

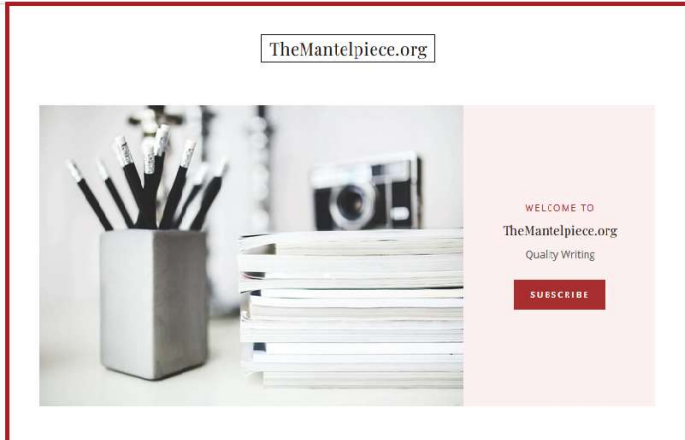
The MANTELPIECE

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Contributors

Lillian Heimisdottir is a writer and poet residing in Barcelona.

Dorothy Seehausen writes speculative fiction about ordinary people in unusual situations. She is a member of the Green Bay Area Writers Guild, Fiction on the Bay and Wisconsin Writers Association. She made her short story writing debut in the 2022 March issue of *Literary Yard* ([web](#)).

Eleanor Jiménez is a writer from Barcelona ([web](#)).

John RC Potter is an international educator from Canada, living in Istanbul. His poems and stories have been published in a range of magazines and journals, most recently in *Blank Spaces* and in *Literary Yard* ([web](#)).

Özge Lena is an Istanbul-based writer & poet. Her poems have appeared in *Ink Sweat & Tears*, *Green Ink Poetry*, *Red Ogre Review*, *Harana*, *Acropolis Journal*, *The Phare*, *After Poetry*, *The Selkie*, and elsewhere ([web](#)).

Erik N. Patel is a writer and digital nomad ([web](#)).

William Fleeson is a writer and journalist from Washington, DC. His work has appeared in *BBC Travel*, *Narrative*, *National Geographic*, the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *WORLD*, and elsewhere ([web](#)).

Heimir Steinarsson is an Icelandic typographer and linguist.

Coverphoto: *Torfi Jonsson*

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Nature and Spirituality

The Sacred Bond That Nurtures Our Soul

In the vast expanse of our planet, one can often find the profound interplay between nature and spirituality. From ancient groves to the vast oceans, there are places that seem to echo with an energy deeper than what meets the eye. They serve as reminders that, at our core, humanity's bond with nature is not just physical but spiritual as well.

Sacred natural sites, be it mountains, rivers, or forests, have been venerated across different cultures for millennia. In India, the Ganges River is not just a water body but a divine entity. In Japan, certain trees and rocks are believed to be inhabited by spirits. The indigenous communities of North America and Australia treat their land with deep reverence, seeing it as intertwined with their spiritual beliefs and ancestry. Such sanctities are a testament to the intrinsic relationship between the natural world and our inner spiritual realm.

So, what makes nature such a conduit for spiritual experiences? Perhaps, it is the peace and stillness that nature offers, allowing us to connect with our deeper selves. Or maybe, it is the sheer majesty of nature – the vastness of the oceans, the towering mountains, the intricate patterns in a leaf – that evokes a sense of something larger than ourselves. Nature, in its myriad forms, serves as a mirror, reflecting the cosmic dance of creation, preservation, and dissolution.

Yet, in the hustle and bustle of modern life, many of us have become disconnected from this spiritual facet of nature. The rapid urbanization, our screen-addicted lifestyles, and the sheer pace of modern life often leave us alienated

from the natural world. But as we face global challenges, from climate crises to widespread anxiety and stress, there's an urgent need to rekindle this bond.

Fortunately, there are paths leading back to this sacred connection. Practices such as *Shinrin-yoku*, or forest bathing from Japan, offer a structured way to immerse oneself in nature and experience its therapeutic and spiritual benefits. Pilgrimages to sacred natural sites, be it Mount Kailash in Tibet or Uluru in Australia, can also offer profound experiences of introspection and connection.

“In every walk with nature, one receives far more than he seeks.”

Incorporating the essence of nature into our daily spiritual routines has the potential to bring about profound transformations in our lives. It doesn't necessitate grand gestures; indeed, it's the subtle, simple acts that often resonate the most. Imagine taking a quiet moment to meditate beneath the gentle canopy of a whispering tree, feeling its age-old wisdom and energy surround you. Consider the sensation of walking barefoot on a carpet of fresh, dew-kissed grass, each blade caressing your feet, connecting you directly to the Earth's nurturing pulse. Or picture yourself beside a serene stream, allowing the

symphony of bubbling, gurgling water to wash over you, carrying away your stresses and worries. These acts, though seemingly small, have the power to anchor us, drawing us closer to nature's heart. They grant us moments of clarity, rejuvenation, and a profound sense of peace that's often elusive in our fast-paced world.

As we find ourselves on the brink of formidable environmental and societal challenges, it becomes more pressing than ever to acknowledge and strengthen our spiritual connection with the natural world. This bond, deeply rooted in our collective consciousness, transcends mere appreciation; it's a reminder of our intrinsic relationship with every leaf, stone, and creature. It's not just about the myriad benefits we, as individuals, derive from this connection – the peace, the solace, the moments of introspection. More crucially, a society that truly grasps the sanctity of nature is one that is poised to act with deeper compassion, consideration, and responsibility. Such a society would undoubtedly approach its natural resources and environments with a heightened sense of care and reverence, understanding that in preserving nature, we are safeguarding our own future and the generations yet to come.

In the words of the famous environmentalist John Muir, “In every walk with nature, one receives far more than he seeks.” Perhaps what we seek, consciously or unconsciously, is a deeper connection to our own spirit and the universe. And nature, with its timeless beauty and wisdom, generously offers that bridge. □ LH

Twice as Much and Twice as Hard

A Feminist Fairy Tale

Lillian Heimisdottir



Illustration: bukhavets / Adobe Stock

Once upon a time, in a faraway land, lived a king and a queen. The king was haughty and supercilious, but the queen was wise and resourceful. They had no children who would inherit the kingdom, so one day the queen suggested that they should search for an heir among the young people of the land to find a suitable successor.

“That’s an excellent idea,” the king said in his boastful manner. “We’ll send some young men on a quest, and the worthiest of them shall get the kingdom after our days.”

“Why only the young men?” the wise queen asked her husband. “Shouldn’t the young women of the kingdom be allowed to participate in the competition?”

At this, the king laughed very loudly and said: “This is such a ridiculous idea, that I don’t know if you are even serious about it. But I say this: If a girl should outperform all the excellent young men in this country and emerge as the winner in the quest, she doesn’t even have to wait for me to die to take over the kingdom, but can take the throne immediately.”

The news of this royal decree spread throughout all the kingdom. Everywhere, young men were eager to prove themselves in an attempt to become heir to the throne. Some of the young women also expressed interest in the competition, but they were laughed at and soon gave up all hope of being able to compete. However, in a small village at the edge of the forest, there lived a young girl who was curious and adventurous. The girl loved to explore and discover new things, so she asked her parents if she could go on the quest and try to become the heir of the kingdom.

“You can go,” said her mother. “But remember that you will have to work twice as hard and twice as much if you want to be as good as all the young men you are competing with.”

“And even that might not be enough,” her father thought, but he said nothing.

The Halls of Wisdom

So the girl left home and went out into the wide world in order to compete for the kingdom. She soon came to the Halls of Wisdom, which were designated to be the first part of the competition. Here the girl read all the books she could lay her hands on and listened to lectures from famous wise scholars from all over the world. She read twice as many books as everybody else and stayed twice as long in the library to work on her assignments. By doing so, she came out on top of her group and did better than all her competitors.

As soon as the king realized how well the girl was doing, he urged her adversaries to torment her and keep her apart from their group in an effort to make life tough for her. He challenged the men to make her life as difficult as they could, "Are you men going to allow this female to outperform you?"

But the girl would not let herself be discouraged. She read twice as many books as everybody else, and attended twice as many lectures as her competitors, and when this part of the competition was over, the king himself came and awarded her recognition for her efforts.

"You see," said his queen to him. "Young women can compete just as well as men."

"That might be true for this part of the quest," answered the king in a haughty voice. "But let's see how she'll do in the next stage."

The Fields of Labour

The girl said goodbye to the Halls of Wisdom, with some regret because she had liked the place very much. She went on until she came to the Fields of Labour. Here all kinds of tasks awaited the competitors, but the girl mastered them all. She worked twice as hard on her projects and stayed twice as long at her workplace than everybody else. As a result of her diligent efforts, the girl did the best work and surpassed all her rivals.

When the king saw how well the girl was performing, he encouraged her rivals to harass her and keep her out of their group in order to make things more difficult for her.

"Are you guys going to let this little girl outmatch you?" he said to the men and goaded them to make her life as challenging as they could.

But the girl continued to work twice as hard and twice as much as everybody else. The king watched her efforts from afar, and although it wasn't easy for him to admit it, he could not but acknowledge the girl's efficiency.

"You see," said the queen. "Women can do just as well when it comes to working."

The king had to admit that she was right, but he wasn't happy with it.

"Let's see how she'll do in the final undertaking," he said and laughed maliciously.

The queen saw the king was up to something wicked and she became worried. She went off, immersed in deep thoughts, dreading the worst.

The Dominions of War

But the girl continued her quest after having said goodbye to the Fields of Labour, where she had had such great success. It wasn't easy for her to leave her newfound colleagues behind, but she knew that she had to go on in order to fulfil the requirements that had been set by the king. She had to prove that she was a worthy leader in order to be able to inherit the kingdom.

But the king didn't want to see the girl win the competition and succeed in the quest, because that meant he would have to resign his throne to her while still alive. Also, he would have to admit to his queen that she had been right about women competing successfully, and he liked that even less. So he put on his armour and commanded that all the young men should be dressed in uniforms and made to carry weapons.

Then he said to the girl: "We are going to war now. We will raid and burn many villages. Will you burn twice as many villages as your competitors?"

The girl gave no answer, so the king and his soldiers just laughed at her.

The king then added: "In this war, we will kill many men. Will you kill twice as many men as your challengers?"

The girl remained silent and the soldiers laughed.

Finally, the king asked: "In this war, we will molest many women. Will you molest twice as many women as everybody else?" He said this in a cruel and vicious voice and the men roared with laughter.

The girl now hung her head, for she knew that she would not be able to do these things, which meant that she had

failed in her quest and that all her hard work had been for nought.

"You see, little girl," the king said triumphantly. "This is the way of the world. You can work twice as much and twice as hard as everybody else, but if you lack the will to conquer people in war you can never rule a kingdom like this one."

