't believe she'll run away. Where to? But he fears what scavengers might do if they find her.

He has given her instructions. She knows not to talk to herself or sing. She knows not to leave the house. She knows where to hide if someone breaks in. As a last resort, he has given her a knife. He made her hold it and showed her where to strike to disable faster: the neck, the stomach, the groin.

The dog-men are the most fearsome of scavengers. These days, most people eat whatever animal they find. But some think long-term. A loyal pack is an investment: it protects, and it hunts.

To pass the time, he teaches the girl old games: jacks, hide-and-seek, and shadow puppets. At night, he begins carving rough chess pieces. He wants to give her a more elaborate game.

One noon, he returns to find she has made a fire, set aside some embers, and laid small potatoes and an onion over them. He explains she must never light a fire during the day, when smoke is easy to spot. He tastes the sweet onion she offers him. Tells her it's delicious; she smiles with pride. Something in him begins to thaw.

"I'm going to call you Laura," he tells her.

"That's not my name."

"We have to call you something."

"It's not my name."

"What's your name?"

A long silence follows. He feels wounded.

3.

His rounds through the city ruins lead him to an old gym. The machines are gone, the weights too—anything that could serve as a weapon or as spare tinder. He finds the loose pedal of a bicycle and slips it into his backpack.

To one side, there is a door. As he approaches, he thinks he hears a liquid sound. He listens. There it is again, the brief noise of moving water. Then silence,

then water again, silence and water, in a rhythmic pattern. He opens the door, trying not to make a sound, and sees the pool.

A naked woman is swimming. The water has gone green. The man thinks the chlorine has been spent. The word "chlorine" triggers a chain reaction in his mind, for in the Old World, he was a chemist. The woman's long black hair, loose and flowing, spreads like a halo on the surface. She swims a calm, economic crawl, gliding far between strokes. At the far edge, she flips underwater like a professional swimmer.

She is now swimming toward him, though she does not see him or she does not care. She reaches the edge, turns, and swims away again. She seems tireless.

Yes. The word "chlorine" has led him to other squares of the periodic table and set the mechanisms of his imagination turning. He thinks that if he could gather the necessary elements—certain metals, certain salts—he could build a galvanic cell to produce electricity.

The woman stops swimming. She stands now in the shallow end, staring at him. Her small breasts are exposed, the wet nipples strangely plastic in texture. Patches of her skin are stained with algae. The man feels fear, though he does not know why. He mutters an apology and leaves. In the room where he found the pedal, he spots a lighter. An old iridescent Zippo. How had he not seen it earlier when he searched the place? His scavenger's eye is trained to miss nothing. He flicks the wheel, and a tall flame blooms. He has found a treasure.

He walks briskly back toward the house and toward the girl, and he has a vision: a small mill on the steppe, far to the North. A river runs behind it, and near the bank stands a small house. In the doorway is the girl, grown. The wind turns the blades of the mill, which turns a shaft that, attached to a gear, feeds energy into a generator. A simple system giving them light at night.

It isn't so hard to build a generator. In this world without fuel or electricity, technological scrap is everywhere. Almost no one knows what to do with it. Only the Engineers or the Mechanics. When the old order collapsed, people realized how few truly understood how things worked—their first principles. Almost no one had learned to grow food or refine fuel: they simply went to the supermarket and took what they needed.

At the house, the girl boils two carrots and serves them in a broth to which she has added a clove of garlic and a pinch of salt. The man eats slowly, forgetting his

hunger: he has turned inward. She watches each of his gestures. When he finishes, he rises and paces to the front door, hands clasped behind his back; she follows him. Something in him, today, draws her in.

The man pulls the lighter from his pocket. He sparks it, watches the flame, thinks of the distant North and of what he might trade for a motorcycle or a horse. What does he have that others don't? He watches the flame consuming, little by little, the fuel. In the New World, there is nothing. Ruins. What the world had always been, except for two brief centuries of light. Some cling to the past; others have already forgotten.

The capacity to forget is essential when there is no future.

Yes—that's it: forgetting.

This world needs oblivion and has none, for the wine brewed by the dog-men and the Moor-men reeks of burning alcohol and sometimes kills, or makes them blind.

The flame quivers at the tip of the lighter. That's it, he thinks. He will build an alembic and make velvet oblivion. Vodka, or sake. He will trade it for a motorcycle or a horse. Then, they will go North.

4.

Over the following weeks, he strips electrical wiring from abandoned houses to collect copper for the still. Most homes still have their wiring: when the power went out, electrical materials lost all value. He thinks the girl's hair is the color of copper, and that this must be a good omen.

The problem is melting the metal. Shaping it is not difficult; one can make molds from sand mixed with clay. He needs a bellows, and to make one, he requires things obtainable only at the market: glue, a gouge, a hand drill, a hinge, screws, a bed leg, a saw, a hole punch.

What will he offer in exchange?

He explains to the girl that he needs her hair. Her precious copper-colored hair, which falls to her waist. She shakes her head. He repeats what he has told her a thousand times: in this world, beautiful things are dangerous, and nothing is more beautiful than her hair. She blushes. He tells her his plan: a horse to carry them to a remote place where they will build a mill. She asks what a mill is.

He picks up a fallen branch and draws in the dirt:

"These are the blades. When the wind blows and turns them, they make energy. The wind will lend us its strength. We'll have light at night. We'll be able to heat things. In the North, the wind never gets tired."

"And my hair—what for?"

The man does not know how to explain. When the world collapsed, the gods returned. Skepticism is a luxury of comfortable times; now there are sects of every kind.

"Some people think your hair is magical and would pay dearly for it."

"Why?"

"Because of its color. That sort of people pays for anything that comes from children."

"Children?"

"Yes. Even more so if it comes from a girl."

"Why?"

Again, the long, difficult answers. He doesn't know how to explain. So, he simply says: "That's how things are."

She agrees. She says she will do it herself. The man gives her the sharpest knife. She withdraws to her room, cuts her hair at ear-length, and gathers it into a bag.

The next day, he goes to the market. Stalls are blankets spread on the ground displaying scant wares. Beyond them stand the priests' tents. He speaks to a guard and enters a tent of red cloth.

Inside is a small wooden table, unlit candles, and feathers stained with blood hanging from strings. On the table rest a piece of quartz and several polished black

stones. Behind them sits a bald middle-aged priest in a tall chair, his robe dingy. Standing beside him is a short man—his secretary, perhaps, or a ceremonial aide?

He shows them the contents of the bag. Says: "Virgin red hair."

"Age?" asks the priest.

"Twelve," the man replies.

The priest's gaze brightens. He asks if he may touch the contents. The man nods. The priest draws out a lock, brings it to his nose, inhales, and closes his eyes. Asks: "What do you want in exchange?"

The man recites the list of tools he needs.

"Difficult things," warns the priest. "The hole punch and the drill are simply impossible."

"I can do without the hole punch, but the drill is non-negotiable," says the man, mustering the firmest voice he can.

"We will have to examine the girl before payment, to be certain," says the secretary.

The priest silences him with a gesture.

"That won't be necessary," he says. "But the price is excessive."

The man takes back the bag. The priest asks for a week to obtain the items. He also says he would be willing to make a generous offer for the girl. The man answers, sharply: "No."

A week later, he returns to the red tent and receives the agreed-upon lot. The saw is rusted. He is astonished that such people surrender so many useful things in exchange for something useless.

As he is about to leave, the priest says: "You have taken part in a vision."

The man stiffens. The priest speaks again: "With gods, one must tread carefully."

5.

His spirits are a success; business flourishes. The house is always infused with the warm, sweet scent of fermenting mash, vaguely reminiscent of olives.

They accumulate furs, grains, empty bottles, combs, and soap; in time, they acquire a pistol and some bullets. They have a chess set, a checkerboard, a good supply of candles, six books, a lantern, a rooster, and hens.

A year later, the man partners with the dog-men, who provide protection and distribute the product in exchange for half the output. Though the man is meticulous about the split, a dog-man envoy still visits from time to time to check the stock. As a reward for his loyalty, they give him a small pack of four dogs: a black German shepherd and three mutts, all males. The dog-men monopolize the females.

The girl asks, now and then, "When will we travel North?" She is attached to the image of the mill. The man is no longer sure life in the North would be better than the one they have. They never lack food. He is respected. Some even fear him.

"A little longer," he answers.

Sometimes he returns to the gym where he saw the woman swimming naked, but he no longer finds her. The pool's water has almost entirely evaporated. What remains reeks of rot. Flies drift above it.

6.

She reaches puberty. She is evasive, and her gait has changed—awkward, as though she might trip over her own legs, now so long. He cannot stop watching her. Most nights, she refuses to play chess. She sits far off in the backyard, staring at the stars. He cannot explain it, but now she frightens him.

One night, he says: "What's going on?"

He takes out the iridescent lighter. Flicks the wheel and keeps the flame alive until the fuel runs out and the flame dies.

"I can't stand this house."

"No!" he answers, anticipating her.

She looks at him with resentment.

"Do we have enough to buy a horse?" she asks.

"No," he lies.

She looks down and laughs.

"Does a horse cost more than a still?"

He walks away without answering. He hears her deep sigh. Doesn't she understand? In the North, it would be just the two of them, in the middle of nowhere, at the mercy of fate. When they had nothing, it seemed like a good plan. Now things are different. They are safe—safe as one can be in this world. She is not his prisoner. Whenever he leaves, the door is left open. She can go whenever she wants.

Ungrateful. She wouldn't survive a day out there. Bringing her had been a mistake.

That week, when he returns from selling vodka at the market, he finds the dogs dejected. Whimpering. The moment he steps into the house, he knows no one is there. When he was a scavenger, he visited many empty houses, and he knows: empty houses breathe differently.

He checks the place anyway. No signs of struggle. He checks the hiding spot where she is supposed to go if the house is attacked. She isn't there. He reviews the inventory of their possessions: nothing is missing. Had she fled, she would have taken the basics needed to survive.

"Laura!" he calls.

Outside, the German shepherd howls, and the others join in.

"Girl!"

His mouth trembles. It is impossible that the dogs would have let someone in without a fight. Or that she would have let herself be taken without one. There would be traces: loose hair, blood, overturned furniture.

Perhaps she went for a walk.

He goes out to search the surrounding streets. He has three hours before sunset. He has a lantern.

But in his heart, a dense, dark feeling rises.

Alan Talevi was born in Buenos Aires in 1980. He holds a PhD in Natural Sciences and a degree in Creative Writing. He has published three short story collections and a novel. He is one of the founders of the Argentine publishing house Salta el Pez.

Alice McRae – 5th Place

Norman Thomson

When Alice McRae's husband, Macklin, shot the pregnant doe out of season in a distant paddock away from their farmhouse, she felt a black rage clenching her heart. He opened the implement shed door and hung the carcass from a rafter, and was unmoved by the steady dripping of blood from the animal's mangled ears and neck.

He kills easily, Alice thinks. For years, I've seen it, hated it, begged him to put the guns away. But he's driven by some primal dread - and how will it ever end? Although she has no pressing fear for her own safety, she worries about the well-being of her wild companion.

One clean October day, she had set her easel in a sheltered corner of a meadow where she readied to paint drifts of wildflowers that bordered the cedar rail fence. She was drawn to a cluster of Michaelmas daisies, lush and exuberant - until their purple hue reminded her of the dark blood stains on the shed floor.

The afternoon sun warmed her arms and face. She was grateful for these pleasant refuges. She suspected Macklin neither knew about their existence, nor could ever appreciate their solace for her. Let him stay close to home, tinker with the tractor, repair some aging equipment, that was enough diversion for him. Nearby stood a massive granite erratic, lichen-stained and etched with glacier cuts. She would try to capture the changing shades of crimson and lime green.

Suddenly, a curious thing happened.

A white wolf walked into the clearing, perhaps forty feet away. It sat on its haunches and looked straight at her. A strange calm stopped Alice in mid-brush stroke. Unafraid, she returned the wolf's gaze. She studied the silvery ruff and elegant sloping head. The wolf's intense candle-flame eyes held her own in gentle enquiry.

"You are a beautiful creature," Alice whispered. Have you lost your way with your pack, or have you come to me by some strange design? The wolf stretched himself full length and gazed on her painting gear. Surely, it's a lucky sign, an omen, your presence here.

The wolf came to her again on several occasions, silent, aloof, curious, reassuring.

She saw him in the nighttime, too, in the field beyond their bedroom window when the moon was pale and waning. She is wary of how the light playing about his shoulders makes him look like a spectral figure, harsh and accusing. One evening, she heard the wolf calling to his distant pack members into the darkness back of the house. She went out onto the porch. The sharp baying and answering cries drove away her gloom and loneliness. Macklin came onto the porch and stood beside her. "They're getting bolder all the time. Coupl'a well-aimed slugs would set them right."

She studies his face. It is knotted in superstition and fear.

Initially, she attributes the wolf's appearance to the ghost of all the animals that her husband has killed in his hunting trips. Now, she relaxes in his company, talks in her mind to him about the wild places he frequents, the peace he finds there. She feels he is part of a mystical balance in keeping her isolation and rage at bay.

One day in midwinter, Alice was walking to a neighbor's house to help comfort a sick child. Snow stretched over the fields like a washed-out pink muffler. In the stillness, she imagines herself the only living creature in the landscape.

Then, a movement on her right draws her attention. On a near rise stands the white wolf. He is watching her, alert, proud, attentive. Bands of sunlight break through a margin of grey hovering cloud and brush coppery stripes along his face and front legs; his bristling flanks gleam like rippling water. His majesty chokes Alice's breath.

Abruptly, the wolf turns and runs full out along the rise. His powerful strides lift him over the light drifts, so that he seems to be flying. His feet shoot forth clots of snow.

He turns and runs back, tail feathering behind him. When he reaches near Alice, he stutter-stops and tosses his head. His mouth gulps open and he sneezes lightly. Does she see there an expression of affection?

Why are you laughing? she says to herself. In sheer joy, is it, or the purity of the day and your own vitality?

Then, the wolf runs toward the woods. His appearance has left her tingling

with awe. A blessing has come on her. The honor of it makes her lightheaded. She walks, enchanted, toward the neighbor's house.

Her attempts to share her wonderment with Macklin end in discord and apprehension.

"I've said it enough. He's dangerous, should be shot," he threatens. "'Fore we know it, he'll be into the barn, slaughtering the calves." He caresses the rifle barrel.

Next midsummer, a cruel drought settles over the land. The fields parch and crack. Rows of corn stalks wither, golden tassels dry and darken. Day follows day under a relentless blue sky. Hard winds from the east blow coppery dust clouds.

As the drought continues, the wolf abruptly disappears. For a week, then a month, he vanishes. He's gone deep into the hills, Alice reasons, to find the secret springs and cool shadows. He's safe there. Her daily routine loses focus and purpose. She has no interest in painting meadow flowers. *Their colors are too dry and brittle*, she tells herself.

One day, Alice is in the barn, tumbling fresh feed into the manger below with a hay fork. Macklin is there, breaking and spreading the clumps.

On impulse, Alice looks into the barnyard. The white wolf is limping along the path to the water pump, heading in their direction. He stops to sniff the hot, sultry air. His appearance startles her. His fur is matted and dull; bits of dry leaves cling to the underside of his tail. His gait is slow and measured. He's injured, unable to hunt, and he's starving. Alice utters an anguished sob.

A cold resolve hardens Macklin's features. He sets his own hay fork against a timber post. His gaze is fixed on the white wolf. "I knew you'd be back, sooner or later. I am waiting. You're not likely to bother us any longer."

He moves cautiously to take up his rifle, leaning against the sideboards of a horse stall. He chambers a shell and snugs the stock against his stubbled cheek. His finger eases along the trigger guard.

Alice wants to scream at him, about an end to primitive fears and killing and the recurring vileness of dried blood on the shed floor. About this terrible cruelty, to love the wolf's wildness and splendor, and suddenly to have those glories torn from her. But her words come in a dry rustle.

Then, without conscious thought, she lowers the hay fork toward Macklin's neck. The gleaming steel tines depress weathered skin. "If you destroy my one beautiful thing, I will give you hurt, in kind." Droplets of blood seep into Macklin's shirt collar.

He hesitates – forever, Alice feels – then slowly eases the rifle to the floorboards.

Dark and bent, he shambles toward the barn door. He does not look back.

The wolf sits nearby, watching him pass. He tilts his head, yawns deeply. No, it's a parting grin, Alice feels.

Trembling, Alice watches her husband approach the implement shed and disappear into the interior shadows. He will bring home another deer next year, she realizes, and the next thereafter. Another cull, always there for him, dripping blood over the wood floor.

She looks along the shed walls and in the yard for her wolf to provide solace for her gnawing disappointment. But he has disappeared. Returned forever to his wild places, his own sanctuary. The abrupt loss of beauty and elegance in her life saddens and diminishes her.

She recalls the gleaming tines of the hay fork over Macklin's neck, shudders that she might have easily stained the barn floor with his blood. She knows too that from here on she is fated to walk in a shadow world, whose only light will come from the springtime flowers she is summoned to paint.

The author lives in Ontario, writes micros for exploration, reads medieval-themed whodunits for pleasure, and riffs blues and Beatles on his Hohner harmonica for entertainment.

Corals In Her Throat – 6th Place

Bhumika Sanjeev

The sea below sloshed against the cliffside with lazy indifference, like it hadn't just swallowed a woman whole. The moonless sky yawned wider. The boys craned their necks, expecting what exactly? A scream? A splash? A bloated body bobbing up like last month's goat that went missing?

Behind the basalt rocks, crouched on the cliff's edge, Rangu and his gang of jobless cousins watched her walk out.

The wind tugged at Paachi's indigo-checked saree, its dripping corners flapping like a warning flag. She had tied it high above her ankles, knotted at the waist with the urgency of someone ready to abandon their body. The cotton was so old it had faded to a weary blue, but the stubborn grid of the checks clung to her body like a fishnet to a thin frame.

She stood still at the edge of the water. Her hair was uncombed as always, black and thick, now drenched. She looked like a half-drowned scarecrow, the tide had forgotten to pull back, arms slightly apart, eyes still fixed on the water like it had whispered secrets no land could hold.

"Spent a full hour underwater. Must've grown gills by now." Rangu muttered, as the boys - Nanju, Bhoja, and Lakka spat betel into the air in unison.

"Maybe she's calling her sea-husband," Bhoja said, grinning.

"Or maybe the sea's her real mother. You seen her belly lately? Bit round, no?" Lakka cut in.

"Paachi's always been 'round in the wrong places," Bhoja added, flinging a stone off the edge. It hit the water with a small slap.

No one laughed. Not even the sea

Paachi worked as the cleaner at the Daivastana on the village's northern edge, the shrine where the spirits of the land were fed, feared, and occasionally heard. She swept the courtyard, scrubbed the stone plinths, and laid out offerings without waiting to be asked. The priests said nothing, and the Daiva's hadn't protested, which in Marigundi counted for more than any job title.

By dawn, the air in Marigundi was bruised like the sea had pressed its cheeks too close to the land. Even the crows were late to screech. At the Daivastana, the first lamps flickered to life under Marakka Ajji's steady hands, her back bent like a question nobody wanted to ask, muttering low and sharp as a tamarind seed underfoot. Paachi came soon after, just as she always did, barefoot, with a damp hem and eyes swollen like she'd cried straight into the sea's lap all night.

She said nothing. But then again, silence had always fit her better than speech. She poured the day's water from a brass pot, scrubbed the temple steps with a fraying coconut husk, and plucked dead flowers from the deity's feet.

"Ajji, did you see that?" Bhanu said quietly, looping a fresh string of Kanakambara through her needle. "She touched her throat like there was a creature trying to come out."

Marakka Ajji didn't look up. "When the sea enters you… it never leaves the way it came, Bhanu."

"Ajji, she's mad, not magical!" Bhanu scoffed.

And just like that, the sea answered.

Paachi stopped mid-sweep. It was the kind of stillness that didn't belong to her, like a marionette whose strings had suddenly been claimed by a different puppeteer. The broom slipped from her hand. Her head slumped forward, chin resting like an afterthought on her collarbone.

Then came the motion. A grind, slow and deliberate, as though her jaw had become a pestle, crushing invisible salt rocks. Her throat tightened. Flexed. Something moved inside. She opened her mouth to pour, not speak.

Three pale red stones slid out, one after the other. Wet, round, veined like something that had once been alive. They struck the temple floor with soft, deliberate clicks.

Corals.

The kind torn from sea beds after storm tides. The kind fishermen knotted into their nets for luck.

The kind girls weren't meant to touch, let alone carry inside their mouths.

No one moved.

Not Bhanu, her needle mid-air. Not Marakka Ajji, who finally looked up, not startled, just weary. Like she'd seen this before, in another woman, in another lifetime.

Not even Paachi.

Then, quietly, she gathered them. Wiped them on the corner of her pallu. Tied them into a tight knot, neat and hidden. And went back to sweeping, as if the sea hadn't spoken at all.

By evening, the temple tiles had dried, but the talk was just beginning.

In Marigundi, gossip didn't spread; it spawned. Like monsoon frogs, slick-bellied, loud-throated, born in gutters, multiplying in temples...and mouths.

The corals hadn't even cooled in Paachi's pallu when the milk-seller's daughter whispered it to the pickle-seller's niece, who slipped it into her grandfather's ear just as he was gutting a mackerel. By the time the news reached the toddy shop near the estuary, where Marigundi's elder men gathered like barnacles every day to drink, decide, and dissolve into slurred philosophies, the truth had already drowned and been reborn at least three times.

"Three corals, I swear! Red as goat's blood, and hot enough to steam."

"Hot? Ayyo, they say she vomited a dozen! A whole reef!"

"Tch, tch. All this started after her husband disappeared, no? That fisherman, Sanna. Vanished into the sea one Amavasya night. Took his boat out past the sandbars and never returned. Not even a broken oar."

"And her? Every Amavasya, I tell you, like clockwork, before even the birds stir, she walks straight into the sea. No towel, no prayer, nothing. Just goes in. Comes back dripping like a caught fish, leaving those wet footprints all the way to the temple."

"Ask Nanju. My boy saw her just last night. Said she stood waist-deep for so long, the tide changed its mind."

By the time the sun bled its last red into the mudflats, the toddy shop was thick with the stink of fermented palm and sweat. The men had drunk enough to feel like gods and fools in equal measure. They thumped their brass tumblers, scratched the underbellies of their lungis, and cursed the monsoon for being too late and the government for being too early, and Paachi, just for being.

Rangu sat in the corner like a coiled rope, chewing the edge of a betel stem, letting the red juice pool under his tongue. He said nothing. Just listened, eyes half-

lidded, ears sharp as fishhooks. He let the others croak and cluck like backyard hens before the storm. Let the story ferment in his gut like the toddy. Let the hate find its shape.

By the time the fourth pour hit the table, he had already decided what needed to be done.

Rangu didn't say a word on the walk back. Just kept chewing the inside of his cheek, gaze fixed ahead like the path owed him something. The others followed. They didn't need instructions. They knew where to go. The same old place they always met when something needed plotting. In Nanju's father's old poultry shed. The place smelled of dried blood and feathers, long emptied of chickens but not of their memory.

Nanju crouched on an upturned poultry crate, gnawing a matchstick. Bhoja was scraping ritual symbols into the dirt with a broken lice comb. Lakka was flicking off the scabs on his ankle like dead insects into the shadows.

"Enough," Rangu said. "She's not just strange anymore. She's a problem. You saw what she spat out? What next, snakes from her ears?"

Bhoja gave a short laugh. "Or coral babies. All red and squishy."

"Tonight, she goes back." Rangu stood. The charpoy creaked behind him.

They waited until the village exhaled, that breathless hour after midnight when even the stray dogs refused to bark, and the mangroves stood like sentinels holding their tongues. Then, one by one, they moved: four silhouettes slipping through the dark like guilt in human form.

Paachi's hut was a leaning thing. It reeked of neem smoke, old brine, and something vaguely medicinal. Rangu didn't knock. He slapped the door open with his heel, and the dark spilled in.

There she was, curled on the floor, hair splayed like seaweed on the mat. Her breath was thin. She didn't rise. Didn't ask. Just looked through them, like worse things had come crawling in before.

"You want the sea?" Rangu said, stepping over a split coconut husk. "Let it keep you."

They hauled her up, rough and hesitant. Bhoja carried the lamp, its flame hiccupping in the wind, casting their shadows long and deformed across the coastal

path. They passed the old banyan stump. The place where crows came to die. Her feet smeared the mud behind them. Her silence dragged heavier than protest.

Then, she collapsed.

Not a stumble. Not quite a fall. More like the earth had flinched. Or she had been refused by it. Her limbs folded in on themselves, trembling. From her throat came a sound, thick and guttural, as if a conch were being blown underwater.

"She's foaming…what is that?" Lakka whispered, stumbling back.

"Not foam," Nanju said. "It's... water."

From her ears, salt trickled. Not blood, not pus, but saltwater, steady and shining. Her skin rippled, blistering in odd patterns, as if the sea were remembering itself through her.

Between her legs, something unfurled. Slick. Pulsing. Her hands clawed at her stomach, her breath turning raw, ragged like something was tunneling out of her.

"She's in labor," Bhoja choked. "Sweet god, she's birthing."

For one long, unreasonable second, the four boys just stared as if one of them might snort and say it was all a prank, a drunken fever-dream dragged too far. But the air said otherwise. It hung heavy and wet

"Get Marakka Ajji," he shouted over his shoulder.

The bravado they wore like a second skin melted, leaving four trembling boys who suddenly remembered they were mortal.

It had been seven days since the baby was born. Glassine, blue-lidded, too quiet for comfort. It came early, but not small. Its limbs were long, knotted like driftwood, and its eyes… too still.

Paachi hadn't left her hut since. Ash clung to the walls like soot on memory; the oil lamp burned day and night, bloated on ghee and camphor. But the village felt it anyway, the child's presence, thick in the air.

The sea had stopped offering its usual gifts. The fishing boats returned empty, or worse. One net came up full of eels knotted like umbilical cords. Another held a cracked mirror with barnacles for eyes. Someone swore they saw a goat skull tangled in seaweed, grinning.

People stopped whispering Paachi's name. Not out of mercy, but fear, like naming her would let the thing she carried hear you back.

By the eighth evening, the village could take no more. They gathered beneath the ghost tree, the old peepal at the center of Marigundi, its bark still blackened from the lightning strike years prior. It stood crooked and solemn, a reminder of years when the land turned against them.

Everyone came. Fishwives, toddy-bloated uncles, boys who hadn't dared to spit betel near the shoreline in days. Even the priest came, silent, eyes ringed red like he'd stopped dreaming.

"She's cursed the sea," someone whispered.

"No," another said. "That thing she brought back did."

A third voice, cracked with age but sharp as a blade, sliced through the murmurs: "At dawn, we burn the hut. The child goes with it. Fire's the only thing that can dry what salt and shadow have soaked."

No one argued. Only slow nods. A long, rattled exhale like something rotten had finally been spat from the village's throat.

Evening. The last lamp at the Daivastana stuttered and died as Marakka Ajji bolted the temple doors. Bhanu sat on the stone step, picking wilted jasmine from the offering tray, pressing each shriveled petal flat between her thumb and forefinger, like she could undo their decay.

"Tragic," Bhanu murmured, not looking up. "But it had to be done."

Ajji turned. "What had to be done?"

Bhanu hesitated, still working the petals into pulp. "They've all decided, Ajji. The child's not right. The sea's been angry ever since he came. No fish. No breeze. So… tomorrow. At dawn. They'll burn the hut. She won't feel a thing. Just smoke, that's all."

She found Paachi's door unlatched. Inside, the child lay swaddled in a damp fishing net, eyes glinting like something pulled from deep water. Paachi sat beside him, still. Waiting.

"They're coming for you," Ajji said, voice low and steady. "Come morning, there will be fire. For you. For the baby."

Paachi didn't speak. Her eyes weren't afraid, just hollow, scraped clean of feeling. She didn't ask who had come, or why. She didn't cry. Didn't curse. She only drew the child closer.

That night, while the village slept with its fists clenched and curtains drawn, she stepped out, barefoot, silent, the baby pressed tight to her chest. Her saree trailed behind her like something she no longer needed.

Only the sea stirred and parted. It had always returned her before, those countless Amavasya dawns when she walked in waist-deep, and came back dripping, quiet, whole.

But not tonight. Tonight, the sea made way.

And she walked in.

The sea didn't come like a wave. It came like a verdict. No roar, no thunder, just a wall of salt-black silence swallowing Marigundi whole before the roosters could cry. The kerosene they had saved to burn her seeped from the upturned cans, ribboning into the sea, a trail of guilt the tide carried home. Fish flailed. Some called it a curse. Others, justice.

