

rhodora

— DIGITAL MAGAZINE —



Issue 5 | January 2022



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THE

It's that time of the year when you tear open the plastic seal on a new diary with 2022 blazoned on it, and, before the first impression of calligraphy or chickenscratch, press your nose to it and deeply inhale the grassy scent of its pages.

Some of us have folded and tucked away the past at the bottom of a cardboard box labeled '2021' in the attic, but some of us carry it in our back pockets, self-reflexively

EDITORS


SUSANNA MARIAN CORREYA KEERTHANA V

FROM

reaching for it every few minutes.

Whether the digit change entailed a complete overhaul or meant nothing at all, we hope you are at peace with what was, what is, who you were, who you are, and who you're becoming.

This issue features work from a talented lot. Arbër Selmani tackles irreconcilable differences with wit in "I Put My Husband Up for Sale". Just when we think all has been said about love and heartbreak, Ozzýka Farah gives



us “New Life”. Ayaan Halder dazzles us with a perceptive, mature portrait of an Assamese artist in “La Nascita de Venere”. Marc Isaac Potter’s “He Said Bending...” sees tradition and modernity, East and West, lock hands in what could be a warm friendly handshake or an arm wrestling match. Mallika Bhaumik paints scenes from life in Calcutta with confident, elegant strokes. James Penha’s “Jessica” is a cautionary tale for Creative Writing teachers while the eponymous character is an inspiration to Creative Writing students.

We thank Mariam Anna Alex for her lovely art that prompted us to refresh the cover design.

Our old contributors will notice that we have altered the format of the Contents pages, and scrapped the About section. Author profiles now appear along with the published work.

Happy New Year and happy reading!

The image features a solid purple background. In the four corners, there are stylized, light purple leafy branches. The leaves are elongated and pointed, arranged in a symmetrical, branching pattern. The word "poetry" is centered in the middle of the image in a white, serif font.

poetry

A decorative pattern of stylized leaves in a lighter shade of purple, scattered across the top header.

in memory

IVAN DE MONBRISON

In memory
there is Time
lying down on a bed
like a headless cadaver.
But the room is locked from the inside.
Beyond the window, outside,
there is a park, clean and beautiful.
You can see some ravens
on the branches,
and a severed head speaking
about Time running away.

В память,
есть время,
лежит как труп на кровати
Без головы.
Но комната закрыта изнутри.
Через окно снаружи,
Большой парк, чистый и красивый.
Вы можете увидеть несколько вороны
на ветвях,
и отрезанную голову,
который говорит о время убегает.

on the table

IVAN DE MONBRISON

On the table,
there is an open book,
which nobody wrote,
and nobody's reading.
There is also a lamp
and a glass of wine
half empty.
I love you.
But you have forgotten all about desire.
And I need to go now.
All eyes being still shut,
as their glaze is bloody.

На столе,
Есть открытая книга,
которую никто не написал,
и никто не читает.
Есть также лампа,
есть бокал вина
наполовину пустой.
Я люблю тебя.
Но ты все забыл о том что такое желание.
И мне нужно идти сейчас.
Глаза все еще закрыты
Но взгляд кровавые.

each step towards thoughts

IVAN DE MONBRISON

Each step towards thoughts.
Light pure as water.
A hyena devours
a corpse.
You can hear the cracking of the bones.
But you can also hear,
In the same time,
the sound of silence
slowly emptied.

Каждый шаг навстречу мысли.
Свет чист, как вода.
Гиена пожирает
Труп.
Вы можете слышать, как треск кости.
Но вы также можете слышать,
в то же время,
звук тишины
медленно опустошается.

Ivan is a French poet, writer, and artist born in 1969 in Paris. His poems or short stories have appeared in several literary magazines in France, Italy, Belgium, The UK, Canada, India, Australia, Switzerland, and in the US. Five poetry chapbooks of his works have been published: L'ombre déchirée, Journal, La corde à nu, Ossuaire and Sur-Faces.



charlene

JOHN GREY

She sits on the sidewalk,
back against the wall,
sipping on a Coke.

Her father's inside,
up at the bar,
joking with the bartender.

Everyone has work to do.
Her father's needs
to get drunk enough
to go home.
The bartender must
keep filling orders.
And the little girl
has to make one soda
last an hour, maybe two.

It's late afternoon.
The sun is setting.
She's forbidden
to walk home alone,
must always be accompanied
by a foul-smelling,
stumbling, mostly silent man.

Neon glows brighter.
She's tiny and tense,
striated with strawberry light.

harebell girl

JOHN GREY

The harebell girl is dressed
as purple as the petals,
towers above those flowers
in the rocky field.

She is the bobolink's
personal assistant,
the monarch's navigator,
the coxswain calling out,
"Caterpillar, row harder."

As she runs in circles,
the sky grows larger.
Sun spins like
a Catherine wheel.

She falls in clover.
in a patch of bluets.
She's the only harebell
who can get to her feet.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in Sheepshead Review, Poetry Salzburg Review and Hollins Critic. Latest books, "Leaves On Pages" "Memory Outside The Head" and "Guest Of Myself" are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in Ellipsis, Blueline and International Poetry Review.

live vs. survive, a cold war

HEMALATHA RAMESH

I'm made of pain and grief in equal proportions
the split ends of my hair carry the threads of uncertainties,
my payals and bangles murmur the hymns of pain,
i swallow pain like i swallow a paracetamol
with a glass of water forcibly,
a few pills of pain on their way to the heart get caught in the
oesophagus.
and my voice screams, bawls in low frequency
that maa can't hear but, my pup reaches lap
lies on, caressing my tummy.
pain reaches the j-shaped organ,
mixes with bile and goes on for an endless mile,
that lasts for an eternity.

if pain were bricks, i would have built an indraprastha palace.

The pills of pain dissolved in my blood,
spread through my body, that's more like corpse
with high blood pressure,
my veins are fragile, like an atom bomb,
not the ones Hiroshima and Nagasaki lands carry,
but the ones which when incubated artificially,
hatch and destroy everything,
leaving nothing to lose.

*if grief were pearls, i wish to string them together
and wear it as my haar.*


My palms, hurt others,

the calluses in my hand cry,
erode sweetness in the warmth of
holding hands,
the scintillating tears,
reflect the recipe of suffering,
the palest gold smiles are fake,
they hide the pain of faking.

*it's all my cracked lips, whose smiles are contrastingly smooth can
do.*

the albums in the almirah
are my abode to seek refuge in,
i flip the butter paper, cautiously,
my sharp nails shouldn't scratch
the sovereigns of the past, of childhood.
When i was a carefree kid,
I always dreamt of tracing a path to the moon,
But all i do now, as a young adult is
move out of the boundaries i shouldn't have
and regret, since there is no going back.
the despair, under the debris of my visage,
peeps out through the open pores.
I cleanse my face with memories,
steam with drops of eucalyptus oil and regrets.

No home remedies work, pain oozes out inexorably.

A decorative pattern of stylized leaves in a light purple color, located at the top of the page.

Hemalatha is a student, spoken word artist, poet, content writer and a blogger from India. She found her passion in exploring various forms of art to satiate her inquisitive brain. Her life being a muse, she seeks inspiration to write, right from the miniscule features of life to celestial bodies. She is a vivid explorer, a lover of art and expression. Instagram: @ _frameofsoul_

tell me all your thoughts on god

NICOLETTE SOULIA

I'll be the first to tell you that I have no idea what's up "there,"
if anything is at all.
I'm not spiritual, or faithful
to anything other than my vices.
I don't feel this magical connection that
blankets me in security and
metaphorical warmth
when the world bears itself as a shitstorm again.
I don't have a friend in
invisible sons of man,
and to be honest with
both myself and those
who want my faith's sequel, I don't care.
These things did not save me from the demons of my childhood,
nor did they protect me from myself in the long run.
I'd like to say that having faith
only cursed me
with false hope, as a rebate
on a thousand unanswered prayers.
I'd like to say that I deserved the karma
that came my way through the years.
And I really wish I'd see some sign, or
that everything turned out alright
despite the circumstance, and maybe I
could if I ignore the fact that my resilience
and strength came at the cost of rape
and the decades of silence guarding my fate
as the woman who would always settle for a place
as a bedpost notch over anything that required me to

feel something real.

For, the only plan I ever saw was to break through my skin and steal all the best parts of me—my hope, my joy, my purpose for living—then

replace them with a Stepford smile and a penchant for burning every bridge built to guide me towards home.

A million empty promises later,

I still tend to wander alone.

Divinity of my spirit will never take away the anger, so I don't send invisible wishes to the sky.

Sometimes, I wonder why.

Nicolette Soulia is an ESL and creative writing instructor, author of short fiction and poetry, preschool director, and dog-mom to a rambunctious Siberian husky. Her writing tackles themes of mental illness, trauma, resilience, and love. She is the author of her self-published poetry collection, It Started With Linguine, and she has also appeared in Open Door Poetry Magazine and the poetry competition series Fire to the Mic: Season 1. She is currently working on her second poetry collection and her first flash fiction anthology. She resides in Evansville, Indiana, and you can find her on IG, Twitter, & Tiktok @nicolettesoulia, and on Facebook @ Nicolette Soulia Poetry.

midsummer

SKYE CABRERA

She reminds me of the bright lovely sun
Both are eerie yet one can't stop staring
They're far away and I am but a nun
A plain nobody who can't stop daring
Oh how I wish I can seal her away
Protect her from all that can bring her harm
Draw her portraits that will rival Monet
Hold her closer as I make her feel warm
But beloved, I do not deserve you
How foolish I am to offer my soul
Your beauty exceeds what I can construe
I am a mere mortal with no control
 So I offer this sonnet to my love
 Maybe this one can be heard from above

Skye Cabrera is an experienced writer and amateur poet who usually writes short stories, prose poems, and articles about a range of topics like identity, social expectations, coming of age, etc. (Instagram: @prideandpoets)

a dedicated dance to the rhythm of loneliness

P - S E V E N

I write this poem in the name of memories
I'm now obliged to worship like gods

And should I dedicate this poem to anything?
To the shattered promises of waiting

In your fictitious world that spins, spiral-bound
With illusory turnaround

To how you disappear without a trace. Nothingness
Like the smoke of cigarettes I puff in emptiness

To the dead pictures of us in my gallery
Recreation could've meant their revival but I'm sorry

Tango is a dance of two but here I am
dancing to the rhythm of loneliness. Here I am

Dedicating what should've been a love song
To the untold and age-long goodbye you sprung

when i think of my hometown

P - S E V E N

The murky borderland near Dahomey.
Thatched roofs that house hoes & cutlasses
& yet farmers appease the god of rain.

The marginalized village of smugglers
who die like mosquitoes
in the bloody hands of khaki men.



How miserable amenities are unnecessary
in the kingdom where ballot boxes
must reach & where heads shall queue
under the scorching sun to vote in oppressors.

& for hands to write & for tongues to read,
legs bear the risk of taking the wards
of the poverty-stricken fathers to afar.

When sickness conquers our immune system,
we think of how to die & where to die;
whether under our leaking roof
or in the empty hospital.

When I think of my hometown,
pure tears embrace my poor cheeks.

Moshkur Ajikobi (fondly called P-Seven) is a student of English language in Lagos State University. His work appears or forthcoming in Punk Noir Magazine, Lunch Break Zine, Rather



Quiet, Coven Poetry, and elsewhere. He has published numerous ebooks (anthologies and short stories). He is the brain behind Rub Bitch With P-Seven, a free weekly newsletter.

pagan prayer

LÁSZLÓ ARANYI

Suck my blood, mosquito! Our Gnomes
broken yoke, sylph breathing
on the liquid spirits of the ocean, and
thrones reigning on heat-creatures,
tear me apart!
For Death's been essentiated to be the food of the living.
Inflated headed bottle-gourds,
a heavy crutch, gas-masked knights of senseless wars
in vain searching their body-parts,
that were scattered toward the four cardinal points,
Earth will squeeze the remains of their twisted souls out of them
now and forever.
Only the reanimated revived from magical purification
and the benevolent of the joyous shall comply
Fly away, satiated gnat
from my grip opening like a chalice,
fly!

Szívd a vérem, szűnyog! Gnómjaink
tört igája, Szilfeket lélegző.
az óceán folyékony szellemein, s
a hőlényeken uralkodó Trónok,
tépjetez szét! Mert a Halál az élők táplálékává lényegült.
Felfújódott fejű lopótök,
nehéz mankó; a négy égtáj felé szóródott
testrészeiket hasztalan kereső
gázmaszkos lovagjai értelmetlen háborúknak,
torz lelkük maradványait most végképp

kifacsarja belőlük a Föld.
Csak a mágikus tisztulásból éledő, átszellemült,
önfeledt derű állandósul.
Kehelyként szétnyílt markomból
szállj el jóllakott szúnyog,
repülj!

Translated by Gabor Gyukics

Laszlo Aranyi is a poet, anarchist, and occultist from Hungary. He has been published in venues such as Juniper Literary Magazine, Feral Dove Magazine, Alternate Route, Centre for Experimental Ontology, Bullshit Lit Magazine, Misery tourism, All Ears (India), Utsanga (Italy), Postscript Magazine (United Arab Emirates), The International Zine Project (France), Swala Tribe Magazine (Rwanda), The Quills Journal (Nigeria). He is a spiritualist and medium, who explores the relationship between art and magic.

i put my husband up for sale

ARBËR SELMANI

I have decided finally to get proper sleep.

I put my husband up for sale
I do not talk to him
our eyes no longer kiss each other
our hands refuse to be touched
his armchair and mine are not friends
my cat hates his cat
I'm tired of how insatiable this man is.

My husband is for sale,
the words 'pot', 'vacuum cleaner' and 'I love you', he's never
heard about them,
he never utters them
they've never taught them to him
neither parents nor teachers,
neither the prophets, lucifers, nor angels and not even hodjas.

I'd rather go into the stove fire
than to continue with him.
I want us to break up.

We bathe in two different bathrooms
we separated the living room,
we made a barricade in the middle
and divided it into almost in ten parts.
My kids hate his kids.
My husband is for sale
for God's sake, please take him, don't waste your time.


17 pair of socks
45 types of shirts
3 bottles of pear brandy
mouth full of saliva with swearing and insults
Xanax every 12 hours
with migraine since the first night we had sex,
a man with vitamin D deficiency.

Take him
or throw him behind the Sun.

I have ambitions, I have dreams
and behold, and not thinking twice, I have put my husband up for
sale.
He knows how to read and write, and does not know what joy is,
in his life he has never ironed a thing
he never bought flour, sugar or oil.
Except for the cries he gave me.
We live separately on two balconies,
he worries during the day, I at night
he eats breakfast when I finish dinner
even our casseroles are different.

Between shouts he wants us to have children
I don't want to have another child with him, not in my life.
We have turned the green yard into two offices with glass,
I hate his mother, and he hates my mother.

My husband is for sale,
He is burly man, he is by no means a winner

A decorative pattern of stylized leaves in a light purple color, located at the top of the page, extending from the left and right edges towards the center.

our ideas do not match, neither the fists,
nor religions
he in his prayers, and I in my prayers against him.
His words are dirtier than his underwear.
His feelings are filthier than his hands.
I have decided to finally get proper sleep.
I put my husband up for sale.

god heals

ARBËR SELMANI

God heals

God has all the strength, all the sweat

All the wounds of all the world, he has them printed in millions of books

He reads them, he heals them.

He keeps the Bible and Qur'an under the bed,

He is the same

For both the rich and the poor.

God has the most masterful in the world

God waits, but he knows how to heal.

God has all our dreams in drawers

God waits, sips morning coffee and flips through the weekend book

He enjoys nature, animals, trees

God has us in the palm of his hand

South Pole, North Pole, human destiny

God heals, God knows how to heal.

God brings medicine to the head where it is wounded.

He also has his prayers, our miserable lives

He waits, he amazes us with recitations, beauties and with loves.

He is big, and we are small

God is the Sun, and the rest of us just get light.

God heals,

He sees the legs that do not move, he sees the mouth that is afraid to speak

He sees the dried branches of the oak

He sees the mild morning dew

He sees the sisters mourning their dead brother
He sees diseases, perforated blood and injured aorta
He sees hospitals, he sees rooms of houses turned into hospitals
He sees the eyes of a girl who does not see
He sees people treading on the bread, he sees the rain of all the
deities
He sees the mountains above us, he sees the slain doe on the
ground
We sleep like a lamb, we drown in crime, but I believe he does not
sleep.

God sees because his images and visions are infinite
God heals, this great God of the seven worlds
He knows how to heal,
He waits, he may be late, He irons the smoothest shirt
God in front of the mirror, a bright-eyed man
He also asks for some time for his sufferings.

God sees the bereaved, the wounded,
God sees, He does not moan
And the God of some, their God, curses
My God waits, but He heals.
Among us here He dwells.

*Arbër Selmani is an award winning journalist and poet from
Pristina, Kosovo. He has published three books: 'Why grandpa is
sad' - poems, 'Kosovo in 14 cultural stories, 1' and 'Kosovo in 14
cultural stories, 2' - books with journalistic articles and features. He*

has participated in numerous literature festivals in Europe, namely POLIP – International Literature Festival in Pristina, LITERODROM – Literature Festival in Slovenia and the XV Biennale of young artists from Europe and Mediterranean in Rome. His poems have been translated to Italian, Slovenian, Bosnian, Serbo-Croatian and lately English for Songs of Eretz Poetry Review (<http://www.sonsoferetz.com/>), Ethel (<https://www.ethelzine.com/volume-7>), Zoetic Press (<https://www.zoeticpress.com/>) and Impossible Archetype (<https://impossiblearchetype.wordpress.com/>).

airport halls



ERIC ABALAJON

after *Diaspora* by Antipas Delotavo

The most tedious part
is when they are
made to stand
together in one room.
The dedicated lane
doesn't speed things up
rather just attracts attention.

I can't see their faces,
but one must be holding back tears,
while being snickered on
by a detached one behind her.
The final flight
often seem impossible
to imagine,
but that day will surely arrive.
Apprehension is reserved
for when you are
no longer in transit.

The layers are worn
in preparation for
the cold in the cabin,
and for the lucky ones, outside of it.
If you look closely,
some children are also held



along with luggage.
It is one way of doing it.
Most rather go
about it alone.

The impartiality of
the word diaspora
brings me unease.
Clearly, they are trekking
long airport halls,
but they also seem
to be floating.

queen elizabeth way


ERIC ABALAJON

I never seen her drive before.
I would have been long dead
she says, if I drove back home,
variation of the same joke
if she pursued a career
after finishing her degree
in criminology.

If a deer comes out
it will destroy your car
because of their size
and of the impact.
You can't go slower than 100 km here
but it's useless since it's still
jammed in the mornings.
Good thing my shift ends late.

During winter, you need to be careful
but still maintain your speed.
I once saw a car bounce around
in front of me
like in a pin ball machine.
I didn't stop right away
when I hit the breaks. I felt like peeing.

You can sleep over at my house
any time you want,
me and your Tita are
done with Burlington,
variation of the same joke.



She ran out of driving stories.
I stared at the sight of entangling concrete
familiar in films, my jet-lag
making me extremely aware at that hour.
You know, her partner shared
while we stopped at the Dundurn
intersection, it only dawned to me
that I was truly abroad
when I saw the highways.

Eric Abalajon is currently a lecturer at the University of the Philippines Visayas, Iloilo. Some of his works have appeared in Revolt Magazine, Loch Raven Review, Ani, and Katitikan. Under the pen name Jacob Laneria, his zine of short fiction, Mga Migranteng Sandali, is distributed by Kasingkasing Press. He lives near Iloilo City.



fight

SONIA CHARALES


Headache grows
Like vines from neck base
One word after another
Only becomes louder
Too much noise
Nothing good of it

Breathe in
Breathe out
Breathe in
Breathe out

Too deep in hot water
Bubbles boiling over
Heat heat heat
Rising in steam
The lid falls over
Shattering on the floor

Breathe in
Breathe out
Breathe in
Breathe - shout
Shout shout shout

Lacrimal sac
Bursting open
Once kept in
Now coming out



Waterline to bridge this
Overflowing mess

Shout shout shout
Shivery shout
Bite down
Breathe in
Breathe out

Face drenched
Chin drips like faucet
Water stain harden eyelids
Puffy red throbbing
Seeping waterline
Throat torn
No one left proud

Breathe in
Breathe out
Breathe in
Breathe out
Breathe in

No apologies ever made
None taken for value
If only we could forget
Those ugly words exchanged
Before they come back to haunt us

Breathe out

limbo

SONIA CHARALES

Lingering in limbo
Long lasting lagging
Looking for longitude
Lately lacking leeway

Layered ladders
Lack length, leading long
Leaving levels lifeless
Longing for levatations

Let me live
Looking forth lively
Life in the lustrous
Lapping lovely liberties

Sonia Charales is an ambitious individual who finds expression through poetry, prose, and art. She writes and creates around subjects like Indian culture, bilingualism, and hope toward self-healing. She hopes her work reaches out to those who need it.


rose quartz & serenity

OZZÝKA FARAH

“Rose Quartz is a persuasive yet gentle tone that conveys compassion and a sense of composure. Serenity is weightless and airy, like the expanse of the blue sky above us, bringing feelings of respite and relaxation even in turbulent times” — Pantone

After a long night
of this & that
mindless thoughts scattered
like bric-à-brac
we raced & we lost against
the night sky to return home first.
It was autumn
the clocks had been set back
but I intended to go forward,
forward into the sea.
To lay there,
to lay there but never drown.

