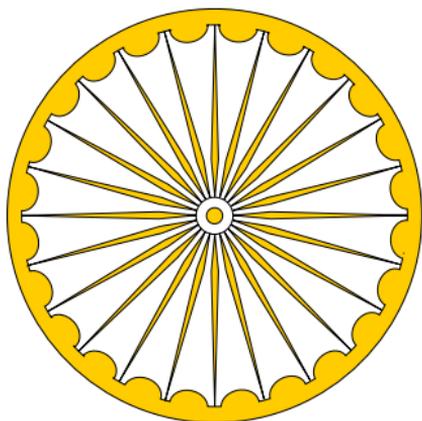


Volume 1, Issue 3 | September 2021

# rhodora

– DIGITAL MAGAZINE –





# rhodora

Volume 1, Issue 3 | September 2021

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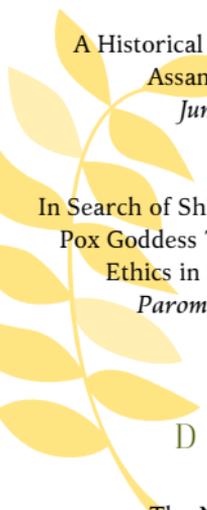
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THE

In a home of many children, every child is different. Some are splitting images of their parents, some look like they come from a different family altogether; some get on swimmingly with their parents while others struggle to find a meaningful connection. So it is with the motherland. All her children relate to her differently. There are those of us who feel loved and valued, and those of us who feel unworthy, unloved, or rejected. Just as our feelings for our mothers overwhelm us on her

# EDITORS

SUSANNA MARIAN CORREYA    KEERTHANA V

FROM

anniversaries, our feelings toward the motherland peak on national days. While some of our siblings celebrated with fanfare, the remaining probably mumbled a prayer or a lament.

This issue is dedicated to India, “the ancient, the eternal and the ever-new” (Nehru), and her children, and all the ways they love her.

This is a cosmopolitan issue. We have writing from Australia, Canada, France, India, Montenegro, Pakistan,

Panama, Vietnam/Ireland/Norway, the UK, and the US.

Aayati Sengupta wrestles with writerly commitment and sincerity; Saniya Ahmad decries the warping of truth by power; Triasha Mondal gives us a mind that carries the weight of the world; Ali Haider Chandio transports us to a mall on the edges of reality where blue pottery birds are covered; Paromita Patranobish exhaustively explores the figure of Shitala; Jumismita Das walks us through the history of the Assamese language; and Richard LeDue rains on the national parade with a poem on indigenous Canadians.

Thank you to our contributors and supporters for your trust and your patience. We hope you love this issue as much as we do.

*Where the mind is without fear and the head is  
held high;  
Where knowledge is free;  
Where the world has not been broken up into  
fragments by narrow domestic walls;  
Where words come out from the depth of truth;  
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards  
perfection;  
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its  
way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;  
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-  
widening thought and action —  
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my  
country awake.*

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

The image features a dark green background with stylized leaf patterns in shades of yellow and light green. The leaves are arranged in clusters around the central text, creating a decorative border. The word "poetry" is written in a light yellow, serif font, centered on the page.

poetry

# deeper than poetry

PRANITI GULYANI

today, my eyes are clouded  
with the mist of a daydream as I stare  
at my fingers which metamorph into  
criss-crossed machines of light, decked with  
levers of stars and nebulas  
as they work their way through  
this entanglement of earth and sky  
to find all those things that are deeper  
deeper than poetry

they begin by sifting through  
the intricate embroidery of a mother's heart,  
gingerly navigating the labyrinth  
of stitches and thread when accidentally,  
they touch a crimson bit  
of flaming red wool, and as they pull  
at it, like a seamstress  
working at a bit of hard, angry thread  
they touch the iron-cold hands  
of a stillborn child,  
and seized by the suddenness  
of an impulsive cardiovascular capacity,  
they pick out a tear, pearly-white  
a tear deeply set —  
deeper than poetry

they continue —  
tip-toeing into twilight belts  
of an eclipse that pulsates



in the spine of a diary  
with the crisp pages, yellow  
with time, and white with the uncertainty  
of the past, as it softly bumps  
into the jagged, crooked ends  
of the present

they search  
for that one word amidst  
the sewn-on letters  
that one word amidst  
the metaphor-infused, lyrical adjectives,  
and when they find it,  
they stand upright, and simply touch it  
as the word trembles, shivers and quivers,  
sheds its leathery coats  
revealing its breasts — bruised and beaten

with wounds pungent with tobacco and sweat and perfume,  
pungent with all things man,  
with wounds deeper,  
deeper than poetry

and then,  
there is a plastic, polythene-like,  
rubbery silence  
coating every wound, like a band-aid

a silence



deeper  
than poetry

# me to myself

TRIASHA MONDAL

Under the leaking roof I lie,  
While my heart and I have an open conversation about  
why a man must hide his face should he wish to weep;  
why every road leads to slaughter for a black sheep in a white  
goat's world.  
why a motherland who holds mountains aloft her shoulders is ill  
at heart;  
why politicians are all spiel and no swing;  
why pianists play dirges and not peacetime ballads;  
why mothers must behold and hold butchered sons in  
slaughterhouse towns;  
why mileposts are few and far between when the lost and lonely  
traveler is desolate and desperate for home;  
why the weak and outnumbered are gassed and guillotined;  
why history books whitewash our wrinkled youth when the  
motherland's scarred arms yielded Kohinoor while she was  
carved up into pieces with names she did not get to choose;  
why the rightless poor are booted to the bottom while the  
conquering capitalists, with synthetic sympathy, soar,  
why some nations must watch bombs fall like stars from the sky.  
A stinging wind blows into my aching eyes.  
As I behold the relic of my dying town's immortality,  
I howl,  
"How long until humans no longer lament the fate of humanity?"

# spirits do love

SRIJIT RAHA

The night was cool with elfin breeze  
Smooching one's soul to eternal freeze.  
I strolled through the haze of a moonlit lane  
Where oaks bury dead in melodious trail.  
Amidst the gloom I whistled my way,  
But found the woods so strangely still.  
It seemed like shadows ceased their play  
As if they sensed a rival within.  
Half a mile I walked almost  
When I noticed a figure in the murk:  
A girl in her teens with a crimson smile  
Her wavering hair clinging to her waist.  
I quickened my pace to gain her soon,  
To drench my soul in her voice,  
But found her fused with fogs of Hurst  
Together with clusters of glow-worm orbs.  
My senses picked up aromas of tuberose, elm,  
My wits were charmed by the brush of the breeze.  
I found myself in weary dream.  
My hat rolled afar with a blustery scream.  
When my eyes opened to dazzling light,  
I found me lying in fronds of clove.  
A chit lay cramped in this palm of mine.  
Scrawled in it, "Spirits do love."

# good intentions

FRANK MODICA

Every summer day dozens of insects  
die under my Birkenstocks.  
I don't feel the crunch of their bodies;

if they cry I can't hear them. Though I try  
to step over every ant and beetle,  
collateral damage is unavoidable.

Because I value the life of all bugs,  
I send my thoughts and prayers  
to ease their passing. It's the best I can do.

# true confessions

FRANK MODICA

Will you roll the dice,  
betting you missed the bullet,  
hunker down and hope  
for short memories  
and a shorter news cycle;  
no more public outings on cable,  
no more former coworkers  
calling you out for past misdeeds?

Or will you try to get ahead of the stories;  
abase yourself on all the talk shows,  
step in front of the news cameras,  
strike your chest with a bowed head,  
to make a true confession?  
“A younger me make bad choices,  
but I am now an older, wiser man.”

# kind of blue

FRANK MODICA

I sit at my laptop in a darkened  
room, listen to Kind of Blue, wrestle  
with words. I gaze at the computer

desktop; too many angry Facebook  
rants, they numb my eyes and ears.  
I turn off the computer, mute my Miles

Davis CD, drink a cup of coffee.  
My alarm will ring in 6 hours.  
Maybe I'll write another stanza

before going to bed. If the lines don't  
sing I can follow William Stafford's  
advice and lower my standards.

# it's raining everywhere

ANIMIKHA PAL

It's raining outside.  
And let me feel the pain,  
which reminds me of that dove,  
whom I tend to love —  
Never.

It's raining inside.  
And I can feel the pain,  
that always tells me,  
You, whom I want to see —  
Forever.

It's raining there.  
Now, it ensures  
the smiling face of yours,  
'cause you love to listen to rain —  
Ever.

It's raining here.  
Looking through the window.  
I can see a soggy crow.  
But I hate it —  
Never.

# she and the night

ANIMIKHA PAL

Darkness has already enveloped the city.  
The half-moon is there, as if a deity.  
The stars and the fireflies are side by side.  
A deep breath, She tries to hide.  
The clock whispers, "It's two-oh-five.  
Into the sleep you have to dive."  
All She wants is to feel the night,  
And knows not if it's wrong or right.

An unknown smell lingers mid-air,  
Kind of strong and also fair.  
She listens to nature's chime,  
And becomes the one, who forgets time.  
Now, She knows it's nothing but right  
To close her eyes and touch the night.

# what expectations have created

YUN MAKAN

What expectations have created —  
The body moves in pain-t  
Ageless through colors,  
Mindless to the art form.  
I am screaming in whispers,  
Have I always been alone  
Or have they forgotten  
Me?  
Fractured sunlight,  
Do we gaze together  
At mirrored worlds?  
Fractured moonlight,  
Do we rest together  
In the arms of a single frequency?  
A billion chasers,  
Reflections still the same;  
Who is the beholder?  
By all means  
Let's lavish in criticism!

# diamond i

YUN MAKAN

Each time I admired the ocean  
I dreamt beyond the horizon;  
To sail,  
Be a siren,  
Find Atlantis.  
Still and all,  
I drowned before  
I dove into the blue.  
Perturbation.  
The ripples led me to  
You.  
My God You!  
You gave me this moment  
In three.  
Now,  
The tide rises,  
The waves ignite,  
This adventure is for you.

# canada day 2021

RICHARD LEDUE

Old statues don't cry,  
but they say so much  
with their cold silence  
(which can be contagious),  
and old statues don't die,  
so tear them  
(those architects of genocide)  
down —  
let's build something new  
that hundreds of years from now  
will make everyone  
proud.

# love from both sides

VERN FEIN

She said: *You don't dream about someone  
who died you don't care about.*

My daughter called me crying  
from her apartment in LA,  
sobbing because she dreamed  
I had died at 80  
that being a possibility,  
but I feel quite healthy  
and don't see that bucket  
swinging before me yet.

She said we laughed a lot.  
We went to Dairy Queen  
where I ordered a hamburger  
but, walking down a hill,  
I dropped it and it rolled  
until we were rolling  
on the ground with laughter.

Her brothers wouldn't  
talk about it in the dream.  
That made her mad  
and woke her up.  
So she called me  
and was laugh-sobbing  
to hear my voice  
and see my reassuring smile.  
Glad I was alive.



So was I.  
Glad to have this much love  
as we were actually  
talking on that other side  
and I jabbered a lot,  
which made it seem more real  
because I do spout off  
and that made me feel good  
about this love from both sides.

# coming and going

VERN FEIN

On the day our son and daughter  
depart from a visit,  
return to their far away homes,  
we could not fathom  
any of our children  
who slipped into this vast world  
from their Mother home  
would go away when they could.

One stayed, two left.  
You feel exactly what I mean.  
We swam through their youth  
like sharks—guided, protected,  
expected a lifetime close  
like the farm families of yore.

But we were city,  
where the sirens most live  
who called them away.  
Love abounds  
even in the comings and goings  
always returning, always leaving  
until their home is only where they live.

# the children most

VERN FEIN

I can't get those little children  
out of my mind,  
shot by the most recent madman.

They crawl inside,  
multiply my thoughts,  
try to escape,  
horror on their faces,  
fall asleep when I don't think of them  
as I move through my day.

They wake me up  
from my nightmare  
at the turning on the stairs,  
as the pantry door opens,  
as I wash my face,  
see their eyes  
blink back  
from the glass darkly.

They stare at me,  
will live there  
until the next ones  
replace them,  
rabbit scream  
and hutch in.

# shadow

AAYATI SENGUPTA

I'll always be a shadow, lurking  
A ghost, with no body to call its own  
Separate from yet sewn together to your life  
I have lived here quite alone.  
This house has been emptied of my fingers  
working to keep it clean,  
no imprint of my life lived —  
nothing holds my laughter  
like water in a glass,  
no higher Memory holds my tears  
and if you remove the broken things  
around the house after I leave,  
it will be as if I was never —  
not just here, but never.  
So maybe if I stay by the door  
and merge with the darkness and the light  
I'll float by through some kind of life  
and through you do some kind of living.

# dead man

JOHN GREY

He should have listened to me.  
I know when it's appropriate for life to be jam-packed  
and when it ought to be compressed.  
I'm an expert on the lifting of the eyes,  
the close-up look, the analysis, the investigation.

But he just couldn't adjust to situations that arose.  
And his emotions were never adaptable enough.

I tried to tell him  
in language common to us both,  
but, apparently, the images didn't get through.  
His hearing was clumsy.  
His mind did not work smoothly.

He had no wish to be reconstructed,  
that was his problem.  
And then he got all muddy  
and wouldn't adhere to the rules I set  
for rinsing himself clean.

He didn't look at the road ahead.  
He went out beyond the breakers.  
He stuck the needle in his arm.  
He tiptoed along the narrow ledge.

And now his frozen feet  
don't move with the rhythm.  
Kinfolk sing and he can't join in.



I can't explain why people do what they do.  
I can only be a critic.  
I've seen my share of dead men.  
There's a lot they have to learn.

# the next voice you don't hear

JOHN GREY

it is dear to me  
that I cannot return  
to the widow  
in her glass sleep

a statue as dear to me  
as the leaves of time

while my endless departures  
rattle her bed  
like a great wind —

can't reincarnate,  
no way to talk,  
spirit is doomed  
to the tender impersonal,  
the rest is reduced to ashes



# imagine

LAURA STAMPS

Petunia struggles with learning disabilities. Actually, I'm the one who struggles. Not her. She could care less. Petunia wasn't always this way. She was a normal cat until she was spayed. But something went wrong during surgery. Something with her brain. She hasn't been the same since. Not that her disabilities bother her. They don't. She's perfectly happy living in her own little world, staring off into space for long periods of time. Not knowing the basic things most cats know instinctively. Not understanding when I call to her. Unable to learn anything. Constantly losing her train of thought and becoming confused. But that's okay. I have plenty of patience. And I'm happy to work with her. To arrange all the food bowls in a straight line, so she won't become confused and panic. To make sure her bowl is white. Plain. No cute cat designs. No bright colors. No clever writing. Because decorative details confuse her, and she thinks there's nothing to eat. On the other hand, loud noises don't frighten her. Vacuum cleaners. Motorcycles. Fireworks. Thunderstorms. Most cats freak over those things. Not Petunia. Playful, sweet, endlessly affectionate. That's Petunia. She adores the little world she disappears to in her mind. Happy with herself. Undisturbed by anything around her. I have to admit I admire that about her. Most of us spend our lives protecting



ourselves from being hurt by other people. That's insanity. Madness. Crazy Town. Petunia could care less what anyone does or says or thinks about her. That's freedom. True freedom. In her happy little world she's oblivious to any of that silliness. Imagine if you could do that. Not care what anyone does or says or thinks about you. Imagine reframing your life with that kind of freedom. Imagine the possibilities. Just. Imagine.

# splash

LAURA STAMPS

What is it with cats and water? You'd think giving water to your cats every day would be easy. Put a bowl on the floor. Fill it with water. Keep water in it. Done. Everyone's happy. Unless, unless, one of your cats is a mermaid. Water fascinates Honeysuckle. Always has. Always will. She slaps it out of the bowl. Every day. Just for fun. She drinks the bowl dry. Every day. Just for fun. She stands in the bowl. Dunks her toys in the bowl. Slaps at her toys in the bowl. Splashes water out of the bowl. She turns my kitchen floor into a pond. Every day. Just for fun. This is my problem. And nothing I try works. A larger bowl. A smaller bowl. Glass and plastic bowls. A large pan. A small pan. Aluminum and glass pans. Nothing. Works. Small bowls are overturned. Big bowls become swimming pools. The perfect solution? A heavy glass bowl sitting in the middle of a large aluminum pan. That works. Now Honeysuckle can play in the bowl, every day, just for fun, splashing water into the pan. None on the floor. Plenty of water to play in. Plenty of water to drink. Problem solved. Unless, unless Jeremiah races across the kitchen floor, jumps on the stove, crashes into the microwave, bounces



off, loses his balance, skids over the edge of the counter, and lands on his back in the water bowl, shooting a geyser of water into the air, turning my kitchen floor into a pond. Which he is prone to do. Big, clumsy boy that he is. And so it goes. What is it with cats and water? Water and cats. The answer I may never know.

# black

LAURA STAMPS

1.

When the lady from the rescue agency brought her to me, she said, “This is a black kitten, I promise.” I had called about adopting a kitten. A black one. But this kitten wasn’t black. And it didn’t have fur. Not much. Just lots of brown hairless skin. Like a bat. An odd little thing with a face that resembled a bear cub. A brown bear.

2.

“She’s black,” the rescue lady said again, when she saw the expression on my face. “I promise.”

3.

Six weeks old, abused by young children, this kitten was not considered to be adoptable. Too many behavioral problems. Too many nutritional issues. The rescue lady warned me. I adopted her anyway. With high quality food the kitten’s coat grew thick, soft, and glossy. Jet black. A beautiful little girl. And a behavioral nightmare of a kitten. The rescue lady was right. About everything.

4.

The kitten’s training has taken months, and she’s trying. She really is. She’s a sweet, friendly kitten. And that helps. But still. There are setbacks. Many. Today, I came home to find her balanced on the toilet seat, slapping toilet water with all her strength, which



was splashing the potted plant sitting on top of the tank, which flooded the dirt in the pot, which was spraying the wall with mud. The rescue lady had been right. About everything. This kitten is definitely black. And now my bathroom wall is too.

5.

I named the kitten “Sunflower.” Not a black cat name. Not a realistic name. Not a descriptive name. But a bright, sunny, cheerful name. There’s something to be said for positive thinking, right? Oh, well.

# nanny ghazal

JADE HIDDLE

When we enter the park, my daughter's hand in mine is a magnet  
for eyes of grayed nannies  
because she is light and I am less, "Buenos días. ¿Qué tal?" greet  
the paid nannies.

Their child-clients understand Spanish but don't listen, instead  
talk back in English.

"She is so good," their chins point at my girl. "Are the parents  
nice?" ask the made nannies.

"Mi esposo es satisfactorio," I joke, but they don't smile. They  
huddle away from me,  
hand off sippy cups and cold orange slices to tow-headed kids. I  
miss my swayed niñeras.

They are parents but I only see them love others' kids. The only  
other parents are bearded men  
with "progressive" tattoos. I don't talk with them who make me  
feel like a trade nanny.

When they ask "Is that your child?", "Are you the mother?", "She  
must look like her father."

I tell my daughter not to walk away but I do anyway or pretend I  
speak as a cade nanny.

Our last time at the park, a nanny spoke to me and still  
keptspeaking even after she knew me,  
as she complained about the weather, her cough, the children to  
whom she is only paid nanny.



She set tupperwares of snacks on the ground where they whined  
and wasted. A pigeon pecked  
crumbs, and this nanny yanked feathers from root. My girl looks  
to me, mama, el jade niñera.

# i first dated a boy who

JADE HIDDLE

I first dated a boy who  
Was four years older  
And not a virgin  
And whose kisses were wet  
And fingers strong.

He called me on the phone  
With the cord I twirled around  
My own fingers, but  
I was in the shower  
Because in a house where shoes are left at the door,  
You rinse off the day before you sleep in the bed that was worked  
for, just for you.

My hair still wet,  
My mother came to me.  
“He talk too sweet,”  
She said. Her brow  
Was furrowed but  
The corners of her mouth  
Were smiling.

# i once dated a guy who

JADE HIDDLE

I once dated a guy who  
Confessed on our first date  
That he liked Mexican chicas  
Best, and gazed at me in expectation.

Silent, I bit into my taco,  
And didn't return his calls  
Asking me on a second date  
To escort him to the doctor.