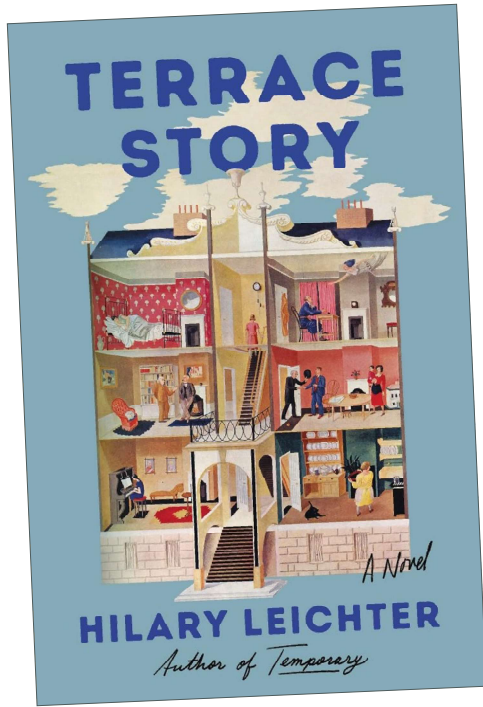
And with that, he made himself ready to lead his young soldiers into battle in order to raid and pillage, kill and molest his victims. But as he was marching off, the queen arrived and with her all the inhabitants of the towns and villages the king had planned on attacking. They had united under the leadership of the wise queen and together they outnumbered the troops of the king by far. The king saw that there was no way he could win this battle, so he retreated and left his kingdom in charge of the queen.

"You have proven yourself to be worthy," the wise queen said to the girl, "and you shall rule the kingdom from now on."

The king, who had to resign his throne to the girl, was out of a job. To keep himself busy he spent the rest of his life playing a silly game in which he had to use various clubs to hit balls into a series of holes on a course in as few strikes as possible.

The girl however, grew up to be a beautiful woman, who, with the aid of the wise queen, ruled the kingdom in an enlightened and judicious manner. She married a handsome, if somewhat useless man, who cut a fine figure beside her, and the people in the land were glad to live under her sovereignty in every area of life. She made sure that girls and boys had the same opportunities when it came to studying and working and that no girl had to work twice as much and twice as hard to get to where her male counterparts were. For this, she was loved and respected by her compatriots. They all lived happily ever after and if they haven't died then they are still living today. □

New Fiction Books



Terrace Story by Hilary Leichter (Ecco). In her sophomore novel, “Terrace Story,” Hilary Leichter presents a nuanced journey through human desires and limitations. Told through a quartet of connected stories, the book explores how different characters navigate the borders between the mundane and the magical. Where last year’s film “Everything Everywhere All at Once” presented a chaotic multiverse, Leichter chooses the domestic setting of a dinner party to gently introduce her own metaphysical twists.

The tale starts with Annie and Edward, a young couple settling into a small apartment with their infant daughter Rose. When a seemingly ordinary dinner with Annie’s coworker Stephanie reveals a fantastical terrace they’ve never seen before, they are offered a temporary escape from their confined existence. Yet this magical expansion only exists in Stephanie’s presence, forcing Annie and Edward to confront the temporary nature of their newly enlarged world.

While the magical terrace serves as a metaphor for unrealized dreams and possibilities, Leichter also grounds her story in the realities of life, loss, and motherhood. Women like Annie, her daughter Rose, and later characters like Lydia and Anne embody the cycles of creation and loss, anchoring the narrative’s ethereal elements in physical and emotional truth.

The book grapples with the themes of creation and disappearance, embodied by Stephanie’s grief and magical thinking. Her backstory offers a sobering balance to the story’s whimsical elements, invoking a sense of melancholy that mirrors the human experience.

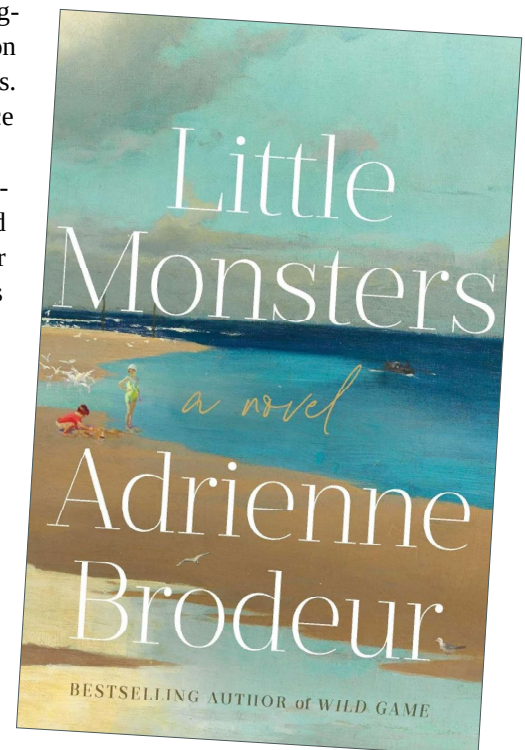
As the tale expands from an urban apartment to an interstellar suburb, “Terrace Story” underlines the inescapable pairing of hope and loss, creation and disappearance. It asks readers to ponder the complexities of existence, whether grounded in reality or exploring the infinite “what-ifs” of life. In doing so, Leichter crafts a touching narrative that blends the dreamlike with the deeply human, leaving readers both enchanted and contemplative. □

Little Monsters by Adrienne Brodeur (Avid Reader Press / Simon & Schuster). “Little Monsters” by Adrienne Brodeur is a poignant narrative that expertly weaves personal struggles with larger societal contexts, set against the pivotal year of 2016. The novel focuses on Abby Gardner, a quietly ambitious artist who faces personal and professional milestones. She secretly navigates a pregnancy while preparing for an art exhibit, intending to announce her news at her father Adam’s 70th birthday celebration.

Adam, an unconventional marine biologist facing forced retirement, adds a layer of familial unpredictability. Meanwhile, Abby’s brother Ken wrestles with his own moral and political dilemmas, a moderate Republican in a dominantly Democratic setting. Further complexity is added by Steph, a Boston cop, who offers a third-party perspective on this nuanced family portrait.

Brodeur excels in pacing the narrative, carefully leading up to a family gathering where multiple secrets and revelations intersect. In this setting, each character’s personal challenges and secrets are revealed, making for a riveting climax. The looming 2016 presidential election acts almost as another character, offering a macro lens through which to view the family’s micro-dramas. The book skillfully employs this political setting as an emotional amplifier, imbuing the characters’ personal narratives with broader significance. While most characters are fleshed out with depth, some, like the bluntly depicted tarot-card-reading Toni, could benefit from more subtlety.

“Little Monsters” delves into the delicate abuses of power that contribute to greater societal issues, indicated by its very title. The novel navigates the waters of family discord, personal ambition, and political unrest seamlessly, questioning whether the author is challenging our complacencies or encouraging us to brace for future societal changes. Overall, this is a compelling read, a nuanced family drama set against the shifting terrain of an era-defining political moment. □



Shallow

John RC Potter

You remind me of a lake I once
stood at the edge of long ago:
shallow,
so shallow, lacking depth
but to the touch just
cold.

 You are that lake:
not very deep,
seemingly calm on the surface
but the dirt churns below;
somewhat beguiling,
somewhat elusive,
as smooth as glass
and almost as
transparent.

 I could walk across that lake
but I cannot walk to you;
a cold lake in winter
is more inviting
and less dangerous.

 You push me away from your shore.

 I want to plumb your depths
but you won't let me enter
even your shallow end.

 I know that if only you'd let me
I could cross the shallows
and reach out to touch
your other side.

You remind me of a lake I once
stopped to take a drink from long ago:
cold
so
cold.

Trace

Dorothy Seehausen



Illustration: Freelanceartist / Adobe Stock

High on a cliff on a remote island in the wilderness known as the Boundary Waters in Northern Minnesota, the gray wolf slowly gnawed at dregs of what was once a large deer. Overhead the late afternoon sun threw long shadows from towering pines across the rotting carcass.

He could not know the name of his disease that attacked his parasitic infected brain. Wherever he walked, pain in his once broken leg jabbed at his aging heart. In his delirium, he dreamed of running like he used to, before the humans came with guns and traps that drove him deep into the woods. Abandoned by the pack, the smell of his own impending death had become his solitary companion. Every day despair etched away any rational thought.

He only wished for one more feast before death carried him away.

“What did you do now, Kate?” Cole Painter watched his girlfriend count the gold bars, arranging them in neat piles on the kitchen table. Normally when she got off at the bar at two in the morning, she’d slip into the apartment quietly. But tonight she had a surprise for him.

“See how each one is stamped with the Perth Mint in Australia? I looked them up on Google. There’s a total of 93 one ounce gold bars. Lobo buys them frequently from online websites. He calls them his retirement but I suspect he’s laundering money. As his manager, I know what a slim profit margin he has.”

Cole picked up a bar, about the size of a playing card but thicker, running his finger over the imprint on the front. All of a sudden she had something other than leaving him to talk about.

“Are you sure Lobo won’t suspect you?” Cole’s first bad impression of Gary Lobonski the night he’d picked up Kate had only grown worse in the six months since she’d moved in. “He can’t ever seem to look me in the eye. I think he’s jealous.”

“Hardly. He’s too busy courting the underworld. The bar was packed last night. There were enough shady patrons he could blame for the theft. Besides, I bring in business. He trusts me with the combination to his safe.”

“Did you change your mind about moving out, then?”

She smiled. "You know I didn't really mean it, Cole. I just...want things, like a house, flower garden, maybe kids..."

He couldn't figure out what he was doing wrong. Once she was happy just being with him. "Right now the economy's bad," he said. "I think we should wait."

"That's what you always say." He could not miss her resentful tone. "I figured out this stuff was worth about a couple hundred thousand dollars, Cole. Two...hundred...thousand..."

"I get it," he snapped. "But stealing is highly illegal, in case you didn't notice."

Frustrated, he grabbed a beer from the refrigerator to calm his nerves. For starters, she never really liked his apartment. Her word was "dull" but to him the location on the southern shore of Lake Superior near the industrial park was close to many labor jobs in Houghton. She didn't understand it kept him working during layoffs.

"Kate, you just can't walk into a real estate company and buy a house with a gold bar." He tried not to sound accusing.

She dismissed the idea with a wave of her hand. "Of course I know that."

He was persistent. "I'm just saying, someone's going to be after someone. Do you get the problem here? You *know* Lobo's into dangerous dealings."

She frowned. "Then we'll have to stash the bars out of sight until we can sort it out, won't we? What if we bury the stuff where no one would ever think to look for it. Lay low for a while up in, say, Canada. It's right across the border in the Boundary Waters, and we're half a day away from Tuscarora Outfitters in Ely. I've got a little money stashed away from tips. Enough to get us to Toronto where we can get jobs. Once we figure out how to turn the gold bars into cash we can go back, dig them up, and we'll be on our way."

"That's crazy. Besides, I know nothing about getting through the wilderness, much less hiking and canoeing. And I'm definitely not going to go live in Canada for a year."

He sighed as she cupped his face in her hands, her soft blue eyes drawing him in while her long blond hair was like a feather as it touched his cheek. "Like it's hard. You're almost forty and all you have is a lousy warehouse job stacking boxes all day long and you can't even keep that. You got the muscles. You just paddle from one side to the other. I'll steer from the back. We're a team, Cole."

