

The Hemlock

A Literary Arts Journal

WINTER ISSUE | DECEMBER 2024



POETRY | FICTION | FLASH FICTION
NON-FICTION | VISUAL ARTS | BOOK REVIEWS

www.thehemlockjournal.org

Editors' Note

Welcome to the latest issue of 'The Hemlock', a literary arts journal that celebrates the beauty and power of words and art. Our journal is dedicated to showcasing a wide range of literary arts, including poetry, short fiction, flash fiction, creative non-fiction, and visual art.

In this issue, we present a collection of stunning works that showcase the boundless creativity and imagination of our contributors. From evocative poetry to mesmerising fiction, each piece explores different themes and issues that are relevant to our world today. The issue also features book reviews that provide you with a glimpse into different literary offerings and help you decide which books to explore further.

Our visual artists also offer a feast for the eyes, with a range of pieces that encompass everything from traditional painting and drawing to digital art and mixed media.

Each work is a testament to the skill and passion of our contributors, who have poured their hearts and souls into their creations. We are honoured to showcase the talent and creativity of our contributors, who come from all corners of the globe and represent a diverse range of voices and perspectives. Whether you are a seasoned reader or a newcomer to the world of literary arts, we hope that you will find something in this issue that resonates with you. Thank you for joining us on this journey, and we look forward to continuing to explore the rich and vibrant world of literary arts together.

*Editorial
Team*



Contents

Poetry

I Have His Pancreas in My Pocket (<i>Alex Carrigan</i>)	7
Gravediggers (<i>Liam Strong</i>)	8
Immediately After the One-Car Crash (<i>John Grey</i>)	9
Color (<i>Meghan Albizo</i>)	10
Beyond the Scar (<i>Ritobeena Kanjilal</i>)	11
What Has Love Done To You Mother? (<i>Krisht Saikia</i>)	14
Glossolalia (<i>Frank William Finney</i>)	18
Cell Phone? (<i>Grant Shimmin</i>)	19
But Not Quite (<i>Subhana Sultan</i>)	21
Unfinished Exit (<i>Claudia Wysocky</i>)	23
Love Beyond Two Souls (<i>Dinta Suresh</i>)	28
Bee Frequency (<i>Lisa Bellamy</i>)	30
O Kafka! (<i>Prashant Mahato</i>)	31
The Temple of Wait (<i>Pinkle Nandi</i>)	33
Great Indian Tamasha (<i>Rafi</i>)	35
People of The Book (<i>A. Daniyal</i>)	36
Elephant Bones (<i>Maureen Clark</i>)	38
War Core (<i>Elisha Thompson</i>)	39
Double Spliced Helix (<i>Chandler Garcia</i>)	41
Winter Poem (<i>Taro Williams</i>)	43

Non-Fiction

Wasiwasi (<i>Kerry McKay</i>)	49
How A Libertarian Paradise Tried (And Failed) To Survive On "Bear" Necessities (<i>JB Polk</i>)	59
Excerpt from Memoir: I Will Burn While I Shine (<i>Michael Amatulli</i>)	66
Archeology (<i>Ronald Fink</i>)	70
Castle Of The Wild Bees (<i>Lawrence Winkler</i>)	77

Flash Fiction

Anton Perfume (<i>Kevin B</i>)	85
Crete (<i>Neil Agnew</i>)	88
Great Things Lie Low and Rest Content (<i>Tim Conley</i>)	89
The Eyes Are Meeker Than They Were (<i>David Hutto</i>)	92
Serpentine (<i>Beth Sherman</i>)	95

Fiction

Snake's Back (<i>Peter C. Conrad</i>)	100
False Millennium (<i>Matias F. Travieso-Diaz</i>)	106
An Hour Of Judgment (<i>Christian Jackson</i>)	117
Hidden Lies (<i>Alice Baburek</i>)	124
A Kind Of Natural Justice (<i>S.D. Brown</i>)	135
Motherhood is Trying (<i>Gretchen Beyer</i>)	142
Life Without You (<i>Alan N Webber</i>)	154
The Picture At The Mill (<i>Jacob Froehlich</i>)	160
The Zebra's Legs (<i>Selene Bey</i>)	168
Silences (<i>Sherri Moshman-Paganos</i>)	174
Bubba D (<i>David Cameron</i>)	179
Dead Time (<i>P.M. Alexander</i>)	188

Book Reviews

Book Review Of Caroline Helenasdotter's 'Whispers of the Nordic Draugr'	198
Book Review of Rishikesh Upadhyay's 'Stress in Plants'	201

Book Review of G. C. Nightwalker's 'Dreams of Perfection'	204
Book Review of John Muro's 'Pastoral Suite'	206

Visual Art

Dandle and other artworks (<i>Michael Moreth</i>)	16
Hydrangea Blues and other photographs (<i>Katie Highbanks</i>)	26
Tripura Sundari (<i>Kalyani Santhosh Kumar</i>)	37
Love Each Other and other photographs (<i>Pop</i>)	45
Cocooned in Chaos and other photographs (<i>Subhana Sultan</i>)	64
Artworks (<i>Mainak Purkait</i>)	83
Expressions with threadi (<i>Manav Timbalia</i>)	98
Freedom in Flight and other artworks (<i>Lindy Giusta</i>)	122
Hudson Delights and other artworks (<i>Cristina Sanchez</i>)	152
Credible Messenger and other artworks (<i>Obie Weathers</i>)	172
Cause and Effect and other artworks (<i>Rudra Kishor Mandal</i>)	196

I Have His Pancreas In My Pocket

By Alex Carrigan

He broke apart into grains of salt while he slept. I saw the purple hue beneath the mounds and dug it out. I felt a coolness radiating out from its polished, marblelike texture. I spent a week thinking of what to do with it. With all of him. I carefully poured all the salt into glass bottles and lined my mantle with them. Ants had mixed themselves with the salt, adding black specks to the white bottles. I thought of making jewelry with his pancreas, of grinding it down into gemstones for a bib necklace. However, I felt most complete with it in my pocket, even if the weight of it made me limp when I walked. Sometimes I rub his pancreas when I feel nauseous. Other times I take it out and lay it on my bare stomach. I hope it will someday sink into my flesh, but until then I enjoy the chill it gives me against my skin.

Title comes from a riff from the Mystery Science Theater 3000 episode Hamlet.



Alex Carrigan (he/him) is a Pushcart-nominated editor, poet, and critic from Alexandria, VA. He is the author of *Now Let's Get Brunch* (Querencia Press, 2023) and *May All Our Pain Be Champagne* (Alien Buddha Press, 2022). He has appeared in *The Broadkill Review*, *Sage Cigarettes*, *Barrelhouse*, *Fifth Wheel Press*, *Cutbow Quarterly*, and more. Visit carriganak.wordpress.com or follow him on Twitter @carriganak for more info.

Gravediggers

By Liam Strong

fog wishes to be snow / i calve a sharpie / to its underbelly / all
mange / a birch branch / saunters in the humidity / by the time i
blot out / lamplight / morning has gathered / reems of opal / &
we're what's often left / my lawn is like / a pillow that's recently /
braved a nightmare / i watch ghosts gel static / bottom of the
ditch / ducks who live there as if / there's no place else / where
vague shapes aren't / shapes / aren't boys / aren't constants /
the dew settles / sinks / sweats again / i lulled someone else's /
car from wakeful / the stratus of exhaust / within & without / my
reach once more than / foreground / even the growing of /
beech leaves & hyacinths / is just another method / of fading /



Liam Strong (they/them) is a queer neurodivergent cripple punk writer and author of the chapbook *Everyone's Left the Hometown Show* (Bottlecap Press, 2023). Find them on Instagram/Twitter: @beanbie666. <https://linktr.ee/liamstrong666>

Immediately After The One-Car Crash

By John Grey

Run your finger slowly
down your trembling cheeks,
Stop for anything moist.
If you have an eye,
contemplate the sticky redness.

Question your body's authority.
Is it in charge?
Respect its ability to squeeze out
from under the driving wheel.
If it can't make it,
sever the relationship.

And cry for help.
Accept the fact that your life is now
as the whim of passing strangers.
They are 9-1-1.
But of their mischance,
not their choosing.



John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in New World Writing, North Dakota Quarterly and Tenth Muse. Latest books, "Between Two Fires", "Covert" and "Memory Outside The Head" are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in Haight-Ashbury Literary Journal, Amazon=g Stories and River and South.

Color

By Meghan Albizo

There's been a lot of criticism around lighting and saturation on film. It's all too dark, too gray, too washed out, too hard to see. When I was growing up I often wondered when the world got its color. Silly now I know, but it was a fascination when looking at history books and old programs. I felt bad, sad, mad for this imaginary time and the people who lived in it, in a monochromatic scape with only the varying shades of gray. Did they know something was missing? They had to. Right? When you were angered or flushed or looking at the sun with your eyes closed did it not feel red? When you tasted an orange did the sweet citrus dancing on your tongue not hint that this was a fruit so unique it's defined its shade? Was a field of sunflowers not as happy without their golden lively hue? Were walks in forests and through the trees still as calming with only gray filtering through the leaves? Did the vastness of the ocean as far as ones eyes could see the sea, not indicate that it wasn't just deep? My old choir teacher used to tell us children that we needed to "sing purple" and more bizarrely we knew what that meant. How else would you describe a soulful melody with body and heart? I think about this because our outsides still have color, but our homes and the things we watch in them do not.



Meghan Albizo is a writer of non-fiction memoir, fiction and poetry. She was born in California, studied English and Biology at Missouri State University, explored the Pacific Northwest and currently lives in the United Kingdom with her partner and child.

Beyond The Scar

By Ritobeena Kanjilal

I float in a fancy,
when you touched my skin
with fingers wet and glossy,
Like the panels of your cabin's windows
on a pleasant summer evening.
The ailing sun with a glowing womb,
pushes down the crimson sky,
with clouds of chivalry
running over the stars
to meet the passionate night.

I cloth myself over fingerprints
marching over my scales and coiling body,
into a battlefield of Time's testimony.
In a mesh of pulpy nerves and anxiety,
I am a cocoon being ready to bloom
for thousands of years.
With crumbled pillows and stained bedsheets
I put it into flames with my insanity;
The sparks of Nemesis offspring
fall over my breasts
limping its way in my head.

Every night, my temple shines,
with hand prints and letters
invisible to all but you.
I drenched myself into a skin of another;
Waxing away the aging prints of hands,
with dark patterns of multiple colours.

It BURNS.
It BURNS.
It BURNS.

You see a body brown like,
the mellow stains of coffee,
I spilled over you, last summer.
I see a woman;
With palpable images she gets drunk with,
every time she falls in love.
With days and months passing by, my skin peels off,
with marks springing from the crevices
you never thought existed.

I ran with a menacing speed,
to hold the fading glimpse into the woods,
of a woman with a body like virgin lilies
Years ago.

I spread my vines over your monastery,
with marbles dark, broad, and cold.
Like the frozen icicles I froze too;
Into a crown too heavy for your throne
to carry.

An ending I cannot see of this agony,
revolving in madness to love you and me.

I am a psychopath,
to call your burning touch as love;
It still burns but I love it, because I love you.
I still stand here mirroring the fingerprints,
with yours over my bosoms,
deep on my heart.

I sit still,
hearing the swan's ethereal melodies,
mixing your blotch amongst thousands;

Slipping my senses into a sleep,
you would rather be happy not to feel again.



Ritobeena Kanjilal is a postgraduate student from St. Xavier's University, Kolkata. She has been pursuing English for the last five years, which eventually led her into a revere of poetries and fiction. She started writing poetry as an escape from the mundane engagements we are bound to conduct to keep up with society. Poetries have always been close to her heart and she loves reading poetries in general whenever she can steal some leisure time out of her schedule.

What Has Love Done To You Mother?

By Krisht Saikia

What has love done to you mother?
Look at your yellow- stained palms,
Wrinkled with the lines of the past,
Belly scarred by days of endless fast.
Skin infested with timeless endurance
Frail Voice aching for love's assurance
Dull eyes weary of bearing dreams,
Cheeks moist with salty streams.

Why don't you paint your nails?
Why don't you dress in red?
Why don't you look in the mirror?
Look mother! Look –
Look what love has done to you!
Perhaps you were disillusioned,
Blind behind the white veil.

Love is to be felt mother,
Not to be forced upon.
The love that I have witnessed
Is nothing like the love,
That you were served, mother.
Love is wild and free,
It doesn't domesticate you.
Perhaps you were illiterate
To even identify a love, true.

Mother, I wished and I still do
That you could afford hate too.
I wish that I could teach you love,
How pure and divine it feels.
I wish I could teach you to live,
The life with a love that heals.

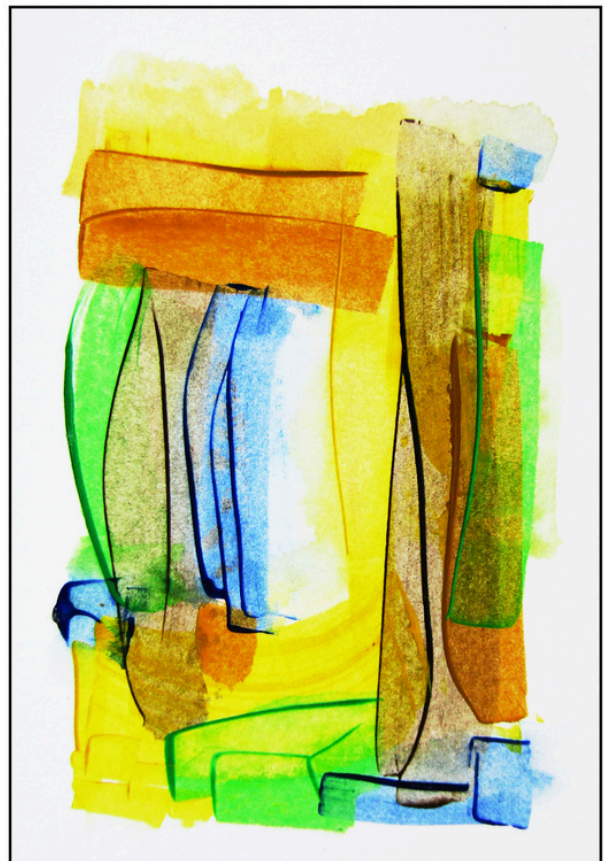
Look what your love has done-
Even lying in your deathbed stern,
Your body reeks of restlessness,
Craving the love of its share in return.



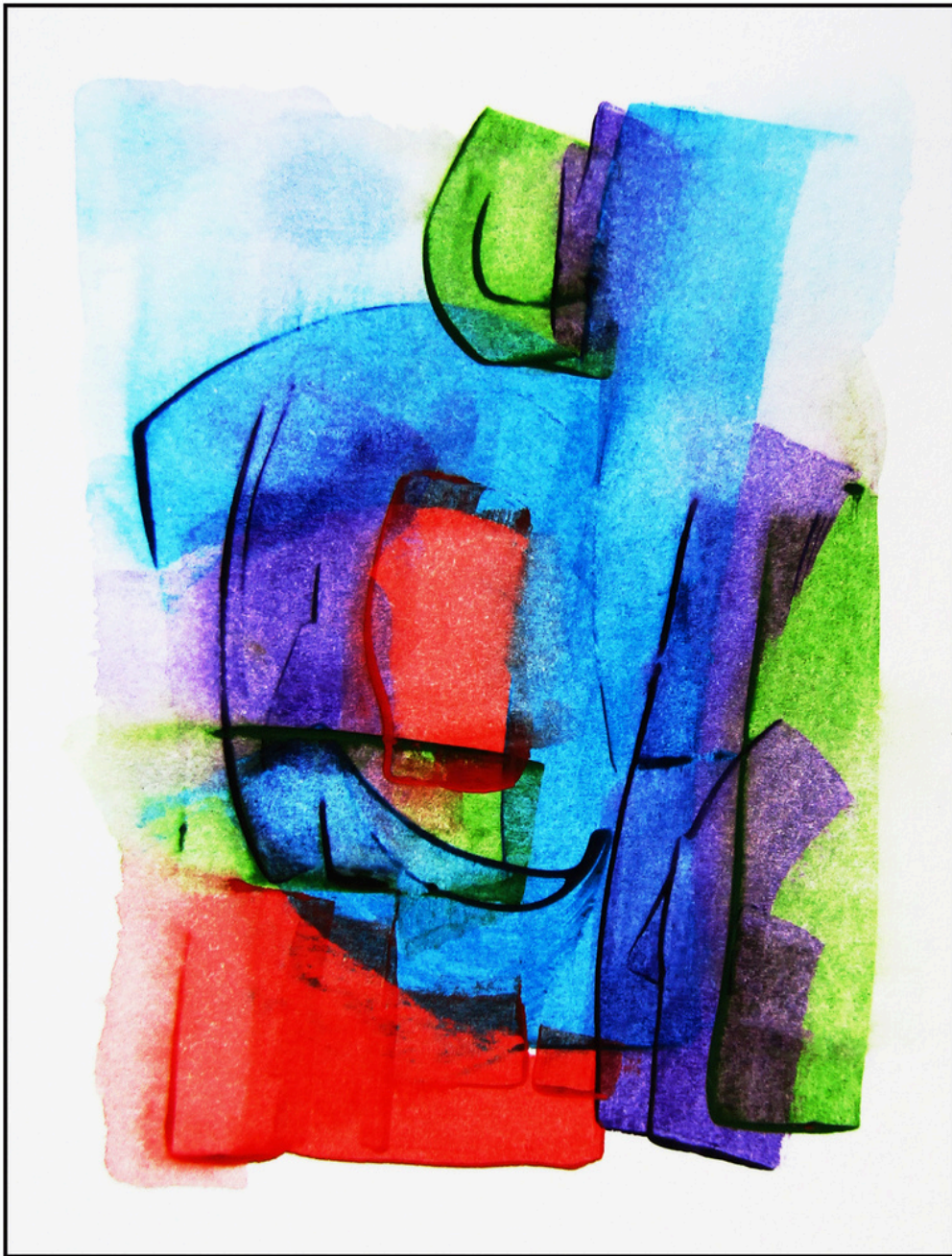
Krisht Saikia hails from India. He especially writes about his raw emotions that he finds difficult to express in front of others. His writings are the reflections of the various forms of himself that exist within him. He usually focuses on the the feelings that are lost in the void frequently ignored and abandoned. It is his poetry that makes him feel alive and honest.