Ashore I am assured
by the scent of pheromones –
that neutral, odourless scent
flourishing like a garden rose in bloom
a miracle
in Birmingham weather.
Making a brief appearance
the sun surfaced
kissed your cheek bronze
softly stroked your scalp
& bleached your hair blonde.
Off the beaten path





A lone, leafless branch from the
tree of knowledge lays unbothered –
home to Eve's forbidden fruit.

On the evening of
man's first disobedience
a stray word was uttered
& translated from Hebrew
into the Queen's English.
The Qur'ān, the Old Testament
& the book of myths
was borrowed like time
& laid on its side

So that the sand in the hour
glass would lay still;
the very concept of time
would vanish, ceasing to
exist so that this moment
would be frozen; motionless
in its own existence.
I find it amazing
how you marvel at life –
its inconsistencies, the blurred reality
& how distorted the entirety of it all is

Still you, with all of God's good grace
come to me puling as you alight
from the motorbus preparing to brave
the cold during those morning commutes



your lips cracked, cheeks rosy red
with aspirations of scarlet & crimson.
There is a consistency in you
that is pure like Hydrogen
& Hydrogen & Oxygen –
an inherent shade of sapphire
on the surface. The tears formed
under pressure will crystallize

Soon after being touched by
the air of night, the saline droplets
leaving slippery trails of sorrow
reminiscent of a love
once found now lost eternally.
I like that
smooth area that is perched between
your nose & upper lip
I liken your soft, your shallow
innocence to your heavy heart
& the way you reject me
because you know.

new life

OZZYKA FARAH



Explain to me as if I do not understand
feed me a spoonful of candour
with teaspoons of molasses & coffee cake
so sweet it tarries on the tongue –
as much as you can bear, as I can bear witness
as the vehicles hasten (just outside)
in the drizzle & mizzle around the bend –
where the old becomes the new. Here today,
the new becomes the dead tomorrow.
Our little conundrum is tucked away neatly
buried in the wombat's burrow
you are sore from the swelling.

Your voice is reticent now
as if your vocal folds have consumed
the deepest darkest depths of your sadness
the tears flow free form, free from restraint –
raw & real. Look me in my eyes:
know I care deeply when our gazes meet, deeper
than the pain that is burgeoning deep inside you.
You should not have to carry my onus
nurse & feed my crippling affliction, let it fester & feel the
emptiness in its absence. The weight of the thing proliferating.
Starved of nutrients, suffering dehydration –
I could not save you from your sorrow. Leading to the lake
I tried to fill your emptiness but you were
all out of happiness – the cup was fully empty.

Down the corridor that stretches forever;

endless doors on either side; the flickering
lights; the warped walls that bend inward;
the job itself a mere dot; trapped in your body
like a patient etherized upon a table;
your soul was snatched out through a vacuum
leaving you empty, blank, & alone.
One day that ghost will leave, too, & take
back the black cloud from over your head
restoring the halo that was always there.
It is still there now, only overshadowed
by grief of that which was lost along the way
an attachment detaching you from yourself
a fugue state born out of wedlock
that paints you mortified
as a mortician on their first day.

I hope you can find the light that once was
where void now lives
I wish a stranger would explain to you
how hearts break as if you do not understand
they would tell you, *hearts do not break cleanly
or evenly in half – hearts shatter.*
*The shards waft around undetected, stabbing at you
when you least expect; the stinging lingers.*
You would reiterate this back to me
& we would ignore it anyway. Laugh until
we, ourselves, were stung by despair's ray – only then
would we understand that it is okay to not feel okay
& I will understand if you do not understand.



I hope you have
a whole beautiful brand new life.

Ozzýka Farah is a poet, editor, and content writer from Sacramento, California. His work has recently been published or is forthcoming in CausewayLit, Penumbra Literary and Art Journal, Dots Publications, Alternate Route, and Big A Little a anthology. He currently lives between Melbourne, Australia and London, United Kingdom. Instagram and Twitter: @ozzynapoleon

he said bending

MARC ISAAC POTTER

The circular imprints
On the wall,
Not the wabi-sabi Japanese style
But rather a wavering ubiquitous perfection
Of a western corporate symbol,

Company initials blazing gold within
The royal blue circle.
Twin vases of iceberg roses
Trimmed the scene.

The keynote speaker
Owner of the company,
Ambled to the trough,
To Drink from the podium.

"I" ... said the owner
"Am fascinated with altars."

He said this
As the new moon ...
Just as he opened his mouth
even before the usual litany of honored guests.

With that, he pulled a Zen Buddhist zafu out of a side closet,
A closet that had been and was concealed by a wall blending door.

"I" ... he began again,
"Need to now meditate at the altar
Of my employees."

untitled 7

MARC ISAAC POTTER

(For Roy Orbison)

Why is it now trite to say the phrase "So Very Much Death"? ...
Could that possibly be Roy Orbison playing in the background?

You do not realize even now how very much I drink. And I think
that you do cut me some slack because of the war.

You have all of my guns locked up in a very thick glass case on the
west side of our bedroom so that the

Morning Sun Shines on them

just the way the explosion shined, screamed into the community
of instant multiple death.

I came home from the war with one leg only to have the second
one blown off during the bombing.

I wish you did not have to work so many double shifts. I wish that
our daughter didn't feel like she was taking food out of our
mouths and money out of our pockets so that she could go to
college. She makes good grades but you feel so guilty.

*Marc Isaac Potter aka Marc Isaax Potter (they/them) is a
differently-abled writer living in the SF Bay Area. Marc's interests
include blogging by email and Zen. They have been published in
Bluepepper, SledgehammerLit, BOMBFIRE, Punk Noir Magazine,
and Provenance Journal. Their Twitter is @marcisaacpotter.*

the number 30

Y U U I K E D A

The cursed number, '30'
is waiting for her
in the upcoming year.

The number is like a syringe
that pours emptiness into her.
The number is like a hammer
that crumbles her rosy past.

She doesn't have any hope
to live with the number.

What she has is only a knife
to die with the number...

six years

YUUKEDA

The evidence
that I was alive on this world
is only poetry
that I wrote.

2016/11–2022/?

I was surely alive
by writing poetry.

Six years are the evidence
that I was surely alive
hopefully and desperately.

Poetry is a drug.
Poetry is anesthetic.
Poetry is a blanket.
Poetry is myself.

Yuu Ikeda is a Japanese poet. She loves writing, drawing, and reading mystery novels. She writes poetry on her website. <https://poetryandcoffeedays.wordpress.com/>. Her published poems can be found in Nymphs, Selcouth Station Press, Goat's Milk Magazine, Sad Girl Review, and more. Twitter and Instagram: @yuunnnn77

a few absolutes

WILL REGER


All words are delicious.
All weather must be weathered.
All stories must have an ending.
All waters flow to the sea.
All g'nights want g'morrows.
All tornadoes spin their tails.
All patience waits.
All knives can murder
as well as serve in the kitchen.
All maps end at the edge of the page.
All men believe there is or is not a God;
even agnostics have their suspicions.
All free lunches are paid for by someone.
All questions have answers turn up somewhere.
All women are apples: bittersweet, refreshing,
with seeds in the middle.
All struggles are glorious to someone.

apneac on the road

WILL REGER

When driving I tire
so quickly I can go no more.
I pull over, lock my door,
turn up the heater,
bow my head and close
my eyes—just for a bit.
I am from that world I see,
both dark and full of light.
I am home there among the colors
fluctuating among my capillaries.
I might slip and fall deeper
into the cavern that holds
that weird spinning icon
from the Romper Room lady's
magic mirror; she looks in
to name the little children
out there in TV land...
but I am asleep by then.
For forty-eight minutes
until a semi horn wakes me
and I carry on my way.

Will Reger has a Ph.D. from the University of Illinois. He has published two books of poetry, Petroglyphs (2019) and Kaleidoscope (2020). He has served as the inaugural poet laureate for the city of Urbana, Illinois 2019-2020. For the last decade he has been active in promoting poetry in his community. When he is not focused on poems, he watches water flow, listens carefully to



what crows are saying, and plays world flutes, especially the nan xiao from southern China (similar to the shakuhachi from Japan).

those heartbeats of ours

NAOMIC KENNY

Those heartbeats of ours:

Those things that fall apart to fall together again.

You crafted a heart out of this chest

of mine.

The skin was made up of dirt and ideas,

the emotions of water that ran through.

The myths surrounding such a place are real,

there they pick the aging world apart.

With cold hands, that saved the previous recitations,

Toes curl as they cling onto the world beneath,

trying to retain some grasp of reality.

Where your laughter is an echo of a dream,

keeping promises and secrets intact.

Walking on iced oceans,

wishing that they don't break,

on my way to you.

an overdue poem about a cold coffee

NAOMIC KENNY

Step in,
save me a word.
Warm hands with cold hearts,
that we've been told need repairing.
Empty chairs in a busy cafe,
there the conversation isn't needed.

The order is already known,
you paid for both of us.
A black coffee paired with a latte,
You empty your cup with no time to spare.

While mine grows cold,
I look at my jittering numbing fingers,
as they play with the side of the cup.
While my heart is trying to keep up with my
mind & mouth.
You left the cafe house hours ago.

Naomi C. Kenny is an upcoming poet, who has been writing since her childhood, she keeps up on her craft by writing poems on request, short stories and novels. From interning at the Lingo Poetry festival, she took away great experiences and insight on how creative-minded individuals work alone and with others.

thoughts at dusk

MALLIKA BHAUMIK

Between sunrise and sunset
the day's diameter has patiently crossed the hours,
sound waves fill the rooms and verandah
the tv beams news of Afghanistan

I look out to see dusk draping the sky
the brokenness of ruins gathered in its folds
my father's diabetic body leans on the sofa
my mother's physiotherapist tries once more

I might pause and look back at this evening someday
when they have turned to minuscule figures, far away in time
~ disappearing dots of light as the train rushes past through
unknown towns at night.

Our mealtimes chatter, monsoon woes, the power cuts in Kolkata
of long ago,
the rounds of clinics and tests in later life
snapshots of such mundaneness might flock my eyes.
Eventually I'll become a tired poem,
words and metaphors sending down roots like an old oldbanyan
shadows resting beneath alphabets that have chronicled this
ordinariness
in a world - lonely, grey, altered.



room

MALLIKA BHAUMIK

As we walk out and close the door behind us
our un-belongingness marked by the hurried clicks of shoe heels,
the room is left on its own...
carrying the gloom of the day like an empty train compartment
waiting for fresh footprints at the next halt.
The air remains thick with the leftover smell of our clay bodies
the messy bed looks up at the shoddy ceiling
where maps of unknown countries stretch clumsily,
places we can never go to; peel off the layers; be ourselves,
countries that only exist as wishes spread on dampened walls.

A strip of sunlight on the red floor
adds a little drama.
In an hour or so; it will fade and the day's fatigue will settle in
the shadowy edges of houses and buildings
will merge into the dusk
losing their familiar outlines,
the room too; will lose the residue of our sighs and scents
forget the frenzied noon,
its floating dust particles will taste the saltiness of some other
skin,
and we too; will forget the narrow lane by Sealdah Station,
the nondescript joint and Room 9 will never occupy any space
of our memory bank.

beginning

MALLIKA BHAUMIK

My eyes see splashes of colours
~ flame orange, mustard, cherry red, birthing dreams in the
narrow alley as we cross each other,
you inhale my lemongrass skin,
I, your smoky shirt,
we smile hesitantly; like autumn drizzle in dusky evenings,
fleeting moments submerge and resurface,
we wait for words.

My body is your imagined landscape
an undulating topography, where wildflowers bloom,
you carry my scent in the taxi, elevator, cafe, office corridor,
my nape, shoulders, arms, breasts, bear the whiff of your burnt
cigarette
the musk of our bodies engage in a tantalising choreographed
foreplay,
while our shy smiles greet each other,
we wait to touch.

The soup bowls come, piping hot,
we sip spoonful of stories
losing our centripetal density, inching towards a hazy periphery,
diffusing, like fragrance in some prayer hall.
Our sad sad envelope of words remain open
- the bleeding heart is a crushed pomegranate
sliding down the throat,
till the ribcage becomes an empty nest
words flying out to rest in the hollowness of a ruin
a lingering tale of love

melting into timelessness,
we wait for a beginning.

Mallika Bhaumik is a widely published poet with two poetry books. Her poems, short stories, travelogue, article, interviews have been published in many well reputed mags and journals and anthologies like Guftugu Journal, Cafe Dissensus, Harbinger Asylum, Get Bengal, Shot Glass Journal, In Parentheses Journal, Kitaab, Pangolin Review, Narrow Road Journal, The Bengaluru Review, Oddball Magazine, Stag Hill Journal, Mad Swirl, Madras Courier, The Grey Sparrow Journal, The Alipore Post, and RIC Journal to name a few. Her first book, 'Echoes' by Authorspress, won the Reuel International Award for the best debut book, 2018. Her second book, 'How not to remember', was published by Hawakal Publisher (2019). She is also a nominee for the Pushcart Prize (for Poetry), 2019. Three of her poems from 'How not to remember' are included in the 2020 postgraduate syllabus of BBMK University, Dhanbad. She lives and writes from Kolkata, India.

jeremiah

ELAINE VILAR MADRUGA

Translated from the Spanish by TOSHIYA KAMEI


“If you find but one man who seeks the truth, I will pardon the city.” — Jeremiah 5:1

To mimic Pier Paolo Passolini,
I laid out boys on the table
as if they were Japanese dishes.
I grabbed them over and over again
and sang lullabies to them
every time they went to bed in the blood
and the debris of the twenty-ninth day that crawled
toward the thirtieth
and beyond the thirty-first.

In those happy days, we counted stars
under the skies of Gomorrah.

Si existe un hombre justo, un solo hombre justo, no destruiréla
ciudad

Para imitar a Pier Paolo Passolini,
puse a los muchachos encima de la mesa
como si fueran platos japoneses.
Los tomé una y otra vez,
les canté canciones de cuna
cada vez que iban a dormir entre la sangre
y los desechos del día veintinueve que pasaba
rumbo hacia el treinta
y luego más allá del treinta y uno.



Esos días felices en que contamos estrellas
bajo los cielos de Gomorra.

persistence

ELAINE VILAR MADRUGA

Translated from the Spanish by TOSHIYA KAMEI

He learns the art of war in peacetime.
the art of peace in wartime
few did it before:



surviving, bleeding, and knowing all
are no easy tasks
you learn them by scratching your poem
beyond your wound
beyond your nerves
until you reach the bottom
the white bone of the word.

Thus he stops the caravans
of beasts and men
looking for some detestable Crete
that will come after the mud.

He learns mazes' obsessions
not like smoking opium in a Japanese den
where certain terrible children
became poets
fated to die.

Surviving, bleeding, and knowing all
are no easy tasks.

He knows the world is too filled with abandonment
to leave.



él aprende el arte de la guerra en tiempos de paz.
el arte de la paz en tiempos de guerra.
pocos lo hicieron antes:

sobrevivir sangrar saberlo todo
no son tareas simples
se aprenden rayando al poema
más allá de la herida
más allá del nervio
hasta llegar al fondo
al hueso blanco de la palabra.

detiene así las caravanas
de las bestias y los hombres
que buscan alguna Creta detestable
que llegará después del barro.

aprende obsesiones de laberintos
no como si fumara opio en una casa japonesa
donde ciertos niños terribles
se convirtieron en poetas
destinados a morir.

sobrevivir sangrar saberlo todo
no son tareas simples:

él sabe que hay demasiado abandono en el mundo
para irse.

*Elaine Vilar Madruga is a Cuban poet, fiction writer, and playwright. Translated by Toshiya Kamei, Elaine's work has appeared in venues such as The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, Star*Line, and World Literature Today.*

*Toshiya Kamei holds an MFA in Literary Translation from the University of Arkansas. His translations include Liliana Blum's *The Curse of Eve and Other Stories* (2008), Naoko Awa's *The Fox's Window and Other Stories* (2010), Espido Freire's *Irlanda* (2011), and Selfa Chew's *Silent Herons* (2012). Other translations have appeared in *The Global Game* (2008), *Sudden Fiction Latino* (2010), and *My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me* (2010).*

like petals that are swept up by the wind

MELODYS

Like petals that are swept up by the wind
They have no say in the matter

Sipping a warm cup of tea, my dog by my side
The sun pierces through the window sill
All is right in the world
Out of nowhere this unbearable ache
I have no say in the matter

I miss the phone calls, "Mija, I made your favorite, see you soon!"
On a random Tuesday, the dining room chairs filled with loved
ones
I hear the ocean waves, the bird's song, or the rustling of leaves
It reminds me of you, "Escucha, what do you hear?"

This grief, this missing you
So real, I could almost touch it
Like petals that are swept up by the wind
They have no say in the matter

treasure trove

MELODYS

Treasure trove

A box underneath his bed

I wonder when was the last time his hands were upon it

What was the last thing he put inside it

A deep breath, a sigh, and then I open it

Discovery - a collage of artifacts, clues about the past

Scientists have found fossils in Argentina

They show that dinosaurs socialized,

traveled together, died together

I am clutching to this past, this yesterday

Photographs of times gone

Locketts of hair, poems, letters, lyrics

Old passports, stamped proof of all the places you've seen

Paperwork stating the date you came to America

I can't put it down, I am reading and re-reading

A letter where you talk about the last time at the plaza

The way your friends, your family bid you and your beloved
farewell


Kisses on the cheek

Hugs that seemed to say "I hope we will meet again in another
life"

There you looked around you and you saw your community

Your family

Patterns you've come to memorize and love



Treasure trove

Discovery - a collage of artifacts, clues about the past

Did they all indeed meet again in another life?

Melody's passion is teaching and empowering others by sharing what she has learned. She helped launch an arts and crafts program at a children's hospital and also taught at San Quentin State Prison. Melody hopes to inspire youth to explore and expand their creativity through web development, writing, and art. Twitter: @melrserra

copycat, copycat, don't run away, don't run away

MATHANGIN M

We meet at the back benches of a classroom, shake hands,
and I feel the need to warn you, hey, you must know
That I'm a patchwork quilt of all the personalities I have rubbed
shoulders with.

Something about you sticks with me, and now I am more like you
than I am like me.

I am more like you, than I am like me.

I hope you will like the person I have become for you,

And I know you didn't ask me to do that, but I fear

That if you don't like me, I am worthless,

I am nothing more than paper to be binned.

I hope I could be the paper you keep in your pocket,
like a love note making your toes curl with warmth.

Sometimes you don't like this part of me that I copied from you,
and that's okay.

It's really hard to love a person who looks like all the things you
hate, so

You're telling me to be myself, like I was before,


and I try, but I don't think you understand what you're asking for,

I have always been like you, always worn your rage and whimsy,
sorrow and dreams.

Always hoping that you would just like the person I have become
for you.

If you don't like this one, it's okay!

I have a wardrobe of your personalities to choose from, and I will
wear them all till you find the one you like,



You can keep her until she bores you, but please just like the person I become for you every day.

Every day I grow more like you and you grow tired of me,
of the girl sitting across from you in a cafe who looks like your reflection

Every day you wish to run away, run away on the wind,
But can you run away, run away from yourself?
So you sit here, hold my hand, kiss it well, and say,
I really like the person you become every day.

Mathangi N M writes for a living and for fun. They love sleep, oranges, playlists with long names, laughing, and foot massages. She lives in Chennai, India.

snug below the cabin

CASEY LAW

Mold swarms the reinvented version of a girl, eyes blue and cold,
in the splintered floor
Sleeping in places, placed above faces, she left no traces,
But burnt fingerprints
If you look deeply enough, you can see through the folk roots of
her story, out of the gory, retell of her death
The children dance around the cabin, bathing in their fear
Laughing gossiped songs that echoed through the cabin
Their tip toed hops, avoiding every nook and cranny in the
floorboards
Through the wood, the girl watched small toes dance around her
story bare
Snug and rotting below the cabin, she always liked it under there

i'm just a kid

CASEY LAW

Your square-shaped handkerchief,
Simply designed to blot the shimmer off my cheekbones, due
-to the humidity of your vent-less basement, you
told me was your safe space.
Speaking softly to me you,
said I was your fate
But you knew what you did
I'm just a kid

You hummed endlessly with my cries
Your face drenched with tears of
joy. Watching the sparkle in my eyes
dim, my fists unclench.
Rigger sets in.
A grin rises upon your face.
"I could watch those eyes for hours," you sighed,
placing me delicately like poetry upon your bookcase.
I am not your horror story
The piece of art you outbid
I'm just a kid

Rolling through your hallways came the CRACK of pistol's
thunder
Eyes rolled back into his head
Shots coming from under,
His scarlet stained floorboards.