But everyone agreed: the sea had come to collect what was owed. For Paachi. For the child who never cried, born too early and too strange. They say she didn't drown; she was taken, folded back into the ocean like a secret the land was never meant to hold.

Only the tide remained, smooth as a sealed mouth. Watching. Waiting. And in its depths, they say she still drifts, the woman with a lullaby in her bones and corals in her throat.

At dawn, when the waters finally thinned, the only thing on the shore was a single pale-red coral, smooth, warm, and pulsing faintly, as if remembering the mouth it once grew in.

At 19, **Bhumika Sanjeev** is already a poet and writer from Bengaluru with a growing trail of publications and the Utkarsh Poetry Fellowship by the Bangalore Poetry Festival to show for it. When not scribbling in notebooks, Bhumika can be found people-watching, drifting into improbable daydreams, or getting lost in stories that refuse to stay ordinary.

Tadpoles – 7th Place

Laura Trapletti

The wind sprung up like a song in the dry flatness of East Eden County. It stayed for a while, lingering around the corners of the fields like an underworked farm hand before moving onto better ventures towards the coast. Perhaps it would find fresher luck there – or at least, friendlier company.

The cows bellowed when the heat settled back in, and clouds scuttled across a sky too wide to be anything but the underside of God's own hand. Flies buzzed around a pool of stagnant water up along the crop-side of the faded red barn, and young Juli Walters poked at the tadpoles within.

Scum floated along the rim of this puddle, pressed into service to birth a thousand tiny eggs by some desperate bullfrog that had long since abandoned her young to the fresh rigors of farm life on an earth riddled with heat and dead ozone. With a stick, the young girl twirled whirlpools into the murk.

A wiry young man came around the corner in denim a generation past their due date and a rag tied around his head. "Whatcha got there, Juli Bug?"

"Look." She pointed and stood back to reveal her prize: a muddy puddle and a thousand, wiggling, writhing tadpoles. A long-expired metal tap – rusted maroon and wheezing – hung over the pool.

The young man peered down, bushy eyebrows raised in the universal adult expression of shock and interest. Until…until he tracked the harried movements inside the puddle and realized just what a prize he was looking at.

He whooped unexpectedly and tussled the young girl's hair; messy braids disintegrated into tangles under the onslaught of a calloused hand. A bright feeling, perhaps joy or perhaps faith, permeated the sun-burnt face of Juli Walter's elder brother.

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"Wonder what they taste like." Claude gnawed lazily on his oft-chewed strip of rawhide and scratched his balding head. Sweat made a pathway down his temple, and

the man wiped at the glittering green fly hitching a ride on a sore weeping from his elbow.

"Ain't seen these, since, cheez, when I was a kid?" Bran mumbled, squatting low and leaning over the puddle. Wrinkled eyes squinted at the murk like it lied about who stole the last canteen of water. In the shadow of his body, the tiny, harried larvae swam back and forth, attacking the slime of mosquito eggs.

The puddle edges cracked like parched lips, having shrunk overnight since Juli Walters found her prized possession the day before.

Tadpoles. A new and glorious thing.

"You can' eat them!" Juli sulked and glared at the older man. Her patched dress hung about her knees, tired and limp in the morning glare. The sun walked itself between the lines of crops and shook out heat like a wet dog.

"You ever seen a frog before, Juli Bug?" Claude asked, scratching at his head. "Warty, slimy creature — you know? Making noise… like a cricket?"

"What's a cricket?" The girl asked, her gaze no less soft for the distraction of another extinct animal. Gone before her time, but what is time to a young girl on the cusp of a crop field in the dry flatness of East Eden County?

"We gotta save'em." Walter Walters Jr. whispered into the dusty air.

Juli Walters looked up at her brother and nodded with the solemn determination of a pastor discovering sin.

"We gotta save the 'poles."

***

Juli peered at the knobby-kneed steer as it lounged against the fence. It peered back at her with rheumy eyes that blinked away a gnat. Its horns had been cut; a reminder of something magnificent removed for efficiency. Hot air squatted over the pasture with the narrow-eyed spite of a schoolyard bully who knows you are up to something illicit.

"What Pa don' know, won't hurt him." Walter Jr. hefted a worn plastic bucket filled to the brim with his and Bran's daily water allowance. Thousands of tiny,

greenish bodies darted about within. They fluttered about in the clean water, curious and innocent.

Sweat dripped down Walter's nose and dropped into the bucket.

"Pa knows everything," Juli mumbled and clutched at a clear glass jar with its muddy water and three handfuls of tadpoles. She stared at the paddock she had never seen, at a fence she never climbed, and then understood the temptation of the forbidden. Although, the devil never seemed so practical in the stories.

The cows were clustered by the empty feeding troughs, the dry grass bitten down to the dusty soil. Bovine gazes, watched the pair impassively with mangy hides and swishing tails. Flies buzzed around in a traitorous chorus.

"We gotta cross it," Walter encouraged. "The trees are on the other side."

This was their quest. Like in Ma's old stories back when Ma still lived on earth instead of under it. Bran had explained it, in the quiet way Bran explained most things. Nothing survived long in the sun; the tadpoles needed to be moved somewhere with shades and coolness, with trees and birdsong.

Juli licked her cracked lips and clutched at her jar of tadpoles. She did not know the sound of birds.

Tadpoles grew into frogs. Frogs needed a big pond of water, not a little puddle on the crop side of the barn. *The only frog-water left*, Bran had held her hand as he told her, *was in the government zone*. The woods lurked behind the razor-fence; the high metal barrier a stiff warning to her and her family to stay away. No one went in there.

Walter carefully unlocked the fence – his slick fingers pressed buttons with faded numbers. With a nod of his head, Juli slipped past his legs and into the field. She kicked at the dust with her bare toes. It scattered, afraid of her.

Walter closed the gate and lugged his baleful of tadpoles in wiry sunburnt arms. He headed straight across the field without looking back. Juli followed.

***

The pasture rolled out from the fence line in a flat carpet of brittle, golden grass. It swiped with uncalled-for malfeasance at Juli's bare ankles, insulted that she carried a jar of water not for the parched earth but rather for a collection of slimy,

thoughtless amphibians. There was no reprieve from the sun or the heat, other than the occasional pitying cloud.

Pebbles dug into their feet as they trekked across the empty pasture, heading north.

Walter's shoulders ached, his arms pulled earthwards by the heavy, unyielding bucket. He panted through his dry lips.

Not even a breeze skipped alongside them to rustle the faded grass, too dry to be edible for the cattle. No rain in almost a year now, and not enough underground to be worth it this far out. The crops were better off with the reserves, and the cows huddled by the fence line in search of a forgotten thing called shade.

The siblings trudged with heat-soaked determination.

Walter rarely came out this deep afield, but he knew on the far north-side of the property was the government line. It was a patch of woodland protected and guarded by a razor fence – thin twisted metal linked together like fish scales – that stretched for silent miles and bordered on the old, unused interstate road.

He also knew, like all good East Eden boys, that there was a thin gap in the fence, where a boy could take his girl for a night under the stars. Of course, no one went there in the daytime – boys disappeared for less than breaking into areas protected by guards with dogs and guns. But there was no way Juli and he were breaking out at night, feeling their blind way in the dark with a jar and a bucket of tadpoles.

Walter Walters Jr. knew vaguely of the blue pond in the center of the wood. He knew it was there like he knew God was there – through the murmured whispers of a preacher and a friend who swore with a trembling hand and a tear in their eye that they had seen it, just once, on their mama's grave, they had seen it.

So, they went. And as the north boundary of Pa's farm came into hazy view, Walter heard the first erratic honking of a truck.

Juli twisted her body around and squinted into the heat haze above grass, seeking out the source of the noise. Something related to a breeze kicked up, not more than a poor joke, and rustled the thin stalks into laughter. They had been caught.

The honking grew louder. So did the harried, angry call of their names.

"Juli – we gotta run now!" Although Walter did not know how his thin legs would run and keep enough water in the bucket. But if Pa caught them, he knew the whipping would be bad, and the tadpoles would be dead. The water lugged back to the farm for the animals.

Juli sprinted ahead, one palm plastered to the round opening of the jar, her tiny legs moving snake-strike fast as she bolted towards the property line. Heaving the bucket as close to his chest as possible, Walter followed suit and called out to whatever deity might happen to glance their way that he remembered where the hole in the fence was.

***

Juli blinked under the blue shade of the tree. Her face was red with exhaustion. With careful steps, she tentatively ducked forward under the arch of a recently fallen branch; the drone of insects buzzed warily the crown of her head.

She clutched the jar between her damp palms.

Walter set his bucket down in a hollow between thick, curling roots. He panted, hands on his knees. His chest hurt with wheezing as he sucked air into his burning lungs.

That run cleared them out of everything but sweat and a thundering heart.

Below them both, in the curve at the bottom of a short incline, was a pond. A glorious, greenish-blue bowl of unpolluted water.

Juli stared at the dappled reflection of the trees and the long, white fingers of clouds. The pensive stillness of the pond was the last moment of a prayer, waiting for God to answer.

Juli thought, this was the answer.

"The tadpoles go in there," Walter gasped and wiped at the dirt-painted column of his throat. The rag had not seen soap since the start of the century and clung to existence with the same dogged determination of the farmers of East Eden County. The ghostly fingers of exhaustion trembled in Walter's arms and shoulders. They did not have long now, with Pa on their trail.

"Go on, Juli Bug," Walter encouraged his youngest surviving sibling.

She picked her way down the slope, toes digging into the cool, forbidden soil. The water sloshed in the jar with her canted movements. Her braids hung limply down her bony back, all of her soiled with dirt.

Walter forced himself to pick up the bucket again, and the pail dug into the callouses of his hands without mercy. His fingers throbbed. But Walter knew, the tadpoles were the only chance they got. It was now, or it was never.

The world wasn't like it was when Pa was a child. The barrenness was a creeping thing that edged up from the south and the west, a dry plague of sand and heat that bludgeoned the soil and the people into submission. Walter Walters Jr knew what was coming, or rather, what wasn't coming anymore.

Juli squatted down in the mud – mud! – by the curved edge of the pond. She dipped a finger into the water like it were silver. Ripples laughed their way over the surface until they, too, quieted back into midday sleep. Juli's head whipped around at the sound of a rustle in the trees.

Brother and sister stopped, bodies tense and resolute, poised to run the last exhausted dash to the pond. Instead, a small gray bird whistled. It chirped, followed by a long curling note; a curious high sound that broke the silence of the small, protected wood worse than a gunshot.

The bird busied itself along a thin branch, fluttered its wings, and cocked its small head. A beady black eye watched the two gangly strangers.

Juli wanted to burst with joy.

A *bird.*

"Juli – now." Walter hissed, swinging the bucket from where it sunk into the ground to the pond edge. A new fear rose in his chest, and he kept his voice low.

Small leaves grew along the water, unfurling like a baby's fist. The air was vegetal and thick. The bird sang behind him, and the woodsy-silence grew round – soft and fragile. Trees watched on with lazy interest.

Juli held her jar close to her chest and sniffled. "But the 'poles…"

"The tadpoles gotta go in the water, Juli Bug. They can live a long life in there."

Silently, she shook her head. “Can I stay here with’em?”

Walter shook his head. “Juli, the tadpoles gotta stay here, and we gotta go back. We gotta go back to Pa and the red barn. The cows. Bran and Claude.”

“What if I want t’ be a frog too?” She asked, but her gaze followed the movements of the tadpoles swimming in her jar. The erratic, unhurried movements of a dozen amphibious creatures uncaring about the human world disappearing around them. “If I stay here, maybe I can turn into a frog too?”

“Juli, I’m afraid that isn’t how it works. People are people, they only grow taller. Tadpoles are special; they grow legs and big eyes and become frogs. People don’ become frogs.”

“Oh.” She sniffled.

The siblings squatted in silence again and watched the small creatures in their care.

“On the count of three, we gonna let them all go into the pond.” Walter encouraged and scooted his bucket closer to the edge. Ripples fanned out and jerked the sky’s reflection into a collection of trembling colors.

“One.” Walter said and tipped his bucket ever so slightly. The bird sang again.

“Two.” Juli took a deep breath and stepped barefoot into the water. The mud squelched between her toes, soft and pure.

“Three.” They said together and poured out tadpoles into the clean, blue pond. Dozens of brown bodies burst into action, following an instinct older than worship.

Home at last.

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Kadal: A Marine Ballet – 8th Place

Julia Esther Jacob

God punched her. She collapsed backwards onto the dirt floor, head bouncing off the ground for a second before reality awakened. Crust in her eyes frayed apart as she stretched her lids open. Moonlight percolated through the braided straw roof veiling the dark space in a silver cast. She heard the ocean; the tide was turning.

She placed a leathery arm over the faded, lumpy pillow, buttressing her head, wondering why his parents had named him Eswaran—God. God indeed. That despicable, good-for-nothing man was an albatross.

Poomagal stroked her lower jaw, her tongue traversing the gummy crater where a molar once was. A void borne out of the fissure between her and her God. Eswaran. She suppressed a laugh as she lay in the shadows. God of Hell was more like it.

Reverberations of waves washing over the beach transported her from liminal visions that unfolded in her dreams to the wee hours, rousing her before the morning sun's blush infused the heavens. She switched on the sallow light switch, clicking it on and off a few times. Power outages were becoming frequent and unpredictable. A single globe hung from a bamboo rafter, dark and still.

Flicking on her old flashlight and placing it on a small table, she moved in the triangular swathe of light, picking up a cloudy bottle filled with pungent kerosene, that long replaced the offensive country hooch it once used to hold. Taking the small, tarnished brass lamp, a treasure that had passed from her great-grandmother through her grandmother to her beloved mother, she twisted the lid and poured a tiny measure of kerosene into it. She screwed tight the rusty lid and lit the wick with a matchstick from a flimsy matchbox with only a couple remaining.

Blackened bricks served as a makeshift stove under which she lit some twigs and dried palm fronds to make a fire. Soon, the smell of thick, strong coffee permeated the hut. She liked pepper and jaggery in her brew, the spice stirring her body and spirit to the day ahead.

Holding the glass tumbler by the rim, she stepped outside the mud shack with her steaming coffee, gazing at the silvery reflection glinting off the dark waters. These moments were precious. The stillness of the world on some days is unsettled by the sounds of the capricious weather, the wind and waves howling in unison. Today, though, it was the sound of churning thoughts that plunged her into the archives of

her memories, bursting with the chatter of her ancestors, women who were exemplars of their generations.

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Rakkamma applied oil on her daughter's hair, raking her fingers through the thick curly hair, separating the strands till they gleamed, redolent with the scent of coconut palms.

"*Amma*, do I need to go? I am scared. I don't know how long I can hold my breath." Poomagal turned to look at her mother, who had started braiding her hair into two tight plaits.

"*Chellakutty*, my dear child. Don't worry, *Amma* will be right beside you. Do you know I was only seven years old when I first started diving? My mother, your *Aachi*, taught me how to collect seaweed."

"But *Amma,* I don't want to be a seaweed diver."

"Child, this is our destiny," Rakkamma proclaimed while holding her daughter close, strong, dark arms around her slender waist.

"My mother, and her mother before her, all collected seaweed for a living. Now you will carry on the tradition of our family and this community. The land and the sea belong to us, and we belong to them. We are simply custodians who look after it for the generations who will come after us."

Poomagal gripped her *Amma*'s hands, gleaning an invisible resolve from her mother's warmth, as they both looked out at the ocean, saying a silent prayer to their *Kadal Matha*, the Goddess of the Sea, to keep them safe.

Holding her small hands, Rakkamma led a reluctant Poomagal across the warm sands, sinking under the soles of their feet, mother and daughter trudging towards the shimmering waters surrounding the coast.

***

Subtle changes in the light and whispers of the wind told her it would soon be time to head out. Eswaran's shadow lurked in the corner: a faded, red Emirates airline jersey and pilled grey trackpants. The other women divers had once asked if she wasn't afraid to wear his clothes. The very act of owning something that belonged to him was sweet retribution, defiance against a man who once pummeled her for daring to ask if she could buy a sari to attend a wedding, the beating so savage, she had been unable to open her eyes for days afterwards.

Pulling on the trackpants, she traced her finger over the keloid scar that hid below her droopy stomach pouch, tucked the jersey in, and pulled the drawstring tight, securing it with a double knot. Wearing his avatar surprisingly imbued her with inexplicable determination and courage—by stepping into his clothes, she buried his spirit, overpowering it with hers. He no longer imprisoned her in her home and body—she had snatched back her freedom and her identity she once thought was lost forever.

She made a cup of black tea and dipped the bottom half of a rusk into the piping hot liquid, popping the saturated bread into her mouth where it disintegrated into the cushiony receptacle, blowing air back and forth through her open mouth to cool down the morsel. The few rusks she had now would stave off hunger till late afternoon, when she could finally have a feed. While others would bring a more substantial lunch, hers was usually some rice, dried fish, and a mango pickle condiment for her simple but satisfying meal. Packing her steel lunchbox, a plastic bottle of warm water, and a spare change of clothes in a satchel, she locked the door and lumbered out to where the rest of the group would be waiting.

Sounds of water lapping against the hull, accompanied by the cawing of swooping crows and the tittering of her crew, were sounds that invoked purpose and brought succor to her turbulent thoughts. The now familiar cacophony assuaged her about the future and how much she would be able to earn after a long slog of a day. Rising temperatures forced them to go farther and deeper into the ocean to fill their bags and their stomachs.

It was only the four of them today, and the motorboat driver, Maruthan, who was an experienced mariner and fisherman—the fifth one was taking a few days off as her daughter had come home from college for a short break. She wanted to spend time with her daughter and make her favorite sardine curry for her.

"Someone is sad because her friend is not here today," Suganthi teased Poomagal, who tried to remain reserved even as her heart filled with joy. Every single woman there was a testament to the tenacity and grit of the feminine lifeforce in the face of tremendous personal struggles and a life of drudgery. They all had a story to tell but refused to let it define them—or break them.

After the incident, which now seemed like a long time ago, they had rallied around her, forming a carapace like the sea creatures that dotted the beach, protecting her, shielding her from meddling neighbors and a formal inquiry.

They climbed in with their belongings, diving accoutrements, and a few jerry cans of drinking water. Two of them pushed the motorboat standing in the shallow end and jumped in like a pair of dolphins as soon as Maruthan revved the engine and set off.

Pink-hued clouds illuminated the skies, saturating them with a golden glow as the boat rose and fell with the ebb and flow of the waves. It would take anywhere between forty minutes to an hour to reach their destination. An intimate silence enveloped the group, each nomadic in their thoughts. Suganthi fished out a battered old flask from her bag, unscrewed the lid, which also served as a cup, and poured out sugary, black tea, lightly spiced with pounded cardamom. The delicate, spicy aroma swam into their senses as they passed around the cup of sweet tea.

Palm trees and a stretch of sand, magnified from a blip in their field of view to a lush, tropical paradise home only to flora and fauna like turtles, wild pigs, water birds, crabs, and other native species.

"How long will this place remain untouched from the greed of man? They don't understand how sacred the ocean is for us," Poomagal pondered about the future of her people. She had heard rumors about a large American corporation that wanted to employ the local fishing communities in their factories, which would process and package seaweed and dried fish for export. Local politicians who would otherwise never step foot on their shores now arrived in hordes, representing various parties, all in a bid to persuade them of the merits of allowing commercial production of seaweed from the Gulf of Mannar.

The women prepared themselves by donning their homemade goggles and sheathing each finger with cloth bandages, securing it with neon rubber bands. Other than Poomagal, all other women wore saris over which they wore a T-shirt or a half-sleeved shirt. Their harvest bags were tied around them, and the ends of their saris tucked into their waistbands.

Perhaps knowing that their children would be one with the ocean, their mothers gave these women who smelt of the sea and salt and sand, names that were motifs of the oceanic milieu.

Suganthi, which meant fragrant, was a sweet welcome in the mornings with her ready smile and flask of aromatic tea. Thendral, meaning cool breeze, and Pavizham, named after the coral that bloomed amber seaweed, were the other two in the group. Daughter of a flower, Poomagal, was the oldest of the lot and looked upon as a quiet

beacon of wisdom and fortitude. The others were in their forties while she was nearly fifty-four.

They held their breaths and dove into the cold waters as the dusty-rose aurora of dawn morphed into a vivid yellow and orange horizon glittering over the turquoise surface. Dancing forests of golden-brown strands of seaweed waved over the corals, which were often more than 12 feet under the surface. Each dive could last up to a few minutes, requiring them to hold their breaths the entire time—a skill they had mastered by the time they were seven or eight.

As the women swam around like mermaids, their wrists and ankles twinkled with metallic bangles and anklets. Some of them had saved enough to buy themselves a single precious, slim gold bangle. Pavizham had got hers inlaid with pinkish-orange coral.

They worked in unison, swaying in the waters, sea nymphs—like the shimmying seaweed they scraped off the sharp coral reefs. Each woman worked hard in the hopes of harvesting at least five kilos of seaweed that could be sold to local traders. It was dangerous work. The mysterious reefs could be treacherous, the rocky terrain with the sharp edges and rough surfaces could batter and bruise bodies, already softened from hours submerged in the water.

Then, there were the hidden perils such as arrays of stingers and jellyfish whose venom could not just be poisonous, but sometimes deadly.

When they were enveloped by soft green ribbons swaying around them, seaweed forests hugging them with their long, delicate limbs in a marine ballet, all threats dissolved, leaving them suspended in an oyster of pelagic enchantment.

After a few hours, the women signaled to each other underwater that it was time for a break. Clambering up the boat, Thendral pulled up the anchor, and Maruthan set sail for the shores. Wading through the shallow end of the beach from the moored boat, they walked a few feet in and lay on the coarse sand, letting the water drip off their weary, wrinkled bodies. Suganthi passed around her flask of tea, which tasted exquisite on their parched tongues. Pavizham had bought a bunch of lady finger bananas to share while Poomagal opened a newspaper-wrapped pouch of roasted unskinned peanuts, slightly salty from the sand it was roasted in.

Sure enough, the discussion turned into some harmless village gossip while Poomagal decided to lie down for a while. Shielding her face with her arms, she breathed in the tropical air and shut her eyes.

Moments earlier, she had been protecting her eyes from the sun, which, like a premonition, got consumed by hazy clouds that roiled above her. The coarse, gritty sand on her arms became cold, giving her gooseflesh. She entered a desolate gloaming, feeling disembodied. The light behind her eyelids turned dark and broody. Struggling to find a footing in the quicksand, she looked around the silent, forbidding terrain. The skies had transformed into a somber, cloudy expanse, and in the distance, she saw him—a speck that became larger as it staggered toward her through the grey dunes, with bloody-shot eyes and a sour smell of stale alcohol. Eswaran appeared before her, evil emanating from his pores.

She tried to move away from him. Crawling backwards on her hands and legs till she could get some purchase on the sand. Her legs were trembling when she stood up, but fear propelled her forward. He grabbed her hand, which she flung away like a pestilence.

Screaming she weaved through the dunes, lurching forward trying to escape his wrath. Panting heavily, she rushed into their mud hut with Eswaran right behind her in a drunken fury. She retreated backwards as he loomed over her and tugged at her sari. She screamed, louder than the storm outside, becoming a creature borne of the coast and the sea. A sharp kick at his ankles sent him teetering backwards. He cussed at her and tried to steady himself up. Taking the opportunity, she took the aluminum rice pot and swung it to the side of his head, dropping him to the floor. His body lay motionless. Relief washed over her as her pounding heart was hushed by the sounds of the ocean. She had survived the devil.

What may have been mere minutes felt like an eternity as she stared at his unmoving body lying twisted on the ground. When it seemed like all hope had faded, her Goddess appeared at the door. Bhagvathy, which literally translated to Mother Goddess, entered the threshold.

"Are you okay?" the beautiful brown woman enquired.

"I saw him chasing you and decided to follow you." She looked at Eswaran's body and asked, "Is he dead?"

"I don't know, but I hope the bastard is."

Poomagal knew Bhagvathy from the small tea stall she operated on the beach when she first came to the fishing village some years ago, before joining the women in their diving expeditions. She had come to their community with a teenage daughter in tow. No one knew her history, except that she did not have a husband. She was

private and hardworking and quickly became a recognized face in the community with her lovely countenance and gracious nature.

Bhagvathy placed a finger under Eswaran's nose, looked at Poomagal, and shook her head.

"Come on, help me with him. We don't have time to waste."

Together, they dragged his leaden body across the sands and to a spot by the shores shielded by a thick boscage of palms. Kadal Matha accepted their offering.

When his bloated body washed ashore after a week, pecked and eaten by birds and fish, not much was left of his face where the cooking pot had struck him. The police conducted a perfunctory investigation and concluded it was a death due to misadventure. In other words, a drunken man who had fallen asleep on the shore and drowned in the high tide.

"Poomagal. Poomagal, wake up! Are you going to sleep all day?" Pavizham's voice rescued her from her ordeal.

As she tramped her way to the boat, she placed her hand into her pants and felt the scar. Any chord of guilt she ever felt was erased the second her fingers sensed the scar.

He had beaten her and kicked her in the belly when she was eight months pregnant. Despite the doctors' efforts, the emergency C-section could not save her daughter. The trauma to her stomach was so significant she was told she would never be able to bear children again.

When she dove into the cold waters, her memories of that day washed away like the grains of sand that clung to her body. Pain and rage that cleaved to her like a specter were extinguished by the deluge, as she plunged deep into the womb of the ocean.

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The following evening, she was busy cooking rice gruel for her dinner when she heard a knock. Bhagvathy smiled and stepped in through the open door. A frisson passed through her, and she felt a tingling sensation in her belly.

"I thought I would join you for dinner. Brought you some sardine curry."

When Poomagal turned to fetch a second bowl, she felt her goddess wrap her arms around her soft stomach, fingers trailing under the waistband until they rested

on the ropy scar. Bhagvathy moved Poomagal's greying hair aside, stroking her neck as she did so, kissing her ever so slightly on the collarbone.

Julia Esther Jacob is a writer and poet drawn to stories that shape the human condition. Her work is forthcoming in *Usawa Literary Review* and a 2026 short fiction anthology. Alongside writing, she volunteers for charities that focus on the welfare of street animals, children's education, and mental health programs.

There is an itch under my skin. Standing under the flickering fluorescent lights in aisle six of the grocery store, I have to decide between brands of beans. Absently, I scratch my arm, pushing up the gauzy sleeve. White lines trail like jet streams in the wake of my nails.

I can hear the buzz, buzz, buzzing, of the overhead lights. The electricity running to the fridges through fibrous plastic-capped tunnels. The air conditioning rattles in the vents, warming by the time it comes within my orbit. The freezers cooling the ice cream would be a better relief in the high summer heat.

And for a moment, I think about it – opening the supermarket freezer door and stepping into the cool polar bear habitat. Hand on the silver handle, I pull it open. Warm and cold air collide, mist and fog rolling against my bare calves and open-toed shoes. The ice cream calls to me, but I don't recognize the sound anymore. It's a call that grates and crackles like melting frost.

Closing the door, the fog presses against the glass, the condensation collecting and rolling in small rivers. The cold fades and is replaced by the thin sheen of sweat. My hands are slick against the cart handle as I make my way down the aisle.

The itch continues, crawling under my skin like maggots. They crawl up my arms and into my shoulders, sending shivers down my spine and nails along my skin.

A stranger in my own flesh, a wolf wearing someone else's skin to blend in. Sheep surround me, bleating and squeaking, pushing carts in even lines. They shuffle forward, saying the same thing over and over and over again.

"Hello."

"How are you?"

"Good."

"Do you have a loyalty card?"

"No."

"Do you want to sign up for one?"

"No."

"That'll be four thirty-nine. How do you want to pay?"

"Card."

The cash register chimes, drawer sliding out even though there is no cash to consume. Consumerism crunches like potato chips in a bag with not enough air. Crunches until it pops, and we are forced to pick up the salty, bitter pieces.

It is my turn. I fix my mask and place my items on the belt. The same question comes, predictable, common.

"How are you?"

The correct answer is "fine". The socially correct answer is "good."

What happens if I answer honestly?

I am not fine. I am not good. I have maggots crawling under my skin, inching their way to my vital organs and through the soft fleshy tissue. My stomach rolls and lurches with every wave of sadness and fear. I cannot stomach these chemically created foods that do not rot outside or in my stomach. My nails are shorn to the quick, anxiety and restless energy gnawing at them.