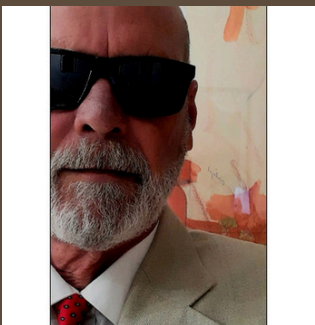
Dandle
Michael Moreth



Factual
Michael Moreth



Eagerly
Michael Moreth



Michael Moreth is a recovering Chicagoan living in the rural, micropolitan City of Sterling, the Paris of Northwest Illinois.

Glossolalia

By Frank William Finney

We necked for hours
behind the church

to the sounds of a sermon
and sacred hymns,

then we shagged between shrubs
on a sheet of ice

till the lot was crammed
with humming cars

and we said goodnight
as the organ moaned

before squinting our way
towards the glaring lights

where the snowflakes fell
like manna.



Frank William Finney is a poet and retired lecturer from Massachusetts who taught in Thailand for 25 years. A recipient of the Letter Prize for Poetry, his work has appeared in numerous international journals and anthologies including Brussels Review, Little Leaf Literary Journal, and Penn Journal of Arts and Sciences.

Cell Phone?

By Grant Shimmin

(After David Whyte. Everything is waiting for you)

Are our lives in the hands
of inanimate objects?
Not that they have hands
though they hold an abundance
of everything imaginable
Everything is waiting for us
through that tiny window
The universe in pocket-size
The holder of all things ... handheld

But is it really everything?
"You're not walking quite as much this week
compared to last week"
mine tells me at 7.57 am
on the first day of 'this week'
when I'm out ... walking
Why so judgmental
oh wielder of the world's wonders?
Where's the encouragement,
the nuance, the empathy?

There are friends through that window
friends never met in the meat space
But if friendship is never embodied
does that mean
we're not real friends
even if everything we are is on show?
Everything?
Aren't edits inevitable in lives live-tweeted?

Is the tiny window on my phone
my dream ladder to divinity
or my digital doorway to despair?
Is one possible without the other?
Is it in my hands or am I in its,
this forever phone?
Will it make me happy? The jury's out
But it's tough to imagine a total absence
of reasonable doubt

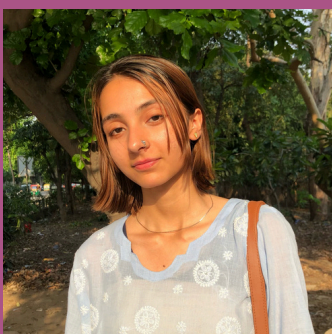


Grant Shimmin is a New Zealand writer who grew up in South Africa, keenly interested in humanity and the natural world as themes. He is an editor for Does it Have Pockets and published in literary magazines globally, including *Roi Faineant Press*, *The Hooghly Review*, *Bull*, *Dreich*, *Remington Review*, *Blue Bottle Journal* and *Querencia Press*.

But Not Quite

By Subhana Sultan

You tell me you're always there for me,
I can see;
Help...
I don't shout but barely whisper it
because you are there, I can see;
I lend my hand out,
you're there, aren't you?
I don't have to say it aloud,
because I can see;
you're there, showing me that,
you're there for me, not letting me be alone;
then why do I feel forlorn?
Why then, there is so much of you I can see
but not quite?
My hand feels tired now,
reaching for you,
as I stand here,
my grey mind against the bewitching blue sky,
my grungy dress upon the stunning green lair of what envelops me,
your many hands against my one; waiting,
been waiting.
It's funny because
you tell me you are always there for me,
I can see;
I can see you being there,
but not reaching for me.



Subhana Sultan is a Multi Media and Mass Communication graduate from Delhi University, India. She is an aspiring photographer and writer and has been involved with various documentary projects.

She aims to continue documenting the stories from the streets.

Unfinished Exit

By Claudia Wysocky

I keep thinking
about the time in high school
when you drew
me
a map of the city,
I still have it somewhere.
It was so easy
to get lost
in a place where all the trees
look the same.
And now
every time I see
a missing person's poster
stapled to a pole,
all I can think is
that could have been me.
Missing,
disappeared.

But there are no
posters for people
who just never came back
from vacation, from college,
from life.
You haven't killed yourself
because you'd have to commit to a
single exit.
What you wouldn't give to be your cousin Catherine,
who you watched
twice in one weekend get strangled nude

in a bathtub onstage
by the actor who once
filled your mouth with quarters at
your mother's funeral.
The curtains closed and opened again.
We applauded until
our hands were sore.

But you couldn't shake the image of
her lifeless body,
the way she hung there like a
marionette with cut strings.
And now every time you try to write a poem,
it feels like a
eulogy.

A desperate attempt to
capture something that's already
gone.
But maybe that's why we keep writing,
keep searching for
the right words,
because in this world where everything is
temporary,
poetry is our only chance at
immortality.

So even though you haven't
found the perfect ending yet,
you keep writing.
For Catherine, for yourself, for all the lost
souls
who never got their own
missing person's poster.
Because as long as there are words on a page,
there is still hope for an unfinished exit to
find its proper
ending.

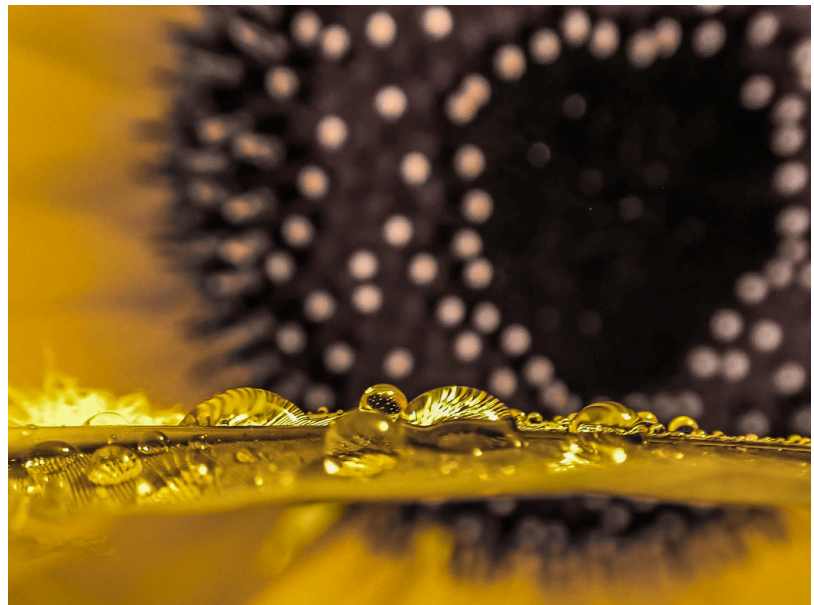


Claudia Wysocky is a Polish poet based in New York, celebrated for her evocative creations that capture life's essence through emotional depth and rich imagery. With over five years of experience in fiction writing, her poetry has appeared in various local newspapers and literary magazines. Wysocky believes in the transformative power of art and views writing as a vital force that inspires her daily. Her works blend personal reflections with

universal themes, making them relatable to a broad audience. Actively engaging with her community on social media, she fosters a shared passion for poetry and creative expression.



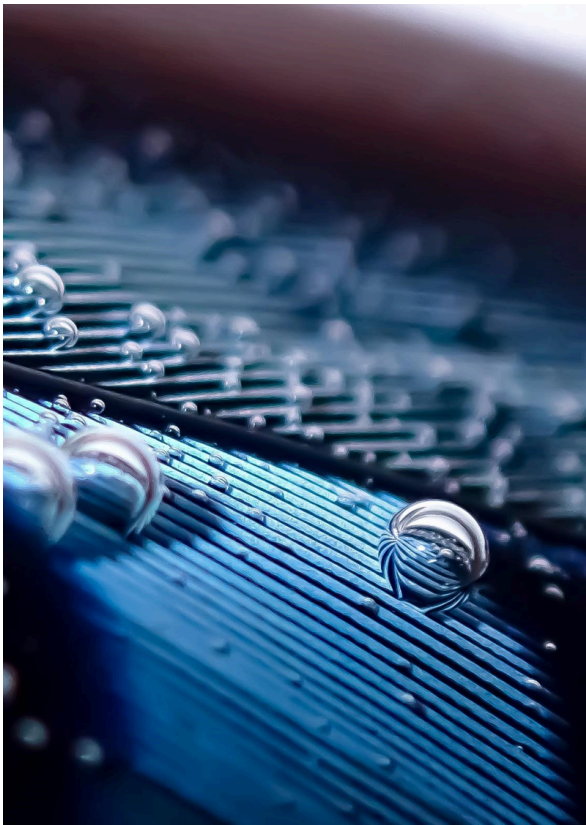
Hydrangea Blues
Katie Hughbanks



Amber
Katie Hughbanks



Underwater Forest
Katie Hughbanks



Bluejay Feather Silence

Katie Hughbanks



Colorful Confusion

Katie Hughbanks



Katie Hughbanks (she/her) is a writer, photographer, and teacher whose photography has been recognized nationally and internationally. Her photos appear in more than 40 publications, including Cool Beans Lit, Peatsmoke Journal, In Parentheses, L'Esprit Literary Review, New Feathers Anthology, Glassworks Magazine, Azahares, Paper Dragon, Sage-ing, and Black Fork Review. Her poetry chapbook, *Blackbird Songs*, was published by

Prolific Press in 2019, and her short story collection, *It's Time*, was published by Finishing Line Press in July 2024. She teaches English and Creative Writing in Louisville, Kentucky, US.

Love Beyond Two Souls

By Dinta Suresh

It all started over a phone call
Soon, we started talking for hours and days,
Where the days were filled with your voice.
Days were like waves of the ocean, were
Conversations were unending, was like a dream.
What was it? Was it love, or I am in love?

I never knew, what were those moments, – so magical
Love, laughter, and our craziness filled everywhere.
As days passed by, we were longing for each other desperately,
To feel the breath of each other, with no words uttered,
Tangling our fingers, sharing gentle caresses,
Unraveling the love, and lust, to the utmost,
Embracing our bond beyond the voice-over the call.

Holding hands, kissing all over again and again,
Caressing the imperfect impression of us,
Feeling loved, touched, and cared for,
We never felt shy to show our flaws.
It was just you and me in a world woven together by us
Was that love or not? I never knew, but I was in Love.

Deep in our love, we never searched for our roots,
Where we are two different souls,
With different values, religious beliefs, and backgrounds
All we saw was just love, got lost in each other madly.
Was that love? I believe it was love.
Do we love each other still? I don't know.
I believe we loved each other but failed to own our souls,

As we are different souls with many identities.
Your sharp gaze to uncover my roots
Made me raw, naked, and shy, left with anger at our world.
Our eyes could talk louder than our voices,
Trying hard to uncover our identities,
Which are too different to be one.
Was it love or not? It was love, not ownership.

Falling in love was more like rain,
But owing it seemed tough as it drained out through my fingers.
We were in love as one soul until we were unknown about us, and
our roots
As we uncover more about us, our love turned to be more complex
To be in love with you was like standing at the shores, mesmerized
by waves,
But we failed to own any of the waves, even when each embraced
us so tightly.

The invisible fences of society are many that could resist our love,
But still, I never feared, as I'm with you.
Yet, you felt we were two different souls,
You wanted to walk away, leaving me and our reminiscences
behind
Still, I don't know whether it was love or I was in love.



Dinta Suresh is a PhD scholar working at the intersection of gender and sexuality. Passionate about literature, she spends much of her time immersed in books and poetry, exploring how stories shape and reflect identities and experiences. She has a deep interest in themes of love and human connection, drawing inspiration from personal reflections and the emotional landscapes navigated in relationships. She also loves traveling, seeing it as the truest form of life exploration.

Bee Frequency

By Lisa Bellamy

When I need respite from human ugliness, I walk out to my favorite valley, search for bush-blossom hollows, pray to hear bee frequency, i.e., 20,000-plus bumblebees—big-buzz, surround-sound, harmonium drone. Bee-torso muscles vibrate, pincers grab flowers' anthers—bee-bang creation; perfect, persuasive pitch for pollen release—O shakedown, O pirate's treasure, O booty. Yes, I may be stung unto Death, but I want to tiptoe near and nearer to thee, dear bees. I want to be a tuning fork, shimmy to pure Middle C—O frequency: release me, twirl me, scatter my dread thoughts—I want to shake, shake, shake it, like a bee; slow-rock my hips, shout Jehoshaphat—if I catch Death's eye, so be it. I want to laugh, despite myself. I want to tremble, until I stop, and am still; until I know I am god.



Lisa Bellamy is the author of *The Northway* and *Nectar*. She has received two Pushcart Prizes, a Fugue Poetry Prize, honorable mention in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, and has been featured in podcasts, including *The Writer's Almanac*. The U.N. Network on Migration featured her poem "Yoho" in its 2022 exhibition. She is a graduate of Princeton University.

O Kafka!

By Prashant Mahato

O kafka! I am here to tell you,
that you were wrong.
all your work was a waste,
at least in today's world.

When you said,
"art depends on truth, but truth, being not devisable, cannot know
itself:"
You were wrong,
'cuz today people know what is true
and what is false,
with such precision that
you would have been canceled long back.

Start with what is right rather than
what is acceptable – you said,
but today without views and likes
you wouldn't even be considered a writer.

Gone are the days when literature had
a purpose, responsibility.
A write-up without abuses wouldn't
be considered a cult today.

Hence, my friend all I can say is,
your work is no more relevant.
You were right in one aspect though,
that you wanted to burn all your writings.

Your self doubt was evident,
in this world of keepers of right and wrong.
O kafka! I am here to tell you,
that you were wrong!



Prashant Mahato is a contemporary writer and poet known for his deep exploration of life's complexities, focusing on identity, purpose, and the tension between personal desires and societal expectations. Drawing from his personal journey and keen observations of the world, his work invites readers to reflect on the choices that define us. Currently, he stays in delhi and works in a MNC.

The Temple Of Wait

By Pinkle Nandi

The sun spoke to the gods
Thunders clapped their hands
In a wistful celebration
Songs flew from the heaven's lands

He whose smile, so warm in a forever winter
Eyes born from the fire of galaxies
His existence beautifully savage
His frame, oh so a library of fantasies

I slept in the temple of Wait
Counting my nights even and odd
He pressed his warmth unto the shivering temple stones
Universe witnessed as I made him my God

I brought blossoms from the five Seasons
I danced away my miseries under his guiding gaze
I waged war against mortality with my heart
I mocked at Time's ocean of haze

Nevertheless, soon I angered the Angels
My growing insanity for a boy, I crowned as my God
The horizon poured an unending rain down upon me
Finally the neck of my love on the world's sword

This tale of worship and madness never ended in bliss
I kept my temple filled with His lasting essence
My eyes still search for his name
As I caress his unsheathed absence



She goes by Lone Feather or Pinkle, and is a fellow literature student, bookworm and amature poet. She is a hard-core lover of nature and extremely introverted but she do likes talking to animals. Also she has a cat!