He gave her a long look. "I'll be back to work soon, Kate. I know I can make enough with overtime. It just takes a while."

She ran a well manicured hand through his

hair. "I would think you'd want to give me the best you have to offer."

There was his foster mother's voice, condescending, reproaching. Seeing his look, she said softly, "We can figure it out as we go. Your lease is month to month, so tomorrow you can give notice. I'll call Lobo and make up something about my sick mother in Florida. I have enough cash for a couple weeks of food, gas, and canoe rental in Ely to get us out to one of the remote islands. We'll bury the gold and get a hotel for a couple weeks in one of those little out of the way towns near the Canadian border while waiting for our passports."

She kissed his forehead like he was a child and pulled him close.

He smelled her hair, felt her warmth, and caved, as she always had a way with him.

In the morning they packed two large duffle bags with a couple day's worth of clothing and toiletries, topping them off with two plastic bags each filled with half the gold bars.

She hummed happily while he was gloomy and withdrawn. He filled a flask with the rest of the Jim Beam she'd bought for his birthday, and tucked in his jacket pocket.

"It's early October" he said, "At least the weather out there should still be in the forties. I'll meet you outside." He picked up their gear and disappeared out the front door to pack the car.

He didn't see her check her wallet to make sure she had her gun permit, or know everything she'd just told him was a lie, or tuck the Glock G20 into her jacket pocket.

She was so beautiful and good for him all he wanted was to make her happy.

That same morning over at Lobo's Tavern, Gary Lobonski stood in front of the empty safe in his back room office. So far, so good, he mused. Ten years of buying gold to invest in his retirement was finally paying off with a scheme to double his money. He had a good deal with Kate. She would secure the bars in a storage locker until after he got the check from the insurance company. He had already lined up a buyer for the tavern. He liked her idea of Paris or London but he thought it would be better to disappear to a little cabin in the forests of Montana or maybe even as far west as Washington state or Oregon. After twenty-five years in the business, he was looking forward to his retirement years.

The ring of his cell interrupted his reverie. "Lobo here."

A gravelly voice with a fake authority sound greeted him.

"I hear you got a job for us," it said. He recognized a lowlife he only knew as The Associate.

Lobo said, "I got a couple hundred thousand dollars of gold for you to fence." He had seen the mobster in the bar often, working the shadows, setting up deals. Lobo could double the value of his gold and at the same time make Kate happy with her share of the profits.

As for the boyfriend, what was his name, Carl something? She'd promised he'd be out of the picture one way or the other.

It was the perfect little insurance scam. What could go wrong?

"I'm in," the voice said.

The seven hour trip from Houghton, Michigan, to Ely, Minnesota in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area was uneventful for Cole and Kate. They bought dried food and water at the outfitters before securing a sixteen foot aluminum canoe with paddles. At six feet two and muscular, Cole easily carried the fifty pound Northwind Ultralight across the portage to Crab Lake, Kate following with both duffels.

It was seven o'clock when they reached the entry point. The warm air cooled as the sun dipped behind the pines, throwing beautiful red orange streaks of color across the glassy water. He took up his position in the bow, she in the stern, the precious gold between them in their duffels.

The pristine beauty of the wilderness should have captivated him.

Instead, he could only ruminate on his dilemma. Which would be worse? Going to jail for stealing the gold, or Lobo's wrath when he put two and two together?

A chill went through him. He couldn't shake his fear that something bad was going to happen to this otherwise perfect plan.

From a cliff high above the island's cove, the wolf watched out across the lake as the humans in the canoe came closer. Were they here to hunt him? This was his territory he must defend.

And he was so, so hungry. It had been a long time since he'd felt a full stomach.

His breathing slow and heavy as he crouched down in the underbrush to wait, knowing his days were numbered.

They moved silently toward the island's cove, accompanied by the soft, smooth swoosh of their paddles dipping in and out of the water. In the bow, Cole had found a rhythm he didn't think possible, hardly aware of the creeping ache in his shoulders.

"Not too much farther," Kate called over to him. Each day off work made it harder to stay positive. He wanted things too, a new truck, a real working wood shop, maybe someday visit the Grand Canyon. Abandoned at sixteen by an uncaring foster family, all he had in the world right now was Kate.

But he could never do enough to have enough. Success that appeared to come easily for others had always been elusive for him. Maybe with the money things might change.

They beached the canoe, jumped out and pulled it up to the tree line.

"We'll build a fire when we come back from burying the gold," Kate said, "stay the night, and head out again in the morning."

Cole nodded and broke out his flask of whiskey. The familiar taste slid easily down his throat and his nerves responded calmly. The gold, he reasoned. Stealing was wrong and she'd made him an accomplice. Was the worst of living with her better than nothing at all?

He wondered how their relationship had become so complicated.

She went on. "Let's carry the gold about half a mile into the woods and bury the bars there. I'll lock in the GPS coordinates on my cell so we'll have no trouble retrieving them."

He took another drink and put the flask into his backpack. Too late to back out now, he chided himself.

The wolf stepped down from his hiding spot. Saliva formed in his mouth and dribbled down his chin. He picked his way along the underbrush guided by the glow of their flashlights. He was intense now, a single focus giving him strength.

In the smallest compartment of his tiny brain he savored this hunt, wondering about the human's taste, the texture of the skin, the smell of their blood. He stifled the howl creeping up his throat. No sense in letting them know he was near.

The gold in Cole's duffel felt heavier now and the underbrush cracked and snapped as they made their way in the dark, each a flashlight in hand to light the way.

"Over here, Cole!" The moon rose, seeping through the treetops, spilling silver splotches of light across their path. He shivered as sounds of night creatures settled in.

"Dig here," she ordered, looking at the coordinates on her cell and pointing to a sparse bit of ground. She stopped next to him and set down her duffel. Cole dropped his gear and retrieved the shovel. The woodsy smell of the cooling night gave no hint of the danger before them.

A hole began to form, growing bigger as dirt flew off his shovel into a neat pile.

"Only a couple more feet to go, Cole."

Was her tone more relaxed? She was probably relieved the bars would be out of their possession. He would win her back, basking in her love and devotion once everything blew over and they were truly safe from Lobo's wrath.

"Enough," she said quietly.

Twenty yards away, in the dark of the trees and underbrush, the wolf was closing in. He picked his way down the ridge, carefully going around brittle twigs that were quick to snap under his weight. Weak as he was, his heart quickened with the thrill of this hunt.

It was time.

Cole stood up, tossing the shovel aside, only to see Kate pull the gun out of her pocket.

"Kate," he said, confused. "What are you doing?" He stared in horror at the Glock, unable to believe it was pointed his way.

Acting instinctively, he stepped aside at the same instant the wolf lunged. The animal flew past Cole's shoulder, finding its target, sinking its fangs deeply into Kate's neck.

All three fell to the ground.

"Kate! My God! Kate!" He squirmed backward. Blood spurted from her jugular around the wolf's deadly bite. Her gargled scream hung in the air while the gun flew from her hand and she clutched her throat,

Gathering his wits, he grabbed the gun, and in one swift second stuck the barrel in the wolf's ear and pulled the trigger. The sound ricocheted into the night and, losing his balance, Cole fell backward, sweat beading on his brow.

With one pathetic jerk of its body, the wolf died instantly, more sad than proud, more pitiful than majestic, more empty than full.

Cole threw aside the gun and, hands shaking, pried open the wolf's bloody jaw to drag it off Kate, heaving it into the woods. Far across the wilderness the wolf pack howled out a eulogy for one of their own.

His breathing was shallow now. With his bare hands he attempted to stop blood pouring from the two puncture wounds in her neck, calling her name over and over. Yet, he knew he could not save her, only watch as the light in her eyes went out.

Nausea knotted his stomach. He held her until he knew he must move on, lest there be more wolves from the pack on the hunt.

He was on automatic now, his mind nothing more than a servant to his survival instincts.

Wiping his bloody hands on his jeans, he grabbed the shovel, carefully widening the hole. He quickly dismissed the plan to bury all the gold. He counted out ten bars, about twenty thousand dollars worth, and put them in his duffel, tossing the rest in the hole. He took her cell out of her jacket pocket and with a detachment he didn't think possible, rolled Kate's limp body into its grave, covering the gruesome tomb with clods of removed earth. He looked at his watch. It had been less than an hour since they set foot on the island.

She deserved a prayer, but nothing came.

He pocketed the remaining bullets from the gun, then crammed the weapon in his duffel with her flashlight and cell phone to deal with later.

The short trail back to camp carrying both packs tormented him. He was no longer Cole Painter from Houghton, Michigan, but the mythical Greek King Sisyphus, punished for eternity by Hades to roll a boulder uphill only to have it keep falling once he reached the top. Ominous shadows of unknown creatures tormented his every step. He stumbled, cursed, and pushed ahead while high in the trees night owls judged him with long disparaging hoots.

When he reached the camp where they'd moored the canoe, he propped the flashlight on a rock, dropped both duffels and gathered enough sticks to start up a small fire to keep animals away.

The warmth of his sleeping bag calmed him like a child and he fell into a fitful sleep as the aurora lit up the sky with its spectacular light show.

Over and over in his dreams he saw her pull the gun from her jacket pocket and aim it at him.

Had the wolf saved his life? Or had she seen the wolf and pulled the gun because she was aiming to shoot the animal and not him?

If only he could have talked her out of the whole stupid plan. If only....

He awoke at sunrise to pack up camp, carefully extinguishing the smoldering fire with dirt. Early morning birds tempered his mood and he paddled back to Ely with the sun on his back. He didn't have Kate's confidence in Lobo's logical thinking process, knowing it wouldn't take long to connect the two of them to the missing gold.

Toronto could work after all. He would find someone in the underworld to buy the gold, change his identity, put the horror behind him.

There was strange contentment knowing the wilderness held their secret. Kate's body would gradually decompose, becoming one with the elements until there was nothing but bones, while hungry bears would feast on the dead carcass of the wolf.

Whatever played out back home, Cole was confident he could disappear without a trace. Underworld guys like Lobo would survive one way or another; he'd find a good scam to replace his lost gold and another woman to replace Kate.

As for the buried gold, well, Cole concluded, he had Kate's cell with the coordinates. Maybe someday he'd come back for it.

But he really didn't think so. □

Navigating the Ethical Frontier

The Heightened Responsibility of Literary Fiction in a Post-Truth Age

Heimir Steinarrsson



Illustration: master1305 / Adobe Stock

In an era characterized by the ubiquitous phrase “fake news,” a term brandished without caution or restraint, the demarcation between what is factual and what is fabricated has become increasingly enigmatic. Within this quagmire, the responsibilities of writers, and more specifically those who craft literary fiction, have evolved into something deeply intricate and laden with paradoxes. As practitioners of a form that has long aimed to expose the underlying truths of the human condition, what moral, ethical, and societal obligations do authors now find on their shoulders? Are they to act as arbiters of reality or

should they embrace the subjectivity that our world appears to advocate for?