They had gotten here in time to kill this killer's gloat
Not in time to find his collection of my pale porcelain





Skin

Side by side with my goodbye's had written,
scripted.

His eyes lie dead and wide consumed, by
the carpets blue mold
crimson spilling from his silver capped teeth,
-skin pale and cold
Now only the cops keep his wicked disposal of my body

My head,
Planted as a white rose protected by a glass case
He and I always face to face, until
it was only armed men who burst through the door
After that, we didn't have staring contests anymore

I stared back at him,
Eyes blank and blue
Without any thought or,
life behind them.
Only remnants of what he put me through
Though,
I was scared.
It was only he who knew, and
only he who cared
That night before
I died.
He found scars,
faded into my stomach.



I could've sworn I saw the smallest bit of gloss coat his eyes,
As he tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear
He made me feel he was not to fear, so
I thought maybe, just maybe
something deeper would begin
In him
But
It didn't.

Red and blue peer through the tinted windows of your wrangler

I hope you feel just as much pain as I did,
When you hung my every limb,
like clothing

Attached by metal clasps to saran-wrapped coat hangers



We never had anything special...
There was nothing sane in anything that you did

You're just a killer

And

I'm just a kid

Casey Law is a 15-year-old queer, neurodivergent, female, and Jewish poet who was born and currently resides in New Jersey. She



has published a teenage mental health poetry book and her work has been published in Brownbag.online and has upcoming work in poetrynation.com @GENCONTROLZ @writenowlit @bullshitmag @inertiateens and @_intersections She is on Twitter: @cjlaureate

horror thriller



JERRY SIMBA

So many ribs were broken
Interminable and sundry
To be cast up amongst other
Scores of the petulant
As ribs also broken
decipher and decoded
And people saw
But none bore witness

Beneath eminently unforgiving
Declaration of the man
Man under sage
Declaration of the woman
Woman astute
Good thing people saw
Extricate salvage if you can/t
Bad thing if you saw

So many ribs were broken
Amidst splatter and tap
Amidst splatter and perish
Pester and pardon?
I mean fetch up and add on
Cracking skulls and a blasted
Of those that were gritty
After pester and pardon
I mean fetch up and add on

So many ribs were broken



Amidst rend and flesh rapture
And bones by the steel
Each spoke by its end
Funny thing is some of them
Do no grasp a tip
slain a sophomore
Bones by the steel
And no mercy to self-denouncers

So many ribs were broken
Upon them every countenance
Descry horror thriller
Conceive through the pain
Funny thing is
those not fell upon
clamored for equity
and people saw
and I saw
that I was sorry but I laughed.

Jeremiah Simba was born in 2000. He lives in Nairobi, Kenya. He loves literature and has several poems under his belt. He has served as the Editor-in-Chief for Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology's Society of Communication Students.

threadbare

FRAN FERNÁNDEZ ARCE

The threadings in the soil,
they mark only an instant for you.

They blend into a passing glimpse,
remnants in the corner of

your eye. The grass falling back,
its stalks undulating like frailed

edges of a single piece of
darned needlework, stunted growth,

it all looks the same to you.
This land, chartreuse green,



moss, and oak, you rolled it up
into a private ball of twisted yarn

for safekeeping,
to keep you warm.

You may reach for it
from time to time. From afar,

this treasure trove of wool and soil
watches over you like a spiral ridge of

all the pieces I am made of.
The fields you drive by every morning,



they are left threadbare, exposed,
when you look the other way.

Fran Fernández Arce is a Chilean poet currently living in the intersection between Santiago, Chile and Suffolk, England. Her work has been featured or is forthcoming in Pollux Journal, Beir Bua Journal, and Tether's End, among others.

measure for measure

RYAN QUINN FLANAGAN

This ruling class of rulers,
I can't think a worse storm out of
its sullen bramble bush of rain;
measure for measure, it's monsoon Mary
taking you for a fallout shelter again,
a prison break of black mascara runs
making for the gate –
I used to have charisma in a past life,
now it's nothing but bad skin and bills to pay;
pen cap work orders while the nine-brained octopus
of the sprawling ocean deep makes a mockery
of this old school wine & cheese
in-house lobotomy crowd.

pear down

RYAN QUINN FLANAGAN

That chugalug bamboozle bass
and I know,
that bruised produce clerk pear down
rolling across floors that would lick
themselves if fetishes wore aprons
for tongues;
goodbye taste, no one can afford you –
bye bye waste, that constant flush
of public bathrooms...
hold my head so the thoughts
can scramble themselves,
wheeling around this well painted
carpark of empty shelves:
give us a smile, a coupon, a rebate;
the runt of the litter has
to eat too.

catacombs

RYAN QUINN FLANAGAN

Nothing
but a soccer ball of skulls
kicked around the cavernous
catacombs,
centuries of the dead
under a city of bells and whistles,
all those chambers hollowed out
and piled with the bones
of complete strangers
with an \$8 admit
or a \$16 tour guide
if you need someone
to tell you how and why
the living should be looking
at the dead.

Ryan Quinn Flanagan is a Canadian-born author residing in Elliot Lake, Ontario, Canada with his wife and many bears that rifle through his garbage. His work can be found both in print and online in such places as: Evergreen Review, The New York Quarterly, Rhodora Magazine, Monterey Poetry Review, Red Fez, and The Oklahoma Review.

The image features a solid purple background. In the four corners, there are stylized, light purple leafy branches. The leaves are elongated and pointed, arranged in a pinnate pattern along thin stems. These decorative elements frame the central text.

fiction

the curtain and the clouds

DIVYANK JAIN

"Look at the clouds."

"Clouds, really?"

"Yes, there they are."

"Sure."

"Why can't you trust me?" the wife asked, anxiously.

"I trust you alright."



"You never like anything that I like," complained the hopeless wife.

It was a cold November morning, and Rahul and Teena were approaching five years of marriage, and it was also the eighth month of lockdown, so they had no business outside or inside, and they were running out of money. Seated on a couch, they sipped coffee together without talking. Suddenly, Teena stood up, went to look at the clouds, but Rahul had already disappointed her again.

He raised his brows, stood up with a sigh. Without uttering anything, he strode straight to the window where Teena stood, holding the dark blue curtain, her smile lost somewhere.

Rahul gazed at the sky. There was no sun today, only cumulus and stratus. Even without experiencing the usual morning warmth, he knew where the sun was. He could always sense the things and he had taken no pride in it; the result had been rarely good for him. And, his wife stood there facing the clouds, hiding herself. Rahul didn't want to see her, for he knew what it was. Instead, he moved closer to the window. Not willing to open it today in the adverse weather, he only touched the cold glass. Unlike his wife, he hated all that was out there in front of his eyes.

Rahul felt Teena's eyes on his neck. He turned to her, and their



eyes met for a moment. She dropped her head down, looked at the floor thoughtfully, her fist still clutching the curtain. Before Rahul could speak about the clouds and the sky, the curtain fell from her hand and the world disappeared, only a navy blue silk curtain remained.

The wife sat down back on the couch, and buried her head in her arms. She stared at the white tiled floor. She saw the half-filled coffee mug Rahul had left on the coffee table. The mug was warm in Rahul's palms and he liked holding it. Now it was cold and alone in this weather. Rahul felt bad that he didn't drink it, a feeling that poisoned his day, his writing and his stories. He had nothing left to lose; he made up his mind and raised the curtain slowly which felt like lead in his hand.

"You're right. The clouds are beautiful," he declared.

"I don't care," Teena replied, her head down.

Without letting the curtain fall, he turned back. He saw the whole of her at once. She looked so small and trapped.

"I thought you liked them," Rahul said.

"Yes I did but you didn't."

"I just said, the clouds are beautiful, didn't you hear that?"

"But, you don't mean it."

"How can you say that?" Rahul pretended to be shocked.

"I just know," Teena replied.

"That's the matter with you, always,"

"Don't talk to me like this."

Rahul looked at her. "I am talking fine. I am fine."

Rahul tried to smile at her. Teena remained there, not moving or caring to answer him and then he wasn't fine. There was a time Rahul admired everything she adored, whether it was the coffee

shop with old, greek-styled furniture, the traditional Indian print of cushions, the brand new trend of grey hair colour for men, or a teenage movie about a road trip into the wilderness. Teena had an adventurous soul, which Rahul loved. Although he had never participated in her risky hobbies like mountain jumping and rock climbing, he admired her fierce energy.

But in a matter of a day, everything changed when there were clouds in the sky, and the entire city was flooded by a rainstorm. Despite the enormous pressure of deadlines, Rahul preferred to stay at home, but not Teena. Unlike every morning, she didn't kiss him goodbye before leaving and she couldn't make eye contact with him when she came back all wet. Later all Rahul was told was that she couldn't make it to the apartment on time because of the heavy rain. He was told this a thousand times, and he despised it again and again. The sugarcoated morning messages from a colleague Rahul found on her phone later that day were the reason behind all the bitterness between the husband and the wife. Teena left the job, closed down her newly started business of local publication and decided to be a housewife forever. But, this only worsened things between them.

"Yes, that was the matter with you, always !" Rahul blurted, remembering.

"Please," she said, closing her eyes. "Stop it."

"You started it."

They didn't talk for a while.

"Rahul!" she looked at him, her eyes now, begging. "It's been too long."

"So what?"

"We must stop it. We cannot go on like this. It's painful. We can

be fine like we were before."

"I don't think so," Rahul replied.

"Why?" Teena asked loudly. "I don't understand. Why can't we talk while sipping coffee or eating supper like we used to? Why can't you say I look beautiful when I brush my hair sitting in front of the dresser? Why can't you trust me at once when I say there are clouds out there?"

Rahul remained silent, then he said, "I don't know."

"It's been three years," said his wife, "and I have done everything I could to gain your trust back."

Rahul looked at her blankly, he said, "you can't fix it."

Teena swallowed back disappointment and said nothing. Rahul glanced at her frantic feet tapping. He loved her. Now and then, Rahul always loved her. Even standing there at the window and looking at her hair and the edge of her left ear, he wanted to love her, maybe more than ever. But the change was painful and it came very strong. Each time he had shown his love to her, it made him weaker. Although he was feeling weak even now, he didn't move from his place.

His wife stood up off the couch, exhaled heavily, and, not trying to look at him, put her hands in her sweater's pocket. "We can't go on like this," she said.

He shrugged and turned to the window. He felt weak when he heard her shuffle across the hall to the kitchen and then the door clicked shut. She always did this, he thought. He stood still, shook his head a little, and looked at the clouds..

Yes, the clouds were beautiful over the pine trees, but Rahul would have liked the sky more if it was clear and blue. He had always loved clear things... clear and simple things. In clear and

calm weather, you could open the window and feel the sun's warmth on your face that could melt down your winter-tightened muscles. He liked the sun very much. Everyone should like the sun and no one should have said that the clouds are beautiful on such a damn morning of a cruel month. The clouds filled the sky needlessly, he thought.

Rahul looked at the floor as he heard a low sobbing sound. She always did this, he muttered in disgust. He stared at the cold knob of the closed kitchen door. His hand, still holding the curtain, was frozen. He ruined the day and his writing. He was too weak to stand it.

"Are you fine?" he said aloud.

"Please shut up, Rahul, please. I beg you," Teena shrieked.

Closing his eyes tightly, Rahul shook his head. Now, he let the curtain fall. He sat on the couch, his head heavy in his palms. He looked at the half-filled coffee mug, hatefully. Now, he needed a little wine, maybe some cigarettes too, and he knew the day was already ruined.

Divyank Jain is a 26-year-old writer based in Udaipur, India. Although a teacher, he has been passionate about reading English literature and writing for a long time. His stories were published in magazines and anthologies like Radiate Lit. Journal, Litsreamagazine, Active Muse, Together Magazine, Firefly Review, Star Gazette Magazine, Yawp Journal, and ARC Journal. He is currently working on his debut novella.

knock, knock

NICOLETTE SOULIA

"Tell me about the monsters," Dr. Perry said. Her fingers gripped her pen and notepad as if they were her battle weapons to fight off demons. The young girl in front of her twirled her ginger curls around her index finger.

"Monsters?"

"The creatures that won't let you sleep?" Dr. Perry egged.

"Oh," the girl sighed, "I'm not supposed to talk about them. They will leave."

"You don't want them to leave?"

"Of course not! They are my friends!" The girl crossed her arms and flopped into the princess beanbag chair behind her. Dr. Perry pushed her glasses up her nose and scanned her notes: *nightmares, screams in the night, witnessed brother drown one year ago.*

"Monsters can be quite scary, huh," Dr. Perry spoke softly.

"Stop calling them that," the girl ordered. "Just because something has claws and teeth doesn't make it a monster."

"How about your brother? Would you like to talk about how you felt when he had his accident?"

"No."

"Cecelia, it's completely okay to feel scared when bad things happen."

"I wasn't," Cecelia replied.

"How long have you been getting visits from the mo-... your friends?" Dr. Perry asked as Cecelia's eyes wandered around the colorful office inspecting the various toys.

"I met them the day Danny died," she said, landing her hands on a plastic dragon. "They live in the water."

"Do you think they will come to take you underwater like

Danny?" Dr. Perry inquired. The girl squealed, startling the therapist.

"They will never hurt me!" She guffawed. "Danny shouldn't have been mean to me. They would have been his friends, too."

"Excuse me?" Dr. Perry froze. "How was Danny mean to you?" The girl fell silent, her smile fading into a steely glare.

"He made me do bad things," Cecelia said. "Grownup things... But my friends put him in timeout and said he can't hurt me anymore. And they tell me funny jokes at bedtime."

Dr. Perry gulped, watching Cecelia bring the toy dragon's mouth to a boy doll as if it were biting off his head. "What kind of jokes do they tell?" she asked.

"Knock-knock jokes, chicken jokes, all kinds of jokes. But Mommy and Daddy don't like it. They say that I laugh too loud." Dr. Perry took down her notes, and when the session was finished, she collapsed against her office chair with a heavy sigh.

That night, Dr. Perry tossed and turned in her bed, cursing the thunderstorm out her window for keeping her awake before she heard it. It sounded as if a tree branch were scraping against her house, but with an ominous rhythm too precise to be accidental. Dr. Perry threw the covers off her body, wrapped her robe around her, and stamped down the stairwell to the front door. Eyeing the peephole, she gasped at the figure on the other side, then heard its voice grumble low. "Knock, knock." She opened the door.

"Who's there?"

Nicolette Soulia is based in Evansville, Indiana. Several of my pieces have been featured in independent publications, such as Open Door Poetry Magazine and Midwest Writers Guild Literary Journal.



jessica

JAMES PENHA

Jessica was the star of my International Baccalaureate English Literature class; in every poem she attended to individual words to discern how they served the whole, in every play she developed an understanding of characters according to their desires, in every piece of fiction she searched for the architecture revealing how the shape of a story or chapter reveals its themes. And despite English being her second language, she crafted analytical essays with flair as well as flawless argumentation. I knew she would earn a 7—the highest possible score in IB—at the end of the two-year course.

But the Creative Writing course Jessica signed up for in her senior year because she got on so well with me in Lit was a different universe. Her work was staggeringly unoriginal, often merely disguising material we had read in Lit—so derivative that I wondered if her essays in Lit had been plagiarized. But, no, her spontaneous oral and written commentaries on works sprung on students as part of the IB Lit curriculum were just as brilliant as the essays she had time to prepare at home.

She was just not creative. Nonetheless, the difference between her work in Lit and in Creative Writing continued to boggle me. And the resulting report-card grades distressed Jessica: She was earning A in all her IB courses and a charitable C- in Creative Writing. “I won’t get into Oxford with a C-.”

“Get a perfect IB score, and Oxford won’t care about Creative Writing,” I guessed. Only six former students in my twenty years of teaching had been accepted by Oxford. I had little idea how that university came to its decisions.

“It will. I want to study Literature. I took Creative Writing to

buttress my application!”

“Buttress! Use words that effectively on your application essay, and they’ll forgive you your Creative Writing.”

“Can’t you just forgive my uncreative writing and goose my Creative Writing grade?”

“Absolutely not, Jessica.” She teared, and so I relented as far as I could, “Look, wow me with something utterly original, and I’ll reward you appropriately.”

But Jessica didn’t write anything, nor even attend school in the two ensuing weeks.

Manjula, Jessica’s History teacher, huddled with me in the cafeteria when I asked if she had heard anything about Jessica’s absences. “Her mother is dying of ovarian cancer. Jessica spends all day at the hospital.”

“Oh, no! How did you hear? Why don’t all her teachers know?”

“Jessica called me. She wanted someone at school—a woman—to know, but she asked me to keep it a secret. I’m breaking a confidence to tell you. But you asked, and I couldn’t lie.”

“Does the principal know?”

“I don’t think so.”

“We have to tell him, Manjula,” I said. “The consequences could be dire. I mean, of course, her mother’s situation is dire, but this is a girl who deserves to go to Oxford. The loss of a few weeks of schooling—”

“You’re right. Let’s go see Dr. Richter. Once broken, a confidence is easily shattered.”

The principal hadn’t known. He suggested we walk down the hill to the hospital after school, express our concern for her mother, and work out a way for Jessica to continue her studies despite the

trauma of her mother's illness.

At the hospital, Manjula called Jessica, told her that she had shared the news of her mother with the principal and me, and that we were waiting for her in the lobby. "Jessica's with her mother now," Manjula reported. "She said she'll try to get down in fifteen minutes or so."

Manjula and I sat on a couch in the lobby, but Dr. Richter wanted to check at the nurse's station on the mother's condition."

"I don't think they'll tell you much," I said. "You're not a relative."

"I'm a principal, Jack," he retorted and proceeded to the desk. When he returned, glowering, he said. "This is bad."

"What?" I said. "Is she gone?"

"She was never here. Jessica's mother was never a patient here."

"How—do we have the wrong hospital?" I asked Manjula.

"I don't think so." She pointed to the entrance.

Jessica, smiling broadly, walked straight over to me and said, "I'll take my A now."



A native New Yorker, James Penha (he/him) has lived for the past three decades in Indonesia. Nominated for Pushcart Prizes in fiction and poetry, his work is widely published in journals and anthologies. His newest chapbook of poems, American Daguerreotypes, is available for Kindle. His essays have appeared in The New York Daily News and The New York Times. Penha edits The New Verse News, an online journal of current-events poetry. Twitter: @JamesPenha

la nascita de venere



AYAAN HALDER

Uttara was a tired woman; you could see it from the way she painted; greyer shades of colour would be used, slothful strokes of the brush showed her lack of interest in what the world had to offer, and sometimes, she'd forget her work out in the terrace, only to find out the next morning that a weeping sky mourning the purpose of her life had washed away whatever she had drunkenly scribbled. There was a time when the brush strokes used to give birth to art less melancholy. A time when she would depict things more beautiful on her canvas; children, love, music, nature, sex, even what her perception of God was. He was loveless; her God, and yet there was a time she felt that he existed; existed only, and only for her. She'd get glimpses of him in her dreams, and the dreams would turn into paintings of him making love to her; his talons piercing through her olive flesh, his silver wings spread out in their full bloom, his gentle lips perched on her flaky, radiating skin. Portraits of his flawless face adorned the walls of her tiny bedroom, and even that left her unsatisfied. She dreamt of painting a masterpiece one day; something along the lines of Botticelli's Venus and Mars. For that is what they were to each other; she, his Venus; he, her Mars. It had been years now, she recalled; years since she had started painting what was meant to be her masterpiece; her magnum opus. She remembered dipping her brush in bright colours, stroking it as she watched the meaningless white of the canvas turn into poetry and into song, until one cold December afternoon, the wretched God abandoned the truth in her worship for a prettier, more luscious lie, and her poem lay there incomplete, just as abandoned as she was.