Great Indian Tamasha

By Rafi

A pampered kid dreamed of a grand marriage
To his childhood sweetheart and assembled
all his pals from various premium schools.
His momma, a 'wanna be a global socialite,'
Ambitious to stretch her reach far and wide,
invited influencers from all over the place.
Their eager PR guy pleaded his favourite
Celebrities and performers to be in attendance.
The big daddy, who was to foot the bill,
Smelled a chance to enhance his brand's image
summoned his friends and bearers on his payroll.
There began a great Indian tamasha of splurge
that unfolded in phases over multiple stages.
It only managed to attract derision, and revulsion.



Rafi is an emerging poet and writer from Warangal, a small town in Telangana state of southern India. He is Masters in English literature and work as Assistant Professor in a management institute. Previously, he worked as an advertising copywriter and editor of a news portal. He tries to chronicle the life and living of marginalized people through his writings and is ambitious to carve out a space in the world of poetry. His works have been published in online literary magazines, including Kitaab.org.

People Of The Book

By A. Daniyal

Far too often
we of professed
Abrahamic faiths,
Jews, Muslims, Christians,
we blatantly deny
a fundamental tenet
of our religions:

That one day
we must all
face God.

How else can you explain
such callous disdain
for human life
and such zeal
to inflict pain,
as if we ourselves will
never die and be shown
in the mirror
our rotten core
riddled with worms.



A. Daniyal was born in Lahore, Pakistan, and grew up in a small town in northern Italy. He moved to Canada in 2008. His work has been published in *The Imagist*, *The Polyglot*, *Ahoy Literary*, among others. He lives in Montreal. You can find him at www.adaniyal.ca



Tripura Sundari-The Supreme Goddess-Kerala Traditional Mural Art
Kalyani Santhosh Kumar



Dr.Kalyani is from Kerala, India. She loves to explore life and places from varied perspectives. Loves debates and delegations on public health issues. A verdant lover of spirituality and Vedanta with an essence of wow in everything. Loves to serve people and make someone's day. Orator, artist, poet and dancer for years. Loves medicine and research. She is a person of the moment and someone who persuaded the ways of MIND and learned to live WHOLEHEARTEDLY.

Elephant Bones

By Maureen Clark

she was the keeper of wisdom and memory
this matriarch and when she died

another elephant led the rest
in caressing her performing a funeral

the dead matriarch was surrounded
in concentric circles with mothers

and daughters walking around her body
pushing her with gentle trunks

to get up singing the deep-throated lament
they pound the earth with their drum flat feet

sending seismic messages to distant relatives
adopt the motherless calf teach them

how to stroke the bones
of the matriarch



Maureen Clark's book "This Insatiable August" was released in 2024 by Signature Books. She has received two nominations this year for a Pushcart Prize. Her memoir "Falling into Bountiful: Confessions of a Once Upon a Time Mormon" won Honorable Mention in the 2024 Utah Original Writing Competition.

War Core

By Elisha Thompson

The metal beat to a crater
Exposing the mantle of flesh.

Behind those blue screens is a beast
Of skin and bone
Of fear and happiness.

Maybe a father, definitely a son.
No question an enemy.

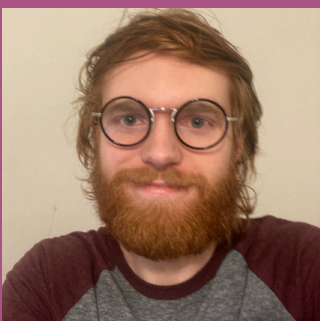
Does it matter in these snowy wastes?
Are the man and soldier one?
Is his steel uniform his flesh or his shield?

The flesh that binds his pride to his heart? Or
the shield that keeps him from firing squads?

Again does it even matter?
We are two men bound by orders.
Orders to kill one another with weapons of war. That
should've stayed in sadistic blueprints of the devil.

The pressure of the trigger pulled.
A single sundering sound brought to a flashing life.
Not a nanogram of regret.

Another day survived.
Another man his family will cry over.
Another order to come tomorrow to kill again.



Elisha Thompson (He/Him) Is someone who wants to write. He wants to try and make things that feel right to him and other souls, and sometimes that's dark, sometimes it's light. Either way, it's him. Even if it's not perfect, not the best, not in the right way. It's still getting somewhere. It's making progress, just like he is. Imperfect but beautiful, as is life.

Double Spliced Helix

By Chandler Garcia

Y chromosome not carved	in stone barely scratching
gravel surface a Wish B	one stolen from a frame
maybe breathe easier	ribs incomplete buried
Wish into soiled	dirt give body back
to earth give	bones back to
God take them	reject them take
them reject	them <i>not</i>
made in man's	image but
from lust	rous black
rubble and	burning
bush in	the form
of hor	mone
replacement	
Wish	
make	
one	
to be	
born	
with	
parts	
wanted	
take	
those	
that	
calcify	
flesh	
Wish	

capture
it
into
frame



Chandler Garcia is a 23 year old Latinx and transgender student at California State University, Long Beach, pursuing a degree in Creative Writing with a focus in poetry. They use their experiences being a trans person of color in various aspects of their identity and life to inspire their writing and poetic voice. Their work has been published in SCAB Magazine.

Winter Poem

By Taro Williams

I flowed into winter with great hesitation
Like a spoiled child – I threw a tantrum

No! No! No!

I'll hold my breathe before I let the cold winds enter my throat

I kicked, I barked, I held up a rageful fist

Another breeze from northern Canada came
And I wore a bitter frown
Making a face more sour than a detained schizoid

Resisting the changing of the seasons
Trying to bargain with mother nature for some stillness
Or – at least, rest

"I don't want to!"

Crying louder than a banshee

Oh! Ah! Oh! Ah! Oh! Ah!

Some folks love December – but I prefer a summer breeze under
July sun

Please god, give me a Jamaican beach over Finnish snow

Reluctantly – spirt threw a wool sweater around me

Someone played, “Fleetwood Mac” over the stereo speakers

At last – this was it

The battle was over

I saw no use in fighting

Like a samurai ready to commit seppuku

Or a king cornered in a game of chess

I called it in...

Checkmate!

And then I surrendered...

My personal crusade of delusions did not succeed

With a cup of Swiss hot chocolate

And a navy blue scarf around my neck

Farewell to twelve hours of sunlight

Goodbye my dear one, (my true lover) summertime

Only, I know I have not seen the last of you yet.



Taro Williams (he/they) is a multidisciplinary artist and writer raised in the east end of Tkaronto/Toronto, the city he is now based in. His work explores themes of gentrification, queerness, and urban living. He is of Nikkei heritage (fourth-gen Japanese Canadian) and has attended Rosedale Heights School of the Arts and Concordia University. William’s work has previously been published in *School School* (2022, 2023), *Ex-Puritan* (2024), *Auvert Magazine* (2024), *Moss Puppy Magazine* issue 7: “The Boneyard” (2024), *100 Stories: Echoes of Empathy with the Asian Arts and Cultural Trust* (2024), *Your Impossible Voice* (2024), and *Squid Magazine* (2024). Williams’ is currently split between both Tkaronto/Toronto and Tiohtià:ke/Montreal, two cities he calls home.



Love Each Other

Pop

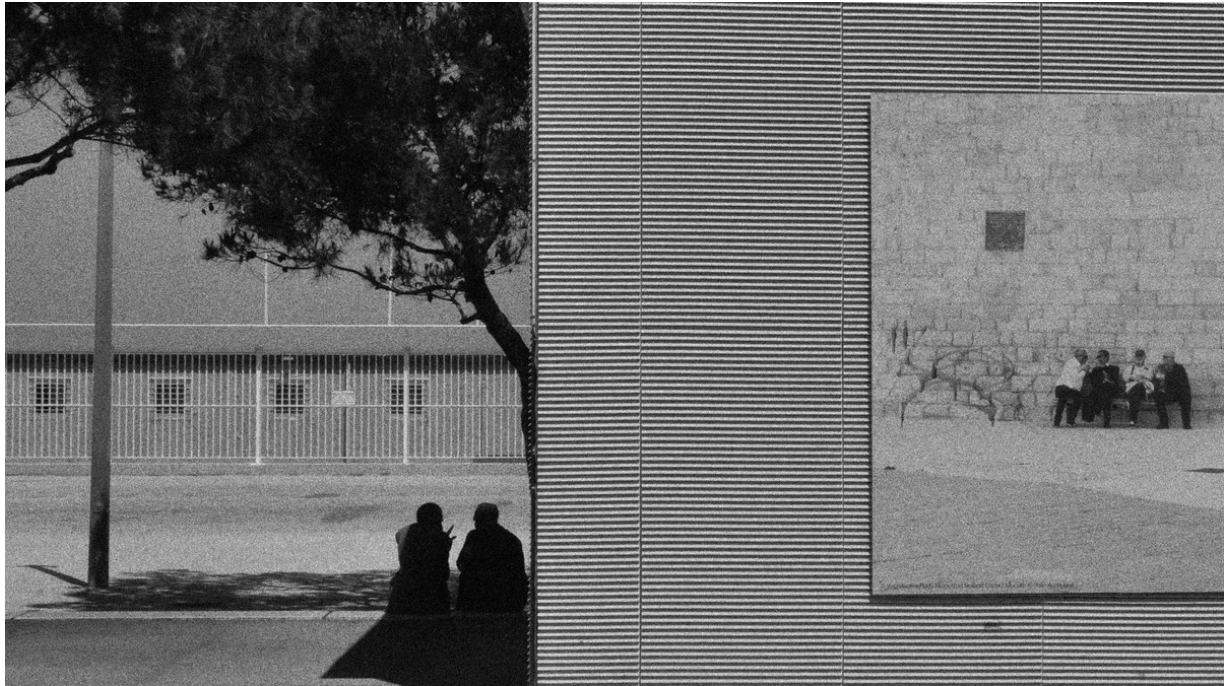
Artist's Statement: I noticed the three policemen and the young couple facing the sea. They formed a perfect scene. The title "Love each other" comes from the tag on the bench. I had my title.



Windows and Fantasies

Pop

Artist's Statement: Of the 5 rooms, only one is not lit. It draws us to imagine things. That's why I chose this title.



Hear or tail

Pop

Artist's Statement: The two old men talk in the shades of this huge poster on the right. If you look close enough, you'll see they look just alike the type of old men on the poster. Hence the title.



On the Road again

Pop

Artist's Statement: A young woman hits the road. Here the rails, as a symbol of freedom. The back-light suggest a gloomy future.



Presenting shoe model n°667

Pop

Artist's Statement: A light, funny kind of picture making fun in a gentle way of Fashion's extreme ways.



The Magic Plane

Pop

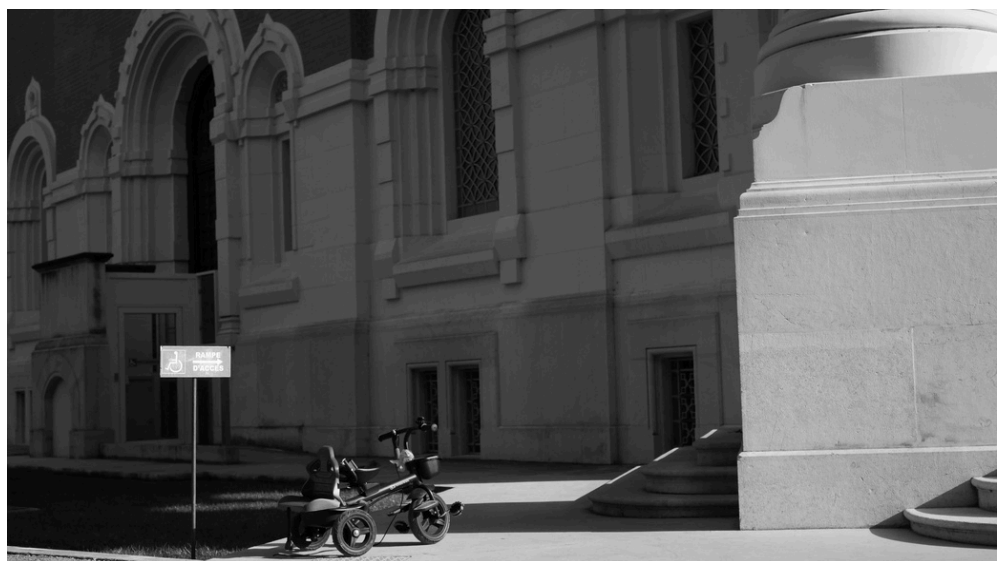
Artist's Statement: A young boy looks at this magic kind of plane. The Umbrella, the position of the man on the wings give the photo an eerie look.



The Plastic mother and her three little lollipops-starving babies

Pop

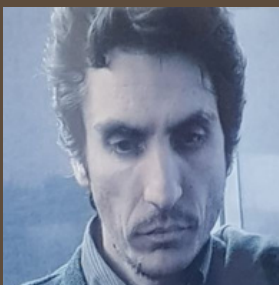
Artist's Statement: The title says it all, doesn't it?



The Tricycle

Pop

Artist's Statement: A tricycle, in front of the stairs of that church. No child around. There's something strange about it.



Pop was born in Romania in 1984. His works include poetry, short-stories, scripts and photography. So far, he's been exclusively published in America.

Wasiwasi

By Kerry McKay

"*Asante sana*" I thanked the Kenyan man who had given me a lift to Nairobi and stepped onto the sidewalk.

It was at least fifteen degrees warmer in Nairobi than Kinale, my worksite and home. I pulled my wool sweater over my head and stuffed it into my backpack. Buses and cars belched fumes alongside small eateries burning charcoal. Billboard ads for orange Fanta and Sportsman cigarettes surrounded me.

I turned the corner and nearly walked into the outstretched legs of an old woman. She sat with her back against the building, shaking coins in her beggar's jar with only two fingers. She had stubs where her other fingers and her feet should have been. My rearing told me to give her a wide berth. She could be dangerous.

At twenty-three, I still felt the constant presence of my mother even when we were 7,500 miles apart. It was 1989 and I had been a Peace Corps Volunteer in Kenya for a year. Soon my parents would visit

so I could show them the country.

I jogged up the steps of Nairobi's Telecommunications Building to stand in line with other expats waiting to make a call. The line to the international calling room moved *pole pole*—slowly. Last month, when I called home, my parents told me they had their plane tickets. Through onion-skin letters, my mother and I planned their trip to visit me.

Spaced evenly along all four walls of the calling room hung gray metal pay phones. I lifted the handset. Held it against my cheek. A slim, neatly dressed Indian guy next to me shouted into the receiver. A poor connection. I looked around at all the faces. I smiled at a white girl my age, and she smiled back but then turned away to face the drab wall. Like me, she wore a smock dress that came below her knees. The female thigh was considered alluring and offensive, so we were instructed as expats to keep our thighs covered.

The phone rang a dozen

times before the answering machine clicked on. I hung up before I heard my mother's recorded voice. I kept the handset against my face and my head down, avoiding eye contact with those still waiting for an empty phone. I didn't want them assuming I was done.

#

Eight hours earlier, at Kinale, I had woken to the sound of roosters near and distant. I had opened my back door and breathed in the cool, fresh air. I could see my breath. How big the sky was. The rains had finally stopped and the clouds puffed up their chests. Moisture glistened on the hills of indigenous grass. Small *shambas*—farms—and traditional mud huts with thatched roofs dotted these green hills.

I had decided to go to Africa to search for meaning. What was this gift of life and how should I be making the most of it? When else, other than in my unfettered youth, would I get to do charity work and see the world? Realistically, I should have been in therapy for phobias and severe anxiety, but my parents weren't believers. My father said that every psychologist he knew had at least one gay kid. And, well, you didn't want that problem. Plus, Dad's first two 911 calls as a New York City cop, when *he* was twenty-three, were each a suicide of a psychiatrist. The profession couldn't

even help itself. The only viable solution, I concluded, face the fears head on. Therefore, hell-bent on doing good work, seeing the world, and curing myself, I joined the Peace Corps. I would finally be a person who took things lightly.

After three-and-a-half months of intensive Swahili lessons and cross-cultural and teacher training in Naivasha, my sixty-two cohorts and I were dispersed throughout Kenya. I was assigned an English teaching position at a high school in the Kinale Forest, northwest of Nairobi.

The outhouse I shared with neighbors obstructed part of my panoramic view. A dense cedar forest towered just beyond the hills. Elephants lived in this forest. I knew because the Peace Corps volunteer before me had written me a letter and said that she'd been lucky enough to see them. Volunteers shared stories, which I, in turn, shared with my mother, including the horrid yarn of the girl in the training group before us whose *choo*—outhouse—had been rickety. Maybe it was termites. Or maybe over time the wood just rotted. Those details don't matter as much as the girl went into the *choo* and the wood floor gave way and she plunged into the depths of human excrement. She screamed for too

long before someone found her. Peace Corps medivacked her home, and rumor was she was still under the care of a psychiatrist because no matter how many times she showered she never felt clean. And I knew, from my father, those quacks were useless.