Furthermore, the power of fiction to serve as a vehicle for not merely escapism—a reprieve from the quagmires of daily life—but also for enlightenment, has never been more crucial. Fiction has the unique ability to transport readers into lives and worlds far removed from their own, thereby fostering a sense of empathy and understanding that can be transformational. Could this capacity be harnessed to bridge the widening chasms of our polarized societies and offer a semblance of shared reality? Or does it run the risk of be-

coming another tool in the arsenal of disinformation campaigns, further contributing to societal fragmentation?

This article aims to dig deep into the multilayered challenges that modern writers face, as well as the opportunities that lie before them in this bewildering landscape. At a time when the very definition of ‘truth’ has become fluid, subject to interpretation and manipulation, the role of the writer becomes all the more pivotal. It’s a complicated charge, requiring careful navigation between the Scylla and Charybdis of creative freedom and ethical responsibility, yet it offers the promise of contributing meaningfully to a discourse desperately in need of nuance and depth.

The Crisis of Credibility

The concept of “post-truth,” a term that gained substantial attention following the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, has a genealogy far more complex and historically rooted than that singular political moment. Its rise can be traced to a confluence of factors that have disrupted the information landscape over the past couple of decades. Notably, the explosive growth of social media platforms has democratized the dissemination of information, but has also created fertile ground for the spread of misinformation and echo chambers. Concurrently, traditional journalism, once considered a bastion of objectivity and a check on power, has faced declines in public trust and financial viability, further eroding the collective sense of a reliable, shared narrative. This vacuum has been readily filled by polarizing ideological movements that peddle in hyper-partisan perspectives, thereby further muddying the waters of public discourse.

In such a shifting and unstable landscape, the currency of credibility has been devalued to an alarming degree. Trust in the written word has become a casualty in this environment, placing authors, especially those engaged in literary fiction, in a particularly precarious position. Writers have always wrestled with complex questions about truth, morality, and the ethical implications of their work. However, the stakes have been ratcheted up exponentially in the current climate. Today's world places an unprecedented burden on writers to navigate a precarious tightrope. On one side is the temptation to surrender to relativism and nihilism, abandoning the pursuit of universal truths altogether. On the other is the imperative to assert some form of objective reality, a feat that comes with its own hazards.

A single misstep in this high-stakes balancing act can carry significant repercussions. An author today risks more than mere criticism or negative reviews; they stand on the precipice of being engulfed by the relentless churn of the 24/7 news cycle and the volatile court of social media opinion. In this hyper-connected, perpetually scrutinized world, the margin for error is wafer-thin, and the consequences are magnified. A poorly considered sentence or an insufficiently researched plot point can quickly spiral into a full-blown controversy, with the potential to overshadow an entire body of work and damage an author's reputation, sometimes irrevocably.

Thus, the post-truth era has brought with it both unprecedented challenges and ethical complexities for writers. The written word is no longer just an instrument for storytelling or argumentation; it has become a battleground where the skirmishes for truth, credibility, and public trust are fought daily. It is a daunting reality, but also one teeming with the potential for meaningful discourse and transformative narratives.

The Power and Pitfalls of Fiction

Ironically, it is in this era of malleable truth and slippery facts that fiction stands as a uniquely powerful instrument for unveiling universal truths about the human experience. Unlike the realms of politics or journalism, which are being continuously eroded by the quagmires of "fake news" and "alternative facts," fiction remains a domain largely unshackled from the objective measure of factual veracity.

It provides an imaginative space where readers can venture beyond the borders of their immediate environments and cultural frameworks, delving into the inner worlds of characters whose lives bear little resemblance to their own. This exploration, when skillfully executed, can function as a catalyst for fostering empathy, compassion, and deeper understanding among disparate groups of people.

However, this power of fiction is a double-edged sword, and the demarcation between beneficial insight and detrimental manipulation can be alarmingly thin. With its ability to captivate and persuade, a well-crafted narrative is not only an instrument for enlightenment but can also be weaponized for the darker purposes of disinformation, propaganda, or ideological entrenchment. Take, for instance, George Orwell's seminal work "1984," a dystopian novel that paints a grim picture of totali-

"The advent of the post-truth era has ushered in a set of unprecedented challenges that writers of literary fiction must grapple with."

tarian government and surveillance. While the book serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of unchecked power, it has also been invoked by political factions across the ideological spectrum to justify their respective agendas, often in ways that would likely have made Orwell himself cringe.

Moreover, the capacity for a piece of fiction to be co-opted or misconstrued is amplified in today's digital age, where narratives can be ripped out of their nuanced contexts and flattened into soundbites or meme-worthy phrases. These decontextualized fragments can then circulate through social media platforms, picking up unintended interpretations and layers of meaning that further blur the line between the story's original intent and its subsequent appropriations.

So, even as fiction retains its enduring power to serve as a vehicle for exposing universal human truths, writers must tread carefully. The responsibility to wield this potent tool judiciously has never been

greater. In a world where the very concept of 'truth' is under siege, the ethics of storytelling become increasingly complex and fraught, calling for a heightened sense of awareness and responsibility from those who partake in the craft.

Writing as Resistance

In response to the challenges presented by this post-truth era, a growing cadre of writers are consciously adopting the role of reality's stewards. They are not merely passive observers of the shifting landscape, but active participants, leveraging their art form as a platform for critical inquiry and intellectual activism. With a renewed focus, these writers are plunging into the labyrinthine complexities that underpin our collective drift away from objective truth. Their narratives and essays scrutinize a range of subjects, from the intricate power dynamics that perpetuate disinformation to the malleable nature of belief systems and the dark psychology of manipulation that fuels polarization and divisiveness.

In essence, writing for these authors transforms into an act of cultural and intellectual resistance. It serves as a counterforce against the dilution of factual integrity and the erosion of a shared baseline of reality that has long anchored civil discourse. By meticulously peeling away the layers that shroud issues like the exploitation of cognitive biases, the unethical uses of technology for mass persuasion, and the subversion of democratic norms, they aim to restore a measure of clarity and consensus to a public square fractured by conflicting narratives.

Moreover, their works offer not just critique but also the promise of enlightenment. Through their characters, plotlines, and dialogues, they attempt to illuminate the deeper psychological and sociopolitical mechanisms that have allowed the concept of 'truth' to become so thoroughly destabilized. They seek to provide their readers with the cognitive tools to differentiate between genuine information and cleverly disguised falsehoods, thereby empowering them to make more informed choices both as consumers of media and as active participants in a democratic society.

Therefore, the pen becomes more than just a tool for storytelling or self-expression; it evolves into a weapon wielded in the battle to reclaim truth and rational discourse. In doing so, these writers are essentially striving to claw back some sem-

blance of a shared reality, to reestablish a common ground upon which constructive dialogues and societal progress can occur. Their efforts underscore the weighty responsibility that rests upon the shoulders of contemporary authors, a responsibility that has perhaps never been more crucial or more fraught with ethical implications.

Ethics and Responsibility

While the power of fiction to enlighten and expand the human experience is undeniable, this potent influence is accompanied by an equally robust set of ethical responsibilities that authors must heed. The act of storytelling is never a neutral endeavor; words can wield considerable impact, affecting readers' perspectives and even their behavior. As such, writers must exercise vigilance in being aware of the repercussions their narratives may generate—whether that entails the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes, the glossing over or whitewashing of historical atrocities, or even the unintentional fanning of the flames of discord in already divisive times.

Navigating this complex ethical terrain demands that authors strike a precarious balance between the imperatives of creative freedom and the moral obligations they owe to society at large. The scope for artistic license remains vast, but in an age where information—and misinformation—can be disseminated with unprecedented speed and reach, the potential for words to be weaponized is magnified exponentially. A single phrase or concept, stripped of its original context and nuance, can become a rallying cry for harmful ideologies or a point of contention that drives wedges between communities.

Given these dynamics, the contemporary writer faces an especially labyrinthine set of challenges. The lines between fact and fiction, creative exploration and ethical compromise, have never been more blurred. As guardians of narrative, storytellers must not only captivate their audience but also consider the broader societal impact of their work. They must interrogate their own assumptions, carefully research the themes they wish to tackle, and be ever-mindful of the potential downstream effects of their storytelling decisions. It's a tall order, no doubt, but one that highlights the gravitas and far-reaching implications of the craft in today's complex, interconnected world. Therefore, as they tread the thin line between artistic autonomy and so-

cial responsibility, authors must engage with their work not just as creators but also as ethical arbiters, particularly in a climate where words can become weapons almost instantaneously.

The Importance of Dialogue

One viable countermeasure to the challenges of living in a post-truth world could potentially be the cultivation of open, earnest dialogues, not just within the confines of the literary community but also in the broader public sphere. While the existence of diverse perspectives and alternative viewpoints is a cornerstone of a healthy democracy, it should not be misconstrued as an invitation to relativism, where every opinion or interpretation is held to be equally valid irrespective of factual grounding or logical coherence. There's a critical need for authors, critics, readers, and indeed all participants in the cultural conversation, to engage in rigorous debates that not only challenge prevailing norms and assumptions but also work towards forging a more nuanced, well-rounded understanding of the complex world we inhabit.

In this light, such dialogues serve as more than just forums for the exchange of ideas; they become crucibles for the testing and refinement of those ideas against the touchstones of evidence, reason, and ethical consideration. These discussions can question the entrenched paradigms that contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypes, misinformation, and divisive narratives. Moreover, they can act as a corrective to the echo chambers and filter bubbles that social media and partisan news outlets often generate, providing an avenue for people to confront and grapple with viewpoints that diverge from their own preconceived notions.

Additionally, this kind of active, participatory dialogue could serve as a form of collective fact-checking and ethical sounding board, creating an environment where misleading or harmful narratives are swiftly identified and critiqued. It emphasizes the role of each individual—be they a writer, a critic, or a reader—in maintaining the intellectual integrity of the public discourse. By fostering these kinds of open conversations, the aim is to elevate the quality of debate and to reestablish a common factual and ethical ground upon which society can build. In effect, it's about paving the way for a reinvigorated public sphere that hon-

ors the complexities of human experience while adhering to standards of truthfulness and moral responsibility.

Final Thoughts

The advent of the post-truth era has ushered in a set of unprecedented challenges that writers of literary fiction must grapple with. This is an intellectual and emotional landscape teeming with hazards, including the risk of perpetuating disinformation or polarizing viewpoints, but it is also ripe with unparalleled opportunities for crafting narratives of profound and enduring impact. Fiction, in this context, can serve dual functions: it can act as a mirror that holds up the multifaceted complexities, contradictions, and ethical dilemmas inherent in contemporary society, while simultaneously serving as a window that invites readers to traverse into unfamiliar realms—worlds imbued with differing cultures, philosophies, and modes of understanding.

In an information ecosystem muddied by the proliferation of 'alternative facts,' propaganda, and deep fakes, the traditional writing implement—whether metaphorical or literal—retains its potency as a tool for uncovering and articulating universal truths about human nature, morality, and the human condition. Yet, it's crucial to acknowledge that the weight of responsibility resting on the shoulders of today's writers has perhaps never been more onerous. It isn't merely about producing a compelling story; the modern author is tasked with navigating a complex ethical maze that comes with being a storyteller in an age of misinformation.

