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rhodora

– DIGITAL MAGAZINE –





rhodora

Volume 1, Issue 1 | May 2021

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THE

Rhodora was named after Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem about a wildflower he stumbled upon in the woods. He wonders why such a breathtaking flower is tucked away in the wilderness where no one can marvel at its beauty, but eventually realizes it is exactly where it belongs.

As writers, haven't we all felt, at one point or another, like rhodoras in a world full of roses? The wilderness is hospitable to wildflower and weed, briar and bramble,

EDITORS

SUSANNA MARIAN CORREYA KEERTHANA V

FROM

moss and mushroom. As an independent magazine, we endeavor to emulate said hospitality.

The inaugural issue is a smörgåsbord of styles and themes: there's speculative queer fiction from Japan translated by Toshiya Kamei, Gale Acuff's existential poetry inspired by Sunday school teachers and short fiction on addiction by Molly Glinski that captures the lows of a high. Then there's Thomas Morgan's moving walk down memory lane, an urban-legend-meets-nursery-rhyme piece by Amanda-Jane Bayliss and two modern classics from Sean Wojtczak that would make

the Romantics proud — or jealous. You'll also meet EA Leutkemeyer's lovable Eleanor, Reem Rashash-Shaaban's curious Martine and Paul Lewellan's recently single Gwendolyn.

Special thanks are due to Mathangi N M and Sai Rakshaya Sowmya S who midwived at the birth of this magazine. Mariam Anna Alex's rhodora art is to us what the real thing was to Emerson — a delightful wonder. We are fortunate to have her design grace our cover and content pages. Jessica Purgett of *The Mark Literary Review* was gracious to feature us in her listicle when we were scrambling for purchase. *The Sunshine Review* and *Orange Peel Magazine* have also been most kind.

To our contributors, thank you for entrusting your work to us. You made us think, you made us laugh out loud (literally, we swear!), you made us cry. Reading your poetry, fiction, non-fiction and reviews has been a pleasure and sharing them with the world through *Rhodora* a privilege.

A single rhodora entranced Emerson. We present to you a cluster.

Happy reading!



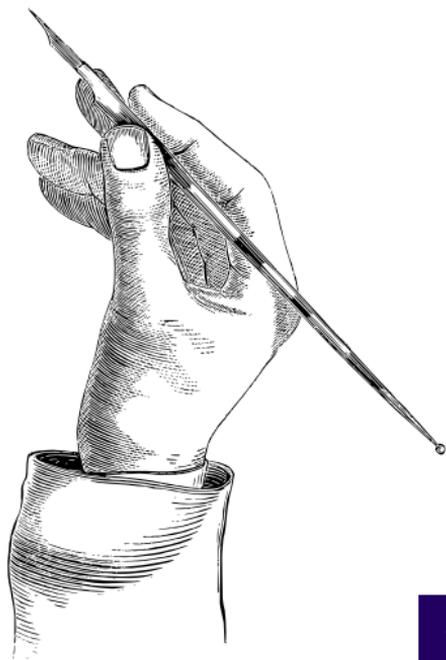


poetry

the voices in my head

VINEETHA A V

the whispers of a long-lost story
haunt me
taunt me
a filament of voice
in the guise of a creeper
tricked me
tripped me
as I ran away from
a tale whose tongue was cut
whose hand was injured
a story who couldn't write,
that couldn't be written about
i'm immersed in a pool
a pool of cold sweat
i finally come to a halt
waiting for the long-lost tale
to imprison me.
now, I begin to write.



roaring with the others

SPANDAN BANDYOPADHYAY

I was on a bus.
Not knowing where I was coming from,
I had forgotten where I was going to.
I was thoughtful,
Yet, I was thinking about nothing.

I saw a flock of sheep,
On a busy highway.
So many of them, four long queues.
Each one obedient, composed.
Like the passengers on the bus.

A sheep in the group lagged.
(It might have been pensive too.)
A tall, stout herdsman
Shouted abuse,
Hit it hard with a strong rude stick.
It did not bleat. It followed the rest.



Just then, someone on the bus screamed too.
“What is the driver doing?”
Another one cried, “Do we have all day?”
Many started yelling.
And I remembered, I had an important meeting.
I checked my watch.
My brow wrinkled
And I roared with the others.



if he comes, if i go

SPANDAN BANDYOPADHYAY

Today if death comes
like an omnipotent king
and stands on my doorstep
and knocks on the door,
and if I open it
unknowingly,
unintentionally,
unconsciously,
I want you, my love,
to think about sobbing
for a minute or two.



For I don't want to leave before living.

Today if I go
like a powerless beggar
and stand on death's doorstep
and knock on the door
and if He opens it
knowingly,
intentionally,
consciously,
I want you, my love,
to grin like a Cheshire cat
for the rest of your life.



For it's easy to leave before living.

when i was a paperboy, i delivered to an old man

GARETH CULSHAW

Eggshells are placed all over the carpet. Dust rubs onto your clothes

as you enter the hallway. A pair of boots stand within themselves, four pairs of slippers lie like beaver tails, one flip flop holds last summer.

He walks towards us, holds a pair of glasses on his nose.

A whisper comes out of his mouth as a draught. I try to hear, turn my head,

catch the words that have slipped out of his photo album face.

Council worker bones rummage under his clothes as if he is shedding skin.

Wardrobe coldness hangs in the air. As he walks to the front door his legs are brushes in a road sweeper's hands. He picks out a bag of coins from his pocket. The left hand rollercoaster shakes.

I see the eyes are starting to peel old age under chipboard eyelids.

He passes me coins. I count them with my school trained brain, give him today's newspapers. He reads the headlines, forces a grin.

I turn to leave the hallway, open the sky, and see the sun hang above

a rooftop like a kite. He locks the door before I open the gate.



winter soldier

RUCHI ACHARYA

Horses are like
winter soldiers,
stubborn and fierce.
Runners in the
distraught thunder —
constantly far and yet so near,
so dear to my weeping heart.

Like wild waves we charge,
the horse hooves thumping beneath us.
We are hurdling over the barricades,
and there's nothing that can stop us.
There's no guidance, no timeline —
Only the beat of our hearts.
Now we are recreating life.
Now, we are living.



Within the blink of an eye,
it all disappears.
I am back to the stable.
Behind the bolted wooden door,
I can see the winter soldier is gone.
The snow turns into red maples.
It's strange how quickly seasons changed.

Here I stand
in this December awry,
touching the snow
and thinking about the majestic creature

that was mine.

In a dream, I ride
over the dry fields
across the horizon.
My hands are buried
in the mare's dark mane.
I am talking to the wind,
for it reminds me of what I felt.

I am the horse. I am the winter soldier.



teacups

RUCHI ACHARYA

We are women united, one.
We make sure that things get done.

Pink tunic, soft music.
Time for you, time for me.
Thank you for visiting!
Let's see if a cup of tea
can bring us some harmony.

Sometimes we're
broken and bruised,
abused and used.
All ruined,
us poor sad things.

My friendship is free.
Now under these trees,
let's forget the past
and feel the silent breeze.

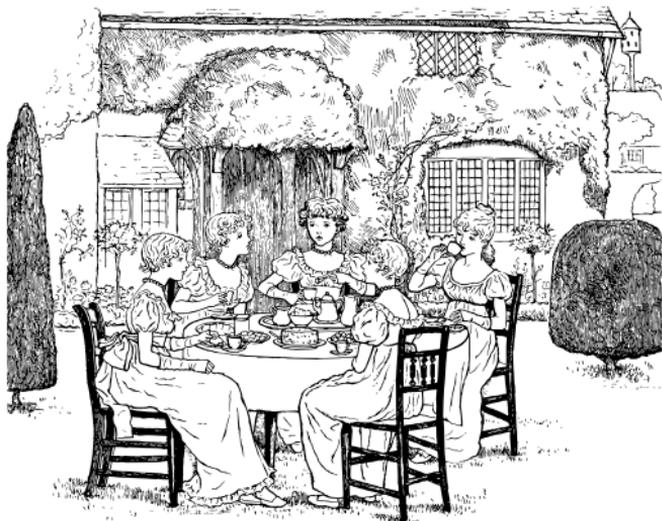
Sister, I feel what you feel.
Let's purify the press!
Let's talk to men like men!
Let's fight poverty and inequality!

This garden view is so overwhelming.
With little sips of tea,
my willpower is strengthening.
Let's walk shoulder to shoulder



You be my rock, I'll be your boulder.

The cookie plates are now empty.
The clock has struck six-twenty.
Before it's late evening,
before our next meeting,
let's promise each other
we'll never fall,
we'll take our call,
we'll make the good things happen,
we'll be phenomenal.



three poems

SELFA ACHEW

Translated from the Spanish by TOSHIYA KAMEI

1

With its fine rainbow beak
the word embroiders
filigree wings in the heart.
How much its flutter hurts
How the ink bites on its tattoo
I dance, jump, and turn
toward the center of its voice.
I learn
how to spin the verse
without a drop of blood being spilled
on a flower over the poem.
How much the letter hurts
and how much I desire it.

Con su fino pico de arcoíris
la palabra borda
alas de filigrana en el corazón.
Cuánto duele su aleteo
cómo pica la tinta en su tatuaje
que bailo y brinco y giro
hacia el centro de su voz.
Aprendo
cómo hilar el verso
sin que una gota de sangre
se pinte en flor sobre el poema.
Cuánto duele la letra
y cómo la deseo.



Naked, I wait for your kiss
 to discover in my smile
 this little hallway to my heart
 where the aroma of coffee lingers
 and a tender surprise
 clinks in the morning light.



Maybe our skin will make its way toward death
 but my fingers discreetly trace
 the moss where the dew smells of life
 and I breathe you just like a century ago.
 Come lift the sheet of warm winter
 let's spend love
 and shake our bodies.

Desnuda, espero a que tu beso
 descubra en la sonrisa
 ese pequeño pasillo al corazón
 donde se guarda el aroma del café
 y tintinea con la luz de la mañana
 una sorpresa enternecida.
 Tal vez nuestra piel vaya haciendo su viaje hacia
 la muerte
 pero yo siento con mis dedos discretamente
 conmovido
 el musgo en que el rocío huele a vida
 y te respiro igual que hace un siglo.
 Ven, levanta la sábana del tibio invierno
 vamos a gastarnos el amor
 estremeciendo el cuerpo.



We're so old,
 so children of each other,
 that I open my crib on your skin
 and lull the young people we were there.
 Like a dim poem
 I want to write life in your memory.
 My tongue returns in dreams
 to the sweet tree that is your body,
 high up the branch
 where your left hand plays the harp
 what your heart became.
 There is the origin of a life dedicated to persecute us
 hating ourselves sometimes and others forgetting.
 I loved you and even dream that I love you.
 I imagine there can be no other life
 without the pain of absence.
 How else does paradise make sense
 if it is not sensing that from there you also love me?

Tan viejos somos,
 tan niños uno del otro,
 que abro mi cuna en tu piel
 y arrullo ahí a los jóvenes que fuimos.
 Como un poema tenue
 quiero escribir vida en tu memoria.
 Mi lengua regresa en sueños
 al árbol dulce que es tu cuerpo,



trepas alta la rama
donde tu mano izquierda toca el harpa
en que se convirtió tu corazón.
Allí está el origen de una vida dedicada a perseguirnos
odiándonos a veces y otras olvidando.
Te quise y aun sueño que te quiero.
Imagino que no puede haber otra vida
sin el dolor de la ausencia.
¿De qué otra manera tiene sentido el paraíso
si no es presintiendo que desde allí también me amas?

Selfa A Chew holds an MFA in Creative Writing and a PhD in History from the University of Texas at El Paso. Her books include the poetry collection Azogue en la raíz (2005); the novel Mudas las garzas (2007), which appeared in English as Silent Herons (2012); and Uprooting Community (2016), her study on Japanese Mexicans.



the vastness in a drop

MANJUSHA HARI

We are
rivers,
broken bridges,
floating reveries.
The eyes of the river see everything
from the core of the sky
to the depth of the water.
Selves are bubbles, forming and disappearing,
vacuous vastnesses.
We are the shadow of nothingness.
Every droplet knows the adieu
of sorrowful distances.
The song from the soul of the sea
resides in our tears.
Our blindness sees for us,
Our dumbness speaks for us.
We are unborn myths.



my heart's uplifted flame

BOBBI SINHA-MOREY

In the juvenescence of yesterday
my heart's uplifted flame layered
in memories sparks the time I met
my very best friend, and it came
flowing back to me just how close
we used to be, Winnie and me, only
one year apart in our first two years
of high school; the air crisp and floral
around us everyday in the spring,
flowering judas weaving the wind,
rugosa roses that loved to speak. And
the two of us meeting each day for
lunch, sharing classes, surprised by
the soft pulse of the day's warmth
and that of drowsy bees that would
often land on our skin, God bred in
us in our early years. At times I'd see
her in prayer, hands woven like secret
friends. As we grew, the wheel of the
sun having spun the days into years,
our hearts ripe as lemon groves, age
has allowed us to find peace in our
lives. We land so easily in quiet spaces
like butterflies.



heart of spring

BOBBI SINHA-MOREY

Pear blossoms are lifted
in flight from their stems
in a flurry of wind and
I confine their pale beauty
to my memory so I can
translate their every swirl,
every arc in the air into my
floral needlepoint, working
on it daily in the heart of
spring for a footstool cover
I may never see, but kept
as home décor to go with my
collection of rose-patterned
china for guests to see. When
I'm alone on my favorite perch,
a delicately woven cushioned
chair – the sun warming the
window, my eyelids so heavy,
I give in to the sweet opiate
of sleep.



breaking up with plastic

MATHANGIN M

someone asked me how i was feeling and i tell them i am fine.
i don't tell them that
i want to break a watermelon over her head for everything she
put me through.
and that's not being mean, that's just how i love.
if her love language is poorly written letter writing,
mine is wasting a perfectly good watermelon to commit an act of
petty violence against her.
for her.
i want to dramatically throw all the shit she left behind from a
balcony and scream into the sky. i want to be a cliché crying in the
rain.
i want to set fire to her hair.
after all, i've done things worse than arson in the name of love.

i don't tell them that
i bought seventy boxes of incense sticks back in january
and have been trying to smoke up my house
in the hopes that the sandalwood would overwhelm the stench of
her rotting core.
a rotting core in a plastic barbie coat.
that's all she ever was. that's all she will ever be.
plastic limbs, plastic voice
spouting the personalities of the people who decided to play with
her.



i don't tell them that
you could slap her in the face with your boundaries, but there was
little chance of her ever noticing them.
she would step over the line and throw a party in the midst of

your selfhood.

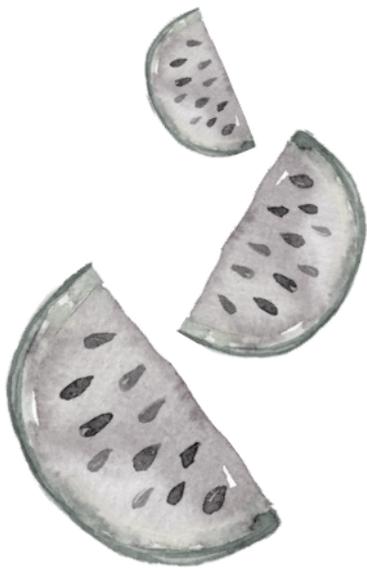
i think she fears all the parties ending. because when they end and people go home, what then?

what does she have, but a hollow chest and the noises of people walking away from her.

i don't tell them that she's just a sad girl desperate for love. i lie.

i tell them she's great.

i tell them that she's as perfect as a person can be.



microwave culture

MATHANGIN M

i wrote an essay today
about woolf's androgyny
and it sounds like the broken
record of my dreams:
repetitive, forever stuck on an off-key note,
fighting to make its mark on history.
i wake up in the morning
and eat microwaved milk and mediocrity. there is simply no time
to cook i am too busy breathing while i still can.
there is a thief on this land, our house,
and he's stealing our oxygen,
so i
have to
sing
while i
still can.
i will sing anthems of pride from exhausted bones,
hoist rainbow flags that will be torn down,
stream rainbow music that will be taken off the cloud,
and throw rainbow filters over the planet
because dying things deserve to look pretty.
the big men with their big beards, they all lie
because people who are different always die
yes, this is a call for help, a battle cry.
now i know why our elders say we need sunlight.
our hearts are loud and cries are clean
but we wear air-conditioned skins to war.
i used to war with all the wrong things:
my parents, my gods,
my mediocrity



because the box television of my childhood
taught me that extraordinary people become history itself.
so i burned and burned like the ruthless sun of my city,
and died and died like plastic-ridden soil.
we are not poets, we are not protestors,
we are not dreamers, we are not saviours.
we are sad children in a fading world
that stole our dreams and sold them back to us like they sell
popcorn sachets at the supermarket.
they want me to microwave my dreams and fall into line
they want us to breathe very little and stop singing over time.
our essays might be in microwaves but our minds are in our
hands.
they're bringing out the hoses now,
but they don't know that we've practiced drowning in failure for a
long time.
they're bringing out the nooses now,
but they don't know that we've practiced being buried for a long
time.
they are bringing out the spies,
they want to put my heart through a shredder.
but they don't know that i will gather up the pieces like they were
cold noodles
and microwave myself a new heart.



categorically yin and yang

COLIN JAMES



The Taoist who had an office
above my auto repair shop
spoke in an Irish brogue,
answered to the name of Heffernan.
His clients mostly court appointees,
descended the metal spiral stairs
shaking their heads and muttering,
“An increase in coherence, complexity
is implicit as the universe evolves.”
Only the most resolute returned
complaining about the long delays,
and not averse while waiting impatiently
as to the possibility of an oil change.



dissociation therapy

COLIN JAMES

The mobile ATMs
who winter in Texas
return with grandiose ideas,
build mega spacious condos
resembling ocean liners.
I can't imagine
how any gangplank
could summarize
the basis of my fears.