I slipped on gum boots to head to the rain tank where I filled the *sufuria*. As the aluminum pot heated over the kerosene stove, I returned to the tank to fill my blue plastic basin three-quarters of the way. I failed at preventing the water from sloshing over the rim as I carried it inside and placed it on a wooden chair.

When I first moved to Kinale, I had written to tell my mother how nice I had made the house. It was a wooden duplex, with cement floors. After I had moved in, my first project was to turn the neglected shack into a home. I swept the floors, walls, and ceilings to remove the cobwebs and dirt. With a rag, a bucket of water, and Omo laundry detergent, I scrubbed the dirt off the walls. It took two days before my work revealed orange paint. I hitchhiked to Naivasha—a four-hour excursion—and returned with a gallon of white paint. My mother had written back to say I should also bleach the floor. I made the even longer journey to Nairobi where I bought bleach and a squeegee which was an ordeal to get home. The headmaster quoted,

“Cleanliness is next to godliness,” when he saw the transformation. For a moment, I felt superior to everyone for renovating my shack. Then I realized it was my mother who was superior. Every weekend, the bathrooms at home smelled like bleach. And every few months she would scrub away the grease from the kitchen stove and tile backsplash with ammonia.

When the water on the *jiko* was scalding hot, I poured it into the basin and swirled my hand in it to even the temperature. Steam rose. I had mastered a sufficient bathing experience with a basin of water, even washing my long hair.

A knock on the door rushed me into pulling my dress over a t-shirt. A small barefoot boy in a tattered t-shirt and shorts silently pushed a glass bottle of milk toward me. For a small fee, milk was delivered to my house each morning from one of the school’s cows. I took it and thanked him in Kikuyu. “*Ni wega.*” The milk still held the cow’s warmth. I poured it into another *sufuria*, lit the *jiko*, and watched it until bubbles formed around the edge of the pot and the milk began to rise. I turned down the *jiko*, stirred the tea leaves into the pasteurized milk, and added a little water. I drank the chai with a slice of

white bread slathered with dry bottom-of-the-jar peanut butter.

I stepped onto the mud path outside my house wearing my large backpack containing only a change of clothes, plenty of room for victuals only available in Nairobi. Since I didn't have a refrigerator, leftovers weren't an option. And while I had plenty of time to cook daily (one could only read by lantern or sooty candle for so long), once a month I went to Nairobi to stock up on jars of peanut butter, jam, Cadbury bars, and Cornflakes—and to call home.

Kinale High School was four-and-half kilometers from the tarmac—the paved road that runs from Mombasa to Kisumu. To get to the high school, you took a mostly untraversable road, dug out from the land but never paved. Eighty percent of the year, gullies formed in the soupy mud, making it impossible for cars to gain traction. I had often experienced the slippery conditions and glue-like qualities of the mud. More than a handful of times I had been surprised to feel my socked foot sink into cold slime because one shoe had stuck while I continued walking. In the dry season, the road poofed, blew, and whipped dust every which way. Timing was important at Kinale. You needed to get where you were going before sunset because once darkness fell, you had only the night

sky to guide you. So many stars the sky held in the dry season, but never enough for a safe journey. And if anything went wrong in the night there was no way out. Almost every night when the sun set I thought of that a little bit. Looking back, my mother probably did too. What if a snake bit, cerebral malaria struck? Writing, reading, and drawing by candle light could barricade catastrophic thoughts from fully entering my mind so long as I deployed these tools before panic invaded my body.

Along the way to the tarmac, I avoided the puddles that stood over the mud. The two tiny storefronts I passed were typical for a Kenyan town—*slabs* of weathered wood running vertically and coated with dirt on the bottom. Mules carried goods to the town's small *duka*—shop—that sold these few staples: cans of Blueband margarine and cooking oil; dried beans and rice; warm Fanta and Tusker beer; Omo laundry detergent; Kenyan tea leaves; and, occasionally, pineapple and loaves of bread. Men in threadbare jackets and tattered trousers hung around drinking outside the doorway of Mpesa Neema Hoteli. The *duka's* blue Dutch door was open on the top. Inside the shop, the *mzee* owner stood in darkness.

The damp road smelled of earth. I passed women hunched over, carrying wood on their backs, wearing Western shirts and skirts from past decades, with mismatched kangas wrapped around their waists. Some wore gumboots. Others were barefoot. We greeted one another in Kikuyu. "*Wimwega*." "*Niwega*." After about my fourth month in Kinale, the mob of elementary school kids finally stopped following me every time I left the school compound, yelling "*mzungu*"—European—and trying to touch my hair.

At around the three-and-a-half kilometer point, I veered off the mud road and followed my newly discovered footpath to the tarmac. A woman, maybe twenty-five, hadn't noticed me approaching. She was digging with a hoe, bent forward at the waist. A red, black, and white kanga tied in the front secured a lump on her back—her sleeping infant. A small boy ran to this woman's side and tugged on her blue and yellow skirt. Something felt genuinely kind about the way the woman acknowledged me. Her smile warm. "*Karibu*"—"Welcome"—she said, waving me forward.

She called out, excitedly, in Kikuyu, and a man emerged from behind their home. Her husband shook my hand firmly, not like when my headmaster held out limp fingers that felt moist and soft.

Perhaps it was the wide smile he first shared with his wife and child that made me think this man, too, was kind. He had lean hard muscles and seemed capable of, if needed, running for hours through the forest with his children in his arms.

The woman said something to her husband, and he walked away. In broken English and Swahili, she and I conversed about my job as a teacher, their farm, and America. I am no longer surprised how much can be understood between people who do not share a language. The husband returned holding a head of cabbage and a bunch of scallions. They sold these to me for three shillings—10 cents. I asked what else they grew and if I could come back to buy more.

They were happy to have me as a customer and told me that peas and carrots would be ready in a few weeks.

"Come in. Come in. *Nauandalia chai*," the woman said, so I, still with plenty of time before my call, followed her into her mud home. Her house was one big room, but strips of plastic divided it into sections. Two naked children seemed to appear out of nowhere and ran to her either side. The baby was stirring. Gitau, whom I had met first, brought me a stool and Mama Gitau insisted I

sit across from her. She squatted and stoked the flames on the fire in the center of the main room. She had strong healthy-looking teeth. Her feet were wide and flat, cracked and dry like clay. She rinsed three enamel tin mugs with water from an old yellow jerry can and set them on one of the large stones circling the fire. She spoke quickly in Kikuyu to Gitau who ran out of the house, returned with a handful of dirt that he dropped into the sufuria, and ran out again. She added water from the jerry can to the sufuria and scrubbed and rinsed it until the aluminum shined. She then said a few words to me in Swahili, and I knew them to mean that she needed her husband to milk the cow.

I asked her the rest of the children's names. She asked in broken English about my family and when I would marry and have children. Her toddlers giggled and sidled up to their bigger sister, Wambui. When the baby began to whimper and Gitau returned with the milk, Wambui helped her mother untie her kanga and took the infant. Mama Gitau poured the fresh milk into the boiling water and added tea leaves. The liquid came to another boil and, from a small brown paper bag, Mama Gitau poured at least a cup of sugar into the pot. She stirred it with a plastic strainer.

Mama Gitau nursed the baby

and Wambui brought her father tea. In Kenya, I had come to love chai time. It was a break in the day and a sweet, creamy treat. I looked away when the baby's lips fell off his mother's breast, thinking of a neighbor at home, Mrs. Malloy, who had once answered her front door to my mother with her infant on her breast. My mother came home appalled at her lack of decency. I did not tell my mother that I thought she was too judgmental.

"Nimeshiba," I told my new friend. I was satisfied. Before I left, Wambui returned with a small bunch of carrots her father must've just pulled from the earth. Mama Gitau exchanged with Wambui the baby for the carrots and rubbed the soil off with her calloused hands before handing them to me.

I asked her how much they cost, but she wouldn't take money. She waved her finger, "No. And you come for lunch on Sunday."

I cinched the hip straps on my backpack and continued my journey to Nairobi, walking among the towering cedars. Once I had walked far enough into the forest, I squatted to relieve myself. The ground cover was soft and green, almost bouncy. It wasn't too far until I arrived at the tarmac.

I stood on the side of the main road, moving my left hand up and down, palm-side up—the Kenyan equivalent of sticking out your thumb. When a Mercedes pulled over, I jogged to the passenger side—clothes, loose carrots, and a head of cabbage jostling around in my backpack. The driver, who looked to be in his fifties, wore a crisp white shirt and black suit. I climbed in, keeping my backpack at my feet.

"I can put that in the boot, if you'd like," he said in perfect English.

"I'm fine. Thank you."

Statistically speaking, for a *mzungu* hitchhiking in Kenya was far safer and more efficient than taking other forms of transportation. I'd recently ridden a bus from Mombasa to Mamburi because no private vehicles were heading that way. The bus driver munched on *miraa*, a stimulant similar to amphetamine, and sped through a torrential downpour without any working windshield wipers. I didn't panic, but I prayed. Similarly, riding a *matatu*, a jalopy truck with a cap on top, usually missing lugnuts and often with bald tires, was a death-defying act. A vehicle designed to seat six typically carried twenty. "Squeeze a bit," says the *matatu* conductor, as he stuffs as many humans as possible into the cab and then bangs on the roof to let the driver know to take off, before passengers are settled. The conductor and, if

needed, a few male passengers stand on the truck's fender, dangling like pairs of trousers on a clothesline. We wazungu were privileged; we could wave down privately-owned vehicles and enjoy a comfortable free lift, usually with someone whose level of prestige far surpassed our own.

#

I dialed home again, in case my parents had been outside or vacuuming and didn't hear the first call. To my surprise, my mother answered. The connection was fair, though I struggled to hear her over the many voices in the crowded calling room, in particular the scruffy blonde man to my left speaking a harsh German. He reeked of booze.

"We just walked in." My mother's voice was faint. I pressed the handset closer to my ear. "Did you hitchhike again?"

"I did," I told her. "It's so safe and I got here in just one ride."

"Who was in the car?"

"A Kenyan man and his wife," I lied.

"Were they preachers too?"

She was referring to a short ride I'd gotten from Kinale to Kimende, where I shopped on some Saturdays. A Kenyan man had rolled down the window of his Volvo and said in English,

"Praise the Lord. Come in. Where are you going?" He asked if I was from America. And when I said yes, he said, "Oh thank you God. God is on our side. Thank you Jesus. I was in your country in 1986. The Lord Almighty permitted me to visit your country. Thank you, Jesus. I started off in Ohio, then went to Florida and up to Detroit in Canada."

"No, he was a lawyer."

When my mother didn't say anything, I realized there was a delay in receiving one another's replies. Nevertheless, I kept talking. "And before the couple let me out they gave me their phone number in case I needed anything." Another fib. Though that had happened on another occasion.

Mom called out from the family room (I could tell from the way her voice traveled) to my father. "John, Kerry's on the phone."

He picked up immediately from the kitchen line.

"What's that banging?" I asked.

"John, stop making a racket."

"Sorry," my father said. "I was putting away groceries."

How progressive of my father to take on a nontraditional role. "Yum, tell me what you bought."

"Bananas, Macintosh apples, cheddar cheese. I'm grilling steak tonight and your mother is making mashies and green beans."

"What else is going on there?"

They reported two successful

college drop-offs. My brother was a freshman. My sister a sophomore. And my mother had enrolled at SUNY Purchase to, at forty-six, begin college. My father said, "Your mother signed up for an African Studies class."

"Did the toads return?" was my mother's second question, which meant she had received my letter about the rainy night when I sat at my kitchen table grading student work, having just cleaned up dinner. The rain was torrential, clattering my roof. The lamp's kerosene was running low, the light dimming. Even though I didn't hear or see anything, I sensed a presence, an invasion in my space. I grabbed the lantern by its metal handle and moved through the small kitchen looking for what I felt. And there they were, amphibious visitors—small toads hopping onto my kitchen floor through the gap under the door. Already more than a dozen occupied the space. I grabbed the dustpan and caught one at a time, opened the back door, felt cold rain on my face, and flung each toad back into the yard. Legs stretched out like crooked wings.

Since she seemed concerned about the toads, I didn't tell my mother about the swarm of bees that migrated over my head last week as I walked to the *duka*. A

sound not unlike a small airplane preceded them. They made up a thick, dark cloud that brought my eyes upward, causing me to lose my balance and brush against the stinging nettles that encroached the path.

"Are you eating well?" my mother asked in a faraway voice.

"I am. So are you getting excited to see Kenya?" I asked my parents. A long pause.

My heart beat more quickly. It wasn't like my mother or me to be direct. We'd always danced around truth, avoiding difficult conversations. I didn't ask why her voice felt small. Instead, my hands trembled.

"Ker, I had a lump removed from my breast and it was cancerous."

I held my breath. It seemed all of the walls of the room were tilting. I looked at my fingernails. I wanted to put down the receiver and walk away. Conceal my fear from her. "I'm probably going to have a mastectomy. I don't think I'll feel depressed after because of Dad. I'm so lucky that he loves me so much. We won't be able to come. I'm not sure if I can get my money back from the airline. Truthfully, I'm not that interested in traveling in Africa anyway. I just want to see you. Why don't you come home for Christmas." I don't remember the walk back to the ratty hotel I stayed in.

#

During my first few months in Kenya, I lived with a Kenyan family just outside of Naivasha and attended full days of training with the other Peace Corps volunteers in my cohort. Our instruction included daily language lessons in Swahili taught to us by native Kenyans. The instructors, young educated Kenyans, lived on the Training Center compound, so we Peace Corps Volunteers often hung out with them after our classes. One of our language teachers, Otieno, began to flirt with me and I didn't mind it. He was a Luo from western Kenya. Very dark and athletically built. He spoke beautiful English and Swahili and was an excellent soccer player.

Occasionally, we had parties at the training center as a way to unwind. Guitars came out. Beers were drunk. We sang. Someone would stick a cassette tape in the big boombox and we'd dance. Those nights most volunteers brought their sleeping bags to crash on the Center floor.

I knew HIV was uncontrolled in Kenya. I'd also learned that Kenyan men didn't like to use condoms. But I was so hungry for human touch. For hours Otieno and I sat outside side by side drinking and talking about our

different countries, politics, and travel (he had lived in London for a year). Our legs barely touched. When he took my hand, I got up with him and we walked through the dark over the grassy lawn. Moonlight lit up his room. He kissed me and his tongue melted something in me.

But despite the need, I heard my mother's warning and pulled away.

"Una wasiwasi?" Otieno asked.

"*Ndio.*" Yes, I said, I am worried.



Kerry McKay is at work on a novel set in Staten Island. Her writing has appeared in Harvard's Education Next, Your Teen Magazine, Adanna, Flash Fiction Magazine, TheRavensPerch, and other publications. She is a high school reading specialist and holds an MFA in fiction from Fairfield University.

How A Libertarian Paradise Tried (And Failed) To Survive On “Bear” Necessities

By JB Polk

Once upon a time in a land far, far away... That's how fairy tales typically start. But the story you are about to read is not a fairy tale. It has no happy ending, either. And it didn't happen long ago in a faraway land. It all actually started close to home in 2001, when a group of libertarians embarked on the so-called Free State Project (FSP). By 2005, as planned, some hundred FSP members had moved to Grafton, New Hampshire, a town so small that it didn't even have one traffic light.

New Hampshire was a state that the FSP perceived as having an individualist culture, which resonated well with their ideals. It also seemed like a logical place because it already had several weird laws, including the prohibition of picking up litter, repairing benches, or raking leaves on the beaches without a special permit issued by White Mountain National Forest. Anyone caught doing so

would be fined US\$150.

But first of all, who are libertarians? For one, they are the people who misappropriated the Gadsden flag: a coiled snake on a yellow background and a legend that says, Don't tread on me. Libertarianism (from Latin "libertas," or freedom) is a political philosophy that upholds individual liberty as a core value. Libertarianism prioritizes individual freedom over all other values, including some basic human rights. They believe the government is fundamentally wasteful and unnecessary, and personal autonomy takes precedence over everything else, from sexuality to education to drug use.