As we continue to traverse this complicated era, literary fiction has the potential to serve as a moral and intellectual compass. It can guide us through the murkiness of conflicting narratives and toward a clearer understanding of both ourselves and the world around us. However, this can only be achieved if writers approach their craft with an elevated level of thoughtfulness, integrity, and due care. Every word penned, every character created, and every plot twist unveiled must be meticulously weighed for its potential societal implications, both positive and negative. In short, the act of writing fiction in the post-truth age isn't just an artistic endeavor; it's also an ethical enterprise, requiring a finely tuned balance of imagination and responsibility. □

Darkness at the Heart of Humanity

Cormac McCarthy's The Road

Eleanor Jiménez



Photo Wikimedia Commons

A scene from the 2009 film adaptation of “The Road” with Viggo Mortensen and Kodi Smit-McPhee.

Cormac McCarthy, who passed away earlier this year, left behind an indelible legacy with his piercing examinations of the human condition. “The Road” stands out as one of his most haunting and profound works, serving as a testament to his unparalleled literary prowess. This novel masterfully combines the raw intensity of human emotions — love, fear, hope, despair — with the bleak and desolate landscape of a world in irreversible decline. What makes “The Road” particularly arresting is not just its dystopian

setting but its deep, introspective exploration of love, sacrifice, and the inherent will to survive, even in the most harrowing of circumstances. The setting amplifies the novel’s exploration of these themes, emphasizing the fragility and transience of our existence juxtaposed against the unyielding and indomitable spirit of humanity. As we reflect on McCarthy’s passing, it’s evident that his understanding of both the shadows and lights of the human soul was truly profound, and “The Road” will forever remain a poignant reminder of his genius.

From the opening pages of “The Road,” Cormac McCarthy crafts a visceral and haunting atmosphere through his depiction of a ravaged, post-apocalyptic world. This universe is a desolate wasteland, marked by monochrome skies that have lost their azure hue, landscapes blanketed in suffocating layers of ash, and a sun that seems to have forsaken its duty to shine with any kind of warmth or brightness. Unlike other dystopian settings where some semblance of life may be present, McCarthy’s vision is overwhelmingly barren: Trees stand as skeletal remnants of what they once were, their branches dead and bare, contributing to a skyline that seems more like a funeral procession than a forest. The absence of animals is equally unnerving; they are so rarely seen or mentioned that their extinction seems almost certain, amplifying the sense of emptiness and loss.

But perhaps the most devastating aspect of this apocalyptic setting is its effect on the humans that remain. Stripped of societal structures and norms, people have been reduced to desperate wanderers, scrambling for scarce resources and often resorting to horrific acts just to survive another day. While McCarthy deliberately avoids providing an explicit reason for this apocalypse, choosing instead to focus on its aftermath, the effect of this unknown calamity is palpable and jarring. Civilization, as we understand and experience it, has been obliterated. McCarthy creates not just a setting but an entire world where the end is not near—it has already happened. Through

these choices, he brilliantly underscores the transient nature of life as we know it, encapsulating an Earth that has irrevocably reached its final chapter.

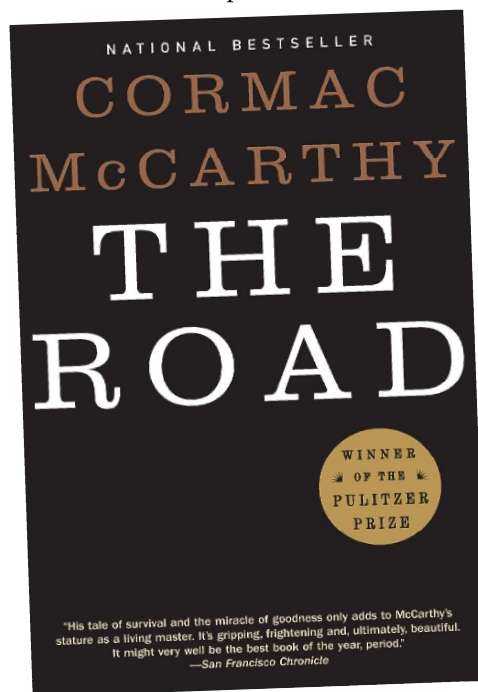
In “The Road,” Cormac McCarthy paints a haunting picture of a world where it’s not only the tangible, physical environment that lies in ruins but also the very core of what once defined humanity. The collapse of society has stripped away the veneer of civility and morality, leaving behind a desolate landscape where the remnants of humanity are pushed to unimaginable extremes. The protagonists, a nameless father and his young son, traverse this bleak world, encountering remnants of society that, in their desperation, have surrendered to the darkest aspects of human nature — resorting to cannibalism, theft, and even cold-blooded murder to stave off hunger and death.

McCarthy delves deep into the psyche of humans, probing the boundaries of what individuals might resort to when confronted by an abyss of hunger, fear, and utter hopelessness. The inherent tension between survival instinct and moral rectitude becomes palpable as the narrative unfolds. Yet, amidst this backdrop of rampant brutality, the relationship between the father and son serves as a beacon of hope and resilience. Their persistent efforts to uphold a semblance of morality in a world that has largely abandoned it is poignantly captured in their repeated assurance to each other: “we are the good guys.” This refrain is not just a means of self-assurance, but a clinging remembrance to a time when such values mattered. It serves as a testament to their unwavering commitment to the ethics of a bygone era, even when faced with the stark reality that the world around them has irrevocably forsaken those principles.

McCarthy’s deliberate stylistic decisions aptly reflect the stark and barren world he portrays. His prose is characterized by sentences that are frequently short and fragmented, often stripping away any excess or adornment, echoing the stripped and ravaged world

of the novel. This minimalistic approach in his writing not only underscores the grim atmosphere but also amplifies the overwhelming sensations of emptiness, desolation, and isolation that permeate the narrative.

The interactions between the father and son, though sparse in words, are densely packed with raw emotion. Their dialogue is often terse, yet it speaks volumes, capturing the essence of their relationship, their shared loneliness in a post-apocalyptic world, and the profound bond that keeps them moving forward in an environment that seems almost void of hope.



Furthermore, McCarthy’s decision to avoid the conventional use of quotation marks to delineate dialogue from narration adds another layer of bleakness to the text. This blurring of boundaries between spoken words and internal reflections creates a seamless flow, further emphasizing the desolation and uninterrupted starkness of the world they navigate. In doing so, McCarthy ensures that the reader is fully immersed in the relentless bleakness of his post-apocalyptic vision, allowing the desolation of the environment to seep into the very structure of his prose.

In the midst of the profound bleakness that pervades the story, a potent and

recurring motif emerges: the idea of “carrying the fire.” Time and again, the father reiterates to his son the essentiality of holding onto this metaphorical flame within their hearts. This fire serves not just as a glimmering symbol of hope amidst hopelessness but also encapsulates the essence of humanity, warmth, and the deep-rooted instinct for survival. In a world that has been rendered cold, gray, and almost entirely devoid of life and vibrancy, this notion of an internal, burning fire stands in sharp contrast, symbolizing a defiant beacon of hope. It acts as a grounding touchstone of their remaining humanity and a moral compass guiding their actions amidst chaos and moral decay. More than just a beacon, this fire also represents the undying ember of perseverance and resilience intrinsic to the human spirit, an enduring force that refuses to be snuffed out even in the face of overwhelming darkness and despair.

What makes “The Road” so profoundly dark is not just its setting or the external horrors that the characters face but the internal struggles they undergo. The novel asks uncomfortable questions: What are we capable of when pushed to the brink? Can morality exist without society to enforce it? Is hope a balm or a curse in a world devoid of promise?

Incorporating details from the obituary, it’s clear that McCarthy’s life was one of contrasts — from his early days of struggle, living in poverty despite the critical acclaim, to his eventual mainstream success and recognition. Such contrasts, arguably, gave him a unique lens to view the human condition, understanding both the darkness and the light within.

“The Road” serves as a testament to his literary prowess, combining the rawness of human emotion with the starkness of a world in decline. The dystopian setting only amplifies the novel’s exploration of love, sacrifice, and the inherent will to survive. Amidst its grimness, “The Road” stands as a reminder of the fragility of our existence and the indomitable spirit of humanity. □

Two Ecopoems

Özge Lena

Coral Colours

Call it orange, call it peach.
Call it rosy, crimson.
Or call it simply pink.

For every evil under the sun,

But they are bleached.
Morphing into a dead white.
Slowly withering.

there is a remedy, or there is none.

They are ill, stressed.
After blasted heats and toxins.
Fading as colossal colonies.

For some evils under the sun,

Their candied colours now
belong to the old memories
of their cruel culprits.

there is no remedy, not even one.

Bronze Giant

Arctic dawn.
By the warm sea.
Pink as sun's blood.
Dropping on the pier.
Over a circle of cloaks.
Made of falcon feathers.
Blazoned by golden chokers.

As alive as Freya the goddess.

A big lump in the middle.
Hidden under a velvet veil.
Until an uncanny polar breeze.
Blows to reveal a bronze giant.
Statue of an euthanised beauty.
That was named after Freya.
Bright as her red gold tears.

As dead as Freya the walrus.

Coffee Culture Unfiltered

Erik N. Patel

Ah, coffee shops! Those little hubs of human interaction, caffeine addiction, and overpriced pastries. From the intellectual gatherings during the Renaissance to the hipster joints of today, these haunts have seen an evolution so profound, it's almost as dizzying as a double shot of espresso on an empty stomach.

Let's journey back in time, several hundred years to be precise. In those bygone eras, coffee shops weren't just places to grab a hot drink; they were the pulsating heart of groundbreaking ideas and discussions. These establishments were filled with the intellectual elite, a magnet for the brightest minds of their generation. Picture it: great thinkers, philosophers, writers, and scientists, congregating under one roof, with the warm aroma of freshly ground coffee wafting around them. They gathered, took gentle sips from their steaming cups, and dived deep into lively debates about life, the universe, politics, and everything in between. It was a time when coffee houses were the fertile ground for the seeds of the Enlightenment.

We zip back to the present day. Enter any urban coffee shop, and the scene is strikingly different. Sure, there's still the hum of conversation, but the topics? A bit less philosophical. Instead of existential ponderings or critiques of monarchies, you're more likely to eavesdrop on someone passionately arguing about the superiority of oat milk over almond milk in their morning latte. Or perhaps a discussion about the optimal temperature for frothing soy milk without losing its sweetness. Descartes, with his "I think, therefore I am" might have a moment of pause, wondering if he'd inadvertently started this chain reaction leading to a debate on the best dairy substitute. One can't help but think he'd have a chuckle or two at the thought.

And let's talk about the beverages. Once, you'd walk in, order a "coffee," and be on

your merry way. Now, you need a translator and possibly a PhD. A simple order sounds like this: "I'd like a venti, sugar-free, non-fat, no-foam, with a shot of caramel, iced vanilla latte, but with only half the vanilla and an extra shot of espresso, oh and can you make it at 145 degrees Fahrenheit?" The barista, of course, doesn't bat an eye. They've heard weirder.