It was on another December afternoon, many years later that




she met Mrinalini; beautiful, though only a year younger to her, married to a pen pusher, and strangely eccentric. The day had begun in its usual monotony, as she found herself in school, teaching uninterested children how to draw mangoes and flowers, painting for things she didn't care about; money, food, a roof over her head. Alone, amidst arrogant colleagues who could never understand, let alone appreciate her or her long dead craft; strangers to her, just like the God she had once loved. It was a Monday or Tuesday, she didn't know. All she knew was that that day, she felt especially low-spirited, and not knowing why made it even worse. Uttara had aged by then, aged earlier, in fact, although it was only now that her body neared its forties and her aching hip became testament to that. The younger woman had introduced herself to the cold and lifeless common room, before claiming the blue foam chair beside Uttara's own and breaking into what Uttara had hoped would be a short lived conversation. She told her that she had taught English for years somewhere in Dimapur, but had finally decided to join her two children and her husband when the latter had gotten a promotion and was transferred to Guwahati a month ago. With every rendezvous the two had between their lessons riddled by one sided conversation, by the end of the day, an uninterested Uttara had known all about how anxious Mrinalini had been through her three weeks of unemployment in what was supposed to be her own city, and all about her relief on getting her new job. Uttara hadn't understood either of those things; for none of it mattered to her anymore; the only sustenance she knew was what she dutifully provided to her catheter dependant father; the other things that came with this 'employment' that her colleague seemed so passionate about,



she had stopped caring for a long time ago. Soon enough, the conversations turned into invitations for tea, lunch, and introductions to the husband and the children, and each time they were brought up, Uttara had struggled to find an excuse. And so, armed with a box of Motichoor Laddoos and a little earthen pot brimming with curd, the lively, boundary disregarding Mrinalini had turned up to her musty old house instead. When she had left, her invitation for lunch had lingered through the air, pervading the nooks and corners of each room, and Uttara had let it linger, paying it no heed, for she had better things to worry about. It was only when she had gone in for a bath that she felt the usual thinness in the air; a tightly packed thinness that seemed to have retreated into the shower at Mrinalini's arrival. And as she let the water take her, she felt the warmth of her tears get mixed with the colder droplets the showerhead spat on her, commentating on the meaninglessness of her life; telling her that Godlessness was a sin that deserved to be punished with obliteration. And so she had run out wailing, and had run straight to her father, not stopping even to cover herself with anything more than the towels wrapped around her body and her head. It had been the old man who had convinced her to go. Had told her that she needed the cheer that Mrinalini had to offer. Had told her he could take care of himself for an afternoon, and had told her off when she had protested. "People leave, my child", he said. "People leave and never turn back. And all we can do is keep our eyes off of the roads they take... lay them on livelier things... Like I do, now that your mother's gone." It was true that her father had dealt with his wife's passing with a strength that Uttara only wished that she could muster. Even with a catheter hanging from the side of his

bed, he found ways to smile, chuckling along to runs and reruns of *Tarak Mehta Ka Ulta Chashma* and *Beharbari Outpost*.

And so, taking her ailing father's advice, Uttara had ridden a cab from Birubari to Panbazar, and had stood at her colleague's doorstep with the obligatory box of sweets for five full minutes, before taking a deep, heavy breath, and pressing the welcoming doorbell. To her own surprise, the afternoon had been a jovial one, and as the affluent couple had kept her company, she had found herself smiling; relishing the mutton biryani Mrinalini had gone through the trouble to prepare, while James and Bond, their two golden Labradors, sniffed her toes and slithered under the table. Jayanta, Mrinalini's husband, wasn't very different from his wife; peculiar, yet interesting, and a man of many words, he had showered Uttara with his awe when Mrinalini had told him of her years in Shantiniketan. "Stupendous... absolutely amazing... I would love to have a glimpse of your work very soon! Probably when we're over for dinner at yours the next time! That is if we're invited" he had said, snorting loudly as he did. And so it happened. By the next week, Uttara had invited the couple and their children for another meal at her humble abode, and found herself marinating chicken in spices and the curd Mrinalini had brought along on her previous visit. She had brought out the best for her new friends; her mother's bone china dinner set and the chequered tablecloths and towels from Shillong which her father had bought during the three years that he had been posted there just before his retirement. Soon enough, the couple had arrived, and had brought a litter of children; their two sons and a niece who was staying over at their place for the weekend. But the extra mouth hadn't bothered Uttara, for Mrinalini was a friend to her,



and now, she really wished that she too could be hers. As Mrinalini had helped her in the kitchen, washing the Basmati, peeling the onions; sans pride, sans complexes, Jayanta, taking the children with him, had hovered over to her father's bedroom and had sat near his feet and kept the old man company. From the kitchen could be heard the sonorous voice of the younger man, complemented by the frail harmony the elder's had to offer. Together, they had talked of things they could pick from the quickly found common ground; government jobs and failing governments, and a little about the old man's health. One of the two sons, a strapping chap of nineteen had slipped into the kitchen and with utter politeness, asked the hostess if he could help her in any way; an offer which she had smilingly declined with a counter offer of making them some lemonade. At the dining table, Uttara had smiled once again, for it had been a long time since her father had walked up to it, walking stick in hand, and sat down with her for a meal. It was there that the topic had shifted to Shantiniketan, and from there had snowballed into a full blown discussion about different styles of art and artists who had left their mark in the world. Towards the end, while Mrinalini pestered her younger son for chewing the bones of the broiler chicken, the conversation had taken its inevitable final form in her husband's keen interest in looking at Uttara's work. And so, after lunch, putting her father to sleep and leaving the TV remote near enough for him to find it when he woke up, but not so near that it fell to the ground and broke, Uttara led the party of five downstairs and into the oddly dimensioned room that she called her workshop.


It was an oblong room, to say the least; each wall a different

size than the other, a roof just high enough for the people to stand straight, and the mouldy smell of solitude. The corner at the narrow end was home to the plethora of incomplete works that dotted her canvases and as they hovered through her older works, she subtly attempted to keep her visitors' eyes off of them. By the time the tour came to an end, her guests, as she somehow had expected, were mesmerised. It was then that Jayanta had made her the offer. Walking up the staircase in a manner that lacked urgency, he had told her about the new flyover that was being built in the Ganeshguri area; the project was nearly complete, he said; another month, two, at the most, and then the ribbons would be cut. Uttara knew Jayanta was an officer in the State's Public Works department; just how high up, she didn't know, but she could gather that he was at, or at least near the helm of affairs that surrounded the flyover project. "The CM recently told me that he wants a cultural aesthetic to the structure; you know. Something to set it apart from the other flyovers in the city." He said, his sonorous voice now in serious, professional monotone. "These city beautification projects, we usually hand to the various artist's guilds and associations that dot the state. Big opportunities for hardworking artists just like you, you know? This time is no different. I've already talked to the president of one of these associations; some mousy fellow called Medhi. They'll be sending their best people for a projection of the State's culture through murals; a sprinkle of the *jaapis* and Rhinos and the occasional Kamakhya temple with overall *gamusa* themed borders. I think it is an opportunity of a lifetime for any artist. Don't you?" Mrinalini nodded her head and looked at Uttara coaxingly. By now they had reached the drawing cum

dining room, and from the corner of her eye, Uttara could see her mother's bone china still spread over the table, unwashed. "And despite all of that business with Medhi, I was thinking, since Uttara *Baideu* is such a talented woman, it would be my honour to reserve a space for her to work her magic on; something; anything that she feels will truly represent the spirit of our land." Before cold anger took her over, Uttara had laughed internally as she told the couple that she would definitely ponder over the offer and let them know. Murals for the government on the side of some half-baked bridge? Did the CM really think his was an original idea? Set him apart from his predecessors? What did these commoditisers of culture know about the spirit of the land? Couldn't they just do what they do best, and not bother poor artists with the eyewash that they were creating something significant? Could one even imagine her crouched under the sun at the edge of some impractically built flyover, painting rhinos and temples when her wretched God was gone? And that too on a wall that had been thrown to her like a piece of rotten bread to a mongrel. Could one even imagine her crouched under the sun, with her aching hip that hurt so much more in the morning, only to create something that would most definitely be spat upon by filthy *pan masala* and *tamul* chewing bikers and rubbed mercilessly with lime by fools who think flyovers were meant for walking. No different from the curses and spit her showerhead riddled her with. No, thank you sir, No, thank you!



For the next few weeks, Uttara had maintained her distance; taking longer routes through the school corridors and waiting inside the classrooms for five extra minutes to avoid Mrinalini as much as she could. She had made up her mind to do it at least

until her anger had subsided. If she were to be honest, it was more so because she still liked Mrinalini; still considered her a friend, and in this was her idea of protecting her from herself. The younger woman, oddly, didn't really notice what was happening, carrying on her usual chatter through the lessened opportunities she got to interact with Uttara, and although there wasn't any mention of another invitation for a meal, things did slowly get back to their usual state between them, and the offer that Jayanta had made to Uttara faded, and ultimately disappeared into thin air. Soon enough, as they went deeper into the New Year, the new academic session began with a cold morning assembly. The wind howled as the students arrived through the gates, hustling and bustling down the corridors. Friends greeting each other with a hug or a playful punch while newcomers stood looking scared. The seniors stood tall and proud, adolescent confidence brimming in their eyes. Soon the bells rang and everybody except an occasional slowpoke or chatterbox melted into the hall hastily. One of the older children then murmured a little prayer into the microphone that echoed through the newly fitted audio system there had been much hullabaloo about, after which, the entire school had broken into songs that praised their God. Uttara never sang along; ready to cite lies about her spirituality at the click of a finger if questioned. Really, it was because she didn't believe Gods were worth worship; nobody was. Worship only made beings proud, cruel and merciless. That, she had to learn the hard way, for she had worshipped too much, and too often, until her cup had run dry and her God had refused to fill it, sipping away instead from another's. The choir consisted of a mix of students; some younger than the others. The younger



ones would fidget around with their pens and the buttons on their blazers, while whispering tiny secrets in their friend's ear, but would quickly be silenced with a flickering look from a Prefect hovering in the back. Sometimes, the teachers would give them those stares too. But all was forgiven once they would break into song. The rest of the students would follow their lead, and the music teacher would strum and pluck the strings of his guitars, with the same forlorn look on his face that Uttara was so used to seeing in the mirror. Yet, he would fill the room with hymns in praise of what she considered an unworthy God. And each day, it surprised her as to why he did it. After the assembly, the students proceeded to their classrooms, and as Uttara followed suite when Mrinalini jogged up beside her. She seemed a little worried, her creased forehead seeming like it had been pasted over her otherwise clear face. Uttara, though feebly, had asked her if everything was okay, but that even that had been enough for the latter too burst into a rant about how troubled she and her husband were because of their son's bad performances in medical school. But the next time Uttara had seen her during the forty minute recess, the creases had disappeared and her new elaborations encompassed the tulips she had planted at home, and how Bond had gotten a neighbour's dog pregnant. Not that it angered her, but she no longer had any energy left to listen to Mrinalini's chatter through the bus ride home. And so when school ended, Uttara chose to get into an auto-rickshaw instead, making up an excuse about going to the dermatologist.

By the end of the day, Uttara wished that she hadn't made that switch; for then, a whole lot of pain could have been avoided. But again, wasn't this the moment she had been waiting for





through hundreds of years and more? It was on her way back home when it happened; for the better or the worse, she did not know. She stopped for coffee, and saw him across the road walking by the old cafe; cigarette pressed between his porcelain lips, a sinful devotee in his arms, her mouth whispering filthy prayers to his ears. He was wearing glasses, as if to hide his shame, but his eyes were wide open; large, dark eyes. The closer she had gotten, the faster her heart had throbbed. Her Mars! Her master! Her masterpiece stood before her! There was a tinge of surprise in them when they met hers, and with a passing breath, Uttara thought he might break into that pious smile like he used to a few hundred years ago. For a moment, she felt the urge to pray again; to sacrifice her body to him, and sacrifice her soul. To be one with him for the rest of eternity. But not even eternities are forever, and she realized that as he turned away, turning into someone else's eternity right before her.

The night had been cruel; as cruel as her loveless God; as cruel as the loveless God who no longer belonged to her. Her God, and yet no longer her own! It was about three in the morning when she made the call; once, twice, as many times as she needed to call before Mrinalini picked up. And after the countless restless twists, turns and the painkillers for her hurting hip, and perhaps her hurting soul, when finally she did pick up, Uttara had shed tears for herself that she knew she should have shed centuries ago. And Mrinalini had listened quietly, for the first time sans chatter, for she was her friend, and she belonged to her. When the tears had dried up and herspined, for the first time in those centuries felt straight again, Uttara had asked for Jayanta, enquiring if his offer still stood, ready with her paintbrushes when he had said yes.

It was time to finish her masterpiece.

Soon, the strokes of her brush, they liberated her; she could finally breathe again. She was free of the supernatural, and he, a mere mortal. She painted with gold, and she painted with red, bringing to life the Dhuliya dressed to impress both ministers and common men, and the Mekhela clad woman beside him who, it almost seemed would break into dance if one's eyes lingered too long over her frame. But it wasn't their bodies that made her work a masterpiece; No, no, they were mere monuments built only to widen the chests of politicians and bureaucrats and perhaps even the contractors, but not Uttara's. Uttara's joys came from the two faces; faces for which she had sacrificed the rest the doctor had told her hip deserved; the faces of her God and his luscious lie that she had painted with such tenderness that if one were to look into the depths of their eyes, their bodies would become as bitter as hers once was. But she needn't worry; no one ever really did look into the depths of the eyes of murals on the side of the road. At least she hoped that no one would. The Chief Minister had cut the ribbons on some holiday, and although Uttara had never been invited to the ceremony, she had waited on a borrowed scooty, waited with the Pan-masala chewing bike riders who had enthusiastically made their way to the edge of the bridge awaiting a chance to zoom through it in the name of a test drive. After the Chief Minister and other honourable men had been escorted through it, the convoy disappearing into the horizon, the fat bellied traffic cops who stood on both edges had signalled the brimming traffic to march forward, and the traffic had enthusiastically complied. Every vehicle that was on that road that evening had made it a point to make its way up the flyover.



Every vehicle, except Uttara's. For four hours, a starving Uttara had waited, like a general watching over her armies wreck the enemy in battle; soaking the battleground in red; hungry for victory. Four hours later, when the cops had gotten off of their duties, and lovers had gone and wrapped themselves around each other, and mothers cradled their babies as they softly snored; when all but the homeless and the drunk had gone home, Uttara hiked the mountain that was the Ganeshguri flyover. As she got closer to her God, her heart had beaten faster; Perhaps falling from grace for mortals is no botheration. But what happens when a God has fallen? Are there earthquakes? Are there storms? Does lava flow through cities, sending sinners to damnation? Or is it that none of those things happen, and shame is all that stands between the God and his mortals. Does he turn into a tramp on whom men and women with lives now as finite as his own spit? At least that is what their mouths had painted him to be; a travesty under the façade of holiness. Spat upon by men, and not showerheads. He had lost today. He lost diamonds and emeralds that adorned his skin; her satin shawls that covered his flaws, keeping secrets that even he didn't know. The riders had been merciless, and the betel juice they had sprayed on that yard of what was mere concrete to them had finished what she had started; her masterpiece! Her masterpiece! Her masterpiece has fallen right before her! Like a planet stripped of all the hope at the birth of the Goddess who had abandoned the wretch. Like the Godless who she knew deserved nothing but obliteration.

Glossary

Motichoor laddoos: Round sweets made with fine and tiny saffron-coloured balls of gram flour

Tarak Mehta Ka Uta Chashma: A popular and humorous Hindi daily soap

Beharbari Outpost: A popular and humorous Assamese daily soap

Jaapi: A conical hat made of bamboo and covered with dried tokou (a palm tree found in rainforests of Upper Assam) leaves. While it is most often used in official functions to felicitate guests, the landscape of rural Assam features a more utilitarian version, which farmers wear to protect themselves from the harsh weather, both sun and rain, while working in the fields.

Gamusa: The Gamosa or Gamusa, a cloth to wipe one's body, is an article of cultural significance for the indigenous people of Assam. It is generally a white rectangular piece of cotton cloth with a red border on three sides and red woven motifs on the fourth (in addition to red, other colours are also used).



Baideu: Elder sister

Pan masala: A mixture of chopped areca nut, lime and other ingredients (sometimes including tobacco), for chewing either by itself or wrapped in a betel leaf, widely available and used in many regions of India.

Tamul: Areca nut

Dhuliya: Drummers who play a twin-faced drum (the dhol, which is hung from the neck) with one stick and a palm in a traditional Bihu dance performance.

Mekhela: An indigenous dress traditionally worn by Assamese women.





Raised in the picturesque hills of Meghalaya, Ayaan Halder now simultaneously pursues his passions as a writer and a degree in law in Guwahati, the quickly developing heart of North-East India perched on the banks of the mighty Brahmaputra. He began writing as a teenager and has contributed a number of poems and articles to premier regional newspapers including "The Assam Tribune", "Guwahati Plus" and "The Truth Today". His short story, "The Gift" has also been published in the anthology "50:1", released by the Xavier's Institute of Communications, Mumbai in 2019, and the poem "The Actress" in the anthology "Elixir of Words", released in 2021.

just like the night

D W WHITE

And in the morning it was still raining. Enough only to hear the water meet the concrete, chipped and cracked in forming crumbling steps to the rusting door, with a rhythm that was probably soothing to other types of people. There wasn't sun but there was light, greyed and hazy through the barred windows, revealing slowly, minute by minute and song by song, the weathered living room, the cheap wine still plentiful but the vodka basically gone, gradually making the bare bulb pointless in the overhead dome, casting out of shadows their paling faces and drying hair, cutting up lines and turning up speakers and pointedly disbelieving the clock that said all those promises of the smaller, darker hours were becoming stale and half-formed memories in the conscious light of day. And the eyes bleed and the mind runs after so many hours, here on top of the world. But there's nothing to stop you, save for the night not yet dead and the day not yet broke but even then it's all perception, perception reflection connection rejection, because age they all say is just a number. And ain't that just like the night, to play tricks when you're trying to be so goddamn quiet, here in the rising morning and the fading light and all those promises it whispers about the future.

But all those thoughts that go chasing away in the night come creeping back again with the muted sun, like the children remembered from long ago mirrors, daring to be confronted, to be pushed back, to be reckoned with, in hazy sight of hazy morning, while the music grows louder and the warm drinks grow stronger and the diminishing returns of the diminishing coke offset the present to make room from the past, room enough for the night to overstay whatever welcome it was given, and what the hell, there was nothing to do tomorrow or today that anyone



would remember long enough to care about.

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rooftop ballet

ALLIE MITCHELL

A bottle of stolen champagne sat dangerously close to the ledge. One wrong move from the ballerina would send the bottle and her over the edge and to the concrete twelve stories down. That night had been the final run of *The Nutcracker*, it was her last night as the leading lady. Below her, the afterparty raged strong as the clock drifted toward midnight, a new year.

What people didn't know about ballerinas, is that they were vicious creatures. They were all dancing on stress fractures and ingrown toenails, and a select few were not opposed to pulling a Tonya Harding for the role of Odette or Clara

Serena had to admit, she was one of those select few, but she hadn't been the one to push the competition down a flight of stairs. That had been a different girl, one stupid enough to get caught. Serena guessed that the company wished she had gotten away with it, because, in the end, their third choice, Serena, had to become the shining star.

All the years of training and camps and expensive lessons had led her here, to the rooftop of someone else's apartment. Where she sat as close to the edge as possible, wondering where her life had gone wrong. Wondering if she would even see the new year.

The event played over in her mind trying to figure out where the evening went wrong. She took her last bow. The curtain fell. She hugged and chatted with the others, and then she checked her phone.

Dan (Bae): I'm sorry

That had been the first text, and over the next few minutes she scrolled through the three paragraphs that let her know that it was him not her, and he hadn't been feeling it for a long time, and he couldn't do it anymore.

One thing led to another, and she ended up sitting in the cold, New York air wondering if it would hurt if she fell. She felt so numb, she doubted she would feel anything at all.

“You going to jump?” A man’s voice asked.

She turned to him. “So what if I am?” Her reaction time was a little slower than usual thanks to the champagne and shots she had taken downstairs. She recognized him from the ballet. He was in tech, or something like that.

His dark eyes looked up at her, then down at the street. “It would probably hurt.” Down below a few couples strolled and two boys were long boarding. They were far enough from The New Years celebration that the noise didn’t reach them, but the lights were a loud beacon that thousands were gathered to watch the ball drop. It reminded her of a theater in the moments before the curtain rose and all unnecessary lights were dimmed. Anticipation rose, the audience quieted, the show was about to begin.

She picked up the champagne. “So what. I’m done. No more.” The bottle slipped through her fingers and plunged to the ground. It shattered into a glittering pile of a thousand diamonds. “Whoops.”

The stranger raised his eyebrows at the glass pieces. There was no one on their side of the street that could’ve been hurt, but the boys across the street curiously looked up.

“What?” She yelled at them while raising her arms.

“Okay, you’re done.” He reached around and dragged her off the ledge.

She kicked against him. “Let me go!”

He ignored her and lowered her to the ground after realizing she wasn’t going to be able to stand by herself. She glared as he

sat cross legged in front of her.

"I don't like you."

"You're drunk." He pulled a bottle of water from his jacket. She took a long drink from it and handed it back.

"That was kind of the point." She rubbed her arms and looked around for her jacket, only to remember that she had left it in the apartment. He sighed and pulled his jean jacket off. It swung around her shoulders.

"What are you doing up here? Tonight was the best performance of your life. You should be down there getting wasted with your friends, not up here yelling at teenagers."

She pulled the jacket tighter. "Dan broke up with me." It hurt to say. Another relationship she could add to the graveyard. Another reminder that she wasn't good enough, and never had been.

"I always thought he was a jerk," he murmured.

Tears blurred her vision. "Over text." And that was worse. How humiliating. She wasn't even worth a phone call.

"I'm sorry." He watched her. "Were you in love with him?"

She sighed and shook her head. "But it was nice, you know. I'm not going to be dancing forever and want to get married eventually." She had gone through quite a few men since she had moved to New York. The others were beginning to point out how she couldn't keep a man. Thirty was only a few years away and she had nothing of real value to show for it.

She reached up and wiped her eyes. Her nose began to run from the combination of the cold air and her fragile state.