# i dated another guy who

JADE HIDDLE

I dated another guy who  
Announced that is bucket list included  
2) Date an Asian girl  
14) Date a white girl

Isn't she the best of both worlds,  
His friend asked, hitchhiking  
His thumb at me.

My guy crinkled his nose  
And shook his head,  
No.

# words like sparrows

ALEKSANDRA LEKIĆ VUJISIĆ

There is no poem  
that could easily describe  
what happened between us  
in Summer 1998.  
However my words,  
wonderfully aligned birds,  
try to fly away — it is too early  
to explain, to understand: it is too late.

Maybe I drank you like wine,  
not being able to leave  
something for tomorrow.  
Maybe I didn't know how  
to hold the golden glass,  
too often toasting to emptiness and sorrow.

I never knew that words  
can be this powerless,  
small and full of fear —  
like little sparrows in  
the winter, shaking from winter  
although the sky is clear.

# the summer left

ALEKSANDRA LEKIĆ VUJISIĆ

You left.

Just like summer leaves  
every September,  
waving goodbye to old dreams,  
never ending the trip  
to your hands and your lips,  
it's killing me —  
this silence that screams.

You will never know  
how time passes on this side of  
tomorrow,  
flip the coin and choose a side,  
heads or tails,  
joy or sorrow —  
and never forget to end the ride,  
the one that leads to stranger's hands  
and eyes,  
the summer left,  
the cold wind cries.

# treason

ALEKSANDRA LEKIĆ VUJISIĆ

Where do you think the ocean ends  
and how well do you know the sky?  
The hurtful truth that pretends  
will never tell you the reason why  
the summer is such a painful season,  
nature playing just another treason.

It was the summer — the music, the sun,  
the sea, and all the mimicry there,  
I never stopped, I had to run,  
swimming to hug you just nowhere,  
the summer is just another layer  
of lies, and dirt, and sinful prayer.

So, come on, get lost in all the lying clouds,  
unsure if they frame the sun or spill the rain,  
unsure how my heartbeat sounds,  
floating with your forgotten pain,  
the summer is such a painful season,  
nature playing just another treason.



# castles

ALEKSANDRA LEKIĆ VUJISIĆ

I get lost in big words,  
please help me to talk with my hands,  
I am not strong enough to love,  
the time is ticking as well as my heart  
♦ both dispersing like castles of sand.

# ottoways

RYAN QUINN FLANAGAN

Everyone has a garden now,  
their own little Eden  
if you are to believe the magazines  
long out of print  
that just don't know it yet,  
still employing marketers and copy editors  
and typesetters, someone to man the phones  
each time they ring, keeping an address right downtown  
in spite of the rents,  
feathering peacocks with titles and desks  
and lavish expense accounts;  
a sudden death is best,  
no one having the time to gather bedside  
for the final culling —  
that is how I want to go!  
you hear some thoughtless mamba  
coil around the wicker of someone else's  
lousy tantric boom-box words...  
that last desperate grasping for anything, anyone,  
says otherwise; a spasm of stiff blue loneliness  
in the end.



# find a woman

RYAN QUINN FLANAGAN

Find a woman  
who plucks your eye brows  
and pulls your ear hairs

and listens to all your  
screaming afterbirth  
insanities

and still  
finds you magical  
as a waterfall.

# on this couch that has been used as me

RYAN QUINN FLANAGAN

No trumpets for the sleepless —  
the seals broken like expiration dates  
that never seem to come,  
that over-friendly dog with a cone on its head  
that licks the balls of your feet each morning  
before it dies; both of you sequestered to the basement,  
on this couch that has been used as me,  
the pillows noticeably different than the cushions  
like a Frankenstein of questionable comfort  
which is more than you have, so you take it:  
all those punches and hangovers and insults  
that come your way like a windshield full of bug  
smears trying to see half-clearly once again.

# curvy clouds

RIYA AGGARWAL

Relaxing on the green bushy sheets,  
Freshly damped and softened,  
I locked my hands under my head  
And sighed all my stress away.

My eyes roamed over the browns of the Earth,  
The greens of plants and trees,  
The pales and brights of different creatures,  
The blue and white of the wide sky.

Everything blurred as my eyes zoomed in  
On the clouds above me—  
So far up and high,  
Molded into different shapes  
Some are hearts and ships,  
Some are hard rocks and delicate leaves.  
They sail through the winds  
Taking my imagination with them.

# let us meet again

DEEP NASKAR

Let us meet again  
When all this is over.  
When the rising sun invokes new hopes  
And not fresh terrors.  
Let us meet again  
When the air becomes breathable,  
When into their deep ashen hibernation have finally rested the  
fires.  
Let us meet again  
When we have finally sealed the edges between reality and  
nightmare,  
When the genocide has finally quenched the thirst of  
Our mother.  
We shall meet again  
Amidst the sakura forest, and the bamboo groves,  
Stealing an escape  
From all the cacophony, memories, philosophy and metaphors.  
But till then, perhaps these hypocritical rantings  
are my only way to cope.  
The morning is still new, we still have the longest way to go.  
We shall meet again  
After we have carried out  
Our pledge to avenge the fallen.  
When we have indiscriminately slaughtered the nonchalant ones,  
Hung them upside down and drained their blue blood.  
Let us meet again  
At narrow escape,  
In dark alleyways, under the tarnished lamppost.  
Let us meet again



for the first time,  
At a different time, surreal place.  
Even if not in this life, then in the next or some  
Distant one.  
Let us utter these words  
And forge our promise in a single breath.  
To meet again somewhere, someplace else.  
When the tally has finally been summed up.  
The book of Chitragupta is shut and shelved,  
And we have been left to absolute silence,  
By the merciful Death.

# the yellow heaven

DEEP NASKAR

The yellow heaven comes  
Flickering awake every night at the stroke of five.  
It glows in its full glory,  
And the anemic yellow lights, the yellow neons, the yellow bulbs,  
And painting yellow the entire sky.  
Silence, buzzing silence,  
Silence filled with radioactive static.  
Hush down, contaminating sighs,  
A city smeared with this foul excreta,  
And within its gaps and faults  
Hide my fellow maggots and parasites,  
Trembling in rage, shedding away all their worthless pride.  
In this pile of feces perhaps that is the only way to survive.  
The way of the yellow gods, the rule of the yellow paradise,  
The dying moths suck up to the yellow brilliance,  
Quenching that tantalean thirst, soothing that burn of yellow  
plight.

The high gods look down and smile, from their penthouse at  
The top of the high-rise.  
Ah! the pleasure, the pain, and the writhing parasites.  
As they gulp down intoxication from their fountain of wine.  
Upon the blood-drained yellow bony body,  
They drool and dine.  
Just a simple snap of finger,  
The maggots run away from their holy divine sight,  
Or are shamelessly crushed under their xanthous divine right.

At the bottom of this gutter,



We remain enshrined,  
Dream to burn down their ivory towers and ivory minarets,  
I savour this abominable fantasy,  
The violent end of their violent delights.  
Rage and roar!  
Zeus with his thunder,  
While I wonder, if we ever be able to  
Pull over the mortuary sheet  
Over that hideous yellow night.

# how does a mother say goodbye?

SWATI MOHEET AGRAWAL

It was the beginning of the college holidays,  
and it was some consolation for Mrs. Taylor to have the children  
back at home.

But Benjamin had become rather reclusive  
and Charlotte was too much of an adult to be chided  
and John would speak with all sorts of nautical jargon.

How she missed combing Charlotte's hair,  
lacing up John's boots and tucking Ben in bed!  
And when the silence stretched a lifetime between the kids and  
her,  
Mrs. Taylor scrambled to find questions to keep the conversation  
going.

Her once rosy face now wrinkled and vacant,  
her once busy hands now frail and wasted,  
her well-kept hair now scattered over the pillow.  
Alas! the kids were too busy to care.

Days lapsed into weeks and weeks slipped into months,  
and just as they were about to leave,  
Mrs. Taylor burst into tears,  
her despair knew no bounds.

It was heartbreaking to watch the children she once loved  
have this whole new life that she knew scarcely about,  
when just a little while back  
she knew everything about them.



How do children get over parents?  
How does a mother say goodbye?

# i don't need a howl, i don't need a cry

SWATI MOHEET AGRAWAL

Look at the clock ticking on the mantelpiece —  
how time flies!  
How we grow old,  
but to sit with you,  
alone with you,  
here in Landour,  
in this firelit room,  
you there,  
I here,  
is all I need.

I don't need a howl,  
I don't need a cry.

Clutching my hand,  
meeting my eyes,  
sheathing me,  
shielding me,  
like a lamp that  
kindles a fire in the dark.

I don't need a howl,  
I don't need a cry.

Beauty and peace  
now imposed upon my disheveled soul,  
vanquishing emptiness,  
desolation.  
Now at the zenith of a beautiful experience,



I give myself up to rapture,  
the sequence returns,  
one thing leads to another.

I don't need a howl,  
I don't need a cry.

# she'd still choose him

SWATI MOHEET AGRAWAL

Him,  
for no one charmed her more:

His dexterous hands and feet,  
skilled lips and ringing laughter.

His mercurial disposition and magnanimity,  
quick wit and humour.

His passions and unwavering confidence,  
haste and extraordinary handsomeness.

And those crass expletives,  
and that tiresome harangue against Mumbai —  
“the city of dimwits, the city of dimwits.”

But what remained intolerable  
was his inability to forgive,  
it alienated them  
and raised bitter storms,  
so that even now she awoke at night  
and trembled with anxiety,  
and remembered his venomous tirade,  
“you did this, you did that,  
you never did this, you never did that”,  
and his insolence —  
“you are no good, you are no good.”



# truth

SANIYA AHMAD

In a world ruptured by the appeal of myths,  
truth becomes a muted cacophony of choked voices.  
It is a burning desire to shatter pretense,  
a phenomenon upheld by the profoundly insane.

Privilege can have a sedating effect,  
it creates a blissful, mythical reality  
forbidden to the oppressed.  
As empathy freezes under the spell of oblivion,  
brutality is celebrated,  
and blood flows, unrestrained.

I dread the moments when lost lives are crystallized  
into numbers and hashtags,  
attracting fragile solidarity for a few days  
before they return once more  
to the staleness of forgotten names.

Truth has been monopolized  
by the whimsical fancies of  
individuals drunk on self-assurance.  
It no longer stretches to cover the ocean of blood  
wherein our humanity is drowning,  
becoming objective, neutral, sterile.

As appropriation of tragedy is frog-marched  
through the landscape of journalism,  
language is seized to extract anguish  
worthy of being clothed in words.



Massacres become a macabre stage  
for the pouring in of tweets and op-eds;  
our torment is condensed into articles,  
their pens dipped in our blood.

Truth is the wailing children of justice denied,  
a distant melody of muffled cries  
dwelling in the anonymity of pain.  
It is a murderer of illusions  
living in the wasteland of lies,  
never spoken, never felt.  
Locked within its corroding beauty,  
is a world where life  
finally makes sense,  
where living, finally makes sense.

# each moment is followed by another

I V A N D E M O N B R I S O N

Each moment is followed by another,  
like a chain that holds us.  
Here the wolf no longer has a head,  
it looks at itself in the mirror,  
and I have no more time.  
There is no more time to cry.  
Now I have to break the mirror  
by throwing dice at it.

За каждым миг следует другое ,  
как цепь, которая держит нас.  
Вот у волка больше нет головы,  
он смотрит на себя в зеркало.  
И у меня больше нет времени.  
Больше нет времени плакать.  
Сейчас я должен разбить зеркало,  
бросая на него кубики.

# there are empty days, like boxes

I V A N D E M O N B R I S O N

There are empty days, like boxes  
in which we put an hour.  
Time cut into small pieces like stars in the dark.  
Each star in the box shines only for itself.  
Each person in his room dreams alone

Бывают пустые дни , как коробки,  
В которые мы кладем часы.  
Время разрезанное на мелкие кусоки,  
как звездам в темноте,  
Каждая звезда в коробке  
светит только для себя.  
Каждый человек в своей комнате,  
мечтает один.

# a hole in the ground

IVAN DE MONBRISON

A hole in the ground  
Is it a grave or a house?  
From time to time I get out of it.  
I go from one house to another,  
always leaving the door open so that  
sometimes the wind can come in and rest a while.  
I lift up my head on my way  
and watch the wingless clouds fly in the night.

Дыра в земле,  
Это могила или дом.  
Я выхожу из дыры Иногда.  
Я хожу из одного дома в другой,  
всегда оставляю дверь открытой,  
чтобы иногда ветер мог зайти  
и немного отдохнуть.  
Я поднимаю голову  
По дороге и я смотрю  
Облака, какой без крыльев, летят в ночи.



fiction

# the language teacher

PRANITI GULYANI

“Moments ago, the world wasn’t what it is right now. Moments later, the world won’t be what it is right now. The Future Tense, you see, is a topic of great conflict and debate, and a question of constant uncertainty. The past is consuming, and a somewhat alcoholic illusion”

He began the class with these words, his eyeglasses teetering on the absolute tip of his nose. For some reason, he did not use his eyeglasses at all, and chose to look over them, rather than look through them. In all honesty, his eyeglasses seemed an unruly prop, forced onto him to make him look like a teacher. Actually, his eyeglasses were the only teacherly thing about him, while his baggy shirt, confused lace-and-wool collar, broken buttons and brass-chain watch, told an entirely different tale. Yet, there was everything teacherly about the way he spoke. He was a wordsmith, a language specialist, in the real sense of the word. He would cautiously lift every word, put them on the tip of his tongue, to see how they tasted, before setting them out into the world. He called his spectacles ‘transparent visual obstructions’, and wove threads of history and geography together even in the simplest of grammar. Once, during recess, he casually saif that ‘language is a labyrinth of all things liberal’. He’d told me that language is the art of symbols, and it is only when we impose the weight of meaning on the seemingly fragile shoulders of symbols can we call them words.

Yet, today, something was not right.

After his fanciful beginning to the topic of tense, he seemed to



forget what he was saying. His eyes were a criss-cross of confusion, and his cheeks were tinted in a slightly bewildered shade of white. It seemed as though he was struggling for things to say, and he had never before, in the past, been reduced to this state of helplessness. He picked four grammar books off my table, and began dictating exercises. The free-flowing ink in my fountain pen began to stumble and stutter. Somehow, it refused to confine itself to the boundaries of the grammar that someone else had set, at least not when he was teaching. As he hurriedly read through the sentences, and spelled out words that he thought we wouldn't know, I felt his voice tremble. His baritone voice was reduced to a soft, wafery whisper and his knuckles were pale.

The school bell rang, and the class filed out. He would usually wait for every child to leave, but today, he left first. There was an uneasiness in his gestures, and an underlying urgency in his steps.

For some reason, in spite of myself, I found myself following him as he made his way through what was supposed to be our school building. I clattered behind him on the cold, metal staircase and finally tiptoed through the hallway that led to the headmaster's room. I felt an uneasy, cold sensation erupt within me. The headmaster's room was the most godforsaken place a twelve-year-old could think of. But today, there was a soldier outside the headmaster's room, a soldier in a light brown uniform, with a gun in his hand, and a sneer on his face — the kind of soldier mother had always warned me to stay away from. I stood in the shadows, straining my ears to decipher the buzz of conversation behind the closed doors.



“I don’t understand,” spoke a cold, grim voice which I instantly recognized as that of the headmaster. “In the name of poetry, you have been converting our students into anti-nationalists? You have been convincing them to go against the noble German rule?”

“Oh, yes!” put in a baritone voice that was muffled, yet oddly familiar. I imagined the speaker to be a tall, bearded man with a rough, patched scarf wound around his neck, partially covering his mouth. He seemed to be a huge, burly man and I closed my eyes and wished for an instant miracle that would transform me into a Herculean figure to beat him up. I heard the rustling of paper, the familiar sound which heralded the opening of an exercise book.

“The person I was, and the person I am  
Is simply not a mound of clay  
That can be shaped, molded, sculpted,  
And pushed into a symbol.”

As the headmaster read these lines out in his cold, steely voice, I found myself trembling. Even from behind the closed door, these recited lines loud and clear. In fact, these lines were my entire world. These lines were the anthem of my language teacher’s class; they were our morning prayer, which we recited every day with folded hands. They meant so much to us, and had an impact so deep and indelible, that most of us had written these lines down in our exercise books. This, clearly, wasn’t the best of ideas, I now realized. “Symbol! Symbol! Do you see that? He is protesting and filling our children’s pure, German hearts against



the practice of making the Jew — I mean, the impure breed, where the Star of David—” spoke the oddly familiar muffled voice.

“But, sir, my class is a combination of both German and Jewish children. I am an educator, sir. I would never specifically target —”spoke my language teacher, in that same, wafery whimper that had worried me in class.

“Enough!” barked the headmaster. The sound of his fists slamming the table echoed all around. “I will not have violators of Nazi beliefs in my institution!” he yelled.

“So, sir, you won’t accept violators of the wrong either?” countered my language teacher. For the first time that day, I smiled. My language teacher was finally beginning to sound like himself.

“Is he of the impure breed?” the oddly familiar muffled voice asked the headmaster (or so I thought).

“Of course not!” answered the headmaster.”

# daughter of brick and stone

PRANITI GULYANI

There's something curiously familiar about her, yet I am unable to put my finger on this element of absolute familiarity. She sits in the corner of the classroom, her hands placed on her lap. Her eyes are a subtle green and there is a soft smile on her face. She is a well-mannered, well-bred child, I conclude. While the other children create havoc, immersed in airplane folding and building blocks, she looks out of the window. I am intrigued by the little-lady aura that surrounds her, and watch the way her emerald eyes move around the classroom, trying to capture every sight, every movement that pulsates within these four walls and beyond.

Finally, her gaze rests on a monarch butterfly that has alighted just a few centimeters away from the glass windowpane. There is something about the butterfly that makes her clap her hands and smile, as her beautiful face slowly but surely lights up. Suddenly, I feel a warm glow in my cheeks, and then I realize I am smiling. In my heart of hearts, I know that I would not have noticed the butterfly if not for her. I close my eyes and thank the Almighty for such a wonderful start to the new session, and finally enter the classroom, ensuring that my steps hold the quickness, agility and light-heartedness that is expected of a teacher to a troop of new kindergarten children. "Good morning, class!" I say, or rather sing, trying to smile at every sun-kissed face, but somehow, I find myself smiling only at her. The walls of the classroom are painted with rainbows, mermaids with stars in their hands, and seashells brimming over with the shape of a song. I feel as though I am transported into the depths of a fantasy, no matter how small and momentary this portion of fantasy is. I would like to believe that it is her presence that compliments this fairy-like, fantastical



essence. As the children respond to my greeting with multiplied enthusiasm and cries of joy, I cannot help noticing how she merely smiles. As I go about the traditional, every-year practice of checking the student almanacs, which is considered to be especially essential for kindergarten, I sense a slight discomfort in her bearing.

Her calm and composed smile is replaced by a slight frown, and moments later, she begins to fidget, her uneasiness increasing as I come closer to her desk. Finally, I am at her place. I smile at her, and ask her for her record book. The glow on her cheeks and the light on her eyelids seems to fade, and it seems as though her face is a reflection of the sky as it pauses between the evening and the night, slowly but surely, losing its light. She fishes out her record book and pushes it towards me, averting her gaze almost instantly. As I flip over to the first page, I read her name: Yuusha. “Your name is so beautiful, sweetheart! I have never come across such a name ever before!” I find myself saying. I expect her to give me one of her smiles, but she looks away. It seems as though she knows what is coming.

I go on to read her mother’s name, ‘brick’ and her father’s name, ‘stone’.

Utterly bewildered, I look at her and she buries her face in the crook of her elbow. Finally, I am able to comprehend the reason behind her discomfort. Yet, for some reason, my immense shock and almost uncontrollable astonishment is well contained within me. I know for a fact, that if I make my unease explicit, it will

bother her.

I flip over to the next page to see a newspaper clipping. This clipping is at least five years old, judging by the yellowness and the crustiness. It is framed with thick green, blue, purple and orange sketch pen, decorated with paper flowers and shaded with color pencil, as though it is the most important thing in the world. And, as I glance at her eyes, which seem to twinkle like two crescent-shaped bits of sun behind the mountain-like crook of her elbow, I realize that probably, it is the most significant thing in the world.