Speaking of baristas, gone are the days when they were just folks who made your coffee. Now, they're artists, milk froth maestros, and gatekeepers of the elusive Wi-Fi password. Every swirl of caramel, every leaf



in your latte foam is a testament to their unmatched craftsmanship. If Michelangelo were alive today, he'd be in stiff competition with Joe from your local cafe for the title of "greatest artist of the age."

But what truly captures the zeitgeist of the modern coffee shop? The patrons. Once, these places buzzed with lively chatter. Today's version? A sea of silver laptops, giant headphones, and the soft tippity-tap of keys. It's almost meditative if you can tune out the existential dread of seeing everyone more focused than you'll ever be.

Ah, and now we arrive at the grand spectacle of our coffee culture: the astronomical prices. Rewind to simpler times, and the cost of a straightforward, no-frills cup of coffee was comparable to that of a fresh loaf of bread. It was a time when coffee was seen as a modest luxury, a simple pleasure available to most. Fast forward to our modern era, and the scenario has undergone a seismic shift. After indulging in just a week's worth of frothy lattes, artistically adorned cappuccinos, or those exotic cold brews infused with flavors from far-flung corners of the earth, one might find themselves contemplating the feasibility of a small bank loan to fund their caffeine addiction.

Yet, in this age of extravagance, we don't hesitate for a moment. With an air of nonchalance, we readily hand over our credit cards, sometimes without even batting an eye at the total. Why? Because today's coffee is no longer just a beverage. It's a meticulously crafted work of art, an experience in itself. It's made from beans that are narrated to have been kissed by the sun at high altitudes, caressed by cool breezes under the glow of the moon, and then harvested with the utmost care by hands that understand their worth. It's this magical story, this promise of an unparalleled experience, that convinces us that every cent spent on this liquid gold is absolutely justified. After all, who can put a price on a cup of heaven?

As we look to the horizon, what's next for our beloved coffee havens? Perhaps an AI barista who can predict our orders? Tables with built-in screens for virtual coffee dates? Or maybe, just maybe, a return to basics: a place where people gather, chat, laugh, and yes, drink coffee. Until then, I'll be here, trying to decrypt the menu and wondering if almond milk is truly superior. Cheers! naps, and the sweet, sweet art of serenity. □

KZ-RU

Reading Basho, Soviet Trains, Border Police, Terrible Coffee, a Deadly Explosion, and Songs of Spring

William Fleeson



Illustration: Tomas Ragina / Adobe Stock

DAY ONE

I left Kazakhstan for Russia one dripping, cold Sunday morning, by train. I carried a rucksack and a clutch of books—one by the 17th-century Japanese poet, Matsuo Basho.

The Astana-1 station was obsolete in a thoroughgoing way. The trains were Soviet-era and looked like they hadn't been washed since. The luggage—everything from duffels and suitcases to re-purposed cardboard boxes—strained against twine and tape and other

jerry-rigged solutions from those who couldn't afford much else. Even the station's name was faded: several days prior, the city had been rebranded Nur-Sultan, similar to the name of the country's longtime autocrat Nursultan Nazarbayev. The man had just announced his resignation from formal office. In reality, he retained total power. His more sycophantic deputies had moved to immediately rename the capital in his honor, something like restyling the city of Washington "George"—or, in a more modern treatment, "Donald."

Mist shrouded the city that morning. Nur-Sultan and its menagerie of gaudy,

wildly expensive architecture, built to celebrate young nationhood as well as Nazarbayev himself, lay obscured and grim. The weather was enough to stymie the capital's vainglory. It was a fitting condition for leaving, the fog like a curtain drawing slowly between its buildings and myself.

The 83C train left at 11:00am precisely for Moscow, where we would arrive three traveling-days later. We would cover roughly 2,100 miles, or the distance from Washington, DC, to Bozeman, Montana. The train would average less than 40 miles per hour.

I noticed the heat as soon as I boarded, hoping the air conditioning would blast to life once in motion. Hardly! The heavy air densified the longer the doors stayed closed. Dirty condensation ran down the windows.

The car was incubated not just with heat but with the body warmth of a full service, adults and children and grandparents all stuffed into the same sweaty boxes. Only the clacking spaces between train cars, smelly from their second function as a smoking zone, offered respite. I changed into running shorts and a tee-shirt, struggling for modesty under my bunk's narrow blanket. On the floor I laid two-year-old slippers I'd bought at IKEA for \$4.

In my four-bunk compartment were two youngish women, one Asian and the other a Russian *blondinka* in a red faux-Versace tracksuit. Staring into their phones, neither spoke the entire day, except when they got off at Petropavlovsk. The *blondinka* offered a flavorless “*Pry-atnavo vechera*”—“Have a nice evening”—and quit the train.

My phone worked no better than the climate control. I couldn’t call or text my wife to say I’d boarded safely, as I’d promised. In the aisle a metal bar stretched along the window, fixed at gut level. I opened and laid my travel journal on it. The height was perfect for taking notes, I thought, and I jotted out my impressions since Astana-1. I planned to read up on the stops in the guidebook I’d brought. I knew a little Russian, but hardly enough for conversation. I was the only foreign traveler, as far as I could tell.

I sought out the dining car at 1:00 pm, books in hand, telling myself that a two-hour wait from departure would cultivate the time-stretching patience I would need for this trip. Passing berths similar to mine, some doors locked tight but others wide open, I watched how the Kazakhs and Russians did rides such as this. Some read. Many poked at their phones. Others slept or looked out the window. Few spoke.

The dining car was empty, except for the five-person staff—all ethnic Kazakhs—who chatted as they loitered. I couldn’t believe the car was empty, at lunchtime, at the start of a long ride, in vodka country. After having to wave for service I ordered some kind of chicken cutlet and a large beer. The staff spoke always in Kazakh, switching to Russian only when a non-Kazakh entered the car.

I set my travel journal next to Basho’s *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* and

Other Travel Sketches. I had never read his work but the world recommended it. Basho took some getting used to; he didn’t release the wallop of description and adventure I admire most in journey narratives. Yet I plodded on, feeling almost duty-bound to see what the fuss was still about, four centuries after his death. Something in the introduction primed my interest.

“Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo,” Basho wrote. “And in doing so, you must leave your subjective preoccupation with yourself.”

In my case “going to the pine” meant visiting Kazakhstan and Russia, in that order and with a slow train in between. That Basho was neither Kazakh nor Russian mattered little to me. It was the universal lessons of his writings, I was told, the guidance for traveling less as a



Illustration: Peter Hermes Furian / Adobe Stock

tourist than as a seeker and a student. My interest in the post-Soviet world stems from the timing of my birth, and therefore my life. I was a Cold War baby, in that era's final years. In school I loved history and languages. Having lived in Europe, I knew the continent is defined, on its eastern fringe, by the epochs of imperial, Soviet, and contemporary Russia. So, I wanted to see the country—and why not a former satellite, too? I was “going to the bamboo,” I realized, even as the train traveled west.

A walk through the hard-class cars helped me understand the train, and its people. Beyond the dining room's empty tables stretched a half-dozen *platzkartny* cars, which offered only benches for sitting or sleeping. *Platzkartny* fares were rock-bottom. I'd heard about hard-class cars in Soviet times, and knew they still existed, but seeing them was a more visceral matter.

Or should I say, smelling them. The car's humid stink rushed out as I drew the latch. On the benches lay pyjama-ed people, dozing or staring at screens and landscapes. Plastic food containers, clearly brought from home, lined up on the floor. The passengers' faces looked like sketches on the theme of resignation. Riding in hard-class was not about passing the time, but enduring it.

A man propped up his head with a prison-tattooed forearm. A wide, tank-topped babushka whispered in Russian to her daughter, sitting opposite. The daughter's own skinny-legged child curled up against her, barefoot and sleeping. The view enriched my sense of just what level of comfort in which I was traveling.

At home much later, in my after-work Russian language course, my middle-class Muscovite teacher expressed dismay that I had traveled so long by train. “Three days??” she asked, incredulity thick in her words. I responded yes, it had not been that bad. And I thought of the resigned, sweating peoples in *platzkartny* class.

I spent much of that first evening standing outside my berth, notebook against the rail. The vastness of Kazakhstan began to register only then. Groups of wild horses faded in and out of view. Hour after hour of bowling steppe flowed past, the brown and white earth undulating like oceans.

Nightfall brought us to Petropavlovsk, a Kazakh town whose name exaggerated the Slavic Christianity of the land. “Peter-and-Paul-Ville,” I thought, my Russian slowly conjuring sense. The train all but emptied. The Asian stepped off after the *blondinka*, as did every other rider in my car save two. When I tried the exit door, just to see, a security officer appeared out of nowhere, barking. Sniffing dogs paced the platform. The train attendant explained, in dumbed-down Russian, “Not you, and not me, either.” Even the bathrooms were locked. The train had become a long and skinny holding cell.

Guards in Petropavlovsk, and immediately again on the Russian side of the border, scoured me with questions.

“*Amerikanyetz?*”

“*Toorest?*”

They shouted about drugs.

“*Narkotiki? Kokayeena? Marikhwan-na?*”

I responded honestly, and lawfully: *Amerikanyetz, da, Narkotiki, nyet.* I grew seriously nervous when three officers, all in heavy jackets and Gorbachev hats, occupied my compartment. I was still in running shorts. They had billyclubs. They probably stayed 20 minutes.

One reviewed the photos in my phone, repeatedly demanding, “*Shto eta?*”—“What is this?” He saw images of Astana-1, some accidental pocket pictures, and a shot of the train schedule, posted in the aisle as public information.

A single sharp command from their mustachioed supervisor cleared my space instantly. The men vanished like djinns. The attendant handed me back my passport, the stamp still fresh from Petukhovo, a map-dot village and the first Russian stop on the line.

The train rolled on thirty seconds later, pushing deeper into the steppe and the night. I sat silently, recovering my breath, grateful to be alone.

DAY TWO

I woke feeling truly rested, though the car remained just as hot. I woke up in a sheen of sweat with one leg sticking out from the bedding.

Outside the steppe had yielded to low brown mountains, their tops prickly with birch trees. Snow covered what the mud-spattered roads and village footpaths did not. It looked like West Virginia, with even greater dereliction.

It was six-something, ahead of the dining car's opening at seven. My maps indicated we were well inside the Urals, past Chelyabinsk, Miass, and Zlatoust, which had been a hub for the metallurgical industry, declining along with the local population since the 1980s.

Factories, snug against the tracks, stood like defeated soldiers called to attention. Tin sheeting peeled like ice cream scoops. From one building a pipe leaned diagonally out of a broken window, thirty feet into the sky. How had it gotten there? Urals iron and copper once supported the industrial and civic progress of nations the world over. The region's metals line the roofs of the Houses of Parliament in London and gird the Statue of Liberty in New York. Little seemed more unlikely, looking at this stretch of the Urals now.