"Serena." She met his eye. "I'm sorry about Dan, it sucks being dumped. But you deserve much better than him, and, what you're looking for, you'll find it. You're already one break-up closer to it."

“Thanks...” she searched her fuzzy mind for his name.”

“Nathan.” He smiled.

She smiled back. “Nathan.”

They sat on the roof listening to the music from the party below. In the distance, cars honked, and echoes of people cheering bounced off buildings. She didn’t know how long they soaked in their surroundings, but sooner than she liked, the count down for midnight began. Neither of them moved as everyone around them rang in the new year.

“You ready to go home?” Nathan asked when the noise dies down. She nodded and he helped her up. “Happy New Year, Serena.”

“Happy New Year.”

Allison Mitchell is a full time college student with a reading addiction. She loves the beach, writing, and finding the perfect notebook. Her favorite food is popcorn and her favorite color is green.

venkatesh's story

LUBHYATHI RANGARAJAN

Every time Venkatesh missed his mother, he would bury his nose in her sari, a pale mustard yellow with a faded red border, tiny birds embroidered on the body. He never let anyone else see him with it, holding it in both his hands, sometimes unravelling its length, nine yards of cotton, other times twisting it into a noose. His olfactory senses would sharpen in these moments of quiet confusion, when the questions were more than he could bear. The ashy smokiness from their stove was homesickness, her briny sweat on the pallu was denial, the metallic scent of blood, anger. But the faint whiff of mallige from the evenings she spent picking flowers for him to sell, was a mixture of regret and gratification.

In the weeks after Amma suddenly disappeared one night, he could sense the adults in his family slowly crumble with fear. There were panicked conversations between his aunt and his grandparents that stopped when he and his sisters were nearby. He caught whispers of the words police and murder, and understood only this: that Amma's absence was not ordinary. She had left him before, yet the fragrance of her eventual return flooded their cramped little one room home. This time it reeked of urgent abandonment. Curiously though, not on her terms.

After days of living with a knot in his little stomach and a big lump of uncried tears in his throat, Venkatesh and his Chikamma went to the police station. They were taken to the office of Chandrappa, Deputy Superintendent of Police. Chandrappa himself was nowhere to be seen, though Venkatesh detected a fishy aroma in the air. He was itching to explore the big desk with its locked drawers, and hundreds of glass curios on it. No gun in sight, he was a little disappointed. In a corner standing upright were a bunch of long wooden sticks, one had a leather belt

attached to its end. He stayed glued to his hard, wooden stool staring at the sticks, while Chikammawas anxiously balling up her sari pallu in her fist.

So. You want to file a missing complaint?

Chandrappa, Deputy Superintendent of Police strides in lazily followed by a constable, takes his police hat off and throws it on his desk. He leans back and picks his teeth, spitting out little fragments of his lunch. Venkatesh thought he looked at them like they were flies ruining his afternoon nap. The congealed lump in his throat started to harden.

Sar, *please* Sar. *Please* look at this boy. He is asking me where is his mother. What do I *tell* him? Please Sar. Only *you* can save us, we are very poor people. Our life is in your hands. Please...

Ena Ma. You are flattering me. It is you who should be telling me why your sister is missing. You know what she has done?

Chikamma is quiet for a long time, staring down at her lap, twisting her sari pallu in different directions. The white pallu is slowly changing colour.

Dei Umesh. They want to file a missing complaint. Get the papers.

Chikamma couldn't believe it. Thank you Sar! Nobody in the government has ever helped us like this, so quickly! I will be in your debt forever.

Ma, don't worry we will find your sister together. I am here to help you, and you are here to help me.

Umesh was back with the papers, locking the door behind him. There were no windows in the room, Venkatesh noticed this for the first time.

Hah! Let's see what is written here. "I confess that my sister

Akira killed 45 people and told me about it. Signed...”

Chikamma let go of her sari pallu and started to cry. The salty lump turned into ice and fell a thousand feet into Venkatesh's stomach. I thought we were here to bring Amma home. Chandrappa Sar must be wrong.

Enna Ma. You want me to go on in front of this boy? Or you sign this now and tell me what Akira did.

In between heavy wheezing, Chikkama said, Sar, we know nothing about this. All I know is that this boy and his sisters have been crying for days, ever since you came that night. Sar, you please tell me what can I do when I don't know anything? I can't even read. I'm begging you Sar, I'll do anything, but I cannot tell you what I don't know.

Dei Umesh. Bring that boy here.

A sharp hit on his head brought Venkatesh back into the room. He had had a vision of himself rooting desperately through garbage for food.

Get up! You didn't hear Sar is calling you. Up!

Taking him by his scruffy collar, the constable deposited him in front of Chandrappa like a sack of old rice.

It hit him in his face like the stick with the leather belt. Salty sweat, stale mallige, blood.

What is your name boy?

He couldn't move his lips. From far away he heard Chikkamma say Venkatesh.

Venkatesh. Do you know what maranadandane is?

Ma.ra.na.dan.dan.ne, he repeated it in his mind.

Your mother killed people. Lots of people who had children like you. If you don't tell me how she did it, she will die.

Wait. Who will kill her? The ghosts of the dead people?

Ma-ra-na-dan-da-ne. Ma-ra-na-dan-da-ne. He took one step with every syllable, rhythmically trying to keep up with the crowd. Hup! He put down the wooden crate with his scrawny arms and wiped his brow with a mustard yellow cloth, tiny birds handwoven on it. Over the years, blood, sweat and tears seeped into the weave and were lost. Eventually, it was only the mallige that survived.

The Sisters of Eternal Mercy did not like his past. It was with great difficulty that he would wriggle out of their grasp and remember. In between psalms (God's love, it's so wonderful, oh! Wonderful love!) and sermons (Perpetual Succour, Redemption and Deliverance), he would read Amma's letter over and over again.

My dear Venu, I have found a place for you and Akka to live. It has a school, and lots of friends for you to play with. A very nice man whose name is Bhava will take you there. Don't trouble him, he is a good man. I miss you everyday, my Veenukutti. Don't trouble your teachers and Akka. Amma will come home to you very soon.

More questions and therefore a letter back. *Amma, ninuenu maadide? Why did you leave me without saying bye? Why have they put you behind those bars? Why do your eyes look sunken and black, and why do you smell so strongly of blood? Did you really do something bad? I don't like this hostel Amma. The other children make fun of me because of you and no one wants to talk to me. When are you coming home? You keep saying soon, but you're still inside. I like the songs they teach me, my favourite song is All Things Bright and Beautiful, All Creatures Great and Small. I will teach*

you how to sing it when we meet. Do you have maranadandane Amma because Chandrappa police sar said you will get it. Is it a fever like that time Akka got boils all over her body? Is this how the ghosts will punish you?

The Sisters found it hard to cope with his frequent escapes from the hostel, and were glad when he turned eighteen and had to leave. He lived with his aunt and grandparents for a few days, until they too were happy that he suddenly disappeared one night. But unlike his mother ten years ago, he left the house steeped in the odours of renunciation.

He began living with other coolies, learnt the trade, shared meals and stories, and slept on railway platforms. He grew used to carrying heavy burdens, while his dignity made peace with earning 200 rupees a day. He occasionally visited his married sisters, his re-married grandfather and his aunt, to make Amma happy. The other coolies only knew that Amma was sick with a disease that covered her in pus filled boils. They would feel sorry for this skinny, underfed adolescent, and sometimes pool in part of their earnings to pay for his ticket 'home'.

Travelers, please pay attention, Train No. 2341 to Belgaum is leaving Platform No. 2 at 12 hours and 52 minutes.

He waited for the train to pull in.

Lubhyathi Rangarajan is a lawyer based in Delhi, and a founding member of Project39A, National Law University Delhi. P39A is an organization committed to providing pro bono legal representation to prisoners on death row in India. This story is fictional but is based on an interview with a female prisoner under the sentence of death.

hinges on the last threads

ANANYA NATH

Probal stared at her silhouette, the neat concave of her waist cupping the dying moonlight. Jonali never shut the bedroom windows, no matter how vindictive the nights grew. She believed in the bleak, the sinuous reality that the inside of her house echoed the benighted outdoors. Had she always been parabolical? Probal raked his mind, bringing back images from their affable times together- times, which were not ensanguined by morbidity. He did enough, did he not? For as far as he could remember, he had internalized this unaskable question. One nod, one validating nod was all he desired. As if a primordial gesture was sufficient to soothe every fissure which have left them sore. On second thoughts, he was hardly sure.

Jonali fixed her gaze at the rusty, slow-moving ceiling fan rotating its decided movement, barely cooling the room. She sighed, bringing her arm over her head. Only if Probal could see her then would he know what she was made of. The circumference of her permissive thoughts, her outlandish outlook on their lives or even her antagonism with his uprightness were alien to him. Probal knew little, and asked even less. His stoicism left him no room for doubts. Rarely present, he let everything that had to do with her emotional void pass as a nuance for bereavement. Of course, he eased her grieving, iterating how people did not have a say over fate. "It was not your fault. It just wasn't meant to be", he would clear the air between them, or at least, tried to.

Sullen, defeated even in her conscience, Jonali switched on her side. The bed gave out a menacing squeak. Probal felt the weight. "Jon", he stuttered. Jonali hummed, affirming she was awake. The moon waned into a cocoon of clouds, hiding from the shame often

attached to it for all the nocturnal shenanigans.

The several hundred nights that they had spent together unfurled before her eyes. Merely a day after their wedding, Probal had to leave for the department headquarters. There was an explosion at the core of the capital and he was rushed to monitor the curfew imposed. The foreboding mattered little to Jonali. After all, she did not love Probal enough to feel his absence. But his parents were apprehensive. They thought it best to wait for him before bringing Jonali home. A bride entering her groom's threshold without his chaperone was as precarious as the belief was credulous.

When Probal returned a fortnight later, he decided to stay at her place. It was nearer to the capital city, he had argued. Besides, his transfers were frequent and because Jonali never insisted on following him, he did not mind the inconvenience. To her, their marriage was a jinxed bond, made on the promise of her dying father. Love looked like a far-fetched metaphor, a privilege he could never be privy to. Probal assumed that her indifference to him bore out of the demanding nature of his service, rather than the impracticality of a loveless union. He had assumed, like everything else, that a woman ended up loving the man she was wedded to, especially when the husband was as capable as him. When she became pregnant with the twins, Probal's expectations were satiated. Jonali exuded an unassailable vibrancy, affirming his convictions.

Even though she doted her, Jonali's mother was ever skeptical. "Do not allow Probal to kill so much as an ant, *bujiso*?", she would chastise her daughter. Prenatal care was always a concoction of science and myth, and Jonali's mother took special care to ward

off portents. Probal did not defy her. He heeded her myopic counsels, assuring Jonali that it would not harm to not kill.

But the twins' father rampaged. Daniel murdered two officers stationed near Karbi *pahar* which served as their hideout. In the encounter that followed, he too was killed. When the news flashed through the television with a jubilant SP declaring their success, Jonali's mother switched channels. The price of desiring a man set out on a self-effacing mission was hardly, if ever, realized. Yet, she knew Daniel had loved her, all along. It mattered little to her that he had to leave her for his people, that it was his destiny to fight for a losing cause of ethnic autonomy. She had loved him, surpassing every communal qualm, surviving every dire demand. It was Daniel who had made a shrine of her heart, now that he was gone, how could she allow Probal to vilify her heart's sanctity?

Yes, she had transgressed. She was relieved to find Probal away for months on end, for they allowed her escapades with Daniel. Jonali was aware of her longing's sinister repercussions. She had yearned an enemy of the state, he had loved a woman whose people called him an extremist. Accursed by every misgiving, the predicament of their longing was fated to doom. The birth of the twins was a short-lived joy. Just as she was beginning to understand motherhood, they died. With them, she wanted to bury away her ungodly testimony- the only truth that threatened to undo her. But the bane was hers. Guilt was all she had to live with.

"Not yours", Jonali gasped, her eyes unblinking.

"They were not your sons", she blurted out again.

"I know. I always knew".

Astonished, she turned to look at him. Her tears dried before they could tickle her ears. He knew? Probal continued, “During my early days at the service, I was once held captive by the insurgents. I thought they would kill me but... later, much later, I found out that they had me”, he paused, gulped, “had me neutered.” His voice broke into a slow, heavy sob.

At the other end of *sout*, *bohaag* awaited. Basking in the afterglow of *sout*’s last moonbeams, Jonali held Probal’s trembling hand. The invincible inches between them, for once, seemed surmountable, as they wept their woes, like babies.

Glossary

1. Bujiso: the Assamese word for ‘understand.’
2. Bohaag: the first month in the Assamese calendar which falls in mid-April.
3. Sout: the last month in the Assamese calendar.
4. Pahar: Assamese word for ‘hill.’

quiet places

VANYA NAUTIYAL

Let's talk about this loneliness that has made its home in my shoulder blades. Or let's not, let's talk about something else, anything else. Anything that doesn't make you tense up and move to the other side of the couch.

Anyway. Let's talk about the movie we saw together last week. Didn't I end up watching it alone while you fell asleep by my side? It is strange how you felt both right next to me and yet a billion miles away, in a galaxy where stars don't end up dying a lonely death. It is strange how we do not exist beyond each other. It is twisted and painful and unnatural but it is also the only place where I feel safe. Not in your arms but in the quiet corners of your mind, where we're sitting next to each other and I never run out of things to talk about. We're sitting next to each other and talking about the clouds in the sky, the safety pin stuck in my sweater, the grass stains on your jeans. We're talking now and laughing now and sitting in comfortable silence now.

And I want it all to be true. I wish I could be kind to you. I wish I could make you laugh everyday. I wish we say next to each other and never ran out of things to say. But the depth of my sorrow frightens me, and I can't bear to speak of it anymore. So we resume our places as the perfect characters in a tragedy, waiting for the inevitable fall of the curtain.

Vanya is a sophomore English major from India. Just like every other college student, she is trying very, very hard not to spontaneously combust. She enjoys writing flash fiction and poetry, and is also an amateur artist. Vanya is also an avid reader of novels and manga.



impulse

JERRY SIMBA

What I wanted really was not the question, no, it had become a regular one. And those who supposedly were wiser used it atme, quite so much it became irritating-it is irritating. I knew I had taken the big leap, well, so does everyone. Let me at least be positive about ordinary transition. One thing I sure noticed with transitions is the vocabularies change. Tongues change and to what extent is upon where you are, are headed next or the famous “people with whom you interact”. I joined campus some time back, I think it was June, typically because it’s somewhere in the middle of the year. Let’s go with August. I joined campus last year, August.

The question wasn’t really what I wanted anymore. It wasn’t where I wanted to be either. Truth is there were a lot of them in my head but none was specific for at each instance, a new question would be born and then the family tree yadda yaddayadda.

I wasn’t in dilemma, I have not been in dilemma in this case, yeah, I know I will be, often someday but I am young here. I’m only slightly above the twenty-year mark. Dark, seventy-one point two five nine eight inch as of the last time I did measure. I remember twenty, just the sound of it and I shuddered, dreaded it, even in the two different worlds, twenty is the same-the world I had just left and the world I was headed-Honestly though, much as it kept popping up, I simply didn’t prefer it, the world I was headed, the life I was headed-well at least a year or so to come; come what may.

So, it was my first cake.


They all knew I loved blue, I still do, soccer affiliation—just read! No questions. So that’s what color the cake was. We (the boys) had always said celebrating birthdays was for kids (this was

a collective noun that comprised the young ones and our sisters (please don't take offence), another irony, the young boy, my little brother he never had a cake and we would only remind him the day after his birthday and he would rant blah blah! But the truth really was we never remembered it on the D-day, there was something about remembering birthdays the day after, after which my mother's deadline for preparing a feast and baking the cake shall have passed. She actually enjoyed that we forgot, much more than when we remembered which in this case was this once. The cake was perfect, I tried as much to spot any skew disfigures, stray cream with which I would start off, dig right in but couldn't find any. I however didn't like the ribbon, the "two" and "zero" candles. I wanted them to be creamy spirals, with a taste superior to the cake itself, with as much flavors, to be mauled by his presence yours truly. The candles were fast burning, and whoever molded the tail of 'two' and the root of the other just quickened the pace; at which they burned, at which the heat spread and seasons darted, at which the wax melted and lessons went, at which the candles thinned and daylight whizzed, at which the flame died and night rocketed. I'm twenty-two now, I said slightly beyond twenty and it's not the twenty-one twenty-three you thought, relax buddy. It became special in the way it begun, how it was going and probably the way it would end thereafter, be positive. Yeah of course there was no indication that it was somebody's birthday midway through the Black Forest which I can confirm and affirm to anyone any day, was a Vanilla but of course I didn't whisper that to anyone within the auditory radius of the self-proclaimed 'with a unique touch' cook in my mother. Okay she's a good cook, always is, all mothers are but I don't

really think... I would taste food while on the Gulf of Honduras and know its hers, bottom-line no unique touch. It was all about the sugar, if not then the salt, she deprived the food of these rights, you of course know why. It's only the little boy that I called aside to tell never to engage in any skull sessions "ever" with the specific topic "types of cake" with his classmates, but he then asked me for the slightest link between the cake and 'black' and 'forest' and sure my index finger did well to point to the baker I after all didn't bake Black Forest. Just before I forget it, the party was packed, some who I knew not, animated, jaded, friends of my sisters and friends of my friends and sisters of my friends, the young bandwagon and of course the supreme court; who made sure the party was appropriate for all viewers-mom and other moms-. You get it when I tell you however casual hugging is, don't do it here, I repeat don't do it here.


Soon after everyone rid themselves of the debt of wishing me a happy birthday, some a happy, happy birthday, let me tell them all: Happiest ever, happy new leaf, all the best-which really irritated me by the way, really common, really irrelevant, all the negative energy here please. Happy plus one, and please, please, tell me "Happy womb escape" won't take over same way a divorce court is taking over "just married". This got me zoned off a while, not creating the picture of course. Womb escape?? Naah! Impossible!!! Take a keen note of my tone, I'm shouting louder than Shontelle here.

It was the impulse in action, no doubt about that. The one impulse we were not, but are now accustomed to, we wake up and we are told you've become taller than yesterday, taller than before you travelled, your sister has taken your body, I can see



your father's face curve from those beards and the ear-drum bursting "you're no longer a child", even if shortly after they refer to you so. Okay I loved the fact that I was growing up, fast. I loved it whenever they said I frequented the gym yet I hadn't stepped into one, I loved it like hell. But then growing up, what I had to become, well, at least sometimes, (I will change) what I had to act like, it's just a script that life has crafted, deviated from the main script of milk and honey and of course a little challenge like losing one side of a pair of socks. Like those people at my birthday, I don't know, maybe I should go as a courtesy suppose they hold a party, maybe I shouldn't, perhaps they came for one reason or another I tell you, and yes what you're thinking is one of them, or rather let me vindicate you, what you thought I was thinking is one of them; some were there for the food. Breakfast, lunch and supper combined, call it killing three birds with just one stone. Now that's where I'm at, and no, the rock and a hard place is an understatement; by far much a softer place to be as far as I'm concerned. The rock will at least shelter you and on the hard place you will lie (see, not bad at all). Hey I have not said I'm suffering and shabby and battered and ramshackle torn inside-never out-, and unmaintained and decaying, nope. But you've not seen me mention that I am not either. So, stay there, hang in the loose and read mate-I'm bloody pissed right now. And that's lovely; not, I could really do with a cuppa right now.



The impulse I guess happens for some reason, it is between the pulses that you come back to find your younger sister ripe for whatever my friends would call it; "Just the other day her thighs were useless, but now!!!"—to realize I have as many bad friends as the good ones, no Nigel and his crew are my friends; all



football fans, and for some reason he finds me more reasonable for seeing sense in him supporting Tottenham. “I mean Hurricane comes from there! And tell me a better striker in England”, I have over and again thought this an abstract question but his love for arguments sometimes washed away his acknowledgement of my support for what he supports. He would be gaping awaiting an answer, the answer. So, I would add “of course” before distinctly spelling out Harry Kane and other details like the best Asian player in the league’s history and the goalkeeper captaining the famous world cup win and other miniature details. Like the day I thought he is the one person who would literally die for Tottenham was when he outlined the minutes these guys play and when they are more likely to score and the boots’ color they would wear. Suppose one had visited the barber before a game, that head would fit his profile picture. I mean I’m easily bored (I know you don’t care) but he never bores me, never! Back to my bad friends. So yeah, that increases the number of my bad friends. Forgive me for borrowing my parent’s eyes here but the bad friends have dreads and wedding rings before marriage and tattoos and they don’t frequent the church doors. Please visit the Bible and Quran, especially where Moses is mentioned a lot for the definition of parents

The good ones are the opposite, or their tattoos are hidden inside the sleeves or they don’t take or smoke and all that nonsense you know it.