In her world, at least.

### ***Daughter of Brick and Stone***

*After a raging tsunami shook almost all of Japan, rescue teams discovered a child, no more than a year old, beneath a pile of brick and stone. The child emerged unscathed and absolutely unharmed. "Considering the heaviness of the material and the size of the pile, the survival of this child is nothing short of a miracle," stated Anderson Matthew, the head of the rescue team. "It seems as though the brick and the stone held her as though she belonged to them. We have examined her completely, and the incident has not altered her mental state at all. We cannot find any traces of trauma. She is like any other ordinary child," added Emily Yale, a senior child psychologist specializing in infant and toddler counseling.*

*The search for the child's parents is in full swing and, as of now, she has been transported to a local orphanage.*



My eyes glimmer with tears, but I do not let them touch my eyelashes, simply because I do not want this scenario to morph into an emotional mess. I want this to be normal, absolutely normal.

I stroke Yuusha's hair lovingly, as she slowly regains her posture. I close her record book, set it down on her table, just the way I had done with the rest of the students. Family does not always have to be flesh and blood. It does not always have to be a picture that can be framed and displayed. Sometimes, family and everything associated with it can be a metaphor written into the skies, with the ink of starlight.

Sometimes, that's just how it is.

With the golden glow of realization in my heart, and a smile on my face, I walk towards the whiteboard. "I'm going to begin with an ice-breaker game!" I say, holding a beachball in my hand. "The person who I give this ball to, will stand up and introduce herself or himself to the class, and tell the class about their lives and what makes them special! Who wants to begin?"

The daughter of Brick and Stone raises her hand.

# a girl's mushrooms

UMIYURI KATSUYAMA

*Translated from the Japanese by TOSHIYA KAMEI*

Once upon a time, there lived a man named Wulang. He had no property, no name, no breeding, no standing at all.

Unable to make ends meet in his hometown, he set off on a journey to inquire about the work his distant relatives could offer. While he hiked along a mountain trail, Wulang heard a crackling sound. The bushes parted, and a deer sprang up. He held his breath as he gazed at its magnificent antlers. The deer stood still for a moment, as if in defiance, and with another cackle, it vanished into the bushes.

“Great to bump into you, sir. It’s my lucky day!” a voice said.

When Wulang turned, a white-bearded old man stood with a cane. Noticing Wulang was all sweaty, the old man offered him his waterskin.

“What about you? I don’t want to drink your portion,” Wulang hesitated.

“Don’t worry. My granddaughter will bring me some food soon.”

“In that case, thank you.” He grabbed the waterskin and sipped cold water.

A young girl of about fifteen appeared. She wore an indigo-dyed jacket with narrow sleeves and pants. Her hair was plaited into two tails, which bobbed as she walked. A vine-woven basket hung from a strap around her shoulder. Although her attire was



simple, her face was lively. Her cheeks shone rosy, and her jet-black eyes were as shiny as fresh lacquer.

“Grandfather, here I am,” the girl said. “Sorry it took so long. Here it is.” She turned to Wulang and offered steamed buns from her basket. “Please try one.”

He grabbed one as large as an infant’s fist. The chewy bun contained seasoned mushrooms, and its fresh fragrance tickled Wulang’s nostrils.

“This is delicious. Better than any store in town.” When Wulang praised her, the girl’s face turned red, and she looked down.

“Glad that you liked it,” the old man said with a smile. “Say, why don’t you come with us? Now that we’re acquainted, join us for dinner at our humble abode. It’s not fancy, mind you, but you could certainly use some rest.”

Wulang followed the old man and the girl to their little hut surrounded by a hedge. Vegetables grew in a corner of the yard. Chickens pecked at worms. Fish swam in a pond whose water ran from the mountain. The place afforded a sweeping view of the surrounding mountains.

“What a view!” Wulang blurted out. “That’s where I’m going myself.” When he sensed the girl’s presence standing next to him, he pointed with his chin to the town below. “Living up here may turn you into a hermit, eh?” He chuckled, and the girl gave him



a polite smile.

The old man invited Wulang in and led him to a simple yet fresh, well-ventilated room.

Soon the girl entered, carrying a tray with food and drinks. The old man and Wulang drank together. They talked about philosophers, and poems of the past and the present. Even though no sound came from the kitchen, the girl brought steaming chunks of meat, namasu salad, and hot dishes to them.

After a while, the girl returned in a red dress. She sat next to Wulang and poured him his drink. The girl wore a slight touch of rouge on her cheeks and lips. She had an otherworldly beauty.

“As you can see, we live alone up here away from others. I’m worried about the girl’s future,” the old man began. “I can’t rest assured until I find her a decent husband. Say, she seems to be fond of you. Why don’t you take her as your wife? If you don’t want to marry her, keep her as a housekeeper.”

Wulang was a bachelor, and nothing impeded him from marrying her. Delighted, he agreed on the spot.

The following day, the girl said goodbye to the old man as tears streamed down her cheeks. Then she followed Wulang, staying a few steps behind. She looked back several times before her grandfather was out of sight.



When they arrived in town, Wulang rented a house with the valuables the old man had given him as the girl's dowry. He paid his relatives a visit with gifts, and received a job offer in return.

The girl was called Liniang.

She kept their house in order, cooked excellent dishes, and noticed details.

“She’s still quite young,” the old man had said. “Promise me you won’t sleep with her until she’s a bit older. Wait for a year before you see her naked and consummate your marriage.” When he said yes, Wulang had every intention of keeping his word.

One evening, however, Wulang came home earlier than usual. No one greeted him as he crossed the threshold. Then he heard a splash of water outside. Maybe Liniang was watering her vegetables. He stepped out to join her. His curiosity piqued, he stared into the penumbra. He gasped when he found the girl bathing in one corner of the yard. Before she could see him, he turned and went back inside.

At first, he doubted his own eyes. Perhaps the last rays of the setting sun played illusionary tricks on him. Yet a sense of certainty gnawed at him. With each passing minute, he became more certain of what he saw — male genitalia dangled between her legs. Then the old man’s words flashed back to mind. He wasn’t supposed to see her naked until they celebrated their first anniversary. Inadvertently or not, he broke his word. At a loss as



to what to do, he sighed. In the following days, he hardly slept or ate. Dark circles formed under his eyes.

“What’s the matter?” Liniang asked. “If something is worrying you, don’t you think I should know about it?”

Wulang hesitated.

“I have something to tell you, Wulang,” Liniang said as melancholy flickered across her eyes.

“There’s something—” she continued. Then she lowered her gaze and lifted the hem of her dress.

“No, don’t do that,” Wulang said, waving her off.

“I want to show you. Look.” She revealed her private parts, which had been hidden beneath her dress.

His eyes confirmed what Wulang had seen earlier. His stomach churned in queasy circles and his chest tightened.

“What have you got down there?” he asked, averting his eyes. Even so, he couldn’t help looking at it. There was no doubt about what it was.

“It’s a mushroom,” she answered.

Yes, of course. He almost nodded. “A mushroom?” he repeated.



“Do you mean one growing wet soil in your yard?”

Liniang dropped the hem of her dress, hiding her body.

“I found the mushrooms about a year ago. When I ate them, I became extremely ill. I was unconscious for three nights, hovering between the realms of life and death. On the fourth day, I awoke with this thing on my body. I’ve taken the herbs Grandfather prepared for me. It has become considerably smaller. It may fall off soon . . .” Her voice trailed off as tears clogged in her throat.

“Now that you’ve seen me like this, I can’t stay with you. I’m sorry you didn’t keep your word.” Liniang packed her things and left.

When Liniang returned home, the old man let out a long sigh.

“Decent husbands are hard to find,” he said. “Let alone gentlemen.”

A few weeks passed. Whenever Wulang came home, the house felt empty, and a profound sense of loneliness sank in. Truth be told, he missed Liniang. Wasn’t she good company? Did it matter she was different? If he begged her to come back, the worst thing she could say was no. He decided to go and look for her. When he reached the old man’s hut in the mountain, he found an unruly hedge and foundation stones. There was no trace of the girl, except for a cluster of mushrooms in one corner of her yard.

# la llorona y el diablo

B CRAIG GRAFTON

There was once a poor, plain, simple-minded young woman who lived with her three small children in a hovel on a cliff overlooking a swirling river. Because she was very plain, and knew it, she opened her heart and body to any man who came along and showed the slightest interest in her, hoping to get herself a husband. But alas, she got none and got three children instead.

She worked very hard cleaning for rich families in town, but was barely able to make ends meet. She even begged for food so that she could give her children at least one meal a day. Many times she went to bed hungry so that her children would not.

One night, after a meal of a few beans, she sat with her children on the cliff. Life was hard for them. *It will never get any better*, she thought. She knew if another man came along and sweet-talked her, there would be another mouth to feed. So she concluded her children would be better off in heaven with God. God would feed and clothe them and they would be happy with Him forever. She looked at the river and knew what she had to do and started to sob, for she loved her children dearly but believed this was the only way she could give them a better life.

Now the Devil was on his way to a convention in town that day, for a convention was always an opportunity for him to corrupt many souls, and he could not pass it up. He saw the poor woman crying and said to himself, "Here is another soul for me to take." So he disguised himself as a priest, for he knew that a grieving woman would confide all to a priest.



“What is the matter, my child?” he asked her. “Perhaps I can be of assistance.”

“Oh Father,” she said, “I am such an evil mother. I cannot provide for my children and can only give them a life of misery and grinding poverty here on earth. I have been thinking of drowning us so they can go to heaven and be happy forever with God. But if I do that they would be in heaven and I would be in Hell for drowning them and I would never see them again. Oh, what am I to do, Father?”

The Devil put his arm around her shoulders and said, “Give me your children and I will see that they are adopted by a rich family here in town who can give them everything they could ever want.”

“Oh Father, that would be wonderful! Would you do that for me?”

“Yes, my child, and I can do even more. You only have to ask,” prodded the Devil hoping to take the soul of this simple sobbing woman.

“Well, there is one other thing you could do for me,” she said.

“What is it, my child?” answered the Devil. He knew he had her hooked now. All he had to do was reel her in.

“Could you make it so that I have no more children, Father?” she asked. “For I do not wish to bring any more children into this world.”



“Yes, I can do that for you. But you will have to give me something in return,” said the Devil.

“What is that?” asked the woman.

“A kiss to seal the deal,” said the Devil. “Give me a kiss.”

The poor woman thought that strange, the priest asking for a kiss, but she wanted so much for her children to have a better life and she wanted to end her cycle of childbearing. So she leaned over and gave the Devil a kiss on the cheek and when she did so, she felt a tremor all over her body. But she did not know why. Unbeknownst to her, the Devil had stolen her soul when she kissed him. For some say that when you kiss the Devil, you kiss your soul goodbye.

Now the Devil took her three children with him and left the sobbing woman there, still weeping. But this time she cried tears of joy instead of sadness because she was so happy for her children.

But the Devil did not place the children as promised with a rich family to raise. Instead he gave them to a den of cutthroats and thieves for them to raise in their evil ways.

The following week, the poor woman looked for her children at the homes of the rich people for whom she worked. But alas, they were nowhere to be found. So she went to the church to find the priest and ask him where her children were.



But she could not find the priest with whom she had previously spoken and instead found another priest. So she asked the one if he knew the other.

“Oh yes, I know of that man,” he said. “But he is not a priest. He was the Devil in disguise. Many a poor soul from the convention have come to me in the past week to confess their sins and have told me how he led them down the road of ruin.”

“Oh Father, what am I to do? I have been so foolish,” she said and started to weep uncontrollably.

“Do not worry, my child. The convention is over now and the Devil has moved on and I know where your children are. They are with the lowlifes of this city. But even those thieves and cutthroats come here to confess and ask for God’s forgiveness for their sins. Why, just yesterday they confessed to the corruption of three small children! They must be your children. I will go to them and tell them that God will only forgive them if they return your children to you.”

And he did. And they did. And she wept tears of joy again when her children were returned.

A year has passed now, and during that time, she did not bear a child even though she had been with a man. She was happy because she had her children back and because she would have no more. She had gotten the better of that deal with the Devil after all, she thought.



A year later, the Devil was back in town to harvest more souls at the same yearly convention. But before doing so, he thought he would pay a visit to the sobbing woman and gloat. But when he came to her home, he found to his astonishment that her children were back with her. He became enraged.

When the poor woman saw the Devil, she shuddered and grabbed her children and pressed them to her bosom.

“Why do you have my children?” bellowed the Devil. “You gave them to me. They are mine. Give them back to me.”

“You cannot have them,” she said defiantly.

“Oh, but I will, for I still have your soul, a soul doomed to Hell, I might add.”

“Oh, is that so?” asked the woman snidely.

“Yes. I stole it from you when you gave me that kiss. Now give me the children and I will give you back your soul.” Steam came from the Devil’s ears as he said this. He was mad at this woman for defying him and was running out of patience with her.

“My soul is worthless anyway. You can keep it,” shouted back the woman. “I will keep my children.”

“Then you have broken our deal and therefore it is null and void. But remember, part of that deal was that you would have no more



children. Since you have reneged, I too renege and cancel the deal. Your womb will conceive again and you will have more children that you cannot feed and you will eventually come to me begging for me to take them all. It is only a matter of time, for you are such a simple-minded fool.” And with that, the Devil let out his trademark eerie cackling laugh.

“Well since you have cancelled our contract,” she answered, “then you no longer have my soul, do you? My soul is returned to me and I am no longer condemned to an eternity in Hell, am I?”

The Devil said nothing for he knew that he had spoken in foolish haste and in revenge when he said he canceled the deal, that he had lost a soul he had previously possessed. This simple-minded woman had inadvertently gotten the better of him.

But the woman knew that the Devil was right. She would have more children now. She knew that she could barely provide for herself or her children and one more would be too many. She knew that her life and the lives of her children and her children to be, were doomed to misery, grief, and grinding poverty here on earth. Perhaps she was right the first time when she wished for her children to be in heaven with God.

She hugged all three of her children and herded them over to the edge of the cliff. She looked down at the foaming river below, made the sign of the cross, asked for God’s forgiveness, then jumped, taking her children with her.



Some say that when a cold north wind blows down and swirls about and churns up the waters of the river, you can hear the haunting wailing of the woman being released from the depths below. Wailing that sends a chill down your spine and makes your flesh crawl.

# the death watch

B CRAIG GRAFTON

It had begun. The death watch that is. It began when the oldest son received a phone call at 5 a.m. that morning from the nursing home telling him their mother was nearing her end. They should be there. So he called his siblings and by 6 a.m., all three of them sat in their mother's room at the nursing home watching the wrinkled, shriveled, unconscious old woman fade away. She had Alzheimer's.

They were uncomfortably glad this day had finally arrived. They knew it was coming. The trouble was it hadn't come soon enough. They had visited her, if that's what it could be called, for they weren't certain if she knew who they were anymore, every Saturday for the last two years. Now they just wanted all this to be over with, for her sake and theirs.

It was not because they held any ill will toward their mother, but it was simply because her life needed to be ended. She hadn't had any form of a real life, no quality of life, those past two years or even a couple of years before that when she started to go downhill. It was pointless for her to decay in this cold barren nursing home. Besides, she was 85, time enough for anyone.

So they sat there and spoke to each other off and on about their jobs, friends, neighbors, mutual acquaintances — anything but their mother. It wasn't that they didn't care about her, for they all loved her deeply and appreciated all that she had done for them through the years. "You're never done raising your children" was their mother's mantra. But they didn't want to think about that or reminisce about her now, for fear that they would tear up and



break down.

Their mother was actually starving to death. Because of Alzheimer's, she couldn't remember to swallow, so she just wasted away. They didn't force feed her, no point in that. All they did was administer morphine to ease her pain.

There was nothing they could have ever done to stop or slow down the death process of Alzheimer's once it had set in. It had started for her when she got pneumonia and was hospitalized. Somehow the pneumonia triggered the Alzheimer's and her mind just wasn't right when she was released. Cured of pneumonia, she was now infected, if that was the word, with Alzheimer's.

True to form, it eventually got to the point that she couldn't remember people, places or things. Couldn't put a sentence together, and when she did kind of manage one, no one ever knew what she was talking about, since her words were so garbled and non sequitur. Finally, she lost all power of speech.

Long before that, when she vaguely had her mind about her, when discussing old age with her eldest one day, she blurted out, "Well you're not going to throw me away, are you?" He wasn't certain what she meant by that, and could only surmise it meant not putting her in a home. But he was sure of one thing now. They had thrown her away.

Only after a number of inevitable things transpired.



They took away her driver's license before she got lost driving. They got meals on wheels for her. Someone checked on her every day. She had been found wandering aimlessly around the neighborhood. Someone called the police. The police called the eldest son. This happened a second time and that's when they cast her into the safety of a nursing home — since none of her offspring was in any position to take on the full-time burden of caring for a demented old woman.

When they first put her there, she knew where she was. She knew she was in a nursing home, not in her home, and she fought for her freedom. Tried to escape, that is. She got as far as the parking lot. They consequently drugged her up and strapped her to a wheelchair, immobilizing her for the rest of her life.

Now, as 6 p.m. approached, her children thought they had better get something to eat since they hadn't eaten all day. They had a discussion about who would go and eat first and who would stay and eat later. Just then, the oldest of the grandchildren arrived. He had already eaten, so he told them all to go ahead, that he would stand watch.

Her children left. The room went silent. The grandson sat there watching the near-lifeless form he called his grandmother gasp intermittently for air as she slept.

Even if one has Alzheimer's, one can still hear, provided their hearing hasn't already gone, that is. Their mother, to the best of everyone's knowledge, still had her hearing. What she heard or



didn't hear and how she processed it was another matter entirely. That's when their mother died. When she didn't hear her children's voices anymore.

The grandson called his father in the middle of their meal and told him Grandma had passed.

Her children were so grateful she hadn't died in front of them. They liked to think she had heard them that day and knew they were there for her. They liked to think that when she didn't hear their voices anymore, she knew they had left, and chose that moment to die in order to spare them.

At the same time, it nagged them. Maybe their mother thought her children had abandoned her when she didn't hear their voices anymore. That they had thrown her away for good. And so decided to give up the ghost.

In any event, they were glad that the death watch was over.

# no completion

AAYATI SENGUPTA

In a kitchen, stands a low table with a lamp hanging over it. It's a bare room with a table, three chairs, a pot of fish curry and rice on the table. The food has gone cold since it has been out for a while. Two women, Ila and Kaya, are sitting on chairs in the inadequate light of the lamp. A patch of light falls on the table from the streetlamp outside.

“No, no—you don't understand—”

“Do you know how you sound right now?”

“It doesn't matter—you have to understand, it's not finished. Everything has changed.”

Exasperated, Kaya gets up. Ila stays at the table, running her fingers in circles on the surface.

“There is no completion, do you get it?”

The soft sound of water running free as Kaya opens the tap over one lonely dish in the sink.

“A story is finished only when the writer says so—no, not even then. Sometimes a reader might feel disconcerted by an ending and they might give it their own, and it might seem like that's the end but is it really? Here, come sit.”

Kaya, finishes washing the dish, dries her hands on her kurta and smiles.



“Go on, I’m listening,” she says, smiling slightly.

“When I wrote *The Sacred Meaning* I saw a web in my head. As they say, there was a seed and I was ready soil and some strange hand planted it in me. I wrote about the necessity of remaking meaning, or establishing meaning in our personal contexts. Language is so complicated if you think about it and our everyday relationships are loaded if we do not clarify the meanings of what everyday words mean to us and if we perceive any of them differently. Do you think there really is any normal word? Anything could be a trigger for anybody, some could trigger groups and communities. Sensitivity is important and the only way to do that is by agreeing upon and, when needed, changing predefined meanings—”

“I already know this Ila, you know. I read your book.”

“I know you did. I’m just trying to tell you something... aah! I wish I smoked. This restless energy is why they always make characters take a cigarette or pace around the room or channel the restlessness,” Ila says, folding her legs under her on the chair and placing her palms on her knees, holding herself.