In Berdyaush a sign read, “Russia lives on the road!” I wondered if the message disclosed a kind of truth-in-advertising, an honest confession from the local populace. Did they want to leave as much as I wanted to keep moving on? If being on the road was real living, was it like dying to stay here?

For breakfast I was again alone. The meal was eggs from powder and gritty rounds of sausage. I read my Basho, trying to enjoy the cups of instant coffee whose grains floated undissolved on the surface.

*On a snowy morning,
I sat by myself
Chewing tough strips
Of dried salmon.*

Salmon, even dried and tough, would have been an improvement. I respected Basho for finding a better breakfast on the road than I had managed to do, even as I sat 15 feet from a modern kitchen and its hired staff. They sat at the other end, playing cards.

Kropachevo offered a 20-minute stop around 9 a.m. The village is modestly famous for its rich array of kiosks on the platform. Women, mostly grandmother-age, hawked everything from candy and water to nesting dolls and keychain tchotchkes. “*Molodoy chelovek! Pozhalyusta!*” they called to me—“Young man! Please!”, continuing while my comprehension trailed. A Russian friend told me later the route is a historic thoroughfare to vacation areas further south, including the scads of Soviet-era youth camps along the Black Sea. The same friend explained that riders trade recommendations on which kiosks to shop at. I imagined the conversations: “Go see Lyudmila at the front of the platform...”, “The bottled-water lady never makes change...” and so on. As we pulled away I saw another slogan, blasted in capitals against the station wall: “The Southern Urals wish you a pleasant journey!”

It certainly was, for us. But something much more tragic had occurred along the same line 30 years ago this year. We passed the site between Asha and Ufa. The facts of the accident struck me as all the grimmer since that no one aboard appeared to know it had ever taken place.

In the early morning of June 4th, 1989, a pair of packed trains, carrying thousands of children and other vacationers, exploded to pieces.

A nearby gas line had been leaking its contents for hours. Worse, the leak occurred in a low-lying meadow, which kept the gas pooled in a single, concen-



Kazakhstan Railway train in terminal

Photo: Mikhail Shcherbakov / Wikimedia Commons

trated area. When the trains passed each other the friction created sparks, setting off an incineration waiting to happen.

The train cars at the explosion’s center ceased to exist. Other cars ground to a stop amid charred trees, steel, and dirt.

Early official reports estimated the casualty rate as “100 or 200 or even more,” a range made woefully optimistic by later reporting. Mikhail Gorbachev himself visited the scene, telling journalists it was “real hell there.” The Soviet Army was deployed for assistance.

In all, 575 people died in the ‘Ufa train disaster,’ as it became known. As many as 800 were injured. The incident is considered the worst railway accident in Russian history.

In light of such a grievous loss, why is the Ufa train disaster almost unknown in the West? How could the event—and the humanizing narrative of perished children, with which people on either side of the Iron Curtain could sympathize—have been swept aside?

One surpassing reason endures: the events of Tiananmen Square. The protests in Beijing, already simmering for nearly two months before the train incident, dominated global media. Chinese troops fired on civilians the same day of

the Ufa event. Amid so much news competing for coverage, the Ufa train disaster would be cut off, like its young victims, from the remembrance it deserved.

From the train, I watch in vain for the place of the explosion. I knew from research that a memorial had been erected at kilometer marker 1710, seven miles past Asha and before Ufa. But I missed it, recognizing nothing as we barreled on. When I asked a train attendant what she knew of the incident, and of the nearly 600 who perished, she did not know what I was talking about.

That afternoon I read something from Basho that would have seemed sentimental, even silly, had I not come through the disaster site the same day. The poet described traveling in a Japanese province where, long before, battles and acts of great valor had taken place. He lamented the ignorance of such events in his own time.

“Both the actors and the deeds have long been dead and passed into oblivion,” Basho wrote. “I sat down... and wept bitterly till I almost forgot time.”

I didn’t weep between Asha and Ufa. Yet I empathize with anyone who would want to mourn the accident. And with those who did.

DAY THREE

Ufa looked like Upton Sinclair's Chicago. Gray soot matched the sky, as the Belaya River—the color of a slag heap—flowed below the hillside station. *Belaya* means white, but the scene gave the lie to its name. A power plant droned on the riverbank. Vanilla-colored exhaust plumed from its organs.

We were stopped for half an hour. I meandered outside the station, reading its signs in Russian and the regional language, Bashkiri. My guidebook called the surrounding Bashkortostan region “something of an oil khanate,” given its fossil fuel resources and attendant industry. I passed through a shantytown above the tracks, where a babushka picked her creaking way down a path of ice. I offered a helping hand but she dismissed it with a scornful wave of her own. She personified Ufa: tough, old, and careworn, but nonetheless in motion.

With my dining-car lunch I ordered a large beer, then another after it. Once the head waiter started playing World of Warcraft on his phone—no earbuds—I went and read for an hour. The West Virginian mountains flowed by endlessly.

After that I dawdled away the afternoon. I remember getting sleepy, cruising through the Volga River region, as I slouched on my bunk. I leafed through my guidebook in the weakening light and made notes on what I might do the next day. There was bliss in the knowledge that, tomorrow afternoon, I would slide into Moscow.

I woke up after nightfall with Basho over my face. I had missed Samara, with its expansive Volga views, and the river bend where a 13th-century battle between Mongols and Bulgars altered history. I had desired deeply to take in the river, to notch a traveler's victory and crow, “I have seen the Volga!”

But town and river were gone, despite Samara's hour-long stop. The emotional charge between Asha and Ufa, the oppressive silence of forgotten ghosts, had fatigued me more than I realized. Cursing, I turned over again, resolving to sleep if the darkness meant I couldn't see anything anyway.

Light struck the tracks at Ruzaevka, the dawn a bonfire in blood-orange. The breeze blew very cold. My unworn fingers struggled to raise the jacket's zipper to my chin. Voluptuous women in peasant dress offered harvest baskets as fertile as themselves as they stood 30 feet tall inside a banner against a building by the station. I wondered if I was still asleep, and dreaming. A sign declared we were in the Mordovia Republic, and 600 kilometers from Moscow.

A group of city types paced the platform. Their clothes were in style; their Italian-looking shoes were clean. They smoked the last of the day's first cigarettes, kissed relatives, and boarded sleeper cars—no *platzkartny* discomfort for them. Their bearing made it feel less provincial here, but I still couldn't get my phone to work. I envied them their proximity to members of family, when all of mine were so far away.

The dining car opened at 7:02. An attendant pushed the door open into the freezing passageway, where I had been waiting, cooling off. More eggs, more gritty sausage. The same grains of instant coffee floated at the surface but I was determined to linger over breakfast. How else to kill time? The first coffee became a second, then a third. I finished my notes on things to do in Moscow, the window showing more brown and white bleakness. The coffee tasted worse with each cup.

More small towns brought more Moscow types. I could not discern if they lived here and worked in the city or vice-versa. I was too shy, my Russian too limited, to ask. Perhaps from the days of isolation, my people-watching overflowed all reason. I hatched wild illusions about their lives, their disappointments. The crush of speculation felt queerly antisocial. I craved a return to inner normalcy once off the train.

Potma warranted a 15-minute stop, though I couldn't fathom why. From crumbling low buildings a few people, some urbanely dressed, walked slowly

toward us. They had the peculiar Russian walk: always shuffling, as if ice lay underfoot, no matter the actual weather. I had seen this from Russians of every age, all the way since Petukhovo.

Later that morning I noticed the first fields without snow since we had left Nur-Sultan. A change of season was imminent, outside and within. I was deep in a limbo between boredom and anxiety to get off the train. I turned again to Basho.

Where the poet had seemed sentimental yesterday, this morning he came off as frankly melodramatic. One haiku fit the time of year but made little sense to me otherwise:

*Ah, it is spring,
Great spring it is now,
Great, great spring—
Ah, great—*

So wrote a high chieftain of Japanese letters. I tossed the book aside. It was before noon and too early for a beer, but not for a nap. I closed the curtains against the gray sun, consoled by the free time and the freedom to do as I pleased.

Ryazan stood up big and dirty on the brown plain. A bulky concrete staircase stretched over the tracks. Schoolkids in backpacks swarmed among commuter trains and regional ones. Fat men from *platzkartny* stood around smoking roll-your-owns in down jackets, shorts, and plastic shower sandals. Their toenails matched their tobacco-stained fingers.

My guidebook offered nothing on Ryazan, except for a point on a map scaled so large as to make it unusable. Nor was there any detail on most of the towns we'd passed up to this point. Even at 700 pages, the book had tackled a country far too vast, physically and otherwise, to corral between a single pair of covers.

A little before 3:00pm the buildings began to concentrate. Moscow's exurbs gathered themselves, like post-Soviet Transformers, toward the thickening sprawl. Some of the houses looked warm and excellent. Others sank back into the earth, still occupied.



Photo: Victorgrigas / Wikimedia Commons

Entrance to the Moscow Metro and its illuminated sign—the famous, scarlet M.

Twenty minutes from Moscow, the sun disbursed a magnanimous glow over everything. I hadn't seen full-on sunshine since Kazakhstan. It felt like a kind of providential gesture, a sign that, at last, our destination was just ahead. I saw one walker unzip his jacket, then another. Spring, or perhaps the incubation from the suburban structures, warmed the scene. The train grew stuffier still.

I spotted an outer station of the Moscow Metro and its illuminated sign—the famous, scarlet M. The stations were sometimes beautiful, built with hope for the future, and themed from the corners of an empire which the world had expected to endure. We would arrive at Kazanskaya station, not so distant from Belorusskaya, Leningradskaya, and Kievskaya stations, among many other by-words from Soviet memory.

I strained to stay patient as the city pulled us in. I packed my things, then returned my bedding to the attendant. She wished me well in Moscow; she, too, had been riding since Nur-Sultan.

I dressed for the chilly weather despite the sweaty mess I knew it would make of me before stepping off.

Kazanskaya's platform teemed with the people from the train I had not seen—Tajiks, Kazakhs, Russians of all variations—and with those waiting to board. Lithe and elegant Russian women, dressed in furs regardless of age, appeared almost everywhere. Other women stood in corners, filthy kerchiefs tied under chins, rows of food containers lined up before them, like in *platzkartny*. By selling, they hoped to pay a bill or two. Students with dyed hair smacked gum, texted, and swore. Outside, a massive Soviet building—one of the "Seven Sisters" of Stalin's time—towered ahead. Beyond the square stood two other major rail stations, shuttling generations of Soviets and Russians from the region's remotest locations. I, too, had been drawn here. My rucksack strapped tight, I breathed a deep sigh of satisfaction as my stiff legs pushed closer to my nearby hotel.

An hour later, having showered, called my wife, and changed clothes, I remembered something from Basho.

*Under this plum tree,
Even a black bull will learn
To sing a song of spring
Filled with cheerful joy.*

I pondered the verses as I looked out the hotel window. The height afforded condescending views above my station, literally. I almost did feel like singing, for having traveled hard, and put up with a modicum of discomfort—the heat and the food, fettered speech—to make it here.