upon my word

COLIN JAMES



Didn't want you to feel uncomfortable
so I wore a Yahtzee t-shirt
and was just staring at my computer.
You sat on the desk naked
knees up by your head.
Occasionally I would grab a mouthful
emitting that tedious sound of arousal
first deployed by West Coast explorers.
Disqualifying thereafter
our contentious universe.



cosmic catch up

TODD SULLIVAN



First among words, discovered by the young
Bye Bye, Goodbye, we will meet again, a
Promise made to keep with the human tongue
Conversation disrupted, yet not done
Though when stressed, meaning alters, forever
Is implied, this moment, to the future
Social contract signed, by both together
Words left unspoken, and we the poorer
Memories watered by silence to grow
Questions of where you have travelled, where you
Have gone, what new sights, across rivers that flow
Yearnings to know, share words, seeing what's new
One day to find you in some distant land
Pause in recognition, we'll understand

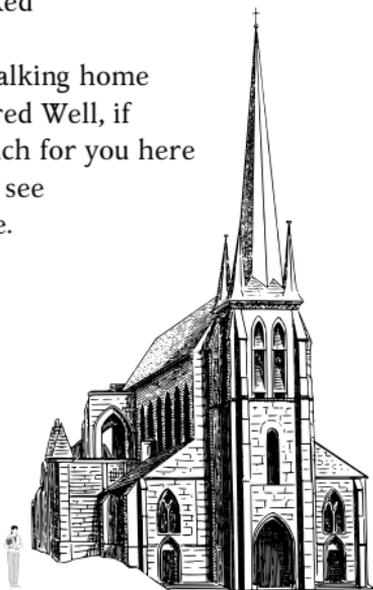


my sunday school teacher says that if you

GALE ACUFF



My Sunday school teacher says that if you wish you were dead then you are already, dead that is, that's kind of clever but like a lot of other things it don't make good sense — doesn't that is — and when I die I probably go to that part of Hell for folks with fumbling grammar, I mean if I'm not in the Afterlife right now, I hope not, I'm only ten years old, so I asked her what happens if I get run over crossing the four-lane when I'm walking home from church today and she answered Well, if you're killed dead then not too much for you here on Earth but in the Afterlife you'll see real action. So I guess I'm still alive.



i'll go to hell when i die my sunday

GALE ACUFF



I'll go to Hell when I die my Sunday
School teacher warns but she also says not
to take it too seriously, most folks go and
probably learn to get along and it
might not be as bad as Earth after all,
plus you get immortality if just
to be punished for longer, it's a toss
-up which is worse, Earth or Hellfire — then she
recommends Heaven above all else
but adds that I surely do sin a lot
for ten years old so maybe there's not much
hope for me, my soul anyway, as for
my body that was probably the part
of me that got me into trouble in
the first place. Then she smiles. She must like me.



blind map for the king of crows

JOHN SWEET

stands holy in the last pure
crippled light of day says
this is not the end

stands in the doorway says
come in
or no words at all

open smile open heart and
this is the year of wonder and
this is the age of fealty

you give and you receive

you wait for the news that christ
is
reborn or at least morrison
or at least pollock and then you
consider escape

make up a list of everyone who
would kill you for it

power over the fates of others
is its own religion

this is true lesson of history
and what she wants is to be held

what we are is lost

kid in the back seat slowly
bleeding to death says we
have to turn around but
it's too late for that

just need to keep driving
until we get to
the point where everything ends



division and subtraction

JOHN SWEET

in the kingdom of dead trees

in the age of falling houses

you wake up to the sound of
gunfire or to the laughter of soldiers
crushing the fragile skulls of
newborn children beneath their bootheels

you wake up to fog

to a hangover

call kirchner
but he doesn't answer

call dorothy hale
but her machine is broken

her message is clogged with blood

and what about these rumors of
sunlight and warmth that
reach you from the south and the west?

what about your children,
crying for their mother?

will you tell them you love them
even when all they want to do is leave?



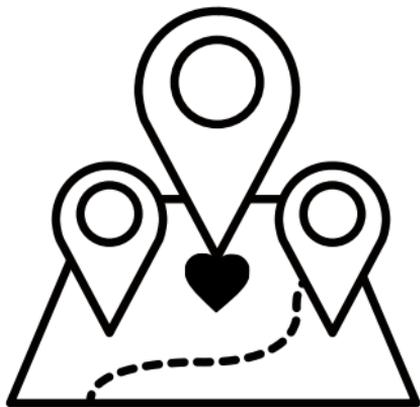
people, places and everywhere

CHRIST KEIVOM

There's a little of yourself in me, you must know.
How I always find a strand of your hair
In everything that I eat.
It's an instantaneous life like Delhi on a weekend
And thinking of you instead of money or career or
Fame is also transient.
So, with our newest shirts, we picked out a place...
went there
And what happened? One of us found
Love with a future instead of a past.
One of us moved on by nights, by writing.
In the city summer felt like being close
To a bleeding star... just warm and alive.
Then it rained. A lot of rain. A lot of you
In the rain that I would imagine and touch.
Oh and Mumbai for its cobweb of lights. Sikkim
For when snow blankets the world.
Every place is a visitor. Sometimes a guest. They
Seldom show up twice and we carry them as
People in our lives even if it's only a part of
Them as long as we can.
I remember it all —
People... Places... Places... People
They all share a face and the face of a clock
On a wall is the only thing that really
Sees you (wherever you go).
Then I heard you graduated, I
Heard you changed the way people find God,
I heard you were settling in a parallel universe.
Far and happy. You felt like freedom:



An unattainable state of being.
So, I took the eastward buses, then
The westward metros, then all
Buses, every metro. All day. All night.
There was an awful version of myself
In every place and in the centre
You sat on its innermost, softest point.
What I mean, wherever I went: you were missing.
You'll understand if I write it all in letters
Like a man at war, writing home —
I have nowhere to send it but to you —
Written for you — and too late.



again and again

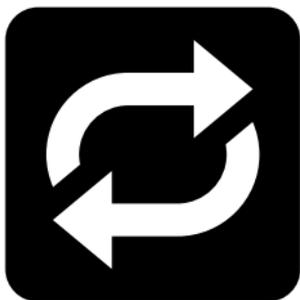
CHRIST KEIVOM

After Rainer Maria Rilke

So *this is love*. That hour everyone speaks of
But won't name. When it's this slow
You can touch the rain as it stops mid-air.
We've been here before:
Seconds. Moments. Fantasy.
We are at 20s but like Baudelaire
'We have more memories than if
We were a thousand years old'
Again and again
you: in the middle of a chapter
(even though the plot is over)
And lately, lately feels like a place
Retrieved from time, happening anew
How is it that this morning?
I can feel how afraid you were last night.
How is it that tomorrow promises a future?
With someone that will stay new.
Summer returns us to a lacuna in time
Where mistakes are resumed with tender chances.
Almost possible: to believe people are full of petals
Each one begging in cognitive dissonance
Will you stay. Will you stay not.
Underwater the voices of winter anchor
At the bottom of a memory. The old floorboards
Creak with a familiar sound. Our handwritten names
Disappear from the interminable list of people
We pray for. The people we love despite
Their cruelty. Life and its cruelty



How it has kept its distance.
But kept us at arm's length.



melancholy: a self-portrait

CHRIST KEIVOM

Look at his little fingers
Who was I to be, but an image:
A caricature of the boy and the wolves

My arms are ragged with teeth —
Never mind the wounds, give me the water

What does it matter who you love?
The hunter and the hunted both have brown eyes

There is far more truth in footprints,

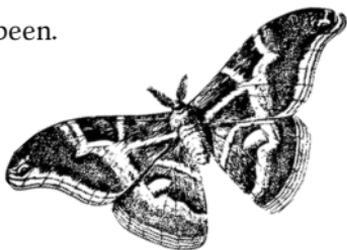
Show me the wandering of yours
Let me visit all the places you've been.

There is a home in your voice
Where I have never lived —

I am haunted by its walls
The stairs, the lawn
And the broad pine windowsills

There is a moth for each memory
I have of you, twitching from the shock
Of having finally touched your flame

The moths will die inside my mind but,
They will never replace you.



great horned owl

JOHN GREY

I don't see the owl,
merely hear its
succession of deep hoots.
It's early evening in the woods,
dark for me,
prime hunting light
for the raptors of the night.
But the bird is near.
I can imagine its yellow eyes,
horn-like tufts,
the turning of its head
at the slightest sound
from far below its perch.
Any moment now
it could pounce upon
some unsuspecting creature.
Such potent senses.
Such compelling power.
I almost wish
it was coming for me.



personal best

JOHN GREY

It's been a hard climb.
Embedded, in the soles of my shoes,
is evidence of every strata
of this rugged mountain,
from the moisty soil at the bottom,
the hardy forested lower reaches.
and now this hard granite
that protrudes above the tree-line.



I'm already at a height
that is good for my age,
but my heavy breaths
encourage me to go farther,
now that there's nothing between me
and the pinnacle,
but the knowledge that this is
as far as I got
the last time I attempted the ascent.

But damn the past.
It lacks the fortitude, the will.
It's so comfortable, so smug,
being over and done
that it figures itself a standard
I'll be lucky to reach,
let alone improve upon.
But this is the here and now.
My first few steps,
half on my knees, half vertical,
take me beyond the years past.

Red-faced, grunting,
I determinedly emerge from the last time.



parallel plains

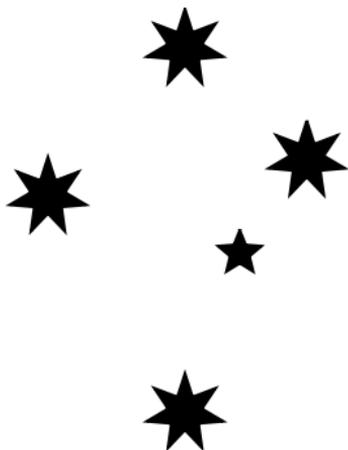
ANTHONY SALANDY



I stand on parallel plains
Where stars graze my eyes
And enlighten my perplexed mind
As buildings crumble-

And fiery skies grow cantankerous
Just as waking hours dawn
And my body is released
From a slumber of reckoning-

Before nights may finally triumph
And consume all days.



a moonlit sonata

ANTHONY SALANDY

Battered shores howl on
As a moonlit sonata begins
It's haunting journey to fruition,

Where in the depths
Of the great stygian unknown
Can mutes be heard to temper
Violent clouds whose innocence

Becomes untenable
As frigid showers fall
Alongside fulmination orotund

As if precipitation gained discourse
As moonlight became clouded
And bolts of divine judgement
Did wage ghastly battle along the
shore,

But as nightfall wore on
And thatched houses flickered
Could momentary respite be seen

As still, a moonlight sonata had halted,
In preparation for its finale
Most deafening, yet sullen still,
A testament to symphonies nocturnal.



the lizard man

AMANDA-JANE BAYLISS

Utah, November, two thousand and eight
Conner Smith finished his shift a little late.
As the clock struck midnight, a storm of white delivered
A violent shiver to attack his bone. So he decided to take
a shortcut home.

As he drove down the white country lane, a reflection of
colour caught his eye. A human face, a reptile body,
shimmering scales of emerald green, Conner shouted out
with a deafening scream.

In a hurry Conner pushed his peddle to the floor,
swerving in the road, avoiding the traffic load. As his
heart raced, as his blood pumped, as The Lizard Man
pounced heavily upon the roof,

Screeching its nails across the tinted metal. The car
pounded with speed, slamming into an old stone wall.
Tributes of flowers for the loved ones that had deceased
here before. The lizard? The man? The monster?
Whipped meters of scaled tail around Conner's neck.

With fear, Conner fell into the fresh snow, as he took his
last breath, before he was introduced to his death. While
the creature enjoyed his dish of carnivore.

The piercing of the devils eyes, scanning every bone for
the last scrap of meat. Before licking his mouth with a
slither of his long reptile tongue.



voices

AMANDA-JANE BAYLISS

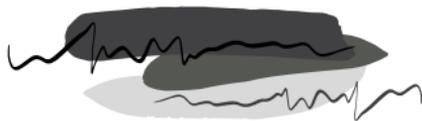
I can hear you
Where are you?

I can hear you
Calling my name.

You talk about suicide
It's always the same.

Get out of here
Get out of my head.

I'm better off dead
You're driving me insane.

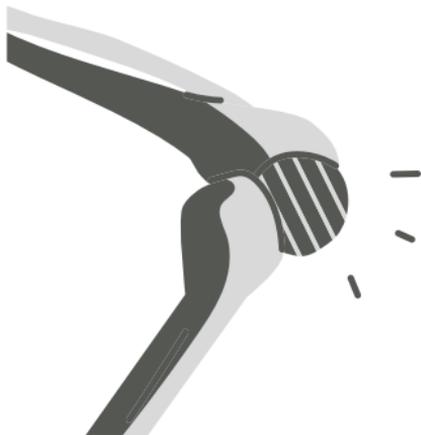


ornamentation

ZEBULON HUSET



Groans and creaks
from the settling bones
of house and the man
babushka-ed within.
He maintains few
knick-knacks, but can't
stand his axe to sprout
a pinprick of rust,
dust to accumulate
on the black frame
over her head.



worm

ZEBULON HUSE T

A foot from the curb squirmed
a slimy worm, in the San Diego sun.
How it reached that spot,



with neither slicked trail
nor human in sight,
I have no idea.

But I neither stooped down
to scoop the worm to safety,
nor squashed the bait

for the sheer humanity of it.
I had warm Jack n the Box
and more important things

to attend to at home, though
the bag of fries and burger cooled
on table as I mused poetic



mother of andromeda

J ARCHER AVARY

oh boastful mother of Andromeda
queen of the Ethiopians
forever exiled to the edge of the northern sky
a victim of your own conceit

oh swaggering Cassiopeia, loose of lip
queen of braggadocio
how cavalier to compare your beauty to the Nereids
such an affront to the gods of surf and sea
seldom goes unpunished

oh vainglorious mother of Andromeda
how your actions coax the vengeance of Poseidon
oh pity the Ethiopians
doomed to suffer the wrath of cetaceans

oh contemptible Cassiopeia
so quick to sacrifice your own flesh and blood
the beautiful Andromeda
naked and chained to the rocky coast
an offering to the sea beast



fear not, oh humble audience
this narrative is graced with a god in the machine
the laws of mythology dictate
that a princess exists to be rescued

enter our hero, the lucky Perseus
flying above Ethiopia on a pair of winged sandals
at precisely the right moment to intervene

of course Perseus falls in love
and in a flagrantly phallic metaphor
vanquishes the monster with his “magic sword”

oh arrogant mother of Andromeda
such audacity to expect a happy ending
did you think Poseidon would let you off the hook
when your daughter was spared?

oh insolent Cassiopeia
suspended in the heavens, lashed to a chair
such suffering is poetic justice
for the laws of mythology dictate
that a bombastic braggart shall be banished



poetry happens

J ARCHER AVARY

poetry happens

in the shower, when you least expect it
images materialise out of steam
rivulets of running water on frosted glass
a code undeciphered, the future dried
riverbeds of some distant no-name planet



on the treadmill at the gym, where pure
weightlifting stink attacks, an unwashed sock
somewhere in the changing room, where
the line of brilliance comes to you
all at once, as you tie your street shoes

at the kitchen sink, elbow-deep in suds
as you scrub the congealed sauce
from last night's dinner plates, wet fingers
shriveled like dried raisins, but bigger
like prunes, but without the reputation



poetry happens in the queue at the bank
or the grocery store, as you look both ways
to dash across the street, it emerges
from thin air, almost anywhere, but never
at the computer, as you face the blank page

winter in broncalafort, 1983

SEAN WOJTCZAK



The winter's winds were blowing 'cross the sea
When you emerged and turned away to sheathe
Your face from both the northern gales and me
To light your crumbled cigarette and breathe.
We huddled near the archway of the inn
And shivered as the bitter tempest swelled
I thought your lighter's wheel would never spin
Until a spark appeared and I beheld
A dying star between your frigid lips,
And galaxies of ember on the breeze,
And when your breath produced a pale eclipse
It felt as though the world had come to freeze.
Such days are never truly left behind
When we remain so young and unresigned.



lines on the seventh nameless king of ardfilimore

SEAN WOJTCZAK

But when you stood in shock upon the shores
And watched your blessed fleet ignite and burn,
Your ears so full of all our panicked roars
Your sight disturbed by ash within the churn,
What did you think, oh seller of our dreams?
What faithless words did you begin to weave
As you beheld the endings of your schemes
And watched the death of all you could deceive?
What horrid voices whispered in your ears?
Did they refrain the lies you used to sing
Of all the glory we would find in future years
If we would only trust in our new king?
Was it regret which drove you from the rocks
To join our souls below? Or was it fear?
Or was it something harder to unbox?
It matters not, what ended your career
For when you fell, a silence overtook the din
And all could see what lay beneath your skin.



Note: During the years of 997-1027, a series of seven kings took the Arden Throne, each worse than the last. Each of these rulers committed failures or crimes so awful that their names were virtually wiped from history. Their actions, however, are remembered well by the people of Ardfilimore. In this excerpt, as recorded by the monks of Storiminster Abbey, the seventh (and final) nameless King attempted to launch an expansionist campaign. Without the wisdom or knowledge to command this campaign, nearly the entire 'Moric fleet was burnt and sunk during the siege of Esarius. Witnessing this defeat, the king allegedly threw himself

from the cliffs. Why did he jump? Was it regret? A means of escaping the trials sure to come? Was he pushed? History does not recall.

This age of nameless kings ended when King Connor the Winter-Song took the Arden Throne. Though much of his reign was occupied by the War of Descendants, he won this war and honored his nation, thus securing his name forever in the tomes of history.



bronze mustang

CHRISTIAN GARDUNO



First time I saw her, it was the last Friday in April
She looked like Rachel from Slowdive circa 1991
She pulled into the Country Mart and smoked a cigarette
as she pumped her gasoline like it was the end of time
Undaunted, she went inside and paid all in change
She moved around brutally, just like Nureyev
Behind her shades, her eyes are copper-colored
I suspect she may be a Capulet, she gets freckles in the summer

Decimate me-
take me back to the sub-atomic level
pulverize me-
Nobody notices the imperfections unless they're perfect
save me-
bury me in wax
preserve me-
encase me in amber





fiction

a little pride with no prejudices

VINEETHA A V

To: charlesbingley1998@gmail.com

From: fitzwilliamdarcy@gmail.com



Subject: Re: Is Elizabeth in love with you?