I remember when I wanted to keep my hair long, I was a hundred percent influenced to keep it, some friend had some neat plaiting and the heart wanted them, not me. I wanted to argue my course to keep my hair but saw no need really, lest I was



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forgetting I was still famously “under whose roof?”. I shaved “number one” and it allegedly exposed a “potato” on my crown—okay we both know that isn’t true—. Bottom-line, these friends, I saw them equal to a higher extent, faced same life dynamics, same spasms, all about the impulse. What I liked about the situation around is we rarely faced same problems at a go, easing help and brotherliness and whys and just because(s) and a very productive quality time spending and it has been good, so good. Amidst these are problems we can’t, couldn’t, wouldn’t solve amongst ourselves and we called them “issues”. We would only come in to give the “presence” support cause it’s all we can give sometimes and it has always been worth it, I remember, really worth it.

Late November last year.

Just when it was necessary to seek a temporary financial shelter—well not till it subsidizes and another temporary one is built from those same shackles, *c’est la vie*—. Just when the moment was ripe, sometimes, like when the heart wanted what it wanted and this time it was another heart, the dream’s curtain is raised; healthy partnership, one you can easily put on statuses and stories “my partner (emoji)” —oh how I wish big Bill brought them along here I would paint this page yellow. I, who was prophesying absolute disaster for young lovers with the common phrases: “will defocus you will finish you off” (well this was heavy, perhaps financial perhaps emotional please fill up the page) and so on, was the same I who had to drink wine and not the water I preached before. The heart had wanted someone else, planning a life with, for reasons I sought myself, reasons supported by the self of hers; good reasons. How life would have gone so fast now I think, because I saw such people, you too, perhaps you’re one such, who



indulge in such relationships as early and the payoff is somewhat a golden handshake, there are such people, in case you don't know and are not one of them.

Mine didn't work out.

Amongst these financial-which is the mother, sister, cousin and friend of all primary tribulations at this stage- woes, a storm beginning to steady thanks to us (I wasn't alone at all, the stage at which I becomes we and mine, ours) came the bad leap, I call it the worst transition. She remained in my heart after she was gone. I went mourning as a friend, of course the boys had made arrangements behind my back, pulled up a "substantial" and of course their priceless presence, knowing the extent of my loss contrary to the rest of the mourners who didn't know me but this is a funeral, you can't chase anybody away, perhaps two strangers somewhere had exchanged charity somewhere sometime.

I remember the feeling that night learning she hadn't made it up her hospital bed, a bed on which she hadn't 'dreamt' of me twice yet, or at least she was going to that very night, how something could happen so quick and erase the entire momentum of the recent good time passed was just "phenomenal". Emptiness is an understatement because I swear, I was wading in a plethora of empty bitterness, anxious thoughts and suicidal aura. For a moment I was certain I was not of this world now that I had experienced such, no, I belonged to another, one where everyone is without compromise piteous towards me and I'm compensated within the emotional weight scale of my loss to the very latter but I don't get to make those plans, neither does she. I had a tearless cry that night. The irony is while I thought I was giving her sometime to have a rest and call her later, I was giving her all the

away from me, away from my heart (away from everything).

Hey cupcake

Heey! The strongest person I know

Just tell that doc not to bother adding any water up there coz you're getting out sooner than they expect

(emoji) I sure will. Wait a moment why don't you come tell her yourself huh! (emoji)

(emoji) I'll come by tomorrow evening with your endless list of fruits

....and Ribena

Thought somebody said I was getting out of here before then(emoji)

(emojis)

Ooh got your pics!

I don't know your nose was that gigantic(emoji)

*didn't

I'll never send anymore pics prick (emoji)


Ooh baby you will (emoji)

Afterwards, a series of online smooches, a goodnight sugar, cloud nine yadda yadda, those things you do when assured, under full protection of "these messages are end-to-end encrypted".

She died through the night or so I think, or maybe during the day somewhere before nine a.m. I've never read that eulogy. perhaps I might reflect some of the energy I had earlier, onto that beautiful blue booklet, to see the gallery at least. No, I won't.



When that moment in time came as early as it did, as early as you clearly know it isn't supposed to, panic became the unbearable. Its more than common that today, parents are as much prepared to bury than the children are, so sad. I usually say they are those things I saw happen to the elderly persons, people who had experienced life to the very fullest of youth and way past it, but this is the norm, the status quo, the new norm. The time bomb is ticking veer normal-somebody please do something.

I wouldn't say I had an explosive talent, or at least that much. Quite honestly though, I had seen lads super-talented, awesome skillset and all that, way out of my league but not way out of my reach, bottom-line no example to follow for a lifestyle that does not reflect the skillset. I could play regular football quite well and I knew I would be a soccer player "if I believe and focus", "I can be anything I want in this world" you know, the two phrases. I wasn't too bad with singing either so I could pull some strings in the studio. In my wildest dreams I was the savior of the hiatus and filth, from the hiatus and filth of the slightly alive state of music. Oh, how I hated on and sort a dent in a music video or the lyrics or most often the views on YouTube. All this was pressure, madness I think, my madness. But I'm still young, aren't I? I can still pull some strings. Perhaps that would have happened had I failed my high-school. No university call-up equals alternative A or B but here I was at a very decisive career junction, all were gems, almost all very lucrative, some very high paying, some very




rewarding but very tough and then there was the love for code. You better believe that I treated these things equally.

The goal has been quite the simple one, more and more money, much to the extent of being able to get that G-Wagon, not be limited by anything (money). I always thought I had corrupted myself into poisoning my mind towards this direction but no, I'm sincerely not the author of this script of life, no. The real villain of this fiasco is everything around me, absolutely everything, like from A-Y, but I want that money really bad. Not be humble because there isn't another option, but because I chose to. All these things I wanted to accomplish because I imagined hell not accomplishing even one when I'm forty-two, then honestly, I shall have lost the best freedom, the freedom without bounds, the freedom to be whom I wanted. Then to make it more awful, get to have children and see the potential in them yet I'm off limits with the capacity to feed them the exposure and lay to them the platform to be participants and not spectators of the economy flair then which kind of parent am I? That's why I chose this path, this anonymous one, to exercise this freedom I talk about. bottom-line I only envisioned two scenarios when I grow up, the opposite of and the one with plenty, plenty as much, to have it as much as I can freely practice impunity even though I won't. Plenty as to be away from the jaws and the claws of tyrants who practice it for gain or pleasure or just to gain pleasure. Then I can have a mouth and then the voice, an indispensable voice. To have the opinion that counts and not like a father's voice in the house, no please, that's too basic a need which believe you me is a rare accomplishment to some, you can attest to this too. No, I'm not talking about that.



I think the day I swallowed this thought after listening to a team builder I swore to never listen to any of them, ever. I came to the conclusion that everyone can team build, and all those jobs which people get to invent. Just picture the leather suit with that tie color-like handkerchief in the shallow breast pocket, a neat haircut and those shoes you see only in Kingsman except without the arsenal and of course the writing right hand inside the pocket. That being said I've never seen a left-handed motivational speaker, if you've seen one pass my greetings. Thank you for understanding that this is not hate against team builders. You have that part of life you are not part of, that profession, that section, that selection, that association that however short you may fall of options in this life you wouldn't consider, this is mine. I won't lie and say, "Yeah, I do. I do motivational speakers, they make it simple, life and all its aspects, even when they want you to climb that mountain in a sweatshirt or talk about astronauts in the ocean."

Makeshift Thomas Dexter here says one can't put a timestamp for another human being and yeah, I think so too, it shouldn't be the case but if you do you won't be hanged either. So, it's one life—don't know whether stiff or tough you'll be the judge of that because I know there is no simple—and the normal people trying to live it, some thinking they are living it most normally, and then the abnormal ones making it as hard, complicating it as much for the former, most of them thinking they are making the world a better place. And then there's you and I; you thinking I'm so judging and I thinking everything is just too confusing and just trying to make sense out of it because when with my own eyes I have seen people make it at 50, 60, 70 and 80—yes, I'm talking



about Iris Apfel as well—people like us, who have lacked the motivation firsthand, when my siblings quit campus and some after four years of pursuing a faculty, and say they don't even know why they enrolled in the first place, hate it to the very core of the core, we see our peers who went it first fail, bail or hail, we are just trying to at least become better persons, just better persons.



It was at which point I was asking myself why not, why not be a nurse and end up very well paid in Canada. Find a white girl and get those beautiful children you see on billboards and adverts, or meet an Ethiopian babe who happens to be living in Canada too and diversity check, happy family check, okay I know it biting you that I'm mention miscellaneous: But then why? Should I? Must I? If so then its only three years or less (or more) standing between me and something else in life, something beautiful (and please I'm not talking about the Ethiopian babe here anymore). Yes, four years and a mountain. But then I had this thing in me, something in me telling me I would want to be a leader colloquially politician around here, but how would I if I went to my Canada? C'mon I've got some beautiful ideas I could turn them into some useful machinery to my electorates. But then I might fail in my first attempt just as most of them do and I'll need to phoenix up on, while probably focusing more on my job for which I'm currently studying (whichever it will be). So that's in my bucket list and two against one that weighs Canada out. "Bucket list" sounds much like a treehouse, I substitute it with ambitions. The latter, another word that scares me the most. How flexible, how volatile. How does it become so easily manipulated?? "Saint john I want to become a pilot. Oh no I think this business will do, it will be a part

time and I'll employ a co-manager. Saint John, I can't be a pilot, I mean look at how awesome software engineers are at stuff they doooo!!!" "Oh man! Submitting business proposals and filing audits has been my new flex! And recently we got a pay rise and my co-workers are just so awesome, I guess I wasn't meant to treat you guys in hospital after all! By the way how's the diabetes going? But I know you'll conquer it, you're strong."

I watched how life turned my goals around, spinning me like a Sumerian potter's wheel, making me fancy the comfort and luxury of kicking in gigs and short expensive contracts. Maybe fortune was sending some goals my way but life turned the goals away, through no fault of my own though, maybe. Something told me though I wasn't done. Done with choosing who I want to be, whatever it is, whatever I shall fancy the most at that moment in time. I still wasn't certain what it would be, I knew quite clear it would supersede the inevitable.

This took me back to last year.



I remember rolling the meat and slicing it, roasting it in the meshes, sprinkling the salt atop in the midst of I don't know how many faces, happy faces. Of course, she saw it as one year wasted, my mother. My father hadn't talked about it, henormally didn't. the only thing he knew was I'm the brightest child he sired and he would have loved to have sired an engineer or doctor, nothing more (nothing less) but I had settled for less. Well at least that was the natural order so again "through no fault" of his own. Good thing is he 'understood' that whatever I was doing is what I wanted and since then he's been sending me those occasional airtimes. Yeah, deep down we all knew it would have been easier, him replacing my name with "Engineer" than five other titles or



so. When they came to BEAFriend, my work station, I could not even tell what he was thinking, but the one vivid thing was that I was having the best of my time and the friendliness around me, the referrals, the calling outs and the hugs were just the signs of those and I remember my sister telling him, “Dad, think of it like he’s having a picnic”. Just let me make this confession right here and now. BEAFriend wasn’t just fulfilling, it was creating a harmonical, a symphony, a beautiful symphony glued to my heart, especially when you meet meat enthusiasts who call themselves Nostalgia and you never get to see them again and that something tells me they are never coming back, they just made a Nostalgic one-time stop. Faces transfigured here, smiles were born and people fell in love with how I sprinkled the salt, in fact it bore the reason some were very consistent and new customers curious.

“Cooking is love, if you don’t enter with your heart then abandon the cooking or not at all” apart from being conspicuously knitted on my apron, I embraced it. I in fact recited it to make a fuss or explain my cooking, but mostly to explain my cooking. Why the phrase doesn’t end at ‘cooking’? (Which was the second most asked question, after the menu of course.) I don’t know. I lied to one very persistent customer one time that the “not at all” made the sounding of the syllables uniform in the original song from where the phrase was extracted. She thought I was concealing something, some hidden meaning, just like the secret recipe. It was until she asked me to sing her the song that I faked a mess on the table and got away with one. Next time she came I didn’t dare come around her vicinity, let alone her table.

That phrase was the brewer of the storm of praises and



accolades. Days after leaving I couldn't believe I had undergone such a transition so quick. It would almost feel like a tale if I could tell anyone, you would say no way someone makes such a swift transition in their life a year. I remember when I left, you know the norm, emotions! Emotions! Emotions!

Whatever it was that had led me to BEAFriend it had printed the nostalgia, wrapped up and vanished, thin air. And I was back. Upon everything I swore, my happiness, put it upon everything. However much 'gullible' I was, however much inconsistent, however bumpy and uninspired, it's just however "who I am". I guess that was me, living, it's always me living how I like to. Not even sure of the next step but I take it whatsoever, whichever it is that I 'want' to do, really want to do. To not be limited, by stipulations and standards. I guess that was me, always me. After all it's always an impulse, this life is. The impulse with which the number of guests at my birthday party was fading, those I knew, knew not, knew that day and those I will never see again in my life and I'm not going to say "probably".

The image features a solid purple background with stylized, light purple leafy branches in the corners. The word "nonfiction" is centered in a white, serif font.

nonfiction

how a getaway to shimla changed me

JERRY SIMBA



The cool blue skies outlined by the grandeur of the Himalayas.

DEVABHOOMI SUMMONS

The week-long Puja holidays came like a rain of relief in the scorching desert of online classes. Just when I could find nothing to keep me going, my family decided to go on a 5-day trip to Shimla, Manali and Chandigarh. Read on about the last two days I spent in the abode of the gods, a serene land clad in misty pine forests and apple orchards. All images captured by yours truly.

WHEN SREE SAW SNOW

The itinerary for the fourth day was to visit the famous Rohtang pass. We were warned of heavy snowfall and while all of us were excited, we had to dress for the part. Thermal inners were a must and I had to wear an orange bodysuit over it with gloves and rubber boots reaching my calves. The day was warm and bright, why would anybody need all these? But boy were we wrong. The moment we emerged from the Atal tunnel, it was as though we had been transported to a white, cold expanse raining snow!

People were going gaga over this phenomenon. I was moved to tears as I felt snow on my fingertips for the first time.



River rafting down Beas. Shots taken from Shimla.

Our galleries were filled with shots of us making butterflies in the snow and hurling snowballs at each other. I can't recall the last time my family laughed so hard together. Our limbs were going numb from the cold but we could never have enough of it. When we left, my father exclaimed: "Two worlds separated by a tunnel!" That night we had a campfire where we grooved to Bollywood beats under twinkling stars.

The next day at Kulu was all about adventure sports! We donned our safety jackets and helmets as we river rafted down Beas. Mukesh Bhayya steered us from dangerous undercurrents and splashed cold water over us with his oar. After drying up, I rushed to go paragliding, something that many did not dare to do.



Pure bliss on my face as I experienced snowfall for the first time in my life.

ON CLOUD NINE

I am mortally terrified of heights. So the most natural thing to do would be to jump off a cliff 6000ft above sea level right? The gravity of what I had agreed to do dawned on me as I was taken to a mountaintop. The glider asked me to wear the paraphernalia of the parachute and I could see why none of the family was up for paragliding. As I stood there second-guessing my choices, Ramesh Dutt, the glider, assured me that everything would be alright. "Relax! It's my sixth jump today," he said in a thick accent."

Running down the edge of that cliff had to be the scariest thing I have done in my life. I leapt with a scream frozen in my throat as the parachute unfurled behind me in an arc. I was in the clouds and still alive! I mustered the courage to look below and I found that even birds were flying beneath me. The sun was a golden ball and the great Beas had reduced to a thin line on earth. During those 20 minutes suspended between heaven and earth, I felt the most alive. It was also humbling and I let out a shout, my voice

trailing off in the wind. Later that day, I also tried zip lining across a beautiful valley!



The Mountains kissing the vast blue skies of Manali

CHANDIGARH DIARIES

The last day of the trip was a fun day at Chandigarh. We visited the Nek Chand gardens and I was fascinated by the mere magnitude of the park. At the risk of missing our return flight, we visited the Sushna Lake where I watched people paddle boats on the crystal clear water. By dusk, we found ourselves shopping at Rehri Market in Sector 15. Merchants were selling red shawls, Mehendi, silver plates and ornaments as it was the time of Karva Chauth.



It was a race against time to reach the airport on time. Luckily, we somehow managed to dodge the Delhi traffic and checked in just in time. A teary yet hasty farewell later, my family boarded the flight to Cochin bearing memories to last a lifetime. I was truly fortunate to have spent a week in the lap of the Himalayas, away from the misery of online classes and pending assignments.



Human figures made from terrazzo tiles at Nek Chand gardens

BIDDING ADIEU

It's true what they say. We never really know someone till we travel with them. Perhaps, the biggest takeaway from this entourage was the connections that I made. We went to Shimla a family of four but we came home a tribe. Something about



travelling together brings people closer. It all started with a bunch of Malayalees complaining about overpriced tea at the Indira Gandhi airport. My journey to Shimla, Kuli and Manali; the textures, colours and sounds are etched to my heart. Like an old lover, it steals a part of your heart, leaving you longing and beckoning you to return.

Sreekanth S. is a third-year college student pursuing his Bachelor of Design from National Institute of Fashion Technology, Kannur.

the time my friend called me a nuisance

SABRINA PEREZ

I was broken up with Elijah for a month when we got closer as friends. I felt good because he trusted me with things he didn't trust other people with. One night I stayed up until midnight listening to his problems. We were good friends at the time, and I was still trying to conceal the overwhelming feelings of jealousy when he talked about other girls. He opened up to me about feelings I didn't know he was capable of having. He admitted to missing his mom—she lived separated from him, all the way in Colombia, and he hadn't seen her face-to-face for two years—after swearing to me until then that being away from her for so long didn't affect him.

"I want an ice cream," he texted me while we were deep into the conversation, "I want an ice cream and a hug from my mom." His words were enchanting, the way in which he described his misery living in a country that was foreign to him. His words were art, he said things like:

"My sadness is because I'm a miserable nonconformist"

"I wish I could tell everyone how nauseating they are to me"

"I would like to shout what I feel to those I love, but insulting them and yelling at them will only make me feel better for a few minutes and the adrenaline will drop, and I'd be in trouble all the same."

His words were somewhat poetic and beautiful, there was beauty in his sadness, there was beauty in discovering that he had feelings about his feelings, just like everyone else. I begged him to write me a letter about everything he felt so I could have a piece of his tragedy, his art, all to myself. I told him to give me his art in any form. He told me he wouldn't want me to read the letter because he wouldn't want me to feel bad for him. I told him to

write a letter with everything he would want to shout to me. "I'll burn it afterwards," he said.

"If you want to. But if you want to, you could give it to me." I offered.

"I don't think you would like what I'd write, I can be very crude about what I think."



"Am I that bad?"

"No, but I can be really bad."

For a while I thought about what he meant. Was I a nuisance to him? And if I was, why did he come up to me at my locker everyday and demand a hug from me whenever he said goodbye? Why did he seem so happy to see me every time that he did? His tragedy was beautiful because he was so quiet about it. It was a secret, an artifact, something so rare to discover that I would be awarded a prize if it had any significance to the world. I craved to know what he thought of me and why I wouldn't like it.

I began to ache for Elijah. I felt it in my blood and in my right hand. For some reason, whenever I am impassioned or vehemently worried about something, I feel a sharp, throbbing ache in my hand. Any heartbreak or deep sadness manifests itself in the side of my palm, as if pain travels directly from my heart and into my hand. Sometimes it kept me awake because it was so uncomfortable, but I respected the intuitiveness of my body, because it showed me how I really felt about something. If I didn't feel it in my heart or my mind, I felt it in my right hand. I began to feel like that for Elijah. I fell in love with him slowly as the days went on, and the more he touched me, caressed me, hugged me, reached down for my hips whenever he had his arm around me, or pulled my mask down to see my smile when I was laughing

about something, the deeper I felt it. He was finally starting to treat me the way I wanted him to when we were together. He even brought me into the car that he spent every lunch in. The “auto”, he called it, was a phenomenon between him and some of his friends. His friend, Sid, could drive, so they would drive around and blast music and do dangerous things on the road and vape and smoke. He had never invited me before, even when I asked him to let me come. Now that I wasn’t anything but a friend, he asked Sid if I could come with him to which Sid responded: “I don’t give a shit.” Being in the car—there was also a girl named Naomi and a guy named Geoffrey—was insufferable. It consisted of Elijah feening off of them for any remnants of vape juice and them bragging about how much all of their clothes and stuff cost. At one point, Geoffrey and Naomi (who had dated in the past, but now Naomi had moved on to another guy named Aden) left the car together, walking to who knows where. A half hour later Geoffrey returned by himself saying how much he wanted to beat Aden up, calling him the f-slur and saying other despicable things. They were obnoxious, disagreeable, and idiotic. They didn’t care about Elijah. Elijah sought validation because they were white. I knew how it felt to be in his position, to pursue acceptance from people you feel alienated from. He was extraneous, an outlier, an immigrant. He knew little of the English language and filled his mouth with smoke instead of words, wasting his precious breath on each exhale. He was wasting himself on these creatures. The worst part of it all, he had nothing to show for. He was impoverished, living with only his aunt and cousin and didn’t have daddy’s money like the white kids because his real father was dead and his stepfather, absent. The



The only thing he had to show for was the chain around his neck, the stainless steel chain that I had bought him for his birthday. He was lost in his efforts to assimilate, and I knew this because he had asked me how much it cost. I was full of pity for him at that moment. He wanted to know how much it cost because I had told him it cost me a fortune, when in reality it cost me \$40. Nothing compared to the \$250 sunglasses and \$170 shirt the other boys boasted senselessly about. I told him to make up a number, any number, it wouldn't matter to them. It was for him to feel better, not because they actually cared about anything Elijah had to offer.