Libertarians also optimistically trust that people can base all interactions on voluntary accords. They advocate allowing things if there's no reason to forbid them. It all sounds awfully

progressive and fantastic if it weren't for the fact that it applies to humans. And, as history has repeatedly shown, for the children of the species *Homo sapiens* to agree on anything unanimously is a truly unworkable task. As the saying goes, *if you put two people together, they will have three opinions.*

In 17th-century Poland, the principle of *liberum veto* (free refusal) was a fine example of old libertarianism. It referred to the legal right of each member of the Polish parliament (Sejm) to null and void any measure under consideration by his vote alone. One vote could even dissolve the assembly and invalidate any act passed during the session. In other words, it was enough to bribe one parliamentarian to overturn any decision, which, in turn, led the legislature to achieve absolutely nothing for years on end! Or rather, it did accomplish the destruction of Poland, a once mighty nation, and its subsequent partition by Austria, Prussia, and Russia, its three neighbours.

Obviously, Jason Sorens, founder of the FSP, then a PhD student at Yale University, had yet to learn about Polish history. And if he did know a little bit, he didn't learn anything from it. He arrogantly thought that FSP would become the "boldest social experiment in modern American history." In hindsight, it

was not the boldest but the weirdest, and it failed sorely. If only he had heeded the Polish experience!

To become a member of the FSP, people were asked to sign a Statement of Intent (SOI).

I hereby state my solemn intent to move to the State of New Hampshire within five years after 20,000 participants have signed up. Once there, I will exert the fullest practical effort toward the creation of a society in which the maximum role of civil government is the protection of individuals' life, liberty, and property.

More than 20,000 people signed it quickly, although initially only a tiny proportion moved to Grafton (original population: 1,200).

By 2006, the project was well underway. Grafton was to become a poster town that would change the way people viewed libertarians and the concept of individual freedom. It was a town whose motto was "Live Free or Die," whose battle cry was "Nobody tells me what to do," and where pizza delivery boys had to obtain a warrant to enter someone's premises. In other words, it was a libertarian utopia.

But it looked good on paper, just like the original Utopia described by Thomas More in his

1516 book of the same title. Alas, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and this pudding came out of the oven grossly undercooked.

Between 2005 and 2015, the libertarians joined forces with like-minded locals. They managed to pass a 30 percent cut in the town's US\$1 million budget, slashing spending on municipal luxuries such as streetlights, firefighting, road repairs, and bridge reconstruction. They also fired the town's one policeman. Some brilliant ideas, such as pulling Grafton out of the local school system or declaring Grafton a "United Nations free zone," failed.

They agreed to resolve all disputes through communication. You know, like people normally do before they take out their guns and shoot each other.

However, it took a lot of work to agree on things when roads, whose repair depends on taxes, were full of potholes, and the nonexistent streetlights led to a soaring crime rate. But above all, Grafton's inhabitants were inherently (and unfortunately) human—even before the bears appeared!

Lyman Tower Sargent, a US academic who studied utopias throughout his life, argues that the nature of a utopia is fundamentally contradictory because people's desires clash and, therefore, cannot simultaneously be satisfied. If one

resident wants peace and quiet while another wants to play his trumpet, that's where the conflict begins. And with the motto "*No one tells me what to do!*" and no law enforcement to intervene, the battle of wills must get out of hand at some point.

So, how do bears fit into this story? The blurb of Matthew Hongoltz-Hetling's book titled "A Libertarian Walks into a Bear" says it all.

"The anything-goes atmosphere soon caught the attention of Grafton's neighbors: the bears. Freedom-loving citizens ignored hunting laws and regulations on food disposal. The bears smelled food and opportunity."

Graftonites, living in their cozy woodland abodes, were practically on a first-name basis with bears and loved to swap stories about their furry encounters. While they weren't exactly best friends, there was no mention of open hostilities. But the bears who descended on the libertarian utopia were different. They were bold. They didn't seem afraid of noise. At first, they just watched. Then, they started hanging out on patios in broad daylight. Chickens and sheep started pulling a vanishing act, and household pets went missing, too.

Some pointed fingers at the “Doughnut Lady,” who adored “nature” to the extent that she threw regular parties for the animals on her lawn, complete with doughnuts on the menu. She was in her right, of course. Liberty is a core value, remember? It wasn’t her fault that the same bears couldn’t resist her goodies and then went on a house-hopping spree, hoping for more of the same. Instead, they were met by garbage cans sprayed with cayenne pepper, firecrackers, booby traps, or loaded guns. So they got mad.

Seven years after the libertarians moved in, the first ever bear attack on a human registered in Grafton’s history occurred. First, one attacked a woman in her home. Two other bear attacks took place in the area. While the three people survived, they suffered severe injuries.

A few remaining level-headed locals proposed specific measures to reduce the bears’ impact on the town, but they failed to pass any legislation. A bill to install bear-proof protections for all trash cans, which the libertarians considered government overreach, was voted down 14-0. After all, it required money, and libertarians were dead against “unlawful” taxation.

Soon, other misfortunes, apart from bears, fell upon Grafton. A poor town to begin with, and with tax

revenue dropping and the population expanding, things got even worse. Streets in disrepair multiplied, domestic violence soared, and heating fuel for public buildings like schools and churches became scarce.

Fast forward less than twenty years, and the settlers finally get around to making the promised changes. But instead of turning the town into a booming success story, they ran an experiment that went so wrong it could have been a plot twist in a bad sci-fi movie. It was supposed to be the golden ticket for New Hampshire that would eventually spill over to the rest of the state. And beyond. Needless to say, it didn’t.

By 2020, the FSP was basically on life support. Two years later, a survey in New Hampshire revealed people barely knew it existed. And the opinions? Let’s just say they weren’t the best. Nowadays, only a few of the original settlers still hang around, and everyone else has moved on to greener pastures. Some packed their bags and headed to other towns in New Hampshire, while others threw in the towel on the whole Free State Utopia.

According to legend, they blame the bears.



Polish by birth, a citizen of the world by choice. First story short-listed for the Irish Independent/Hennessy Awards, Ireland, 1996. Since she went back to writing in 2020, more than 100 of her stories, flash fiction and non-fiction, have been accepted for publication. She has recently won 1st prize in the International Human Rights Arts Movement literary contest.



Cocooned in Chaos

Subhana Sultan

Artist's Statement: This photograph encapsulates a moment of quietude shared between a couple, oblivious to and perched amongst the daily chaos of city life that engulfs them.

This juxtaposition was captured around the bustling Museum Street of London.



Sonder

Subhana Sultan

Artist's Statement: This photograph kindles the essence of "sonder" or how every person, every pet dog, every street cat you cross paths with in life for a brief passing moment, has such a vastly different and complex life of their own that nobody around them is aware of.

It beautifies the idea how life is experienced by everyone through a similar complex understanding yet such a different living experience.



The Moving on the Feet into Egypt

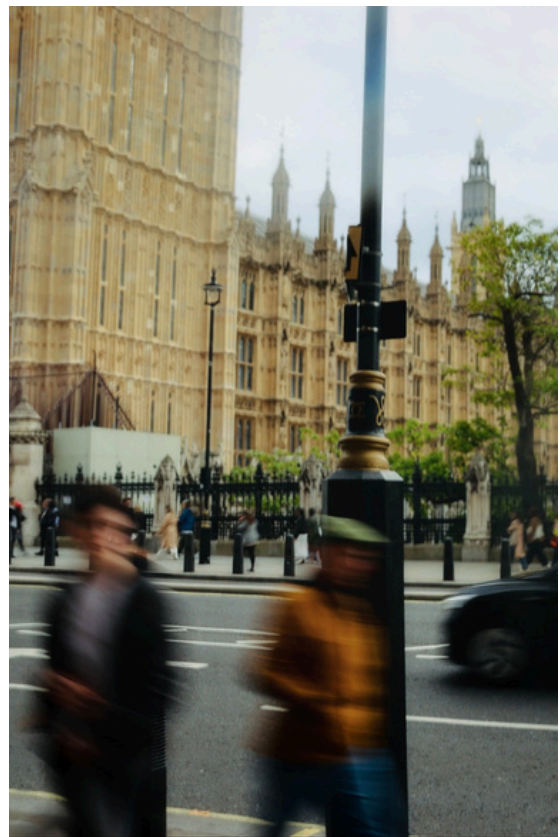
Subhana Sultan

Artist's Statement: The title of this photograph is based upon a word play on the title of the painting by Orazio Gentileschi "The Rest on the Flight into Egypt" which hangs in The National Gallery in Trafalgar Square in Central London. With motion blur, it captures the still painting timed and placed right between the two moving visitors.

Passer-by

Subhana Sultan

Artist's Statement: This photograph captures two passersby in the Westminster Street in London; the swift street shot also evokes the idea that often it's the photographer that becomes a passerby to the existing moment.



Subhana Sultan is a Multi Media and Mass Communication graduate from Delhi University, India. She is an aspiring photographer and has been involved with various documentary projects.

She aims to continue documenting the stories from the streets.

Excerpt from Memoir: I Will Burn While I Shine

By Michael Amatulli

The following morning I rose from between two parked vehicles, still high from my near-overdose. I slowly walked in the direction of the train station and the paid underground bathrooms. Vincenzo had confided that he was leaving for Sicily after the feast of Santa Reparata and would most likely not return. I found him at the top of some ancient steps that stopped before a door which hadn't opened in half a millennia, and where we usually fixed first thing in the morning. It was nearby an old leather goods market, across the street from Vincenzo's pensione. We entered his room and squared away the cash from the kilogram of hash we'd sold, according to our agreement, and did one last smash together. I buckled after my fix and Vincenzo helped me to a chair. He sat with me for some time, to make certain I didn't go under again. When I came-to an hour later he was gone, no sign in the pensione that he'd been there at all, except for the bloodied syringe that sat in the

empty ashtray. I thought it was time I called my mother, and when I finally did, I received news that prompted me to leave for Grumo right away.

I arrived home to my father's usual indifference and my mother's fervency, and Maria's love. Ang was a mature fourteen, with a good head on his shoulders and quite responsible for one so young. He was in fact the opposite of my other brother Pino and me. He worked as a helper in an electronics shop, repairing small appliances and such. A person of few words, we exchanged pleasantries and within minutes he was back to whatever he was doing before I had arrived. No one, however, suspected anything unusual about me, though it was the early days of my addiction and my parents had not as yet learned the signs: my changing demeanor, mood swings and strict impatience, and the jewelry that mysteriously disappeared

from time to time. As far as my family was concerned I was just an irresponsible teenager who suffered with depression. Yes, I was that too; but I was also on a savage path; a full-on heroin addict. It was late-afternoon Monday and I had enough heroin to last me until Tuesday. I was scheduled to begin a year of mandatory military service in *Pesaro* on Thursday 2000 hours.

I cut my hair to specification in the shop at the bottom of nonna Rosa's building and returned home immediately, ducking through side streets so as not to be seen by those to whom I owed money. I remained in bed all of Wednesday, tossing and turning with the discomfort of a leper. By Thursday I was dope-sick. Everything had a bad smell to it, like when you cook fish and smell it for days in your apartment. Except this was more like what you'd smell inside of a pharmacy, or a hospital, medicinal-like. I sweated profusely and cold chills raised goosebumps all over my body, my mind growing darker with thoughts of suicide, or of robbing a bank. Instead, I visited the doctor at the hospital again. He looked at me and immediately understood my need. My pupils were large as marbles and I could barely stand. The doctor simply said, 'morfina?' I tried smiling, but only managed to screw my face into a look of wild bewilderment and nodded yes. In a dark, quiet spot at

the train station I fixed the morphine and savored the sweet relief you feel the very moment heroin withdrawal leaves you, like coming in from the numbing cold, to a roaring, transformative fire. The antidote to the poison was the poison itself.

The military base of the 28th Infantry Regiment Pavia in the city of Pesaro was quiet on the evening of November 12, 1983. I was escorted to the barracks and assigned a bed and locker. Our unit comprised mostly newbies who stood awkwardly by their bunks, making small talk and acclimating to their new surroundings. An inherent skill that addicts possess is to recognize their own kind, like a pack or pride, sniffing-out signs of drug-abuse like dope-detectives: pinned pupils, constant and excessive scratching, nodding mid-sentence, and non-stop incoherent ramblings if they were high; or runny noses, pupils like targets, and debilitating lethargy if they weren't.

I scouted two heroin addicts; the group had doubled by the following afternoon. I spent most of the next day acquainting myself with the base layout and

schedule. We were then given a leave-of-absence for the rest of the evening. The pack headed straight for *Piazza Del Popolo* in Pesaro's historical center, where we located a heroin dealer. We were flush with the dope-sickness. We pooled our money together and scored enough junk to straighten us all out. We slowly made our way back to the base, stopping first at a brightly-lit bar just outside the base's ramparts. The regiment's sigil flapped in the wind, its gold crown standing proud and regal, the motto a legacy of the many who'd died under its protection: *Ardeam Dum Luceam* it read – I will burn while I shine. Inside the bar we scattered, each searching his own level of security amidst the ramble of the crowd. The officers kept to themselves and commanded authority. We *spine* sat or stood or leaned against the bar, not caring about much else but our junk-groove.

I was fitted for fatigues in the morning and our entire company stood outside in the encampment, performing drills and snapping-to at some Sargeants command. We were organized into platoons and marched and tried this new thing or that new thing and then I heard names being called-out by a *sott'Ufficiale*.

"*Amatulli, vieni con me, forza!*"

I followed him to the hospital unit and stood in line and waited

to undergo a complete physical. The doctor looked me up and down and saw the tracks on my arms, including the fresh needle mark where I'd fixed the night before. Heroin addiction in Italy had reached crisis levels; the good doctor had seen this too often. We made brief eye-contact and a bible's worth of understanding passed between us. He understood the trajectory my life would likely take as a heroin addict. But I saw none of the likely scenarios, and whether out of ignorance, or from just plain old not giving a shit, it mattered not because when I was high, nothing bothered me anyway.

The following morning a group of soldiers travelled by train to a military hospital located in Rome, where more tests were conducted. They confirmed it was in fact heroin I'd taken.

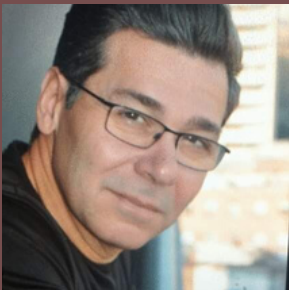
"You'll be given a medical discharge," said an officer when my name was finally called. "You'll be given a train ticket back to wherever you're from. But first you'll go to a detox. You will be officially discharged from there."

"I'd rather stay. Can I stay? I'll volunteer for Iran, or is it Iraq? Italy has peace troops there, no?" I said this without any hesitation. I was afraid of returning home after only three days of service.

"What do I tell my parents?"

"Tell them we found traces of blood in your urine, if you can't say the truth." The officer said this mechanically, like he'd told the lie to

countless other charges before me, themselves equally anxious about having to face their dishonor. The plan was simply to lie. Well, this I could do.



Michael Amatulli's writing captures the essence of his experiences in marginalized communities. He has existed in subcultures enriched with life's battles and the human condition; Michael's characters embody this struggle and speak with a voice that is at once bold and authentic. His truth is laid bare for the reader to experience.

Archeology

By Ronald Fink

The ceramic Aztec mask mounted on my apartment wall is one of the few physical reminders I have of my Chilean uncle, who died in exile in Mexico City almost two decades ago, two weeks after I informed him of the death of his favorite sister, my mother, almost two thousand miles away. The other reminders of him are fading images and half-remembered conversational exchanges I piece together from the increasingly distant past.

What is certain is that Checho, as Jose Vaccaro de Ponce was nicknamed, had attained mythological status in my childhood imagination, as my mother had told me story after story of his exploits as a dashing young man full of wit and charm and then as a rising star in the Santiago labor movement, whose self-evidently noble goal was to narrow the widest gap between rich and poor in the Western Hemisphere. The stories themselves loomed larger for the fact that he was beyond physical reach after she'd emigrated to the U.S. to marry my father. They'd met during the Second World War, when he was

attached to the American embassy in the Chilean capital as an Army Air Force instructor to the country's military pilots, countering the Nazi influence in Argentina. Checho first met me when I was too young to remember, my mother having taken me as a toddler to visit her family in Chile. But my uncle and I grew close during the summer that I spent there mostly on my own fourteen years later.

"You give me such pain," Tio Checho said in Spanish when I delivered the news of his sister's death after his wife handed the phone to him. She had warned me that he was seriously ill with the intestinal disease that he'd long suffered from and that was finally about to kill him.

"I'm sorry," I replied in his language. Those words were the most personal we had ever exchanged, and they would be the last.