“You know, we are all trapped by systems. If we are not inconvenienced by them, we can go our whole lives without noticing them and that’s the thing; they are so flawless that billions of us go our lives without feeling anything but a slight twinge now and then. I wonder, when and where did they first decide to adopt a uniform system of laws for everyone? Isn’t it



arbitrary that somethen someone decided that this is the start and the end of a place and it's ours and decided who fell within that 'ours' label—"

"Ila, you're deviating. What's it got to do with the book?"

"No, no, it's all connected. I just can't see it clearly yet. Well, nothing really. It's quite simple. It's like drawing with a chalk, erasing and then doing it again, or better it's like writing a post on your blog or any of these social media places really. I can't write the book anymore."

"You can't write the book anymore because you can erase it while writing?"

"No Kaya! I can't write the book because it's ridiculous now. I have changed since I began and if any writer is worth their salt, I don't think we should be having any books. All books should be burned after some decades—"

"You sound unbelievable. I wonder if this is how it starts. Burn the book? What's this new ridiculousness? Don't say these words in front of anyone else. I'm trying to understand and honestly I don't get it."

"Kaya, I can't be trapped by a contract; I don't know how others are either. When I started writing, when I pitched the idea, I looked at it as if it were an important thing. I truly believed in icragas and so wanted to write on icragas. I felt called to write



about it, which is why I could write such a great proposal and have publishers pounce on the idea. But, now I don't. And why should I write about something that is clearly irrelevant?"

"Icragas is irrelevant?" Kaya speaks quietly, but her face is tight with anger.

"It is to me, Kaya. I'm not who I was when I signed the contract, when I began writing the book. I'm changed because I began exploring icragas. I can't finish this book. I have to pull out and go under and that boils my blood."

Kaya is quiet.

"I think I'll head to bed now," Ila says, getting up. "When will you come up? Should I leave the passage-light on?"

"No, no light. I'm not sure. I'll stay here for a bit."

"*Achha*, goodnight Kaya and thanks for listening, even if you didn't understand."

Kaya nods, her face half in the shadows.

Ila wakes up the next morning and finds the usual empty bed with disheveled sheets. Kaya wakes up early every day, makes tea, cleans the kitchen and starts making food. She runs a food delivery service out of the house and every day like clockwork by



six in the morning, starts preparing the lunch for the day. Ila rarely helps and finds some of the food left aside for them as well. She doesn't care; she would eat anything and if Kaya weren't there, probably nothing.

Ila made the bed, thinking over the decision she was surely veering toward. Not writing the book would mean either a tiresome legal battle or paying an insane amount of money. That money isn't for them, it's for her to build a library for the community, she rages to herself. But it's not their fault either. They invested in her. Did she not know that there would be a penalty when signing the contract? She had read it, had signed it, had been of sound mind. *Of sound mind*. What does that even mean, she muttered to herself. Imagining all the arguments that she would be hearing once she spoke her truth, Ila felt tired and burdened already.

“So, this is what the weight of an obscene amount of money feels like,” she thought to herself. She walked down the stairs to the kitchen and found Kaya ready at work, tea and biscuits waiting for Ila on top of the microwave. Ila took the biscuits in her hand and put the cup into the microwave to heat the tea. Kaya stayed as she was, her hands busy moving between the two pots in front of her.

“Kaya?”

“Tell me.”

“I'll write the book.”



“I knew you would come around. It’s a lot of money. You know what it would mean, you could build the library, you could do all the things you have wanted. You can create a little corner in the world where things will be different, Ila.”

Ila stays silent. She knows how little will change unless people look at things differently. But Kaya is right; a little corner in the world where things are right for some, even if those some fall among the loneliest minority of one.

“Thank you for hearing me out. Your silence and disappointment reminded me of my responsibilities. This compromise is momentary. I can let them know what I think, how I feel after I have finished the book—”

“No, Ila. That you cannot do. It’ll diminish the integrity of your narrative if you don’t stand behind what you wrote right after and that too for something as important as icragas.”

“This is not right. These systems... I can’t see a way out. I don’t believe in icragas anymore. Why can’t I say so?”

“You are not a child in the world. Think about it and the answer will come to you. Why can’t I tell you after ten years that I don’t love you anymore?”

“You can if that’s how you feel.”

“No, Ila, these things are not done. There’s a build-up, a moment



when things change, conversations are meant to be had as pointers so as to not break someone's world—”

“I’m confused. Are you saying you want to leave?”

“No. I’m just saying that things don’t just change overnight.”

“You don’t know when they change. If we are lucky, we might be able to pinpoint exactly what causes a change in us— this is ridiculous! Why are we fighting?”

“We are not fighting. I’m just saying things can’t *just* change.”

“Things do just change, Kaya. I used to hate living with someone until well into a few months of us living together—”

“Is this a good time to tell me that you didn’t want to live with me the first months we were together?”

“Not the point, Kaya! Listen please. The point is not that I got used to you; because I have lived with others before. But something changed here, something altered—”

“Ila, you should probably start writing. I don’t want to do this but don’t forget that I’m your editor. Your writing decisions affect me too.”

Stopped in her tracks, Ila weighed her next words.



“I’ll write, Kaya, but I’ll write so I can make the library and pay you your share. I’ll not stand by a book that I don’t believe in. If you think time makes a difference, I’ll speak about it later.”

Watching Kaya’s strong frame by the stove, Ila sighed.

What people often forget is that nothing is truly ever complete, unless you think so. A story when being written is only finished when the writer thinks so. A dissatisfied reader might think otherwise, as is often spoken of about fairytales nowadays: what happens in the happily ever after?

The truth is that the nitty-gritty of what life is, what living is, can never be fully captured. It is our job (should we be interested in the endeavor of moving toward completion) to keep on living (thinking, reading, talking, being) keeping in mind that nothing is ever complete. When we love a thought and feel at peace at its profundity, we must come back to how it is just one way of looking at the world, one explanation. It will knock our peace right out, and good too for that peace is but a false peace, coming from an untrue thing. But if that peace is important to you, even if it comes from an untrue thing, hold onto it. When and if something will happen to change it, it will.

# judith was never adopted

BRYANA LORENZO

Once back in foster care, I knew a girl named Judy that married a gangster. She'd aged out of adorableness when she turned fourteen. Freckles became acne scars. Short, chubby baby fat stretched into long, awkward limbs. Clothes were too tight, too revealing. Only her rose-blushed cheeks revealed her youth.

She never wanted to marry Griffin. She said so herself the day before her wedding. He was twenty. She was fifteen. His last girlfriend had been found in a cheap motel overdosed on oxycontin. She was fourteen.

"How did this happen?" she whispered. "Why me?"

She wore the long black dress she'd worn for our foster father's funeral. Her hair was parted in two long tawny braids. She looked like a clown—face porcelain with mauve polka dots—a parody of a little girl. Of herself. Tears revealed the soft peach skin beneath the makeup.

"It was never supposed to turn out this way! All the pretty orphan girls in books always get adopted! This ain't supposed to be me!"

Once, Judy sang to cancer patients across Tennessee hospitals with her little guitar left by her real Pa. Once, she'd been a companion to a lonely old chiropractor who'd wanted to adopt her but then died of a brain tumor. Once, she'd crawl under her bed and cry as her best friends were adopted by orthodontists or finance consultants and stopped sending her letters out of shame of where they came from.



Even if she were never adopted, she should have married well—married the son of an oil tycoon or a politician—a prince who jumped from the creased yellowing pages of an old classics book from the back of the school library. That’s what the books said happened to girls like her. The books, the movies, the musicals, the TV shows.

But Judith was never adopted, and she never married well.

“He’s so handsy!” she cried. “He’s handsy! And gets jealous when I talk with another boy! And snuffs his cigarettes out in my hair! And he—”

“Stop!” I said, hands over my ears. “Why are you marrying him if he’s such a tub o’ lard?”

“Cause he said he’d hurt me if I didn’t,” she gagged out. “And you. And Aunt Jeanie. And I can’t run away ‘cause then we’d all have to run away and then where would we even go?”

“Judy,” I said, and grabbed her by the shoulders. “No one would blame you if ya’ just left. We can take care of ourselves if worse comes to worse.”

“No, no, no!” Judy sobbed. “I’m an orphan! I already got no Ma or Pa to call my own, and if I lost you and the other kids, I don’t know what I’d do with myself!”

She cried into my shoulder. I held her there for a few minutes,



even as snot permanently etched itself into my sleeve, forever dying that part of my jacket green. Really, I knew what Griffin would do to us if Judy ever left. Shattered bones would be the least of our worries. Right then, an old British earl should have swooped in and taken Judy away—taken her away and left us in the dust. It would sting for a day, but Judy deserved to be swept to safety.

“Judy...” I said, holding her face close to mine. “You... you should marry Griffin.”

Judy nodded. “I know...”

“But not for long,” I said.

Judy wiped her tears away. “What do you mean?”

“One day,” I said, grabbing her hands. “One day, Imma’ leave this city and come back rich. Become a railroad tycoon or something. Then I’ll come back for you, and you can leave Griffin and marry me instead!”

Judy smiled. “You really mean that?”

“Course I mean that!” I said. “It’ll be just like in the movies! I’ll swoop in—with my fancy pinstripe suit—and tell Griffin that if he don’t leave you alone, no tough guy talk will save him from all the hitmen I’ll hire!”



“You promise,” Judy said. “You promise you’ll come back for me.”

I grinned. “Cross my heart and hope to die—”

“Stick a needle in your eye.”

She married Griffin the next day, and I left the city soon after. Then two years later, there was a war in Iraq. I got involved, cause I needed to pay my Milligan University tuition somehow. I fell in love, I lost that love, and I lost an arm. I came back home. Aunt Jeanie had passed from breast cancer. The other kids were scattered across the country. I was homeless.

Griffin and his gang were gone to terrorize some city in the Midwest—Judith with them.

“Wouldn’t it be crazy if... when you came back, I was the rich one and you were the poor one?” Judith had asked me before the wedding. “The way stories like mine go, I’ll find out I’m secretly related to the duchess of Sansbury and get you out of some pickle.”

Playfully, I scoffed and crossed my arms. “Are you implying that you’ll be the one saving me when I come back for you? That you’ll be the hero here?”

Wickedly, she grinned. “Well, I am the precocious protagonist after all!”



Of course, she never did. Judith was never adopted, and she was never saved.

In fact, I never saw her again.

On the land where a bridge curves around the flat waist of the city, there was a field of sunflowers blooming with blue birds that chirped all day and fed upon seeds and light. They built a mall where I run a hundred rupee shop now. Everyday someone bulges into the shop to see what new, 100-rupee worth accessories I have put on display; some come to get the Persian rugs, some come to window shop on the cutlery (they are never welcome though), some are interested in things they will never find in my shop, "Would you happen to have oil paints, specifically crimson and olive?", and most just roam around shoplifting. But I hate kids the most; not mine, theirs. My kids are good kids and not any kind of shoplifters; one is working with a *Mistree*, to be a *Mistree* (good job prospects), and the other one works with me, he will take care of the shop for me when I am old. Good kids! Its other people's kids I hate. Have they been taught no shame, creating havoc in my property, disturbing my business and my other *Gaahak*? Sir, even though I stand behind the counter only, I survey the entire room well and I know when a kid has picked up a yoyo or a pack of my precious golden dice from the corner I have brightened with blue light. It's the kids' corner, lit blue so that they keep away. If it were my kids I caught stealing, I would administer a handsome beating of the buttocks with a broken piece of rubber or the metal pipes I have a collection of from my years as a plumber in this very building, but rich parents don't know how to bring up their kids with hand. It's all pathetic. The secret is in the smell shoplifting kinds have on them. The sheer pungency, the scent of *Malir* sewers, visibly emanating from their frail necks, makes one want to wring them apart.

Only a week ago, this kid came into my shop and started breaking all my blue pottery birds. Can you imagine? Now no such behavior is acceptable inside my shop. I also have put up a notice on the entrance and behind the counter for all to see and beware of: **Walk carefully into the shop, many objects here are fragile.** It's written in Urdu too. There, no below that. If it weren't for the blue pottery birds, I wouldn't even have put this notice up, because, you see, they are very precious to me. My dealer got them from Isfahan, which is in Iran, especially for me because he knows how much I love these, through the Quetta route. The key to their beauty is that they are of a size where I can press each of them between my palms and they would be hidden even from God's sight, an unknown that only I know exists, and when I unwrap my hands again, they are liberated: I release a reality into the thin, blue air of my shop, God bless me. These birds agree with my moving hands like the metal pipes when I whip them in the air. They look good in your house, place them on a shelf in your study, by the bedside desk, or in your office on your big table as you break big deals, you shall always be charmed by how they fly when they cannot stir. As you become richer, they enable you to never detract from the road to success and you spend less on corrupting your children. They remind you of your *Mantiq* and *Manzil*. So quiet obviously, if an annoying kid runs into my shop, breaks the rules and hurts my birds, I will have to administer a fatal whipping of his ass with one of my pipes. And that is what I did when that insolent kid started to metamorphose into a *Gidh!*

I will tell you exactly how abhorrent that boy was. The moment

the bell on the entrance door rang, I was alerted, not by the fact that I had company but by the fact that I had danger. I sniffed it. Now I have a good sense of such situations. So every time these kids appear, I know that they have brought trouble. He roamed around with his mother who was least interested in looking after him; moreover, she kept staring at the small rugs with lion prints hanging by the windows, touching them as if to judge their quality but I know she had smudged one with her grimy fingers and was acting as if it was already there. She was definitely one of the factory women, living across the highwaybridge. She took my blue pottery birds with no intention of buying them; and the kid was set loose. *Matlab...?* Never set the kids loose, they go bonkers; and that's only the first rule! *Chutiya jate hain bhai!* I understand he must have been hungry since they didn't seem to have money to dine at this mall; (the burgers here are 300 rupees each and they don't even feel like starters, let alone a main course), but was it a good place, or appropriate time, to start losing hair and shedding skin? That disgusting piece of shit wept and screamed as if he were dying, and kept calling his mom who was, guess what, standing by his side. They could have left that very moment and it would have been fine. Now that he is dead, whose fault is it?

“*Amma, dard horahi hai!*” he screamed as his bones started to change shape. Extending fingers, thighs diminishing, ribs expanding and feet converting to claws inside his small, mud-ridden shoes until they were torn is neither the way to be a good *Gaahak*, nor to be a good kid. I had to clean up all that dirt and the torn pieces of polyester submerged in wasted blood afterwards. The stench of *Malir* sewers, grime and blood took



three days to vacate. The blue light looked green as I sat without customers, fighting a swarm of flies. Can you now see how difficult kids are? The mother, however, was dumbfounded. The boy was already larger than her palms and she could not hide him in the unknown. The sound of the kid kept turning into high-pitched shrieks of a vulture and it was irritating me greatly, while the mother kept on hugging him and even she cried loudly. And I don't like noise. Also, I found her obsession with her son's newly growing feathers very morbid. Throughout his nasty process of growing wings, she would hold his shedding feathers, caress them and would collect all that had fallen into her lap, least she could do, *warna* I would have to clean them up too. Very weird, I would say, as I only like my children the way all human children are, that is featherless, hairy and definitely not stinking. I have started to think the death was the mother's fault. You should make a note. She gave him too much freedom to roam and prance around my shop. It's just like all the mothers who come here along with their kids.

It was then when he extended his elbows into all directions, rotating and reveling, screaming as if he was exposed piece of fresh uncooked meat simmering on a pan, his saliva showering like the splatter of oil browning the steak. I knew he had his eyes on my blue pottery birds. He cried to his loudest, manifested on the wavering of the shut windows, and dived onto the shelf of pottery. Few things persisted the fall of the five-foot-high shelf, and only one blue pottery bird survived this attack.

I couldn't hold myself then. How could I? I unsheathed my



strongest metal rod from the unknown of my palms that I had hidden for unseen circumstances and I jumped on him. He kept on making those incomprehensible noises and I kept on whipping him with the rod, hard enough for him to go silent and be a good kid. One thing I would give him is the fact that he did manage to metamorphose completely before he lay dead; even his brain, splattered on the floor due to severed skull, looked like a bird brain. When I kicked him, the vulture did indeed fly. But good God, he was ugly bald!

The thing I fail to understand now is why the mother comes to the shop every day, stands outside of the shop all day and cries, stares at me and sometimes shouts, banging on the glass door which I have to keep locked lest she charge in and carnage on my property (indeed it is hard to get customers now that the shop doors are always locked). God knows when she will leave. They are expensive doors; I cannot afford to renovate them if they get cracked? I will have to get rid of her. I think I should complain about her to someone sane or run her down with a pipe. No one is sane in this mall anyway.

# when their hands bury me

GEORGE ROSAS

The pornographic skull is crushed by the rolling threads of an armored battle tank, its methodical and mechanical doom ceaseless and red in its prescient mission. The smoothbore gun swivels in its fey ambit and an ambrosial round is loaded into its hollow shaft. It unloads a depleted uranium shell against the walls of Jericho where the remnants of men are hung as if in the gallows of old. Once regaled by the macabre opera, the powertrain hums the automated composite chariot into vigilance and it drones against the black wide open. The skyscrapers, no longer skyscrapers, are torn from the firmaments in which once the puissant resided and looked below to those they ruled through unnatural and calculated disasters. The shattered glass and the corroded steel from the unbroken rain and the crumbled concrete and exploded bricks lay on the sepia streets as if the debris had poured from a vengeful cloud beset on the destruction of all that was alive. Jealous of their freedom and of their love and of their lustrous illusions. Cannonaded vehicles tipped sideways lay on the cracks of the sidewalks where nothing grows and light posts that lean towards the ground in reverence litter the garboil of the nocturne street, the abandoned playground of a spoiled divinity. Nothingness hides amidst the eldritch shadows underneath the alloy and the copper. A silence profound inundates the breath of the city, it is pain and it is hurt. A frozen twilight, the culmination of a decadent race, of an unworthy and a fleeting and uncompromising beast.

He checks the pockets of the gentle gray oversized utility jacket. He opens a flap with flout and pats the rustic homespun lining inside. He feels a small box within a pocket and removes it from



the chasm. The Sun and the Moon. A box without matches, a box without light. This is all that he finds. He kicks the ribs of the corpse and curses the body of the man who lies dead and then curses himself for being alive. He does not know why he is alive but he wishes that he was not. He looks down at the body that did know how to number his days and turns his head away from the rot. Shame arrives with lateness to the lowly. But so does anger and it persuades with much ease those that are meek and unwise. He grabs the edge of the sleeve of the utility jacket and yanks the fabric from the body and the body moves towards him with raw force. He yanks again and obtains the same results. A madman in a bedlam. The bedlam in Jehoram. He spits at the corpse and yanks once more and the decaying ligaments from the shoulder are torn and the arm is freed from the socket. He falls to the ground and hits the tip of his coccyx on a hard surface and sucks in the pain that comes in waves through a grimace and he turns his body sideways and holds his knees to his chest and the man cries. Trapped behind silence, he cries. He cries for those who cannot. He cries because he is the only one that can. And he cries because he is cursed with the ability to feel and to think. And he thinks and overthinks but a single memory, a single person. An image and a name engraved in his eternity by a predicament and a measure of his own construct.

The swans of steel shriek in the gloaming onyx over the constructed skeleton underneath an everlasting obsidian sun. The fallen kingdom holds its breath, awaiting a vortex of heat and combustion. The dissonance of the metal engines of the bird-like machines fade into the white light and the black rain pouring



from the condemning heavens. An incogitant sound, much like a whistle in the deep, echoes from the abandoned buildings and from the soot covered granite and blackened pavement. The air crackles with the weight of the low-drag diminutive horsemen of the apocalypse as they fall like Titans bringing fire from above to scorch and punish the damned and lost souls inhabiting the unfathomable and repugnant halls of Abaddon. A comet of magnesium containing inside the inevitability of oblivion and of destruction. A curious architecture, an ill-worshipped monolith of human ingenuity and brutality. The wickedness strikes the ground with the force of Armageddon. Its incandescent torch lifts and renders fruitless what it touches and it envelops the land of the dead in an inescapable inferno, a malignant and cancerous rancor that leaves behind not a word to voice a promise of hope. Dark, dark is its light as it conducts the low points of moments that should not have passed.