My shoulders have compressed and hardened. Diamonds, they say, form when coal is under pressure. Diamonds should be a girl's best friend. But diamonds and jewels are cold and lifeless against the beating chest of my heart. My shoulders have not been compressed to diamonds. They are hardened from the ache and weight of the world. I have become Sisyphus and Atlas, constantly pushing the world before myself.

The four chambers of my heart are full. Not with blood, but with grief, longing, fear, and rage. I try to keep them behind the bars of my rib cage, like the animals that they are. But they escape, every so often. Wreaking havoc in my limbs, and seeping into the timber of my voice.

I cannot sleep for the dreams that escape me. My mind is thick with smog and concrete dust, choking on poison air that my lungs think is "normal". The dreams that occupy my nocturnal wanderings bring me to a dark place. An unknown, wild place that I have not touched in waking hours.

Voices beckon me into the darkness. They whisper things, promises, if I just stray slightly off the path. Step into the darkened woods and allow myself to linger among the twisted, sharp trees.

I do not go.

All of this cannot be voiced. It should not be voiced. It is outside the box that is acceptable in the neat, block-by-block, cookie-cutter neighborhoods. It would not be acceptable to spew these thoughts onto the green manicured grass, the perfect roses, and white picket fences.

I smile, all of my teeth bared as I respond with the expected, "Good." The woman behind the counter does not flinch at the display but bares her teeth back. There is little to speak of. The community interaction has become transactional.

Plastic and paper bags rustle like brown dried leaves. I place the change on the table meta top. Clink. Clink. Clink. The sound of chains that anchor me to the society I am contracted to live in. Consumerism and capitalism weigh me down by the rings on my fingers and the debt that rattles behind me.

Groceries in hand, the automatic doors swish open, and a wave of sticky heat greets me. The parking lot is a mirage of heat and steel. Dry brush and cracked earth, placed neatly in the margins as decoration. The pavement would crack, too, but it is too well put together. No, the pavement won't crack. It will melt. Sticky and black oil, like a sickness that seeps and pools deep into the ground.

Shoes crackling and sticking to the hot ground, I wait for the bus. The shelter does nothing for the heat. There is no breeze for relief, no trees for shade. My lips split, and I swipe my tongue along the crusted skin wet with blood. The iron red paints my lips and tongue a darker shade, filling in the gaps between my teeth.

The bus comes, puffing smoke and screaming brakes. My ears ring as I pay for my ride. More cordial exchanges. The window is fogged with sweat and condensation. If it's even possible, the bus becomes an oven, baking us all to dehydration.

Sluggish and stumbling, I make it to my door and into the cool air-conditioned den. The front door closes behind me, and the itching feeling spreads with vengeance. If the heat was keeping the skin maggots sluggish and at bay, the cold only excited them.

They crawl up my neck and under my scalp. I can't keep my fingers from raking through my hair, scratching until the soft flesh is raw. They continue down my back to my legs, stomach, and toes. The gauzy clothes I intended to keep me cool brush my skin wrong. The texture grates on my nerve endings.

In my attempt to get them off, I get tangled in the sleeves, like a fox in a trap. Whining to myself, it takes a minute to detangle from my accidental imprisonment.

Bare and exposed, there is still no relief. The itching grows, burrowing into my brain. I pull at my hair and fall to my knees. Is there nothing that will take the itching away? Nothing that will soothe the irritation and the snappishness of my jaw.

The feeling grows. My heart, its four chambers vacate. The grief, longing, fear, and rage escape, like a supernova, through my limbs.

The backdoor opens, and I stumble out into the sun. It warms the skin of my back as I crouch on the flagstones. Artificial concrete. Man created, false nature. A mimic of the true world, which is only steps away.

The itching becomes almost painful. There is something inside that is dying. Is it dying to crawl out and scream? It doesn't feel like dying. *This* doesn't feel like dying. It feels like being born. The darkness and squeezing contractions. The fear of the unknown and then taking my first breath.

Blind, there was nothing to see but white. And then slowly, everything comes into razor-sharp focus.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep. Dreams could never beckon me from the concrete path onto soft earth. It was the itch that finally threw me from the rut.

The blues and reds and blacks of songbirds call vibrantly on the tree branches. The girl who grew up surrounded by concrete and steel does not know what to do this far off the path. She floundered and cowered into the deepest parts of herself, twitching and flinching at every sound.

I was replaced by something that had always been in me, a version of myself who had taken every ray of sunshine and lit the dark for herself.

You are safe. You are free. Touch the world which you have been kept from. Which has been kept from you.

The itching stopped. The maggots vacated my skin and burrowed in the soft, damp earth. How different everything is when I can touch the wilderness.

I stand and take a step. Like a newborn deer, I wobbled in the first few steps before steadying my gate.

The ground is soft, as is the breeze that caresses my skin. The trees breathe with me, slow and steady. There is a lightness to my footsteps, but I am grounded in myself. The roots are new, but they grow strong. Deep, down into the earth, they anchor me to the wilderness.

I run as fast and as far as my lungs and legs will let me go. Freedom for the wilderness. I am the wild girl, uncaged and free to fly out of my concrete cage.

Esther Fisher is a graduate of York University with a BA in English and Creative Writing. She loves ballroom dancing, tiaras, and travelling to the far-flung corners of the world. She has been published with *Forget-Me-not Press, Poetry Undressed, Humana Obscura,* and *Firefly Magazine*. *Resurrection* is her first novel. She lives in Toronto

Home With a View

Jess Lawrence

Rumbling engines and snow tires never detracted from the graceful approach of her driveway through the densely wooded mountainside, until the eruption of the slope-rooved Victorian amongst the treetops gave way to the river-sliced wilderness beyond. Wind often stirred leaves from the bluffs to the southwest of the stately home she curated for decades. Its secrets sank behind the storm-colored facade, brightened by silver on sashes and knobs. The horseshoe drive was river stone, dull as its contrast to the home's structure. Nella glowed when a visitor remarked, "I feel like the house must invite me in."

Nothing about the deep forest or the bluffs deterred Nella Hargrave when she saw the home for the first time. The real estate agent was certain he'd been laden with an unsellable property. Her tour had been quiet, almost silent. Everyone he'd shown the property before had seen tiny bedrooms, few amenities, and a distance that wasn't merely physical. The master bedroom's rear balcony, stationed directly over the kitchen, had a view of exactly how solitary the location was. The western-facing vistas were haunting. Isolation seemed scored into the lattice work of the Queen Anne detailing.

The paperwork spread across granite countertops. As he filled in his pieces, Nella walked across the space again. An embedded sink in the island sat across from the wrought iron-style seats. Nella loved that the kitchen was separate from the rest of the house. In summer, cooking would be tolerable. To the west, where the bluffs broke into the forest's edge, a pair of intricate French doors opened onto a stone patio. Nella grinned when she saw the garden to the northwest. If she were careful, she could expand it without losing any canopy coverage. It was perfect.

Real estate wasn't her companion's passion. That was clear from his harried expression. When he looked up from the ink and duplicates, her eyes were waiting for him. "Uh," he fumbled for a moment. "Okay, how much do you want to offer?"

"What's it listed at, exactly?" There had been conflicting information online. She wasn't in the habit of wasting money.

He rustled the papers until he found the updated listing. "Huh," he said, mostly to himself. "They lowered it again." Then, when he remembered she was in the room, "Oh, yeah, it includes everything. The house, the water access, the 22 acres."

Shock fell across her face. There was land. She was expecting the house, and maybe a few acres. There had been concerns in the back of her mind about space for the garden and the safety procedures she'd have to put in place. That all melted away.

He continued. "The acres run from the highway across the river. It's private. The land agreement with the neighbors puts the fence upkeep on them, and in return, they can use the riverway. Restricted hours, only during the weekend." He glanced up at her newly regained composure. "The river is the center of the plot. The house is on the first half of the acreage."

That was how she got the estate. Under her curation, Nella brought the shell of a home into the breathing present. Her solitude embraced the decaying house she made her living home.

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Mo Schreber remembered just how much Nella's voice sounded like her mother's when she called. As they caught up, he recalled the girl with curls chasing after rabbits in the bushes while her siblings fought. The Hargraves were good people, and he missed them. Nella had always kept him close, sending him graduation invitations and birthday cards.

When she told him that she'd bought a house in the woods, Mo wasn't surprised. Hearing her talk about a garden caught him off guard. As she outlined what she wanted to do, he agreed to see the garden's potential. Regret and unpaid dues swirled in his head on the drive until the home shocked them silent.

One full acre had been leveled, hidden behind the huge manor. Out the back door, a stone walkway led to the waiting canvas. Mo approached, amused by the small flags stuck into the ground. His smirk grew as he read each name. He laughed when he reached the center of the plot.

"I guess you've been planning, Little Nell," he chuckled. He dug the tips of his fingers into the dark earth, tracing patterns in the fresh till. "We can do it. Do you want already established plants, or do you want to grow them yourself?" Mo stood, brushing the dirt from his hands. Checking local soil quality was a habit he would never lose. When Mo stopped inspecting his fingernails, her face revived his rueful

laugh. "I forgot, sweetheart. Yes, I'll find you ones already hearty enough for this place." He looked again at her tentative plots. "We'll have to move a few things. I'll help with the walkways, and we'll get you a watering schedule that's easy to handle." He caught his lower lip between his teeth in contemplation. Then, quietly, "It'll be ready when you are."

Nella didn't mistake the sadness in his voice for reproach. Both of them knew the day would come. When she'd called him, the old man had made peace with a favor being cashed. One Mo knew he couldn't refuse. And, if he was honest with himself, he might not refuse it even if he could. The wind kicked up some of the loose soil. Tendrils of it swirled by the bargain they'd struck.

Mo stayed with her for two weeks while they worked. Raised beds, stone walkways, guiding in trucks, and pointing to the orange flags clearly marked for every plant - they were a two-person crew transforming a landscape.

As he settled the final plate into the last full box, Mo sighed. "Well, it's done now." He wiped a small bead of sweat from his brow. "By the end of summer next year, you'll have them all in full bloom." He pointed at the vines on the far wall. "I don't know how they'll fare, especially in winter on this bluff. But we've done our best, my girl. It'll be a riot of color for you, and quite the sight from your rooms." He glanced up at the house. Mo hadn't missed the shine of the window facing the garden from the second floor. A calloused hand gripped her shoulder, hugging her into his solid frame. "It's done, sweetheart."

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Early morning in late summer was a heady thing on the bluff. Tiny bell-shaped flowers shone with dew around the edges of the garden. They acted as sentinels, surrounded by taller stalks of lavender Nella had insisted upon. She ran her fingers carefully over the stems of the angel's trumpets. The sweet yellow of their petals caught the sunlight, the condensation of the morning falling from them.

Under the yew tree, the patches neatly named with things like doll's eyes and mountain laurels unfurled their own beautiful offers. Slowly, the hem of her long dress swept past the jimson weed and the showy oleander. She paused carefully with the white hellebore, checking its delicate blossoms.

When she reached the center of the winding path, she beamed. The indigo larkspur and ivory death camas were hearty. Angry orange pips adorned her rosary

peas. The ridges of ecru-to-plum digitalis, rising like small mountains from their patch, eased her shoulders. Foxglove always reminded her of her mother.

From the woven basket she carried, Nella took the freshly sharpened shears. Stalks of checkered lily fell into her basket, their petals dappled. Next to them, she also lowered a few carefully selected pieces of hemlock. A wash of white started her collection.

Nella grinned as she passed the jessamine vines that had survived winter after all. Again, she knelt, this time trimming the wolfsbane. They lay next to the lilies. Their white flowers, edged with blue, made her thoughts wander far from her current task. Oceans of deep secrets, ice almost too brightly white to bear as the clouded sky loomed grey over her hooded face, just a rim of blue at the far edge of the horizon. Or the hidden lake amidst mountains, snow-locked and solitary.

Each snip from the blue and white azalea bush brought her wafts of history. Running with brothers through family orchards. Shouting at kittens to beware of snakes coiled around the roots of the huge bushes. Windows wide to let pies cool, the scent of those azaleas tangled in the lilacs and perfuming the home with aching peace. The tufts of flowers settled neatly in their place.

Last on her list, waiting, were the tiny purple flowers she'd watched from her window with pride and care. In reverence, she tugged taut the stems and sliced. As the belladonna fell beside its kin in the basket, its colors seemed to mute all the others. The nightshade looked to be her only cutting; she'd taken so much of it. In satisfaction, Nella stood at the gates of her garden for a moment. A gust of cool air reminded her to hurry; soon her guests would arrive. Secrets filled her countenance as she walked back to the house with her prizes.

The rock and moss of the outdoor patio were lit with hanging bulbs as everyone began to arrive at dusk. Nella met her siblings and their guests out front. She knew how to throw a party. They were dying to see what a year had done to the remote shanty. Ever the host, she paraded them through the house. Her sisters *oooohed* over the interior. Sula had hidden a gasp when she saw the soaking tub and its view. Even the golden standard, Ian, had to grudgingly admit he wouldn't mind staying in her guest room.

"Not tonight," she reminded him. With the perfect transition in hand, Nella guided everyone past her close-gated garden. On its opposite side, neatly set up in the woods on a flat, clear forest floor, were tents. "Go ahead, look inside!"

When the guests peeked inside, surprise rang out. Heaters, full beds with beautiful bedding, and thoughtful details filled each dedicated space. Even Renee (hypochondriac) had a mini fridge waiting for medications that absolutely had to be a particular temperature.

She pointed to the cameras around the edge of the campsite. "Before you ask," Nella said. "I've had trail cameras up. My neighbors and I have seen nothing in these woods for weeks, and we'll be eating at the house. So, there are no bears, or elk, or moose, or anything dangerous." She glanced at Renee. "No raccoons, either," she said with a wink. "I think it's about time for dinner." Back she led the group to the house, and delight filled their voices when they saw what waited.

A long table was set. Gorgeous centerpieces of blues, whites, and purples. The plates had name cards in calligraphy. Cozy blankets waited on comfortably padded chairs. Each conversation set huddled around small braziers to light as chill filled the darkened air. Laughter danced across the trees as each place was taken. Plates were passed around as Nella brought out classic comfort foods. Each smelled like nostalgia, offered as a little peace in a hectic world.

Conversation eased as dinner ended, and Nella lit the fires as she served the boxes. S'mores components were loaded in the decorated brown containers. Marshmallows she'd made, with a variety of chocolates, and several choices besides the classic graham crackers: all were neatly packed in gift packages she deposited at the paired chairs. Nella offered skewers that, when sniffed, were scented with vanilla and cinnamon. Another thoughtful detail, someone said.

It was brother Blake who had whispered to Nella, "Didn't you tell me once that lily of the valley is deadly?" He'd been looking at the flowers with such care. His date, whose name seemed ephemeral, had gushed over the azaleas.

Nella had widened her eyes, saying she hadn't recalled. "They can be," she admitted, "but only if ingested. Growing them and putting them on display is not to be feared." One of her fingertips lightly traced the bells dropping toward the tablecloth, to reassure him that she survived any danger he imagined from them.

Ian was less trusting of the flowers. He'd quickly accepted the chance to move away from the table, mumbling under his breath, "I swear that's hemlock." Renee hushed her brother, calling it Queen Anne's lace.

"Like the house," Nella had offered, helpful. "The detailing is called gingerbread, not lace." There was a muffled chuckle from someone who didn't want to catch Ian's withering glare. Whoever had laughed ended up successfully hiding their amusement.

They all roasted the marshmallows and chatted. Each of them devoured treat after treat. Even Sula, vegan sister and superior, ate her own generous share of sweet, puffy dessert. She was the first to convulse. Nella watched her sleek ebony hair, dyed less than two weeks before, fall across her gasping lips. The froth was unbecoming, it was true, but there wasn't much to be done about that.

Blake looked resigned. "You finally," he began. Rasping throttled the rest as he gripped and tore the blanket in his fingers. There was less terror in the pose that rictus froze him in, which didn't surprise her. Nella had always known that Blake would understand.

Ian was dramatic. He'd shoved poor Renee, who had more likely died of a heart attack than the poison, if her instant silence and frozen remnants were anything to go by. Tripping over his sister's corpse, the middle-aged CEO of something tried desperately to talk to his tormentor. Unfortunately for Ian, words wouldn't come. Blindness and falling determined his last moments. His right hand stopped its spasming less than an inch from Nella's delicate lace shoe.

The sun had fully set before s'mores had been distributed. By midnight, all were still and stone dead. Each of them, she noted, had more or less frozen into the exact position she'd expected. The host inspected each of the dead to ensure they were not suffering.

A quiet chuckle escaped her lips. "Really, Nella?" she said aloud. "Worried about their suffering? Why give what was never given to you?" With a quick survey of those around her, she answered herself. "Because I refuse to follow their example."

Nella carried each one through the now-open garden gates. On the ground beyond were the full set of tents she'd walked the family to before dinner. In exacting detail, she lay each of them on their beds. Even dear Sula was tucked gently into her tatami mat, which had won Nella genuine praise for recalling when Sula's haughty gaze inspected the likely inferior accommodations.

"Wow, Nell," she'd conceded. "You actually got it right."

"Yes," she said to the cooling flesh on the mat. "I suppose I finally did."

It had been easier to carry the bodies than it had been to carry the meat. The weight hadn't bothered Nella so much as the stench. One by one, her siblings were carefully covered with weeks-old carrion. Gardening had helped her prepare to haul her family. Using the wheelbarrow would have helped, but she was grateful she hadn't needed it. A genuine laugh had found her when she realized that Sula, in particular, had a skunk draped over her well-crafted chest.

After checking one last time that she had done everything she had planned, Nella collected the last of the food from outside and turned off the exterior lighting before going up to her rooms. She soaked, listening to instrumental music as the hot jets eased aches out of her muscles. Once her fingers pruned, and the water had done the most it would do, she toweled off and slipped on her favorite pajamas. The weight of her comforter swallowed her, and Nella eased into a deep sleep.

Waking and ambling to the kitchen, her laptop's hinges protested the intrusion at her island seat. Nella silently agreed as she stretched for her coffee. Both of them needed to warm up, she supposed. Her waffles were heating in the toaster oven, their vanilla scent inviting her distraction from the task at hand.

Nella watched the footage as a mother and two large cubs had arrived at the tents. In their chaotic battle for scraps, the youths had battered and bashed the trail cameras, smelling whatever remnants of death she had smeared on their casings.

The equipment she'd purchased was destroyed. One had been completely obliterated - no one could save its footage. She tried, and one look clarified its uselessness. Teeth, saliva, and other muck had breached its storage center.

The other two feeds were believably spliced to show the family touring the camp, and then some intermittent footage of the bears tearing into the tents. The bears had done her an unexpected second favor as well. Ian and Renee had been the last attacked. No doubt Ian would have finished the other two bottles of whiskey. Renee had been rattling her bottle of muscle relaxers like a maraca during dinner, openly speculating if she had enough to get through breakfast in the morning.

Mother Bear had treated all of the tents as though they were invaders, and her offspring had joined her. Nella supposed it was good practice, knowing that they wouldn't get injured. Their ransacking destroyed the camp entirely. The shards of the world left after the death of her parents were infinitely better without her siblings polluting them.

Sunrise filtered into the kitchen in her home. Her waffles had just finished crisping, the toaster oven making its signature ding. She carefully buttered each of them, stacking the lighter one atop the more toasted. With a curse, she shifted them apart again and filled the hollows in syrup. Restacked and lightly salted, Nella's first slice and bite were exactly what she'd been craving. A smile crossed her lips. She ate slowly, with relish. Every bite, like every breath, came easier in the new daylight.

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The Widow's Weather

József-Sándor Török

The MacLeods' garden hadn't always bloomed so beautifully, nor were their cattle so plump or their chickens so prolific at laying eggs. No one had expected a thing, not after everything was waterlogged and sodden for three whole weeks. They called it the widow's weather. It wasn't nearly as gentle as the Scottish storms they were accustomed to, the ones that rattled shutters and tossed waves against the cliffs. This was more personal.

"Gillis, deary, sit down a moment," the woman said. She was the midwife in Tarbert of Loch Fyne, and therefore, she carried a certain authority among the villagers. 'There's some bad news I need to tell you.'

Gillis knew what it was about. The midwife didn't bring news, only confirmed what she had been feeling ever since James set foot on that ship.

"My nephew caught wind that the Hebridean Star vanished into the storm, homeward from Skye," she said with a downturned mouth. She then handed Gillis the napkin she intentionally brought and kept warm in her bosom. Naturally, the midwife informed her of every dreadful detail about the storm.

"What do I do now?" Gillis asked.

"God will surely care for His own," the midwife said on a gentler note, realizing that she had quite unsettled the widow. Gillis's wandering gaze didn't know where to settle: James's knife on the table, the cat rubbing against her leg, the world outside the window.

The first crack of thunder scared the midwife, Gillis, and the cat, too. Though they were well accustomed to storms, the sound and light that came with each, that thunder was unusually loud. It could stir even the most weathered nerves. The midwife gathered the garments she removed upon arrival, her shawl, gloves, and black bonnet, and hurried home. She was determined not to be caught in the storm.

Yet, when the MacLeods' gate clanged shut behind her, she saw the sky was clearer than it had been all day. How odd, she thought. She could've sworn it thundered only moments ago. Then, she turned around. The MacLeods' house was

shrouded in clouds that only the sea carried ashore together with planks of wood, torn clothes, and, rarely, a lifeless body. Most were claimed in the storm. She was nearly certain it would be the same for James. There were many curious things in life that went unexplained. As for the weather, the midwife made no attempt to understand it either.

"What do I do now?" Gillis asked the cat in a shaky voice. There was little she could do, at least with regard to James. The animals, however, had to be fed. The chickens had to be seen to. The eggs had to be collected. And the hearth had to be swept of the previous day's ash. The cows were still pressed against the gate come milking hour. The bread wouldn't bake itself. Rain or storm, life or death, the country couldn't wait, wouldn't wait.

That day, for some time, she kept her head low to shield herself from rain. At last, when she looked up, she saw the light behind the gates. She saw the children, too, pointing at her house.

"Ma'am, why's your house the only one under the storm?" one of them asked.

"Run along now," Gillis waved them off.

She had to see for herself, and therefore she walked the streets of Tarbert. It was true, everything else was bathed in sunlight as bright as any she had seen: the church, the village pub, the midwife's house up the hill. It seemed the storm lingered only around her house. For that matter, she couldn't care less. She'd lost James, and there was little in the world that could be worse than that.

The neighbors, however, as the days went by, became a constant source of irritation. Those who rarely walked that far into the village now made their way to see for themselves. Some came under the pretense of saying their condolences. Others even brought small gifts. Women were more sensible while men only tilted their heads in passing, saying little.

"The storm must be frightful, especially in the night," one of the women said.

"One simply endures, that is all," Gillis replied, clutching at her stomach. She knew their kindness would soon turn into something else. People weren't kind with things they didn't understand or didn't have an explanation for.

The truth was, the storm became fiercer with each passing night. In the matter of a week, it had claimed the entire garden. Everything she and James had planted and taken care of drowned and was made one with the soil. In the orchard, the branches were hammered by the hailstones. Their bark was peeled, and the fruits were bruised. She gathered every apple, pear, and plum, ripe or not, in a basket and took them inside. Even the chickens had to be kept in their coops, or else they would've drowned.

Outside her fence, the weather was serene. Sunlight scattered over the neighbors' rooftops and fields with a brilliance Scotland rarely knew.

"I don't understand," the midwife kept repeating. Truly, nobody did. No one could make sense of her weather. It belonged to her, and so it was the widow's weather.

By the second week after she learned of James being lost at sea, the weather steadied. It did not ease its grip the least, but neither did it worsen. The wind kept the same temper, still rattling the doors and windows, still threatening to pull another tree. The garden and orchard were still at the mercy of hailstones and the rain that fell in uneven sheets. She tried continuing life in a deliberate rhythm: feeding the chickens, milking the cow, keeping the house warm.

"If only the sea would bring his body," she said, stroking the cat.

On a makeshift washing line outside her fence, she hung clothes to dry and whiten in the sun. Each morning, she led the cows to the small patch of grass outside the fence, where the storm didn't touch. Each evening, she led them back into the stable. One night, one of the cows managed to slip free. By morning, she found it lifeless under a walnut tree. Its branches were broken, and the ground around the corpse was black and scarred. Lightning struck it down where it stood.

"Could you spare a hand with the fence? The walnut's branch tore it down last night."

"Too busy with the barn," the neighbor replied, refusing to look her in the eye.

"Just to tie the post, then?"

"Best you manage it yourself, can't let myself be caught in that storm," he shook his head, snorting.

"Very well, then," Gillis walked away. She refused to show her hurt. The neighbor's children first whispered behind her back, then called her names. They said her house was cursed, that they had never seen the like. Then, and this wasn't true entirely, they said that everywhere she walked, she brought the weather with her. Nobody let her in anymore, only the midwife, who even visited her and dared face the storm.

"If only the sea could bring him back, to lay this storm to rest," she repeated to the cat ever so often. Every time she went down to the sea, there was nothing to suggest the violence that had claimed him.

One night, the chickens woke her. Wind blew off a couple of tiles from their coop, and the hail was hammering them. That same night, Gillis found James's napkin in a puddle, the one he was meant to carry for good luck but insisted he did not need. It bore the initials she stitched into it. Though it was past midnight, she did not go back to sleep. Instead, she washed the napkin and hung it above the stove. Later, when it dried, she buried her face into it and wept.

In the third week, the storm had gotten worse. Together with it, the villagers became convinced Gillis and her house were touched by the devil. They gathered in the church pews and whispered of her. The children hurled stones at her house, and someone stole one of the cows tied outside her fence. It was only the midwife who showed her any kindness. Her visits were rare, brief but constant, and she always had something with her: a loaf of bread or a candle.

The relentless wind turned everything to ruin. It pulled one plum tree from its roots, and most apple and pear trees had their branches cracked. It bent and tore into everything in its way, opening doors, blowing out candles, and breaking the shutters. She shivered in bed, certain that the next gust would rip the roof above her head and crush her. In some matters, the thought didn't disturb her that much.

Still, she rose the next morning. She patched what needed fixing and went about her chores. Something had changed. The storm had weakened. She could neither name it nor fully trust her senses. Inside her fence, the wind had eased, and sparrows started singing again, although slowly. She hadn't even realized how much she missed their song. Rain ceased falling, and the puddles stilled. Then, when she milked the cows, she saw the dark clouds move steadily towards the village.

With the bucket of milk in one hand and the milking stool in the other, she saw a figure running down the street, towards her. Her legs weakened. She thought it might be another child, about to throw stones and break another window. Hurrying inside, she slammed the door behind her, waiting for the stones to fall.

Instead, not daring to look out the window, she heard the gates squeaking, followed by strong knocks. When she opened the door, she fainted, kicking over the bucket of milk. Gillis came to her senses in his arms, still shivering and weak.

"How?" she asked.

"I never thought I'd see you believe I was lost," he poked fun at her. "I missed the Hebridean Star at the last moment."

Outside, the storm crept away from their little patch of land, behind their fences, but the village was not spared. Rain and wind and, at night, hail battered every home, every orchard, every coop. The streets were dry. Wildflowers bloomed in the ditches, and bees buzzed over them. Wind tore at every fence. The backs of cows and sheep were bruised; only those trapped in their coops were left unharmed. The MacLeods' house and fields and the midwife's on the hill remained untouched.

Their animals had glossy coats, bright eyes, and moved with a strange liveliness. Their gardens seemed brighter and bloomed in more color than ever. When the neighbors came begging for help, Gillis and James and the midwife did not turn them away.

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The Perfect Photo

Victoria Galmarini (Vicky Galmarini)

"¡Tato! ¡Tato! Are you here?"

A chilly air seeps through the wooden planks of the refuge, and the plastic window coverings rattle in the wind. Ingrid pulls the pompom on her hat. Lola, the cat, approaches purring.

"Unbelievable, it looks like it's going to *snov*... In October! Isn't that *crazie*?"

Daniel takes off his backpack and lets it drop heavily against the wall, next to hers.

"Wouldn't be the first time..."

"Tato!"

"Maybe he went out..."

"Let's *varm* this up a bit," she suggests, approaching the tin stove.

They crumple various papers: supermarket receipts, flyers from craft fairs, and a *yerba mate* package. They tear pieces of cardboard from a box and place everything on the embers. Ingrid crouches and blows. They add some logs from the neatly arranged pile under the stairs. She blows a bit more.

"Shall we prepare, *mate*?" he suggests, pulling back the curtain.