He had served in the brief administration of Salvador Allende, the charismatic medical doctor who had become the first

democratically elected Marxist chief executive in the world, and had married an attorney who was his justice minister's daughter, only to flee with her and her family to asylum in Mexico after the coup mounted by Allende's own chief of staff, Augusto Pinochet, in September 1973. My aunt, Roxanna, his younger, archconservative sister, had slammed the door in his face when he arrived at her house in the upper middle-class neighborhood of Brown Norte, where I had spent that recent North American summer and South American winter, to say goodbye the night Checho and his wife and family fled. Instead, the last words he would hear from Roxanna were, "You brought this upon yourselves." She would die of emphysema a few years later.

I visited him twice in Mexico City during the years after the coup, and he came to New York once after those visits, where in our apartment kitchen he recited by heart several of Pablo Neruda's *Veinte Poemas de Amor y Una Cancion Desesperada* with perhaps a trace of emotion reflecting the fact that his wife, who was some fifteen years younger than my uncle, had begun to demand a separation. I say "perhaps" because he did not let on that this was the case. Only later, from my mother, did I learn that his wife had grown tired of the fact that he couldn't find permanent work

and thus was forced to live off her earnings as a civil servant in the Mexican social security administration.

My uncle then traveled by train to Chicago, where he asked my mother if he might come to live with her and my father, only to be refused for reasons that were never quite clear to me. My mother simply explained to me, plaintively, that she simply could not accommodate his request. It wasn't possible, she said. It just wasn't. I could tell from her tone, and her inability or unwillingness to explain herself, that she felt badly about this. Still, there was a coldness to her decision I'd never seen her express before. Her brother was her closest living relative, someone she said she adored, featuring most prominently in the stories she told accompanying my childhood dreams for myself, while I pored over maps of South America and Chile in the Rand McNally World Atlas that still gathers dust on one of my bookshelves, one so old and out of date it reflected the Cold War divisions of Europe and Asia in primary colors. It also contains the red crayon scribbles I'd scrawled in the margins of those maps that course included the two-thousand-mile-long shoestring of a country that ran half the length of the coast of the

continent immediately west of the Andean mountain chain, known locally as La Cordillera. As I did so, I would listen to her speak of life in that country before she left her entire family to marry my father.

"You are Chilean," she would insist over and over. I would hear how her own father had sung her to sleep to the lyrics of "Besame Mucho" and taken her to soccer games at the National Stadium, where my uncle took me decades later and where the Pinochet junta rounded up those it considered subversive less than a year and a half after that, storing the bodies of those it killed in its concrete bowels. And I would witness her cry and cry to depths I'd never imagined possible when she received news of her father's funeral via a flimsy aerogram not long before from his widow in Chillan, my grandfather's second wife, whom, once my parents and sister had joined me late that summer, we had visited along with him and their daughter via a long train ride south of Santiago. But again, the actual reason my mother might have given Tio Checho for refusing him room and board—a lack of money or space, or the emotional burden he represented—she never provided to me.

My uncle then traveled to San Francisco, where he visited his third and youngest sister, who had

emigrated with her family a decade or so before Allende's election. I do not know if he asked her the same question only to be refused again. Perhaps someday I will ask that of a cousin there with whom I remain in sporadic contact. I've lost touch with other members of my mother's side of the family, there and, after the coup, in Chile.

My uncle returned in any case to Mexico City, where he eventually reconciled with his wife, and then visited Chile after another decade or so, when Pinochet finally fell, democracy was restored and a general amnesty for political antagonists was declared. But too much about the country had changed for my uncle to return for good. Time had passed him by, and Chile was no longer his.

When I heard this, I recalled an evening during the visit I'd made to Santiago a year and a few months before Allende's election. Tio Checho had taken me to a café in the Bohemian quarter known as the Quinta Normal to hear folk music. I cannot remember who exactly we came to hear, but I often wonder whether it was the renowned singer-songwriter, poet, theater director and political activist Victor Jara who performed on the piano that

night.

A documentary I watched the other evening about Jara was inconclusive on that point, simply because the images of his countenance did nothing to jog my memory. But the documentary showed recorded images familiar to me from a much older documentary about the coup, "The Battle of Chile," which included scenes from Allende's campaign, election and rallies designed to counter the opposition brewing because of the outbreak of worker and trucker strikes and the chaos that ensued, his distinctive, black-framed glasses over the neat mustache so similar to my uncle's own, which he had never shaved after his mother told him she found it handsome when first encountering it decades earlier, the earlier images of Allende before ecstatic crowds followed by those of the fighter jets strafing and bombing the presidential palace where he would die, by his own hand or the army's has never been clear. I recalled passing the palace, called La Moneda (roughly, "The Mint"), not eighteen months earlier with my aunt and her similarly black-clad friend as we strolled toward the Café do Brasil or a similarly Latin-named but Viennese-styled restaurant for Once. This custom, like so many in Chile, was actually Anglophilic and quaintly but erroneously called by that word

though it took place at or around five pm instead of at eleven am, as Once means in Spanish. It amounted to afternoon "tea," including sandwiches and pastries that would tide one over until the family would take a simple supper at nine.

I imagine the long-standing custom has survived all that subsequently occurred after our peaceful, aristocratic stroll so far away from the miles and miles of corrugated tin-roofed shanties that lined either side of the Pan-American Highway on the outskirts of the city, but not so far away from the high-walled, well-shaded, inner-patioed compounds of the wealthy.

Yet the image from the older documentary I most distinctly recall was that of an army tank in the street outside the palace, a soldier with a rifle pointed directly at the camera, and a puff of smoke emitted from its barrel before the camera moments later turned skyward as the man behind it fell to the street, having filmed his own death.

We had received reports via aerogram or long-distance phone call, from Chile or San Francisco, of the growing chaos that preceded the coup, the strikes, the marches, the public threats issued from the right-wing newspaper, El Mercurio, and

the quarters that my uncle and his wife referred to as “los momios,” Spanish for “the mummies” and slang for those whose political thinking could be characterized as eons out of date and had themselves therefore been metaphorically wrapped for posterity in Egyptian cotton so desiccated it resembled stone. Yet among those reports of what was happening five thousand miles away was one that noted my uncle had taken to carrying a pistol because of the chaos, including squatters in his apartment whom he had had to drive off, but mostly for his own personal protection. All of this, of course, was blamed on Allende when it would become clear later that it was instigated and supported all along by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, before, of course, the latter would receive the Nobel for helping to arrange peace, however temporarily, in the Middle East.

“Quite the magician,” my uncle would later comment in his familiar ironic tone about the U.S. president’s closest adviser on news of the award, which happened to coincide with a visit Checho made to Chicago not long after he escaped to Mexico.

I also distinctly remember how upon our arrival at the café in the Quinta Normal years earlier he had been greeted like no less of a

celebrity than Victor Jara might have been. Surrounded by the crowd of young people gathered there, Tio Checho received warm handshakes and firm abrazos amid admiring smiles all around as we made our entrance and sat down at a table to drink mulled red wine and listen to stirring songs full of hope for the future of Chile. After the coup, when I heard that the junta’s thugs had broken Jara’s hands as they tortured him inside the stadium where I’d sat with my uncle and watched the national team beat Bolivia in a World Cup preliminary while the streets of the capital were completely deserted for a much happier occasion, everyone not at the stadium glued to radios or TVs to watch the game, I wondered how many of the people in that crowd in the café that evening the junta also might have made “disappear.”

A few years later, while I was visiting my uncle in exile for the first time, he took me to the National Autonomous University of Mexico to attend a lecture about the coup. I realized as I sat in the classroom filled by students and non-students like us that my Spanish was and had always been limited. And I decided that the resulting language barrier—my uncle’s

English was next to nonexistent—might be one reason I felt as if I could get only so close to Checho. But there was more to the issue than that. After all these years, my impressions of him ultimately still seemed more mythological than real, not to mention intimate. He was still mostly a character in a narrative my mother had told me about herself, and how I figured in the life she had come to live in a world not her own.

After the lecture, Tio Checho explained that what they had heard was a “scientific” explanation of what had occurred in his country, in keeping with what he considered the reasoning of Marxism, that is, strictly logical and empirical in its analysis of historical developments, and what was derived from this explanation could help the left avoid the mistakes the Allende regime had committed the next time it came to power.

But something about all that lengthened the distance I felt between us. I found what he said hard to accept, not so much because of my own political inclinations, which were largely in sympathy with his, but because of the lack of personal connection his explanation of the lessons of the coup involved. He did not speak and, it seemed to me, never would of the pain and anguish involved, not to mention the evening we spent

together in the Quinta Normal. Perhaps his losses had embittered him or simply made him stoical in the face of all that had transpired. The fact was my uncle seemed personally detached from his own history, even his family, and lived as if that approach were unassailable, and if he hadn’t always done so, he did now, as might any true Marxist.

As he went on explaining the substance of the lecture to me, we stood before an enormous, stylized mural painted by David Siqueiros high up on the façade of a university building in abstract depiction of the native Mexican population and the revolution they had finally succeeded in pursuing after the Spanish had destroyed their ancestors’ civilization. I felt dwarfed by the mural’s expanse, and those of others around us by Diego de Rivera as well as Siqueiros. At last I understood that my uncle would remain more of a symbol for me than a personal relation, which of course could not help but sadden me and likely always will as my memories of him fade.

I purchased the Aztec mask now affixed to my wall at a tourist stall at the edge of the Zocalo, the vast square at the center of the Mexican capital. After the

university lecture, he took me there to inspect the remains of the empire that lay directly beneath the huge Spanish cathedral built upon the ruins of the pyramids leveled by conquistador Hernan Cortes.

Archeologists had only recently begun their work excavating the fragments of the buried past. And it continues to this day more than a half century later, as does my own.



The literary works of Ronald Fink have appeared or will soon appear in publications Alternate Route, BlazeVox, Calliope, DeComp, Fresh Words, Ginosko, Global City Review, North American Literary Review, and Tampa Review. He's a journalist as well as creative writer and serves as Senior Editor at Harvard Business Review Analytic Services.

Castle Of The Wild Bees

By Lawrence Winkler

'When the flower blooms, the bees come uninvited.'
- Ramakrishna

The road was held together with flocks of goats and serpentine curves. Thirty cents had bought us an hour and a half of coiled vertigo. The bus driver threw in the bananas for free, and finally dropped us at the bottom of a hill, just past the sign. *Population 507 Souls.*

Surrounded by glaciers and razor-thin waterfalls on three sides, the town spread out like the leaf of a pipal tree, unfolded on the slope of Han peak. We hoisted our packs and began the long climb to the imposing medieval citadel cantilevered off the cliff above us, effortlessly hanging in the morning Himalayan air. We passed a whitewashed barn, decorated with rows of circular cow patties stuck on its walls- fuel, furnishing, and function. The white uniformed brown servant who met us at the top was named Madhukar. He told us that he spoke only Hindi. In perfect English.

"Is this Naggar Castle?" Julie asked. Head bobble.

On the other side of Naggar River, in the 13th century, a powerful ruler

with a reputation for cupidity and stupidity, had built and fortified his royal residence of Gardhak. On the advice of his *wazir*, Rana Bhosal had also buried his own queen along the watercourse, to ensure a continuous supply of irrigation for his rice fields. She had been alive at the time of her presumed reluctant interment, but clearly not a favorite of the *wazir*. In 1460 AD the Raja Sidh Singh, had the stones from Rana Bhosal's palace passed hand to hand, through a chain of human laborers across the river to the current site of Naggar Castle. His view of the Valley of the Gods and snow-laden peaks was still staggering.

When the Chinese pilgrim monk Xuanzang came through the surrounding mountain passes in 635 A.D., his route followed a series of meditation caves, into a fertile valley of gold and silver, and red copper and crystal lenses. He entered a green idyll of twenty Buddhist monasteries,

fifteen Hindu temples, and mixed devotees who lived together in harmony.

Madhukar showed us to our rooms—gigantic rooms with adze-carved ceiling beams, sloping floors, priceless Victorian furniture, gingerbread beds, and a verandah with red scalloped Mughal-curve carved portals, projecting wooden brackets, and one of the most spectacular panoramas in the world.

In the attached dining room, a large antique glass chandelier hung pendulously over a huge oaken table, surrounded, on the wallpaper, by a herd of gazelle head trophies. A fireplace sat in one corner of the room and in another, Alan and Adera, two Kiwi hikers who, although exuberantly friendly towards us, didn't seem to have much to say to each other. We arranged to meet them later for dinner.

Julie wandered off to check out the new neighborhood, and Robyn and I stretched out over our gingerbread bed, and a quiet game of Scrabble. It was all so absurdly romantic.

He came in through the window on a triple word score. Robyn and I looked at each other. The intruder spoke.

"A very good afternoon, Sahib." He said. "Perhaps you may be wishing to purchase some ganja?" We looked at each other again. The balcony was suspended in space,

several thousand feet above the valley floor. In harmony, our interloper levitated imperceptibly above the sloping floor.

"It is only of the very highest quality." He assured us. It seemed credible. I asked him how he got up here, to the side of the castle suspended in the air. He only giggled, and head bobbed, and giggled again. I looked back at Robyn and reached into my Kashmiri pouch. A commodity like that, it just doesn't float through the window every day. He left through the dining room, counting his rupees.

Madhukar, his white uniform a little worse for the day, was already serving Alan and Adera, when we finally entered the dining room around seven thirty. They had spent the afternoon summiting most of the peaks around the valley, but we had climbed higher. Both groups had healthy appetites for Madhukar's dhal and rice and veg curry. Halfway through the trifle, the chandelier began to swing. Everyone looked up from the custard. I looked to Madhukar.

"Is that an earthquake?" Robyn asked. Head bobble.

"Are we safe?" Asked Julie. Head bobble.

"Does this happen very often?" Alan inquired. Head bobble.

"Jesus, man, say something. Are

we in danger?" I asked. Everyone was keenly aware that we were hanging off a cliff, conspicuous in the extreme to the unforgiving gravitational forces of the planet. Madhukar's lips finally moved, in English.

"No problem." He bobbled. "Naggar Castle five hundred years old. Many earthquakes. Naggar town flattened." He moved his hand across the scene, palm down. "But Naggar Castle, no problem."

I learned much later how right he was. And why. There had been a mighty and disastrous earthquake in 1905. Naggar town was destroyed. Naggar Castle didn't move. The reason lay in its local architectural construction style, an antiseismic technique known as *kathkooni*. Stone layers were punctuated with long pieces of cut wood, ensuring a lot of resilience in the structure.

It rose, to be topped by a grey slate roof. But it never fell.

The wooden carvings in its walls were no less exquisite than the wooden carvings within its walls. Every evening, the temple bells around Naggar tolled the music of compassion, peace and brotherhood, unrestrained. Later, tucked in our gingerbread beds, we watched the shooting stars, through the Mughal holes in the verandah.

* * *

The spicy incense coming from the small temple in the courtyard, wafted over our breakfast next morning. Vermilion paste smeared the doorway. I asked Madhukar what it signified. He told us of the powerful legend that was associated with the castle, and the tiny Jagti Patt temple within its walls. There was a massive stone slab, five feet by eight feet and six inches thick, inside the shrine. When the gods decided to make Naggar the celestial seat of all the gods in the world, they transformed themselves into honeybees, endowed with Herculean power. They flew to the high sacred mountain of Deo Tibba, cut a monolith from its face, and flew it back to its present site in the castle courtyard. It is still the unshaken belief of the locals that, even now in times of calamity, all the Kullu gods assemble here to mitigate the suffering of the people.

The three little girls playing in the mud below the castle didn't sound like they were suffering, if the giggling that came through the mud was accurate. They sang a song behind our descent. A devotee of the courtyard temple ran ahead of us, with a dab of the doorway vermilion paste smeared on his forehead, marking the bond between the

wild god honeybees and the humanity below. We passed the grey sandstone 11th century Shiva temple of Gauri Shankar, carved with monkeys and lions and flowers, and topped with an umbrella-like slate roof.

At the bottom of the hill was a makeshift A-frame bakery, and its shorthaired Tibetan owner, in his saffron shirt and a carnelian *chuba*, draped loosely over two great high boots. His dog didn't bark, as it came out of the darkened interior of the shack, to check the sudden traffic. Julie and I looked at each other, in a simultaneous recognition that this could be an answer to our problem. Robyn was about to have her 29th birthday, but it was going to be at Naggar, and it was going to be the next day. I had already asked Madhukar about a birthday cake, but he told me it was impossible. One of the differences between the Tibetans and the Indians, it is that the Tibetans will expect that nothing is possible and go on to disprove it; whereas the Indians will expect that nothing is impossible and go on to disprove it. When an Indian tells you that something is impossible, go see the Tibetan. Julie whispered to him that we would return next morning, without Robyn.