In his hand, a bird. It is dead. Within his dirty fingers, its anisodactyl feet. He lowers the cordate bird onto the unbearing soil. He covers it with various rocks. He does not cry. He sees an onyx puddle born from a hole in the ground. There is no reflection. There is nothing to reflect. An abyss. Waves ripple on the surface. An autorhythmic Panthalassa. His hand dives inside of the pool and drains the mere from its hidden treasure. In his hand, a retrieved knife. Annihilation. He watches the irenic beetle scuttle between the friable cinder blocks, guided by the potent smell of rot and degradation. In its mandibles is an insect that he does not recognize. A modicum source of food. For both.



Coronets of luminescent flames dance on the reflection of the patina of the forsaken bubinga from an eon now consumed. A hand glides over the tongues of the blaze, seeking a warmth that seems but a fable. He looks at the fire and watches how it licks at the air, consuming its life and fueling its own. It seeks an escape from its cage made of wood and bones with an exhausting wrath, an inimical violence. He remembers. The way his feet soaked in the shore of the blue water. He remembers. In the tarriance of autumn, when he watched the leaves turn from green to red and descend in grace and in death, and wondered if the trees would cry as he now was. And he regrets. He should have said more and he should have expressed more and he should have listened and he should have done and he should have acted. Taken that leap, not of faith but of love. For he knew what he felt but had not the wisdom to seek destruction. Of his fears and of his expectations. Of what could have been and what could not have been. Of the things that would have come to pass and those that did not. Of the past and of the future. And now, above the fog and the cessation all he knows is the irenic night as she disappears into a fragile extinction. And himself, a mirthful continuation. But her, an indestructible anamnesis. A singular, unimaginable person in a perfect time. A perception immemorial. A miracle.

Beneath the undertow of mourning, at the end of all things he walks through the ashes in the snow, without wisdom and without fault. He is unredeemed and time is absolute. The words that he utters are without grace and his face is seasoned with the salt of his tears. An agonist. He shall never know the answers that he seeks. The world shall turn and things will fade as all things



should. And he shall never find her face in the lonely threnody of the desolated city.

# dl boyfriend

JUSTIN FROBINETTE

To get with the kind of men I'm into, there's no choice but going down the spectrum a little. Bi, straight, or DL—I'm only into certain types of guys. One guy posted a profile on a gay sex app that said, "Just looking to see who else is around." Neither of us had completed our profiles. "Sup," I said.

"Nothing much," he replied. "Stats?"

"180, 6'4, 24, vers bottom," I wrote.

He wrote, "I'm Str8. Never been with a guy before." He sent a picture of his body.

"Do you show face?" I asked.

"Sure," he said. He sent me what I learned was a fake face pic. "Was going to marry my high-school sweetheart, but she passed away in September," he said.

"I'm sorry, man," I said.

"James here," he replied.

We agreed to meet up in public for a drink first. I didn't care that James didn't look like his picture. He actually did look better in person. He told me his real name was Kyle. He told me he was a teacher. His father was Jewish and his mother was Christian. He told me about when his father, mother, and brother were on a trip, and they all started driving steeply uphill.



“And then my dumbass brother says, we’re going to see JESUS!” he told me, and I laughed. “That’s when it started to become oppressive. He wouldn’t let her take us to church. He banned Christmas.” He said his father lost it on his mother. The whole family walked on pins and needles around his dad until the divorce. His mom loved to share that her great-grandfather was one of the original Christian settlers of Pennsylvania, not Amish or Quaker. “Episcopalian,” she declared. She overdrank. While Kyle lived with her, he lived out a protest. Whenever he would find an empty wine glass, or multiple, thrown away in the trash, he would take each of them out, place them openly on the kitchen counter, and if there was more than one, then he lined them up in a row for her to see.

“What are you doing after this?” I asked. “I can be discreet.”

“That girl behind you was listening to what you said,” he told me.

I bought him a beer which he gave to the girl. I also saw him playing a song for her at the bar. He played it again and said it was such a good song. I tried to change it once, saying it was overplayed. He did take me home. The boy who bends over for a night. Later, I saw the girl from the bar walking the dog that was in his dating profile. I guess they were going out.

I didn’t have anywhere else to live, my mom was just like his. My parents wouldn’t let me live at home with them, so I lived in his mother’s house for three months, up in his bedroom, through the walk-in closet behind a closed door in what I think was an office. I



lived there and she didn't know at first. He snuck me up to his room so his mom wouldn't see. He called it 'Anne Franking' me. When he went out with me, he told his mom on the phone that he was hanging out with a different friend, not me.

When she drank, Anne Franking me was easiest. Still, she slowly caught on that I was living in her house. She actually thought her kid was eating more because he was hungrier. Once she almost went into the back room where I was staying, but he was serious about her not going in there. She finally did discover me. I parked my car down in the cul-de-sac to hide, but a neighbor told his mother about it, to move it up farther near her house if I was staying there. She sat me down to tell me that she didn't believe in 'homosexuality'.

"My son thinks differently than I do," she said. "I just care about my son." She had written down her words. Her hands were shaking. When Kyle found us, he became enraged.

We had sex every time she was out of the house, on the floor of the back room until we heard her car. I was in my underwear back there most of the time, but he told me he liked that idea. He said, "Easy access." I hated that he would secretly pretend that he wasn't my boyfriend most of the time. He took me and a girl to a family wedding. That girl who walks his dog for him now. At the wedding, he held her out as the girlfriend and held me out as the gay friend. He took the wedding pictures with her. Look how progressive it was to have a gay friend, they said about me. Then, he fucked the gay friend in the room that belonged to the



girlfriend. We called the resort, Ballin'Isles. They had a bonfire on the beach that was enormous. We stood on the other side of the fire from his family where they couldn't see. The fire got so hot I thought it would actually ignite my clothes and sear the flesh off my face. We kissed. Nobody saw.

After we returned, he told me, "I think it's a good idea if we broke up and you moved out."

"I can move out," I said, "but do we have to break up?"

He told me he wanted kids someday. "My own that look like me running around," he specified, "not somebody else's."

"You're choosing her," I said.

"My family loved her," he replied. My stomach knotted less after I considered, at least, it was better than him leaving me for a different man.

"What about an open relationship?" I asked, but he shook his head. "Did you ask her?" I countered. He ignored my question.

Before leaving the bigoted mother's house, I broke some things that belonged to her. It was a matter of easy access. I spit a little in her mouthwash since urine would change the bright green color. I took a butcher knife from the kitchen and stabbed the car leather. I made just so many holes that you couldn't detect it was vandalism, although certainly a problem that needed to be fixed. I



poked a hole with my finger directly through an oil painting. I rearranged her china in the cabinet, a candelabrum, a series of decorative boxes on a glass table, and I put syrup in her shoes, just so she would know someone was fucking with her. Then, I saw all of the empty wine bottles in the trash can, so I took each of them out, and lined them all up on the counter for her to see.

# staring at the covid-19 ceiling

ALIYA FATHIMA SHERIFF

It is the year 2021. The world is ravaged by a pandemic, everyone is sick or knows someone close who is. India tops the chart of nations worst hit by the second wave. Oxygen is now a precious commodity to battle for, not everyone is fortunate enough to receive it. Hospitals and crematoriums are saturated, governments are lax, and each one is essentially down to taking care of himself.

Given this milieu, Asha stared at the ceiling well past midnight, in her usual oily hair tied up in a messy bun- even she doesn't remember when she combed it out properly last, and her loose and baggy night suit.

“Go to sleep! Just close your eyes and sleep!” Asha says to herself. A long day lay ahead of her, but sleep did not comply with Ashas wishes. It was Mothers' Day. She had to tell a story of empathy the following day in class, but all she could think about was the pandemic and what had happened the previous week.

She remembered the time she lay staring at the ceiling a week ago when she couldn't stop thinking about the image of her mother, all alone in a hospital, with oxygen cylinders attached to her and her strained breathing. The image doesn't leave her mind, she does not want to think about it further. The stream of thought was a risky endeavor, and she knew she would end up in tears, but a breakdown at that point was out of the question. She couldn't afford to break down. Next to her, her younger brother snores and turns in deep sleep, unaware that his mother isn't even in the house.



At 7 that evening, after she had made soup and sent it to her parents quarantine room, she heard frantic phone calls from within. She put on her mask and peeped into their room. Her mother ran a very high fever and was low on her oxygen levels. She sat there on her bed, tired, eyes unable to stay open. Her soup bowl lay at the side table, she was too weak to hold it.

The doctor said that even though it was the 10th day since treatment began, a fluctuation of body temperature was normal. But she didn't look normal, she was exhausted. Her father decided that admitting her in a hospital would be the best course of action. The search for a hospital bed began. Her father called people from within his room and Asha turned to social media for any leads in her city.

But to her bad luck, her city was a two-tier one. There were elaborate leads on diverse resources in big cities like Bangalore, Mumbai, Chennai—but none for hers. Thankfully, since it was a small city, people knew people; her father at least was relatively well connected.

But getting a hospital bed while quarantined is no easy task, given the limited number of hospitals as well. He called up major hospitals like Apollo, but they were full. They didn't even have time to answer basic queries, he says. The family doctor was trying to arrange for a bed somewhere, but there is no development there either.

Just then, a client who incidentally called to talk business with her



father offered to help. He arranged for an admission into one of the best hospitals in the city. With continuous follow-ups and many more calls, the bed was arranged. Now that that was done, it was time for her mother to leave with a hurriedly packed bag of possible essentials. Her father's company arranged for her pickup and drop at the hospital. Arrangements were made but no one could accompany her. No one could be there in case she needed something or to merely make sure that she was taken care of well.

Thankfully, upon reaching the hospital, she was taken in immediately. This, Asha later understood, was possible only because her father had paid a large sum to the hospital before admission. Beds were in such demand that if you wanted one, you had to pay 50K and book one, or else you were on your own, even if you arrived at the hospital in a severely battered condition.

That night, her mother was given oxygen, and treatment with plasma had begun. Asha couldn't speak to her that night or even say bye to her while she left. She played Snakes and Ladders with her brother in the other room, to make sure that he was safe and that he didn't know about what was happening. To him, she was in the room, watching Netflix.

The next day over video call, Asha saw her mother with the nebulizer on her face. She couldn't speak; whatever she said through that mask was muffled. She looked more tired than usual and her white hair suddenly proliferated. During these tough days, Asha recalls how every act of kindness helped her go on.



She recalled how her watchman uncle brought in food and medicines every day, regularly, even though the new rules did not let any deliveries inside. She recalled how her neighbors sent her food when they found out she was fasting, how the doctor sent medicines unavailable elsewhere to their doorstep, how her friends and family checked up on them every single day. She remembered how a friend's mom explained how to make *kashayam* while her grandma told her how to make *khichdi* as her parents recovered. Every small act of kindness was remembered and deeply appreciated. Her escape was to speak with her friends and simply vent late in the night, and they were all there to listen.

Now, Asha's mother is back home, thankfully, and is on her way to a speedy recovery. At the dinner table that night, her mother shared an instance about the woman she shared a room with in the hospital. Both were COVID patients, both were on oxygen and both were alone. They decided to help each other through the difficult time. They couldn't talk with each other as they would lose their breath soon, but they somehow communicated that they would fight this together. Smiles and having meals together allowed them to bond—complete strangers, mind you. Her mother explained how, in a time of such large scale crises, simple acts of humanity, empathy and kindness went a long way.

After a few days, once her mother felt better, the two women would bond over womanhood, their disease and their circumstance. She noted how the *dosa* in the hospital was somehow extremely tasty, or maybe it was that they had lost their taste, but that *dosa* oddly helped in distract them and aid



their recovery.

At a time when everyone is sick and everyone is on their own, acts of kinship still persist. In a country where the government, even educational institutions, don't recognize and support ailing citizens, people help themselves and each other. Random people, strangers, become friends. Despite inherent circumstances, people were there for each other.

“This is a weird disease. Very alienating. It keeps people alone.”

“Alienating.” Very true. You cannot even hold the hand of your mother and tell her that she'll be okay. You cannot visit your aging relatives and help them out without the risk of being infected. You cannot give your last respects to the ones you lost or be with them during their last breaths. You don't even know that you may be spending a moment with someone for the last time.

Today, we are left on our own because everybody is sick, but simple acts of kindness, empathy and kinship still prevail. It is the year 2021.

Asha decides to share this story in class the next day, to show how these acts of kindness are indeed life-changing, and after a little while, she fell sleep.



nonfiction

# a historical flip-through of the assamese language

JUMISMITA DAS

Language determines people's identities. The constitution of India recognizes 22 languages, Assamese being one of them. Assamese is the official language of Assam, a northeastern, multilingual state of India. Since ancient times, people of many tongues have resided in Assam. People from different regions migrated to Assam during different phases of its history and assimilated in spite of linguistic differences. In terms of numbers, Assamese is the most widely spoken language in the state, and serves as a lingua franca. Assamese belongs to the Indo-Aryan language family.

In 1826, Assam was annexed under British colonial rule as per the provisions of the Yandaboo Treaty. After the annexation of Assam, the colonial rulers had introduced a new language policy in the state. In 1836, the British officials declared that Bengali would be the new state language. This decision had created much resentment in the state, and the newly emerging Assamese intelligentsia vehemently opposed it. In the 1840s, the American Baptist missionaries who had arrived in Assam for the propagation of Christianity supported the Assamese intelligentsia. Due to the collective efforts of the Assamese intelligentsia and the Baptist missionaries, in 1873, Assamese once again became the language of schools and judicial proceedings in the state. During colonial rule, there was an influx of migrants, notably Bengalis. The Assamese people were apprehensive, considering the imminent threat to the Assamese language posed by the Bengali community. After independence, the Assam Sahitya Sabha urged the government to recognize the Assamese language as the official language of the state by 1960. But the All Party Hill Leaders



Conference, various tribal organizations, and the Bengali community of the Barak Valley opposed this plea. Ultimately, a language movement started in Assam.

This language issue was not a new one in Assam. The Assamese people had fought against the colonial rulers when they introduced the Bengali language in Assam in 1837. So, the establishment of the company's authority may be considered the beginning of the language problems in the state.

Various organizations have contributed to the genesis of the language movement of Assam: Assam Sahitya Sabha, All Assam Students Union, Asom Jatiyatabadi Mahasabha, and Asomiya Bhasha Unnati Sadhini Sabha were the prominent ones.

The Assam Sahitya Sabha observed 9 September, 1959, as the state language day to declare Assamese the official language. Several members of different political parties raised the issue and supported it in the state assembly during the budget session in 1960. The APHLC and all tribal organizations opposed the demands, arguing that it would thwart the educated English-speaking middle class who sought administrative jobs. The opposition claimed that Assamese as the official language would hinder the assimilation of hill tribes with the people of the plain. At the same time, the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) passed its resolution and declared that Assamese be introduced as the official language in all districts except the districts of Cachar, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, and Garo. The APCC



resolution failed to satisfy all sections of the state. Ultimately, large-scale violence occurred in different parts of Assam in May 1960 when the non-Assamese population of Shillong demonstrated with slogans against the Assamese language and also against the APCC. As a result, thousands of students took to the streets to counter the Shillong processions, and demanded the immediate introduction of Assamese as the state language. The movement became violent in Upper Assam. Due to the acts of violence and conflict between the Assamese and the Bengalis, some Assamese people were forced to leave their home, and became refugees in their own state. As a result, large-scale demonstrations took place in different parts of the state. On the other hand, the All Assam Bengali Language Conference was convened by the Cachar congress leaders to raise their demand on 2 and 3 July, 1960. It was held in Silchar under the presidentship of Chapala Kanta Bhattacharyya, an MP from West Bengal. They demanded that Assam be recognized as a bilingual state. The Silchar and Karimganj Bar Associations passed resolutions demanding president rule in Assam due to the lawlessness in the state. Violence erupted in Guwahati. On July 4, 1960, an Assamese student of Cotton College, Ranjit Borpujari, was gunned down by police while six other students of the college were injured. Borpujari became the first martyr of the language movement in Assam.

In this tense atmosphere, the Chief Minister of Assam, Bimala Prasad Chaliha, introduced the Assam Official Language Bill in the Assembly. The bill failed to satisfy the various groups of people in the state but graduated to an act. The act provided that



“Assamese shall be used for all or any of the official purposes of the state of Assam.” Further, the act provided that “the English language, as long as the use thereof is permissible, and thereafter Hindi, in place of English, shall also be used for such official purposes of the secretarial and the offices of the heads of the departments of the state government.”

# in search of shitala: what can bengal's pox goddess teach us about social ethics in pandemic times?

PAROMITA PATRANOBISH

One of the recurring narratives of the Patachitra folk art tradition of Bengal is the story of Shitala, the Hindu deity of the underworld and pestilence. The folk idiom, itself a site for inscribing marginal subjectivities and neglected expressive forms, is an apt medium for the articulation of this ambivalent entity's prehistory. I first encountered Shitala on two occasions, both made memorable by the exceptional nature of the circumstances.

The first time I heard about this obscure character, otherwise unrepresented in the repertoire of popular television mythologicals, *Amar Chitra Kathas*, and the prevalent religious iconography in places of worship including home altars, was as a name uttered with both reverence and trepidation while I lay quarantined and convalescing from chicken pox. The scientific etiology of the disease might have been the fascinatingly named Herpes Zoster virus that I spent my sickbed isolation time reading about, but as I soon discovered from the hushed conversations of worried elders, the virus, like the semantic plurality of most Indic faiths, had alternative avatars. A many-headed hydra like the multidextrous Gods of the Hindu pantheon, the virus, it appeared, was both: a manifestation of divine presence as well as an invitation for divine intervention. What I was afflicted with wasn't just a contagious microorganism colonizing my cellular chemistry; it was an act of possession—a sacred being inhabiting the body in order to cleanse and thus cure it of the disease and intrinsic fleshly pollution.

In Hindu conceptualisations of divine possession, an entity, usually a minor God or Goddess, animated and powerful, enters the body



of a person, either willingly or in response to invocation, and inhabits it till appropriate expiatory or propitiatory rituals are performed at a social level. The contact with the sacred and its primordial otherness translates at the level of the individual body as painful and markedly anomalous manifestations, the pustules of pox being one such. Within the scheme of religious hermeneutics, certain diseases make the ailing body a medium and vehicle for the expression of divine will. The debilitation of the person becomes a threshold for the amplification of the divine—the self as the seat of rational agency and free will is evacuated, made into a no-man’s zone for the occupation of the sacred. The sick individual is also a form of individuality, a singularity or haecceity, from which the scaffoldings of modern liberal selfhood have been removed.

Illness in this interpretive framework has a communicative function. It is the predominant mode through which the element of community as what surrounds and sustains the individual is brought to the fore. The deity’s object of address is not so much the individual subject but the collective social domain to which it makes its desires, demands, powers and promises made known. The divine origins of sickness underscore the ethical, interpersonal and reciprocal entwinement that binds and underlies the figure of the autonomous human subject. It brings to our attention a relational collectivity that includes not only historical-chronological time, socially segmented space, and cultural notions of identity, but also contains nonhuman and elemental forces.



As Victor Turner's studies have shown, pathological states are transitive, liminal. Liminal states occupy a threshold (limen) between two normative or stable stages: child/adult, young/old, sick/healthy, agrarian/industrial, primitive/modern, and enable the examination, analysis, and reconfiguration of those foundational values, principles, norms, institutions, and practices that structure social formations. Liminal moments overturn established hierarchies creating temporary anarchic pockets of chaos, confusion, disorder, and instability. They permit the liberation of those ways of existing, styles of expression, habits, pleasures, and capacities, that are repressed in the production of stable social orders. The construction of pox as an act of divine visitation, a becoming sacred of the ordinary or profane self in the event of divine intervention, is not a mere superstition, an old-wives tale of grandparents' lore, the remnant of a premodern approach to disease to be rejected outright as anachronistic and antithetical to Western Scientific discourse. Just as to think of the performative possibilities of Shitala's presence in the diseased body as metaphor, a figurative fantasy set up to comprehend, explain, and thus tame the unknowable, unpredictable and radically alien nature of both illness and its cause, is to miss the rich field of ethical and existential questions that non-modern conceptions of disease provoke.