I did, though.

Sabrina Perez (she/her), is a 16 year old poet-in-the-making with a lifelong, innate passion for writing and music. As a singer-songwriter, she writes lyrics and sings fervently in her free time. Sabrina lives in Edmonton, Alberta and is currently working towards a High School diploma. She is new to the world of poetry and building her repertoire.

promise-shaped

DISA BASU

The elephant. The regal pachyderm, gray-bellied, pensive, two milk-white scepters protruding from its skull. Its trunk- a double entendre, both hand and nose, swings with the elegance of a ribbon-dancer. How gentle its stride is, this animal that shares a face with Ganesh, this animal that, like all animals, lives only to live. And now an arrow, slick with chemicals at the tip, is sunk into its leathery flesh. The poison enters the canals of blood that tunnel through its Herculean frame, slowly, but surely, blighting its life, burning it to the wick. All this, for some cruel and faceless stranger to walk to its thick-skinned corpse and carve out those glorious tusks. I can play this scene behind my eyes, and rebuke it, repent it, revile it. I can look at the forked and curved path of my life and be sure that I would never tread near where I could coax it to reality. No, I refuse to be the one to snatch the elephant's pulse, just as I refuse to fish a whale from its home of icy black seas, or to pluck the golden feathers off a nightingale. These fates-unsavory, grotesque- are just taking beauty-shaped things and turning them to rubble. What do I see when I think of a broken promise? I can't say I'd strive to preserve a promise-shaped thing, because I'm not sure how unforgivable it is to break one. Easy to picture promises aspolished pieces of glass, which makes it easy to think of their mild demise- just put a wild boar in a China shop, and you've got thousands of broken promises littering the ground. Tiny sharp shards that can even glisten if hit with the right light. I'm not morally opposed to a healthy shattering. After all, this is entropically favorable, a push to disorder. Maybe promises are like elements- naked to the human eye but present in flames and metals. Maybe you break it by extracting an electron from its orbit, which could be catalytic for its stability. Maybe its

instability will turn the promise into a newer, more useful element. Or maybe it will combust, adding a fistful of heat to the skies. I can't see this being any more sinful than driving a car- not great for a planet being baked, but a lone soul driving out of the *billions* of souls driving shouldn't be crucified. Perhaps promises are statues, not unlike the ones the Grecians fashioned from limestone, marble, bronze, terra-cotta. Excruciating detail in each clay strand of hair, in every one of the taut muscles. Only the most inconsiderate of us would break something so painstakingly crafted. But some would argue that this casual damage just adds to the character. The broken noses, the missing limbs, the headless chests, give a sense of culture, history, importance. Why on Earth would I run from actualizing art? It seems like a rather noble cause. And then there's always the chance that a promise-shaped thing is quite dangerous. Yes, maybe it's best to break it into bite-sized, manageable pieces. Think: a man vows to find a New World, and now a promise is shaped like an island of genocide. A president, or vice-president, or a devil tells his country *I will keep you safe!* And now a promise is shaped like a nuclear war. A king promises to adorn his lover with the finest ivory known to man, and now a promise is shaped like a poached elephant.

Disa Basu is a beginning, emerging writer stationed in Silver Spring, Maryland. She is currently working as a neurobiology lab technician at UMD.

letter

VERONICA ORTIZ-ZELADA

I really thought we were going to build that house we always talked about with fairy lights and the notes we had written for each other lining the windowless walls, our matching blankets that I had crocheted just for us hanging beside the TV that we had thrifted at that store where we bought Jenga from when I was sad and you wanted to make me happy, ready for our next despicable me movie marathon. I really thought I was going to get you into decorating excessively for Christmas and teach you the joy of taking a warm bath after a morning walk. Did you mean it when you said that you were excited at the thought of having a home littered with my books with the best quotes highlighted and the worst chapters tear stained? Or that you loved the idea of having a tea party every weekend with reggaetón and bachata blasting in the background, a biscuit in one hand and my swaying waist in the other? I really thought you meant it, but based on how you treated me that night, I've now concluded that you did not.

How could you? Seriously, how? After I did the most for you. Like seriously... *the most*. I cared for you when you were sick and supported you through your bad employers and even helped you get your medical appointments when you were not doing so well. I gave you the most thoughtful gifts and listened to all your rants about things that you passionately loved and things that you eagerly hated, and I stayed up all night to make sure you were okay on the nights I knew you were not, even if I also was not. I almost missed the 2021 countdown to midnight with my family and eating the grapes which has always been our tradition because I was giving you my whole self to cry on. I put you before myself. I put you before my education (which is super expensive, by the way), before all my other friends and my hobbies and

passions. I let you lash out at me so that you wouldn't lash out on yourself, and I let you hold me tight for as long as you wanted because I knew you felt like so many other things were existing just out of your grasp.

I would say that maybe I wasn't enough for you, but that *literally* makes no sense. How can the *best* girlfriend eeeeeeeeeeeeer... not be enough for you? Because on top of everything I just said, I'm also the prettiest and kindest girl I know. I am, as they say, the TOTAL package. So, I just think you suck at keeping your word. If you'll recall, the grand majority of our arguments always ended with you saying you were sorry that you weren't there for me like I was for you, and that you were going to change for the better. AND THAT!!! NEVER!!! HAPPENED!!! In fact, as soon as this small and totally fixable on your end thing came up, instead of trying to compromise, or even slightly trying to see things my way for once, you thought the best way to proceed would be to end it all. Well, I've got news for you. As sad as I am that you never ever lived up to the promise you made to me on several occasions, I can honestly say that you won't find someone as good as me willing to do what you wanted of me without compromising. It's too unrealistic. I'm not going to say that I'm not sad, because I totally am and probably will be for a while more, but I can find some comfort in the thought that I'm really awesome, and you're really not.

Veronica is currently pursuing an undergraduate degree at the University of Alberta with a major in Spanish and a minor in creative writing, as well as a certificate in international learning. She has volunteered as a writer with the Gateway, the student journal of the University of Alberta. Instagram: @veroo.zelada.

The image features a solid purple background. In the four corners, there are stylized, light purple leafy branches. The leaves are elongated and pointed, arranged in a symmetrical, fern-like pattern. The word "drama" is centered in the middle of the image in a white, serif font.

drama

eureka

EDWARD LEE

Lights up on a laboratory. Everything state of the art, cold, clean, clinical. A workstation with desktop computer on top of it is roughly centre stage, while downstage, near stage left there is the suggestion of a door (the frame, nothing else)

SCATTERSCREW stands at door, keeping watch.

BRIARTAPE sits at a workstation, laboriously two-finger-typing on the computer keyboard, looking from the screen to the keyboard to a sheet of parchment beside keyboard.

Both of them are dressed in dark suits, the material made darker with dirt; they seem dishevelled, the suits possibly a little bit too big for them; the suits are not ripped or torn, just unwashed. Both of them, their hair is slicked greasily back. The two of them could be any age from 40 to 100, though Briartape gives the impression of being the older than Scatterscrew.

Scatterscrew picks his nose (left nostril), looks at his finger then puts finger in mouth. He makes a disgusted face and spits the snot out. He picks his nose again (right nostril), looks at his finger, this time for a longer moment than before, then puts it in his mouth. He nods appreciatively as he chews.

Briartape tuts loudly to himself and taps the delete button on keyboard repeatedly and with anger, one letter deleted with each tap, seemingly unaware that he can keep his finger pressed down. He begins to type again, with the slow two-fingered pace.

SCATTERSCREW: This is boring.

Briartape doesn't answer, just continues his painfully slow typing. Scatterscrew looks over at him.

SCATTERSCREW: Briartape, I said this is-

BRIARTAPE: (Still typing) I heard you.

SCATTERSCREW: You heard me? Why didn't you answer me

then? If you heard me?

Briartape stops typing, sighs and looks at Scatterscrew

BRIARTAPE: I chose to ignore you. I heard you, and I chose to ignore you.

SCATTERSCREW: You were ignoring me?

BRIARTAPE: Yes, I was ignoring you.

SCATTERSCREW: That's hardly nice, is it? Ignoring me. Hardly nice at all. No, not at all.

BRIARTAPE. Nice? You're saying it isn't nice? That's what you're saying? It isn't 'nice'. We're demons. Demons. Spawns of hell. Born of pain and brimstone. Of spit and shit. Nice isn't exactly in the job description. Nice isn't... No one has ever described a demon as nice. Not once. Not ever. Across all of time, no one has ever called a demon nice. The word 'nice' might as well not exist when it comes to demons and their descriptions. For that matter, no one has ever expected a demon to be nice. No one who has encountered a demon has ever walked away from said encounter, if they have walked away, no one has ever thought "Oh, that demon was nice". I imagine, if someone were to come face to face with a nice demon, they would undoubtedly be more perturbed by the fact that the demon was nice than they would that there was an actual demon standing in front of them. They might wonder if the demon in question was a demon at all, and not just some human with halitosis and an aversion to bathing.

Beat.

SCATTERSCREW: Still. You can be nice without being nice.

BRIARTAPE: No.

SCATTERSCREW: No?

BRIARTAPE: Demons can't be nice. They can't.

SCATTERSCREW: They can.

BRIARTAPE: They can't.

SCATTERSCREW: Says who?

BRIARTAPE: Me. I say. I say demons can't be nice. And common sense says it. And millennia of proof to the contrary. Demons are not and cannot be nice. You might as well ask an (he shivers) angel to go without smiling like a loon for more than five minutes. Ask one of them – pick any one of them, even the cherubs, who frankly, looking like that, have absolutely nothing to smile about – ask any of them to just not smile. For five minutes. Five minutes without smiling. Five seconds! Those shiny bastards think they're god's gif-

Briartape bites down on that last word, annoyed with himself.

SCATTERSCREW: Well...

BRIARTAPE: Yes, yes, I heard what I said. I heard it just as I said it. It doesn't matter. My initial point still stands though. What I was originally saying before you caused me to digress. Demons are not nice. Never have been. Never will be.

SCATTERSCREW: How did I cause you-

BRIARTAPE: Listen, can you, just for a minute, be quiet? Can you be silent? For one minute. That isn't too much to ask, is it? It isn't too dire of a request. A mere minute. A swift sixty seconds. What is sixty seconds to a creature that has been alive for millennia? It's nothing, that's what it is. Nothing. It's not even the blink of an eye. It's a moment of stillness becoming another moment of stillness. So, sixty seconds out of the thousands of years that you have been in existence? How about it? If I fail in this undertaking the Supreme One – all hail his glorious name (they both bless themselves but they do it in reverse) – he'll detach my head from

my body again. And this time he mightn't reattach it. He might mount it on a spear at the gates and... I don't want that. I quite like my head.

SCATTERSCREW: (Under his breath) Someone has to.

BRIARTAPE: What was that?

SCATTERSCREW: Nothing.

BRIARTAPE: It didn't sound like nothing.

SCATTERSCREW: What did it sound like?

BRIARTAPE: More than nothing.

SCATTERSCREW: Which could be anything.

BRIARTAPE: Yes. That's my point.

SCATTERSCREW: But it was nothing.

Briartape studies Scatterscrew for a long moment, then shakes his head.

BRIARTAPE: You tire me sometimes, Scatterscrew.

SCATTERSCREW: So you keep telling me.

BRIARTAPE: And supposedly demons cannot tire.

SCATTERSCREW: You keep telling me that too.

Briartape studies Scatterscrew again before sighing.

BRIARTAPE: Can I... (indicates keyboard)

Scatterscrew holds up his hands.

Briartape starts typing again.

Scatterscrew reaches up to pick his nose again, going for the left nostril first, before remembering, then switching to the right nostril. He picks vigorously, removes his finger, examines it.

SCATTERSCREW: I don't get it.

Scatterscrew sticks finger in mouth, chews contently. Briartape continues typing, ignoring him.

SCATTERSCREW: Briartape, I said-

BRIARTAPE: Yes, yes. I heard. I heard you. I'm right here. I can hear you perfectly well. But, like last time, I was ignoring you, so I might complete this task assigned to me by-

SCATTERSCREW: Us.

BRIARTAPE: What?

SCATTERSCREW: Us. The task was assigned to us. Not you. Us.

Beat.

BRIARTAPE: And yet I seem to be the only one engaged with the task at hand.

SCATTERSCREW: No, you're not.

BRIARTAPE: No?

SCATTERSCREW: I'm keeping watch.

BRIARTAPE: You're keeping watch?

SCATTERSCREW: Yes.

BRIARTAPE: Keeping watch at two in the morning in an empty building?

SCATTERSCREW: There's a security guard.

BRIARTAPE: A sleeping security guard. Whose snoring can almost be heard here, four floors above his slumbering frame.

SCATTERSCREW: He might wake.

BRIARTAPE: He might wake?

SCATTERSCREW: Yes, they do that all the time. They sleep. And then they wake. (Beat) Unless they're dead. Then they don't wake. Though, I don't think we could say they'd been asleep in the first place, if they were dead. Unless they died in their sleep. They do that a lot too. Die in their sleep. Frankly how they get anything done, between sleeping and dying, it's beyond me.

Beat.

BRIARTAPE: Fine. Good job, Scatterscrew. If I had a hat I would

tip it to you. I can easily say, and without any falseness to my words, that I would truly be lost without you. Adrift. Utterly incapable in performing the duty entrusted to us, the bulk of said duty being what I am doing.

SCATTERSCREW: Thank you.

BRIARTAPE: You're very welcome.

Briartape starts typing.

SCATTERSCREW: I still don't get it.

Briartape sighs.

BRIARTAPE: Undoubtedly I'm going to regret it, though I know if I don't ask, I won't get this completed at all. So, Scatterscrew, enlighten me. What is it you 'don't get'? Ofcourse, I imagine the list of things you 'don't get' is longer than all the roads of hell, paved and unpaved, combined, so please, try and be brief. And specific.

SCATTERSCREW: You're being not nice again.

BRIARTAPE: Let me, without prejudice, redirect you to my previous comment about being a demon.

SCATTERSCREW: Yeah? Well, let me... redirect you to... what I said earlier, about being nice nice.

BRIARTAPE: Touché, Scatterscrew. Touché.

SCATTERSCREW: Forget it. Forget I said anything. You do your part of the job and I'll do mine. You over there. And me over here. At the door. Keeping watch for the security guard who could wake up at any moment. Which, in my honest opinion, is the most important part of the task, because if a human sees us, well, then we would be in real trouble, wouldn't it. What would we do then, if the security woke and came up here and saw us? I'm keeping us safe while you... you do your part of the job. The least important

part of the job. And yes, I know if the security guard did see us we'd probably just kill him, but then there'll be all the paperworkand... No one likes paperwork. It takes half the fun out of being a demon. So, I'll stand here keeping us safe from paperwork while you... you do... that.

Scatterscrew turns back to keeping watch, his back to Briartape. Briartape looks at Scatterscrew for a moment, then sighs, loudly. Scatterscrew ignores him. Briartape sighs again, but Scatterscrew continues to ignore him.

BRIARTAPE: Scatterscrew.

Scatterscrew continues to ignore him. Briartape shakes his head.

BRIARTAPE: Scatter-

SCATTERSCREW: Annoying, isn't it?

BRIARTAPE: What?

SCATTERSCREW: Being ignored.

Briartape opens his mouth to speak, then closes it, shakes his head, smiles despite himself.

BRIARTAPE: Tell me then, what don't you get?

Beat.

SCATTERSCREW: This.

BRIARTAPE: This? Define 'this'.

SCATTERSCREW: This. As in, all this.

BRIARTAPE: I swear, it's like playing charades with a sulphuric wind. By 'all this', you mean...

SCATTERSCREW: I mean, aren't they going in the direction we want? The direction we've been edging them towards? Granted, they haven't needed that much encouragement, and sometimes we don't need to do anything. At all. If I were... (he points upwards) if I were him I'd been frankly embarrassed.

BRIARTAPE: Freewill.

SCATTERSCREW: Freewill?

BRIARTAPE: He gave them freewill.

SCATTERSCREW: I know that. But he could have given them some, I don't know, some sense of accountability with it, couldn't he?

BRIARTAPE: It's his... failsafe. His get-out-of-jail card. It means he can't be held responsible for what they do. He can say, look at these wonderful beings I have created, perfect in every way, and look at what they do to themselves because I have made them so perfectly. The flaw isn't in giving them freewill, the flaw is in what they choose to do with that freewill. Though, to be fair, if it wasn't for their freewill, we wouldn't get a quarter of the souls we do.

SCATTERSCREW: Still, it seems like a huge designer flaw.

BRIARTAPE: Indeed.

SCATTERSCREW: I mean-

BRIARTAPE: Scatterscrew?

SCATTERSCREW: What?

BRIARTAPE: Your point. Before your security guard and most of the people on this side of the planet wake-up.

SCATTERSCREW: A minute ago you were giving out to me for talking, and now you're giving out to me for not talking.

BRIARTAPE: Perhaps I just enjoy berating you. But, be that as it may, either tell me now or remain silent until I've completed the task at hand.

Beat.

SCATTERSCREW: Berating means giving out, doesn't it.

BRIARTAPE: Yes, in a roundabout way. Berating means giving out.

SCATTERSCREW: Ok. Just checking. Because-

BRIARTAPE: Scatterscrew.

SCATTERSCREW: Yes, right. Sorry. So, the humans, they're going where we want them to go. With their fossil fuels and carbon... stuff.

BRIARTAPE: Their 'carbon stuff'?

SCATTERSCREW: Yes. Their carbon stuff.

BRIARTAPE: Do you have any idea what carbon is?

SCATTERSCREW: At first I thought it was to do with the demon who guards the gates of hell, but then I figured it wasn't, because, he's not the brightest flame in the pit, and they wouldn't entrust something like the end of the world to him. Unless the end of the world needs a demon who's an expert in picking warts. But, do I really need to know? What carbon is? Is it something I need to know? I know it exists, is that not enough.

BRIARTAPE: No, you don't need to know what it is. Not particularly, I suppose. Not to keep watch at the door, no. Your knowledge or lack of knowledge concerning carbon will not impact upon you keeping watch for you sleeping security guard.

SCATTERSCREW: Ok. So, fossil fuels, carbon stuff, and all the other things I'm sure I don't know about, with all that, they're going where we've been pushing them, aren't they? Right where we want them. Hell on earth and all that. I'm fairly sure that's in the job description.

BRIARTAPE: Literally and metaphorically, yes, but where they're going is worse.

SCATTERSCREW: Worse than hell on earth?

BRIARTAPE: Yes.

SCATTERSCREW: What's worse than hell on earth?

BRIARTAPE: Not-

SCATTERSCREW: Is it earth on hell?

BRIARTAPE: Earth on...? That doesn't make any sense.

SCATTERSCREW: It does.

BRIARTAPE: It doesn't.

SCATTERSCREW: It does. It makes sense.

BRIARTAPE: It makes sense? Earth on hell? It makes sense to you?

SCATTERSCREW: Yes. It makes sense.

BRIARTAPE: Explain it then. Explain the sense of it.

SCATTERSCREW: Well, it's.. it's exactly what it soundslike. Earth on hell, instead of hell on earth. It's... It's self-explanatory. I mean, it's hardly complicated, is it?

BRIARTAPE: Wouldn't that mean that hell becomes earth?

SCATTERSCREW: Yea- What?

BRIARTAPE: Earth on hell would make hell earth.

Beat.

SCATTERSCREW: No.

BRIARTAPE: No?

SCATTERSCREW: No. (beat) Maybe.

BRIARTAPE: Maybe?

SCATTERSCREW: Fine, what's worse than hell on earth? If it isn't earth on hell. What's worse?

BRIARTAPE: Nothing.

SCATTERSCREW: Nothing?

BRIARTAPE: Nothing.

SCATTERSCREW: Now that doesn't make any sense. Earth on hell makes more sense than that.

BRIARTAPE: Nothing as in nothing at all. The earth is heating up. The seas are rising. Vast swathes of land are burning. The

weather is turning ever more violate. Their food sources are dwindling. Their population levels are borderlineunsustainable. Before we know it, centuries at the most, maybe, there won't be any of them left. Not one single one of them. Gone. Extinct. Not even the memory of them will remain. Hence my use of the term 'nothing'. There will be the earth - there's at least a few billion years left in its lifespan - but there will be no humans left to inhabit it. And, if there areno humans left, then there'll be no...

Scatterscrew looks at him confused.

BRIARTAPE: Dwell upon it. Ponder it. Take your time.

Scatterscrew still looks confused.

Briartape sighs.

BRIARTAPE: What's the one thing that humans have. No other creation has it. Not the animals. Not us. Not even the (shivers) angels, though those feathery fuckwits act as though they do.