But that day we hiked up another height, to the Light of the Morning Star, *Urusvati*, the Institute of

Himalayan Studies founded by Nicholas Roerich. Russian mystic, painter, philosopher, scientist, writer, traveler, and public figure, Roerich was the kind of man who would have been ignored if he had stayed at home. By escaping to live in another culture, he became noteworthy and unique, because of the noteworthy and unique geographical displacement, dislocation, and dissonance. His breathtaking mansion, with a resplendent view of the Dhauladhar Mountains on all three sides, was adequate reward for his gallery of mediocre paintings. Roerich is widely credited to have formulated the principal difference between culture and civilization. I hadn't realized there had ever been one. However, in one of the rooms I met Jackie, a thirty odd, very odd, fanatical feminist, who was living proof that one can exist without either.

This encounter was counterbalanced at dinner that evening by a new addition to our Naggar nucleus. Francois was a delightful balding research mathematician, originally from Paris, and working in Bombay. He told us that Peter O'Toole was on his way to the Wild Bee Castle, to film a movie version of Kipling's *Kim*. Madhukar said that he had heard it as well, and that nothing

was impossible. Unfortunately, or fortunately, Peter O'Toole didn't arrive until a month later. He played a Tibetan monk, with absurd doddering mannerisms, and an atrociously inauthentic costume. It may have been just as well we left early.

There was nothing inauthentic about our Tibetan baker next morning. Julie and I snuck out while Robyn was still sleeping. We let Alan and Adera and Francois know about the birthday party later and dropped the two hundred meters to the bakery entrance. His dog licked my hand as we drank ginger chai, and Julie drew a picture of a birthday cake. He didn't seem to understand at first, until she added the candles. We had seen the convergence of culture and civilization. Or so we thought. We arranged for him to personally deliver the cake up the hill that evening, all for ten rupees.

The day melted into Scrabble games, a brief entourage of Indian tourists from Bombay, and planning for my true Destiny.

Madhukar's curried veg repast was up to his usual standard of unexceptional sustenance, but he returned to the dining room in a slightly excited state, carrying rice and a message. Someone was at the door for Julie. Robyn wondered out loud who it could be, but stayed to continue the conversation we

were involved with. Julie got up quietly, to engage the convergence of culture and civilization. She wasn't quiet long. "What?!" was heard all over the valley. "What?!" she screamed again. I jumped up, motioning to everyone seated that they should remain so, and that everything was under control. Reaching the kitchen door, I saw the source of Julie's exclamation.

Our Tibetan baker had arrived with his creation, three very heavy loaves of dung-like bread, clearly inspired by the barn wall pattern of cow patties in his universe. Goodness knows what he thought the candles were.

"Big balep, no?" He asked sheepishly.

"No!" Julie said. But it was too late. The birthday moment had arrived, and we had, as our only substrate to create a facsimile of a birthday cake, three loaves of ponderous hefty Tibetan barley bread. We turned to Madhukar, recently arrived back in the kitchen. No head bobble. Bad sign. We thanked the baker and sent him back to his cultural roots. Without drawing breath, we turned to the rest of the kitchen, rummaging through shelves and drawers, looking for a means of salvation. There wasn't much, but there was enough.

We found a tin of custard powder,

a jar of Bhutanese red jam of some unidentified fruit, and bananas. Julie sliced the balep breads across their horizontal galactic axis, creating six dense thinner layers from three lead weights. I spread the Bhutanese jam on each side of the millstones. Just another brush with Paradise. Madhukar, meanwhile, had fired up the stove and already had a pot of daffodil camouflage custard ready to pour on our assembly. All of us attacked the bananas with knives, until the yellow molten mass was covered in sliced cadmium coins. A large white wax candle stake was driven through its heart. It looked, for all the world, like a birthday cake.

Jules and I sported it into the dining room on a refrain of Happy Birthday. From the pain in my arms, a forklift would have made for a safer workplace. Or a godswarm of wild honeybees, endowed with Herculean power.

Robyn smiled and thanked us and broke the first knife in the ritual

cutting of the replica. We all eventually got a piece and tucked in with the kind of enthusiasm that all civilized birthdays demand. I looked back at the carnage at the end of the evening, as Madhukar was switching off the chandelier. The bananas and custard were gone. In their place were several wedges of baked barley flour. None of them had teeth marks. With the cone geometry of what was left, you could have completely reconstructed three large loaves of Tibetan bread. It was September 11th.

Ten years earlier, they had finished building the World Trade Center in New York. They had used the wrong materials. Here, in the Castle of the Wild Bees, they had the architectural construction expertise required, to withstand all the mighty and disastrous earthquakes of life.



Lawrence Winkler is a retired physician, traveler, and natural philosopher. His métier has morphed from medicine to manuscript. He lives with Robyn on Vancouver Island and in New Zealand, tending their gardens and vineyards, and dreams. His writings have previously been published in *The Montreal Review* and many other literary journals. His books can be found online at www.lawrencewinkler.com.

Artworks by Mainak Purkait



Croud

Acrylic On Canvas
Mainak Purkait



Bura 56

Mainak Purkait



Instructions
Mainak Purkait

Mainak Purkait

Mainak Purkait is from Sonarpur. He earned a bachelor's in B.F.A. (specializing in Painting) from the College of Visual Arts. His paintings are inspired by the daily interactions of different people with him. Usually, He travels through public transport like buses, local trains, etc. In his journey, he observes the way people communicate, empathize with each other, and help each other. He observes how people let become others a part of their happiness though they are complete strangers to each other. He also witnesses how people find solitude but obtain inner peace just by spending time with themselves. So he tries to highlight different ways of acquiring happiness for different people through his paintings.

Anton Perfume

By Kevin B

For a few moments in the lobby of the Viking Hotel, Anton Perfume forgot that it was winter. While he was not a busy man in the colder months, he made it a point to vibrate a few times a week. It consisted of drinking a nice scotch at the bar of a hotel like the Viking. Something with character that remains mostly empty until the summer tourists return. As he sips his scotch, he sends a pulse throughout his body. Nobody would be able to see what he was doing, but he could feel it. Across the globe, an old woman grabs her heart. She feels as though she's in a state of arrest. Anton Perfume doesn't know about the woman. He only knows that outside it's below freezing and he has nowhere to be for an hour or two.

The generosity of time in that instance gave him a warm feeling. Something unique from the vibration. Something that smelled of jasmine and salt. A young couple was checking in at the front desk. Anton supposed they could be

getting married. Winter weddings were more du jour as summer weddings on the island had become reserved for the ultra-wealthy. Anton saw these people come into his restaurant earlier and earlier each year. Memorial Day was no longer the beginning of the season, it was the middle. Now, tourists could be found walking on the cobblestones as early as Easter. Those without children decided to celebrate as soon as they could, and why not? For them, money may be plentiful, but life is still short.

There are places, however, where the volume of life is slightly *higher*. Anton Perfume finds that hotels with character always resonate with him on a kind of seismic level. Before he owned a restaurant, he worked in a hotel with character. It was also in no short supply of *characters*. He'd take their luggage to their rooms, and if they were a woman, and traveling alone, he'd linger in doorways and wait for them to

notice him. Some gave him tips. Some rolled their eyes. More than a few invited him to come back after his shift for a nightcap and some conversation. Women traveling alone always told him that he reminded them of their fathers. It didn't matter what the women looked like or how old they were compared to Anton; to a one, they would always say that he was the spitting image of their fathers.

Looking back now, he supposed he could read a great deal of psychology into that, but instead, he sips his drink. Free time wasn't as free as it used to be, and the past was the only thing that could eat it up faster than human analysis. Still, Anton wondered which of those women from his youth were still alive. There was one that jumped to the forefront of his mind. A Nebraskan in town for her sister's wedding. Her husband wouldn't come along, because he said he had too much work to do at home, but the woman confessed to Anton that her husband and her sister simply didn't get along. She was around fifty-four or fifty-five, and Anton was twenty-four.

"I'm old enough to be your mother," she kept saying, as he poured her another glass of wine, "Don't you know that? Don't you know that I

could be your mother?"

With her hair down, she looked somewhat medieval. Like the Lady of the Lake. Her hair spread out over the hotel pillows and down over the side of the bed. Anton stayed with her all morning, and when she left to go to the wedding, he stayed in bed so he could keep smelling her on the sheets and on the blankets. He wanted that smell to invade his skin. He wanted to smell like her forever. There was that jasmine, but no salt. Coconut. She smelled like coconut--and Shalimar. That year, his father grabbed his chest at the breakfast table and took his last breath. Anton Perfume gave the eulogy. It was not short.

A woman sits down next to him. She is around fifty-five, but that makes her around twenty years younger than Anton. She has a travel bag at her side, and she orders a negroni. Anton signals to the bartender, and he's brought a second scotch. He has another hour or so before the meeting at the restaurant. There have always been discussions about selling to a group. Selling the name. Franchising. Consolidation of debt. Minutia like the cost of scallops rising and which server has a bad attitude. Anton used to

sit in his office and wait for these kinds of meetings. He'd have to get into a zone of administration. He'd find himself rolling pens across his desk. He'd torment cuticles. He'd ask himself questions without answers.

Now, he found no reason to worry about meetings. Meetings simply led to more meetings until one day you were no longer invited to meetings you never wanted to go to in the first place. The woman sitting next to Anton Perfume clears her throat. He looks at her. She's a beautiful woman. Her fingers showed no sign of a wedding ring, but that wouldn't have deterred Anton. He would have started a conversation with her. He would have asked her what she was visiting from and how long she'd be in town. He would have put his hand on his chest and caught his own breath.

Instead, he took another sip of his scotch. The woman retires to her room. Anton Perfume looks over a

photo on the wall behind the bartender. It's a black and white photo from the day the hotel first opened in 1926. Everyone in the photo looks stern. It's as though they forgot they were at a celebration. People back then were different, Anton thinks to himself, they didn't make a show out of everything. It's possible they thought those landmarks in time were nothing special. That there would always be something new to celebrate. That there would always be time.

Anton Perfume tastes the way the ice waters down the scotch. He doesn't dislike the taste. He just prefers to notice it when it happens. At a restaurant across town, preparations are being made for a meeting. It's going to be someone's last meeting, but it's still too early to think about all that. There's still time for something to change.



Kevin B is a writer and poet from New England. Their work has appeared in *Esoterica*, *Molecule*, *Havik*, *Qu*, and *New Plains Review*. They are the George Lila Award winner for Short Fiction, and the Barely Seen Featured Poet of 2023.

Crete

By Neil Agnew

Verdant vistas lie before mountains of stone that solemnly watch over. The ridge's message is clear: nothing beyond here. Patches of variegated green- and dun-colored grass sewn onto the land. White doilies of wildflowers in repose. Bosky. Shrubs like dilated buttons, some like pins. A grove of olive trees arranged in a stoic phalanx—a vestige of the past. Old-world villages, ruddy Spanish tile roofs, buildings of white stone and concrete. Peals from the town tell the time. A blanket of dry heat—unrelenting, not malevolent. Breezes that mean business. Zephyrs that sway. Swallows slake in a pool, swiftly dipping in and out, a parabolic choreography. Saline sea a gradient lapis lazuli. Coruscant. Wind ripples the waves like cirrus

clouds that fan out to forever. Mountain as parent, sun as grandparent—no, sun as ancestor. The still quality of rolling hills. Knolls, dells. Vertiginous gorges. There is danger in this beauty. Sheep huddle in the shelter of an olive tree. Goats cling to the cover of a crag. At night, cats saunter the streets, feline mendicants. Roosters follow their instinct. Grasshoppers gab, like the old men at the taverna, gathered in the shade. A place where living in shadow has no clandestine, furtive suggestion. Every frame a Van Gogh, a Cézanne. Yes, like this: a post-impressionistic painting come to life.



Neil is a writer living in New York. His short stories and prose poems have been self-published on Medium. A longtime musician, avid cruciverbalist, and neophyte Super 8 filmmaker, Neil has a passion for different kinds of art, but writing is his home.

Great Things Lie Low and Rest Content

By Tim Conley

Whispered in the palace courtyard, three wild rumours about the reclusive young Emperor.

The first had it that he was, as they say, a child of nature, or, to do away with niceties, a simpleton, an idiot, incapable of speech or understanding, one who smiles at moonbeams and could not give offence if he tried. As such, he had to be protected from a world that would be incomprehensible and even dangerous for him. More importantly, the defective heir was a shameful secret.

According to the second rumour, he was either dead or very near death, victim of a terrible illness, and the palace was keeping the fact tightly under wraps. Of course, no one had seen a doctor arrive, but he must have been admitted secretly and had never left, perhaps beside the sickbed even now.

The third and most outrageous rumour held that he was not a child at all but a demon assuming that form, perhaps seizing the opportunity of stillbirth, an empty vessel. The malice of the creature

could not be dispelled, so it must be contained. The demon tried all manner of ruses and tricks to obtain release from its appointed chamber: only a small cadre of the most loyal servants were said to have access to him, all of them with ears blocked and strict regulations about basic and limited interactions, delivering meals and the like.

*Those who don't know talk,
And those who talk don't know.*

Even I, a man fit only for minding horses, had heard these stories. All words eventually trickle down to the stables: it's a law of nature. The horses hear everything. Stately animals committed to their physical moment, hearing but needless of such words; none of which is true of me.

The arrival of the first snow lured the old man, the heir's maternal grandfather, out to see it fall, the first time anyone in the inner circle, as it were, had dallied in sight of all. His habit of staring long in the distance suggested

to some that he was wise, to others an imbecile.

It is truly impossible to know the thoughts of another, I once heard someone foolishly say. But the best horses know what course their driver will take.

The old man, as all of the servants called him, not without affection, stood for nearly an hour that morning watching the snow. It was early and the fallen snow was pristine and undisturbed until, a bit ruefully, I had to take some of the horses out for exercise. Sharp Wind needed especial care and coaxing because of the cut to his right foreleg.

The old man's emergence on this occasion was subsequently absorbed as complementary notes into the respective melody of each of the rumours. Overcome with shame or grief or vexation, he had to break free of the silent enclosure and come to look at the wider world. He was penitent or furious or dabbling in dark forces. And so on.

Sharp Wind's breathing clouded the air, but his injury did not seem to be bothering him. On our third circuit of the courtyard I looked up to see, to my amazement, that the old man was striding directly toward us. One of the maids paused in an errand to gape in disbelief: a high lord going out to a lowly groom in the snow.

When he reached us, the old man disregarded my clumsy bow and assessed the horse. So far as I knew, he had never before shown any particular interest in the animals, but he stroked his nose thoughtfully before turning to me. His face was the very picture of fatigue, but his posture and his eyes together spoke of a resolve not to relent to that feeling. At length, he said, You are the one the other servants call Daoshi, I believe.

I bowed again, lower, to hide my blushes. It was no secret but to hear a high lord utter that nickname, refer even obliquely to that expulsion, was shocking. What is a secret, really?

Past lives, he said. Let us not deprive this fine animal of its constitutional. We can walk and talk.

This we did. At first, the only sounds were those of our paces, four and four, in the snow. Then the old man spoke at length and without hurry. He told a story, or at least that's what I think he was doing, and I of course listened attentively. The whole story took three revolutions of the yard, or at any rate that was when he stopped speaking. Once more he stroked the horse's nose and once more I, far from certain

what else to do, bowed. Then he walked back the way he had come.

When I brought Strong Wind back to the stable, there were two servants anxiously waiting. They stared but knew, without asking, that I would say nothing, because I never did. Still, perhaps every instance of silence has its own reasons.

The next morning it was announced that the high lord, the Emperor's maternal grandfather

had died peacefully in his sleep. In the period of mourning that followed, the inner circle remained out of sight.

None of the servants referred to him as the old man after that: the name died with him. And nothing of what he had said as we walked together in circles, I confess, made any sense to me. Naturally, the horse understood it better.



Tim Conley's most recent fiction collection is *_Some Day We Will Look Back on This and Laugh_*. He lives in St. Catharines, Ontario, in Canada.

The Eyes Are Meeker Than They Were

By David Hutto

Noah knew a person living in Mexico ought to have a better command of Spanish than he had. Sitting on his porch one day with the newspaper *El Universal*, he tried to read an article, but after ten minutes of wondering why some of those sentences seemed to have so many pronouns, he laid the paper down, frustrated by his own ignorance. Back in high school he had heard that Spanish was easy. Who was telling those lies? This wasn't easy. Letting out a heavy sigh, he rose and went in the house to look at something else on the computer, as if his brief ramble in the desert of incomprehension had left him needing to go for a swim in a language he actually knew. Eventually, he drifted into email to find a message from his mother, telling him that one of his grammar school teachers back in New Jersey had recently retired. The mention of Mrs. Wanderbeg brought back memories of a particular English class.