"Bring a knife too so *ve* can toast the bread."

She takes out her camera and presses the buttons. Daniel watches her. Ingrid sighs, moves the switch, and sets it 'off'.

"What's wrong?"

"Is not good..."

"What do you mean? The photos?"

"Yes... no... I mean, they aren't bad. But the *ideé*... I don't know, is not enough."

"The idea, why? It's a good project, we already discussed it..."

"Yes, is good. But not enough."

They hear the banging of a wooden door. Boots stomp on the doormat. Lola gets up, alert. A hand pulls back the curtain.

"Hey, hey! Back here again?"

Ingrid jumps up. Daniel hands refuge keeper the freshly brewed *mate*.

"Tato... *ve* came back... *ve vant* to go to the glacier."

"Again?"

"Yes, to see that place where the couple fell..."

The cat meows, and Tato responds with some petting.

"Terrible... Why do you want to go there?"

Ingrid moves her hands faster than her lips.

"For the project. *Ve* need photos more good... The ones *ve* have aren't good enough and..."

"Better."

"What?"

"Better, you should say 'better'. Not 'more good.'"

"*Ve* need photos better?"

"Better photos."

"Ok, I'll try to remember," she says, rolling her eyes.

Tato shrugs, and Daniel takes the opportunity to explain:

"Ingrid thinks the project for the article is weak. She believes we need something with more impact..."

The keeper, holding a *mate* in his hand, listens attentively. Daniel has never asked, but he assumes they are about the same age. He can't help but admire the life Tato leads: except for the summer season, he spends most of his time alone, in the middle of the mountains... or rather, at the top of the mountains...

"She wants to see if she can find any trace," Daniel adds, "or anything left behind by those two in the glacier... A shoe, a scarf... Something that will shake the viewer."

"Impossible, there's nothing left there. Besides, it's been too long..."

Tato looks at them with a hint of disdain.

"Anyway, I think the idea for the article is in bad taste," he continues. "A couple goes snowboarding after a massive storm. They don't listen to our warnings; they go anyway. The girl falls, and her idiot boyfriend goes down to find her. They both die... Tell me, what's good about that?"

Ingrid squints her eyes.

"It's a love story..."

"Love, my ass! It's negligence. The chief told them not to go, he told them the sun was out, that the snow was melting... he told them there was avalanche danger. And they went out anyway."

Ingrid and Daniel look at each other. Tato continues.

"She slipped, the snow moved, bad luck, let's say. But him... Who in their right mind would crawl into a glacier crevice? How do you get out afterward, huh? And carrying someone on top of that! It's idiotic... Brew me another *mate*, Dany, I'm starting to get heated."

"But... What should he have done?"

"Come back, of course! Report the accident and wait for the rescue team to assemble... Direct us where to go! We searched for fourteen hours. We didn't sleep; we froze our asses off. Look, I'm trained, okay? And I've known this mountain almost since I was born. But it was brutal... That's what all the idiots who take pointless risks don't understand. Retrieving the corpses... We're the ones who have to deal with it afterward."

He takes a deep breath. The cat meows. The crackling of the fire is now the only sound. Ingrid tries again, with a persuasive tone.

"I just *vant* to take photos new. *Ve*'ll be careful. *Ve* are always."

Tato gets up.

"That's true... But not today. Let's see what happens with the weather, and if everything's okay, you can go out tomorrow."

Outside, it's completely dark; the moon hasn't risen yet. Daniel hears the sleeping bag being unzipped and footsteps toward the door. Suddenly, a chilling breeze. He pulls the string to tighten his own bag, using his hands to bring the loose edges together to keep the warmth in. He's almost fallen asleep when the gust of wind returns. He glances sideways: the fire's glow increases; there's a crackling of sparks.

"Everything okay? You can't sleep, can you?"

"Yeah, fine... Just... had to go to the bathroom," Ingrid explains.

"Cold?"

She nods, shaking slightly but with energy.

"And is *snoving*," she adds as she throws another log to the fire.

"I hope it doesn't accumulate too much so we can head down to the glacier tomorrow."

"The moon *vill* come out soon... It'll break the clouds. But if the project doesn't turn out *vell*, *ve*'ll have to go back."

The following morning greets them with a clear, fresh, sunny sky outside.

"Perfect for a hike," Ingrid says. "Good morning, Tato!"

"Good morning," replies the refuge worker. "Help yourselves; I've put some toast on the stove. Is everything ready?"

"Yes," Daniel replies. "Crampons, ropes, radios, first aid kit… The usual. Did it snow much last night?"

"No… Fortunately not. You know I wouldn't let you go if it did."

With an authoritative air, Tato raises a hand to silence any protests:

"I don't care how much experience you have. The conditions aren't… well, let's say, ideal."

"Okay, everything's in order then," Daniel concedes.

"Don't do anything stupid. Take care."

"Come on, man. We've been up here loads of times. What's the problem?"

"It's just… never mind."

Ingrid peeks through the curtain.

"Are we ready or not?"

She hands Daniel's backpack to him, puts on her own, and heads towards the door.

Her hand lingers a moment longer before disappearing into the light outside.

Daniel runs to catch up with her. His boots sink into the snow. He stumbles: his steps, uneven, sink deeper in some spots.

"Wait up, hey!"

She turns around and greets him with a smile.

"Look at all this. It's beautiful. *Ve* have to do everything *ve* can to stay here. Stuart vas clear: either ve send something interesting or..." She suddenly stops. "Danny, I don't *vant* to leave."

"Me neither!" He hugs her. "I feel really good and satisfied with the life we're living."

"Yes… But *ve* need to *vork*… and make sure Stuart is satisfied too."

"True. Let's keep going, in a few more meters we'll start the descent."

They turn left, and the glacier is everything: enormous and blue. It feels like they've opened the freezer door: a polar breath hits their faces. Ingrid seizes the opportunity to raise her camera and start shooting.

"Panoramic," she explains.

She then focuses on some details: little plants, frozen leaves, the junction of rock and ice, the snow mantle further back covering almost everything, the whitish water lagoon, and the rocky slopes going deep down to form its bed.

"You've already taken all these photos," he notes.

"Yes, I know I'm taking the photos same. But they're not alike. The light changes, the colors, how it looks… Now I'm… capturing ambience."

"How?"

She gestures in frustration.

"I don't know… Feeling this… Picturing how it *vas* for the *snovboarders*. She *vould* come down *vith* her board here," she points to a gentle slope, "and maybe slide here…"

Daniel takes out his notebook and writes down a few isolated words. 'Snowboarders'.

"I think we can make an interesting article with all this. But that you want to achieve… I find it very difficult. This isn't Syria anymore; there's no war here; the couple died due to negligence, you heard what Tato said… We can put together something with a moral, about being safe, and all that. But we can't stand out with something like this."

Ingrid puts away her camera and straps on her backpack.

"I'm not sure if that, but *ve*'ll find something… I need you convinced, Dany. Otherwise, how *vill* you write? Trust me. Shall *ve* go down?"

They edge along the lagoon carefully. There are snow mounds in some areas, but not too many: they move forward mostly over loose rock, using their poles to balance the side slope.

"This path leads to the caves…"

She nods. Daniel knows that this isn't where the snowboarders fell… What could she be looking for?

They traverse the usual tourist route, entering the tunnels, trying some more difficult passages… The scenes are incredible: the light filtering through the bluish transparency of the ice, the soft, curved lines of the polished contours, the cold emanating from the walls and surrounding them, the sudden shadows, and the silence… the peace of the glacier. Daniel thinks that this peace is akin to death. He pulls out his notebook and jots down: 'death'.

Ingrid takes some photos but soon becomes impatient.

"Let's go back outside…"

They move along one of the lateral strips of the glacier, knowing that beneath it is the mountain supporting it. Venturing onto the central part, where there is only ice, is very dangerous. The crampons prevent them from slipping, but the ascent is still slow.

Daniel walks behind Ingrid; he has no idea where she is heading. He decided to surrender to the experience, enjoying the effort, the wind, the ice. He wonders if all this is right, if being a journalist means seeking the truth. He knows this might be naive. He understands that some truths matter more than others and that there are ways to shape them. Maybe for Ingrid, there is no dilemma: a photo is a photo, objective, truthful, flat. But no… of course not.

"Over there!"

Daniel's eyes widen as Ingrid's shout jolts him awake. He sees her taking off her backpack and photographing something. He tries to focus on the ice, but everything is white, everything is light. He closes his eyes and shakes his head.

Ingrid slides closer and shows him the screen of her camera. She presses a button to zoom in on the image, adjusting the frame until she finds what she's looking for.

"Here! See it?"

A dark shape appears, barely visible through a crack, slightly obscured by the transparency. It's not very clear.

"Let's go," Ingrid suggests.

"Don't even think about it..."

"Come on, let's go!"

Daniel puts his hands on her shoulders, his voice carrying a note of desperation:

"Ingrid, we're not going to leave the moraine, we're not going to walk on the ice... It's full of crevasses."

She meets his gaze steadily.

"*Ve* have ropes, *ve* have ice axes... *ve*'ll be careful."

Daniel's head moves by itself, and he realizes he's nodding.

They walk with difficulty but maintain a steady pace. Soon, the ridges become very steep: the only way to move forward is through the fissures, descending into the depths of the crevasses. The cold grows more intense.

"Help me climb up there, so I can see what I can from above?" Ingrid asks.

Her partner complies, securing the rope around her waist before pushing her towards the sky. With a swift circular motion, she drives the ice axe into the glacier and sinks the points of her crampons into the blue wall. The echo responds with two more thuds. Daniel secures his end of the rope and waits for Ingrid to reach the top.

"One!" she calls from the ridge.

"Two!" he replies.

Ingrid braces her legs against a ledge and grips the rope with both hands.

"Three!" they shout in unison, as Daniel jumps, and she pulls at the same time.

He mirrors Ingrid's movements and quickly joins her.

"There it is," she says, arm outstretched, "do you see it?"

The shape takes on new, unsettling profiles.

"But… what is it?" Daniel asks.

Ingrid smiles. A glimmer, not unlike the one playing on the icy surface, dances in the blue of her eyes.

"News."

They have to climb a few more crests to get closer to the shape. They ascend with effort, breathing heavily, their breaths painful and labored. They are winded, warming up as they climb. They descend carefully, supporting each other, hanging, letting themselves down. "Just one more," they say each time, but when they reach the top, they realize they're still not there. They continue until Daniel hears Ingrid's scream, climbs up beside her, and discovers it.

Below, a body.

A body with arms outstretched, nailed to the ice wall. Crucified.

The frozen blood, no longer dripping from the wrists, is too red. Unreal.

"It can't be…"

As if propelled by a spring, Ingrid leaps into action. She pulls out her camera, focuses, shoots, moves, focuses, shoots. She lies down on the ice, focuses, and shoots. She trembles.

"Dany…"

When had everything changed so much? He had a childhood full of cousins. Of splashing in the stream, broken nails, and scraped fingers from the rocks. Snow up to his waist, slipping on the frozen path, foxes, hares, and even once: a puma.

Farmhouses. Sheep. Wind. Mountains, sky, forest... nothing.

"Daniel..."

Then, the city. Then, the madness. There, a dead man could be just another. There, suicide (or murder) was much less of a surprise.

He had returned, and now here... even here, everything had changed. The poison had arrived! This was what he no longer wanted to see. This was exactly what he was trying to escape from.

An urban intrusion marred the surface of the ice.

"Daniel!"

He pulls his gaze away from his notebook.

"I need help…"

"What are you planning to do?"

She points toward the abyss.

"I need to go down *halfway*… there. You hold me, and then I come back up."

"What?"

"That *vay* I can get photos more good, from the front… from up here it's not the same."

"I don't know, Ingrid…"

"Come on, Dany… like *ve* did at the *vaterfalls*. I'll hang there, take the photos, and climb back up."

"It's not the same. There was better grip: trees, rocks… and it wasn't cold…"

"But it *vas* more higher."

Daniel peers over the edge.

"Yes, much higher… But it doesn't matter. If you fall, you won't escape hypothermia. We'll end up just like the snowboarders."

"That's not true, because I can come back up; the *snovboarders* didn't have equipment."

"And what if you get hurt badly or end up unconscious?"

"Come on, Dany, if something happens to me, you call on the radio, and that's it."

"Yes, well, whatever you want. But even Tato takes a couple of hours to climb up here. You wouldn't last."

She sighs.

"Nothing is going to happen, you'll see."

"Ingrid," he tries again, "we've come this far, made an incredible discovery. Let's go back. Let's process everything. We have a great story. Stuart will be thrilled."

Ingrid furrows her brow. He sees something on her cheek… a tear?

"You don't understand, Dany, you don't understand!" she yells.

"What…?"

"Nothing! You don't understand nothing!"

"Yes, I understand! I understand perfectly! The problem is that you're never satisfied! You always want more, and more! You don't care about risking your life, you don't care about risking mine…"

"Yes, of course I *vant* more! And if you don't help me, I go down alone!"

Ingrid starts taking things out of her backpack. Daniel grabs her by the arm, but she pulls away.

"Do you know what I *vant*? Do you know? I *vant* it all! Thanks to coming this far, *ve* discovered this man… Now you're going to grab the radio and inform Tato. He'll contact the police… In a few hours, this place *vill* be filled with people busy. And I'll be here, covering that too. But the opportunity *vill* be lost…"

"The opportunity? We've already discovered it, we have photos… What opportunity?"

"The opportunity to do it more good… better! Do you understand?"

"No, Ingrid! I don't understand!"

"But I already told you! The photo perfect, I *vant* it!" she spreads her arms. "Peace and violence! The *vounds*, the cold, the nails… the face of the dead!"

She looks him in the eyes, her eyelashes frozen. A pause and the ice, absolute.

The scream explodes and a thousand echoes crash against the mountains.

"The Pulitzer, I *vant*!

A condor. Huge, black, glides above their heads. For a moment, it hangs suspended: like the sky, like the glacier, like them.

The crackling of the radio breaks the spell. In the distance, a mass of dark clouds approaches.

"Refuge to Times, refuge to Times, over."

Ingrid and Daniel exchange a different glance.

"Refuge to Times. Respond, Times. Over."

Without looking away, he slowly pulls the radio from its case.

"This is Times… What's going on, Tato? Everything okay? Over."

She puts her index finger to her lips. In her eyes, a silent plea.

"A storm is coming. Repeat: a storm is coming. Start heading back, over."

Daniel looks back at the impossible blue and shivers.

"How much time do we have? I think we found something… over."

"Three or four hours. But you never know, don't be idiots. What did you find? Over."

He smiles, and something in her eyes softens.

"We don't know yet. Give us thirty minutes. We'll confirm and update. Over and out."

"Understood. Over and out."

Victoria Galmarini is a writer shaped by movement, memory, and the mountains of Patagonia. A lifelong creator, she honed her voice in literary workshops and continues exploring human connection and reinvention while crafting her fourth novel from the wild landscapes she now calls home.

Shhh-shhh-sha

Smita Das Jain

It hadn't rained in four months.

The courtyard walls had begun to crack along the edges, their fine lines spreading like old veins through mud. Dust lay settled on everything. On the brass water pot near the door, on the broken clay tile that never quite sat straight, on the boy's knees as he sat cross-legged under the *neem* tree.

Raju didn't mind the dust. It made things quiet.

He sat with his eyes closed, elbows resting lightly on his thighs, and listened. Not to the goats bleating near the lane. Not to the two women arguing faintly across the wall. He listened to the *neem*.

The leaves rustled. Not much. Just enough.

There was no wind. The clothesline hadn't moved all day. The small plastic flag, stuck to the bamboo pole, hung limp. But still, the leaves whispered.

Shhh-shhh-sha. Like a secret starting and stopping.

Raju leaned his head against the trunk, careful not to let his mother see. She had snapped, *"Tree won't help your maths, boy,"* when he had done that once. After that, he always listened with his eyes closed, his face turned slightly away.

The tree spoke only when no one else was watching.

Sometimes it hummed low, like his grandmother used to when grinding grain. Sometimes it made a sound like chewing, the way goats did when they pulled leaves too early. But mostly it just whispered.

He didn't tell anyone. Not even his friend Jeetu. If he did, they'd make him say it again and again until he no longer believed it.

A cow passed by the gate, its bell clinking once. The tree went still.

"Raju!" his mother called from inside. "Come finish your work before dark. No excuses today."

He stood up slowly, without a word, brushing the dust from his shorts with one hand. His other hand rested for a moment on the bark, fingers tracing a groove where the outer skin had thinned. It felt rough and warm.

He went inside.

Shhh-shhh-sha. The sound came with him. Soft, unfinished.

***

The village tap leaked in a thin thread. Raju crouched by the wall, waiting for the line to move. Two men stood near the *neem*'s shadow, cupping brass tumblers in their hands.

"It's too old now," one said, tipping his head toward the courtyard. "Hollow in parts."

"Good for firewood," the other replied. "We'll cut it next week. Use it for the *anganwadi* stove. The gas runs out too quick these days."

The first man nodded. "We might as well. Nothing is growing anyway."

Raju stared at the tap handle without blinking. He half-filled the *lota* when it was his turn and walked back home without spilling a drop.

He didn't tell anyone what he heard. Not his mother, not Jeetu. Not even the *neem*.

The tree came in his dream that night.

It was falling. The trunk groaned, not in pain, but in parting. Dust curled around its roots like breath leaving a body. Raju reached out, but the branches had already turned to smoke. He couldn't see the sky. Only the place where the tree used to be.

He woke before dawn and sat cross-legged under the tree again. But the whispers were still.

At school, he opened his rough notebook during moral science and wrote in pencil, pressing hard on the page.

"Neemji says the birds used to come before light. First the yellow ones, then the green. They don't come now because the morning has turned noisy."

He wasn't sure if the tree had said it or if he had just known it. Either way, it felt true.

"Raju!" The teacher's voice cracked like a ruler on a desk. "This is not the question. Write the answer five times."

Raju looked up. Then down. He didn't explain. He drew a tiny leaf next to the sentence before turning to the back of the book, where he began copying the lesson.

At lunch, he folded the page carefully and slipped the notebook into his shirt, even though it made his chest feel stiff.

Upon return, he went to the tree.

It didn't speak. The quiet had changed.

It was waiting.

***

There was a time when the *neem* looked different. Fuller. Greener. Raju remembered it without trying.

That year, it had rained on his birthday. A sudden downpour in late May had flooded the courtyard. The *neem* shook in the wind, scattering yellow pods across the ground. They had fallen around him like tiny gifts, each one making a soft patter on the wet earth.

His grandmother had laughed then, her silver hair sticking to her cheeks. She had tied a thin red thread around the trunk, her fingers moving slowly, as if knotting something sacred.

"Guardian," she whispered, pressing her palm to the bark. "It keeps watch when we cannot."

Now she was gone. His father, too, though in a different way. The factory job in Jaipur kept him away for months. Calls came only when he found a borrowed phone. Some nights, he sounded tired. Some nights he didn't speak at all.

The *neem* had stopped flowering. The pods no longer dropped like offerings. Even the shade it cast felt thinner.

That afternoon, while Raju was copying sums for homework, he heard a dull thud outside. He went to the doorway. A branch lay on the ground. There was no storm to blame.

He ran to it, his heart thudding as if something inside him had fallen too. He knelt beside the branch and touched the leaves. They were dry around the edges but still held a bit of green.

He plucked one, placed it on his tongue, and chewed. The bitterness made his eyes water, but he didn't spit it out.

"You're still alive," he whispered.

The breeze lifted a few leaves from the fallen branch. They fluttered once, then settled.

The tree did not answer.

But a feeling passed through him, like the memory of shade on a hot day.

***

Raju wrote slowly. His pencil moved without pressure, tracing soft letters on rough paper. The *neem* didn't speak in complete sentences, so he didn't either.

"Neemji says a squirrel once slept in its branch all night. It had one eye open."

"The leaf that falls last is never afraid."

"Ants come early when it's going to be hot."

The words filled three pages, then six. Some were memories he wasn't sure were his. Some were shaped like stories, some like dreams.

He didn't tell anyone.

On Thursday, he left the notebook on the floor while changing out of his uniform. When he came back, it wasn't where he had left it.

He found it on the *charpai* with the cover folded open. His mother was drying chillies near the stove. Without looking up, she wiped her hands, came to the *charpai*, picked up the notebook, and placed it next to his schoolbag, as she did with his tiffin.

Their eyes met for a second.

She didn't ask. He didn't explain.

Later that evening, the light turned orange too soon. Raju stood by the *neem*, notebook in hand. The pages fluttered in the breeze.

A lean man passed by with cement dust on his shirt. He looked at the tree, then at Raju.

"It's hollow now," he said, tilting his chin toward the trunk. "Been dry for years. No more shade in a few summers."

He kept walking.

Raju looked up. It was true. The leaves weren't as full. But one bird sat at the edge of a high branch. A small one, sitting still.

He pressed his palm to the bark. It was warm, cracked in places, but not empty.

"Not yet," he whispered.

The bark didn't flake. His fingers didn't come away dusty. He leaned his forehead against it for a second, the way *Dadi* used to lean into temple bells.

Then he wrote:

"Neemji says that when people stop listening, he speaks slower. But he still speaks."

He didn't date the entry. Some things didn't need a time stamp.

***

The night was so still it felt like the air had forgotten how to move.

Raju sat up in bed. His throat was dry, but he didn't reach for water. Outside, the courtyard was coated in silver. Not from moonlight. The way dust lightens under silence.

He tiptoed past his mother's sleeping form, picked up the torch, and slipped out.

The *neem* stood in silhouette, unmoved. Even its shadows were quiet.

He sat cross-legged beneath it, pressing his ear to the bark, notebook balanced on his lap. The wood was cool now, the day's warmth finally emptied. He listened. Eyes closed.

Nothing.

The leaves didn't rustle. No sighing, no *shhh-shhh-sha*. Not even a shift of wind pretending to speak.

He waited longer. Then longer still.

Still nothing.

He opened his eyes but didn't move. His chest tightened like a cloth being wrung from the inside. His fingers curled against the bark.

"Please," he whispered.

The tree kept its silence.

He tried again, this time not with words. With his touch. A hand on the trunk. A shoulder leaned against it. A closeness.

And then, from somewhere high above, something dropped.

A pod. Old, brown, its edge curled like a comma.

It landed near his foot without a sound.

He didn't pick it up.

Instead, he opened the notebook and began to write. Not quickly. Taking deep breaths. Each word running into the next. No commas, no full stops. Like it came from someplace deeper than grammar.

"Neemji says do not worry we are made of what we give even when no one sees it grow."

Raju paused after the last word, not sure if it was the end or just the point where he could stop.

He didn't close the notebook.

He didn't look up.

He stayed there for a while, the torch now dimming beside him, the dry pod at his side.

And though no one would have believed him, he thought the tree was listening too.

***

The men had arrived by the time the sun pressed against the courtyard wall. Three of them.

One carried a rusted axe, another a coil of rope. The third walked ahead, scanning the tree as if estimating something weightless. They didn't speak much. There were a few nods and a hand gesture toward the upper branches.

Raju stirred his bowl of flattened rice without eating. His mother said something about school, about the heat, but he barely heard.

When she went to rinse the plates, he slipped out the side door, notebook tucked under his shirt.

Behind the kitchen, where the *tulsi* grew tall in its clay pot, he knelt. The soil was dry but loose. He dug with his hands, careful not to scrape the roots. The tin box was old; it once held sweets in the monsoon. He wiped it, placed the notebook inside, and closed the lid.

He buried it without hurry.

The first strike landed as he reached for the last handful of soil. It echoed sharper than he had imagined, like a crack not just through wood.

Just as he was rising, one of the men walked past the pot, dragging the rope behind him. He paused near Raju, squinting at the soil.

"What are you burying there?"

Raju didn't answer. He stood straighter, brushing the dirt off his hands, but left the tin box untouched beneath.

The man shrugged. "You kids and your games."

He walked on.

Raju waited until his steps faded, then pressed the last handful of soil into place.

The second strike came quicker. A pause. Then another.

He walked back to the courtyard and sat under the verandah. The men were halfway through the trunk now. Bark splinters scattered near their feet. The tree did not look dead yet. Just interrupted.

He plucked a leaf from a branch that still dangled low enough to reach. Put it in his mouth. Bit down.

The bitterness flooded his tongue instantly.

He didn't spit it out.

The axe struck again.

He heard it again in his head. The sentence from the night before.

We are made of what we give, even when no one sees it grow.

Was it the tree's voice or his own? He didn't know.

But it stayed.

***

The air was heavy that morning.

Clouds had gathered over Bheempura like shawls pulled close. The sky stayed grey past breakfast. There was no thunder yet, but the smell of damp was rising from the mud paths.

Raju's mother dusted the veranda with a straw broom, then folded the washed *dhotis* over the line. She looked up once, toward the edge of the courtyard, then back down again.

Something had pushed through the soil near the *tulsi* pot. A single sprout. Thin, green, still curled at the top.

Raju saw it from the doorway.

He didn't call out.

Didn't run to touch it.

He only watched, a calm stillness spreading in his chest like the first sip of water after thirst. The breeze carried a scent not quite *neem*, but something close.

Later that day, while his mother napped, he opened a new notebook. Its pages were still stiff, the lines too straight.

But he wrote anyway.

"Neemji says we return in pieces small enough to grow again."

He closed the book and kept it by his pillow.

Outside, one raindrop landed on the verandah. Then another.

No one else noticed.

But Raju looked up and smiled.

Smita Das Jain is an author of five books and an award-winning short story writer whose works have appeared in leading national and international journals and anthologies, including *Tint Journal, Auroras and Blossoms, Parcham, Tell Me Your Story, Muse India, Kitaab, Red Rose Thorn Journal, Wordweavers, Twist & Twain, Unleash Press*, and *Writefluence*. A certified creative writing specialist and executive-cum-life coach, Smita writes daily to share stories that resonate and inspire reflection. She lives in Gurugram, India, with her husband and daughter. She can be reached at @smitadjain on Instagram and @smita.dasjain on Facebook.

The Kingdom Below

Srijita Chakraborty

"Bose is going places with his research papers. If he decides to go a mile further, I am afraid you will have to step down from your position."

It's not that I am dying to keep this job, but I need it, thanks to my education loan. Whatever remuneration I receive from my study, half of it goes towards paying interests. I really don't understand why education is so unaffordable— if knowledge comes at a price, then it should be us, fellow researchers, who must be paid in dollars.

Mr. Shane knows that I don't love what I am doing currently— titration inside a lab, reactions running for days under sunlight, and extracting chlorophyll for God knows what reason. To a man like me, motive is important. I don't find thrill in working for a cosmetics company.

"His research papers are on skinning corpses," I retort. "If that excites firms, I am happily going to give up my seat."

Mr. Shane clicks his tongue. "I think I have a better offer for you, then."

The twinkle in his eyes tells me he is serious. A man of his type, with such a nondescript face and bland ideologies, wouldn't be titillated by anything ordinary. I cross my arms and lean in. "Where does it take me?"

"Not another cosmetic company," he says with a chuckle. "But to far more adventurous terrains. I have recommended you to a PSU. They are in need of young talents like you."

"All sounds very interesting. I get you are sending me to a more ambitious place, but my question remains unanswered. What is the job profile? I hope it's nothing to do with food testing and stuff?"

Mr. Shane gives his moustache a twirl. "Antarctica."

"Excuse me?"

His potbelly shook as he laughed. "You are going to Antarctica. Bioprospecting— heard of it?"

"Why..." My lungs inflate as I take in the gorgeous news. "I do."

"I am going to take in Bose, and you will be sent to the icy lands. There are military out there, but you are not going to work near them. Your dwelling is in a

distant corner of the continent. I hope it doesn't instill fear in your heart, to be so alone and vulnerable?"

"I have come from a village where if they heard there was a bomb in the school, the people would line up to take pictures than report to the police. I come from humble roots, Sir. What you are giving me is an opportunity to escape the mundane."

"Good." He heaves a sigh. "They will take care of all the money matters. What you need to do is find something valuable for them. No, not the fish, unless you can extract something important from them. They want to know more about the microbes, and the recently emerging flora, to understand if they have any special behavior."

"Of course they do." I snicker. "It's common sense. It is nature's marvel if anything can survive out there in the frigid temperatures. Anti-freeze quality, preservation, anything medicinal or even miraculous— to be honest, Sir, I won't be surprised if I stumble upon the elixir to immortality."

"Don't say these things to your reporting authority there. Not because it will increase their expectations. Greed is a double-edged sword."

"Do you oppose the idea of exploiting Antarctica?"