Dear Charlie,

It is obvious that Elizabeth is falling for me. I have been nothing but kind to her and I think she must have interpreted my kindness as love. You know how much she despised me when she joined college. She assumed I'm arrogant and superficial because of the way I behaved during the freshers' party. Well, I can't blame her. But in my justification, I wasn't being mean to her. It was part of a dare in the game we were playing, right? Anyway, I'm so glad we found each other after months of misunderstanding. It was a relief when she finally smiled at me and decided to invite me to her party. And I can't believe we've been friends for over two years now.

I know you felt at ease with her the moment you met her. You two have become really good friends and that makes me so happy. The past few months have been really enjoyable as we three hung out with no qualms. Elizabeth and I were so excited when we came to know you were spending the summer with us because we had classes and couldn't come to you. She was overjoyed at the prospect of hanging out with two crazy boys. I admit she makes me happy. I can tell I make her happy too. She made life better for me here and has been there for me just like you would have, had you been studying here. I cannot ask for a better friend, you



know. But after your last email, I've been feeling confused. It did seem like Lizzie had feelings for me and that made me paranoid.

How do I tell her I do not feel that way about her without ruining what we have now? I'm so sorry I ignored your emails and texts for two weeks. I was angry at you, Charlie, for assuming I'm in love with her when I had clearly told you I'm not. You of all people should have trusted me. I know I haven't been myself lately and I had acted like a jerk to you. There has been a lot on my mind and I'm sure you must have noticed I'm hiding something from you. I've never been the kind of person who had a lot of friends and I really do not want to lose you, my best mate, just because I was stupid and took you for granted. Believe me when I say you mean a lot to me and though we had to move away from each other after high school, I still haven't met anybody who can be a better friend to me than you are. Yes, I know I just said that Lizzie is my best friend in college. That's true. But Lizzie did not grow up with me, you did. She did not defend me in the locker room as the rest of the team bullied me for my lousy game, you did. She wasn't there during the lowest of my lows in school, you were. And when you told me she might have feelings for me, it scared me. I stopped talking to you because I was worried you were right. And yes, you were right. Yesterday when we were studying for the finals, she kissed me, Charlie. She said, "Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, I'm so glad that I found you. I think I'm falling in love with you. No, I am in love with you."

I didn't say anything in response. She left after a while and I knew I had to tell her the truth. I knew I had to tell YOU the truth. So,

this morning, I went to her dorm and told her I'm in love with someone else. Yes, Charlie, I'm in love with someone else. I know I should have told you, but I couldn't. And the more I put off telling you the truth, the harder it becomes. I'm so sorry for lying to you, Charlie. You have always been there for me and what do I do in return? I hide the truth from you. I did hide the truth from everybody but I should have told you at least. But I want to come clean now, so here goes...

Charles Bingley, I love you. I have been in love with you since high school. Even before I realised that I am gay, I had fallen in love with you. All these years, I remained in the closet, choking, struggling for freedom, being in the way of my freedom. Charles Bingley, after seven years of being in the closet, I'm coming out to you. I'm gay and I love you. I don't know if you feel the same way about me but I had to tell you this. For hundreds of years, Darcys ended up with Elizabeths and Bingleys ended up with Janes. But I want to end up with you. I love you Charlie and I thought I should come out to you before it's too late. I know you've blocked me on all social media so please get back to me when you see this email. I'm sorry for being a jerk. I love you and I'm sorry.

Hoping to hear from you soon,

With lots of love and apologies,
Your best friend,
Fitzwilliam Darcy



Note: This letter is a revisionist take on Jane Austen's classic novel Pride and Prejudice. Set in the twenty-first century, it attempts to overcome the stringent limitations imposed on sexuality by Victorian ideals and endeavours to redefine the rigid conventions of the society.



to shut down a heart

EDWARD LEE

He shuts down his heart. He waves goodbye to his daughter, blows kisses to her, and shuts down his heart before the pain of her absence can settle its claws deep into him. Over the next eleven days he will not feel anything, not the pain of her absence, the laborious weight of it sitting heavily in his chest, a weight which seems to inflict a strain on every part of his body, nor the regret he feels at the choices which have led to her absence. And then, on the day when he sees her again, the very morning he wakes — if he has slept at all — like a child of eight just like his daughter, on Christmas morning, some of the night still remaining in the sky, he will turn his heart back on and feel only his joy at seeing her again — ignoring, somehow, how different she looks, taller, older, after just those eleven days of not seeing her — seeing her for the two and a half days out of two weeks that is his time with her, the only thing he and his ex-wife have been able to agree on in the everlasting arguments born from the ending of a marriage, cramming all those missing days, all the minutes and hours, into their time together, doing whatever she wishes to do, even if it is, as it has been of late, wanting to watch videos on her phone, barely talking to him bar to ask for food; it is enough, or as close to enough as to make little difference, to be in the same room as her, to hear her laugh, see her smile, when there are so many days when he cannot even do that.

Except of course he does not shut down his heart. He does not, because he cannot shut down his heart — though he has tried, through drinking to excess and working every hour available to him, with the former leaving him hungover and unable to work all the hours available to him and the latter leaving him so tired



that he cannot fall asleep without the aid of alcohol — no more than he can go back in time and stop himself from sleeping with another woman — a colleague from work at the office Christmas party who had long complimented him on attributes, both physical and emotional, that his wife had stopped noticing — and in so doing, ending his marriage of fourteen years. It was a foolish mistake, fueled by drink, that he was already regretting before the pleasure of body against body ceased. The next foolish mistake was possibly not as foolish as the first, but certainly near enough: he had felt compelled to confess it all to his wife, the guilt erasing any memory of the pleasure left untouched by regret. But he likes to pretend he can do so, that he can shut down his heart at will, and by doing this impossible thing he can stop feeling the pain he feels. It makes no difference, this pretense, and yet he feels better believing it, which perhaps does mean that it makes a difference, just one he is unable to understand, but might some distant day when he has grown accustomed — or as accustomed as possible — to this new aspect of his life as a father and not a husband.

He watches his ex-wife's car disappear around the corner, his ex-wife taking their daughter back to the family home that is no longer his home, that is just a house with his name on it, a house which still takes money from his back account every month, a house that, he knows, will never be his home ever again. Then he turns and re-enters his apartment block where the apartment he can barely afford, even as he works all the hours he can, sits unremarkably among many other apartments, some of them housing men like him, their ghostly-bruised faces, cloudy eyes

and slumped shoulders telling their tale better than any words could, while families reside in other apartments, husbands and wives, boyfriends and girlfriends, and their children with voices and laughs that, when heard through the thin walls, sound so like his daughter's voice and laugh — high-pitched and almost musical, vibrating with life — that he feels as though a thin blade of pure heat has been taken to his lungs. He steps into the elevator, his body suddenly too tired to take the stairs, feeling all the pain and regret he feels every day, his heart throbbing with being inside his chest.



my little cody

YUKI FUWA

Translated from the Japanese by TOSHIYA KAMEI

We're all equal. After all, all of us consist of both male and female attributes. Nowadays, "he" doesn't mean just male. Nor does "she" mean female. "He" is male as well as female. Likewise, "she" is female as well as male. Every baby — with no exception — is born in an artificial womb. And the only sex assigned to babies at birth is "neutral". Even so, my abdomen throbs with a near uncontrollable desire. I can't focus on what the teacher is saying. I push away my chair, get up, and head toward the health office to talk to the school nurse.

"What's wrong with me?" I cast my gaze downward and frown.

"Nothing," the nurse assures me. "It's just a genetic throwback. Don't worry. It'll go away as soon as you grow out of adolescence."

My body still feels hot, but her words comfort me.

"If you can't stand it anymore, see this pediatrician." She hands me a piece of paper with a doctor's contact information. "She will prescribe you some medication."

"I'm like some animal, aren't I?" I blurt out of self-hatred.

"More or less," she agrees. "What triggered it? Any idea?"

"Beats me." Cody's face flashes in my mind's eye. I still remember the brush of eir lips and eir warm breath in my ear.

"Sure?"

I roll onto the bed to escape her cross-examination. The sheets smell differently from my own. While I take a deep breath through my nose, flaring my nostrils, my desire gradually wanes. Maybe the sheets have done the trick. My eyelids feel heavy, heavier and heavier, and sleep seizes me.

When I return to my homeroom at lunch break, several gazes scorch me. Nowadays, hardly anybody gets ill enough thanks to advances in preventive medicine. I sit at my desk, but nobody wants to talk to me. I open a paper bag on my desk and find milk, an apple, and a granola bar. I rip off the plastic wrapping and gobble the granola bar. I chew it noisily, triggering my classmates to dig into their lunches. Regardless of whether it's public or private, every high school is a part of the national school lunch program. Today's granola bar comes with chocolate chips. Who knows what's inside, though? Better not to think about it. By the time I'm done with the granola bar, the throbbing in my body has faded away. My animal instinct is tamed, and I return to being a human. On second thought, it's not working. When I turn left, eir back comes into my sight. Cody, my childhood playmate. The sun in the southern sky paints eir hair gold. Maybe ey has finished eir lunch already, apparently quite absorbed in a book that lay before em.

I wonder what book Cody is reading.



While I stare at em intently, ey never looks back. Cody and I aren't exactly a perfect match. Whenever I'm near em, I lose my

cool. Once I found myself alone with em in the restroom. I lost my control, and we locked lips over and over again. I've got no idea what came over me. Maybe because of the cameo brooch Cody wore that day. But even I own one. Or maybe because ey wore a skirt for the first time in a long time. I'm not sure. Something flicked my switch. Still, Cody was a worse mess.

"I don't want to turn into an animal," Cody cried, but ey didn't stop. Ey was the one who stuck eir tongue in my mouth. How did we end up like this? When we were in elementary school, we bathed together. In middle school, we hugged each other just like any friends do. Since we entered high school, things have taken a peculiar turn. But Cody is the one who needs a doctor. My mind flashes back to eir flushed cheeks. Chills run down my spine.

Turn back, Cody. Look at me.



Even so, I remain out of eir sight.

Cody gets up and leaves, oblivious to my wish. While I lick my wound, a peal of laughter reaches my ears. It's Akka next to me. A few months ago, he decided to live as a boy. Since middle school, he's been a bad influence on me.

"Don't ogle em so much. Poor Cody," Akka says.

"Poor Cody? What do you mean?"

"Drop it. Cody is not thick-skinned like you."

“Excuse me?”

“Unlike you, ey wouldn’t dare go to the health room in the middle of class.”

Akka hurls his granola bar at me. He’s now obsessed with naturalism. He never touches school lunch. He says he wants to find out his original sex. Waste of time if you ask me. Today’s women are as strong as men and live as long as them. Your genitals are altered at birth, so everybody looks the same down there. Even so, naturalists insist that we have false equality. Akka shifts in his chair and sits cross-legged like a typical man does.

“Does that suit you?”

“Who knows? Still too early to tell.”

“Maybe I should do it, too.”

“Not today. Don’t wanna show your underwear.”

“Yeah, you’re right, Akka.”

I wear a skirt today. Other kids frown at our frank chat. Oh well. I can’t even let my hair down in the classroom.

“I’ll go look for Cody,” I say, fidgeting in my chair.



“Oh, good luck!”

“By the way, Akka, why are you so curt today?”

“Tell that to men three centuries ago.” Akka waves me off. He, too, seems to be going through trials and errors.

“I like your new hairdo, Akka. It does suit you.” I point to his close-shaved head.

As Akka smiles shyly, I wave him goodbye and get up. Once I step out of the classroom, I turn back. From a distance, my classmates’ varied hues blend into a harmonious mosaic. Some wear skirts, others wear pants, while some others wear pants under their skirts. Maybe their desires are equally redistributed, too. They love each other equally, after all. In other words, they aren’t possessive enough to hate somebody. Like any other day, equality reigns over this world today. Except for Cody and me.

There are only fifteen minutes left before the next class begins, so I hurry directly toward the rooftop. Cody’s heart beckons me. Grown-ups say desires belong to animals, but I disagree. Ever since a desire seized my body, the world shone with much greater intensity. I recall Cody’s twitching eyelashes as we kissed, trying to burn eir image into my mind forever. I want to devour em. Screw equality. A long time ago, Akka showed me an old video. A male and a female, drenched in sweat, as if conjoined at the abdomen. The whole spectacle looked silly, but the sound of their lovemaking still resonates in my mind. They groaned and moaned out of instinct, discarding reason. Even so, Akka showed no interest in the video. He didn’t say “yuck” or anything like that.



But he stared into open air, beyond the screen, and beads of sweat formed around his brows. He was “neutral” in the true sense of the word. The school nurse would call him an “exemplary specimen of modern humans”.

I push open the door leading to the roof of the school building, darting my eyes around. There ey is. Alone, Cody gazes up to the sky. I don’t want to make em cry again, so I keep my distance.

“I love you, Cody.” Then and now, that’s all I could say to em.

As Cody opens eir eyes, tears trickle down eir cheeks.

Ah. . . Eir beauty leaves me breathless. I lose my words as if I turned into a docile dog. If I had a tail, I would wag it.

“Can I touch you?” I ask, out of the last remaining kernel of reason in me.

Ey nods, and I embrace em. Then I seek eir mouth. Our lips lock and our breaths fight each other’s, before we learn how to breathe as one. I drown in Cody like drowning in the ocean. I grab eir hips and push my abdomen against eirs. I don’t know why, but I want to pin em down to the rooftop and mount em. But my thoughts are jumbled, and I can’t get any words out of my mouth.

“Hot, isn’t it?” I manage to say.

“Yeah. Scorching hot,” she whispers, panting. Sparks scatter

across my mind. Even though our tongues tangle together, no answer comes. Still, I find a girl inside Cody. I'll never let her go. What kind of girl lives inside me? Her eyes only reflect back a neutral me. As my thoughts cool down my body heat, Cody calls my name. Yes, Cody will lead me to the answer. I'm sure of it. My right hand slips into her blouse and touches her bare back. She twists her body and lets out a soft moan. My. . . my little Cody. As I call her childhood pet name, jolts of ecstasy slam into me. I no longer need to think. I hold her down, and she puts her hands around my neck. Now I understand how she feels. Meaningless gestures sometimes feel so good.

The bell announces the end of the lunch break. But our hands ceaselessly grope each other's bodies. We can't conjoin our bodies like our ancestors did. But it doesn't matter — because our hearts are linked together.

Yuki Fuwa is a Japanese writer from Osaka. In 2020, she was named a finalist for the first Reiwa Novel Prize. In the same year, her short story was a finalist in the first Kaguya SF Contest. Translated by Toshiya Kamei, Yuki's short fiction has appeared in New World Writing.



echo in the canyon

DOUG VAN HOOSER

Tonight, his mind reaches back fifteen years, the night when his wife confessed her infidelity from twenty years before. Now, with the blanket pulled up to his chin, he questions his reaction, his easy acceptance. His words, “Why are you telling me this? I have no need to know”, glued in his memory. Did she reveal it during the preamble of sex so his desire would forgive her? He had quickly convinced himself that what happened twenty years before didn’t matter. The confidence in his love the armor she knew the words would not penetrate. She uprooted the one weed in her love.

But tonight, it is the what-if of thirty-five years. What if she had told him at the time, a month later, or what if one night with the other man had become two, three, or more? They would have split like two branches of a river. His stream, a turmoil of white water that would run for miles slapping rocks. But eventually calm water would have come.

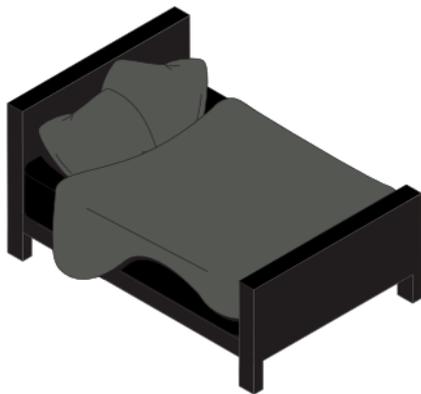
His memoir would be a novel. There would have been other women. At that age they, like him, would be a used car, dented, dinged, scratched, in need of repair. How many would he have bought, sold, or traded? How much more wear and tear would he have incurred or inflicted?

His wife moans. She must be dreaming. He rolls on his side, she flat on her back, her lips parted. She moans again and her body arches slightly. Is it he or is it someone else? He wants to reach out and touch her, but instead he watches. When he dreams often there is no resolution. The ending is rarely satisfying. Would her

dream be complete? Would she even remember it? She moans again, her chest flexes, her hand emerges from under the blanket and wavers in the air. If he reaches out and takes it, would she awake? Would it end her dream?

He could be the other man watching his wife dream, imagining it was her ex-lover she was dreaming about. That her first love still hid in her subconscious and all the times they had made love. The other man wounded by the image of him making love to her in her sleep. The man unable to put himself in her dream. Her possession of a past he was not a part of.

She moans again, turns her head towards him and suddenly opens her eyes, staring at him. He looks into her eyes and wonders if she sees him, if she knows who it is? Then her eyes slowly shut, her chin drops, as the dream leaves her, and she sleeps.



crikey

PAUL LEWELLAN

On Thursday morning Gwendolyn Morgan finished teaching her last seminar at the Commonwealth Bank of Australia Headquarters in Darling Harbor. Evie Walker, the intern who'd been assigned to her during the stay in Sydney, was instructed to treat her to a private afternoon tour of the city and a cruise on the harbor. After the official tour, Evie suggested a Barramundi Burger and a frothy at the Dove and Olive. "Enough of the dags at the bank. Meet some real blokes," Evie suggested.