This last point is at the heart of much controversy, especially in the light of the global encounter with a novel virus and its catastrophic effects in the last two years, as ideological claims over religious resources usurp the latter to fit these into uniquely and narrowly partisan frames. Some years ago, Paul Gallagher



wrote a scathing and illuminating article on the anti-vaccine campaigner Meryl Dore's misappropriation of Shitala as being a harbinger of the "gift" of measles. In this piece he debunked the reductive notion that disease as it appears in non-secular, mythic or religious worldviews, is merely synonymous with divine retribution, or alternatively a miraculous divine prophylactic making the sufferer automatically immune. In what seems uncannily prophetic in retrospect, Gallagher exposes how contemporary politics, the argument against vaccination in this case, twists ancient texts and complex belief systems. Shitala and the smallpox epidemic is used as an example of divinely preordained justification for a specific response towards medical protocols. Gallagher and a host of other commentators on Shitala's role in the causing and curing of disease (Ralph Nichols, Veena Das, Edward Dimcock, and Aditi N Sarkar) have shown how religious interpretations of pathology have historically been part of larger cultural contexts and shifts, in which a range of contending forces: social, political, and economic negotiate to make sense of and establish standards and paradigms of truth.

Faith-based iconographies, narratives, and practices do not yield to easy appropriations without losing their potential to create new trains of thought, different ways of conceiving the world, unconventional, divergent perspectives on human realities. When placed in the context of modernity's dominant models truth that is at once empirically verifiable, capable of being semiotically coded and represented in language, as well as consistent with the basic tenets of a liberal humanist vision of the world that places the human subject at the centre of earthly and cosmic affairs, the

rhetoric of supernatural possession appears to be a mere figment of the imagination, a fabular remnant of a pre-scientific era before the invention of modern medicine. But as Veena Das explains, deities like Shitala represent a specific premodern response to disease and are also active agents in a society's engagement with mortality, corporeality and human finitude.

Shitala's social resurgence in Bengal and North India as an icon of pestilence is historically connected with the smallpox epidemic in Bengal. In 19th Century Bengal, variolation practices: a set of inoculation methods first used for smallpox (variola comes from the Latin for smallpox) as an early precursor to vaccination--included an elaborate ritual invocation of Shitala. A 'tikadar' literally meaning someone who places a mark, usually chosen from a marginal caste, took on the double role of a medical practitioner and priest to inoculate the smallpox patient, usually children. Like in similar variolation practices in China and Turkey, the mark on the child's forehead or *tika* was rubbed with pus collected from infected skin, and consecrated to Shitala. It became the sacred point via which she would take possession of the body. Bringing the mythic and the medical together in her person, Shitala's benedictory and divine immunization does not contradict the medical and scientific model of immunity, but instead reinforces it through the trope of the antigen: a beneficent form of the malignant disease which is also its cure.

The second time I encountered this pestilential Goddess was in a local crafts fair in Kolkata sometime during the late nineties. She was the subject of a narrative scroll painting that was being



unravelling to the accompaniment of an incantatory song sung by a frail woman whose family had been practitioners of this endangered folk art form across generations. The hypnotic quality of the bard's voice coupled with the intoxicating details of the maverick Goddess's escapades as she roams the earth ridding it of maladies, had the ability to make the old tale come to life as a spine tingling feverish sensation, a rapture of listening which had the audience in thrall.

The story of Shitala and how she comes to be associated with pestilence is a complicated one. Among the many circulating versions of her origin story, one traces her to a sacrificial fire from which she emerges as a woman of considerable beauty. In order to remain perennially beautiful, she is tasked with having to always bear on her person grains of lentil (*masoor*, which lends its name to the Sanskrit term for measles). She is given a consort (a brother in some versions) called Jwarasura (literally fever demon), also born of the same fire, and a beast of burden to bear her supply of grain. Together with these companions, Shitala initially roams the heavens. Tragedy strikes this journey in the form of an infestation. Her grains rot and begin to contaminate the heavens. Petitioned by the other gods and promised earthly worshippers in return, Shitala and her consort leave for the hither realm, wormy *masoor* in tow, where enamored of Shiva, the kings refuse to acknowledge this new and obscure female goddess. Denied recognition, that fundamental tenet of the metaphysical contract between gods and humans, Shitala takes recourse to force, using her contaminatory powers to create a kingdom-wide plague, until those in power are compelled to

acknowledge her powers and install her as a permanent tutelary deity. A related subplot of this story involves Jwarasura starting his own rogue trail of disease on earth, inciting Shitala to take the form of an antigen, and cure the afflicted by entering their bodies and fighting Jwarasura from within. This variation on the pathological associations of the goddess is also what connects her with a more modern immunological imaginary. In several Patachitra traditions of rural Bengal, which themselves draw upon local oral narrative repertoires of invocation and address collectively called the *mangal-kavyas* or auspicious songs, Shitala's earthly role as an arbiter of disease in its pathological and curative dimensions, both toxic and palliative, is the subject of worship and eulogy.

In most standard artistic representations the goddess is clad in a gossamer garment, usually vermilion or royal blue, barefoot and sitting semi-reposed on her donkey, an upraised broom and pitcher of cold water/cooling condiment in her hands, a threshing winnow stuck in her hair like a comb. Unlike Durga whose avatar she is considered to be, Shitala is not overtly militant. Her weaponry is of a much more humble and pragmatic order: objects of daily use, just as the orientation of her combat is not the cosmic body politic threatened by other races but the downsized, microcosmic corporeality of the earthly subject invaded by other species. But what is singularly distinctive about her instruments and method, and what would possibly appeal to a therapeutic imaginary both in its premodern and modern variations, is their duality: the broom and winnow are not just the stuff of combat, they serve a more sustainable function of hygiene and



purification, reinforced in turn by the cleansing and restorative properties of water.

The ambivalence at the heart of this representation extends to the manner in which the deity is linked to the field of disease. While her more virulent counterpart has a straightforward mode of causing sickness through contamination, Shitala's relationship to disease is inductive, where illness is a means to effect its antithesis. Like other Indic cult deities like Manasa, the snake goddess and Ola Bibi, the goddess of cholera, Shitala's pestilential curses as well as her curative fevers are specific usages of illness to bring about cure, at the level of the individual and society. Whether it is the deity using disease to enforce her authority, demand recognition, remind her followers of their obligations, or her more modern immunitary function of curing from the vantage of the bodily interior that she occupation and where she is both disease and its remedy—the cult of Shitala like that of other marginal deities is a reminder of the forces that exist outside our cognitive capacities or powers of rational comprehension.

Shitala's presence could very well be seen as a foregrounding from the peripheral discursive perspective of myth, religion and indigenous art forms, interpretive possibilities that alert us to new ways of making sense of experiences and phenomena that are at the limits of language, representation, and understanding, including pathological experiences. Shitala's mythic presence engages and synthesizes two kinds of ontological otherness—the divine and the parasitic, god and virus—both anterior to the



human subject defined as a bounded, autonomous, self-contained being. Both the viral infection and divine possession are forms of contact with otherness, events that expose the embodied self as an open structure, an ecology capable of harbouring multiple agents. They are paradigms of co-existence and cohabitation that bring the anthropocentric notion of the autonomous human subject as a consistent, unified, and stable entity to a crisis, inviting in turn thinking about the entangled, interconnected, collaborative nature of existence, and challenging us to reconceptualize the liberal cult of the individual in order to make space for articulations of living that are symbiotic, empathetic, collective in form and motivation.

Last year at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Corona Mata emerged as a new deity worshipped in different parts of India from Assam to Andhra Pradesh and Jharkhand. In Bengal during Durga Puja Durga was presented as a Corona warrior, with some idol makers replacing her traditional weapons with medical equipment. Not surprisingly, almost all of these idols were accompanied by Mahishasur, Durga's arch enemy impersonating the virus itself. Religion, in its organised, public form—be it as a hegemonic, hierarchical and centralized power structure, nationalistically coded ritualized spectacles of banging plates and blowing conches, or the popularization of new age spiritual rhetoric as a mechanism of emotional coping—has acquired a new significance in the light of the current landscapes of disease and social isolation. While the trope of supernatural protection can and has been used to delegitimize scientific mandates, (the large scale gathering of pilgrims at Kumbh in direct violation of medical protocols and social and civic ethics, being the most



blatant case in point) subcultural faith traditions as Shitala's with their remarkably radical and often socially subversive imaginaries open up a space of discursive couplings and intertwining between medicine and ritual, science and faith, purity and pollution, corporeality and spirituality, transcendence and immanence, that in turn have the potential to challenge both religious and social hegemonies.

The figure and legend of Shitala demonstrate the disease's social ramifications. She compels acts of communitarian worship and social rearrangements that destabilize caste and gender hierarchies, and provides therapeutic and spiritual authority to the socially marginalized. Her dual nature visibilizes and sacralizes the infirm, disabled, pustulous body by reinscribing it in an order of divine significance where it is no longer seen as repulsive or alien. The traditions of worship and devotion engendered around her craft a new theology in which disease and healing coexist as parts of the same deific persona, and menial objects associated with dirt, labour, and pollution and loaded with class and caste connotations thereof, are infused with talismanic efficacy. In rescripting the phenomenon of contagion as a matter of social responsibility, the cult of Shitala in its multiple narrative and iconographic configurations is a reminder of the ethics of caregiving and mutuality as central to the social response to disease.

The image features a dark green background with several stylized leaf branches in shades of yellow and light green. The word "drama" is centered in a light yellow, serif font. The leaf patterns are arranged in a circular fashion around the text, with some branches extending from the corners towards the center.

drama

# the nanny (cntd.)

FAVOUR IGWEMOH

## SCENE 2

*(This scene opens with a woman in her early 20s calling the order for a table while another woman in her late 20s answers as she prepares the food).*

WAITRESS: Order for table 12!

ANNA: Coming up!

*(She transfers the food to a plate and raises it up as she passes the other people in the kitchen, places it in a tray and smiles at the waitress. As the waitress is about to leave, a third woman in her late 20s stops her.)*

GBEMISOLA: Wait, wait, wait, this is also for table 12. *(She drops a pepper shaker inside the tray.)* They are regulars and they like it spicy. *(She winks at the waitress and leaves. Both of them are smiling as the waitress leaves. When the main door opens, they see Loretta come in.)* Speaking of regulars. *(Loretta sees them and waves. They wave back.)* She wants something.

ANNA: I know. *(They turn around and resume cooking. They come out from the kitchen door while the remaining customers exit the restaurant. Other workers in the restaurant emerge and start clearing the tables. Anna and Gbemisola head to Loretta.)*

LORETTA: Women in the kitchen, I was wondering when you guys were going to come out. *(Gbemisola laughs and Anna chuckles.)*

ANNA: Evening, Loretta. *(She starts cleaning and clearing the tables while Gbemisola sits opposite Loretta.)*

GBEMISOLA: Evening, Lorry.

LORETTA: Evening, babes.

ANNA: So, what do you want?

LORETTA: Who says I want something?

ANNA: The big smile that was plastered on your face when you came in.

LORETTA: I was only smiling because you guys said I should always be smiling.

GBEMISOLA: That's because you smile often.

LORETTA: I do.

ANNA and GBEMISOLA: No you don't.

LORETTA: Sometimes.

ANNA and GBEMISOLA: Once in a blue moon.

ANNA: That's why you are still single. Babe, you are young and beautiful and rich don't add lonely to the list. *(Gbemisola laughs.)*

LORETTA: Okay, enough about me, I came here for something else.

ANNA: What we've been saying all along, and no.

LORETTA: I haven't even said anything yet.

ANNA: Still no.

GBEMISOLA *(chuckling)*: Let her land first. *(Anna is silent. Gbemisola gestures for Loretta to speak.)*

LORETTA: Okay, so I have a job proposal for you. How would you like to be a nanny? It...

ANNA: No. *(They look at her.)* This time I let you ask the question, that was the agreement.

LORETTA: The agreement was to let me land and I haven't. Look, the job is going to pay well. Free accommodation, free food, free Wi-Fi. A very good looking and very single boss.

ANNA: Again, no.

LORETTA: Is no the only word in your vocabulary for today?

Don't answer that. Girl, I really need this.

ANNA: So, what you are saying is that I should leave this really nice restaurant I'm working in to go and baby seat some stranger's kid? I really need this too.

LORETTA: They are not strangers. They are my nieces and nephew. Come on. Look, these kids are out of line and my brother's place is a mess. He is so busy at work that he can't handle it. Gbems, help me out.

GBEMISOLA: I don't know what to say that you haven't, you even said there was free food and she turned it down. That's a solid no.

LORETTA: Anna, Anna. Oh baby, baby, shake body na? Show your girl some love.

ANNA: Switching to pidgin will change the words in my vocabulary for the day. 'No' is still part of those words.

GBEMISOLA: Girl, she looks desperate, make you consider, na.

ANNA: She always looks desperate. N, O. *(She hands over the dishes to a coworker and heads to the kitchen door when Loretta speaks up again.)*

LORETTA: *Your pay will be double of what you earn currently. (Anna stops in her tracks, waits for a second, then turns around and looks at Loretta.)*

ANNA: Triple.

LORETTA: Done.

ANNA: You know, since we are speaking on the subject, what about allowance fee, feeding, trans—

LORETTA: No. *(Anna pauses for a while, still looking at Loretta, while Gbemisola is smiling.)*

ANNA: Triple, huh? *(She takes her seat.)*

LORETTA: Triple.

GBEMISOLA: See how she keep face, like she does not like it.  
Smile jor.

LORETTA: Don't mind her. Come on, smile.

*(Loretta shoves Anna slightly and smiles while they tease her. She takes her seat.)*

ANNA: You people should leave me alone. Alright, when do I start?

*(Loretta and Gbemisola share a look and a smile.)*

*To be continued in Issue 4.*

# times change

GEORGE FREEK

## THE CHARACTERS

STEVEN OLDHAM, A Literature Professor, late 50s, well-worn, but ‘distinguished’

SUZIE OLDHAM, His wife, 60, looks like the remains of a very self-indulgent life

FENTON NEWMAN, A Professor of Genetics, 30, handsome, shy

HILARY NEWMAN, Fenton’s wife, 28, a High School Teacher, ambitious, bold

## THE PLACE

STEVEN and SUZIE’S home

A small Midwestern college

## THE TIME

Recently

## ACT ONE

*(A dark stage, then a door opens, and STEVEN and SUZIE enter their living-room)*

STEVEN: (He bangs into a table) Ouch! I wish you’d quit moving that table around.

SUZIE: (Laughing at him, as she switches on the light) God, you are a klutz!

STEVEN: I was born that way. (He rubs his shin).

SUZIE: (Still laughing) You’re worse than that kid—

STEVEN: What kid?

SUZIE: Remember HAROLD and MAUDE?

STEVEN: Were they at the party tonight?

SUZIE: No, stupid! I mean the movie Harold and Maude. That kid, I guess he was Harold, and he was incredibly clumsy. You remember?

STEVEN: No! And I wish you hadn't reminded me. That was an awful movie!

SUZIE: Steven, you're such a nerd. That was a really cool movie.

STEVEN: It was moronic! The situation was revolting, and it was totally unbelievable.

SUZIE: You're such a snob. You know that? You're really a terrible snob.

STEVEN: I hope that was a compliment. Of course it was totally credible that an eighteen-year old kid would have a sexual relationship with an eighty-year old woman.

SUZIE: It was CUTE!

STEVEN: Yes, dear.

SUZIE: And you're being a superior snob!

STEVEN: I don't want to argue with you, my move. It's too late.

SUZIE: Late! It's not eleven yet. So now you're an old sarcastic snob!

STEVEN: (Gleefully) But I'm younger than you, sweetheart.

SUZIE: Don't say that!

STEVEN: But I am younger than you are.

SUZIE: Not that! I mean don't say 'sweetheart' that way. It sounds condescending.

STEVEN: That was a long party...sweetheart. We've been drinking since five o'clock, and I am tired, so good night. (He kisses her dutifully on the forehead).

SUZIE: You can't go to bed.

STEVEN: Watch me, my love. (He starts to exit).

SUZIE: We're having company!

STEVEN: What!

SUZIE: You were there when I invited them!

STEVEN: I thought they said no.

SUZIE: They did, but when you were getting our coats, I convinced them it would be fun.

STEVEN: How did you manage that?

SUZIE: (Kittenish) I have my ways.

STEVEN: It sounds vulgar.

SUZIE: Hey, baby, I'm not vulgar! So fucking screw you!

STEVEN: (He looks meaningfully at her) Do I have to go through this again?

SUZIE: Go through WHAT?

STEVEN: They seem like nice kids, I'm just asking you to give them a break.

SUZIE: Whatever you're accusing me of sounds very nasty!

STEVEN: It could be. But if they're coming, where are they? The party was only a block away.

SUZIE: They'll be here.

STEVEN: It looks like they've changed their minds.

SUZIE: They'll be here! I also happened to mention that my brother is president of the college. Having a little suck never hurts. (She laughs rather loudly).

STEVEN: 'Suck?' Your vocabulary is limited, but it's charming!

SUZIE: Oh, shove it, fuddy-duddy.

STEVEN: Well, anyway, it only takes about two minutes to walk here from the Dickinson's, so they must have changed their minds.

*(Before STEVEN can finish his sentence, the doorbell rings; SUZIE*

laughs loudly)

SUZIE: I told you they'd be here!

STEVEN: I hope they're prepared.

SUZIE: For what?

STEVEN: For you, naturally—

SUZIE: (As the doorbell rings again) I'll consider that a compliment, babe. Now be a good boy and make me a drink while I let them in.

STEVEN: (Muttering under his breath, as she goes to the door) Said the spider to the flies—

SUZIE: (Sharply) What was that?

STEVEN: Nothing at all—(As she opens the door).

SUZIE: (She sticks her tongue out at STEVEN, as HILARY and FENTON enter) Well, come on in, kids. Welcome to our humble abode.

HILARY: (Entering first, takes a quick look) Oh, this is really nice. (Nudging FENTON) Isn't it?

FENTON: (More or less dragged in by HILARY) Oh boy. Really nice!

STEVEN: Excuse the mess. We're usually a little more prepared when we invite people over.

FENTON: (To HILARY, he is very uncomfortable) You know, honey, it really is late, we probably shouldn't even have—

SUZIE: (Cutting him off) Oh, for heaven's sake, don't mind old stick-in-the-mud there! (She looks at her watch) In fact, it's just exactly party time! (To STEVEN) Why don't you take their coats?

STEVEN: Right! Sorry. He takes HILARY'S and FENTON'S coats and hangs them up in the closet).

SUZIE: Do you have some pot?

HILARY: No, sorry. I smoke, but he doesn't even inhale!

STEVEN: Good Grief! We can't have that, can we, my love?

SUZIE: Make me a scotch and water, very light on the water, in fact, forget the water. (Laughs)

FENTON: A beer would be fine for me.

HILARY: I'm sorry about the dope. Would you have a white wine?

STEVEN: We can do that. (He gets their drinks).

HILARY: (About an abstract painting on the wall) Oh, that's really interesting.

SUZIE: It was cheaper than buying wallpaper. (She laughs).

FENTON: (Assumes she is joking, chuckles) I like it, too. Of course I don't know very much about art—

HILARY: He knows nothing about it. He doesn't even know what he likes! (They smile politely).

FENTON: But I *think* I like that. Who painted it?

STEVEN: One of our college artists: Hugh McDowell. You might have met him tonight.

FENTON: I'm probably showing my ignorance, but does it symbolize anything in particular?

STEVEN: (A Pause) Don't ask me.

SUZIE: If you ask me, I felt like it was a symbolic representation of *our* love life! (She chuckles. The others are uncomfortably silent) Hey, that was a joke! (They smile).

STEVEN: Oh no, it wasn't. (They now laugh loudly).

SUZIE: (Not to be outdone) Speaking of that blowhard McDowell, how did you like that shot I got off at him tonight?

STEVEN: I suppose both barrels were loaded!

SUZIE: You know it, baby! He was dominating conversation, as usual, telling this incredibly dull story about how he was on his

way to New York for a one-man show some two-bit gallery was giving him. They probably felt sorry for him because his wife had died—

FENTON: Oh, I'm sorry.

SUZIE: Don't be. He wasn't.

STEVEN: They didn't have much of a marriage. Of course, that's not exactly rare, is it?

SUZIE: Anyway, for some reason he was taking the train. Probably so he could spend the trip in the club car. (Winks) He's a real lush, believe me. (She takes a large gulp of her whiskey). So anyway, what with one thing and another, he was telling us he just caught the train by the seat of his pants, and I looked at the ones he had on and I said, 'It must have been the pair you're wearing.' Everybody was so bored listening to his rambling, that broke them up! (She laughs. Then, after a second or two, HILARY laughs along with her).