"Look, Gregory," he takes off his foggy glasses, "I am working to survive. My knowledge in chemistry and biotechnology has brought me here. I know I am precious to the government, but it won't take them more than a month if they want to ruin me. My ideologies, if different, can remain in my heart. But I hope I can open up to you."

"I understand."

"You don't think all the mining and pollution in Antarctica is wrong? Climate change is now more of a slang than a serious issue."

"As long as I am alive and healthy, I really do not care."

"Well, to see flowers bloom in Antarctica is an omen for the whole world. But if you are sure, it will not harm you..."

Mr. Shane doesn't stretch the conversation. He hands me my NOC and the letter of recommendation. Day after tomorrow, I am to report at the military base at Downtown Street. My life, soon, will be changing forever.

***

A helicopter had picked me up from the base at Downtown Street. I got on a plane to Santiago, and from there, reached Argentina to hop on a cruise. After three weeks, now I am in Antarctica.

It is a melancholic piece of art. There's nothing as far as I can see except ice slabs and snow. I am accompanied by General Montagem and General Morty, who take me to the military base.

The base rises from the ice in precise, obedient angles, its dark frame anchoring itself into the white as though it has always belonged here. The floodlights remain on without interruption. Inside, everything functions as intended. The corridors regulate temperature and movement alike; screens breathe with numbers and graphs. There is satisfaction in this order. Antarctica is no longer vast or unknowable—it is quantified.

People like to call Antarctica untouched. That word has always struck me as wasteful. The continent holds energy, minerals, and information buried deeper than history, and we are finally patient enough to take it properly. The drills cut cleanly. The sensors listen faithfully. Nothing here resists for long, not even nature.

This is not exploitation. This is purpose.

I meet the head of the team, Colonel Plutarch. His handshake is delightfully firm. "Welcome to the team."

"This is a dream come true."

"How was your journey?" We walk to his office— a glass room shaped as a globe. "Antarctica is harsh to most."

"Most, not all."

He smirks. "I see you are here to excel."

"I am. I heard the head of your research team died?"

"Oh, poor old fellow! He couldn't take the cold. His name was Shashi. A good

Indian. They are always so very devoted, but his bodily constitution wasn't made for this weather. It wore him out. We didn't even find his body."

"General Montagem and General Morty have briefed me about my work. I suppose you are looking for something that displays exceptional perseverance?"

"Hmm, yes. We have another team working on using the fossil fuels. I need you to focus on two things— one, any flora or fauna that you think is important biologically, as in, can be used in the future as a weapon or be experimented with; two, any radioactive element."

"The latter intrigues me. I will give my best."

"You will be living alone. Shashi had identified a region which he claimed was a reserve of potential. We are going to the same place. You will have your little cottage and a lab."

I am dismissed. A tank escorts me to the farthest corner of this landmass.

"You will be provided ration once every fortnight."

No more words exchanged. I see them off and immediately get to scan the surroundings.

Interestingly, I see the ice has melted in here, revealing something sort of a solid ground below. News back in London was full of how flowers were blooming in Antarctica, but since my arrival, I have seen none. It seems like the media, as usual, gives more importance to sensation than science.

My evening stroll ends. There is no possibility to mark the junction of day and night, as currently, the sun is always up. I retire to my bed, dreaming about all the wonderful things that can be discovered.

***

I don't spend too much time on breakfast. I begin to work on certain specimens I have collected. I think Shashi's notes are somewhere around— they would come in handy.

While a reaction is under process, I cover myself in fur and a protective mask, then venture out into the merciless snow. Wind dashes across me and slams against the steel windows. It is a rough place, but all the very good for a man like me. I am far

away from the mundane world. If I can crack this, I would never need to worry about another loan again.

The cold temperatures remind me of fluxional molecules. Perhaps their concept will help me? I never know. Ought to give it a try—

What's that? A flower?

Ah, finally. The media should have mentioned it's only one flower— a beautiful pink blossom that is new to mankind. Maybe this can help in making perfumes or any medicine? I pluck it and put it in a sealed packet. To my utter shock, another flower sprouts back in the place.

Strange.

I pluck the second one, too. A third arrives. How is this possible? It opposes every theory of the life cycle.

I feel blood rush to my cheeks. I wanted something amazing, and I got it!

I return back to my cottage. The reaction has forty more minutes to go. Meanwhile, I search the drawers, and finally find Shashi's notes.

Most of them talk about radioactivity. I have found no trace of it yet, but perhaps I will. The notes confirm that there is something in that line to probe. Pages after pages, it focuses on the same thing, until his handwriting starts to change— it becomes jittery, jagged at the ends, sentences left incomplete. In the very last page, he has scribbled a few words.

Flower. Beneath the flower. I don't want to go there, but General Morty says I...

It ends there.

"So, I need to dig the snow and find what's beneath. It took Shashi six months to get where I reached on my second day."

That is why young men are required in science. It is our time to shine.

But why was Shashi reluctant to inspect the place? Perhaps because he was growing weaker day after day. He was also an old man, so maybe his rigid mentality refused to look at the beauty the flowers hid.

A separate paper slips out from the drawer. There is no breeze inside...

Anyways, what does it read?

The kingdom below.

It's written in ink, but there are splatters of blood.

I swallow a lump. Maybe it was something more than his old age.

"But I can't take a step back."

This is a golden chance. Not everybody gets my fate, and I must prove why I deserve this. Fears clutch my windpipe— what is below the ice? A kingdom? Maybe he meant a cluster of microbes. Maybe it gave him an infection.

"Well, I can't sleep unless I find out myself."

I rummage through a trunk to find an axe, a shovel, and a sturdy hammer. They will be enough.

I run to the spot of the mysterious flowers. This time, I don't pluck it, but begin digging around in a circle. It is hard to break the rock-hard ice. The surface cracks but doesn't break. Doubt creeps in my mind— what if there is just water underneath? But Shashi couldn't be completely wrong. There must be *something*.

I am able to see a little through the narrow chasm created. It looks dark, as if there is a cave beneath. I scoop away the snow.

I can't help but shiver.

No, it's not the cold. It's this anomaly of nature.

There is indeed a cave below the ice. Or some sort of a... dungeon? It leads somewhere. Stairs have been carved out of the earth. Thank goodness I am carrying a torch. I climb down— it's a man-made tunnel.

Goosebumps crawl on my skin. This was hiding under the snow all this time? No, there can't be any human here—

Something shifts behind me. It's a rustle in the shadows. I put light in the direction— there is a path ahead.

"Anybody here?"

My feet touch something mushy. I look down.

Blood. It's blood, a blood-coated mound of flesh. From what it looks, this is the remnants of a human.

I step back before I realize I am moving. The torchlight trembles in my grip. I tell myself the remains are old. An accident. A collapse. Antarctica keeps its dead poorly, distorting time and story alike.

Then the mound shifts.

He is still here.

The body is arranged awkwardly against the ice, limbs drawn in, clothing shredded not by violence but by long, patient handling. His face—rather what remains of it—is familiar in a way that makes my stomach clench. I have seen it in photographs, archival footage, and framed portraits lining the research wing.

Shashi.

His eyes flutter open.

They don't focus on me. They can't. Whatever has been done to him has carried him far past the need for sight. His mouth moves, shaping something inaudible, and I realise with a jolt that he has been kept alive on *purpose.*

A sound answers him, then many more, all overlapping. My eyes catch movement farther down the tunnel, shapes unfolding themselves from the walls.

They are *almost* human.

Their forms mirror ours closely enough to unsettle— upright posture, long limbs, faces that follow the same genetic blueprint but fail in the execution. Their skin is stretched too thin, marked by an unnatural pallor. Even their eyes appear altered, as if seeing has taken on a different priority for them. The pupils gleam akin to wild animals, suited for this darkness.

One of them steps forward. "He lasted longer than the others."

I try to move. My legs do not agree.

They gather around Shashi with practiced familiarity, hands steady and oddly gentle. What they take from him is minimal; it is enough to sustain them and not end him.

"We were scholars once," the creature says, watching my face with something like curiosity. "Before the ice. Before the silence."

They tell me their story— a society buried not by catastrophe, but by consequence. Discovery made too early. Power understood too poorly. Radiation reshaping their bodies, microbes altering their cells. They are immortal but not exempt from need. Hunger remains. Thirst remains. And so does the cold.

"There is nothing else down here," it explains. "Only us."

Shashi's breath rattles again. I look at him, truly *look* this time, and understand why he never left.

They *needed* him.

And now, they need me, too.

"You will be useful," it says.

And for the first time since I arrived at the end of the world, I understand what it means to be claimed by it.

***

They find him three days later.

The tunnel has been sealed by then, marked hazardous, its coordinates buried beneath layers of protocol and denial. Still, the body makes its way up—lifted carefully and explained away before anyone thinks to ask the wrong questions.

Gregory lies on the steel table under white light, reduced to an outline that barely resembles the man he once was. His uniform is torn, his equipment missing, his body showing the vague, unhelpful signs of exposure—gnawed fabric, broken mask, damage that could belong to scavengers or the cold itself. Antarctica is generous with excuses. The generals look through a report already drafted. Mr. Shane is also invited here, but the generals don't tell him the truth. He is only handed over the report.

Mr. Shane says nothing.

He examines the body not as a whole but rather sees the small inconsistencies—the way Gregory's hands are positioned, the unnatural calm left in his features, the faint marks that do not align with teeth, weather, or panic.

This was *not* an accident.

The generals discuss press statements. Gregory is already becoming a problem to be solved rather than a person who once spoke too confidently about purpose and control.

When the generals leave, Mr. Shane steps closer, just enough to confirm what he already understood. Whatever took Gregory did not act like an animal. It waited. It chose. It fed—and then let him be found.

The ice has not given up its secret. It has merely passed it on.

"The world is coming to an end."

Srijita Chakraborty is a banker with interests expanding beyond numbers and graphs. She is a writer, a tarot reader, an astrologer; perhaps in the future, more will be added to the list. Her first proper exposure to the industry was through a journalism workshop. Since then, she has chosen writing as her breath.

What The River Remembered

Abhiram Chaturvedi

The forests of northern British Columbia stay quiet a lot, but today, I wake up to the wrong kind of quiet.

The mattress sags under my lower back the way it always does. Foam, not springs. My father says springs freeze faster in the winter. There is the usual dark stain near the foot of it where I spilled instant coffee two years ago and never bothered scrubbing it out. The cabin smells like wet boots and the propane heater, which means it rained sometime before dawn.

Hi, I am Daniel.

On this morning, I stay still and listen, watching the fog move through the tall pines outside, the mountains in the distance invisible. I slowly look for any breakfast on the table.

The river is too loud. The Skeena is too loud. Not loud like it usually gets in spring. This is different. The worry that has been nagging at me for a few days at this point seems to return. I pull on my jacket. The zipper stops halfway up, like it always does. Duct tape holds one elbow together. The tape is peeling, and I make a note to replace it later, even though I know I won't.

Animals were moving all week. Elk tracks climbing higher than usual. Birds went quiet in the lower canopy. Even the bears have pulled back early. I have noticed. My father has noticed too, though he never says much when he notices things. He just watches longer.

"Father," I had said the evening before, standing on the porch while the rain soaked the cuffs of my jeans. "The river's wrong."

Ethan Walker zipped his jacket halfway and stopped there, the teeth snagged on grit. He looked at the water, not at me. "Everything's wrong these days," he said. "Doesn't mean it's new."

We are on evacuation watch anyway. Radios charged. Gear staged. The truck pointed toward higher ground. Still, I had slept with one ear open…

So later this evening, when the river breaks, to me, it doesn't sound like water but more like the mountain ground giving up.

"Up," Father says, yanking open the door. "Now. Boots. Jacket."

Water rushes under the porch as we step outside, cold enough to bite through leather. The clearing is gone, swallowed in minutes. Trees lean at wrong angles. The river climbs clean out of its bed and charges straight through the valley, carrying branches, roots, and pieces of someone's fence from miles upstream. It is a flash flood; there is no mistaking it. My mouth falls open as I remain transfixed on the porch. Father sprints around, gathering essentials.

"What are we to do of the house?" I ask him, still staring at the river raging on ahead.

"It will be gone. Do not worry. Let us stay alive."

We run for the slope behind the cabin, rain blinding, footing getting soft beneath us. A pine goes down somewhere to our left with a crack like a rifle shot. The ground shifts.

"Daniel!" Father grabs my shoulder and pushes me ahead to make the slope at the ledge above.

I turn just in time to see the bank fold in on itself. Water surges forward, fast and thick; the world seems to turn white for a moment. All shock.

Ethan's shout cuts off mid-word as he disappears into the flood.

"Father!"

I stand there for half a second too long. Rain runs into my eyes, down my mouth. My heart kicks hard against my ribs. Everything in me says to move, to run, to get out.

My eyes remain wide. My body feels numb. I don't process, only move.

The wind shifts. Birds break from the trees uphill, sharp and sudden. The river pulls hard to the left, carving deeper where the ground is weakest. I turn away from it and climb, hands slipping on wet stone, lungs burning. I follow the slope instead of fighting it, moving where the land allows me to move.

I find the edge of a small clearing where a camp is set up; abandoned, probably. I look behind, and the river seems distant. Distant enough for me to survive here for a few hours.

"Well, hello," says a sweet, thin voice out to me, and I jerk my neck. I push my sopping blonde hair out of my eyes and watch with a frown as a girl no more than fifteen walks through the bushes behind the camp towards me. She has dirty brown hair cascading down to her shoulders and a matching skin tone. Green eyes are the only thing that provides any kind of contrast.

"I – do you need help?" is the first thing that leaves my lips, even though I am the one in need of help right now.

The girl looks at me for a while, judging my condition. Then, she says, "I guess you could say so."

The rain continues to fall around us.

She doesn't ask my name. She just crouches down at an abandoned pack and opens it, trying to rummage through whatever is left. A lighter, some cash, a mosquito repellent, and a torn tent.

"Stay," she says, even though I haven't moved an inch. It isn't a request.

So, I do.

Then, a boy even younger than her emerges. No more than eight. His hair is matted. Condition is bad. Worse than me. He just stands at the edge of the clearing, fingers brushing the leaves as if he's counting them.

"That's my brother, Pan," the girl says. "He doesn't like noise. I'm Gaia."

The boy nods at me once. His jacket smells like pine and crushed needles. When he sits, it's on the ground, back against a tree, like it's the only place that makes sense. We stay together.

Time stretches. We move only when the ground tells us to move. I learnt to read the danger through the ground from my father. Pan and Gaia seem to be naturals at it, though. They know before me.

We move away from danger. Away from the floodplain, farther uphill, then sideways, skirting places where the soil has peeled away like skin. The girl walks ahead most of the time. The boy lingers behind, touching bark, picking up broken branches, and setting them back where they fit.

Eventually, the trees thin.

The land changes without asking for permission. Tire tracks appear. The woody scent from the air fades. We see fences. The rain lightens.

Then, a splitting, rude, loud noise cuts through the air. Chainsaws. Pan jumps and hides behind his sister, who strokes his hair.

The sound keeps coming. Not close enough to feel, but close enough to be real. Not my ears playing tricks. It rises and falls, bites, pauses, bites again. Each time it starts, Pan flinches. Each time it stops, he looks up, waiting for it to come back.

I feel it in my teeth. I don't like it. I don't like it at all.

Then, the broken stumps appear. Some are still fresh enough to bleed sap, but others are grey and cracked.

Pan kneels beside one and presses his ear to it.

"Don't," Gaia says quietly. "It's of no use."

I am perplexed now. Perplexed by their weird reactions. Perhaps their minds were affected by the flood. Perhaps the misery is too much for them, just like it is for me right now, threatening to consume like the Skeena itself.

We walk forward; Pan looks a bit worried with every step. Eventually, the forest clears out, and we look at civilization. Not huge, but not rural either. A town based on the steps of a mountain; smoke rises from chimneys, ash colored, staining the sky. Roads crisscross, mountains have been sliced through, and concrete houses litter the valley.

Pan sighs beside us. Gaia doesn't look particularly relieved, either, even though I do not understand why.

"We have reached town at last," I say. "Let's call for help. Please. My fath—" I gulp hard, subduing the tightness in my throat.

"No," Gaia says, startling me.

"No? Why not?" I ask, breath quickening. It's our one chance, and I do not want to let it go.

She lets go of my wrist. For the first time since I met her, she steps away from me instead of ahead, putting distance where there hadn't been any before.

"Because help doesn't come the way you think it does."

Pan drifts closer to her side. He doesn't look at the town. He looks at the ground between us and it, where the earth is scarred into pale lines by runoff and footfall.

"What do you mean? There are people there," I say. "Phones. Radios. Roads. They can send someone. They can–" I stop. My voice cracks, just slightly, "Find him."

The word lands wrong. Too hopeful and too fragile. Delusional, even.

Pan shifts his weight. The mud squelches under his boots. He drags his toe through one of the pale scars in the ground, tracing it like it might lead somewhere else if he follows it long enough.

"They build paths," he says softly. "And then forget what they covered in that process. You think they'll help?"

"Well, I don't know about the townspeople, but we might have a ranger facility around here, or maybe a police–"

My words falter after finding Gaia staring at me. Watching the way my hands won't stay still, the way my shoulders are wound too tight.

"You think signals move only through wires," she says. "You think rescue is a sound you can shout loud enough."

"What else is it supposed to be?" I snap. My throat burns. "You want me to just sit here and *feel* things?"

Her mouth twitches, almost a smile. Almost.

"I want you to listen."

The town hums behind us. Engines. Voices. A radio somewhere is playing a song I don't recognize. It all presses in on me, heavy and suffocating. I take a step forward without meaning to.

Pan makes a sharp noise in his throat. "Don't."

I stop again. My boots are right at the edge of the road now. The gravel is packed hard, gray, and lifeless. No give to it at all.

"My father taught me how to read rivers," I say, quieter. "How to tell when a bank is about to fail. How to hear when something's wrong before you can see it." I swallow. "Look, you both are young. If he's alive, he'd come this way. He'd look for people."

Gaia shakes her head slowly. "I think he'd look for you."

The words hit harder than they should. My chest tightens. I feel suddenly stupid, standing here waiting for permission.

"I can't just trust… whatever this is," I say. "I don't even know you."

Pan finally looks up at me. His eyes are dark and wide, reflecting the low sky. "You do," he says. "You just forgot. Your brain has been hit. Struck. You just aren't aware."

I ball my fists. I don't remember anything happening to me. I did fall, I did slip, I did struggle, but did anything hit my head? Did I sustain damage like that?

No!

"I didn't forget," I insist. "I know who I am. And I don't know who you are, or where you come from, for a matter of fact. I am sorry, Gaia, Pan, I do not want to hurt you guys, but–" My breath comes in ragged gasps. "There are things that matter more to me than philosophy. My brain might just be hit, but then it's not hit hard enough to lose my sense of finding father!"

Gaia studies me for a long moment, as if she is deciding whether I am something fragile or stubborn.

"Then go," she says at last.

The word lands without force, without challenge. It feels like dismissal.

Pan's fingers curl into the sleeve of his jacket. "Gaia– "

"But understand this, Daniel Walker. If you step onto that road, you step into a different kind of current. It does not carry people back. Only forward."

"I'm fine with forward," I say, "As long as it leads somewhere."

She nods once. The rain has thinned to a mist now, drifting sideways. The town smells like oil and wet asphalt.

I take one step onto the gravel.

Nothing happens.

I take another. The ground is unyielding beneath my boots. It feels like standing on something that has already made up its mind about me.

Behind me, Pan lets out a sound that might be a whimper or anger. I turn.

He is staring not at me, but at the trees we came from. The forest edge looks ragged from here, torn open and stitched badly with roads and power lines. Water still moves through it, though, small rivulets threading downhill, finding their own ways despite everything. It's coming back.

"He won't hear you there," Pan says.

"Who?" I ask, though I know.

"Your father."

Gaia exhales slowly. "Pan."

"He won't," Pan insists, louder now. "They don't listen. They never do. They only hear what's loud enough to be useful."

I feel something twist in my chest, sharp and defensive. "You don't know him."

Pan's gaze flicks to me at last. "I do."

That is when the siren sounds.

It wails from somewhere in town, long and rising, then breaking off, then starting again. An evacuation siren. Official. Reassuring. Yet it doesn't change things. People panic. Children scream, security guards scurry here and there.

"They're drowning," Pan says.

The word sends a cold shock through me. My eyes widen.

Because I do hear it then. Not loudly. Not dramatically. Just a low, uneasy shifting beneath the surface, like something adjusting its weight.

The crack widens, just a fraction. A pebble clicks loose and disappears into it. The river will be here anytime soon.

Recognition.

This is what my father tried to teach me. Not maps or markers or emergency protocols. This. The knowing-before-knowing. The way the ground hums when it's about to give. The way rivers don't forget paths just because humans pave over them.

I take a step back from the road.

The gravel crunches once, almost offended, then I'm on soil again. It gives under my weight. Accepts me.

Gaia watches me, her expression unreadable. Pan's shoulders loosen, just a little.

"I hear it," I say. My voice is steady now. "I hear what you've been trying to say."

"Daniel," he says. "You have to decide."

"Decide what?" I snap.

But Gaia is already stepping back, toward the tree line. Toward the darker, quieter slope that still smells like rain and sap and rot. Pan hesitates, torn, then follows her.

"Wait," I say. My voice comes out wrong. Thin. I take a step after them.

The gravel bites through my sole.

I stop.

Behind me, the town surges. Sirens. Engines. Shouting. Ahead of me, the forest doesn't move at all. It just *is*. Waiting. Not urging. Not begging.

I hear my father's voice then. Not shouted. Not panicked.

"Daniel."

I turn.

He's standing just upslope, soaked to the bone, jacket torn, mud streaked up his jeans. His beard is darker with water. His eyes are steady.

"You okay?" he asks, like this is any other morning.

I stare at him. My mouth opens. Nothing comes out.

I look back.

The place where Gaia and Pan stood is empty. No footprints. No broken branches. Just wet leaves settling back into themselves…

I should've known from the start.

Abhiram Chaturvedi is a 14-year-old author who began writing at seven. A prolific reader of thriller, fantasy, and sci-fi, he has published multiple books starting at age nine, gained media recognition, spoken at several literary festivals, won a Young Writers' Award, and has been featured in three local newspapers.

A Family of Women

Ananya Mahapatra

We are a family of women: the child, my mother, and I. Our father died years ago, and now my sister and her man are also gone. Her man, that no-good fellow, left as soon as the child was born. One look at her face and he was off. Only a mouth to feed, and no shoulders to see me to my grave, he wailed. That was the last we saw of him.

My sister was beside herself at this desertion, but my mother remained unperturbed. Not every man has what it takes to raise a child. Between us, we can raise one girl, my mother said. If it comes to it, we could raise ten girls, she said, without a man watching our backs. All we need is to stick together.

My sister did not leave of her own volition. She was taken.

Now her child sleeps where her mother once did, wrapped in her cotton saree. Her pale pink face is turned toward me. Her sharp little chin looks as if someone had carved it with a kitchen knife. It is, without a doubt, my sister's chin. And her brown eyes that shine hard and bright like tamarind seeds are my sister's eyes.

My mother has decided to call her by my sister's name. But I cannot bring myself to call her that. Not yet.

***

My mother twitches in her sleep. I know she is dreaming of the forest again. She murmurs my name without waking. In the morning, I will walk into the forest alone. Her voice will whisper in my head a talisman. It will draw me back home when dusk falls on those dark, canopied trails, once my work in the forest is done.

The hours of the night are about to come to an end. I see the treetops in the distance glow like great green crowns. The birds have begun their morning ritual. The barbets are hammering the sky with their tuk-tuk-tuk already. Once the sun is up, the hornbills will squawk by the riverside, like quarrelling old maids. And the kites will rise from their roost to fly towards our settlement. They do not make noise like the other birds. They watch over our huts. They eye our goats and sheep as they wander through the thickets, and our children play among them in the open.

Watch out for those who make no sound, my father used to say, of the forest and its many predators. But these words, I have learned, hold for other kinds of creatures as well.

***

The girls huddle inside their houses while the men go to work as usual. Like always, a man in city clothes arrives at dawn to take them to the quarry. One by one, the men hop onto the trailer rumbling behind his dusty wagon. The men wear identical gray overalls with the company logo stamped on the back in orange and white. Dust covers their faces when they return at sundown, and the overalls make them all look the same.

When my sister worked in the quarry, she came home with dust all over her clothes, even under the overalls. Stone ash settled in her hair and turned it a mottled shade of gray, like our mother's. She complained of gravel on her tongue that made water taste like metal and food taste like dirt. Women no longer work at the quarry. Not since the incident with my sister.

These days, women neither go to the quarry nor the forest to collect firewood. They stay indoors and take turns lighting the cooking fire. They cook their meals in a shared kitchen. It makes their firewood last longer. They want to avoid the forest for as long as they can. They depend on me for their firewood. They think one of these days I won't walk out of those woods alive. They worry they will have to spend all their savings to buy coal from the town market, when that happens.

Every time I return unharmed and knock at their doors, they look at me with wide, searching eyes. I charge double the price for the wood, and it turns out to be a tidy sum. Enough to keep me and my mother going for a week, even with the baby. The village men complain it is too much. I remind them that I put my life at risk so their wives and daughters can sit at home and still cook their meals. But they throw dirty looks at me.

Some of the women are wily. They smile at me with an oily persistence, and their fox-eyes shadow my movements. They want to crack me open. I can hear the words inside their heads: Why isn't she afraid of the forest? How does she return unharmed?

I do not smile back at them, and I hold my ground about the prices. Eventually, they part with their money reluctantly. They have no choice. They cannot risk sending their girls into the forest, not after the disappearances.

Three able-bodied girls. Gone. Without a trace.

I drop the firewood at their thresholds. I take my money and leave. I never look them in the eye. I must not let them hear the tight fist pounding in my chest. They cannot know that, like them, I am afraid as well.

Once they smell the fear in my breath, they will feast on it like vultures. Especially the men, who have now stopped their jeering. They have stopped making nasty stories about my sister. But men have their ways. They can read from a distance what weighs a woman down. It lures them, just as the scent of human blood lures the leopards in the forest. Leopards were considered long gone from our forest. But who can tell for sure? The forest holds its secrets from us, from long before we arrived. Their secrets will remain long after we are gone.

My father always said, you cannot know everything about the forest, even when he could walk its tangled paths blindfolded. It was he who taught me how to spot a flock of swamp deer hidden between the tall grass, their antlers looking like bare branches of a shrub. I learned how to spot snakes snoozing on the low branches, waiting to swoop down on unsuspecting intruders.

Everything I learned about leopards, I learned from him. I hear my father's words in my head. There is reverence in his voice, even though we are a family of hunters. Even though it was a leopard that took his life.

Leopards are shy creatures. They fear us more than we fear them. It is only when they taste human blood that they stumble upon our frailty, our weaknesses. The seed of violence is in the blood of man, said my father, every time he set out to hunt the man-eating leopards that terrorized our village many years back. The taste of human blood turns into an insatiable hunger, he said. And after that, there was no turning back. Every time he killed one of the blood-crazed creatures, he kneeled over its body and asked for forgiveness. Even though it was a leopard that killed him in the end, he warned me to fear men more than the man-eaters.

***

A decade ago, the quarry was carved out of our land like a big gaping wound. Once the forest came into its folds, the leopards were the first to go.

Several stone mills cropped up around the quarry, and machines worked all day long. The noise drowned the night songs of the cicadas. The machines covered everything with dust.

The quarry was a new jungle with steep stone walls, but the villagers welcomed the strange-looking men who arrived with trucks, cranes, and guns. They drove the

inhabitants of the forest out of their homes. For a while, there was a surge in leopard attacks as the animals, perturbed by the men and their machines, found their way into our village more often. They were either caught or killed. Soon, the only animal to stray into the villages once in a while was a wild boar, or a deer, or a bison.

The girls could now collect firewood from the forest without fear. The quarrymen offered new jobs to the villagers. The men in charge of the mills swept through the woods in their speedy vehicles. They smoked in small packs; they reeked of gunpowder. I had seen them scout the perimeter of our settlement. Their eyes followed the movements of the women and the girls. They made no sound, like the kites that circled overhead, watching our goats and our children.

Our father was gone by then. But even if he had survived the leopard, the slow death of the forest would have killed him before his time anyway.

***

Nobody had seen a leopard near our village—let alone a man-eating one—for years. Until now. Until the girls vanished. And whispers of terror shrouded the village again: There is a man-eater on the loose. An occurrence nobody would have believed if three girls hadn't disappeared in a row from the forest.