"I'm engaged. Meeting 'blokes' isn't a good idea."

"I'm not saying ya get nuddy with them or lose your knickers, just raise a pint with some of my mates. No mongrels allowed, no root rats, no show ponies."

"All right. One beer," Gwen conceded. "I have an early flight."

Evie laughed. "Obviously you've been drinking in uptown bars and not in proper Aussie pubs."

"And how do you know that?"

"No true Aussie drinks *one* pint."



"Fine. Take me to a real pub and fill me up."

"The first shout's on me."

In the cab, Gwen checked her text messages, opening first the one



from her mother: *Cancel the engagement*, followed by the exploding stick of dynamite icon, and a link. She clicked on the link and read the breaking news: *Prominent Attorney Caught in Prostitution Sting*. That explained the tsunami of texts and emails that followed, including a half-dozen from Bill.

Gwen turned off her phone as they pulled up to the pub. Evie ordered them each a pint of James Squires One Fifty Lashes. Her mates arrived a little later, along with their second pints.

After her third pint, Gwen excused herself to the Sheila's room and read the story that followed the headline. Undercover police officers impersonating high-end prostitutes had targeted upscale bars in the downtown business district. The most notable of the Johns caught up in the sting was Williams Jeffers, an attorney with a prestigious local law firm. She turned off her phone without checking email, Facebook, or Twitter.

When Gwen returned to the table, Evie and her mates had been joined by Jack Sunderland, one of the young executives who she'd trained over the last few days. Tall, tanned, articulate — a surfer with a MBA from the University of New South Wales — he'd offered to take her to Bondi Beach after the second day of classes but she'd declined.

"I didn't expect to see you here, Jack."

"Evie gave up your whereabouts after I promised she could chuck a sickie tomorrow." He pulled out Gwen's chair. Beside a fresh

pint was an order of fish and chips. “I thought you should have some food before you drank anymore.”

“I’m not a beer drinker, I’m afraid.”



“No worries.” Jack sat down beside her and pushed the beer into the center of the table where one of Evie’s girlfriends snatched it. “There’s a world-famous distillery in Brisbane that makes Bundaberg Rum. Might I suggest a rum and coke? They have it on tap here and serve it in pints.”

“I’m game.” Jack looked different without his suitcoat, which was hanging on the back of his chair. His shirt was unbuttoned far enough to reveal the blonde hair on his chest. “What time do the bars close in Sydney?”

“They don’t anymore. The citizens voted to keep them open 24 hours a day.” He grinned. “Evie told me you’re staying at the Sydney Harbour Marriott Hotel at Circular Quay. What time is your flight?”

“Six a.m.”

“I’ll make sure you don’t miss it.” He was true to his word.

Gwen slept fitfully on the plane. After customs, she found her fiancé waiting by the luggage carrousel. Bill wore a chauffeur’s hat and held up a sign with her name. When Gwen walked past him, he fell into step beside her. “Don’t know what I was

thinking —” “I’d been drinking —” “I missed you —”

Twelve hours into the sixteen-hour flight home she had resolved to forgive him. Now, she changed her mind. Gwen worked as a consultant to international business concerns instructing them on nonverbal and intercultural communication. She’d met Bill when his law firm hired her for a case. Now, as she watched him explain, she knew her fiancé was lying.

Outside the terminal, standing in line for a taxi, Gwen raised her hand to silence him. “Let me get this straight. You missed me so much that you hired a whore? Is that what you’re saying?” She kept her facial expression neutral; she masked any body language that would betray her anger. She waited for an explanation, as did the other women in line listening in on the conversation.

“I met her at Drivers when I went in for a drink after work. We were outside the bar before she mentioned money.”

“I see. Hoping to get laid for free?”

“That’s not what I meant. I wanted company. One last time, before I married...” Gwen noted his increasing blinks, the elevated heart rate, blood rushing to his ears and lips. Lying again. “I was stupid.”

That she believed. She pushed him from the cab line. “We’re done.”

When the Sunday paper arrived with the engagement





announcement, Gwen put her cell phone on mute and turned off the answering machine for her landline.

Wednesday evening Bill stopped by the apartment. She listened at the door as he explained he would probably be fired, but his mentor at the firm suggested that Gwen's appearance at the annual Summer Solstice party would do a lot to sway the partners to retain him. Either way he was off the partner track. Gwen reluctantly agreed to attend the party with him. She didn't want to destroy him; she only wanted him to suffer.

At the party Gwen wasn't sure who irritated her more, the women who urged her to return his ring until he took a sensitivity class, or the ones who counseled her to forgive him. Neither action held him accountable.

Bill and Gwen stayed too long and began arguing the moment they got back into his car. He told her the senior partner recommended a sex therapist who could "help them resolve their intimacy issues". She made him stop the Porsche.

That was how Gwendolyn Morgan, twenty-seven, recently unengaged, found herself after midnight on foot at the north entrance of Hutchinson Park. *What did I see in that ferret?* Gwen started walking home.

Even where lights had burnt out, or been broken by vandals, she knew the way. She was comfortable in the cool damp air. Gwen tightened the strap around the waist of Bill's trench coat. She'd

grabbed it along with her phone.

She climbed the stairs to the park's first terrace, and then took the path left toward the statue of Commodore Hutchinson. Traffic noise became sporadic and muted. Gwen listened to the echoes of her heels on the concrete. She preferred the silence. She removed her shoes and felt the cold grainy cement through the feet of her textured nylons. *I should have called an Uber. I knew we'd fight.*

For the party Gwen bought a tiered red satin halter dress at Macy's. *Too short, too low cut, too tight.* It got Bill's attention. "Sexy lady," he'd called her. As the evening wore on, the compliment ate at her like a worm. She looked at the spiked red heels in her hands. Bill always teased her about her sensible shoes. *What was I thinking?*

She'd taken a selfie in the mirror of the dressing room. *For Jack.* But she didn't send it. Why would she? She didn't know Jack. They'd spent an evening. He'd texted a couple times. *Nothing special.* She'd said nothing about Bill.

Gwen caught sight of the Commodore's statue. Young couples huddled beneath it. *Five minutes from home.* Local legend said kissing a virgin under the statue's shadow brought people good luck. *It didn't work for Bill,* she thought as she circled past the lovers. She'd been the last virgin among her girlfriends. "We have decided to wait until we are married," she'd told them, but then she and Bill didn't.

She took out her phone and looked at the selfie again. *Sexy Lady*, she thought. She tapped in Jack's number, texted "Going to a piss up!" and pressed Send. "Piss up" was slang.

As Gwen climbed the second terrace, she heard a noisy group of teenagers approaching. Her first instinct was to run. *Ridiculous!* she thought, feeling the tight red satin rub across her thighs. *Fight, not flight.*

The boys caught up with her at the top of the stairs, then surged past. One brushed his hand across her bare arm. The last boy stopped and turned. He couldn't have been more than fifteen. "Hella hot, baby! You working?" He laughed at the expression on her face, and then ran to catch up with his friends.



"Not for sale!" she screamed to the retreating males.

Gwen began walking again, shivering with the cold from the sidewalk. The uneven cement shredded the soles of her nylons, and they unraveled. The grainy dirt abused her feet. The deeper she walked into the park, the more the silence surrounded her. She carried her heels, listening for rapists hiding behind every tree. *Rapists?* Where had that thought come from?

Gwen increased her pace, eager to reach the final flight of stairs. She saw the end of the path, streetlights, and beyond that her apartment building. She stopped, listening for footsteps. *Slow and steady, a hundred steps to home.*

Then she stepped on something. *Glass.* She looked down to examine the bleeding wound on her right heel. When she looked up, a man stood at the park entrance, his face in the shadows from the streetlights beyond. She hesitated. *I'll walk right past him,* she resolved, *across the street into my building. I'll say "Good evening" to be polite.*

When Gwen tried walking, she limped like a wounded animal. *I can't stay here. He wants me in the woods, away from the street.* She limped closer to the entrance. *I could open the trench coat, and ask him if he wants to get lucky? Maybe that's what happened with Bill.* She kept walking, the sand and dirt grinding against her wound. It had been a long week.

The man stood ramrod straight, hands at his sides, staring down at her. *Fight or flight.* Gwen slipped out of Bill's bulky coat and let it drop to the ground. Clutching a stiletto in each hand — her weapons — she limped toward the stairs.

"You're leaving my trench coat in the dirt? Do you know how much I paid for it?" Bill walked down the stairs toward her. "It's a Burberry, for god's sake!"

For a moment she felt relief. Then she felt anger. "Your coat? I'm alone in the park, obviously injured, and you're worried about your damned coat?"

"I'm not the one who decided to walk home." He caught himself and shifted his tone. "I found your purse on the car seat. I figured



you'd need your keys." He lifted them up so she could see. "Plus I didn't want you walking the street looking like that."

"Afraid some stupid patent attorney might mistake me for a whore?" She limped back to where she'd left the coat and grabbed it.

"Listen, Gwendolyn, if I could give you back your virginity, I would. Gladly. Gift wrapped for your birthday. But I can't undo the things I've done." They were face to face now. "You have to accept me for the person I am."

"Hell no," she said. She grabbed her purse, shoved the coat at him, and walked away.

He raised his voice. "I thought we could sit down over coffee at your place, make things right."

She didn't turn around. "How exactly would that work?" She climbed the stairs to the street where he'd parked his Porsche in a handicapped space and limped across the street. Gwen unlocked the door to her building and stepped inside. She'd expected Bill to follow her. *How much don't I know about men?* she wondered. There was no easy answer.

When she reached the elevator, her phone dinged. She had a text. "*You little ripper!*" Jack wrote.

She wasn't sure what that meant. She figured he liked the dress.

It was almost midnight now, two in the afternoon in Sidney. “Call me after work,” she texted. “We should talk.” *Send.*

She ran a hot bath, dropped a lavender bath bomb, and prepared to wash away the evening.

She grabbed her phone and sent Jack one last text. “Not wearing knickers.”

Gwen didn’t see his reply until she’d emerged from the tub an hour later. She had no idea what she’d tell Jack when he called. No clue about life without Bill. Then she thought, *No worries.*

Gwen read Jack’s text just before he called. “Crikey” was all it said.

Crikey indeed.



do you remember?

THOMAS MORGAN

Do you remember the day we first met? What were we, twelve or thirteen? That was such a long time ago, wasn't it? I remember how you were introduced to the class by our teacher. What was his name again? I know it's in here somewhere. I'm sorry. This is what happens when you get older. It'll come to me in a minute.

Mr Tharby! That was it. He read us *Of Mice and Men*, and he did those awful American accents for each of the characters. It was so funny, wasn't it? Do you remember? There was a spare seat next to me, so he told you to sit there. That was when it all started for me. Was that when it all started for you, too?

I remember word getting out that you liked me. Your friend Judy came over and told me. Was it Judy or Lucy? It was something with an 'e' sound. In any case, I didn't think she was telling the truth — I didn't believe that someone like you could like someone like me in that way. It was just impossible to me. But you did like me, didn't you? I remember the way you said my name. "Hi, Tim," you said. You said it in that way — you know, the way you used to say things. I didn't know what to do. No one had ever liked me in that way before.

I remember my friend George telling me that I had to go over and kiss you. I was so nervous that he practically had to drag me across the playground. Do you remember? We stood there and looked at each other like two frightened animals. But before anything happened between us, the bell went. I thought it was over. Then Judy told me to come to the park after school. She said you'd be there — and you were. God, I was so nervous — more

nervous than I had been at school. I wanted to kiss you then, but I didn't know how — I didn't know what the hell I was doing. So I just stood there and did nothing again. But I guess you already know that.



We spent a few years apart after that, didn't we? You went to Davison's while I was over the road at St Andrew's. I don't know why we didn't keep in touch. I hope it's not because you thought I didn't like you. I was such an idiot back then.

It wasn't until we finished school that we saw each other again. Do you remember? We had that joint prom. I saw you there. You had your hair tied up, and you were wearing a baby blue dress with those pearl earrings. I'll never forget how I felt when I saw you. But I was still too shy to make any sort of move, so you made it for me.

Remember? You came straight over to me and asked me if I wanted to dance. I couldn't believe that after all those years we'd spent apart, you still liked me. I said I'd love to dance with you, but it was only after I accepted your invitation that I realized I didn't know how to dance. I never told you this, but I thought about pretending to be ill to get out of it. But when the music started playing, and I held you in my arms, something happened to me. And I knew I didn't want to let you go.

Do you remember how we were all invited to that big party at the beach after the prom? We didn't go, though. Remember? We stayed up all night, just walking and talking. Then, the next



morning, after I walked you home, I finally found the courage to kiss you. And let me tell you, it was worth the wait.

Do you remember the day we got married? Of course you do. We had some good times together, didn't we? I've always felt ashamed and embarrassed that I didn't have enough money to take you somewhere nice on our honeymoon. You deserved better than that. But you didn't care about money. You only cared about the important things — you only cared about us.

I remember how we stayed up for most of the night, talking — just like we'd done on prom night. We always used to do that, didn't we? It was our thing. Do you remember what it was that we talked about? You said you wanted to start a family; you said you wanted a boy and a girl. I said that was fine by me. But we didn't get that far, did we?

Do you remember the day it all happened? I don't suppose you do. I was on my way home from work when I got the call. I raced to the hospital as quickly as I could. The doctor told me it was your heart. I asked him if I could give you mine. He said that'd be impossible. You should've seen how I protested. I just wanted to help. They eventually let me go in and see you, and I sat beside you, holding your hand until the end.

I want you to know that I never forgot about you — and I never will. In fact, I often see you at night when I close my eyes, and you're beautiful, and you're perfect, and you're happy. And that's exactly how I remember you.

hunger

MOLLY GLINSKI

The hunger started when you were about fifteen. You went to Jack's house with a couple of mates and one of them passed you a joint. You'd never even smoked a cigarette before because you were such a little mummy's boy. Didn't know how to inhale properly, so you choked. Cough. Cough. Pass.

Next thing you know, mummy's boy is in the basement with a bunch of blokes he doesn't know. Watching them score up. "Look at that. Bashed out the perfect line."

They all agree. You don't know the difference, so you just sit still and hold tight.

You're not coughing anymore, you're sniffing.



You never sit still again. You can't even shut the fuck up. You want to superglue your own jaw shut but it won't stay put. You keep saying things that don't make sense, and you sound like that hum you hear when you can't tune the radio properly. The white noise that goes *bzzz* forever and ever. That's you. Tonight, tomorrow morning, and the evening too.

You're useless with girls, too. Every single girl that smiles at you, you want to bang their brains out. And the sex is amazing. Sex on drugs is always amazing. Two clammy bodies on a blanket that would stick to a wall if thrown at it. Every single time, you fall in love with the body and not the person. You want her to meet your mum. You want to grow old with her and have babies with her. In the morning, she's disgusted by you. A weird and mangled mess

who won't leave her alone. Later, she'll tell her friends, "Oh my God I can't believe I fucked him." And they'll probably all laugh at you.



The hunger continues.

There was a kid that used to get the school bus with you. He did skag for the first time and died. It only took the once to shut him down completely. You always wondered what he'd been feeling in his last moments. Apparently the first time you ever do skag, it's the most intense high in the world. You just lie down and take it. You were ashamed that you felt almost jealous of him. The funeral was on a Monday, but you didn't go.

A dull grey afternoon in Preston. Knocking off school to go for a walk and smoke a blunt and maybe do some K. Your mum didn't raise a useless druggie, she raised a shy and sweet little boy. The same little boy who always wanted to pass out the nibbles at family gatherings, and make sure everyone had enough tea to drink. A little boy who grew to be a Maths prodigy at his secondary school. When you were sixteen, they said Cambridge. When you were seventeen, they didn't say anything at all anymore. They didn't say anything about you after you bought that lock for your door.

You're hungry all the time. There's this ache in your stomach. There are a million shivering teeth gnawing at your insides all the time. Like you're starving. But you know the ache is not to do with food. It is to do with a quick fix. It is to do with weed, pills, acid,



ket, mandy. You want more. You want more because of the comedowns. Every time you come down, you fucking die. Your brain is made of jelly, being mashed up with a fork. All you can hear is your little brother screaming.

You don't want to come down, that's the point. You're searching for the one big high you can never come down from. All your important parts, all of your brain and lung and heart parts, simply different. Happy, not sad. Your brain would just be in another place. It would no longer inhabit your family's post-marital home. Your heart would no longer cry for it, either.

I asked you to tell me if that was the reason why you were doing drugs. Your dad beating up your Mum.

I don't think I ever got an answer.

You don't want to come down because you have to remember it all. You don't want to come down because when you do, you have to do fucking Maths. You don't want to come down because everyone is trusting you to say and do the right things at the age of seventeen. It won't stop at seventeen, either. It will go on and on and on. Until you're ninety-six.

Once, you came home high. Just once. You walked through the hallway, with the pictures of the horses and the family. And you stood at the bottom of the stairs. Dad had Mum by her hair. And she was screaming at him to get off. He was screaming back, but at you. Saying that he was going to chuck your Mum down the

stairs and if you didn't get out the way, she'd fall on you and he'd hurt you too. You were scared that night. You thought Mum was going to die. You still remember how the carpet felt as you ran up the stairs toward them. It felt like it was slipping beneath your feet. You punched your dad in the face, and he let go of her hair. He hit you back and so you hit him again. You fucked him up, didn't you? And then he left forever. You don't have a Dad anymore. You don't know if you want to have one either. You think about the boy that overdosed and died. You sometimes wish you were the boy who overdosed and died. Not just because of the high. Maybe that's what the hunger is. Maybe the hunger is to die whilst you're up. And once you're up, you're dead. You're not coming down ever, ever, ever.

Die when you're up, you won't think about Dad.
Die when you're down, you'll be thinking of him.