HILARY: I remember that. It was funny.

FENTON: I don't get it.

SUZIE: You probably didn't see the pants that idiot had on!

STEVEN: (Winks at FENTON) Maybe you had no interest in Hugh's pants.

HILARY: Sometimes I'm not so sure. (Uneasy chuckles).

STEVEN: (Pause) How do you like our little college?

HILARY: It's a very prestigious school.

SUZIE: It certainly is that.

FENTON: Speaking for myself, I can tell you that I feel privileged to be teaching and doing research here.

SUZIE: Of course it wasn't so wonderful before my dad took charge. You probably knew he single-handedly built this

institution into what it is today.

FENTON: No? Clayton MacCormick was your—

SUZIE: I told you Randolph is my brother, didn't I?

HILARY: That's an incredibly impressive family legacy.

STEVEN: You don't have to tell her that.

SUZIE: Was that meant to be sarcastic?

STEVEN: (Chastened) Certainly not! That IS an impressive legacy.

FENTON: Of course I'm sure being married to the College President's daughter isn't the easiest thing in the world.

SUZIE: You're kidding!

STEVEN: Oh, it provides tremendous advantages. It's an extraordinary opportunity. Many people would give an arm and a leg for a chance like that, as opposed to making it on one's own merits, whatever those merits happen to be—

SUZIE: Yeah, but let's not get started on the martyr thing, okay?

STEVEN: Sorry, sweetheart—

HILARY: Listen, if it wouldn't be too much trouble for you, I would love to see the rest of your home.

SUZIE: Well then, come on. (To STEVEN, as she and HILARY exit) Just watch what you talk about, buster!

FENTON: (After a pause) What did she mean by that?

STEVEN: I can think of a couple things, but I'd rather not. Look, I think I could use another drink. How about you?

FENTON: Oh no thanks. I don't drink much.

STEVEN: I do. (Pouring himself a drink) My wife and I drink a lot.

FENTON: I'm not criticizing, mind you—

STEVEN: We'd probably be classified as alcoholics.

FENTON: Well, they say as long as you can function—

STEVEN: At times it's tremendously difficult.

FENTON: (Wishing he could leave) And then, too, I guess that depends on what you mean by ‘function’—

STEVEN: It’s quite pathetic, really. (He knocks back a large gulp of whiskey and becomes self-absorbed).

FENTON: (Nonplussed, he begins to ramble) Well, look, I want to say how hospitable it was of you and your wife to invite us over like this. I mean with us being new at the school and everything. The other school I taught at people weren’t this friendly. I don’t mean they were hostile, they just tended to sort of mind their own business. You couldn’t really get to know them like this. That was too bad, if you know what I mean, but maybe you don’t, being as how you’ve apparently been here for quite a few years—(He begins to run out of steam).

STEVEN: (Suddenly stares vacantly at FENTON) What were you saying?

FENTON: Oh, nothing important.

STEVEN: How did you become interested in biogenetics?

FENTON: I’m sure you wouldn’t be interested in that.

STEVEN: Oh, I’m very interested in it.

FENTON: Oh, I get it. I see where you’re going with this.

STEVEN: What do you mean?

FENTON: You’re into literature, the humanities, right?

STEVEN: That’s true.

FENTON: So I guess you see us scientists as amoral, fact-oriented fanatics, re-arranging genetic structure and cloning life into these identical, pseudo-perfect replications of each other—

STEVEN: Good heavens no! I greatly admire what you’re doing!

FENTON: You do?

STEVEN: I can’t say I actually understand it.

FENTON: Oh, I see. You're being sly with me.

STEVEN: No. I think that you people, I mean you geneticists are at the cutting edge of knowledge today. I admire that very much.

FENTON: (Still wary) I admire art and literature, too.

STEVEN: I think you're trying not to embarrass me.

FENTON: Honestly! I mean you know that science is essentially about facts—

STEVEN: But those are very important facts.

FENTON: Sometimes, but you humanists, you criticize we scientists—

STEVEN: Us scientists—

FENTON: There! You see what I mean! We can't even express ourselves correctly!

STEVEN: Oh God, that was unforgivably pedantic.

FENTON: Anyway, you criticize us for having no 'soul.' We're accused of being insensitive to the deeper, more 'human' side of problems.

STEVEN: You don't believe that guff, do you?

FENTON: (Blindly barging ahead) Yes, I do. And correcting that defect in 'us' scientists is where I think literature and the arts are important.

STEVEN: Let me tell you something, my friend, I hope I can call you my friend, literature and art have had their day: long, long ago. They have been around for thousands of years, and they really haven't gotten any better in all that time. Nor, arguably, have they improved the human race. For instance, many people would say the greatest art and literature was created thousands of years ago by the Greeks, and since then it's simply been a matter of recycling. But science gives us definite progress. New

discoveries are being made all the time! I should have been a scientist, maybe a bio-geneticist, or maybe an astrophysicist. That's where all the exciting things are happening in our day! (He sighs deeply) But then, as with so many things, I missed the boat. I simply couldn't make the grade.

FENTON: Why was that?

STEVEN: I despised math.

FENTON: (Pause) Um, what about your wife?

STEVEN: She doesn't care for it, either.

FENTON: I mean what does she do? Does she teach?

STEVEN: (Thinks about it) I guess you could say she's taught a few people some things. (He then laughs).

FENTON: (Becoming a little irritated) I'm not sure I understand. I mean what the heck is that supposed to mean?

STEVEN: I don't know. But you might find out.

FENTON: (Then embarrassed by his rudeness) Now I'm sorry. That was rude of me.

STEVEN: You were within your rights to insult me. You should have hit me. Do it, if you want.

FENTON: I don't know what came over me!

STEVEN: I pushed you to your breaking point.

FENTON: There's no excuse.

STEVEN: If you'll excuse me, I'm going to have another drink.

FENTON: (Mopping his brow) To tell you the truth, I'm ready for one myself.

STEVEN: Suzie and I often have that affect on people. (He mixes another drink for himself and then opens a beer for FENTON). Here you are.

FENTON: I was thinking of having what you're drinking.

STEVEN: Of course—(He takes another glass and pours a shot of whiskey into it, then hands the shot to FENTON) Bottoms up. (He takes a long gulp).

FENTON: Cheers. Do you have any children?

STEVEN: Do we have children? (Pause) That's a touchy subject!

FENTON: I understand! We don't have any, either. But Hilary wants them.

STEVEN: (Matter-of-fact) Then you'll have them.

FENTON: Of course I'd like a son. I guess every man wants a son. I guess it has something to do with following in his footsteps, carrying on the family name. Of course not everyone feels—

STEVEN: (Abrupt change of subject, but not nasty) I wonder what our wives are talking about?

FENTON: (Pause) Your wife let me tell you—(Finds himself at another loss)...she...she is...you know—

STEVEN: She certainly is!

FENTON: I mean she has a pretty strong personality.

STEVEN: I like the euphemism.

FENTON: (Chuckles) I mean she's really quite a character.

STEVEN: She wouldn't appreciate you calling her that! She'd think of Micawber!

FENTON: I meant no disrespect.

STEVEN: None taken—but many people would call her grotesque.

FENTON: Now you're putting me on.

STEVEN: She wasn't always like this.

FENTON: I'm sure—Hey! Now quit kidding me!

(HILARY re-enters. She looks at the men and immediately seems suspicious)

HILARY: Fen, you really have to see this house. It's charming.

FENTON: I'm sure.

STEVEN: Thanks. But, where is Suzie?

HILARY: She's changing into something more comfortable.

STEVEN: Uh-oh!

FENTON: At this time of night?

STEVEN: (Looks at FENTON and shakes his head, muttering ruefully) You poor man.

HILARY: (Warily, to FENTON) Are you all right?

FENTON: I'm just fine.

HILARY: (Points to the glass of whiskey) What are you doing with that?

STEVEN: I'm sorry. I gave that to him.

HILARY: (To FENTON) Well, I hope you haven't done anything to embarrass us in front of our host.

FENTON: (To STEVEN) At times I don't hold my liquor very well.

HILARY: Sometimes he doesn't hold it at all! He throws it up!

STEVEN: (He moves away from FENTON). It's my fault. My wife and I drink like fish, so we assume everyone else does, too.

FENTON: Now look, honey, I'm fine! Besides, I hardly touched it.

STEVEN: Here. I'll take care of that problem. (He simply pours the whiskey into his own glass) There! Now, is that all settled?

FENTON: I'm really fine, sweetheart.

HILARY: (Pause, to STEVEN) By the way, your wife was telling me you had a son.

FENTON: I thought you said you didn't have any children?

STEVEN: I said it was a touchy subject.

FENTON: Oh. Well then you DO have a son? That's wonderful.

STEVEN: Yes. (He smiles weakly) So Suzie mentioned our Mick, did she?

HILARY: Yes.

STEVEN: Yes, of course. After all, he's our boy. (Suddenly ill-at-ease) What exactly did she tell you?

HILARY: Well, she was saying—

(SUZIE re-enters, garishly dressed in what she imagines to be a very sexy outfit)

SUZIE: I'm baaaack! How do I look? (She models her dress for them).

STEVEN: You don't have to tell her the truth.

FENTON: You look very nice. (To HILARY) Doesn't she?

HILARY: It's very chic.

SUZIE: Just something I wear to the church on Sunday. (They politely chuckle).

STEVEN: The Church Street Tap, it's our favorite tavern. (They all laugh loudly).

SUZIE: (Still posing 'seductively') The thing is, I've still got a pretty good body, as you can see, and I've always said why give it up until you have to.

HILARY: I think that's a very healthy attitude.

SUZIE: (Walks over and feels FENTON'S biceps, etc, as far as the Director feels she can go) It seems you've got a pretty good body, too.

FENTON: No, I don't at all—

HILARY: Well, if he does, it's no thanks to him! I make him work out every day.

SUZIE: That sounds like fun!

HILARY: Sometimes it takes a lot of effort.

SUZIE: That sounds like even more fun! I always say 'Don't knock it, 'til you've tried it.' (She laughs).

STEVEN: Suzie knows and uses every cliché in the book. (He and FENTON then laugh. HILARY smiles uneasily).

SUZIE: Hey, you! Get off your dead butt and make me a drink!

STEVEN: (Cowed, he jumps to it) Certainly, sweetheart!

SUZIE: That's how I keep him in shape. (They all politely laugh).

STEVEN: Here's your drink, my sweet. (He hands her a drink).

SUZIE: (To FENTON) I'll bet you were quite an athlete when you were in school.

FENTON: No, but I was on the chess club.

STEVEN: The chess club? What do you know! When I was in high school I was president—

SUZIE: (Peremptorily cutting STEVEN off, to HILARY) I'll bet he's just being modest. He looks like he might have been a darn good middleweight.

HILARY: You mean boxing? (She laughs) Oh boy!

SUZIE: What's the joke?

HILARY: (To FENTON) You want to tell them, or should I?

FENTON: (Now he is also laughing) Well, one time, before we got married, she knocked me for a loop!

SUZIE: No!

FENTON: One afternoon we were just horsing around a bit when I gave her a playful tap on the jaw, just kidding, but she rared back and landed a haymaker on my nose that knocked me down, and it took ten minutes to stop my nosebleed!

HILARY: So you see how mistaken you were about the boxing champion!

STEVEN: That must have been quite a punch.

HILARY: I stay in pretty good shape myself.

STEVEN: I can see that.

SUZIE: (Slightly irked, not to be the center of attention) But I have to say that did sound just a little sneaky.

HILARY: Oh, it was. But I honestly had no idea—

FENTON: She didn't know her own strength! But I found out!

STEVEN: It all sounds kind of sexy.

SUZIE: Uh-huh. It does at that.

FENTON: Well, I never thought of it that way. (He rubs his jaw).

HILARY: You wouldn't!

STEVEN: (To SUZIE) Hey, sweetheart, come here.

SUZIE: What for?

STEVEN: Come and give me a little kiss.

SUZIE: Ugh! You've got to be sick!

STEVEN: You can't kill a man for trying.

SUZIE: Especially when try is the best he can do!

STEVEN: None of us is as young as we once were, dear.

SUZIE: I am! (To FENTON) By the way, big boy, I understand you were a real whizz in academics. I mean getting your PhD at sixteen or something.

FENTON: (To HILARY) You didn't tell her!

HILARY: I was trying to think of something I could brag about you.

FENTON: Well, it wasn't sixteen! I was already twenty!

STEVEN: That is very, very impressive!

FENTON: I just put in a lot of hard work.

STEVEN: Nevertheless, I am extremely impressed by that.

FENTON: (Very embarrassed) And I really didn't go to the very best university. I mean Princeton, big deal—

STEVEN: I don't care where you went! That is phenomenal!

FENTON: (Must change the subject) Um, by the way, will your

son be home tonight?

STEVEN: (To SUZIE) God knows! Will he?

FENTON: I guess he's not here, so he must be out.

HILARY: We'd love to meet him.

FENTON: We would. When will he be home?

STEVEN: Where is he is probably a more relevant question.

(Then, suddenly, they hear what sounds like a back door, slamming; A Pause)

SUZIE: That must be Mick now. (She goes to the door and calls) MICK! MICK, HONEY! Come down here, sweetie, there's some folks we'd like you to meet! (Silence; she shrugs) He is incredibly shy.

STEVEN: Some people call it rude. He gets that from his mom. (They laugh reservedly).

FENTON: His name is Mick?

HILARY: What a nice name.

SUZIE: I named him after Mick Jagger.

STEVEN: In case you hadn't noticed my wife is hopelessly lost in the '70s.

SUZIE: What days those were! What times we had!

HILARY: It must have been fun.

FENTON: Of course we weren't born then. (Awkward pause) That is not quite—

SUZIE: I always say age is a matter of mind, not a matter of time!

STEVEN: She says it, but that doesn't help much.

SUZIE: It seems like yesterday!

STEVEN: Well, we really did have some wonderful times. But then, we were very young and life is always wonderful when you're young, and you have everything in front of you. (Suddenly

turns sentimental, to HILARY and FENTON) Believe me, kids, for you, these are the most wonderful years of your life, enjoy them, because they won't come back again, let me tell you—

SUZIE: CAN IT, for God's sake! We're not dead YET! At least, I'm not!

STEVEN: I don't know what got into me.

SUZIE: About a gallon of Jim Beam! (She laughs raucously. The others merely smile uneasily).

HILARY: And of course you have your son.

(And then they hear loud drumming, coming from somewhere in the house)

SUZIE: Oh, that's Mick now!

HILARY: He plays the drums?

SUZIE: (Can barely hear because of the drumming) What?

HILARY: (Louder) He plays the drums?

SUZIE: Isn't he great! I'm so proud he's an artist!

FENTON: (They are all now, of necessity, talking much louder) How old is he?

STEVEN: Ten—

HILARY: And he can play the drums like that! My Gosh!

STEVEN: Ten going on twenty-five—

SUZIE: WATCH IT, SWEETHEART!

STEVEN: Just kidding, dear.

HILARY: Does he play with a band?

SUZIE: Not at the moment—The guys he was playing with really weren't up to his level, so he walked. But he's auditioning for a couple of groups next week, and I understand one of them is about to cut a CD, so we have our fingers crossed. (To STEVEN) Don't we? (STEVEN smiles weakly and raises crossed fingers).

HILARY: It sounds very exciting!

SUZIE: I must admit. When I got pregnant, I was a little frightened, you know? I kept saying to myself: 'I'm having the time of my life, so am I ready for this!' But as soon as he was born, I knew he was going to be special. Oh I know, EVERY mother thinks that, but in his case it was really true! He was just brilliant from the beginning. (To STEVEN) Wasn't he?

STEVEN: Like father, like son, as they say.

SUZIE: And so cute! Of course, he got that from me. We both fell in love with him, and maybe we spoiled him a little, but we couldn't help giving him everything he asked for.

STEVEN: You might say we spoiled him rotten.

SUZIE: (Laughs, as if that were a compliment) We sure did! But, as you can see, it paid off.

(Then, suddenly, the drumming stops. They try not to look too relieved)

HILARY: (As if disappointed, but still speaking loudly) Oh. He's stopped—So soon?

SUZIE: ARTISTIC TEMPERAMENT!

STEVEN: We can hear you now, dear. (Everyone laughs).

FENTON: He seems to be really talented.

HILARY: We'd like to meet him.

SUZIE: He'll come down when he's ready. Like I say, artistic temperament.

STEVEN: He gets that from his mother, too! (They laugh again, no one louder than SUZIE).

FENTON: (After a moment, he begins sniffing) What's that I smell?

HILARY: I don't smell anything. (Elbows him) For heaven's sake,

don't be rude!

FENTON: But something might be on fire.

SUZIE: (Sniffing) Oh. That's weed. Steven and I decided early on that we weren't going to be hypocrites about that. I mean we smoke it. He's free and twenty-one.

STEVEN: Well over twenty-one, to be exact. I don't personally smoke it. (After a withering glance from SUZIE). Well, some, naturally. I mean who doesn't?

SUZIE: We simply don't want to be hypocrites? Do as I say, not as I do. I don't know how you feel about that attitude.

FENTON: (Uneasily) Raising kids can't be easy.

HILARY: (Jumping in) I think that's an admirable attitude. Besides, marijuana should be legalized, and not just for medical reasons.

SUZIE: That's exactly what we think!

STEVEN: (Takes a long gulp from his drink and, suddenly, begins to show the effects of much drinking) What we did we raised him according to The Bible.

SUZIE: (Looks at him) What do you heave up your sleeve?

FENTON: How do you mean?

STEVEN: We raised him according to that Biblical observation. (He giggles slightly) 'As ye sow, ye shall reap.' (He chuckles drunkenly).

SUZIE: (As a challenge to STEVEN) Well, baby, MY philosophy has always been 'Do Your Own Thing!'

STEVEN: There's something else about the '70s.

SUZIE: Right On!

STEVEN: The '70s not only made self-indulgence, vulgarity and selfishness acceptable, they practically made it obligatory! (He chuckles again, and takes another drink).

SUZIE: I RESENT THAT IMPLICATION!

STEVEN: Are you sure, my love, you don't mean you resemble it? (He laughs drunkenly, making HILARY and FENTON very uncomfortable, indeed).

SUZIE: God, that was a NASTY thing to say, and if I wasn't a LADY! Well, I just don't know what—(STEVEN visibly shrinks as SUZIE stares daggers at him; then, feeling very injured, she exits).

STEVEN: Suzie, wait! I didn't—Boy, I really put my foot in it this time!

HILARY: (Not really wanting to, but feeling she ought to offer) Look, why don't I go and talk to her?

STEVEN: Thanks a lot! Would you mind?

HILARY: (Not the answer she was expecting) Why—No, of course not. (Reluctantly, she exits).

STEVEN: (To FENTON) I'm sorry, old man. I'm sure you and your wife found that incredibly unpleasant.

FENTON: It was just a misunderstanding. (She smiles weakly).

STEVEN: Suzie is very sensitive.

FENTON: I can see.

STEVEN: Sometimes I forget that.

FENTON: She'll be fine.

STEVEN: She isn't aging well.

FENTON: I think she looks just fine.

STEVEN: For your own sake, don't tell her that.

FENTON: Why not?

STEVEN: I'll tell you, when we were young—younger, back in those '70s, she dwells upon, Suzie was a tremendously good-looking woman. In fact, I can prove it. There's got to be a photo handy. I mean she has a *million* of them lying around. (He now is

fixated on finding a photo).

FENTON: I believe you. Really. You can tell that she once was...I mean she still is—

STEVEN: (Finds a photo) Here we are. There! You can see what I'm saying. (He hands the photo to FENTON).

FENTON: She was very pretty.

STEVEN: But I wasn't simply interested in her physically.

FENTON: I'm sure.

STEVEN: Or simply because her father was President of the college, either—

FENTON: No?

STEVEN: Not that it didn't help, mind you! But in those days she was quite the catch. I mean beautiful and the President's daughter, and she was a lot of fun, so full of life—

FENTON: Well, I think, you know, still—

STEVEN: What more could one have asked for?