Beat.

SCATTERSCREW: Self-destructive tendencies.

BRIARTAPE: Besides that. Something that is uniquely theirs.

SCATTERSCREW: I still think it's self-de-

BRIARTAPE: It's not. Not in this case.

SCATTERSCREW: I don't...

Eventually it dawns.

SCATTERSCREW: Souls!

BRIARTAPE: There we go.

SCATTERSCREW: There'll be no souls.

BRIARTAPE: You 'get it' now?

SCATTERSCREW: Yes. No humans. No souls.

BRIARTAPE: No humans. No souls.

SCATTERSCREW: No... us.

BRIARTAPE: No, we'll still be around, but we'll be... unnecessary. And he (he points to the ground) does not like unnecessary things. Unnecessary things are usually wiped away.

SCATTERSCREW: I don't want to be wiped away. I like being... unwiped.

Beat.

BRIARTAPE: You like being unwiped?

SCATTERSCREW: Yes.

BRIARTAPE: Do you ever listen to yourself, Scatterscrew? Do you ever listen to yourself when you speak? The words you use to say the things you say.

SCATTERSCREW: Of course I do. I listen to myself. I'm speaking, amn't I? I'm going to hear myself if I'm speaking. I'm going to hear the words I used because I'm using them.

Beat.

BRIARTAPE: Each to their own.

SCATTERSCREW: You've just insulted me, haven't you?

BRIARTAPE: No, I haven't.

SCATTERSCREW: It sounds like you have.

BRIARTAPE: No, not this time.

Beat.

SCATTERSCREW: I don't believe you.

BRIARTAPE: Why would I lie?

SCATTERSCREW: Because you're a demon.

BRIARTAPE: Fair point. But I wasn't lying then. I didn't insult you. I can, if you wish. If you are eager to be insulted.

SCATTERSCREW: No, I'm good, thanks.

BRIARTAPE: So be it.

SCATTERSCREW: I still think you insulted me.

BRIARTAPE: In all the years we have worked together, Scatterscrew, have I ever denied insulting you? Have I not always insulted you openly, and when asked if I have insultedyou, have always admitted to such?

Beat.

SCATTERSCREW: I think so.

BRIARTAPE: There you have it.

SCATTERSCREW: Have what exactly?

Beat.

BRIARTAPE: I didn't insult you. But I'm feeling a great urge to do so now unless you let me finish this.

SCATTERSCREW: Don't let me stop you.

Briartape looks at Scatterscrew for a moment before he starts typing again.

SCATTERSCREW: So, you're... doing what exactly.

Briartape sighs, shakes his head before turning his attention to Scatterscrew.

BRIARTAPE: You were at the briefing.

SCATTERSCREW: Yes. I was at the briefing.

BRIARTAPE: So, any questions you have should have been answered then. During the briefing. That's what briefing means. Becoming informed.

SCATTERSCREW: Yes, but I might have fallen asleep.

Beat.

BRIARTAPE: You might have fallen asleep?

SCATTERSCREW: Yes. Might have. Definitely.

Beat.

BRIARTAPE: I'm not wasting my time explaining it, you wouldn't understand.

Beat.

SCATTERSCREW: You don't know, do you?

BRIARTAPE: Of course I do.

SCATTERSCREW: Were you asleep too?

BRIARTAPE: Was I asleep too?

SCATTERSCREW: You were, weren't you?

BRIARTAPE: I was not. I was not asleep. Don't... I'm performing the duty, am I not? I could hardly being doing this is I had been asleep during the briefing. Here I am, executing... the duty we have been charged with.

Briartape hits a few keys, his fingers fast, all the while looking pointedly at Scatterscrew. Then he stares at screen, frowns, and hits the delete button a few times.

SCATTERSCREW: Nope, you don't know. I know that look of frustrated confusion.

Beat.

BRIARTAPE: Alright. No, not exactly. I don't. No. But, in my defence, look at it. It's... It's all... algebra.

SCATTERSCREW: Isn't that one of ours?

BRIARTAPE: Exactly! That's my point. It's algebra. Born from the pits of hell. A needlessly complicated procedure. It's not... It's not natural. *(Beat)* I have to type this in here and...that's all I understand, to be honest. Though it pains me to admit it.

SCATTERSCREW: Then what?

BRIARTAPE: Then what?

SCATTERSCREW: How is all this algebra going to save them?

BRIARTAPE: Seriously, you were at the briefing.

SCATTERSCREW: And, seriously, I may have definitely been asleep. And seeing as you don't know what to do, maybe you *were*

asleep too.

BRIARTAPE: I wasn't- I know what to do. I'm just not entirely cognizant on what it is I'm doing. I type in these numbers and letters and... This scientist, this is her lab and...she's close to a breakthrough. Discovering some new way to create cleaner energy. Some... I want to say perpetual energy, but... Whatever it is, these humans need it if they're going to survive. But she's has some numbers in the wrong place. Or letters. Or she didn't carry the one. Or the really really smalltwo. I don't know. It's nonsensical. All I know is I'm typing in the right... calculations and she'll-

SCATTERSCREW: She'll have an eureka moment!

BRIARTAPE: Yes. An eureka moment.

SCATTERSCREW: We've done a few of those. In the past.

BRIARTAPE: We have.

SCATTERSCREW: Not all of them have worked the way we wanted them to.

BRIARTAPE: We don't talk about those ones.

SCATTERSCREW: Didn't some of them, some of those eureka moments, the ones that did work, didn't they... Aren't they why they needing this cleaner energy?

BRIARTAPE: Yes. Unfortunately.

SCATTERSCREW: Is that ironic?

BRIARTAPE: Possibly.

SCATTERSCREW: We're responsible for irony too, aren'twe.

BRIARTAPE: Yes and no. Irony is one of his (he points upwards) and we're responsible for the fact that no one is ever entirely sure of its definition.

SCATTERSCREW: Like effect and affect?

BRIARTAPE: Yes, it's the little things that seem to be more successful than the bigger things. The minor annoyance compared to the major one. Or at least, the accumulation of little things.

SCATTERSCREW: So, she has this eureka moment and...

BRIARTAPE: Well, with luck, they won't climate-change themselves into oblivion.

SCATTERSCREW: It's a good idea.

BRIARTAPE: It is.

SCATTERSCREW: Clever.

BRIARTAPE: Yes.

SCATTERSCREW: Are you sure we thought of it?

BRIARTAPE: Of course... (beat as he considers) I presume we did.

SCATTERSCREW: Well done us, then.

BRIARTAPE: Yes. (*Beat*) Can I continue?

SCATTERSCREW: Don't let me stop you.

Briartape returns to typing. A few seconds pass.

SCATTERSCREW: What if it doesn't work?

BRIARTAPE: It will work.

SCATTERSCREW: But you don't even know how it'll work.

BRIARTAPE: I know what the end result will be, which is almost the same thing.

SCATTERSCREW: But-

BRIARTAPE: Scatterscrew! Please!

Scatterscrew holds up his hands, nods his head.

Briartape starts typing again.

SCATTERSCREW: But what if it doesn't?

Briartape stops typing, genuinely considers the question.

BRIARTAPE: Then we're all doomed, I suppose. And not in a good way.

*Scatterscrew nods his head, then resumes keeping watch.
Briartape continues typing.
Lights down.*

Edward Lee's poetry, short stories, non-fiction and photography have been published in magazines in Ireland, England and America, including The Stinging Fly, Skylight 47, Acumen, The Blue Nib and Poetry Wales. His play 'Wall' was received a staged reading as part of Druid Theatre's Druid Debuts 2020. His debut poetry collection "Playing Poohsticks On Ha'Penny Bridge" was published in 2010. He is currently working towards a second collection. He also makes musical noise under the names Ayahuasca Collective, Orson Carroll, Lego Figures Fighting, and Pale Blond Boy. His blog/website can be found at <https://edwardmlee.wordpress.com>

twins

MARILÙ CIABATTONI

Dramatis Personae

- Alice: 40 years old. Paul's twin sister. She has curly red hair which she is proud of. She has a master's degree and a Ph.D in medicine. She is very outgoing and welcoming.
- Paul: 40 years old. Alice's twin brother. Red-headed like his sister. He is an introvert and a freelance writer. He hasn't seen the rest of the family in eight years.
- Robert: 45 years old. Alice's husband. Black hair, dark eyes. He's a lawyer.
- MaryAnne: 16 years old. Black hair like her father's.
- Beth: 8 years old. Long red hair like her mother's. She doesn't look like her sister at all.
- Rose: Over 60 years old. A close friend of Alice and Paul's parents. Retired. She has come to pay her condolences to the deceased. Even at a funeral, she enjoys minding anyone else's business.
- Friends of the deceased: A group of 8-10 people, most of them elders. They have come to visit the body of the deceased and pay their condolences to his family.

Act I – Scene I

It's getting dark outside. The action takes place indoors. The living room has been turned into a funeral home. A coffin stands in the middle of the stage. The FRIENDS OF THE DECEASED stand around it in a circle.

FRIENDS OF THE DECEASED: ... blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now

and at the hour of our death, Amen.

They get close to ALICE, holding her hands and paying their condolences.

ALICE: (Holding everyone's hands) Thank you so much for coming. My father would've appreciated it a lot.

ROSE: He was an honest man, always looking at the bright side of everything.

ALICE: Yes, he was. Thank you, Rose. My b... My family and I are very proud of him.

ROSE gets close to ALICE and her family.

ROSE: Look at your daughters! They were this tall the last time I saw them. But I don't remember you... Uhm, you see, I retired pretty soon and, since then, I've spent a lot of time with your parents. You may not be aware of it, but I used to be very close to them. Especially your mother, until she... Anyhow, she never told me about you expecting a child and we sure did a lot of talking back then.

ALICE takes ROSE by the arm and brings her to the other side of the stage, away from MARYANNE and BETH.

ALICE: So, uhm... My husband had another family before he met me. He divorced his ex-wife a few years ago. His youngest sons live with her now. But MaryAnne lives with us...

ROSE: Oh, I see... And was Beth born after your marriage?

ALICE: We weren't husband and wife then. Not yet, at least. That's probably why my mother—bless her soul—didn't tell you anything... My parents have always disapproved of extramarital relationships. They've been raised with that mindset so it's understandable they had these opinions. You they got married when my mother was twenty and my father thirty-two!

ROSE: Yes, yes, I remember your mother mentioned that once.

ALICE: Right... We don't usually talk about this, though. Especially not in front of our girls. So, if you could please avoid asking these kinds of questions when I'm next to them...

ROSE: Oh yes, yes, I understand... Sorry about that! I just couldn't help noticing that your daughter looks so much like you. Same hair!

ALICE: (Smiling) Yes, I know. We get that a lot.

PAUL enters the room, now quiet. He first looks around as if he couldn't recognize the place. PAUL's and ALICE's eyes cross, but they quickly look at the ground again. Then, slowly, he starts towards the coffin and sobs.

ALICE exits. ROSE gets closer to ROBERT.

ROSE: Why didn't she say hi to her brother?

ROBERT: It's a long story. Many years ago, Paul had... Issues, with a girl he used to date. Then things escalated and around ten years ago or so the rest of the family cut every contact with him, or at least that's what Alice told me. She doesn't even want to talk about him. I tried to make her understand the value of forgiveness, but she just wouldn't listen... I told her a broken family wasn't the solution to anything. (Pauses) But, after all, she's been very busy with work, family and... You know, her father's health. So maybe that's understandable, but still.

ROSE: What happened exactly, if I may...

ROBERT: Oh, I don't know either! Trust me, I wish I did, but she would just refuse to mention anything more than what I have already told you. I'm the only one who still talks to him. I'm trying to do the best I can to, you know, keep the family together.

ROSE: It must've been very serious if they don't even look at each

other after their father's death!

ROBERT: Uh uh, yeah I'm sure it was. Now if you'd excuse me, I have to say hi to the people who've just arrived.

ROBERT steps away from ROSE. ALICE enters the room again, carrying flowers. She is about to place them under the coffin when PAUL starts towards ROBERT, his eyes still moist.

PAUL: Hey Robert...

ROBERT: Paul! It's been a while, how are you?

PAUL: Good, good. Uhm... Would you mind me asking you something?

ROBERT: Not at all! What's wrong?

PAUL: So, uhm... I would like to spend the night here with my father and... You know. I don't know whether she would be okay with that, though. Would you please convince her to let me stay here for tonight?

ROBERT: I see, Paul, I see. Give me a few minutes and I'll see what I can do. I can't promise you anything for now. She's been having some rough weeks lately and she gets mad quickly. But I'll try and get back to you as soon as I can. Sounds good?

PAUL: Thank you! I... I don't know what she told you about me...

ROBERT: That doesn't matter! You're family and, if no one else does, I'll treat you like that!

PAUL: Thank you.

ROBERT: Yeah no problem! Why don't you go say hi to everyone while I talk to her? It'll be quick!

PAUL: Sure.

PAUL gets close to FRIENDS OF THE DECEASED and starts holding hands with them. ROBERT starts towards ALICE.

ROBERT: Honey, I was speaking to Paul a minute ago and...

ALICE: Let me guess: he asked you to spend the night here, didn't he?

ROBERT: Yes, and...

ALICE: Okay then the answer's no.

ROBERT: But...

ALICE: I told you what he did, Bob. He's not the kind of person I want to be in the same room with.

ROBERT: But honey, honey, listen. This could be the perfect time for the two of you to talk a little and clarify things about each other.

ALICE: I'm not sure, Bob... I've told you what happened. I don't feel comfortable being here with him.

ROBERT: I know but listen: your father passed away last night and Paul lives too far to be here sooner. He was his son, too, after all... Not to mention, you're twins! When I look at him, it's like I see you as well. Anybody needs compassion, no matter what they did. Besides, you haven't seen him for almost ten years! I bet he's changed since then.

They look at each other.

ROBERT: Please, let him stay for tonight.

ALICE: Alright...

ROBERT holds her tight.

ROBERT: Thank you, honey! I love you!

ALICE: I love you, too, Bob.

ALICE and ROBERT keep holding each other when the stage goes dark.

Act I – Scene II

It's night. ALICE sits next to her father's coffin, touching it with one

hand. PAUL enters the room. They smile at each other.

PAUL: Hey there, twin sister.

ALICE: Hey there, twin brother.

ALICE immediately stands up and hugs him. PAUL holds her back.

ALICE: I missed you so much.

PAUL: Same here.

ALICE: Is everything alright?

PAUL: Yes... Well... (Looks at the coffin) Kind of alright.

ALICE: I know... It happened suddenly. Robert and I had just gone to bed when the housekeeper called and said she wanted to wish him a good night but he didn't open the door. You know that in the past few years he's been really obsessive about being killed and stuff, but he would always unlock the door and peep outside when the housekeeper said goodnight. My husband had to break the lock to get inside, but when we arrived he was already gone, holding to his gun... He was probably afraid someone would kill him.

PAUL: I'm sorry I wasn't there when that happened...

ALICE: It's fine. You're here now. Your presence would probably have made things worse for... You know what.

PAUL: Yes. Yes, I know what.

PAUL and ALICE are silent.

ALICE: I still think about that day.

PAUL: We had many tough days...

ALICE: The day you left... We've always been together since we were kids, and not having you mocking the way I style my hair broke my heart.

PAUL: It was for the best of our father... It wasn't his fault either.

ALICE: Yeah...

PAUL: He threatened to shoot me with his gun, remember? This house wasn't safe anymore for me, and mom agreed.

ALICE: Mom...

Pause

ALICE: I miss her a lot. She was the only person who could understand.

PAUL: I only had you and her by my side. Especially when Lucy tried to sue me for...

Pause

ALICE/PAUL: (Together) That bitch

ALICE: Have you heard from her since?

PAUL: No, thankfully. She just took the money and left. As long as I know, she could've done the same with a millionaire and now she lives on a private island in the middle of the ocean...

ALICE: You should learn to not trust people...

PAUL: I think I've learnt it now... Never be intimate with someone you don't trust.

ALICE: And...?

PAUL: Always buy your own condoms.

ALICE: Exactly!

PAUL: It could've saved me so much time and energy. (Pauses) And money, too.

ALICE: Dad was furious when he found out. He accepted to give that woman enough money to keep her quiet. People talk, you know? Especially in this town.

PAUL: Yeah. I may have moved out but I never forgot that. You can't keep secrets in a place like this. That's why I'm glad she

delivered far away from here. (Pauses) And then... She finally fucked off. Pardon my French.

ALICE: You always find the right words for everything. I've always liked this about you. Even when I complained about you correcting me every single time I made a mistake...

PAUL: Yeah... (Giggles)

ALICE: Sometimes I was afraid to talk around you.

PAUL: (Surprised) Really?

ALICE: Maybe I'm exaggerating a little bit, but that was essentially how I felt.

Pause

PAUL: You know what I've always liked about you, instead?

ALICE: What?

PAUL: You're very mature. You always knew how to handle a situation in the best way possible. And I bet you haven't changed.

ALICE: (Giggles) Modestly.

PAUL: And quite frankly, I wouldn't be here if you weren't by my side when dad threatened me with his gun.

ALICE: Don't say it out loud, please. I still have nightmares of when it happened.

PAUL: I'm sorry. It's just...

PAUL starts sobbing. ALICE puts a hand on his shoulder and strokes it.

PAUL: She is beautiful.

ALICE: She is...

PAUL: When I saw her today, I almost couldn't recognize her... The pictures you sent me don't do her justice.

ALICE: She's always with a book in hand. It's so hard to catch her attention sometimes. You two are so similar. Every time I look at

her, I think your child couldn't be more beautiful.

PAUL: Thank you! And you know what I like the most about her? She doesn't remind me of You-Know-Who at all. When she was born I was afraid that she would have blond hair and dark eyes...

ALICE: Instead, she turned out to be red-headed and blue-eyed. Exactly like you!

PAUL: You mean us?

ALICE: (Smiles) Us.

Pause

PAUL: God, you have no idea how bad I wanted to see her.

ALICE: Now you two will meet more often.

PAUL: Of course I will! (Pauses) Have you told your husband, though?

ALICE: Not yet. I don't think he's ready to know. Don't get me wrong: he's an amazing man but I think I should take my time to tell him about this. We've both been very busy lately.

PAUL: I see...

ALICE: But I promise you something. (Places herself in front of him and grabs his shoulders) You won't be isolated from the family anymore.

PAUL: I wish mom and dad could share this moment with us.

ALICE: They're looking over us. And I bet they're proud.



PAUL: You know, I never apologized to dad after I was kicked out. I wish he could know I'm sorry for what I did.

ALICE: (Putting one hand on the coffin) He knows now.

PAUL puts his hand on the coffin next to ALICE.

PAUL: You're right. Now he knows.

The stage goes dark.



Marilù Ciabattoni is a writer, editor and translator based in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. She studied English Literature and Creative Writing in Rome, Italy, and she's now working as a Communications intern and a freelancer. Her creative work was featured on various zines like Cordelia Magazine, Unpublished Magazine, and Bloom Magazine, as she continues publishing fiction, poetry and nonfiction on a regular basis.

The image features a solid purple background. In the four corners, there are stylized, light purple leafy branches. The branches are composed of several oval-shaped leaves attached to a thin stem. The word "masthead" is centered in the middle of the image in a white, serif font.

masthead

SUSANNA MARIAN CORREYA

Susanna is a lanky long-haired twenty-something from Chennai with handwriting that resembles a cardiogram. She recently completed her Master's in Literature from Stella Maris College. She worked as an editor for a publishing company and was a regular contributor to the college magazine. She founded *Rhodora* on a quiet starry night when she realized the potential of indie zines. Cats, Joan of Arc, and Mark Twain are some of the things that get her excited.

KEERTHANA V

Keerthana is a social-media-shy creature who giggles in short bursts. Articulate and laser-focused, she assesses submissions and situations with sensitivity. She doesn't believe her WhatsApp texts could go straight to publication. She is fluent in Telugu, English and Tamil and can translate and interpret with ease. She obtained her Master's in Literature from Stella Maris College. A Carnatic singer with an airy voice, she will calm your nerves on a bad day or make a good day sound better.

MARIAM ANNA ALEX

Mariam "Akku" is a soon-to-be Visual Arts graduate from Kottayam. She was the set designer of the play *On Both Sides* and has contributed doodles to The Ecology Project. She loves art, music, TV shows, flowers and dogs. Plump chicken dumplings and the color aqua make her happy.

THE RHODORA

ON BEING ASKED, WHENCE IS THE FLOWER?

In May, when sea-winds pierced our solitudes,
I found the fresh rhodora in the woods,
Spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook,
To please the desert and the sluggish brook.

The purple petals, fallen in the pool,
Made the black water with their beauty gay;
Here might the red bird come his plumes to cool,
And court the flower that cheapens his array.

Rhodora! if the sages ask thee why
This charm is wasted on the earth and sky,
Tell them, dear, that if eyes were made for seeing,
Then Beauty is its own excuse for being:
Why thou wert there, O rival of the rose!
I never thought to ask, I never knew;
But in my simple ignorance, suppose
The self-same Power that brought me here brought you.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