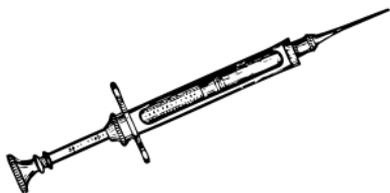
You wish you never did drugs. You wish you'd stayed clean of it all, because not everyone has the right mindset just to do a load of coke and pills in one go. The boy that overdosed didn't. And now, you don't either. Maybe you can go back to college tomorrow then. Maybe you can go home and give your mum a hug and tell her you're sorry. You know the pain behind her eyes isn't about your Father anymore. You're not going to go and call your dealer. You're going to go home and see your Mum and tell her you love her. You're still human beneath the high. Everyone is. People forget. You don't want to do drugs ever again. That's it. You're going to stop, now.

In three years' time you're at a party with two of your best mates. It's about two a.m. You're thinking about going home, right up until someone mentions getting some pills in. Your brain goes into overdrive. You think of all the amazing sex you had whilst high, all the intense and amazing conversations you had. How you danced for hours. How you forgot your Dad. You feel suffocated with the knowledge that you can never return to that period of your life ever again.

You nod to everyone, grab your jacket. Go back home.

As you walk away from the house, you feel your intestines clench. In and out. Like you're taking a massive shit and your insides are reacting with spasms. The teeth yawn and breathe out. Bite down into your soft and quivering flesh.

The hunger is still there. It's always there.



those without souls

B CRAIG GRAFTON

A man grew old and as he did, he started to reflect back upon his life. He did not wax nostalgic for he forgot about all the good times and good things he had done and for some reason or other fixated only upon all his screw-ups and failures. Those foolish things he had done then and regretted so dearly now. It pained him that he could never ever undo them. And the more he thought about those things, the more obsessed he became. It came to the point where he would shake his head from side to side as if to somehow shake his thoughts loose so that they would go flying off into space somewhere and be lost forever. But alas, this did not happen for the man did not have it in his power to do that.

Now that he had but a few years left to live, the man feared that when he died and went to Heaven, these things would still be with him there and therefore Heaven would not be a pleasant place for him after all, but rather a kind of Hell as he would be thinking about his screw-ups forever. *Certainly God would not let me suffer like that in Heaven*, thought the man, *for God is just and merciful.*

Now the inevitable happened. The man died and he appeared before God.

God sat high upon His throne and smiled His fatherly smile upon this man. God knew that the man had been a good man, a moral man, a believer in Him, and therefore deserved a place in Heaven.

“Welcome to Heaven,” God said to the man.





The man took a breath and blew it out slowly, his shoulders slumping as he did so, a distraught look on his face. “Thank you God,” he muttered, not knowing what else to say.

“What is wrong, my son?” God asked. But God knew what was wrong.

“God, could you please erase my memories of all the bad, stupid things I did while on earth?” the man pleaded.

“Why, my son?” But God knew the answer to that too. He asked just to be polite, to show His concern.

“Because it hurts me so much to think about them and now that I’m in Heaven I will think about them forever and ever, world without end.”

Now the Devil was there, lurking in the background, and had seen and heard all this. He sensed he may have an opportunity to snatch a soul here.

The man had not noticed the Devil as the Devil was dressed in a natty dull grey business suit, his tail tucked in his pants, his horns covered by his fedora. The man assumed he was just another soul waiting his turn to meet his Maker and thus paid him no attention at all.

“Oh, I know how to do that for you,” the Devil spoke up, “for I was a psychiatrist in my previous life and I helped people like you



wipe those things from their minds forever. Come with me and I will do that for you.” He put his arm around the man’s shoulder and started to lead him away and astray.

“Hold on there, Devil!” God roared, rising from his throne, lightning and thunder flashing and clapping all around Him as he did so.

The man jumped and pulled himself away from the Devil upon hearing this.

“Now God,” said the Devil, “you know you will not do that for this man. For if you erase his bad memories, you would also be erasing his good memories too because, as you know, one cannot have good memories unless he has bad memories to compare them to.”

God knew the Devil was right. That He would not destroy the man’s good memories for some day he would want them. He did not wish to destroy something that was good.

“Look,” said the Devil to the man, “come work for me. I will erase all those memories for you.”

“But then I will burn in Hell and suffer physical pain there forever after,” the man whined, quaking in his proverbial boots. “And I do not know what is worse, physical or mental pain.”

“Well, I promise you that you won’t feel either with me. Neither



mental or physical pain shall be yours,” answered the Devil, forcing himself to hold back his patented devilish grin.

Now that offer was tempting to the man for that is what the Devil does. He makes tempting offers. But the man did not trust the Devil for no one in his right mind would.

With pleading eyes and a mournful face he turned to God and asked Him, “What can you do for me?” And upon saying this, the man immediately regretted it for he realized that he was playing one against the other and thus insulting God by doing so.

Now God knew that the man had not intended to say this. That this was just something that had slipped from the man’s lips, a hasty emotional utterance under stress. But before He could answer, the Devil spoke up again.

“Oh, you can have him, God. This man is of no use to me anyway.” The Devil now figured that the man would suffer eternally in Heaven and that was good enough for him, a moral victory, even if he wasn’t in Hell with him. *Let him go*, thought the Devil. There’ll be other souls to fry.

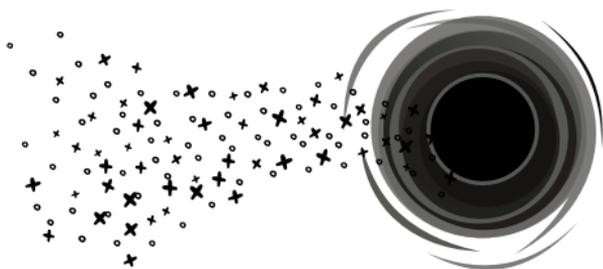
Now God wanted to help the man, for who does not want to help their children, but in doing so, He would have to destroy the man’s soul and this pained Him terribly. Nevertheless, He decided to do just that because he loved his children so, and saw no other way to relieve the man from his pain and suffering.

This is what I will do for you, if that's what you want," God said. "I will make it" — and notice God did not use the word 'destroy' here — "so that you do not have a soul at all and therefore without a soul you can't go to either Heaven or Hell. I will turn you simply into dust for dust does not have a soul, a memory, any existence of any kind at all, and as dust from which you came, so shall you return."

Upon hearing this the Devil grimaced and cursed. God had foiled him again.

The man noticed this and thought to himself, This must be a good deal because the Devil doesn't like it. So he answered, "Please do that for me, God."

And with that said, God immediately, with just a shake of His head, turned the man into dust and scattered him into His ever expanding universe. And through the years, the particles of dust of this former man without a soul were eventually sucked into a black hole. For that is where God places those without souls, in a black hole.



the bridge

B CRAIG GRAFTON

In the beginning there was just Good and Evil. They each lived in their own separate worlds on their own separate sides of a deep abyss. On Evil's side, Evil had taken the hopes and dreams, wisdom and knowledge of the people and had thrown them into the abyss. Those people were a sad lot. Whereas on the side of Good, Good had let the people keep their hopes and dreams, wisdom and knowledge, and they were a happy family.

One day, Good thought it would be nice if they could all come together as one people. So Good began to build a bridge to bring people together. He did so by gathering ladders, especially Jacob's ladders, and attaching them one to the other, making them into one long extension ladder. Then he laid his gerryrigged ladder bridge on the ground and shoved it out over the chasm. He kept on shoving it and adding extensions to it until finally it reached the other side. The bridge, since it was really a ladder, was only eighteen inches wide and therefore only wide enough for one person at a time to use it. And of course it was dangerous too because of the spaces between the rungs. One had to watch one's step so as to not fall off.

"Now that I have built the bridge," said Good, "I will go over to the side of Evil and free those people from their bondage."

Evil saw Good coming his way. "Here comes that fool Good who thinks so highly of himself that he assumes he can change the ways of the world," said Evil. "He believes he is on a holy crusade, but what he's really on is an ego trip wherein he fashions himself a champion of the people."

Nevertheless, Evil knew Good was a formidable foe and knew he had to slay him while he had the chance.

So Evil started to cross the bridge to kill Good. But he didn't have a plan yet.

There in the middle the two of them met, each blocking the other's way.



“What shall we do now?” asked Evil, confronting Good. Evil knew that Good did not like confrontations and went out of his way to avoid them and he was banking on this as part of his plan that was beginning to germinate in his brain.

“Why, we try diplomacy. That’s what we do,” answered Good, proud of himself for having come up with that answer, thinking himself intellectually superior to Evil for having done so.

“Yes, we must try diplomacy for that is the sensible, rational, thing to do now, isn’t it?” agreed Evil. “Everything can be resolved by diplomacy between reasonable men like us now, can’t it?”

“Indeed it can,” replied Good, “So in the name of diplomacy, I will lay down and you can step on me and cross over to the other side. That’s fair, isn’t it?”

“More than fair,” smiled Evil, as his plan came together. He loved it when a plan came together. He would use diplomacy to do Good in.



So Good laid down and Evil walked over him and went to the other side. Then Good got up and went over to Evil's side, each party thinking they had got the better of the deal because of diplomacy.

Even though Good knew that Evil would try to work his evil ways on his people, he had faith in his people to resist. And in the meantime he would free the people of Evil. And once they were free, they would never go back to evil again for good always triumphs over evil. Or so he thought.

Thus Good and Evil went about their business, completed their missions and started on their way back home. When they got to the middle of the bridge, they confronted each other again.

“My turn to lie down now and let you pass over me,” Evil said. “For that is how diplomacy works, each giving and taking a little.”

“Yes that is how diplomacy works alright,” agreed Good.

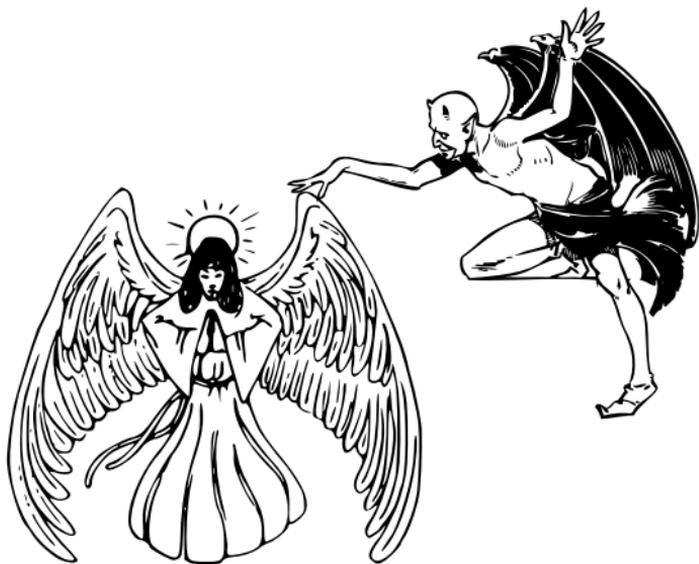
So Evil laid down in the middle of the bridge, stretched himself out, and let Good pass over him. But when Good had done so, Evil rose up and stabbed Good in the back, causing Good to stumble, lose his balance, and fall into the abyss below. Then Evil rolled merrily on his way and became the ruler of both worlds, now morphing them into one thanks to the bridge.

There in the depths of the abyss among broken hopes and dreams and trashed wisdom and knowledge thrown there by Evil, lay

Good. Good might have been down but he was not out. So he gathered up all those things, put them in his pockets, pulled himself up by his bootstraps, and rose from the abyss. He was a wiser man for the wear, made stronger by that which had not killed him, and he came to the world now as a different Being. Reinvented himself by changing his name from Good to God.

But in the meantime, Evil too had reinvented himself in order to fool the people, by adding a letter to, not taking one from, his name, and he became the Devil.

And Good as God and Evil as the Devil have been doing battle ever since.



the twin

MINA MOLTS

“Why don't you take him to the lobby for a while? Try fixing a puzzle maybe, the both of you?”

“I'll be okay. Just make sure he's alright,” I say, watching Adam's worried gaze on me. He smiles, a reassuring hand on my shoulder, and I nod at him in the silent understanding that passed between us. Danny was clinging onto him, barely reaching above his hip, with that distant glassy look that had made home in his eyes now. He'd always been shorter than kids of his age, quieter too, but neither of us had ever looked at our child and seen anything so lost, so terribly broken and suffering. I remembered the beginning of all of this everytime I looked at him. How terrified he was, how he used to scream and claw at everything, how he couldn't bear to look at his reflection for weeks, how he wouldn't let us leave his side even for a moment. It had scared us beyond anything then, but now that I think of it, nothing was worse than this forlorn, defeated boy I saw clinging to his father. It was as if he'd given up. Like there was a limit to the things fear could do and he was well past it.

I walked them out the doctor's room and watched them strut down the hallway. Danny's feet dragged along the floor, tired, silent and slow, but I didn't miss the beat of stiffness that took over when they passed the mirror on the wall opposite the lobby. He didn't look away. In fact his gaze lingered on the glass even as they walked past it and Adam guided him into the lobby. Even from this far, I hadn't missed the quiet tears dripping down his chin.

I went back and took my place on the chair across the glass-topped table and he slid a bottle of water to me. I watched his kind smile and nodded in a polite refusal.

“You’re going to need it,” he smiled ever so lightly again, pushing the bottle further so it sat right in front of me. The kindness in his eyes did not waver even for a moment but I knew what was coming next. The words still sent a chill down me when he said it out though.

“I need you to tell me all about your sister.”



My twin Rachel and I had never shared much affection. In fact, for as long as I can remember, she's been scared of me. Terrified. The only time our parents ever managed to put us both in the same room was at night, when they put us upstairs to sleep. We had a bunkbed, where she always took the bottom bed. I never complained. I don't remember much of the nights, but for as long as I live, I'll never forget how she woke up in the mornings. Curled into herself under the bed, eyes all sunken and blackened from not sleeping, paralyzed and terrified.

Terrified of me.

She wouldn't be able to talk for hours later, but when she finally caught her bearings, she repeated the same story over and over again. That I'd pulled her under the bed in the middle of the night. And then endless tears.



She never said what had happened under there, what I had done to her, but there was no mistaking her terror. She wouldn't look at me, wouldn't even have me in the same room.

At first, everyone scolded and interrogated me. It was hard to dismiss when a child of twelve showed that kind of terror towards her own sister.

Our parents did the next best thing when scolding me didn't work. We were kept as far apart as possible while living in the same house. Father slept with me while Rachel stayed with mother in their room but in the morning, there she'd be, under the bunkbed, repeating the same story all over again.

I resented her just as much as I didn't understand her. Over time, she gave in. Grew quieter. It was as if she'd shrunk into herself. It was only natural that we grew apart, farther every passing day and I still can't say which one of us found more peace in not having the other around. She moved out the first chance she had. Boarding school was just an excuse for what we all knew was inevitable and no one stopped her. If anything, we were all relieved.

The more Rachel disappeared, the better I flourished. Over the years, it was as if there never was another child. Even her absence was a kind of taboo for us. We never even talked of her unless it was absolutely necessary.

She was better when she came back for the vacations, but she still



avoided me like the plague. Her newfound chirpiness dulled out over the days, but we'd all been so accustomed to her merging into the shadows that if anything shocked us, it was her presence.

We didn't talk until years after our marriage, after the both of us had had kids and settled well into our new lives. Adam and Kevin had picked up a friendship where we'd failed, and soon the kids were sharing and comparing everything that went on at the two homes, including the mothers, until somehow, along the way, it inevitably connected Rachel and me too.

We never spoke of those incidents from our childhood. Everytime the children, especially the twins, came up with a question about our old days, the home we grew up in, she was quick to change topics.

Sure enough, it was shock when they said we were all meeting up at our childhood home for the summer break that year. Rachel and I had tried our best to propose better plans, but the kids wouldn't agree. Years of friendship over phone screens had left them excited and not ready to take a no for it, come what may.

The warmth of our newfound relationship hadn't extended well enough when we met in person after years that summer evening. We'd exchanged awkward smiles and half pleasantries before conveniently ushering the kids inside and showing them around. Rachel steered them clear of our room.

Later that night, after the kids had gone out for a walk with their



fathers, I found her out in the garden and awkwardly dragged a chair, settling next to her. Conversation didn't flow naturally but we picked up after about half an hour and talked all about the kids, our jobs, husbands, hobbies. It was all going well, far too well than anything we'd ever been used to having, when out of the blue, she asked about the scar on my forehead. She would take no part of my confusion, and no matter how much I insisted of not knowing what scar she was talking about, she wouldn't have any of it.

We'd been out in the garden for hours when she got up and went back inside, me trailing her after a moment of confusion, only to see her frantically pulling out things from the drawing room cupboard and slamming an album on the table as I walked in. I watched as she tore through the pages, impatient, beginning to seem more like the sibling I grew up with, with every passing moment and finally, after looking through the whole thing thrice, pulled out a picture of us, around nine or ten and showed me a bandaid on the temple of one of the girls. Her talking was getting urgent and she wouldn't let me say anything. On and on she rambled of all the unspeakable things I'd done to her, how I'd ruined her life, how after all these years and her forgiveness I was still trying to trick her, how she'd seen my scar nice and clear every night I pulled her under the bed.

It wasn't until Kevin and Adam rushed in, hearing the noise and Kevin had pulled her away, caressing her hair and mumbling silent reassurances that she'd quietened down and it had hit me. I hadn't even processed the thought for a second before the

question came out of me.

“Where are the kids?”



Adam said they were fine, they'd tucked them in, but I wasn't hearing him. Rachel's eyes had locked with mine and in that moment, the same sense of sheer terror hit us both. I watched it in her eyes just as she did in mine and she was screaming where the kids were when she pushed past Kevin and tore up the stairs, me on her trail.

The twins were fascinated with the bunk bed, Adam had explained later. They'd pulled up a couch and a spare bed from the other room and put them in our old room.

“So, you found Danny under the bunk bed that night?” the doctor asked now, putting together the pieces of the puzzle in his own head.

“Just like Rachel,” I said, already knowing how futile this whole exercise was, vaguely remembering how Rachel had pulled back the bangs from her forehead that night and stared back at me in more fear than anything from any of those mornings.

“And how's Danny's twin dealing with all of this?” he asks again and I close my hands around the bottle in front of me.