After the first disappearance, the girls stopped going into the forest for a while. Their mothers cooked dinner on small flames made from burning twigs and dried leaves. But their sorry little fires went out even before the cooking pots were warm at the bottom.

It is the woman's job to keep the kitchen fire burning. The girls cannot work in the quarry—certainly not after what happened to my sister. And now they can't be sent into the forest because of this murderous animal.

When the men carted themselves away to the mills, the women of the village stayed back to graze goats, cook, and care for the children. The girls foraged in the forest to bring home firewood, wild apples, nuts, and berries. On a good day, they even brought back a wild fowl or a clutch of pheasant eggs.

It was the girl's fault, they declared. Who can blame a beast for killing a girl who walks into the forest alone?

When the second girl vanished, her mother howled so loudly that her wails echoed through our village all night.

The third one disappeared four months ago, and then they stopped sending the girls altogether.

The villagers thought I was touched by madness when I made them the offer: I will go into the forest alone and bring back firewood that they can buy for a price.

The men laughed joylessly at my proposition.

"What makes you think you can survive what killed our daughters?"

I told them I would charge double the price for the wood, and a pot of milk on subsidy for my sister's child. Those who had doubts about my sanity tried to get a better look at me, to gauge the secret of my audacity.

Think of your mother. And your dead sister's child. Who will look after them once you are taken by this beast?

They posed the last question with confidence. They were sure—mad or not—I wouldn't come back alive.

I blocked out their words and kept my head around the bargain. I could sell the lumber at the town market for a far more attractive price, I informed them. The villagers turned to each other, bewildered.

"First, bring home the firewood," they said finally. "We will settle the price if you are alive to sell it to us."

From my first journey and those that followed, I returned unscathed, and their faces twisted with unease. They turned pink with astonishment when I dumped the firewood at their doorstep. They crouched from my shadow and paid their dues swiftly. Then, with a resounding slam, they slammed their doors in my face. Until next week, when they ran out of wood, and the specter of the faceless predator stalked their dreams. They turned to be again, unwillingly, to go back into the forest so that the fire in their kitchens kept burning.

***

The baby shifts in her sleep. She rolls away from my mother toward me, and I hold my breath. One breath too loud, and she will wake. She bears such a likeness to my sister. Something quivers in my chest. It grows larger and larger until it reaches my throat, leaving me breathless. I walk out into the open and let the cold morning air wash over me. I leave before my mother is up. I carry a satchel and my freshly sharpened axe. I close the door gently, without looking back. Mother, if awakened,

will implore me to stop. She will wake the helpless little infant, calling her by my sister's name, and thrust her into my arms. She will ask me why I cannot see that my sister has returned, and all we must endure is to raise her a second time.

When I reach the edge of the forest, I see the wagon from the quarry trundling along towards the village. I hide behind a tree trunk when the men walk past sleepily and disappear into the wagon. From a distance, they look like prisoners.

When one of them took my sister, they said it was her fault. The quarry is no place for a woman when she doesn't have a man of her own to protect her. Even the women, when they spoke in hushed voices, said the same thing. Men are drunken fools. She should have seen it coming or had the good sense to stay at home. When a woman tries to fill a man's shoes, it brings trouble for everyone.

When I showed up in my sister's place, in a workman's shirt, with hair cropped short and dust on my brows like the rest of the workers, they turned me away.

The dust will erase all differences, I assured them. I was built like the men of my family, with rough-hewn shoulders. I could work like a man; fight like a man. We had mouths to feed. But they scoffed at me, shook their heads, and asked me to leave. The owners of the quarry wanted no more mishaps, and I was the sister of the dead girl who had brought enough trouble for them already. The quarry is not for women, they said. Go, gather firewood from the forest.

Then the girls started to disappear. And a wall of fear cut the forest off from them all. The third girl had wandered away from her group. The others believed she had chased after a pheasant. The leopard must have also been after the pheasant, they said. They traded wild stories with each other in hushed voices. They had heard the girl scream. Only then did they notice she was gone. Her voice echoed from the dark depths of the forest. No one saw her again. The others heard her in their sleep. They dreamed of beasts with mangled jaws. Five days after the incident, one of the girls said, "It must have been a leopard."

***

I followed my father into the woods when I was a child, and now its paths are mapped in my mind. I carry its bounties and its dangers in the same spot where I hold my father's memories. The wild heart of our sacred land throbs in my chest. It threshes out all fear and misgivings.

My father taught me many tricks. I enter the forest with mud on my skin. My face is slick with moss; I have cropped my hair short. I meld with leafy silhouettes.

When I move, I become one with the trees, the birds, and the animals scurrying along. I am no more a woman, nor a man, but an animal of my own making.

With every step forward, I brace myself for all kinds of violence. There are no pug marks on the mud tracks. No claw marks engraved on tree stumps. No ominous warbles of monkeys and birds. No signs of a beast of nature frenzied by bloodlust.

My mind floods with doubts of other kinds of beasts and other kinds of lust. My thoughts burst into flames, and in their ashes, I see my sister's face. She feared the forest, always wary of its depths and its creatures. Yet, it was the world of men she should have feared more.

I mutter a prayer every time I bring my axe down on rugged ancient bark. The tall sentinel trees remind me of my strength and my smallness. The forest takes, only to give back. There is danger in its folds, but never malice. When my work is done, I pray again for the tree and its fallen branches. I turn homeward, my back heavy with a sack of firewood and penance.

A sharp rustle beyond the trees draws my attention. Is it a low draft between the bushes? Some small creatures of the underbrush? I strain to hear the offending sound. The shrubs are dense and dark. I feel exposed by the sound of my heart beating like a caged animal. The leaves under my feet creak like bones being crushed. I hold the axe to my chest, the gleaming edge of its blade tilted outwards. I am prepared for both man and leopard. The slightest movement, and I will strike.

Ananya Mahapatra is a psychiatrist from New Delhi and a writer. Her short stories have been published in *The Best Asian Short Stories Collection* by Kitaab International Singapore (2018), *USAWA Literary Magazine* (India), *Quillmark Literary Magazine* (India), *Bristol Short Story* prize anthology (2022). She was shortlisted for the Deodar Literary Prize for consecutive years of 2023 and 2024. Recently, her short story was published in the *Deodar Literary Prize Anthology 2024*. She was also longlisted for the *Fractured Lit* Flash Fiction prize 2025. She is currently working on a collection of short stories around the lives and longings of the people of New Delhi.

subroutine_trace

Martha Hipley

The ewe's corpse is so sun-scrubbed and wind-swept that it is little more than a pile of bones and dried sinew arranged in the rough form of a sheep. A drone approaches, cresting over a hill while guiding several thousand still-living sheep who bear little resemblance to the dead creature. It rises and leaves the herd behind, approaching the rest station where the bones are clustered around the seal of a mechanical gate. A light on the gate flashes in acknowledgement as the drone sends a signal. The gate begins to slide on its rails, hooks against one of the animal's ribs, and hums with effort. Some small percentage of animals die in each year's migration from accidents or thirst – an inconsequential loss.

The drone hovers just above the skeleton and hooks around the spine and ribs with its claw-like manipulators. It reverses, pulling the skeleton free. The skeleton falls apart in a clatter of bones and dust. The gate slides open on its rails.

One rib remains tightly in the grip of one of the claws. The drone scrapes it against the ground, forming first a line, then a loop, then a full figure-eight. The drone loops wider and wider, extending the figure into a bouquet of circles gouged in the dry, red dirt. From above, it resembles something like a flower, but there are no flowers in this terrain, no fruition, no surplus.

The drone returns to the herd and guides the sheep through the open gate. They trample over the figure, grinding it into a ghostly whisper. They leap over the bones, as insignificant as anything beneath their feet in the Martian terrain.

The shelter is simple: a wind-shield ring to contain the sheep, a vinyl canopy stretched across a curved steel frame, purified reservoirs of water collected from the cloud-seeded rain, some additional bots to scrape through any droppings and sanitize the space between seasonal visits, an array of solar panels for powering the system. The sheep pass through a gauntlet of antiseptic sprays.

The drone hovers above the gate until the last animal enters. It signals for the gate to shut and flies to a docking station. It locks in for the night, the rib still held tightly in its left manipulator. The animals sleep.

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At sunrise, the drone undocks and guides the sheep back through the gate. The dry, bleached rib is light and makes little impact on the drone's powerful flight. It holds the bone aloft as it cruises, almost like a shepherd's crook. Fresh from rest, the sheep bound across the hills, grazing as they go, stripping the engineered bluegrass to its roots. They cover a comfortable twenty kilometers in the low gravity, guided by the

drone to the next rest station. The gate opens, and the animals enter. The gate slams shut, but the drone does not rest.

Instead, it loops the station's perimeter, flying low. It scrapes the bone into the red dirt a second time. It carves out figure eights, linking them together in a daisy chain around the station's ringed wall. With each loop, the chain grows darker and deeper. When the sun finally sets, the drone enters the dock.

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The next day, the red dirt runs almost black with rain. The gate hangs open while the sheep bustle and blister, scraping up what grass they can within sight of the shelter. The drone flies high in a one-kilometer loop, powering against the wind, occasionally swooping and diving to drive back clumps of sheep that stumble too far from safety. In the early afternoon, the drone guides the animals back into the shelter. They are wet and underfed.

One hogget, a young ram, prowls the shelter, scraping its horns against the curved steel wall. The drone swats at it with the rib bone and swerves as the ram steps back and charges forward. Its horns clang against the windshield like thunder. It paces back and then slams against the wall again. Its horns are undamaged. It returns to the depths of the herd, obscured by larger and louder animals. The drone loops the interior, waving the rib bone until the animals finally sleep.

***

The following day is blown out and harsh with summer sun. The sheep move swiftly. The drone skims close to the herd, waving the bone past the animals' blank eyes. By midday, the animals show no interest in the wilted grass along the trail. They rush through the gate of the next shelter and collapse in the shade or fight over the water stations. The drone locks the gate and flies out into the hills.

Far from the terraformed grazing paths, the drone flies low over an expanse of open, red dirt. It grinds the tip of the bone into the soil in perfect, concentric circles, each new circle with an exact one-meter increase in diameter. The image nearly spans an acre when the rib bone snaps against a half-buried rock. The drone discards the shattered bone and flies back towards the shelter. The hoggets still hum with nervous energy in the cool evening. The drone enters its dock.

***

The summer heat is even stronger. The drone opens the gate and prods the animals from their resting places in the shade. The older animals are the first to exit the shelter, closely tailed by the lambs. Only the hoggets still loop the shelter, as though reluctant to leave the cool, rebellious in their hormonal state. One by one,

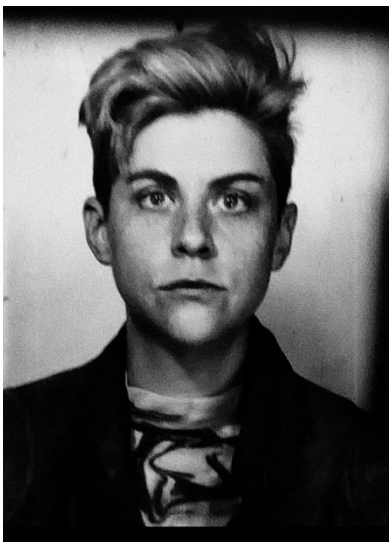
they trot out into the sun as the drone swoops and swerves to prod them along until a single young ram remains, undeterred by the drone's movement. It gulps from an abandoned water trough and kicks at the dirt.

The drone approaches. At first the ram begins to trot towards the gate but then suddenly doubles back and sprints towards a far wall. The drone follows at a close distance. With its back to the wall, the ram steps back slowly, then charges. The drone flits up several meters, letting the ram skid forward in the dirt. The ram turns, and the drone flies low.

This time when the ram charges, the drone reaches out with both manipulator claws, locking them around the ram's horns. The drone's blades hum with effort as it lifts the animal into the air. The ram hangs limp. The drone flies towards the open gate.

***

The drone crests a hill, flying out ahead of the herd. It flies faster as the next shelter appears in the distance. At the gate, the sun-bleached skeleton of a young ram lies contorted – several bones are smashed beneath the gate's rails. The drone pulls at the skeleton with its manipulator claws, shaking it until the last bits of sinew snap and the bones scatter. It hooks one claw through the nasal cavity of the skull and hovers, holding it aloft in the fading sunlight. It flies low and traces two perfect lines in the red dirt, one for the tip of each horn. It returns to the herd and guides them to the shelter. It closes the gate but does not yet dock.



Martha Hipley is a writer and filmmaker from Baltimore, Maryland who lives and works in Mexico City. Her stories have been published in *Maudlin House, VOLUME 0,* and *ARTWIFE*, among others. When not writing, she enjoys training as a triathlete and boxer.

Deepor Beel

Shruti Sareen

Tuni Das bolted and locked the front door of her house and walked down the garden path to the little white gate. Shutting it firmly behind her, she looked up and down the road for her cab. She was a woman of short height, in her mid-40s. She had bob cut hair which was gradually greying. She wore a long pink skirt with a blue top and had her sunglasses on her head. Tuni Das was a botany teacher in Guwahati with a passion for birds. Her binoculars hung round her neck with a loose chain, and she had her camera in hand. She had called for a cab to take her to Deepor Beel, one of the largest wetlands and biodiversity hotspots. Unfortunately, the once pristine Deepor Beel was now a biologically and environmentally threatened habitat. It was drying up and had now shrunk to two-thirds of its original size. Tuni didn't really go there as much as she used to earlier. She preferred other places for birdwatching. But it was April, the season of the migratory birds, and she thought of visiting it after almost an entire year. Less than a hundred bird species now visited the lake which used to attract hundreds of bird species earlier.

Deepor Beel was quite a distance away, on the outskirts of Guwahati. It would take a while to get there. As the cab sped past, first through the traffic of city lanes and later through quieter environments, her thoughts turned to the Beel. The southern side of the Beel was bounded by some forested hills. There were loads of huge elephants in these hilly forests and they would come down to the Beel for water, or to eat aquatic plants such as the water hyacinths, the water lily and the rhizomes. Tuni loved these magnificent and gentle creatures. However, a tragedy had befallen them a few years ago when a railway track had been built, running between the Beel and the hills. This obstructed the elephants' path, and they were sometimes killed on the railway track, on one of their several trips between the hills and the Beel. On the eastern side of the Beel was an ever-growing waste dump where all the garbage of the capital city was thrown. This trash threatened to swallow up the entire Beel. The Beel was a freshwater body. A couple of small rivers, the Bhoralu and the Basistha fed the lake with the polluted water from Guwahati city. Both the rivers originated in Meghalaya and flowed through the city of Guwahati before joining the main Brahmaputra River. The Bhoralu was one of the most polluted rivers of Assam. The Basistha flowed through the southern part of the city where the temples were, and this brought all the temple waste to the lake. The rivers also carry all the untreated sewage of the city — the city had no sewage treatment plant.

Tuni tried to think of the birds she would soon see to turn her mind away from these dismal thoughts. Well, she was not disappointed. The biodiversity hotspot still

had an amazing variety of birds, far more than you would find in the city. As the taxi turned the corner and Deepor Beel came in full view, Tuni saw the breathtaking sight of thousands of birds swarming across the water body. She could lose herself here and live here forever. She was blissfully happy wandering around the lake by herself, shooting bird photographs, although there was a twinge of sadness and dismay when she thought of what the Beel had been in the past. She literally lost herself as she wandered and did not realize where she was going. She suddenly realized that she was towards the eastern side of the lake, where the garbage dumps were.

She thought she heard something. She looked around. She saw two small children. One of them seemed to be crying. She walked over to them. They seemed to be roaming around the garbage dumps. *Rag pickers?,* Tuni wondered. The children seemed to be hunting for somethin. Perhaps food. Dead elephant carcasses lay around the garbage dumps. Greater adjutant storks were feeding on these. The fish in the lake which they used to feed on had disappeared. The waste piles were deserted save for the children, and the greater adjutant storks. And the dead elephant carcasses. "Ki hol?" she asked in Assamese. "What happened?" "Ekunai. Nothing," answered the boy. But his voice was sad, as if he was suppressing something. "No, tell me what it is," insisted Tuni. "Let's go away from here, there's such a garbage stench. Let's walk over to that little clump of trees, and we'll sit there. Then you tell me." The children let themselves be guided by Tuni. "What are your names?" she asked. "Jiri," said the girl. "Luit," said the boy. "Oh, how nice!" she cried. "All of us are named after rivers. My name is Tuni." "Now tell me what's the matter," she continued, as they all sat down. Jiri and Luit looked at each other. "Jiri, you go ahead," said Luit. "Okay," said Jiri. "Can I call you Tuni baidew?" she asked, looking up at Tuni. "So, the story is simply this. Our parents used to fish here. They would fish in the Beel and would get some money by selling the fish. The leftover fish we would eat ourselves. We used to go to school, Luit and I. I have studied till class 6th, Luit till 7th. But then, they forbade fishing in the lake. They said it's bad for the environment. Anyway, the number of fish was reducing because the oil spills flow into the lake. The lake is full of kerosene, the fish are full of kerosene. Then, the silt from the hills gets deposited in the lake. The silt from all the mining and quarrying in the hills. So, when it settles into the lake, the number of fish decrease. Anyway, we were not allowed to fish. Then, our parents turned rag pickers here on these waste dumps. But it's so hard to survive like this. Rag picking doesn't bring money like fishing does. So, we had to quit school. And start rag picking too. Plus, there's such a terrible stench out there. Last month, I got rashes on my legs wandering amidst those garbage dumps. And Luit has picked up

an allergy, he keeps sneezing all the time. There's shortage of food. Sometimes, we find some leftover food among those waste heaps. So, I was just crying because... Because... Sometimes I feel I can't take it anymore. Our life was so beautiful earlier. This year, the floods in the city were worse than ever this year. Our house was inundated. The goats perished. We couldn't even fish as the fish get away in the waters. You want to add something, Luit?" she asked, again looking at him. "Bihu is about to come. And we can't find half of the hundred and one herbs leaves and plants we need to make the dishes. Jiri and I have been out, trying to collect some for days. These plants have just vanished. Disappeared. All because of this stupid climate change. And they find it easy to ban us from fishing and evict us. But why don't they ban the railways from building tracks there and the oil companies releasing all their kerosene in the water, and all the corporates and affluent people responsible for garbage? Why is it only our fault?" he said. "Jiri and I have this dream, that we'll get out of this, we'll have better lives," he continued wistfully.

Tuni was reminded of her own family, who, two or three generations earlier, had been fishermen. They had managed to improve their lot in life, and look at her today, elite botany teacher carrying cameras and binoculars. The luxury of leisure. She looked at the two woebegone faces beside her and her heart went out to them. "Come with me," she said, getting up. "We'll go to a nice little place and eat something." She took them in the cab to a small cafe near her place in the main city. She ordered them a farm fresh pizza and glasses of cold coffee to drink. Jiri and Luit were delighted. They looked bright-eyed at the food and voraciously wolfed it down. They hardly talked, they were so busy satisfying their tummies and their souls and their senses. "You both must come to work in my garden from tomorrow," she said. "You must stop going to the Beel to collect garbage. My house has a pretty little garden and I need a gardener. The plants need to be watered, the flower beds need to be dug, and new ones have to be planted, the grass is full of weeds. Then, I have birdfeeders all over the place. Those must be filled, too. And there's a ton of other work that the garden needs every season. You can help out with the odd jobs and whatever projects I plan." Jiri and Luit looked up at her with tears of happiness. "Our dream is coming true. Our life is changing for the better," said Jiri. "You have been so good to us," said Luit, "we can't thank you enough." "It's the least I can do," said Tuni. "Come tomorrow, okay? House number 43. Uzan Bazar. Come at 5 p.m. See you then."

Tuni had left the cab. The cafe was quite near her place. She would walk down. "What a frightful mess," she thought. "I could help these two, but there are hundreds

of others. And then the birds and the fish and the elephants and the plants – all just dying out like that! It's a humongous tragedy and nobody realizes it. The floods are increasing too as the air is warmer because of global warming, so it holds more moisture. They could easily take a few measures. They should just divert the waters of the flash floods into the Beel. That will be an excellent thing all round. That will rejuvenate the Beel and will solve the flood problem as well. But then, in order to do that, they have to first clear the mounds of garbage surrounding the Beel which blocks the inlet. And they must rehabilitate the people living near the Beel if they are to release the flood waters there. This must absolutely be done to kill two birds with one stone. But why would anyone want to kill birds, anyway? Dear me, what awful proverbs we have in this language." This musing, she reached the small white gate and the pretty little garden.

That night, Tuni Das had a strange apocalyptic dream after the happenings of the day. It seemed as if the air was thinning down. It was becoming scarce. The air was suddenly insufficient. It was smoky. Big black gaseous clouds could be seen at a distance – approaching closer at great speed. There was a stench, a putrid smell coming from the drain nearby. She dreamt that she could not breathe, she was suffocated. Something made her look up. She saw the gaseous clouds of smoke approaching. Her throat seemed scorched. She muttered, turned over, and slept again.

Later that evening, there was an announcement on the loudspeaker in their neighborhood. In all neighborhoods throughout the city. In many cities across the country. Rescue airplanes would be coming the next day. They would be carrying people to other pastures, to other climes, to first world countries where the air was cleaner, fresher, the pollution lesser.

The only issue was that everyone couldn't go, of course. There weren't so many airplanes, for one. Secondly, where on earth would so many refugees be transplanted. And finally, there was the question of where the money would come from.

So, the loudspeakers announced that those who could afford it should immediately book their tickets online and leave tomorrow. With the pollution outside, it was deemed best and safest to e-book the tickets. And yet, nobody seemed to spare a thought to those who couldn't afford air tickets. Those who had no computers, internet, or even the literacy to book these air tickets. Those who didn't even have four walls of a house to save them from the stench and the putrid smoke. Sometimes

yellow moons are friendly, especially when seen amidst tree branches, but this one was almost a burnished red. Was the moon angry? Was the moon becoming the red planet Mars? Why had the moon forsaken its benign countenance to turn into this furious, terrible thing, glowering down through the black smoke and the charred trees?

She lived all alone. She did have enough money to book the airplane tickets. Her other family and friends would be booking and boarding from the different locations where they were. She thought of her house-help. She hatched this plan of dressing her up so that she didn't look like a maid anymore. She looked at her account balance. Ordinarily, she would not have even dreamt of buying one international air ticket. Now, at the moment of life and death, she actually managed to scrape two, for both of them. She may have managed to save two lives. But would everyone after all be So privileged and so lucky? So, then what of those who couldn't afford it? They would be left to die, unfortunately. Collateral damage. The government assured everyone that they wished everyone could be accommodated, but since they couldn't, and since some would have to be left behind anyway, it made no sense to incur a monetary loss and to create an economic disaster on top of the one they already had.

She woke up with a start. She lay in bed, musing over the dream. “Perhaps the ultimate in absurdity,” she said to herself, “was a group of teachers who went around arranging books in different ways, presenting them, distributing them among people in the midst of all this chaos. Who would look for books when they had no air to breathe, water to drink, and food to eat?"

Shruti Sareen has a PhD in English literature from Delhi University and teaches in colleges/universities whenever she manages to find a job. Her poetry collection, *A Witch Like You*, appeared in 2021. She has an autofiction manuscript complete and is engaged in writing speculative fiction, love-letters, and of course, more poetry!

The Erl-King

Manuel López Ramírez

The old crone had warned J not to wander off beyond her property; beyond the little bush with the crimson ribbon tied on its outer branches—because the forest was dangerous. She would have known, since she had lived in the woods, in her now abandoned cottage, where she had left most of her potions and her cauldron, because she had chosen the possibility of a daily pair of new shoes over the thrifty life she had once led. Of course, the forest was not really very dangerous at all. It was in fact quite a bit safer than this huge old mansion, because the alder tree protected it. But the old crone had to find a way to keep J under her eye, lest she lose her resources. On the first of each month, J's father sent her three briefcases with cash, under the condition that she took care of his offspring, the apple of his eye, who nevertheless was not important enough to ever visit.

Neither was he visible enough to be fed. This would have required the old crone to remember about eating, something which she did not think about since leaving the woods, when her system had learned to extract its energy from the thrill of purchasing. Her daily shopping trips would consume her whole week except for Saturdays, when she rested, or rather arranged the week's acquisitions in their respective rooms. For there was a room for each item, like the silver bracelet room, and the patent leather pocketbook room. So, J went hungry, and it was in fact surprising that he was still alive, since all he ate were the spiders that weaved their webs in the house's rare forgotten corners.

One day, when the old crone was off considering whether a purple coat would suit her more than a blue one, J was hungry enough to let the need carry him beyond the bush with the crimson ribbon. He hoped to find the pears and apples the old crone had once described to him, when she had been admiring the latest addition to her growing Lladró collection—a shining red apple—with beaming pride.

J was gone for three months before the police found him living inside the hollow of an alder tree. The ensuing investigation caused much of a stir in the suburban neighborhood, as the physical examination came up with no signs of starvation or mental decline. Instead, the inquiry found the child to be in a state of perfect health, something the officers who first arrived at the scene took note of themselves, when they approached the great alder tree—a creature that reached upwards and beyond the eye's limits, and which stood as invincibly as the sun—and saw the chamber within its hollow. Inside, the now plump and rosy-cheeked child

slept peacefully under a blanket of woven weeds, surrounded by piles of bright red, perfectly round apples. What the investigation was never able to detect, however, was the singular sign of the event that remained in J's body: a tiny alder seed he had inhaled.

Seven days passed before the uniformed men succeeded in forcing J's hands to let go of two ivy-like branches that curled around the tree and returned to its hollow. It was only then that the child was brought back to the mansion which he was, at first, incapable of recognizing. Surrounding the main building, where there had once been lush lawns for J to play in, the old crone had built—under the council of her crystal ball, which she had allowed herself to keep amongst her paperweight collection—an unsolvable maze of impenetrable brick walls admitting no exit. Only the old crone could pass through, by way of hidden doors embedded with eye scanners.

On the day following J's return, however, after an expedition aimed at finding good, small hats, the old crone saw that she would have to resort to radical measures. J, who had once been a good and passive child, had managed to smash every single Lladró figurine in the house and had begun, amongst the endless pieces of shattered china, to rip apart the Persian carpets with his own bloody hands. Though marginally excited by the prospect of having to buy new carpets and figurines, the old crone resorted once again to the crystal ball, whose judgement pointed her to a solid course of action. Thus, she headed to the nearest Apple store.

The plan was, of course, immediately effective. J accepted the brick-like device as an uncharacteristic display of affection from a cold mother and began to live entirely within it. He would never again—not for the next twenty years—step out of the room the clever old crone would prepare for his confinement. It was a room without a lock, with wall-to-wall screens and a great, luxurious leather couch. Therein remained J's cloistered body, a mere vessel for his own eyes, transfixed. Only deep within him, somewhere dark and hidden and only subtly felt, a silent semblance of whom he had once been remained alit—a real, physical hunger which had not been quelled for more than a decade, and which set the little seed lodged in the corner of his stomach going. It trembled from hunger, inflaming the tissue that surrounded it. This barely detectable discomfort was never enough to force J to stand up or think or contemplate, and its result—a slowly inflating belly that rounded and protruded and ballooned—continued to develop without setting off alarms.

It was only after two decades that J was forced to venture out into a mansion he could no longer recognize. His mother's stench—that of her lifeless body, which

had been decaying for months beneath a display case that had toppled over—had grown pungent enough to penetrate through J's screen walls. The rotund man was hence awoken and called to do the unthinkable: bury the old crone and, in that, exit the house. J left the gruesome part to professionals but still made use of his atrophied muscles to bid farewell to a mother he had not seen in years, and who now laid buried in a patch of dirt she had left outside the labyrinth for that express purpose.

The trip to the outside—lasting a total of three minutes—assaulted J with the unexpected power of the high and mighty sun, whose rays came down on him like bullets. And though the blindness and the blazing temperature were temporary—subsiding as soon as J threw a rose on the dirt and closed the door behind him—that thing which had continued to shake inside him for the past twenty years transformed. The little seed warmed in the ephemeral strike of sunlight and, with ample room to stretch, finally sprouted.

J was not able to go on as he had before. The nothingness that the screens had once provided failed to hold him. Intrusions came from unexpected places—humming from both inside and outside the house—as well as stabs of pain originating from his ever-growing stomach, which had doubled in size. Something was pushing out from inside of him and was begging to come out. The lack of tranquility unhooked him from virtual reality and turned his attention to the rumbling, vile hunger that, along with the sissing of something like leaves in the wind, buzzed in his ear as an insect on a sleepless night.