FENTON: (Trying to put an end to this conversation) I see your point. Now when Hilary and me... Hilary and I—

STEVEN: (Blowing right past him) And I was the one she chose! And take my word for it, she had plenty of options. Practically any young man on campus, and in those days, single or married, it hardly made any difference. Of course at that time I wasn't the wreck you see before you today. Of course the life we led in those days has certainly taken its revenge on me, too! But I was young, and I was also pretty good-looking, if I must say it myself, and I was also the rising young star of the English department. I was a scholar and a poet, to boot—

FENTON: You write poetry?

STEVEN: I did at that time.

FENTON: I'm impressed! I enjoy poetry. Would you happen to have any of your stuff handy?

STEVEN: (Caught up in telling his story, he waves that off) As I say, at that time, I was considered quite the tyro. I was a promising poet. I'd published in numerous reviews, and I also had a small volume coming out. In those days, poetry was not looked upon with, shall we be kind and simply say with the indifference, with which it is regarded today.

FENTON: I wouldn't exactly say that.

STEVEN: But what can you expect from an era that considers 'rap' and rock-and-roll lyrics the epitome of poetic expression? Where was I? Yes, I was saying for reasons of her own, Suzie set her sights on me. Of course I was flattered. And I still am, because inside that crass exterior, Suzie is still a warm, intelligent and a beautiful human being. (He takes another long drink, as if it might actually sober him up) So despite what you're seeing tonight, and I'm afraid you haven't seen everything, not by a long shot—(He takes another gulp).

FENTON: (Now slightly alarmed) It IS getting late. I suppose we should think about heading home—

(Then SUZIE re-enters the room, followed by a nervously smiling HILARY)

HILARY: I think all is forgiven.

SUZIE: (To STEVEN) Your apology is accepted. But I hope you feel guilty!

STEVEN: I deserve that.

SUZIE: But what is this talk about leaving?

FENTON: I was just thinking it is getting kind of late.

SUZIE: Nonsense! Don't let his rude behavior scare you off.

STEVEN: No, don't. I was way out-of-line.

SUZIE: And the night is still young. (Sharply, to STEVEN) I want a drink!

STEVEN: That's an excellent idea. Let's all have one!

HILARY: I guess I could manage another glass of that wine. (Quickly) It's so good.

FENTON: What the heck! (He finishes his beer).

HILARY: (Sotto Voce, to FENTON) For God's sake, be careful.

SUZIE: Now listen! I know how to liven things up! Let's dance!

STEVEN: I must admit my wife is an excellent dancer.

SUZIE: I'm going to play something that really ROCKS! (She goes to a CD player and puts on some raucous '70s music) Now that's more like it! (She now tries to pull FENTON to his feet) Hey, get with it, baby! Shake it!

FENTON: No, no, I'm a terrible dancer!

SUZIE: That's okay. I'm not! (She shakes her body, laughing).

FENTON: I mean it. I'm just awful!

HILARY: Take it from me, he's not kidding!

SUZIE: It's all right. This isn't a contest! (She pulls on FENTON).

HILARY: (To FENTON) Oh, go on! (To SUZIE) You asked for it!

SUZIE: (Leeringly) And I'm gonna get it! (They dance, SUZIE really getting into it, FENTON very awkward and feeble, stumbles over his own feet).

HILARY: (To STEVEN) You're right. Your wife's a great dancer.

STEVEN: She used to do that all night long. It got a bit tiring.

HILARY: But have you ever seen anyone as clumsy as that husband of mine!

STEVEN: I don't think I ever have. (They chuckle).

SUZIE: (As FENTON finally steps on or falls on her) Whoa! Down

boy!

FENTON: Sorry.

HILARY: I warned you!

SUZIE: Okay, maybe we should give it a rest! (She kisses him)  
Well, anyway, Frankenstein, that's for trying!

FENTON: I've got three left feet.

SUZIE: I can see you didn't marry him for his dancing.

FENTON: I sometimes wonder why she did marry me!

HILARY: Now that's another story—

FENTON: But I'm sure it's not as interesting as your story.

SUZIE: Oh boy! (She's ready to launch into it).

FENTON: I guess you must have been impressed knowing Steven was a poet.

SUZIE: Huh? Oh God. Did he tell you that?

HILARY: So you're a poet?

STEVEN: No. No, not any longer—

SUZIE: I think it was all part of the courtship ritual, you know? I mean he used to write poems for me all the time. Didn't you, Lover?

STEVEN: Well, sweetheart, you were my inspiration.

HILARY: (To SUZIE) Oh, wow! That must have been very exciting for you.

SUZIE: I must admit it had an effect. And you wouldn't believe some of those poems! (She feigns fanning herself) Whew!

HILARY: I'll bet they were sweet.

SUZIE: Sweet! Some of them were downright syrupy! Weren't they, Shakespeare?

STEVEN: Well, you know how it is, a young man in love.

HILARY: We'd love to hear one of your poems.

SUZIE: Yeah! Read them one! (Laughs) It'll KILL you!

STEVEN: (Warily regaining a slight sardonic edge) Now, now, sweetheart, we don't want any dead guests on our hands.

HILARY: We'll take the risk.

FENTON: Yes. We'd really like to hear one.

SUZIE: (Assuming the poem will be one he wrote for her) Oh, come on! Give them a laugh!

STEVEN: I just might have one of them around here somewhere! (He rummages around for a poem).

SUZIE: Don't read the one you wrote about my purple underpants!

HILARY: Oh wow!

SUZIE: I'm telling you he was RELENTLESS! If you can imagine that these days! (She laughs. HILARY and FENTON smile uneasily).

HILARY: I think it all sounds very romantic.

FENTON: I was telling Steven I really enjoy poetry. Now I don't pretend to understand a lot of it, modern poetry, especially. I'll take Keats or Tennyson, or even Browning or Shelley—

HILARY: Hey, will you let the man read his poem?

FENTON: Oh yes—

STEVEN: Here's one. It seems the only one I can find at the moment. (He looks at it uneasily) It's that poem I wrote about my father.

SUZIE: Oh GOD! Not that!

HILARY: That's all right. We don't care.

SUZIE: But it's depressing!

STEVEN: (They look at him, he shrugs) My dad was a sad case.

SUZIE: He couldn't write a poem about someone who was

successful, like my dad.

STEVEN: Dear, we all know he was beyond my talents. Look here, let's just forget the poetry reading.

HILARY: Oh please.

FENTON: I'd like to hear one. I mean that.

SUZIE: (Sighs) Oh all right. Get it over with.

STEVEN:

FOR WILLIAMS

I remember the first time he lost  
his bid for State's Attorney,  
I cried. "We'll get them  
next time," he told me,  
but we never did.

And my mother, fat at thirty,  
daughter of the local judge,  
nagged him for his failure  
and for his drinking,  
until the day he died.

When his heart finally burst,  
at seventy-five,  
he still took indigent cases.

And then there was me:  
the son who wanted to be  
a poet, instead of a lawyer.  
I think he once had an affair  
with a lady who owned a bar,  
and he lived in an era of  
good whisky and cheap beer.  
I hope it was a consolation,

because when they tell you:

“You can’t have everything,”

they sure as hell don’t lie.’

SUZIE: (After a pause) I told you it was a downer!

HILARY: It is a little sad. But I liked it.

FENTON: I think it’s really very good.

STEVEN: Thank you.

FENTON: You’re father was a lawyer?

STEVEN: Of course I took some poetic license. It’s not absolutely autobiographical.

FENTON: I’ll tell you. I really like the end. How did it go, “When they tell you you can’t have everything—”

SUZIE: I hope that wasn’t autobiographical! (They chuckle).

HILARY: I guess your parents weren’t terribly happy.

STEVEN: I believe these days the euphemism is ‘incompatible.’ Dad was rather lonely, I think—

SUZIE: Hey! If I thought this was going to turn into a ‘Sob Session.’

STEVEN: You’re right. It’s not exactly a party topic, is it?

SUZIE: (To HILARY) If I can change the subject, I guess you didn’t marry handsome over there because he wrote poetry to you.

HILARY: Thank heavens he didn’t! And you’ve seen him dance! (They all chuckle).

FENTON: I’m still not sure how I snared her.

SUZIE: (She feels FENTON’S biceps, etc) Well, I got a sneaking suspicion.

HILARY: Frankly, I was more interested in his brain potential than his brawn.

FENTON: To tell you the truth, I chased after her shamelessly,

didn't I, honey?

HILARY: You want to talk about relentless! (She laughs, and FENTON joins in).

FENTON: (Now also beginning to feel his liquor) Yup! I used to sit out on the fence by her bedroom window and howl like a tomcat. (He imitates this).

HILARY: My parents were not amused.

FENTON: I guess it was my persistence that finally wore down her resistance. Hey! I guess I do have a little poetry in me!

SUZIE: I bet you got more than that in you, sweetie.

HILARY: Of course it helped that his family has a fortune!

STEVEN: Aha! Are we the first to learn you married him for his money?

HILARY: Oh God no. Everybody knows it! (Assuming it's a joke, they all laugh again).

SUZIE: Now come on, admit it. I'm sure there was something else he had.

HILARY: I hope you're not talking about sex.

STEVEN: Suzie rarely talks about anything else.

HILARY: I hope they don't ask us about our wedding night.

SUZIE: I hope we don't have to ask!

FENTON: It's embarrassing to admit, but I got a little drunk, and, well, you've heard how I sometimes don't hold my liquor real well? I sure proved it that night!

HILARY: That set the tone for our marriage!

SUZIE: Oh come now. He looks like he can handle himself all right in that department.

HILARY: Be my guest!

STEVEN: That does it!

HILARY: You know I sometimes think if I'd been born ten years later, I'd be a lesbian.

SUZIE: (After a pause, to FENTON) That must be a little frustrating for you.

FENTON: (Going along with the 'joke' and truly showing the effects of his liquor) Well, I guess there are times I can get a little raunchy! (He makes an inept grab for HILARY).

HILARY: Hey! Don't make this one of those times!

SUZIE: (Encouraging FENTON) You mean sometimes you like fun and games?

FENTON: I guess I can be as gamey as the next guy!

SUZIE: Well, come on then, baby, let's PLAY!

FENTON: You're on! And no holds barred!

SUZIE: (To HILARY) With your permission, of course!

HILARY: Be my guest! Maybe you can make a man out of him!

SUZIE: I can sure try! (To FENTON) Okay, so I'm going to make myself even more comfortable, and then I'm going to count to ten! (She exits, blowing him a kiss).

FENTON: (Chuckles very nervously) You'd almost think she meant it.

STEVEN: Let me ask you. Are you ambitious? I mean at this college?

HILARY: (When the dumbstruck FENTON says nothing) Yes! He DEFINITELY is.

STEVEN: Well, if you want to make it at this college, you'll have to make it with Suzie.

FENTON: You're kidding me! I mean she's—She's older than my mother!

HILARY: (Ambiguously) Oh, for heaven's sake!



FENTON: I mean you're putting me on, right? (Pause)

SUZIE: (Off) TEN! (There is a pause, then A BLACKOUT, and...)

## THE FIRST ACT IS OVER

*To be continued in Issue 4.*



about the  
contributors

### AAYATI SENGUPTA

Aayati is a creative being who writes, paints, creates music and finds avenues of expression wherever she can. She has worked as an editor and poetry facilitator, and currently writes on her blog *Venus in Aries*. Apart from that, she spends her time reading, cooking, experimenting with different things, and traveling (though not right now). Her writings have been previously published in *ChaiCopy* and *EFLUCampusMag*.

### ALEKSANDRA LEKIĆ VUJISIĆ

Aleksandra (Podgorica, Montenegro, 1979) is a professor of English language and a passionate writer of prose and poetry for children and grownups. She has participated in festivals across the globe and her work has won prizes and acknowledgments. She is a member of the Association of Montenegrin Authors for Children.

### ALI HAIDER CHANDIO

Ali is an aspiring writer and an undergraduate student in Lahore, Pakistan. His degree involves learning about postcolonial literature and subaltern history. His hobbies involve discovering newer recipes and hip hop trends around the world.

### ALIYA FATHIMA SHERIFF

Aliya is the ultimate social butterfly who is always on the move, mostly in search of some good filter coffee, and some free time. She is a Literature student with existential angst, a deep love for traveling, and an occasionally commendable sense of humor.

### ANIMIKHA PAL

Animikha is an 18-year-old student of Multimedia from Kolkata, and the owner of a creative mind. She is passionate about different art forms and keeps herself busy with creative pursuits. You can find her on Twitter: @palanimikha\_05 and Instagram: @animikha\_pal\_05.

### 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.

### BRYANA LORENZO

Bryana Lorenzo is a rising Junior at Boone High School in Orlando, Florida, and a Junior Editor at Polyphony Lit. Bizarre dramatic stories are her bread and butter, both for reading and writing. Her short fiction has been featured in *Outlanderzine*, and her articles are forthcoming at *Voicevolic*. You can find her on Instagram at @bryanastarwrites, or on Tumblr at bryanastar.tumblr.com

### DEEP NASKAR

Deep pens novels, short stories and poetry. His creative interest lies in crafting horror, paranormal, fantasy and magic realism. He has published a collection of poems, titled *Apocalyptic Dusk* (former #1 Kindle bestseller) and a collection of horror short stories, titled *The Tales of Unearthly Encounters*. His works have

been featured in numerous anthologies and magazines.

### FAVOUR IGWEMOH

Favour is a Nigerian writer. She is passionate about art forms like movies, writing, painting, pottery, fashion and cooking. She temporarily quit writing as she was shy but resumed when she realized she couldn't live without it. She uploaded her first book, *How to Love Like That*, to Wattpad, and it was later published as a webnovel. She considers writing her God-given gift, and wishes to use it to spread joy and hope.

### FRANK MODICA

Frank is a cancer survivor and retired teacher who taught children with special needs for over 34 years. His work is forthcoming or has appeared in *Blue Mountain Review*, *Lemonsputting*, and *Fahmidan Journal*. Frank's first chapbook is forthcoming from Alabaster Leaves Publishing.

### GEORGE FREEK

George has been playwright-in-residence at the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, Southern Methodist University, Southern Illinois University and Eastern Illinois University. His plays have been published by *Playscripts*, *Blue Moon Plays*, and *Off The Wall Plays*.

### GEORGE ROSAS

George is a native of the Republic of Panama. He is shy and somewhat stubborn. His publishing credits include stories

released in the US and in the UK in the following magazines: *The Fiction Pool*, *Aphelion Magazine*, *Dark Dossier*, etc.

### IVAN DE MONBRISON

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

### JADE HIDLE

Jade (she/her/hers) is the proud Vietnamese-Irish-Norwegian daughter of a refugee. Her travel memoir, *The Return to Viet Nam*, was published by Transcurrent Press in 2016. Her work has also been featured in *Michigan Quarterly Review: Mixtape*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Witness Magazine*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *The West Trade Review*, *Bangalore Review*, *Columbia Journal*, *New Delta Review*, and the Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network's [www.diacritics.org](http://www.diacritics.org). You can follow her work at [www.jadehidle.com](http://www.jadehidle.com) or on Instagram @jadethidle.

### JOHN GREY

John is an Australian poet and US resident, recently published in *Penumbra*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, and *Hollins Critic*. His latest books, *Leaves On Pages* and *Memory Outside the Head* are available through Amazon. His work is upcoming in *Lana Turner* and *Held*.

### JUMISMITA DAS

Hailing from the Land of Greenary, Assam, Jumismita has always adored nature. She has always been fascinated with literature and verbal expression. Apart from writing, she is interested in music, art, photography and dance. She is a trained vocalist. Her works have been published in various magazines like *LitGleam*, *Riot* and *Roux*; some reputed newspapers; and several poetry and short-story anthologies. She is a undergraduate in Literature and a postgraduate in Linguistics. She works as a teacher.

### JUSTIN ROBINETTE

Justin is a graduate of Duke University. He has enjoyed publishing fiction in places like *Erotic Review Magazine*, *Horror Sleaze Trash*, and *Datura Literary Journal*. Works of which he is proud are forthcoming in *The Winnow*, *Angel Rust*, *Apocalypse Confidential*, and HauntedMTL's upcoming horror anthology, *Queer as Hell*.

### LAURA STAMPS

Laura is a narrative poet who likes to push the boundaries of form by blurring the line between poetry and fiction. She is the author of several books, including *In the Garden*, *Cat Daze*, *Tuning Out*, and *The Year of the Cat*. She is the winner of the Muses Prize, and the recipient of 7 Pushcart Prize nominations. She was shortlisted in the Loft Books Poetry Competition. You can find her every day on Twitter at @LauraStamps16. Website: [www.laurastampspoetry.blogspot.com](http://www.laurastampspoetry.blogspot.com)

### PAROMITA PATRANOBISH

Paromita is an independent researcher and writer. She works at the intersection of literature and philosophy and enjoys photography. Her writing has been published in *Hakara Journal*, *The Chakkar*, *Bengaluru Review*, *The Bombay Review*, *Cafe Dissensus*, *Firstpost*, *Scroll*, *Gulmohur Quarterly*, *The Quint*, and *Assam Tribune*.

### PRANITI GULYANI

Praniti is a 17-year-old writer from Delhi, India. Her book, *Sixteen Drops of Ink*, was published in August 2020. She is also an international haiku poet who has been awarded the second position in the International Mainichi Haiku Contest (Children's Section) for three consecutive years.

### RICHARD LEDUE

Richard LeDue (he/him) was born in Sydney, Nova Scotia, Canada, but currently lives in Norway House, Manitoba, with his wife and son. His poems have appeared in various publications throughout 2020, and more is forthcoming throughout 2021. His first chapbook, *The Loneliest Age*, was released in 2020, and a second chapbook, *The Kind of Noise Worth Writing Down*, is forthcoming in early 2022 from Kelsay Books.

### RIYA AGGARWAL

Riya is an author and an enthusiastic learner from India. She believes there is no wrong age to learn. She's always open to trying new ideas and hobbies. She indulges in different art forms

and photography, and she is quite the bibliophile. You can follow her on Instagram: @thenextipenned

### RYAN QUINN FLANAGAN

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

### SANIYA AHMAD

Saniya is an undergraduate student at Lady Shri Ram College for Women. She frequently writes about social justice and her works have been featured in several well-known publications. Her interests revolve around history, political philosophy, and critical engagement with literature and current affairs.

### SRIJIT RAHA

Srijit was born in Kolkata, India, and grew up in Berhampore. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in Literature from the University of Calcutta. He enjoys expressing himself through written words and loves reading and writing intriguing poems, short stories and novels of various genres. Raha's works had been previously published as an Editor's Choice Selection in *The Nightingale Poetry Journal*, *From The Heart* (Poetry Press Publication), *Borderless Journal*, and many more.

### SWATI AGRAWAL

Swati is a poet and writer based in Mumbai, India. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Alipore Post*, *Sledgehammer Lit*, *Minnow Literary Magazine*, *Mad Swirl*, *Ariel Chart*, *Modern Literature*, *Setu*, *Active Muse*, *Potato Soup Journal*, *The Pangolin Review*, and *Muse India* among others. Follow her on Twitter @MoheetSwati and Instagram @swatihowrites.

### 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*.

### TRIASHA MONDAL

Triasha is a student from Kolkata who believes in the cathartic power of writing. She views poetry as a safe haven for her thoughts. She feels closest to herself when she writes. Poetry saved her life when she was drowning in despair and angst, so she uses it to liberate her soul.

### VERN FEIN

A retired special education teacher, Vern has published 150+ poems on over eighty sites, a few being: *\*82 Review*, *Bindweed Magazine*, *Gyroscope Review*, *Courtship of Winds*, *Young Raven's Review*, *Nine Muses*, *Monterey Poetry Review*, and *Corvus Review*.



## YUN MAKAN

Yun is a Tangkhul artist from the North East of India. She is a lover of the arts and uses her artistry to raise awareness on mental health and other social issues. She enjoys practicing all forms of art and lives in the catharsis that comes from expressing herself.

The image features a dark green background with several stylized leaf branches in shades of yellow and light green. The word "masthead" is centered in a yellow, serif font. The leaf patterns are arranged in a circular fashion around the text, with branches extending from the corners towards the center.

masthead

### SUSANNA MARIAN CORREYA

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

### KEERTHANA V

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

### MARIAM ANNA ALEX

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

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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