“That's the thing Doctor, Danny's our only child.”



treat

FABIANA ELISA MARTÍNEZ

Hannah pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose and looked into the garden with the same intensity with which she had answered James' question once he had popped it so unexpectedly. "Will it be a yes? We deserve a celebration after all this love, don't you think?" She processed the inquiry and deemed it logical, poetic, and reasonably formulated. Since she had replied a choked 'yes' three weeks ago, the torrent of emotions and preparations had channeled methodically. Every announcement, call, and order had been placed in smooth Pied-Piper tones.

Today, from the foam of her satin sheets, Hannah looked out into the garden and realized that the unsprung flowers would behold a very different woman from the one who had woken up this morning in a bed too big for her. The future carer of those lilies would be the absolute queen of the house whose walls were papered with music sheets, where love was made graciously at odd hours, where the laughter of friends echoed after parties.

Hannah rose from the bed, put on a cardigan that officially belonged to James but had been repossessed thanks to the new order of facts and, despite the cold marble beneath her feet, walked barefoot to the dining room. The windows framed her slender figure against a panorama of the garden. The morning sun bathed her hair in a glow. Hannah observed with baffled admiration the assortment of sweets and delicacies that Lydia, Ruth, and Phyllis, her three older cousins, and the maid, Danila, had prepared the previous day for today's reception. Every single candy, every coin of chocolate, seemed to have been arranged by the hands of fairies that guarded the cribs of little princesses in



the old tales. Perhaps her shift in status was why she had been blessed with the fairy handmaids. Danila, the fairy who saves princesses from unjust death, had arranged the house, laid the table and baked a cake in the shape of James' second love, his 1905 Steinway, following the precise instructions he had given her regarding the number of keys and pedals. Hannah did not care about cakes but these events just seemed incomplete without one.

She walked toward the piano, still savoring in her nostrils the tempting fragrance of chocolate and praline. She couldn't hold a candle to the talent of the man she loved; she only knew how to play the first notes of their song. James had urgently taught her the magic formula: *C, D, A, F*. She couldn't distinguish the notes, but could recall his fingers caressing the keyboard as gently as they touched the curve of her shoulders under the stars. "If something happens, you can show any lousy pianist how our song starts. Just have him play the opening notes and I will take over his hands from there," he told her.

C, D, A, F, Hannah played with a fervor that could summon the ghosts of dead pianists. She shuffled the sheet music that was meant for James' students who would be playing that afternoon. His inspirations were an eclectic deck of contemporary geniuses whom he taught, studied and played with furious passion: Stucky, Salonen, Auerbach. There was also, for those who were illiterate in contemporary classical, a sprinkling of jazz, from Porter to Coltrane.

Hannah had to hurry up. Her cousins became angry Medusas



when she had ordered them not to come this morning to help her get dressed. “Women need help on a day like today, darling. What you want to do is unheard of. Putting on your own makeup? Buttoning your dress right? Fixing your stockings?” But Hannah had triumphed and the loud chorus diminuendoed into a haze of frustrated murmurs.

Back in her room, Hannah slipped into the outfit Danila had draped over the chair. Her dress was made of the softest silk with intricate lace decorations at the hem. The skirt and the sleeves followed the Chanelian recommendation: to extend slightly past the knees and elbows. No decent woman over certain age should show these betraying joints. Coco Chanel had a draconian way of defining this “certain age”, so Hannah followed her rules out of respect and for the sake of elegance. Her shoes were too bright and inconveniently high for the occasion, but she knew too well how much James loved the contour of her calves when she walked in them before a crowd (and this was not a day to deny naughty memories of the past). Her last item was the tiny pillbox hat that had belonged to her mother. “Wear it once, Hannah,” she had said. “Use it for a special occasion, and don’t let the net cover too much of your eyes. Let people see your eyes on that day. Let your eyes do the talking for you.”

The doorbell rang. Whoever was ringing, the chauffeur for sure, was being respectful of the solemn hour. Hannah had just finished cleaning the excess of her mascara. Lydia told her to brush only the tip of her eyelashes so it wouldn’t run when she cried.

Hannah stole a chocolate from the impeccable table and headed to the door. She put it in her mouth to melt while the chauffeur opened the door for her. He let her take her time to enter, as if she were a fragile onyx statue about to be shipped far away. He profoundly respected silence during such intense moments in the life of a woman. Hannah was aware of how strange it would seem that she would go to the church without any company but, as she and James had discussed, nobody should judge decisions between lovers but the lovers.

Hannah took one more look at the house that would be full of guests once she returned. She would be the mistress of all its possessions. The inside of the limo felt like the belly of a whale. Too dark, too scary. Black seemed to be the color of this sunny day: her hair, the chocolate, the piano, the lace, the silk, the shoes, even the net brushing her black eyelashes. The bonbon disintegrated on Hannah's tongue as her bitter revelation took shape. She wasn't crying for all the love she never got to offer James. She was crying because nobody would ever love her like he did. She would miss his special love, his voice, his laughter, and the way he brought notes to life when he played. Hannah's mother had been right: "The love of a special one is a treat melting on your tongue."



the ghost of love

SOPHIE RAOUFI

She sits on the bed she's slept on for more nights than she'd like to remember. Sometimes alone, sometimes not. She's always desperate to be elsewhere. There's an ache in her she has no name for, a space inside that nothing can fill. A wanderlust for a world that doesn't exist.

Pulling the towel back through her damp hair, she begins to untangle the strands with her fingers. There's a flash of memory to her childhood, of someone else dragging a brush through her hair, either with hurry or care, she couldn't say. *Maybe that's the ache*, she thinks, *it's just the ghost of love.*

Later, hair dried and burnt into submission, she puts her make-up on in the mirror, the acrid smell of heat still lingering in the air. The glass is dirty, but she won't clean it, she never wants to be fully seen, not even to herself. She layers on the concealer thick, and feels sorry for the men who can't — or won't — do this, who won't hide themselves in plain sight.

If she could strip away everything, she thinks, she'd be a different person. She could pass her brother in the street, and he'd never know who she was. It makes her feel powerful, to transform into someone else and to become whoever she wants to be, even when most of the time, she wants to be no one at all.

She can't remember a time when she didn't perform this ritual. The pain of beauty, the pulling of hair taut, and the sharp tang of chemicals swimming on skin. She does it all, and still, no one has ever told her they love her. Maybe it's not love she wants. It's



belonging she craves.

Then there's the tight bond of clothes that she'd never choose to wear, if it was just her, alone in the world. Clothes she puts so much thought into, only to be removed hours later. Sometimes she never sees items of clothing again. They are forever lost to her, these small pieces of dignity that always cost more than they're worth.

But it's her shoes that always catch her. It's the inelegance of crouching down to reach them, the skin folding upon flesh, her body collapsing into itself. She'd like, just once, for someone to do it for her, to tell her which ones to wear and place them on her feet. There's another sharp memory of getting ready for school, of someone tying her laces, teaching her how to do it for herself. There's a smallness in her chest when she realises that was the last time she felt loved.

Just before she leaves, she strolls into the kitchen. It's her prerogative to be late, and she won't be rushed. She always pours the same: three parts vodka, one part soda, no ice. It dances on the tongue, all fire and hot sparks down her throat. This is being alive, she thinks, when all of the senses are right under the surface, their little claws pressing against her body. There's a hunger in her now, a need to be sated and full.

She chooses, before she leaves the house, what will happen. Whether her bed will be filled or empty. If the ache will pull her further open, or if she can keep herself balanced for a day longer.

She might ask this one to brush her hair. That ghost from long ago can creep across in the night and hold her, just for a moment, and she'll think, maybe she can rent love until dawn. Maybe it will be enough.



the day i met martine

REEM RASHASH-SHAABAN

I had been living with my husband in our new apartment in Beirut for a couple of hours when I was introduced to my next-door neighbor. Not formally of course. I learned about her without meeting her. Through the thin walls of the apartment building, she screamed in a language that she had obviously created — a mixture of Armenian and broken Arabic. That was all the introduction I needed. In a space of about five minutes I got to know all about her life. She came from a rich Catholic family, had married a Chinese man she had met in a bar, and had been disinherited by her parents. In the weeks to come, and every night, she cursed the day she had met him and had his children. She kept praying to Jesus, Mohammed and God to ease her pain. I was curious and often wondered what Martine looked like, but she was the least of my problems.

It was 1982 and life in Beirut was getting worse. The electricity would get cut over eighteen hours a day. Once the electricity went, so did the water, so you needed to time things, especially the washing. After sleeping on one side of your sheets for a week, you needed to turn them over and use them again for another week. All the dishwater had to be saved to empty the toilet. It took calculation and perseverance. But what depressed me most was spending the evening by the light of a candle. And good candles cost a lot. If you bought the cheap ones, they melted all over the place. After months of unromantic candlelight, we considered getting a generator. But then where do we get the gasoline to power it? Gas had become so expensive and sometimes the stations were out. We would need to store gallons of petrol and keep them on the balcony. Then we would need to worry

about a fire or explosion because a shell could set them off. I never thought I would have to worry about such things when I first got married. I had thought our life would be different: a world of adventure and happiness. Instead, my married life danced to the beat of falling shells. The day of our wedding, the explosions drowned out the happiness and most of the guests did not come. We turned off the music.



As I was coming back home today I was stopped by ten checkpoints. In the end I stopped putting my ID back into my bag; it was easier to leave it in my lap. The last checkpoint was one I was not familiar with — a roamer, the ones that sprout suddenly on an empty corner at night. There were four hooded soldiers. I could hear them shouting at the driver in the car before me. One soldier dragged the man out while the other surrounded him with their machine guns.

“I am not the man you want. I have never been involved in politics! Please let me go. My wife and children are waiting for me.”

“Well they’ll be waiting for a long time, won’t they? On your knees you communist dog!”

“But look at my mother’s name; it’s different. It’s a mistake I tell you.”

“We don’t make mistakes,” the man replied, throwing the paper to the ground. “Take him away.”

The man was handcuffed and hauled into a khaki-colored jeep, his shouts flying in the wind.

I looked around me. The streets were as empty as the naked buildings which had been stripped of their windows, shutters, and doors. Anything that could be sold was missing, taken away like the young man in the car ahead of me. That could happen to me too. What would stop these people? I felt my heart running laps in my chest. The soldier pointed at me and asked me to come forward. I stopped slowly, opening the car window to salute him.

“Papers please.”

“Of course. Here you are.”

He balanced his kalashnikov on his shoulder, glared at me then looked at my identity card. He then looked back and forth to check that it was really me in the picture.

“Rana?” he paused.

“Yes.”

“What are you doing here all alone at night?”

“I am on my way home.”

He grunted and handed me my papers. I noticed he was wearing a ring engraved with the year 1976 on it. *He has a university*



degree, I thought. *What's he doing on the streets?*

“GO!” he shouted, giving a sign to his soldiers to let me pass.

He didn't bother to warn me not to say anything about what I had seen. He knew I had neither the inclination nor the power to affect him.

I drove slowly in the semi-darkness. No electricity. After being stopped at a few more checkpoints, I pulled into the parking lot of our apartment building.

Please let Martine sleep early tonight, I prayed. *I cannot take another night of her ranting*. Last night she had kept me awake until 4 a.m. I smiled as I noticed the neon lights of the shop next door. There was electricity! The elevator would be working! I could fill a couple of bottles of drinking water and wash my hair. I ran into the building entrance only to bump into a bony object. My books fell and I bent to pick them up. I noticed hairy legs beneath torn nylon stockings and a pair of pink slippers. As I rose, I saw the rest of the person, dressed in a red print dress and a black leather jacket that didn't quite fit.

“Watch out! Are you blind?” screeched a crooked mouth. “Who you think you are? You think this building is yours?”

“I —”

“Enough! No time. Electricity here now. Later go. You not from

the building, yes?”

I was about to explain that I was recently married and had just moved in when the woman interrupted again.

“You girl who visit German teacher, yes? Tall man, blond hair, huh?”

“No, I’m —”

“You Abou Talal woman?” she interrupted again.

I had heard about Abou Talal. People said that he was a high-ranking officer that PLO leader Yasser Arafat visited on occasion. How could she think I was connected to him?

Before I could react, the elevator arrived with a swoosh and the bony witchlike woman opened it with difficulty, balancing her two grocery bags with one hand while she braced herself. I could have helped her, but I was too upset.

“Mother no teach respect?” she growled. “You not open door for auntie? You bad girl. You no good.” She started to raise her voice and I could tell she was swearing even though I didn’t understand what she was saying. I decided not to answer and followed her into the elevator, almost getting hit with the heavy iron door.

Bitch!

I pressed the seventh floor button and noticed that the woman didn't move to press a floor. Maybe she didn't want me to know what floor she lived on. I looked at her again. She was short and thin, a human version of the wooden Pinocchio. Her beady brown eyes, steel wool brown hair and fried onion smell mingled with her perfume and made me want to puke. I turned away and looked at the floors appearing and disappearing, replaced by concrete walls until the elevator reached the seventh floor. I pushed the door open and was surprised to see Pinocchio follow me, the sounds of her keys jingling. I paused, ready to defend myself if she tried to attack, when I heard her put her keys in the lock of the apartment next door. I couldn't believe it! Why hadn't I recognized the voice!

"Abou Talal woman live here?" she asked, laughing as she slammed the door in my face.



I had finally met her. Crazy, noisy Martine.

When my husband came home, I told him what happened. He just laughed. "Don't trouble your head over it."

"What do you mean don't trouble your head? That woman insulted me and you want me to forget it?"

"You get heated up over nothing. Who cares about a stupid neighbor. It's not as if we'll be inviting her for dinner or anything." He stretched on the white sofa and turned on the TV.



I decided not to start our first argument as newlyweds and went into the bedroom, slamming the door. I hoped that would bother him. Whether it did or not, it made me feel better. I liked nothing better than the sound of wood crashing against wood. It reminded me of how good it felt to hit a tennis ball. I hadn't played tennis in over a year and missed the taste of sweat on my lips as I raised my head to serve. So many things had changed since I got married.

After a quick shower and a drinking water rinse, I put on my nightgown and sat next to my husband on the sofa. He was watching the news.

He looked up. "The situation is bad. The Lebanese forces have attacked Sabra and Shatila."

"Three hundred soldiers from the Lebanese forces attack Sabra and Shatila, killing hundreds of innocents," announced the anchorwoman. Soon images of women and children sitting in piles, swimming in their own blood, appeared. A survivor described how his whole family was dragged out in front of their house and shot. He noticed that his mother was still moving, so he ran to her when he heard another shot and felt her brains splash onto his face and neck. Other scenes showed victims buried under the bulldozed remains of their houses while others were screaming, spitting curses, asking God to punish all leaders and save a space in hell for all those responsible for the killings.

I turned away, disgusted.

“There must be something we can do,” I said. “We can’t just sit here and watch.”

“The best thing we can do is survive.”



“Survive? How can you —?”

My question was interrupted by the screaming of our windows as they rained heavily on the new wall-to-wall carpet of our living room. A steady wail shrieked in my eardrums, eliminating other sounds. The lights went out and I fumbled in the dark for the flashlight I always left on the coffee table.

“Be careful. There’s glass everywhere.”

I heard screams, smelled tires burning and felt my heartbeat galloping in my chest.

“What was that? A bomb or a shell?”

“Most likely a bomb. There was no whistle before the explosion.”

“Shall I turn on the radio?”

“Too soon,” said my husband.

I slowly made my way through the broken glass and stepped out



into the balcony.

Shouts echoed in the unlit streets.

“It’s a bomb, a bomb. Farouk, he’s injured! Call an ambulance!”

Two men came out of the entrance to our building carrying Farouk by his arms and legs. An older woman in a scarf and dressing gown followed. Farouk was not moving. One of the men bent down beside him and got up shaking his head.

“Sorry Um Rafik,” he said, shaking his head.

Um Rafik looked up, her mouth open, and she screamed, beating her chest with her hands.

As I watched her, I felt helpless. At the mercy of everyone. The soldiers on the streets, the shells that flew, the planes that shattered sound, and the bombs that shattered space.

I tiptoed into the apartment and sat next to my husband who was changing radio stations. I wanted to reach out to him and hug him, needing his support when I heard a familiar voice — Martine’s. Tonight she was not complaining or swearing. Instead she was moaning, “My daughter. She dead!”

I wanted to ignore her, but she was knocking on our door.

“Should I open?”

“Move away, I’ll open it,” he said.

There was Martine Pinnocchio, her mouth opening like a goldfish, her eyes as round as the sun. She grabbed my husband’s arms and shook him. “My daughter,” she gasped. “Help me.”

Her eyes rolled and she fell like a wall hit by a shell. We grabbed her before her head hit the ground. While my husband supported her, I put a pillow under her head and covered her legs.

“Martine, Martine. Wake up.”



I looked at my husband.

“Are you going in?”



He nodded.

I gazed into Martine’s apartment and saw the flames. I wanted to tell him not to go, to stay here with me, but I knew that Martine had no one. I saw him run into the apartment, his flashlight leading the way until he was swallowed by the smoke.

Will I ever see you again?