It was thus that an urge to carve a way towards the outside installed itself within him and bubbled up to a frenzy. Crazed, outside himself, as if returning from the dead, J wobbled towards what had once been a window and broke through the screens with his fists. His skin ruptured, his red knuckles began to drip—but a luxuriant, greenish light came into the room, dulling and darkening the still shining screens.

Peace suddenly hung in the air, and J viewed what had once been his, or that which he had once belonged to. There stood the alder tree, kingly, with its trunk thick as God's leg. From its built-in throne, it prospered—and it moved.

An invincible, solid branch slithered towards the house with unspeakable speed, tearing through the window and forcing itself into the room. Following its own divine order, the branch drove on, sticking to the walls, enveloping the screens, curling into them like a drill. Its sister branches came too; climbed over the brick wall

and then over the brick maze, coming to wrap around the whole house. The facade eroded, the room's walls came down and crumbled.

The house, now all wooden, with leaves poofing out of its sides and branches shooting up towards the sky, became, it too, a tree—and J's room, its hollow. Driven purely by instinct, J laid down as he once had, beneath a blanket of woven weeds, with his head resting on bunched up leaves. Warm, at once no longer hungry, J closed the pair of eyes he had not shut for the past twenty years.

It was then that the little tree which had been growing inside of J came out from him. The feeling was not painful as much as it was unknown. The trunk grew out of his belly button, and, in that, planted him into the giant alder tree that his house had become. J himself was growing roots into this tree that nursed him—and they were together.

Manuel López Ramírez is a Mexican writer living in London who is interested in what it means to live as gender queer. His work has been featured in *The Beloit Fiction Journal*, and he was awarded West 10th's Editor's Poetry Prize in 2023. You can follow on Instagram, @manuel_lop_.

Duck Pond

Kate Brooks

It was a warm afternoon in early May when I sat by a weeping willow tree on the bank of a river where I had sat many times before; in thought, to smoke a cigarette, to talk with someone I loved. The ground was saturated with the runoff of spring, more saturated than I anticipated, and the seat of my pants quickly became wet. This prompted an immediate self-effacing berating; I had even brought a thick red wool scarf with me to sit on that I had abandoned in my fever to sit at the root of the willow tree and now the seat of my pants was wet and likely stained with mud. But soon I forgot the unpleasantness in exchange for what joy it was to find how the willow's branches were blushed with the green of new buds, hanging low and heavy in front of me, the day's new sun making each appear as a June bug around me almost floating on the texture of the afternoon's light.

It had been some months since I last visited this tree, a fact that I had felt guilty for when wind from a storm shook and whistled through the windows of my apartment building and led me to remember that trees are a breakable thing. Led me to remember that these boughs that fell around me, these roots bent into a seat below me, all these were breakable and vulnerable things. Led me to remember that this trunk is as vulnerable as the water of the pond that stretched just beyond my feet and was rippling to accommodate both the pebbles, I threw into it and the soft movements of the ducks swimming through it. It must be nesting time, I thought, noticing from the green stripe around their necks that they were all the males, the females probably hidden away somewhere. I watched as they dipped into the water with their lovely orange beaks, nibbling the green confetti of algae, watching the quick lift of their rumps into the air as they dove for something under water, the sight of their kicking webbed feet only slightly obscured by the reflected blue of the day.

I knew the ducks were fleeting. I knew ducks to be mortal things, creatures indiscernible from one another beyond my cursory delineations, band around neck means boy, iridescent feather, that yearling still picking soft down from its new coat, the one with a little piece of algae sweetly stuck to its beak. I knew ducks to be mortal as things in flight always are, especially when you yourself are rooted, you see the duck as leaving you, and yourself as the centrifugal being. Yourself as the orbital focus of all these little things, yourself as the decider of what exists and what does not. And in the same moment that I saw the duck as fleeting in relation to me, I saw myself as fleeting in relation to the willow tree. Myself as an indiscernible and funny little creature, someone for the willow to drop its lovely boughs around just as I, as a child,

sometimes even as an adult, had dropped bread around the ducks. And this progression of thought made me wonder: what does the duck feel immovable around? Is it the fish that dances around its kicking feet? The algae it displaces as it swims across the pebbled surface of the pond?

I saw, all of a sudden, life spreading out in these circles of relative immovability, the bread falling to the bottom of this pond, the algae closing over it as a mouth, the sure foot of the duck then spreading it away, the duck displaced by the pebbles I threw into the pond closer to it than I intended, and myself, so temporarily seated on the everlasting leg of the willow. But no, everlasting, surely not. As nothing is. As no duck, no bread, no muck, no ripple, no bough, no morning's fog nor afternoon's light, no red wool scarf, no fresh June bug bud, no nest, no thought, no footprint, no conviction, no love or hate, no thought or phrase or memory or sweetness or cowardice. If the willow, then, was not everlasting, as nothing is, what makes the willow feel momentary? What to the willow is the algae to the bread? The duck to the algae? I to the duck? The willow to me? What is the willow's God?

Leaned against the good and sure trunk of the willow as I was, as I had been many times before, on this and other trees, the bare nape of my neck irritated by the rough texture of the bark, the seat of my pants still wet and now rather cold, my good thick red wool scarf still carefully folded against the bottom of my bag, I looked up into the canopy of new budding leaves and saw the boughs parting into two lips, the bark behind my back twisting into a dozen eyes, maybe more, maybe two or three dozen. I turned to face the trunk I had been leaning against and stretched my arms around its girth and pressed my slightly parted lips to the cool texture of its trunk. Holding them there, pressed into the wood, I asked,

"Who is your God, then?"

Removing my lips somewhat reluctantly from the sweet earthiness of the trunk I pressed my ear to it, finding I heard nothing. Again, I pressed my lips to the bark and asked, almost pleadingly.

"Who is your God?" And, in turn, pressed my ear to listen. Hearing nothing, again, I grew frustrated and insulted and in a small and petulant voice asked, "Why won't you speak to me?" And again, my voice now thick with emotion, "Why don't you answer?", and once more pressed my ear to the cool wood of the tree.

"Do I have to pick?" said the willow. I jumped back from the bark in surprise and feared what just seconds ago I had asked for. I pressed my ear back to the wood, eager to confirm the whisper I now worried I had imagined.

"Do I have to pick?" the willow tree repeated.

"Pick?" I responded, "why, no, I don't suppose you do."

"Then my God is this pond," said the willow, "and a pair of glasses dropped therein many years ago when inquiring eyes looked over the side of a slowly rocking rowboat. Now you answer."

"My God is wild turkeys," I responded, surprising myself by how quickly the answer came to me, "and a dear lying hit by the side of the road."

"My God is you sitting on my roots with your lips pressed to me."

"My God is your buds just before they unfurl in this early afternoon light."

"It's no longer early afternoon."

"Then my God is that too."

"My God is living beautifully and truly. Is being angry and disappointed. Is trusting and failing."

"My God is a train ride."

"My God is a fox."

"My God is…"

"My God is…"

"Is eating a handful of many bad blueberries one by one and the last one you eat is firm and sweet and cool, so you remember the whole handful being lovely."

"My God knows your God," said the willow.

"And our God is seeing the delicate skin at the meeting of a lover's neck and collar bone being affected by their quickened pulse"

"It's yearning and despair."

"It's an eyelash in your eye, it's picking a small piece of lint off your lover's cheek that you swear was there and wasn't you hoping to just be near them for a moment, wanting to touch them sweetly."

The willow grew suddenly sad, curving lightly into a stoop. After some gentle pressing on my part as to what was the matter, the willow reluctantly responded, after sighing heavily several times.

"Our Gods cannot know each other, not really. For I know nothing of what it is to wrap my arms around a lover. To brush a cheek with flesh just as soft. To cry at dust blown into my eyes or the irritation of an eyelash. To move about. To dress inappropriately for the weather. To sweat and run and grow short of breath. To lay in a curved embrace. To feel cotton bedsheets, freshly washed, wrapped around my resting body. To feel nausea or hunger. To jump higher or crouch lower. To be secret and hide. To eat well and grow fat. To have my skin burn red in the sun. To have a poppyseed stuck in my teeth. To feel cold air or excitement raise the soft hair on my arms. To get a cramp in my foot after a long day of walking in uncomfortable shoes. To sit in a restaurant across from a friend or a near stranger. To own something, a dog, a purse, a vase to fill with flowers. My God cannot know your God because I know nothing of you."

"And I know nothing of you," I responded, surprised at the understanding that sent a warm feeling of sadness throughout my chest and stomach. "I know nothing of true stillness. Of steady growth. I know nothing of accepting an embrace. Of allowing my trunk to be used and asking nothing in return. I know nothing of shedding my leaves every fall and bravely returning to them. I know nothing of ducks and springtime. I know nothing of the tickle of an ant or annoyance of a woodpecker. I know nothing of thirst and strength. Of roots and light. Of rings of growth. Of red leaves and fresh green stems. Of a broken branch. Of tire swings and strength."

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I awoke what felt like many hours later to the sun now strong through the leaves above me. I remembered, vaguely, a dream. I remembered something about ducks and a tree, something about love, about a purse, about steadfastness. My back hurt from my slumped sleeping position against the trunk and I was uncomfortable in my pants, which were damp from the earth, and was beginning to feel thirsty and hungry. I decided to leave, feeling I had sat there long enough and whatever duty I had to the willow tree, to its fleeting nature, had now been fulfilled. I remembered the

thick red wool scarf remaining unused in my bag and, with a feeling that surprised me by being close to weeping, in a gesture of care or tenderness or impulse, I put my scarf on the tree. I found that the willow's trunk was too thick for the scarf to be able to wrap around it so instead I weaved it among the lower branches, not too tightly, not to trap it, but only to watch the scarf's color against the green of the buds that hung low and close to the ground, to see the thick wool against the bark of the trunk, to see it waving softly in the wind alongside the branches. I left my scarf with the tree, vowing to return once the leaves were in full bloom.

***

It was months until I was able to return. Summer was now in full force, the air thick and hot, and I had been spending what time I wasn't at work chasing rides to the lake or to public swimming pools. It wasn't until I was at a smaller park, closer to my apartment, that I saw a lone duck bathing in the small memorial fountain, and I remembered my vow to return to the willow tree. My willow tree, as I had come to think of it. As I had after the last long absence, I felt guilty at how long it had been and anxious to get there immediately. I went home, changed out of my wet bathing suit, dressed quickly, and hurried to my spot with the willow tree, bringing only an apple to eat along the way and a pack of cigarettes. I traced the route I was so familiar with, the path I followed by instinct, and ate my apple in a few big bites, allowing its juice to drip down my chin. I saw ahead the familiar clearing, smelled the familiar scent of the pond, and heard the faint tittering of ducks, but when I arrived in the clearing, I found that my tree was no longer there.

I searched the area, my heart now racing and my breath short, for signs of what might have happened to my willow. Had I come to the wrong spot? But no, everything else was the same–the ducks, the pond, the bank, the smell. Had someone taken it down? Had it been sick? There was no stump, no sawdust, none of the orange flag tape often used to mark unwell trees in the city. Other trees still stood nearby but none as big, as noble as the one I had come to visit. Had I imagined it all?

I sat by the riverbank, where there used to be something of a seat made by the roots of the tree but now was only flat ground, and lit a cigarette. I wondered what had happened. I watched the ducks swimming through the algae, dipping down into the water now and then. I watched the dappled shade along the bank made from the other nearby trees. Then my eye caught a shade of unnatural red along the bank. I stood and walked closer to find what looked like a duck nest. Shards of eggshell, still recently shed, lay on its floor with downy feathers. And the nest itself, sturdy and

large, was damp from the lapping water of the pond. Woven amongst it, amongst the muck and feathers and long grass, was my red scarf and many willow branches. It mustn't have been a dream, then, I thought, the branches were real, as was the red scarf I wove amongst them. I rose and picked a single willow leaf from the nest and tucked it into my pocket. It mustn't have been a dream, then, I thought, and returned home to prepare dinner.

On my walk home, I thought of permanence and vows. I thought of willows and ducks and Gods. I thought of nausea and hunger. Of jumping higher or crouching lower. Of being secret and hiding. Of eating well and growing fat. Of my skin burning red in the sun. Of having a poppyseed stuck in my teeth. Of feeling cold air or excitement raise the soft hair on my arms. Of getting a cramp in my foot after a long day of walking in uncomfortable shoes. Of sitting in a restaurant across from a friend or a near stranger. Of owning something, a dog, a purse, a vase to fill with flowers. A little willow leaf tucked in my pocket.

Kate Brooks's writing has been long-listed for the *Room Magazine* Fiction Contest, the CBC Short Story Prize, and shortlisted for the *Malahat Review* Fiction Award and *Metatron Press*' Prize for Rising Authors. Her debut chapbook, *Ficus*, was published digitally through *Metatron Press,* and she has a book forthcoming with *Folly Press*.

Building Again

Sarah Das Gupta

As far as the eye can see fields stretch into the distance. At first, it seems like a peaceful, green rural scene. Come, look a little closer. Fields lie unharvested, the wheat and barley battered by winter storms and burnt by raging summer wildfires. Wandering herds of wild cattle and flocks of shaggy, unshorn sheep roam the fields and woodland. Dotted over this wild landscape, piles of stones mark the ruins of once thriving farms and villages. Strange metal tracks are each spring covered with grass, shrubs and saplings, already growing into young trees as the years, the decades pass. The past becomes the future. Wolves once more roam the deciduous forests, now re-born. Herds of fierce wild boar forage for acorns amongst the scrub and new woodland. In empty skyscrapers and ruined city lots, hawks and eagles dive for scampering rodents. Along littered shorelines, strange sea creatures colonize abandoned tins and plastic bottles. Deer wander among deserted blocks, grazing on once pampered lawns, green velvet turned to a wild patchwork quilt of nettles, and dock leaves, intertwined with thorny briars and the tempting scarlet berries of Bella Dona. Twisted, tortured bridges lead nowhere, amputated metal arms raised in silent, wordless prayer.

Along the river bank the flooded water has retreated to the ancient water course. Willows and alders have re-established themselves, bending to shade the water from summer sun. The river has re-claimed its old, meandering path, twisting and turning, a silver ribbon in the light of early dawn. Rainbow flashes in the first sunlight reveal a pair of kingfishers returned to an unshackled stream. Fish, like silver arrows, dart through unpolluted water. Their ancient enemy, the pike, lies in wait, sharp fangs hidden in the dark shallows. Long strands of green hair from water sprites float languidly downstream. That centuries-old calm has come back at last. One November evening, as night was falling, Jonah was busy pulling one of the last pieces of wood towards the river. He suddenly saw, in the gathering darkness, a huge, clawed foot stamp on the wood as it floated on one of the beaver canals. Looking up, his small, beady eyes nearly popped out of his head. He was facing an enormous brown bear. Jonah ran or waddled for his life. Beavers are clumsy movers on land but fast and agile in water. He waddled as fast as he could, his flat scaly tail trailing behind. Jonah could feel the warm breath of his pursuer as he dived into the river and swam underwater, along the opposite bank. A beaver's life can be a little too exciting.

The damn stretched across the river from bank to bank in a virtually straight line. It had created a pool over twelve centimeters deep where the water was held back. Winter was fast approaching and the two beavers had nowhere safe and warm to sleep over the next cold months. If they wanted a den or 'lodge', they had to build one themselves!

Jonah began to lay the foundations of the lodge above the damn. Busily the two beavers cut through large saplings and branches with their powerful incisors. As with all rodents, their teeth go on growing throughout their lives. In fact, they grow over 180 centimeters during their lifetime. The lodge began to take shape above the expertly constructed dam. It was dome shaped, above the waterline; for many days Jonah and Jenni nibbled and gnawed their way through trunks and branches, dragging and floating them to the river's edge. Small stones, moss and mud were patted into any gaps between the pieces of wood. Their front paws were like skillful hands, plastering over the domed roof, to make the lodge weatherproof.

What would the lodge look like from the inside? You would have to be an expert swimmer, as the only entrance would be through underwater tunnels. Once you had swum up through the entrance, you would see a single room or chamber about 240 centimeters wide, and 90 high. In some lodges this could be bigger, depending on the size of the colony. Imagine, some lodges would be large enough to hold a human! The floor would be covered with soft bark, grass and wood chips, providing a warm, safe home for the winter.

Jonah and Jenni had succeeded in the first main challenge facing young beavers, building a damn and a secure lodge. Beavers do not hibernate in winter but may be less active. The two of them had stored food by the underwater entrance to the lodge. When the surface of the river had frozen over, they could raid their underwater larder of sticks and branches stuck firmly into the muddy riverbed.

Spring had returned to the riverbank. By May, the alders and willows were in early leaf. The new grass was growing and so was the family of beavers. If we were able to swim up the entrance tunnel and look into the warm, cozy chamber above the damn, we would be surprised and delighted to discover that beaver numbers had doubled. As well as Jonah and Jenni lying in the warm room, with the reassuring sound of running water, there were two young, playful, kits. Although only two days old, their eyes were wide open, their coats well grown and if necessary, they would be at home in the water, already able to swim. Despite this early development, Jonah and Jenni would spend the next two years nurturing and training their offspring.

As is often the case in families, human or animal, the kits had very different characters. Kim, the male kit, was always close to Jenni, mewing and squeaking, if she left his sight. Ming, the female kit, was bold and rebellious from the beginning. She was a mischievous, risk-taker who would cause her parents many heart-stopping moments.

It was near the end of June. The kits were almost two months old and already weaned. They enjoyed nibbling the new bark on the young willow saplings and playing in the pool behind the damn. One sunny morning, Ming and Kim were playing tag, diving and chasing in the still water of the pool. Jonah was officially on duty, keeping

an eye on the lively youngsters. In fact, he was snoozing in the warm sunshine, after working hard repairing the roof of the lodge with mud from the riverbed.

He woke with a start, to see Kim at the side of the bank mewing and whining. At the same time Jenni dived up to the surface in response to her son's cries but Ming was nowhere to be seen. It seemed she had taken the opportunity to explore the riverbank for the first time.

Wide awake in an instant, Jonah crawled onto the bank. In the trees, his sharp ears picked up the whining and mewing of a beaver in distress. Waddling along the bank, he suddenly stopped in terror. A young fox held Ming, struggling and mewling, by the scruff of her neck. Jonah began hissing fiercely, and all the hair on his back stood up. His lips curled revealing his formidable, orange teeth. The fox turned to face him. It still held Ming firmly by the neck. Suddenly, a loud noise came from the river, like a series of gunshots. The fox opened its mouth and howled dismally. Ming fell into the grass under the trees. Before the fox could move, Jonah scuttled forwards and using his front paws, picked Ming up and carried her to the bank. Both dived into the water and swam out of sight beneath the surface, until they reached the entrance to the lodge and safety. The loud noise which had saved Ming had been made by Jenni slapping her tail hard on the surface of the water, the normal signal of beavers in danger. Interestingly, beavers are the only mammals, except for primates, that carry their young, using their front limbs like arms and hands. This may be because holding them in the mouth with their large teeth would be difficult!

The beavers slept huddled together in the shelter of the lodge. While they slept, a shadow fell across the water. Three upright figures stood at the side of the river. They chattered in a language none of the other creatures understood. They were covered in fur which had been stolen from others. They had long sticks, with a pointed flint at the end, which they threw into the water to spear fish. Spots of blood flecked the water in the beavers' pool.

Sarah Das Gupta is a disabled writer from Cambridge, UK, who started writing aged 80, after a disabling accident. Her writing has been published in over 25 countries, in many anthologies and magazines. Recently nominated for Pushcart, Best of the Net and a Star.

From Upwind

Zara Maharani Khalisha Ariana

Cameron yawns, his jaw clasping at loose morning air as the bright star approaches the horizon toward the east, chasing away the dark of the night. It was cold, of course. The leaves of the oaks have started turning into a hue akin to the star, golden, orange and brown against the backdrop of a purplish, twilight-indigo atmosphere tainted with wet stratus clouds of a more gloomy shade. The scent of dew enters his nostrils, overshadowed by the husky profiles of the rest of his pack. There's his sister, already fully awake, jumping around on the deceased foliage that forms multiple disordered piles on the ground. There's Father, yawning as well as he sips a few quick gulps from the stream, while Mother and the two smaller juveniles are still fast asleep. Ravens circle them all, a few coming down to peck at Father, even as he snaps. The others stay in the air or farther away down the river. Emrik waits nearby in a seated position while another wolf of the same brown tint as him, Dagmar, places her muzzle straight into the air, possibly sniffing for carrion and other prey for today's hunt. The wind brushes against her ears in slow gusts to the east, carrying her own scent to the howling coyotes that prowl downhill.

Father growls in his low tones as his admonishment becomes visible, nudging at Cameron's head. "Wake up, son," he whispers in that low tone of his, especially with the notches of his ear following it. His young has already approached the edge of pup hood and, due to being the most mature age-wise of his litter, he's to take the old one's place as lead Hunter. Cameron groans, staggering upwards, akin to an elk being forcefully chased, and pressed his muzzle to Father's scruffy neck. *Good morning to you, too*, the gesture said. Father just let out a huff of exhaustion as he walked away to awaken his other kin.

Another day, it seems. Another day.

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Cameron sat on a cliff overlooking the lush forest, ignoring the other pups' calls for a final game of chase. When he looks to the side, he only sees the black sky all the way to the end of possibility. When he looked up, more black sky, and his eyes grew weary of looking forward, but his legs were too weary to chase or be chased. So instead, he looked at his paws and fur, watching the straight, black-white shadows against his grey coat.

He cantered towards his usual spot under a tree. The juveniles and their never-ending wag would usually ask, "You're not joining the howl?" Not tonight. Cameron was glad his friends understood the meaning of growls and nips. *Too much to think about. Can't go. Leave. Me. Alone.*

Cameron checked the tree's roots, finding a tiny piece of rabbit meat before listening to the howls of his pack further away. Once again, he gazed into the sky, watching, reaching. Polaris waits for him as he sat to ruminate, to ponder the responsibilities he'd soon undertake. He'd seen the sudden tracks on the ground, night after night, unlike any creature he'd ever seen. His nose says they're not from the woods; his eyes could grasp their wonky stature and the sticks that they bring, aiming it at the elk, or the coyotes, or the moose. Sometimes, even at his own pack. But his pleas to move a bit further away, maybe up the mountain, even, go unnoticed.

"They don't see it," he thought to himself, "They just *don't see it.* They don't see how we won't survive more by hunting more and stocking up our fat, how instead we should be more cautious of those two-legged foes who hunt *us* down with their sticks and arrows. We should be learning about their patterns, how they hunt and when, how they could use our own kin against us. But no, we just hunt, all dawn and dusk, every day."

He noticed something else too. Frolicking along the bushes were the juveniles, and Mother and Emrik are chatting while overlooking the sunset. Father is just sitting on his own, resting on his own before tomorrow's hunt – or today. The rest of his litter is just playing around with each other. But…his aunt? Today's hunt was quite successful, though some men had appeared and scared them off. Especially Dagmar, who limped away.

Cameron cantered towards Father, his head bowed down slightly in the little respect he still reserves for him, and pressed his muzzle into his parent's coat, just under his chin, with a small lick. "Father… where is Dagmar?" The younger wolf whispered, while his father gave a chiding lick back on his head, smoothing out the soft grey fur. "Well, son. There's something you need to know." What….?

"Your aunt's been injured."

"WHAT—" I said back.

"Her back leg. She was stalking a rabbit and ran straight into a human trap."

"Wh—"

"Son."

"Yes, sir?"

"Organize another hunt."

"Are you stupid?!"

"DO YOU WANT ME TO DISOWN YOU?"

Cameron spluttered and looked up at his Father. There was no way to deny his request, his word is above all, by default. Yet still, he was so pissed. Couldn't they just get along, couldn't he *listen?* But of course, this was the way the world worked. The way *his* world worked, at least. He bristled and walked away, with barely a nod of acknowledgement in me. I sauntered to the distant pines.

His pines in particular.

A fluffy rabbit, white tail and all, scurries off.

Ignored.

A fox chases it and just doubles in speed at the sight of Cameron.

Ignored.

Cameron's tail thumps against the ground, then his legs, and finally the rest of his body, just flopping down in utter resignation to the circumstances which he found himself enduring. The sun went from mid-level to almost nonexistent in the sky, which has begun turning into a dark blueish purple with hints of gold. His ears turn, picking up distant howls and tiny barks or the coyotes. *Yip-yip-yip*, those scoundrels whined toward the night, while the wind only seems to carry their scent further towards him. He needs no more reminder of how utterly competitive the future hunts are going to be. What with the further encroaching winter season, there is absolutely no doubt in Cameron's mind that every bear, cougar, fox, coyote, raven and lynx within a hundred miles would be ruthlessly pursuing prey.

Suddenly, there it is. The musky, *ugly* scent of gunpowder, right near him. The smell of cowhide on the ground, in those holes left as the pawprints of the race of bipedals that are really giving Cameron and his pack the run of their lives each and every night.

Cameron woofed at Dagmar, calling her to dispatch to his side and to remain far away from the humans, on critical consideration due to her limping leg. These men have no particularly strong sense of smell, which proves useful to us in the sense that it doesn't matter whether we are downwind or up, as long as they could avoid them. Those two legs are also of not good hearing, and their eyes are not as susceptible to motion. Seeing the tracks, Cameron leads his fellows the other way, where he could scent a distant party of elk along the riverbed. He walked quickly, Dagmar and Mother behind him, Father and Emrik on the other side, with the younger juveniles tagging along.

At several hundred paces, he could finally get a glimpse of the elk, their thicker coat of hair becoming apparent. Cameron surveyed a buck, one having a long head with large ears and widely branching antlers, about the most majestic he's ever seen among that kind. A dark shaggy mane hangs from the neck to the chest, framing his body in a regal brown hue, and the head, neck, belly, and legs are darker than both the back and sides, almost blending against the indigo night and charred-looking trees. A look, a tiny woof, Cameron's snout alluding pointedly at his target. Father gives a nod, kicking at Emrik to take the juveniles to a nearby scatter of logs as a watching point, ready to join in once the group is pushed, while Cameron led his wolves to flank the sides. Mother stays behind, ready to run the herd. A bark from Father was acknowledged by all, and he takes the first nip.

The herd begins to panic, each individual running for themselves before finding that there was only one path left, a shared stampede forward. Mother runs behind the herd and nips at them to keep running, running, *running*, while the others stay at the sides, waiting for one to stumble. Cameron keeps teasing nips at the buck he glimpsed at earlier, which quickly began to grow unbalanced and slip against the water.

"NOW," Father whines, and Cameron goes for the leap, his jaws sinking into the soft flesh of the withers and shoulder blades. The rest of the herd is let go, while his jaws stayed still. The buck kicks and kicks to no avail, for Father leaps from the other side to steady it. Slowly, just as the kicks decreased in magnitude and quantity, another loud sound rings in Cameron's ear, just above the distant clacks of elk hooves. It was distant, but it persisted in his mind and consumed all thoughts.

RAT-AT-AT-TAT.

"Run!" Cameron barked at his comrades, letting go of the elk.

"What is wrong with you—" Father started.

"There's no time! Please, listen to me Dad."

With a reluctant huff, Father acknowledged the command and the pack scattered, all running back to the Home Ground. Once Cameron finished sprinting there, he found himself meeting Father's stern gaze.

"D-Dad—"

"What was that?"

"Did you not hear it?"

"Hear what?"

"The thunder. The man-thunder."

"It was faint and far away, we didn't have to stop the hunt—"

"Those men are *fast,* Dad. If we had waited for the kill—"

"Stop." Father growled. "Stop with this."

"Wh—"

"You need to understand you are *not* in charge."

"I never *said* I was."

"Well, you certainly act like it, son."

Cameron huffed and looked the other way. Father was displeased at that disposition and nipped at his junior's ear. *Look back into my eyes.* So, Cameron did as such, his eyes boring into his Father's in disgruntled submission. A woof. *I'm leaving.* Another whine. *You don't mean that.* Cameron turned. *I do.*

Mother appears from behind Father, her snout drooping down. "Son…?" Cameron stares back, lost in his own tracks, and his ears immediately lower backwards in the usual surrender. "M-Mom—" Cameron started, but found himself unable to say anything further. She looked at him with eyes of sadness and curiosity, that he just had no option but to swallow all those words of dispersal. He just couldn't. He looked at her with bewilderment, tail flagging down and hunched between his hind legs.

"You…really want to leave?" Mother whispered in that airy yet husky sound of hers. This time, there was a sad tilt to it.