Basho exhorted his students to abandon preoccupation with oneself. "*Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine,*" he said, "*or to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo.*" I had come from Kazakhstan to Russia, hoping to learn of the real and metaphysical traits of the lands in between. So far from home, I had been stubborn and lonely, dirty and dumb. I was the black bull from the poem. But even I had managed to learn, to explore and observe and to part with a few of my preoccupations.

I locked my hotel room door, eager to explore Moscow's streets. On them I would sing my own song of spring, for I had arrived, and after so long a journey. In me welled the cheerful joy that Basho had promised four hundred years before. □

Intricate Harmony

The Geometry and Spirituality of Islamic Aesthetics

Erik N. Patel

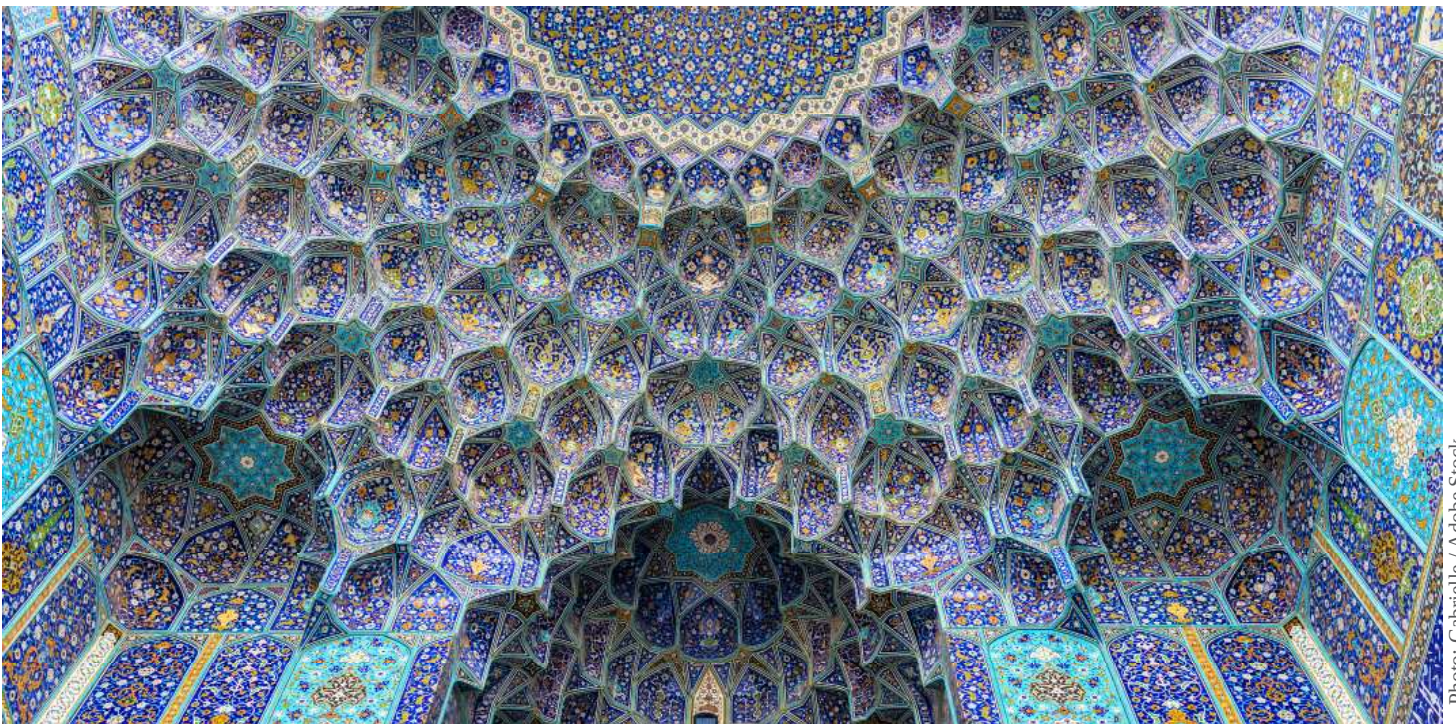


Photo: Gabrielle / Adobe Stock

Ornated dome of the iwan - the vaulted entrance arcade - of the Shah Mosque in Iran.

In the hallowed halls of the Alhambra in Granada, Spain, or under the intricate domes of Iran's Shah Mosque, one cannot help but marvel at the elaborate geometric designs that adorn the walls, ceilings, and floors. These are not mere decorations; they are a cosmic language, encoding centuries of mathematical wisdom and theological profundity within their mesmerizing patterns. They are the hallmarks of Islamic art, a form of artistic expression steeped in both scientific rigor and spiritual depth.

These designs emanate far beyond mere aesthetic satisfaction—they offer a window into the intricate connections between art, mathematics, and spirituality

in Islamic culture. This article aims to explore the captivating world of sacred geometry in Islamic art, delving into its mathematical foundations, its theological underpinnings, and its lasting cultural impact. In doing so, we will unveil the rich tapestry of meaning and symbolism behind these complex forms, uncovering a unique form of artistic expression that fuses the empirical with the ethereal in a celebration of both divine and human ingenuity.

The Roots of Islamic Art

Islamic art sets itself apart through its theological restrictions against depict-

ing human or animal figures, especially in religious settings. This prohibition stems from an Islamic injunction against idolatry, ensuring that worship is directed solely to Allah. In place of figurative art, Islamic tradition has fostered a rich landscape of abstract forms, including geometric patterns, arabesque motifs, and ornate calligraphy. Far from being mere ornamental choices, these abstract forms emerged as a creative response to religious guidelines, offering artists a canvas to express both intellectual depth and spiritual reverence. The result is a unique form of art that aligns closely with Islamic theology while providing avenues for complex aesthetic and

intellectual expression. This focus on abstraction sets the stage for the intricate geometric designs that have become emblematic of Islamic art.

Geometry as Divine Language

In the diverse world of Islamic art, geometry ascends to a level of profound importance, serving not just as a branch of mathematics but as a divine language unto itself. Meticulously chosen shapes like circles, squares, polygons, and stars are woven into complex patterns through the use of algorithms and precise calculations.

But this geometry is far from a sterile exercise in mathematical abstraction. Each shape carries its own symbolic resonance, echoing cultural, philosophical, and most importantly, religious principles deeply embedded in Islamic thought. In this intricate dance of shapes and lines, every element serves a purpose. Each is a ‘word’ or a ‘phrase’ in a visual lexicon that seeks to articulate the ineffable: the nature and attributes of a divinely-ordered universe. This blend of precision and spirituality transforms the experience of observing Islamic geometric patterns into a contemplative journey, making it possible to engage in a form of aesthetic appreciation that is also an act of spiritual mindfulness.



Photo: devnenski / Adobe Stock

Detail of the royal palace Nazaries of the Alhambra, Granada, Andalusia, Spain

The Mathematics of Beauty

In the realm of Islamic art, the advanced mathematics behind geometric designs translate into a unique aesthetic framework often termed as the “mathematics of beauty.” Built upon the bedrock of mathematical principles such as balance, symmetry, and harmony, these designs deliver an arresting visual experience that is both immediately engaging and intellectually stimulating.

Each shape is like a note in a grand celestial symphony, and when these shapes come together in precise, algorithmic

placement, they produce a visual melody that enchants the eye while speaking to deeper philosophical concepts. In this way, Islamic artists have skillfully harnessed mathematical principles to create compositions that offer viewers a multi-layered experience—one that tantalizingly blurs the lines between scientific inquiry and spiritual awe.

The Theology of Shapes

In the intricate web of Islamic geometric art, shapes carry theological weight that transcends decorative function. The circle, frequently employed in Islamic designs, often symbolizes the concept of Tawhid—the oneness and indivisibility of God. Squares and rectangles might stand for earthly stability and the four cardinal directions, providing a balanced counterpoint to the more ethereal symbolism of the circle.

Even the interplay between shapes, their alignments, and points of intersection are charged with meaning. These are not just aesthetic decisions but carefully thought-out expressions that echo the core principles of Islamic theology. In essence, each geometric pattern serves as a visual sermon or theological treatise, offering an eloquent articulation of



Photo: Nicola / Adobe Stock

Mosaic tiles decorating a wall in the Alhambra served as inspiration for M.C. Escher's work.



Photo: devmenski / Adobe Stock

The Nasrid Palaces in the Alhambra complex in Granada are renowned for their finely carved stucco walls, beautiful tiling, wooden filigree work, and elaborate courtyards. They are a testament to the rich cultural and artistic heritage of Islamic Spain and stand as a high point of Andalusian architecture.

Islamic doctrines in a form that engages both the aesthetically inclined and the spiritually attuned.

Cultural and Modern Implications

While rooted in a specific religious and cultural context, the geometric principles in Islamic art have found resonance in various modern applications and cross-cultural dialogues. These ancient patterns are now emerging in fields as diverse as architecture, fashion, and digital design, demonstrating their universal appeal and adaptability. Moreover, their aesthetic and mathematical attributes are subjects of study in academic disciplines ranging from art history to computational geometry.

In the broader cultural discourse, these designs serve as a touchstone for discussions about the harmonious co-existence of science and spirituality,

tradition and innovation. By straddling multiple domains, Islamic geometric art not only remains pertinent but becomes a compelling point of intersection for different cultural narratives and intellectual pursuits.

A Living Art

Far from being a static or antiquated form of artistic expression, Islamic geometric art thrives as a vibrant and evolving discipline in the modern world. With the advent of digital tools, computational algorithms, and new media platforms, contemporary artists and mathematicians alike find fresh avenues to both preserve and innovate within this rich tradition. This embrace of modern technology infuses the ancient art form with new possibilities, widening its appeal to a diverse global audience.

By adapting to the evolving cultural and technological landscape, Islamic

geometric art retains its foundational essence while continually renewing its relevance. Thus, it remains an active, dynamic field that not only looks back to its storied history but eagerly anticipates future explorations of the intricate interplay between aesthetic beauty, mathematical precision, and spiritual depth.

The sacred geometry found in classical Islamic art serves as a fascinating intersection of aesthetics, theology, and mathematics. Far more than intricate designs or eye-catching motifs, these geometric patterns function as a visual language that articulates complex spiritual and intellectual themes. As we find this art form influencing modern culture and embracing new technologies, its enduring significance proves that it is not merely a historical artifact but a continuously evolving testament to the rich tapestry of Islamic thought and creativity. □

Workplace Witticisms

Heimir Steinarrsson

The man who smiles composedly and looks serene when things go wrong, has already found someone he can blame the whole disaster on.

There is no task so simple and straightforward that it can not be misunderstood and turned into a wretched heap of misery.

People are always ready to offer their help and volunteer for projects they are sure will soon be obsolete and disappear.

The life expectancy of plants you buy to decorate the place varies inversely with their price but matches with their ugliness.

The universal aptitude for sheer incapability makes any real accomplishment look like a curiosity.

Next time you've something hard to do, just put it off for long enough; the chances are that someone else will rid you of this tedious stuff.

Sweet-talk is the lubricant of painless social intercourse. If you don't wield it, you will have to use a lot of carnal force.



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