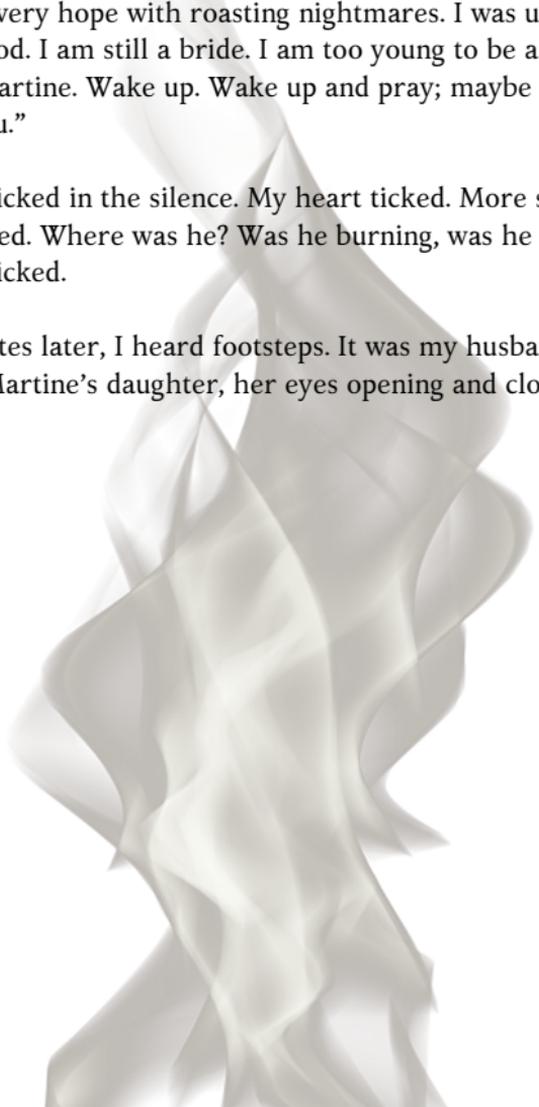
Sitting on the floor, shattered glass underneath me, I looked up at where I always pictured God to be. In the semi-darkness of the glow of my flashlight, I repeated every prayer I had been taught as a child.



I looked at the unconscious woman, smelled the smoke, and felt the fear that seemed to be darkening every stage of my life, upstaging every hope with roasting nightmares. I was unable to rise. “Oh God. I am still a bride. I am too young to be a widow. Wake up Martine. Wake up. Wake up and pray; maybe God will listen to you.”

The clock ticked in the silence. My heart ticked. More silence. My nose twitched. Where was he? Was he burning, was he choking? The clock ticked.

A few minutes later, I heard footsteps. It was my husband. In his arms was Martine’s daughter, her eyes opening and closing in surprise.



an idle mind

Translated from the Telugu by KEERTHANA V

Ajay was a determined and energetic young man who joined the army without informing his parents. He worked hard and gained appreciation from his superiors for his dedication. He was engrossed in his work all the time and hence never thought about his family.

There was an ongoing battle that had been suspended temporarily and so the men did not have much work. Considering that he now had time to kill, Ajay was flooded with thoughts about his family. He began to wonder about the well-being of his parents, his sister and brother, and whether they were worried about him too. He became increasingly perturbed with each passing day.

One day, an officer found Ajay in a desperate state. He understood what he was going through. He called Ajay and took him to a vacant plot of land and asked him to dig a pit. Ajay obliged and finished the task in a short while. He informed the officer who noticed there were still two hours left before they could break for the day. He asked Ajay to refill the pit with the mud he had dug up earlier. Ajay did as instructed. Since he had been involved in a grueling task for the better part of the day, sleep embraced him quickly that night.

The next morning, the officer asked Ajay if he felt any disquiet while working and also if he had been able to catch up on his sleep the previous night. Ajay replied that he had slept well without any disturbing thoughts. The officer told him that focusing on one's work helps in keeping distress at bay and advised him to always be engaged in some activity.

Note: This story originally appeared in Chinna Katha, Pt. 1, a Telugu magazine for children. Anonymous children's stories with morals are commonplace in Indian Literature. They are notable for their brevity and non-reliance on ornamentation. The ancient guru-shishya relationship is given a modern makeover in this story with the officer and Ajay as teacher and disciple respectively.



the pact

HARISHANKAR PARSAI

Translated from the Hindi by SONAKSHI SRIVASTAVA

It is native logic that when two cyclists collide, they first rise to fight, and only then proceed to dust away the clinging dirt.

This native logic has so long been acknowledged as a universal truth that if the fallen cyclists do not get at each other's throats, they are considered cowards, not saints.

One day, two such cyclists rammed into each other. No sooner had they gotten up than one challenged the other.

“Are you blind? Can't you see?”



“*Saale*, they will walk along the wrong side but still hurl a threatening look at you.”

The first cyclist got back at the second with an abuse of a larger magnitude and challenged him again. “Mind your tongue, or else I will break your head.”

The other craned his neck higher and answered back, “*Arre*, who are you to break my head? One thwack from my hand will suffice to blow your temples off.”

The two were about to get embroiled in the business of ripping each other's heads off when suddenly a man intervened.

“Look brothers, continue with your business after listening to me. You want to smash his head, and you his. All in all, both of you will attain peace only after smashing each other's heads. Since it is

so, why don't you call a truce by smashing your heads against that electric pole?"

The intervention was so impressive that the crowd broke into laughter, the two cyclists too. In their unrestrained bouts of laughter, they consummated the pact.

Glossary

saale: literally, brother-in-law; idiomatically, it could mean “idiot”, “bugger” or “dude” depending on the context

arre: hey

Harishankar Parsai (1922-1995) was a popular Hindi satirist. His “vyangyas” (satire) was directed at corruption in the country. He also wrote about Indian idiosyncrasies. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1982.



the migration of plastic pink flamingos

EA LUETKEMEYER

Eleanor was up at the break of dawn. She would water the tomatoes and melons before the sun got hot. She didn't expect Molly would lift a finger. The girl wasn't made for a garden. All these years she didn't know rhubarb from rutabaga.

She wrapped herself in a faded pink terrycloth robe, slipped into a pair of fuzzy pink slippers, and padded across the floor. She found the note on her dresser under the pill bottles:

Ma, I got to go. I'm twenty-two years old and except for once up to Branson, Missouri, for the Patsy Cline Tribute Show, I ain't never been north, south, east nor west of Arkansas. Hell, I ain't never lived nowhere except with you and Pa. I said I'd stay on and help you move into town when the war took the boys and Pa got busted up under the tractor but that was four years ago and here you are moved and here I am still with you, wastin' my life away! So I'm goin' now, Ma, I don't know where to but it's a big world out there and I got to go see it while I can. You just keep on embroiderin' that table cloth, Ma, and water the tomatoes in the mornin' before the sun's too hot and don't let the melons rot. And don't you fret none, Ma, I'll make lots of friends where I'm goin' and I'll send you a postcard when I get there. Love you to pieces.

Your baby girl, Mollie.

P.S. Don't forget to take your meds, Ma. You know what the doctor said.

Eleanor crumpled the note and tossed it onto the dresser. Fine, fine, she said. Go! Little Miss Foot-loose and Fancy-free!

She unscrewed the cap of a pill bottle and shook out a pill and looked at it sittin' in the palm of her hand like the new-laid egg of a miniature bird. She put it back in the bottle. Medicine, schmedicine, she mumbled. She shuffled to the closet and took off her old robe and put on a pair of dungarees and high-top tennis shoes and one of Pa's old flannel shirts and went out back. The screen door slammed behind her. It was a warm morning, a little mist off the grass already and the sun not yet up. Gonna be a hot one, she said to herself. She walked down the crooked sidewalk past the rows of tomatoes and cantaloupes to the tool shed and put on her old potting gloves and got out a watering can and filled it at the spigot and watered the tomatoes, careful not to wet the bottom leaves. She looked out over the rows of them, twenty feet long and four deep: big, red, ready-to-burst tomatoes alongside little green babies hardly come into this world. She looked at the cantaloupes a lyin' in the dirt, a whole mess of fat, sweet melons just a cryin' to be et — and no one left to eat 'em! She put down the can and took off her gloves and looked at her spotted hands: they trembled like leaves in the wind. She held the fingers of one hand in the fingers of the other. She said to herself: The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away.



She gripped the steering wheel of her sputtering old pickup as though it were the last reliable thing in the world. At the A&P Fred tallied her bill and bagged her groceries. He noticed her shaking hands.

We goin' to see you and the Little Miss at the Farmers' Market



come Sunday, Eleanor, he said.

Ha! she said. We'll just see come Sunday, now won't we, Fred?

Little Miss! she muttered as she pushed her cart across the parking lot. Not so little she cain't be traipsin' off to the far corners!

She drove to Arnold's Garden and Hardware. She put Garden-Gro and wire ties and Bug-Off into her cart. She noticed the plastic pink flamingo out back: tall on skinny green legs, a curvy neck like the letter S.

Flamingos! she scoffed. Like as if we need flamingos in Arkansas! Send 'em back to Florida where they come from!

But this one, the way it was lookin' at her like some damn puppy in the pound! All right, all right! she said. I could use some company my own damn self!

Eleanor thought the flamingo looked mighty fine amidst the melons and tomatoes. So tall and graceful and proud! The Queen of the Patch! But a tad bit lonely, too. The next day back at Arnold's the clerk shook his head and frowned.

I'm sorry, Eleanor, he said. You bought the last one yesterday.

Well, order me some more, dammit!



By Autumn's early frost she had a dozen plastic pink flamingos milling in her garden, facin' north, south, east and west, lookin' ever which way but loose. She never made it to the Farmers' Market, nor back to the A&P, but lived out of the pantry on Saltine Crackers and jars of preserved vegetables and jams from days gone by. She only ventured out to check her mail and to commiserate with her flock of fine feathered friends. Thank you for keepin' this old gal company, she told them. Y'all are my family now!

By night she sat in her woven-cane rocker by the pellet stove and by the light of a kerosene lantern embroidered her table cloth, a tableau of her long life: the old two-story white frame farm house and fleecy white clouds behind it; a tractor, a barn, a plow; a chicken, a horse, a cow; the old shaggy sheep-dog; the water well with a broken pump handle; the weeping willow beside a pond and the picnic table beneath it; tricycles and bicycles and baseballs and footballs; rifles and helmets; hero medals and headstones: one each for her own ma and pa; one for him that got ground up under his own tractor; one each for the two boys who didn't come back from the war; and one for the child hardly come into this world before the Good Lord took him back, after which she could have no more. The story's a comin' along, she thought, with but a wee bit yet to be told.

Winter came. The tomatoes and melons lay rotten on the frozen ground, covered by a blanket of snow. One deep dark December night, after a supper of crackers and cold rutabaga, as she embroidered by the glow of the pellet stove, Eleanor was startled by a fluttering commotion outside. She went to the garden to



investigate. Somethin' is mighty wrong here, she thought, and sure enough, she counted the flock and there weren't but eight birds left! She shouted into the darkness: Damn little hooligans, anyway! Don't think I won't call the Sheriff!

But she didn't call the Sheriff and a few days later she received a postcard on the front of which was a photo of four plastic pink flamingos wearing sunglasses, standing under a palm tree on the beach. On the back, in a fine unfamiliar script, were the words: *Couldn't take another winter in Arkansas. Wish you were here!*

The next evening after dark there came again the flutter of wings and her flock had been reduced to four. Soon after, she received another postcard on the front of which were eight plastic pink flamingos in sunglasses before a giant pyramid. And horses with humps. And dark men with rags on their heads. And on the back a greeting in a language the letters of which looked like chicken scratch!

She called the Sheriff and the Sheriff posted a deputy up the road a ways but after two uneventful nights he said: Eleanor, I ain't got but a few deputies on the force and I can't be givin' one up over a bunch of plastic birds!

The following night, hearing the now familiar clamor and commotion, Eleanor was seized by a spasm of panic. She hurried to her garden: a solitary bird remained, with but one skinny leg embedded in the frozen ground, the other half-cocked in an attitude of pending flight. She yanked it by its curvy neck and

carried it round to the tool shed and locked it inside.



Y'all ain't goin' nowhere! she said.

Soon after, the banging began. Night after dreadful night. As the wind howled and the ice-bound branches of the barren trees chattered and creaked, Eleanor stitched and listened until she could take no more. She unlocked the tool shed. Follow me, she commanded.

The last of the flamingos sat opposite Eleanor basking in the warmth of the pellet stove. Wait here, she said, and fetched a pair of sunglasses from her daughter's room. She finished her table cloth that night, adding a plastic pink flamingo in sunglasses under a palm tree, then fell asleep in her old cane rocker. She was awakened near dawn by a cold draft and the banging of the open kitchen door. A delicate swirl of snow drifted across the linoleum. She was alone in the room.



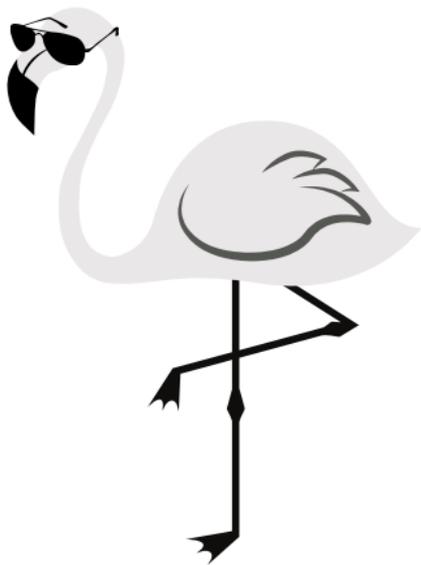
Fine, she said. Go!

She re-lit the pellet stove and spread her marvelous tapestry on the kitchen table and breakfasted on cold okra and sesame crackers with honey-mustard, content to be right where she was.

And that's where Molly found her, sitting upright in her rocker, cold and stiff as a board, the table cloth draped over her shoulders like a shawl.

You shoulda took your meds, Ma, she said.

She made arrangements for interment, then stayed on till Spring when the house could be sold for top dollar. One morning after a fitful night of sleep she was startled by a clamor and commotion outside. She went to investigate. It was a warm morning, a little mist off the grass already and the sun not yet up, and there in the dawn's creeping light, perched in the garden amidst the rotten flesh of forgotten tomatoes and melons, was a flock of plastic pink flamingos in sunglasses, facin' north, south, east and west, lookin' ever which way but loose.





travel
writing

what lies ahead

DIANA ROSEN

The four of us are in the Indian-style Jeep; our driver, Devan, is at the wheel; our host, Rajah, next to him; Alexander and I in the back seat. I'm visiting Darjeeling to write about tea. Alexander is a German graduate student here to study biodynamic farming and insects for a degree from University. We're off on a side trip to Sikkim where we will meet the former prince of an independent country that's now a reluctant state of India.

It's already been quite an adventurous drive to get here. At one point, we reached a fork in the road and neither Devan nor Rajah could determine which road we should take when we hear, "Go left!" Looking to our right, we see a small bony, toothless man in a modest loincloth sitting in a carved out shelter in the side of the mountain.

"What are you doing there?" Rajah asks.



The old man replies, laughing, "Hiding out a few days from the wife." All three men nod in tacit agreement. I roll my eyes mentally and marvel how all cultures seem more alike than different.

We follow the old man's directions as a chorus of red monkeys scream, as if to say, "Keep to the left, keep to the left," as they scramble on top of the fence that borders the road, stopping without missing a beat, to groom one another and chatter to themselves before carrying on their cheerleading.

Too soon for me, we come to a narrow wooden suspension bridge



with enough space between each slat that I can see the river bed of the Teesta River left dry by the recent drought, with only ribbons of mud and rocks scattered along the river bottom. Only one car at a time is allowed on the bridge and we wait our turn before easing up onto it. From our swinging aerie three thousand feet above, the river is no longer the rafters' nirvana; no swollen banks so common during the monsoon season. Rajah senses my fear and says calmly, "There's nothing you can do, Diana. We will get across. Devan, he is good, he has done this many times." The driver looks at Rajah a little too quickly and I have a heavy feeling that this is actually his first time on this flimsy excuse for a bridge.

I want to pull Rajah from his front seat, bop him one on the nose and scream, "Get me out of here," when I realize what he has said is true. There is nothing I can do. That feeling lasts a microsecond as my brain screams, "Nothing you can do? Nothing? We're three friggin' thousand feet above a pile of rocks; this car and we weigh nearly a million tons and I don't see much civilization around here. How long will it be before they discover us and if we could survive where's the nearest hospital and..." At that very second, Rajah turns to me again, and smiles, projecting the calm of a dedicated yogi, a deeply believing Rastafarian, sans dreadlocks, native born and bred in the land of karma, exuding a sort of Indian *que sera sera*. My body releases tension slowly like a too-rigid balloon losing small gulps of helium. I submit to my fate.

I remind myself we have already traveled enough hazardous miles to verify that Ganesh surely must be ahead of us removing all



obstacles, like when we drove along a stretch of the Himalayas becoming a paved road. The so-called road was a jumble of broken rocks, picked up since dawn by women who now carried many of them in baskets in their arms or balancing one or two on their heads. The men carried vats of hot tar on their heads and walked barefooted. It appeared this road would be paved several feet at a time. How the people, much less the tar truck, came to this point miles away from anywhere, I do not know. We were stuck while the workers scrambled away from our path and the tar truck backed up to a point where it could hug the mountain tightly enough so we could pass.

Devan led us expertly through this anomaly of road clearing and paving just as easily as he had driven us down from the hilltop tea plantation yesterday and up toward the monastery where we saw the orphaned children chanting, behaving like children everywhere, some ogling us: the blond, blue-eyed, very white Alexander, and me with my Clairol red hair. A few were yawning, others intent on their prayers, a few wiggling fingers in their noses, or giggling. We stayed overnight in spare very clean rooms albeit with only cold water in the bathrooms. The window of my room was like a viewfinder framing a perfect vista of snow-capped Himalayas as the sun awoke me. We dined on a simple breakfast of chai and scrambled eggs that had been gathered just moments before from the henhouse.

Our car reaches the end of the four-mile long wooden bridge, edges its way down the dirt pathway and onto another road, and I forget to be fearful of the dizzying heights and become a tourist

again marveling at the rolling green hills of Sikkim dotted with two-story farmhouses white with brown crisscrosses of wood that could be Tudor cottages in the Cotswolds or ryokans in rural Japan.

The prince of Sikkim lives in a humble, nondescript stone house with rounded interior walls. He greets us warmly and serves us momos, the north Indian version of pot stickers, neat little pockets of vegetables and chicken wrapped in dough and steamed. They're the most delicious I've ever had, or perhaps the hours-long trip has made me ravenous.

The prince leaves Alexander and me to have a private talk with Rajah about how and if tea could be grown in the Indian state that once was an independent country of Sikkim, lush green land of snow lions and pandas, wild orchids and cardamom, whose staunch independence was curtailed once India aggressively annexed it as a state.