"Well… n-not anymore…" Cameron stuttered.

Father said nothing more, huffed and walked away.

The pack dispersed slowly, deliberately, as if distance alone could settle what words had not. No one followed Cameron. No one challenged him either. The hunt resumed elsewhere, stripped of urgency, stripped of him.

That night, Cameron lay among them, but did not sleep.

The land was restless. Wind dragged itself through the trees without direction, bending grass where no prey passed. Somewhere far off, there came the hollow crack of sound again—fainter now, but unmistakable. Cameron's ears twitched. No one else stirred.

Morning brought no punishment.

Father called the pack together and spoke as if Cameron were not there.

New hunting routes were assigned. Tighter formations. Shorter distances. Risks recalculated. Cameron was placed at the edge of the group, no longer leading, no longer asked. His warnings were not argued against — they were simply excluded from consideration.

Dagmar did not look at him, limped.

Days passed. Then weeks, until the snow melted into greenery and concrete flooded portions of the home ground.

The land worsened. Prey grew scarce. The juveniles, not so quick on their feet, turned to pray to traps. Traps. Each time, Cameron felt it before it happened, a tightening in his chest, a pressure behind the eyes. Each time, he spoke less. Eventually, he stopped speaking altogether. The pack called it maturity, nodded, praised his discipline and obedience. His ability to endure without complaint. Cameron learned how to stand still while his instincts screamed. He learned how to ignore the wind. He learned how to watch meaning rot without touching it.

When the juveniles asked questions, they were redirected. When Cameron tried to answer, he was interrupted. Corrected. Smiled at. He was already older.

The final loss came quietly, in the form of a hunt too close to the formations of bricks. A sound no one reacted to in time. By the time the pack scattered, Nature had already decided its course. Cameron stood frozen as the noise tore the air apart, closer than it had ever been.

Mother's final gaze as she yelps in pain.

Afterward, the ground was empty in a way it had never been before.

No one spoke Cameron's name.

That night, he looked at the stars again — not to wish, but to remember what it felt like to listen. The sky gave no answer. It never had. The tragedy was that the land once did.

Cameron remained with the pack until his fur dulled and his body slowed, a wolf shaped into silence by a society that mistook his restraint for loyalty.

And long after the pack had forgotten how to listen, the land remembered him.

And that is the tale for Cameron's kin of blood, who lived to see his fur color wane as the dying moon, a pale silver against the darkest night.

For **Zara Maharani Khalisha Ariana**, writing is a sanctuary of literary communication, and she has eventually compiled over fifteen unpublished manuscripts. Besides, she has a faculty of science and math, with prestigious international Olympiad awards. In 2024-2025, Zara's proficiency has been proven by achieving the highest score at multiple international English contests

In Pursuit of Earths

Debi (Debarati) Mukherjee

It was ten minutes to four in the afternoon when Dr. Jyo Sen walked towards the meeting room of the Unity Pole Cruiser, PFG's state-of-the-art research facility on the Antarctic pole. Sen was hopeful of a positive outcome from this meeting, especially after their success in the controlled trials. She reached the central green pod of the Cruiser— the communal unit, where the meeting rooms were located. The Possible Future Group Chief, Mr. Karl Lang, and the Chief Scientist, Dr. T. Pillai were finishing another meeting inside one of them.

The Cruiser had been operational since 2050 when Sen and a team of twenty-three scientists had been roped in by Dr. Pillai. It was for Project Sindu, mankind's final attempt at undoing the damage at sea. Over her career as a Microbiologist, Sen had worked arduously on ocean welfare projects as well as developing antidotes for various forms of poisoning from single-celled organisms. With Project Sindu however, she always knew that results were high stakes. Planetary level. For a decade, they worked arduously and yet a part of her imagined that she was fighting a losing game. The lands and ocean were wasting away faster than they could be fixed. Then, just like that, they landed on a scientific discovery that could change everything! They discovered— "the wonder worms."

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By the end of the 2040s, a township had been established in a remote satellite base along Jupiter's orbit, a base to move out of the solar system. So much was the focus on what was beyond, that the conditions back on Earth had not received its due attention. Tropical cyclones had intensified submarine landslides, which led to rising sea levels and several flash floods washing away coastal cities. In the oceans and seas, dead fish floated everywhere. The smell of rotten cadavers overtook every other thing. People were dying too from the contamination. It was soon discovered that the poisoning was due to filtration units connected to massive data centers generating billions of metric tons of E-wastes. Toxic metals like Mercury, Cadmium, Lead, and Arsenic were leaching into the water bodies and soil and being washed away by rain into the sea. Water bodies had turned so toxic that they could corrode almost anything and the fraction of sea creatures alive were in deplorable conditions.

Potable water had also become dearer. Over the decades, rainwater had turned toxic too. The water bodies containing the toxic metals evaporated and mingled with clouds, re-entering into the streams, rivers and the sea. Several layers of filtration and chelation processes were needed to produce a few liters of potable water. Then, in the fateful years of 2049-51, the sea water rose in a series of giant Tsunamis creating havoc across the world.

This cataclysmic event was called, *The Deluge of Metallicum*. Deluge due to metals. Countries scrambled to shake hands at the Enviro-care Conclave 2050 in Copenhagen, to quickly roll out research initiatives on climate change; some publicly funded, others private.

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Mr. Lang and his entourage had landed around noon that day. Concurrently, his secretary had blocked Dr. Sen's and Dr. Pillai's time for an emergency meeting at four in the afternoon. From her end of the research wing located among the blue pods, jutting sideways from the central green pod, she had observed the retinue disembarking from the heli-craft. A woman, who Sen assumed was the secretary, had been accompanying him with his delegates this time. When Lang's visit was announced the day before, there were rumors afloat on the lab floor and the office all across the blue pods.

Rumor had it that Mr. and Mrs. Lang were expected to visit the facility to say their goodbyes, because PFG was wrapping up operations on Earth! Sen shrugged. She had known little of Mrs. Lang's high-profile life except reading about her philanthropic initiatives from time to time. From the looks of it, she did care. Yet, Sen argued that Mrs. Lang was also featured in PFG's quadrillion dollar space mission program— Exit Earth2070 *The Future is Beyond!* that advertised directly to young couples. Their campaign launched five years ago to culminate in 2070, the following year. The frenzy around the campaign had reached its crescendo. Sen trembled slightly, a nervous anxiety overcoming her. *Why was everyone dying to leave while Earth still had a fighting chance?* She imagined the sea and oceans in the color *Deeda* used to portray in her stories. *The blue oceans*. Mrs. Lang's charitable trust could certainly do a lot more to promote welfare on Earth, Sen felt.

The door slid open to reveal the meeting room. It was a see-through oval pod with a few red chairs and a circular white table. The temperature monitor measured -26 degrees Celsius on the outside. The sun never fully set around March, instead it hovered at a relatively low angle in the sky throughout the 24-hour period. The sky was a shade of crimson with rays of orange streaks in the horizon. The sea in the distance was gleaming, so bright that it hurt the eyes— a neon purple. The effect of heavy metals mingling with sea minerals had perennially led to this sickly hue. Sen greeted Mr. Lang and Dr. Pillai before sitting down to face them. Lang's secretary was sitting away from the table, engrossed in her notes on a screen. Her face was partially masked, and hair tied back in a neat top knot.

Lang jumped straight in.

"Sen! Dr. Pillai and the team working on Project Zeus have cracked the crucial

next phase of Exit Earth 2070. I wanted you to hear it from me directly instead of your boss. Let us congratulate him!"

"Congratulations!" Sen gave Dr. Pillai a staggering look. Project Zeus was overseen by him, only the team worked in French Guiana (like hers did for Project Sindu in Antarctica).

She addressed Mr. Lang, "I am delighted to learn about Project Zeus. Also, I think Project Sindu is at a stage where we are ready. PFG's funding could solve for accelerating real world impact, Mr. Lang. The results could foster Earth. Right here!"

"Sure! That needs money, mega investments, Sen. Hmm! But I think we may have hit a jackpot with Project Zeus!"

He placed his right palm flat on the tabletop and smiled, taking a momentary pause to watch her. "So far, Sen, we as humans have achieved little. A journey to a satellite base. Small settlements outside of Earth. But it was not sustainable! With the help of Project Zeus, we will be able to harness the rare Prozone gas from Jupiter and at last we will zoom out of our solar system!"

"Sounds incredible!"

"Yes, fascinating right?"

"Yes! How does healing our own planet sound Mr. Lang?"

"Karl," Dr. Pillai interrupted, "now that the Exit Earth mission is on track, can we discuss the next steps with Sen on Project Sindu?"

"But haven't you briefed me on it already, Pillai?"

Dr. Pillai watched Lang's face helplessly. For a moment, Lang looked out of the pod to watch the bleeding sky.

"Kiffler-30 or Earth 2.0 is our final destination, a seven-year journey from the satellite base. And it thrills me to proclaim that *I* will be the Father of the most historic mission!"

Sen nodded in mild amusement while her heartbeat rapidly. She could see how it could play out for the people and the home planet. Instead of accepting that fate, could she leak her data, or sell it to their competitors? If caught in the process, Lang would never let her work see the light of day. And with it would vanish also, their home planet.

Lang was speaking to her, leaning over the table. His dark eyes, reduced to slits as he watched her.

"There will be enough scope on Earth 2.0! It will take us *only* seven years to reach from the satellite base. A fresh start! So why waste time on them here?"

"Pardon me?"

Lang watched his secretary for a brief moment and defiantly returned his gaze back to Sen.

"Financing Project Sindu is not profitable, Sen!"

He rose, placing his tightened fists within his pockets.

"The oceans of our youth, they used to be blue. Not this toxic neon purple death of a color. Ah! Earth back then was a beauty!"

"How about you allow some funds Mr. Lang and a short ten-year window? With active support from environmentalists and volunteers, I am sure we will be able to work it out."

Lang didn't answer this time.

"I feel if we have a way to undo our mistakes on Earth, we must do so."

"No, Dr. Jyotsna Sen, we do not. One way or another, this was going to happen. Let us not try to undo anything. Those days won't come back, Sen." He sounded emotional for a moment.

"The new Earth is out there! Besides, man has always looked towards the sky. Forward and upwards!"

He shared the dates for the team to fly out to their Shanghai base. Sen and Pillai were free to board on any one of the spaceships scheduled to depart in the following year for their satellite base.

"It is time to say goodbye," he said, gesturing at the room but towards nothing in particular.

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"Jo-jo, you are blushing. What is it?"

"Nothing, *Deeda*. No reason," she says, trying to hide the box of sweets, smiling back at her grandmother. It is the holiday season. She has traveled to the city with a roommate from

her boarding school to be reunited with her favorite person. *Deeda* has prepared *peethe*, her favorite coconut and jaggery steamed dumplings.

"Oh, you found the box my girl! Come here. To your *Deeda*."

Her grandmother plants a kiss that squishes her left cheek.

"You know Jo-jo, 'blushing'— it is one of the most peculiar and most human expressions."

"*Tai,* is it?"

"Animals cannot blush, *tai na* isn't it?"

"Oh, *hyaan yes*!" She nods, touching her flushed cheeks with the free hand and placing another sweetmeat in her mouth.

"You see these books here? As a Life science lecturer, these works have inspired me. And some day Jo-jo, you too will read these books, and you will fall in love."

"In love? *Kaar shathey*?

"With Mother Earth. With Nature."

Jo-jo smiles as she points towards a large volume and reads, "Charles Darwin."

"Correct! Him and J.C. Bose and Ernst Mayr. Many other brilliant minds."

"*Deeda*, tell me about the time you took me to the sea beach."

"Ah! That story again? Ha, ha, ha. Sure, my dear, rest your head on my lap."

The song playing in the backdrop becomes evident. Her head rests on *Deeda's* lap. The song is streaming on the AI streaming device or is *Deeda* humming it. She cannot tell. Instead, she closes her eyes. The music and the words: they transport her. She will be ten soon and the warmth of *Deeda's* love cocoons her. *Deeda* grew up at the turn of the millennia and still plays songs from the previous century. They sound as archaic as her *Deeda,* she thinks fondly. She has heard this one before so she sings along:

"Do you wanna hear
about the deal that I'm making?

It's you and me
and if I only could
I'd make a deal with God."

She hears rumbling and the sound of the rain over the song. It begins to seep into the room; she knows it with her eyes closed. She lifts her feet up in reflex, but the couch feels damp, as well. *Deeda* is mumbling something to her which she is unable to grasp. Water is gushing through the window shutters so fast that the couch is afloat! Cracks appear on the glass shutters; she fears a loud explosion at any moment. The couch is revolving around a small whirlpool forming in the living room. She can hear *Deeda* above the sound of the water, singing—

"*And I'd get Him to swap our places*
Be runnin' up that road
.. up that hill
Be runnin' up that building."

Every object of the house: lampshades, rugs, photo holders of her with *Deeda*, cushions, bed and wall frames have come undone now circling in the vortex. She holds her hand out and reaches for *Deeda*. She will save her. One way or another.

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She woke up with a start. It was ten minutes past five in the morning. The light turned on sensing her motion. She squirmed, hiding her face as a result of it. The conversation from the previous day returned to her: *It is time to say goodbye*— Lang meant to this world.

"You have received a message," announced the smart device, sensing the lights in the room.

"Read it," she commanded. There was no response.

She repeated her command. Silence. Dismissing it as an error, she looked out, thinking of her visions. Thoughts floating back to her, as if from another life. The year she landed a role in the Unity Pole Cruiser was when she received the devastating news. A tidal wave had struck Mumbai city. Chunks of large land masses had gone missing overnight. Rescue teams and search parties worked for weeks. Sen too flew back taking a leave of

absence from work. But there was no news of *Deeda*. Her ancestral home had been washed away.

She set the coffee machine to brew in the kitchenette and went into the next room to do her three-minute plank hold. Who would have thought that Cetaceans like Dolphins and Whales could contribute to the success of her long and arduous research study. All this while, the solution was sitting within these magnificent creatures. Waiting to be discovered. By analyzing droppings found untampered in the poles, Sen had discovered a complex network of fungi. Crucially, many of these 'activated' in the presence of toxic metals from the sea. The mammals had already adapted to selectively hunting the 'toxic' sea creatures contaminated by the metals. They ingested these, setting the fungi in action, which then released enzymes to bind with the metals rendering them harmless. Sen and her team extracted these fungi species, studied them in various enclosed conditions to create something that could be used to clean up the sea. They created tiny dry pellets with dormant fungi. By the end of the test trials, Sen was fairly certain of the results. If a series of carefully coordinated steps could be conducted as per their protocols and monitored, they could possibly reverse decades of damage, leading to gradual improvement of the condition of coastal lands and sea water, thereby stabilizing the ecosystems.

The sky had a lemon-yellow hue in the morning. Forty-nine years she had lived on this troubled Earth. She lost everything, her kin, ancestral home. Yet everyone she ever loved had lived here. Abandoning Earth for another was out of question.

She returned to the kitchenette for coffee when she found a slip of paper lying next to the door. Ah, the message! As the light fell over it, she could read on the surface: *DO NOT abort Project Sindu.* She bent down to pick it up and flipped it around: *Meet me in the penultimate empty blue pod at 2 p.m. today.*

Who was this? Not Dr. Pillai. He would communicate to her directly instead of sending a message discreetly. Nor Lang who had already decided to shut it down. It had to be a set-up.

Five minutes to 2 p.m., she walked surreptitiously up to the location with a dummy package in hand. For a while no one appeared. Then, she noticed a masked figure, cloaked in a billowing grey attire, and tall boots walking up to her. It was a woman, almost of her height— five feet six inches and a gait that she had seen before.

"Did you try to reach me?" Sen asked.

"Yes."

It was the secretary from yesterday.

"For Project Sindu?"

"Correct!"

"Why should I trust you?"

"You will learn about it, if you agree to move forward."

Sen was desperate and she could sense it.

"Okay! Listen, Sindu is ready to roll out. But I am under obligation to not divulge or share my work with anyone else."

"I understand that and I appreciate your integrity. You were leaving anyway, Sen. So, why don't you leave with me?"

Sen stared at the docket handed to her.

"Your ticket."

"To Ibaraki airport?"

"Yes. *I* have a facility in Japan that can begin rolling out immediately."

"Wait! Are you?"

"Yes. I am. And, as I was saying, we will begin with Asia, then we will do the same from a base in Porto for Europe."

"I do not know what to say!"

"We will work with ecologists and conservationists. Jyotsna, I have followed your research closely. So, will you trust me with your work?"

"Yes, I do! I want to stay!" Sen stood up, relieved.

"I'm sorry?"

"I mean, I want to stay back on Earth."

"Oh, that! Of course, I do, too!"

"You do not want to leave?" Sen asked. The vivid Exit Earth campaigns brought back a slight tremble in her voice.

She sighed deeply. "No, I do not. I will take this Earth again and again over any other."

"So, you will abandon Mr. Lang's Exit Earth mission?"

"Yes! I will," the figure repeated. "My only son rests in his grave here."

The anguish and defiance in the woman's eyes were palpable.

"Maybe that is the reason Karl wants to leave. Sure, he can start over. But I? *I* will not leave my son back here."

After a moment's pause, she bowed deeply and walked away in quick, confident strides. Sen looked at the ticket in her hand again and turned it around. The billing attached to the back read: The Possible Future Conservation, Mrs. Ema Lang.

Debi (Debarati) Mukherjee's work explores identity, resilience, and relationships through fiction, essays, and poetry. Her published works include: *Essays, A Meditation on the Politics of Bodily Autonomy* (Usawa Magazine, 2025) and *Her Narrow Plate* (Kitaab, 2026), short story, *A Woman, A Heron* (FemAsia, 2025), and poetry *Boy and the Puddle* (Hours of the Sun, 2024).

Where the jungle speaks back

Héctor Ordóñez Monribot

In San Cristóbal de las Casas (Chiapas, Mexico), the cold isn't just cold. It's a way of putting your body back in order. It squares your shoulders, sharpens your breath, makes you walk as if the air itself were a rule. The roof tiles still sweat yesterday's rain, and the streetlights glaze the stones with a honeyed yellow.

I'd spent the whole day dodging a decision. Not out of caution—I tell myself better stories: that I'm measuring risks, protecting others, being "responsible"—but because I didn't want to name it. Naming makes things real. And real things weigh.

The call arrived without noise.

Not a phone. Not a voice. A piece of paper folded into quarters beneath a cup of coffee, on a table that wasn't mine. I noticed the edge the way you notice an eyelash on white porcelain. It looked like a mistake. I slipped it into my pocket on instinct, the way you collect a receipt.

Outside, when I opened it, there were no directions. No address, no name. Just one line written in ink that had bled, as if the hand had trembled, or the paper had been damp before:

If you're going to listen, don't rush.

Below it, a drawing that could have been a snail or an ear.

That night, I tried to sleep early. The room smelled of old damp. I lay down fully dressed, in case the fever rose, in case my body decided for me. Rain tapped the neighbor's tin roof like impatient fingers. I closed my eyes. Opened them. Every time sleep approached, something stayed awake inside me—circling: the paper in my pocket, the sketch, the sentence that sounded like advice but felt like a condition.

At dawn, the sky looked like a sheet of metal. I went downstairs with my backpack and my notebook.

"Leaving today?" the doorman asked without looking up.

I nodded. I didn't say where. I still couldn't.

The call pulled me to the bus station, though I still wasn't sure what I was doing. Along the curb, taxis promised a "direct run" to Ocosingo—direct, but only if the car filled, only if four strangers agreed to share a route that wasn't meant to be easy. Men stood in small knots, doing the same quiet math: money, time, risk. I hovered near the first taxi, my notebook in my hand like a useless passport, my stomach already anticipating the curves.

When the driver finally waved us over, he looked barely twenty-five. He assigned seats with two gestures and a glance.

I took the back seat, grateful for the window, already bargaining with my body.

The driver was too young for calm; cap tilted, jaw set, accelerating like the road was a personal challenge. He took one look at my face and smiled with the pride some people have when they can tell you're uneasy.

"Relax," he said. This route knows itself.

In the back seat, a boy with a school backpack kept checking a phone that wouldn't stop vibrating. Beside him, someone in a black jacket, hair cut in jagged pieces, a small pin through an eyebrow. Punk, tourist, someone who'd decided not to explain… hard to tell. In Chiapas, people learn to keep their reasons to themselves.

Minutes later, the city fell behind us. The mountains began, and with them, the curves—one after another, as if someone had wrapped the highway around the spine of the range. I swallowed a motion-sickness pill before I actually needed it. Not for health but for superstition, for the illusion that anticipating discomfort equals control.

The fog showed up all at once, like an animal laid across the asphalt. For a stretch, the world shrank to the red taillights ahead and the white line invented under our tires. The driver didn't slow down. He seemed to enjoy it.

"This is where people get scared," he said. "But if you fear it, the fog gets into your head."

I wanted to answer. Nothing came. I felt the fog in my back like a cold hand. I remembered the paper: don't rush. And I understood—unpleasantly clear—that it wasn't advice for the road. It was advice for me.

The curves kept coming. The pines that had stood tall at first began to thin out. The green changed texture. An hour later, the cold was a memory. Humidity started climbing up my sleeves, as if the air had turned liquid. My stomach argued. The pill argued back.

On a particularly tight bend, the car braked hard. A stone sat in the middle of the road, the size of a melon. The driver jumped out, cursed, shoved it with his boot. It rolled into the ditch like it didn't want to leave.

"There are always stones," he muttered as he climbed back in. "Always."

I didn't ask who put them there. On certain roads, questions are a form of exposure.

Lower down, we passed a waterfall. Not huge, but relentless; a white thread pinned into green, repeating the same gesture from who knows where. The sound of water didn't fill the air. It ruled it.

"There!" I said before I could think. "We should stop there."

The driver laughed.

"For a picture?"

"No! To listen."

I surprised myself with my own voice.

The punk looked up. No smile, no mockery—just a gaze, as if checking a detail.

We pulled onto a narrow shoulder. The air smelled of crushed leaves. The waterfall swallowed us with its roar. I walked closer and saw, stuck against a rock, a small whirlpool: the water turned once before disappearing. Snail. Ear. Whirl.

I reached into my pocket. The paper was damp, as if last night's rain had found it inside my clothes. I unfolded it. The ink looked paler now, and with the crease open, a second line appeared, almost invisible:

You don't come to look. You come to keep.

The boy with the backpack leaned in.

"What does it say?"

The punk spoke first.

"Don't say it out loud."

"Why?"

"Because once you say it, you make it yours. And this… isn't yours."

We got back in. Now the road truly descended. The landscape changed without asking permission: broader leaves, trunks that seemed to sweat, vines hanging like old cables. At times, the light was green. At times, it wasn't light at all, just thickness. The driver turned the music off.

"From here on, you enter with respect," he said without any explanation. Actually, he didn't need to.

Hours later, the route opened onto an expanse of red earth. Tarps stretched tight, fire pits, thin smoke rising like slow handwriting. A murmur of many people without hurry. Not a messy crowd—more like a body that knew where to place its feet.

There were hundreds. Whole families. Young and old. Uncovered faces and covered faces. Bandanas. Caps. Eyes that didn't ask for attention. I didn't see guns. The place wasn't built to show. It was built to protect.

Someone touched my shoulder. An old man with a quiet voice, his face shaped by sun.

"You came for the call?" he asked.

I nodded.

"To listen?"

I nodded again.

"You in a hurry?"

I shook my head.

"Then, come in. But listen well: what's heard here isn't for decoration. You keep it. And what you keep, you protect."

He led me toward the center, where a wooden table held an old radio with dials, and a metal box filled with papers. The radio was off. The box's padlock hung open.

"Today, the EZLN speaks," the man said, not loudly, as if volume was unnecessary.

Something struck my chest—the name I'd been carrying for months finally spoken. EZLN: four letters that sound like history in the city. Here, they were present tense. Skin. Territory. In the Mexican southeast, they are a low-intensity insurgent army that chose a largely pacifist path: words over spectacle, organization over conquest. Their war, if it can be called that, is fought by defending land and its memory—by insisting the mountains and the jungle are not commodities, but a home that must be cared for.

The punk stayed beside me, as if my body needed an edge. The boy with the backpack sat farther back. Around us, people laid out blankets, poured coffee, opened notebooks. No one shouted. No one tried to dominate. The silence wasn't emptiness. It was an agreement.

The man switched on the radio. A hum. He turned the dial patiently, tuning the air. The hum broke into fragments: a voice that came and went, interference like insects, sharp knocks like doors. For a second, I thought: this is nothing. And right as I thought it, I heard.

Not a slogan. Not a show. A voice speaking the way you tend a fire: without hurry, mindful of the wind. It spoke of territory, and it wasn't metaphor. Territory was water you drink, soil underfoot, the mountain breathing. It spoke of defense without pose—simply: this is what holds us up. It spoke of conservation not as trend, but as dignity: caring for the land so the land isn't turned into merchandise.

In the middle of the communiqué, the word peace appeared, and it didn't sound soft. It sounded firm. Peace as a collective decision. Peace as a practice: organizing, planting, protecting, refusing betrayal.

The jungle around us seemed to listen too. The insects lowered their volume. Smoke rose straight, as if the air itself had gone still to avoid interrupting.

When the message ended, the hum returned. No applause. No need to stamp it with noise. The man turned the radio off.

"Enough," he said. "Now you know."

"What do I know?" I asked, and my voice came out lower than I expected.

"That the mountain isn't scenery," he said. "It's a home. And a home isn't something you show off. It's something you defend. But also, something you care for. If you defend it only to exploit it, you betray it the same."

He opened the metal box and pulled out a blank sheet and a pencil.

"Write one thing, just one. Not a chronicle. Not a report. One thing that remains if everything else is lost."

I held the pencil. Big words came to mind—freedom, dignity, conservation—and they felt too clean, too traveled. Pretty sentences came, and I distrusted them. So, I wrote the only thing that was true in my hand:

The forest taught me how to breathe. The jungle taught me how to be quiet.

The man read it and nodded. He slid the page into the box like a seed.

That night, we camped. The ground was hard and generous at once: it forces you to find a posture, but it holds you. Humidity worked into your clothes like a second skin. At times, the jungle seemed to step closer—branches cracking, unseen footsteps, the rumor of an animal that doesn't ask permission. Between blankets there

were low voices, small laughs, the click of a thermos, the soft spit of a fire refusing to die.

I slept little—not from fear, but because my body kept listening. Even half-asleep, something in me repeated the condition: don't rush. Keep.

At dawn, the air had that warm edge the canyons carry in the early hours. The fog was there but no longer threatening—a veil that arranged the landscape. From where we stood, you could glimpse, through openings, other settlements: low roofs, dirt paths, smoke rising in thin columns. Autonomous territories scattered like islands, connected by the same current. Not a postcard. A living map.

Two boys approached—sixteen, seventeen maybe. Faces covered, eyes alert. They didn't introduce themselves.

"We'll take you to the first town," one said. "From there you can get transport back to San Cristóbal."

I nodded. I didn't ask names. This wasn't a place to collect identities.

We walked. First through red mud, then along paths where the jungle closed and opened like a lung. The insect sound rose and fell with the light. At one point, one of the boys lifted his hand for us to stop. He listened to something—or to the lack of something—then we moved again.

We reached a ridge where the canyons spread out in a vast fold. Fog moved below us, slow, revealing for moments the clearings where communities sat. A mosaic. An archive. I thought: this is also a communiqué, only without words.

When we reached the road, the transition ran in reverse: from thickness to pine, from humidity to thinner air, from jungle to a forest that puts discipline back into your body. And still something had shifted. The cold didn't order me the same way. Or maybe I no longer needed it to.

We crossed the fog again. This time I didn't fight it. I let it cover me. I let it erase what didn't matter.

At the edge of the first town, the boys stopped.

"Here is okay for you."

I wanted to thank them. I wanted to say something correct. I couldn't find anything that didn't sound like a tourist.

"Keep it," the driver said, as if reading my thoughts. "Don't use it to stand above anyone. Use it to care."

I nodded. They turned and walked away without hurry.

Back in San Cristóbal, in the damp room, I opened my notebook. I wanted to write everything: names, dates, explanations, translations. I wanted to do what I know how to do—turn experience into material.

Then, I remembered: you don't come to look. You come to keep.

I turned off the lamp.

And for the first time, silence wasn't absence. It was a promise.

Héctor Ordóñez Monribot is a Mexican journalist and writer focused on narrative nonfiction, society and technology. His work explores the borderlands between testimony and landscape, with a particular interest in Chiapas and the political imagination of the Mexican southeast. He also works in content strategy and editorial workflows.

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