We leave after too brief a visit to return to our home base in Kurseong, Darjeeling. I was sad to leave a place where red monkeys cheer your journey, chai warms your body, detours are not really detours at all but charming glimpses into other worlds, other times, and there is no need to worry because, what can we do but accept what lies ahead.





book
review

words that kept me going

SURABHI GUPTA

Reviewed by SUCHITA SENTHIL KUMAR

*Some memories are like roses,
neatly tucked in the book of life,
the petals wither over,
but the fragrance stays on,
for a lifetime.*

— Surabhi Gupta

Beneath the minimalistic cover is a narrative brimming with lively sentiments.

This is an epistolary book: a series of letters between Ananya and Rajeev, a couple separated by the pandemic. Their letters provide a glimpse into their emotions and the outside world.

It was the first time in a long time that I read a book without skipping lines. Gupta kept the narrative alive by interspersing it with poetry, fresh metaphors and subtle humor.

The appeal of the letters lies in its description of people you'd meet every day, neighbors: relatives and — the highlight of the book — the couple's little child. Bringing characters to life with a few words is no mean task.

The setting alternates between Delhi and New York. Although I've never been to either city, Gupta's vivid writing took me to them. The mannerisms of the Delhi locals are brought out in sharp relief. It's remarkable when a writer can evoke the vernacular zeitgeist in a different language. The mention of *Chacha Chaudhary* comics made me nostalgic.

As the proverb goes, “Distance makes the heart grow fonder.” In a world where long-distance love struggles to stay alive, this book offers hope and renews our belief in love.

Rating: ★★★★★

 Click here to buy *Words that Kept Me Going* for ₹49.
(Free for Kindle Unlimited subscribers.)





music
review

byredO

ONLYONEOF

Reviewed by SAI RAKSHAYA SOWMYA S

*Memories in a small glass bottle
Drippin', one, two, three
Your emotions fill it up drop by drop
They look transparent
— OnlyOneOf, “byredO”*

OnlyOneOf released their four-track EP, *Instinct, Pt. 1*, on April 8, 2021. It is a “cinematic album” following a musical plot structure with a beginning, middle, and end. The four songs represent four stages of instinct: denial and acceptance of libido, strengthening of the instinct, realization of the insatiability of the instinct, and pardon-seeking from God.

“libidO”, the title track of the album, is set in Freudian terms. The choreography of “libidO” caused severe backlash in Korea because of its provocative key moves that involved crotch-grabbing and a hint of oral stimulation. KB, a member of OnlyOneOf said, “[libido is] a topic that other groups were careful about doing and is also considered taboo. However, there are a lot of artists in the past and even the present who have turned human instincts into art. So, OnlyOneOf has sublimated the most basic part of human nature into music.” The album is the artists’ way of coming to terms with libido. This review will only deal with the b-side track “byredO”.

“picasso” and “dOramaaR”, from the previous albums, were followed by “byredO” in the 2021 album as one of the art pop songs of OnlyOneOf’s discography. Art pop songs usually integrate elements of popular culture. The song “dOramaaR” is named after



a painter who was a lover of Pablo Picasso. “byredO” gets its title from a Swedish perfume and cologne brand. The brand name is a portmanteau of “by redolence”. The Cambridge dictionary says, “[redolence is] the quality of smelling strongly of something or having qualities that make you think of something else”. It originates from the old French word “redolent”. The word is linked with fragrance and memory. The song “byredO” links fragrance, memory, and desire.

The official YouTube channel of OnlyOneOf says, “Love can be a blessing while also being so cruel. Just like a pleasant smell can become too strong when sprayed too much, love also becomes bitter as obsession grows stronger.” The memories of desire leave the persona of the song yearning for more like an addiction, a vicious, unstoppable train of desire. The first experience of consuming drugs is never surpassed by subsequent experiences. The addict wants to get higher than the first time and the last time. “byredO” also talks about the feeling of headiness and drunkenness. The memory of desire and the present yearning create the song.

The song emphasises the word “transparent”. Except for eyes, all the other senses capture formless existences. “byredO” talks about dealing with a desire which is as transparent as perfume. There is no way a person can fight it. “Transparency” can also refer to the rawness of emotions.

In his sonnets, Shakespeare values scent more than form as scent contains the essence of the form. Even if a rose has to lose its



form one day by wilting, its essence, the fragrance, can be preserved by distilling it into perfume (from Sonnet 54). In short, the fragrance represents a raw emotion. “byredO” talks about strong and raw feelings for someone. It does not deal with platonic love. The song itself feels like a bottle of perfume. It tries to give form to formless emotions. The vocals and the instrumentals seem to animate the act of spraying perfume. OnlyOneOf attempts to package those strong feelings for the listeners in a short song, which adds to the song’s sexual tension. Though spraying is an uncluttered and a breezy feeling, “byredO” links it with tension. It’s a cruel process that leaves the persona yearning for more.

“byredO” begins with a whistle performed by member Nine. Whistling is usually a carefree and lighthearted act but the whistling in “byredO” represents a cruel experience. Whistling involves pouting and concentration. It feels like collecting the intensity and essence of the emotions and blowing them through a little hole that distills the intense, raw emotions into a song. The song begins and ends with a whistle. In the chorus of “byredO”, the whistle is imitated by vocalization. The persona cannot wait for distillation to happen drop by drop. The vocalization of the whistle represents the need for rushed distillation to satisfy the instincts. It also symbolizes rushed sexual activity. Except for the chorus, the instrumental of “byredO” is minimalistic. It adds to the sensuousness of the song. “byredO” successfully captures the feeling of ever-growing, smoldering lust. Even without understanding the lyrics, the listener can feel the song animating the act of spraying perfume.

 [Click here to stream “byredO” on Spotify](#)

 [Click here to stream “byredO” on YouTube](#)

Rating

Song: 

Album: 





about the
contributors

AMANDA-JANE BAYLISS

Amanda-Jane (West Yorkshire, England) works at her local college supporting students with their studies. She encourages them to follow their dreams and reach for the stars. In February 2021 Amanda-Jane practiced what she preached by submitting her work to publishers. In the short time that she has been submitting, her poetry has already appeared in several online journals, and her upcoming work will feature in a number of anthologies. She was invited to read at the Tablerock Festival that is taking place this summer in Texas. She will also be featured in the upcoming Who's Who of Emerging Writers 2021. Amanda-Jane's Successful Submissions can be found at www.facebook.com/groups/moresuccessfulsubmissionsbyamandajane/

ANTHONY SALANDY

Anthony is a mixed-race poet and writer whose work tends to focus on social inequality throughout late-modern society. He travels frequently and has spent most of his life in Kuwait, jostling between the UK and America. His work has been published 150 times. He has published a chapbook titled *The Great Northern Journey* with Lazy Adventurer Publishing. His latest chapbook, *Vultures* will be published in 2021 by Roaring Junior Press. Anthony is the Co-EiC of *Fahmidan Journal*. Twitter/Instagram: @anthony64120. His website is <https://arsalandywriter.com/>

B CRAIG GRAFTON

Craig is a retired attorney. His latest book is *Willard Wigleaf*:

West Texas Attorney. It is a legal fiction western thriller concerned with the diversity and social issues of the American West in the 1880s. It is available on Amazon.

BOBBI SINHA-MOREY

Bobbi's poetry has appeared in a wide variety of places such as *Plainsongs*, *Pirene's Fountain*, *The Wayfarer*, *Helix Magazine*, *Miller's Pond*, *The Tau*, *Vita Brevis*, *Cascadia Rising Review*, *Old Red Kimono* and *Woods Reader*. Her books of poetry are available on Amazon. Her work has been nominated for Best of the Net Anthology in 2015, 2018 and 2020 and a Pushcart Prize in 2020. Her website is <http://bobbisinhamorey.wordpress.com>.

CHRIST KEIVOM

Christ is an undergraduate student of Literature at the University of Delhi. You can reach out to him on Instagram: @passmethecigarettes.

COLIN JAMES

Colin has a book of poems called *Resisting Probability* published by Sagging Meniscus Press. He lives in Massachusetts.

DIANA ROSEN

Diana is a journalist and tea enthusiast about which she has written six books. She is also a poet, essayist, and flash writer of both fiction and nonfiction. Her works include the essay "Far Villages" from Black Lawrence Press, blogs for the Los Angeles Public Library Docents, and flash in *Mad Swirl*, *Ariel Chart*

International, *Potato Soup Journal*, and many others. To view her fiction and nonfiction, please visit www.authority.com/dianarosen.

DOUG VAN HOOSER

Doug Van Hooser's fiction has appeared in *Red Earth Review*, *Light and Dark*, *The Riding Light Review*, *Flash Fiction Magazine* and *Bending Genres Journal*. His poetry can be found in *Chariton Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, and *Split Rock Review* among other publications. Doug's plays have received readings at Chicago Dramatist Theatre and Three Cat Productions. More at dougvanhooser.com.

EA LUETKEMEYER

Eugene's short fiction has appeared in *Sou'wester*, *Opium Magazine*, *Del Sol Review*, *Commonthought*, *Perversion Magazine*, *The Ilanot Review* and the anthology *Stories That Need to be Told*. He is the author of the novels *Inside the Mind of Martin Mueller* and *Penitentiary Tales: a Love Story*, and the memoir *The Book of Chuck: A Memorial Compilation of Poetry and Prose*. He was awarded an MFA in Creative writing from Lesley University, Cambridge, MA, in 2015. He has been a martial artist, a long-distance runner, an outlaw, a fugitive, a husband and father and sometimes a fool. He lives and writes between the San Francisco Bay Area and Southern Oregon and favors the trite but true adage that bad roads lead to good stories. His website is <http://www.ealuetkemeyer.com/>

EDWARD LEE

Edward'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*. He is currently working on a novel. 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>

FABIANA ELISA MARTÍNEZ

Fabiana was born and raised in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She graduated from UCA University in Buenos Aires with a degree in Linguistics and World Literature. She is a linguist, a language teacher and a writer. She speaks five languages: Spanish, English, French, Portuguese and Italian. She has lived and worked in Dallas, Texas, for almost 20 years. She is the author of the short story collection *12 Random Words*, her first work of fiction, and the grammar book series *Spanish 360 with Fabiana*. Other short stories of hers were published or are forthcoming in *Rigorous Magazine*, *The Closed Eye Open*, *Ponder Review*, *The Halcyone*, *Hindsight Magazine*, and *The Good Life Review*. She is currently working on her first novel.

GALE ACUFF

Gale has had poetry published in *Ascent*, *Reed*, *Poet Lore*, *Chiron Review*, *Cardiff Review*, *Poem*, *Adirondack Review*, *Florida Review*, *Slant*, *Nebo*, *Arkansas Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *Roanoke Review*, and many other journals in a dozen countries. He has

authored three books of poetry: *Buffalo Nickel*, *The Weight of the World* and *The Story of My Lives*. He has taught university English courses in the US, China, and Palestine.

GARETH CULSHAW

Gareth lives in Wales. He has two collections by FutureCycle called *The Miner & A Bard's View*. He has been nominated for Best of the Net. He hopes one day to achieve something special with the pen.

J ARCHER AVARY

Archer (he/him) is a writer. His recent works can be found at *Journal of Erato*, *Openwork Journal* and *The Decolonial Passage*. He's also EiC at *Sledgehammer Lit*. Twitter: @j_archer_avary.

JOHN GREY

John is an Australian poet, and a US resident, recently published in *Orbis*, *Dalhousie Review* and *The Round Table*. His latest books are *Leaves On Pages* and *Memory Outside The Head*. They are available on Amazon.

JOHN SWEET

John sends greetings from the rural wastelands of upstate NY. He is a firm believer in writing as catharsis, and in the continuous search for an unattainable and constantly evolving absolute truth. His latest poetry collections include *A Flag on Fire is a Song of Hope* (2019, Scars Publications) and *A Dead Man, Either Way* (2020, Kung Fu Treachery Press).

MANJUSHA HARI

Manjusha has a PhD in Malayalam. She is a published poet and teacher from Kerala. She has written for magazines and journals and edited books. She has published two poetry collections in Malayalam and has contributed to national and international anthologies in English. Reading and writing is a big part of her life.

MATHANGI N M

Mathangi (@mangsandsomestufftheywrite) spends their time under fairy lights, singing to their many stuffed toys. They like strawberry ice cream, baggy t-shirts and baby shampoo. They are from Chennai, India.

MINA MOL T S

Mina is a 19-year-old, final-year undergraduate actively ignoring her material existence. She writes. She reads. When she's not doing either of those, you'll find her by a window in a dimly lit room because light is a significant metaphor. Carries a strange love for poetry, foreign cities and the stories they have to tell. Instagram: @_hiraeth.poetry_

MOLLY GLINSKI

Molly is an aspiring novelist and poet from London. She focuses her work on addiction, grief, and moving on. She hopes to shed light on difficult topics in a thoughtful way that will inspire discussion.

PAUL LEWELLAN

Paul lives and gardens in the United States on the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River. When the COVID numbers spike, he shelters in place with his wife Pamela, his Shi Tzu Mannie, and their ginger tabby Sunny. He has recently published fiction in *October Hill*, *The Sock Drawer*, *Statement 2020*, *Erozone*, and *White Wall Review*.

REEM RASHASH-SHAABAN

Reem holds an MA in Applied Linguistics from the American University of Beirut where she taught English for 33 years. In addition to being a mixed media artist, she is a poet and fiction writer. Her poems and short stories have appeared in *The In Posse Review*, *Foliage Oak Literary Journal*, *Sukoon*, *The Potomac* and *The Rusty Nail*, to name a few. One of her short stories, "Grooming Rana", was published in an anthology of Arab women writers and her new poem, "A Million Moons", was published in *Texas' Best Emerging Poets 2019*.

RUCHI ACHARYA

Ruchi is a Business Analyst by profession. She is the founder of an international writing community popularly known as Wingless Dreamer. She is an Oxford University summer graduate in English Literature. Her poem, "Long Distant Call", was the winner of the 4th Issue in the Poetryworld.org contest. She has also been a contributor to multiple writing platforms such as *The Pangolin Review* (Mauritius), *Fairytalez.com* (Denmark), *Overachiever Magazine* (China), *Rigorous Magazine* (USA), *Detester Magazine*

(USA), *Loose Tooth Magazine* (USA), *Afropuffchronicles* (Africa) and *Poetrychoice* (India) among others. Her literary works include poetry, love stories, and motivational quotes. She has a deep interest in Victorian Literature. She never ate a dragonfruit. Website: <https://www.ruchiacharya.com/>

SAI RAKSHAYA SOWMYA S

Sowmya resides in Madurai, the city of sweet nectar, tall gopurams, and jigarthanda. She would rather listen to full-length albums for three hours than watch a movie. She is a K-pop and PoV playlist enthusiast who appreciates and listens to a spectrum of artists. She reads almost everything and sees the goodness of coffee's warmth in art. She is also a Literature graduate with Wasted Academic Potential.

SEAN WOJTCZAK

Sean is a graduate of the University of Iowa. His work has been published in *Cleaver Magazine*, *1966*, *Typehouse Literary Magazine*, *Eckleburg*, the Keats-Shelley Association of America's blog and the British Association for Romantic Studies' blog.

SPANDAN BANDYOPADHYAY

Spandan is an 18-year-old writer from Kolkata, West Bengal. He loves literature more than he loves himself. He hopes to be a full-time writer in the future.

SONAKSHI SRIVASTAVA

Sonakshi is an MPhil candidate at Indraprastha University, Delhi.

She previously graduated from the University of Delhi. Her works have appeared in *Odd Magazine* and *Feminism in India*. Her work was awarded thrice by MyStory Contest, organized by TATA LitLive, the international literature festival of Mumbai. Her short stories have also been anthologized. She is one of the current recipients of the South Asia Speaks mentorship programme where she is working on translating the Hindi novel *Titli* into English under the guidance of Arunava Sinha.

SOPHIE RAOUFI

Sophie is a British-Iranian poet and writer who takes inspiration for her work from love, loss and technology. She lives in London. Her website is <http://www.sophieraoufi.com/>.

SUCHITA SENTHIL KUMAR

Suchita is an aspiring writer and artist creating chaos. She feels at home in Bangalore, India, and hopes to feel the same in every little corner of the world. She is highly inspired by works that showcase vulnerability, resilience and independence. You can find more of her work on suchitasenthilkumar.wixsite.com/thearchive

THOMAS MORGAN

Thomas is a writer from Worthing in West Sussex. He's been published in *Dream Catcher Magazine*, *STORGY*, *Bandit Fiction*, *Nymphs*, *The Mark Literary Review*, *Sledgehammer Lit*, and *Truffle Magazine*.

TODD SULLIVAN

Todd lives in Taipei, Taiwan, where he teaches English as a Second Language. He hosts a YouTube Channel where he interviews writers across the publishing spectrum: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCcSYSQpTpiyJknWjg2AkC8A>

TOSHIYA KAMEI

Toshiya holds an MFA in literary translation from the University of Arkansas. His translations of short fiction have appeared in venues such as *Clarkesworld*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and *Strange Horizons*.

VINEETHA A V

Vineetha is a passionate writer who resides in Chennai. She completed her master's degree in Literature at Stella Maris College. In addition to creating content for her blog vineethawrites.wordpress.com, she actively engages in singing, dancing and painting. Vineetha is a practitioner and an advocate of self-love and has expressed her views on the same on different social media platforms. She is keen on doing research in the fields of gender studies, culinary literature and diasporic literature. She has published research papers in different journals and has co-authored two books.

ZEBULON HUSET

Zebulon won the Gulf Stream 2020 Summer Poetry Contest and his writing has appeared in *Meridian*, *The Southern Review*, *Fence* & *Texas Review* among others. He publishes *Notebooking Daily*,

edits the journals *Coastal Shelf* and *Sparked*, and recommends lit mags at TheSubmissionWizard.com.





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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. Even her rough sketches look printable and marketable. 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