*

Jane was a thin girl with light brown curly hair that fell heavily around her shoulders. Jane and Noah were both in Mrs. Wanderbeg's fifth grade, where Jane sat in the back of the room. As Noah thought of Jane later, he imagined that she was always hoping to avoid being noticed by Mrs. Wanderbeg, a generally kind woman, but her demands for knowledge from the students made her a bit frightening. The school year had slowly drifted from the short-sleeve memories of watching butterflies on hot days to jackets in a chilly breeze. Noah remembered the time of year because a storm had come through over the weekend, and on Monday after school, he had been walking through piles of red leaves on the sidewalk when he found an old bird's nest that had blown down. He took the nest home, put it on his dresser, and filled it with summer sea shells.

"Where did you get the bird nest?" his twin brother Nolan had

asked.

"In front of Mr. Sweeney's house."

"If I give you my new comic books, can I have it?"

"I already read your comic books," Noah had replied.

Sitting in his house in Mexico, thinking back on that English class, Noah remembered that only a few days after he found the bird's nest, Mrs. Wanderbeg had brought in a poem called *Autumn*, with a first verse reading:

The morns are meeker than they were,

The nuts are getting brown;

The berry's cheek is plumper,

The rose is out of town.

Copies of the poem were distributed to the class, with the more avid students, like Noah, immediately reading the poem to themselves. "Here's a poem about this time of year," Mrs. Wanderbeg said. "It's by a poet named Emily Dickinson, who lived a hundred years ago." A hundred years ago! This was a clear danger signal for many of the students. Something so old would surely be a problem. "Let's take turns reading lines and then we'll talk about them. Jane, would you read the first line?"

Like other kids in class, Noah turned to see Jane, who looked at the teacher with an expression as though she had been hit with a stick,

then stared down at the paper.

"Please stand, Jane, and read the first line."

Slowly Jane stood, then continued standing silently for five seconds, ten, fifteen, and at last she said, "The" and paused. A moment later, in a soft voice, she said, "I don't know the next word."

"Morns," Mrs. Wanderbeg said.

"What are morns?" a boy asked loudly without raising his hand.

"Who can tell us what a morn is?" Mrs. Wanderbeg asked, looking around.

There was a further brief silence, until a girl near the front raised her hand and was called on. "It means morning."

"Then why don't they say morning?" the same boy asked.

"This is poetry," Mrs. Wanderbeg answered mysteriously, helping to teach the class that poetry is something you can't understand and should probably avoid if possible. "Continue Jane."

"The...morns.....are...m— m— m—" Some of the kids laughed.

Mrs. Wanderbeg finally decided Jane's medieval moment was over, saying, "OK, Jane, sit down. Who can finish reading the line?"

That evening, Noah and Nolan were doing homework to write a short paragraph about the poem. Nolan mentioned Jane trying to

read that morning, and Noah remembered he had almost felt embarrassed before Jane even started, knowing what was going to happen. Why didn't Mrs. Wanderbeg know?

"That girl needs help," Nolan said.

"Maybe I'll help her," Noah said.

"How could you help her? You're not a teacher."

But Noah had approached Jane and offered to help her with reading. He was surprised that rather than the grateful yes he had expected, her reaction was further embarrassment, keeping her eyes on the ground as she hurried away.

*

Returning to the porch after reading

his mother's email, Noah picked up the Mexican newspaper lying on the table. *How am I different from Jane?* he thought, tapping the folded paper on his knee. But of course, he knew. Jane had no problem speaking English, even though she struggled with the shapes of letters. Noah could clearly read every word, but that didn't help him with knowing Spanish. He took a drink from the beer he had brought outside, then looked out at his yard where the tree by the gate was filled with red flowers. He glanced at the newspaper he was holding and thought *Thank God nobody is asking me to stand and read this out loud.*



David Hutto's work is forthcoming in Mediterranean Poetry and has recently appeared in Literally Stories, Brussels Review, Mudfish, Cable Street, Galway Review, and Paterson Literary Review. He recently won second place in the Darling Axe First Page Prize for novels, as well as first prizes for short story and poetry in the Northeast Georgia Writers Club contest. His experience includes a writers' retreat in Mérida, Mexico in 2024, a residency at the

Vermont Studio Center in 2003, and first-place poetry awards from state-wide contests in Alabama and Georgia. Website: www.davidhutto.com

Serpentine

By Beth Sherman

The marker went up on a Tuesday at the corner of Cumberland Head Road, right next to Lake Champlain. A maroon metal sign with gold letters proclaiming: *CHAMPY, the legendary lake monster lives here. Over 300 sightings reported since 1819! Up to 200 feet long! New York State law protects this regional icon.*

"So, you're an icon now," I say, keeping my tone jovial, erasing any traces of venom from my lips.

Champy bares his teeth, which is what passes for a smile with him. "You know humans. They'll do anything to attract more tourists."

It annoys me that he said it first.

We're sitting on the muddy bottom of the lake, playing braid the eelgrass. A school of sturgeon swims by, waving their sharklike tails. They're not afraid of us. We're herbivores.

"Two hundred feet?" I scoff. "Wishful thinking!"

"Come on, Memphre," he says. "Size matters. Haven't you heard?"

I consider swimming back to Lake Memphremagog, but it's early afternoon and the trip involves

crossing woodlands as well as water. I can't risk being spotted. With my luck, one of the humans will shoot me and deliver my spotted carcass to the nearest museum.

Overhead, we hear a man yelling through a bullhorn. The *Ethan Allen* brunch cruise, making its daily trip across the lake. It's how we get our news, how I learned about the Champy sign. The captain, a guy named Burt, likes to improvise. So, in addition to facts about Lake Champlain's history and geology, we know he lives in Florida in the winter and has an ex-wife named Linda Sue. Champy thinks he's a drinker. But I'm convinced he's bored, making stuff up as he goes along.

I'm older than Champy. Been around since the First Nations, thousands of moons ago when there weren't big houses lining the shore and no one rode noisy jet skis or blasted awful music. When it didn't rain so heavily all the time causing the lake to flood its banks. I used to sleep more

then. Because there wasn't much else to do. I didn't know Champy.

"You got in the papers," he reminds me.

"Yeah. But my lake isn't as popular as yours. People said I was probably a giant octopus or seahorse – not a sea monster. Remember?"

Champy scratches his sandpaper skin, picks at his ear. "Actually, one lady thought you were waves from a boat wake."

This is what bugs me about him. He likes to have the upper talon.

"It's not a competition," Champy says.

But I know what will happen next. They'll sell T-shirts with his picture on them and a bunch of goofy looking humans will pose next to the sign, holding dinosaur stuffed animals because no one really knows what we look like but us.

"Let's play hide and find," he says, and we curve our way through the water, making serpentine shapes. That article said I was wily. Cunning. Not true at all. Sometimes I feel like my brain's turned to lake slime, like I could close my eyes and sleep through years of sunlight and storms.

We're under the *Ethan Allen* now. We can see the boat's white bottom. It's raining again. Silvery wet darts blur the lake's surface.

"There's our new sign, folks," Burt is saying. "Any of you ever seen a bona fide lake monster before? Ours is the very best. That's why we call him Champy."

The words stick in my gullet like algae. Why does he get all the huzzahs? I'm just as good as he is. Better even. Smarter. Before I can stop myself, I let out a snort, which causes the boat to careen back and forth.

"Now you've done it!" Champy mouths, waving his fins.

Dozens of faces peer down at us, pointing and shrieking, humans waving their stupid phones. I realize it's the first time I've ever seen Champy afraid.

"They see us," he says, grimacing. "They *know*."

I thought it would make me happier, being seen.

"Swim," I shriek, and we dive down, paddling madly away from the boat, our stomachs scraping muck.

We eel-glide it to the other side of the lake, our tails thrashing in unison. Lightning knifes the sky open. The water billows gray, churning. They'll come for us soon. They'll drain every inch of Champlain if they have to and yank us out by our necks. Put us in a zoo. I dip my head, fold my wings to my chest.

If only we could fly.

Champy is swimming in circles. "What are we gonna do?" he keeps repeating.

The maroon and gold marker flashes through my mind. How shiny the sign is. How lavish.

Above, the lake gasps and

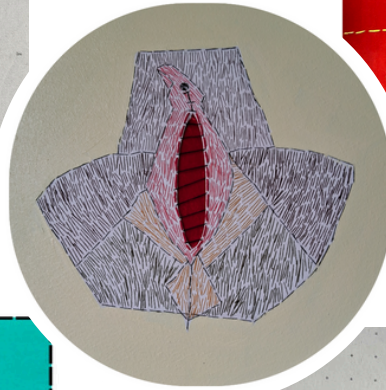
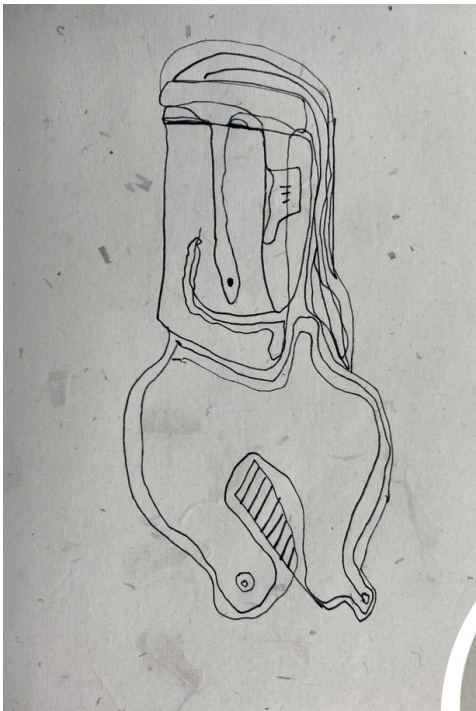
heaves. I look at my friend, his eyes dilated with panic, picturing humans and their nets. Grabbing his fin, I pat the familiar rough scales with my snout.

"It's okay," I say, not believing it. "We have each other."



Beth Sherman's writing has been published in more than 100 literary magazines, including Portland Review, Tiny Molecules, 100 Word Story, Fictive Dream, and Bending Genres. Her work is featured in Best Microfiction 2024. She's also a multiple Pushcart, Best Small Fictions, and Best of the Net nominee. She can be reached at @bsherm36 or <https://www.bethsherman.site/>

Expressions with threadi by Manav Timbalia





His artistic expression thrives through the medium of stitching. Delving into this craft brings me immense joy, as it allows him to explore and express his thoughts in a unique way. Each of his stitched creations embodies a rich diversity of elements and forms, meticulously crafted over years of observation and practice. Witnessing the intricate process firsthand has significantly honed his skills over time.

The shapes and forms that emerge from his work are spontaneous manifestations of his emotional journey in the moment of creation.

Snake's Back

By Peter C. Conrad

Everything was changing in Paul's life again. Paul stood with his brother David and two sisters Kate and Julie at the side of his adoptive mother's burial. She died of cancer a week before. Her grave was prepared beside Jonas, her youngest biological son, in the Hinton cemetery. There was a small group of friends from the businesses in town, Paul's mother had worked keeping their books updated. Paul smelled the citrus, turpentine aroma of the pine and spruce tree sap of the early summer. The smell was suffocating. He looked down at the ground that was a dark green in the shade the trees cast over them. His muscles were tight as if he was carrying a heavy pack.

Jonas, Paul's brother had died two years before on the farm from a heart attack at age fifteen. Paul was two years younger, and his mother brought him back to Hinton, where they lived before their father brought the family to the farm, he bought just off Alder Ridge Road between High Prairie and Valleyview. The farm was in the south Peace River region. His mother and father

were divorced after the separation.

It was early summer; school was out for Paul. He expected to finish high school in Hinton, but that was unclear now. Kate, the oldest sister invited him to move to Edmonton, where he could finish high school. She was a nursing assistant in a retirement home and had a two-bedroom apartment. Paul caught himself with a strange sensation since the day of his mother's death that felt like the ground under him was tilted, he would walk down the hallway in the house, but it was like he walking along the slope of a hill. As soon as he felt it, it would be gone. It was happening now as he looked in the direction of the cemetery gate.

Their mother had taken care of all the details in town when she got her cancer diagnosis. Keren Olson was part owner of the town's bakery and accepted a property management role for the apartments in the basement of

their house. The four children would receive monthly payments from the rent. Paul had enough from the inheritance to pay his way through high school. Paul thought about what it would be like without his mother, and it occurred to him that it would be the same, because she would be gone, like she was every day, as she was up and gone to work when he got up in the mornings. He would still take of his own meals, breakfast, packing his own lunch and often making his own supper. Paul realized that he would be the one who would have to shop for the groceries that were always there. He would have to clean the house and wash his own laundry. He would have to make a list of things he needed and the jobs around the house he would have to do.

Paul was struck by a repeated image in his mind when he was thinking about what he would have to do: the image was an empty box he would use at the grocery store. That image was replaced with the empty cupboards he would have to restack alone. He thought about coming home to the empty house in the evening and on the weekends. He would be in the silent front room. Then all the images would run through his imagination again starting with the box.

David had a position with the

Co-op in Valleyview and made regular trips to the farm to check it out. Their father worked as a welder on the pipelines and was rarely around. Julie was an X-ray and lab technician in Grand Prairie, not far from Valleyview.

The four started to walk out of the cemetery together.

Julie looked at Paul and said, "You need a break."

"It's summer," replied Paul, "and my job as a tree planter doesn't start for a week."

"David and I were thinking we could take you on a camping trip," said Julie.

"It would be to the Snake's Back trail near Kamloops," said David.

"That would be alright," said Paul. "Why the Snake's Back? I've never been there."

"I have a friend who told me about it. I have an elevation map and it will be fun."

Kate looked at Paul, "I have to get back to work in Edmonton, so I can't go."

Julie looked at Kate, "That's okay, the three of us can go for the weekend."

* * *

The three pulled into a cleared area that looked like a

campground, but once they stopped there was nothing, just an enclosure of trees. It was later in the day, and they had to make it to where they could set up camp for the night. They were in a small lot cut from the forest. David pointed to the side that looked like a trail. The three pulled on their back packs and stepped into the opening in the forest.

The narrow opening closed in as they walked until they were moving among the trees, looking forward and lining the trees up in a straight line, as David and Paul learned to do in the woods around the farm. They knew what direction they should travel in, but there was not trail, no obvious way to go. They pressed forward, not acknowledging they were lost.

David stopped and pulled out the elevation map and looked around. "I'm sure this is the right direction."

Jullie's left eyebrow lifted as she looked at him, "You haven't been on this trail before."

"No, but it is this direction."

They continued in the forest without any indication that they were on a trail.

Paul looked at his own compass and confirmed that they were walking in a northwest direction. He could get back, as he had been

trained how to go out to a set place and back when he was with the tree-planting crew the summer before.

The group continued walking through the forest. They stepped into the bright sunlight of the banks of the Gillard Creek. There was driftwood on both sides of the creek and they could see that there was a flat area on the other side. The stream rushed loudly but it was not deep.

David stepped to the edge of the water and smiled. "I know exactly where we are."

The icy waters flowed fast and roared. Paul and Julie watched as David hurried along the bank and stopped. He waited as the two caught up.

David pointed across the creek, "It's shallow here so we can cross." Stones were breaking the water surface the full width of the stream.

David started to walk into the stream and slowed, taking careful steps as the current was stronger than he was expecting. Paul followed bracing each step as he went. Julie followed carefully. Soon the three were across the water and looked at the open area on the other side. They followed David to a flat area that was rocky. The ground was

covered with a light silver-grey sediment. Along the edge of the rise to the flat area, there were a few trees that found enough fertile soil to set roots. There was dry driftwood along the creek side of the trees. In the distance, the land rose rapidly to the mountains that surrounded them.

Julie looked around, "We can make our camp here."

David nodded, "That's a good idea."

David and Julie set up the tent while Paul gathered the wood for the fire. The tent was difficult to set up in the hard sediment layer over the granite below it.

The fire was burning as they completed the work on the tent. They brought hotdogs and wire forks to roast them and soon they were eating.

Julie looked at Paul, "You know you have to move in with Kate in Edmonton."

Paul looked at her and paused, "Why are you so sure of that? I've started to make plans on how I could get the things I needed and get the chores done around the house."

David shook his head, "Dad is never around the farm, and I am sure he is around Hinton."

"Why is he around Hinton?" asked Paul. "I thought he was in a hurry to

get to the farm because he didn't like our place."

Julie shook her head, "He's after you."

Paul adjusted himself and put another piece of wood on the fire.

David looked at the fire and then Paul, "That's why we thought we had to make this trip. You really don't get it."

Paul looked at David, "Get what?"

Julie spoke slowly as she started, "He thinks you were adopted to take care of us."

"He thought Jonas needed you to take of him," said David.

"But after Jonas died, he still thinks you have to keep the farm going for us," said Julie.

"He talks about that all the time," said David. "He knows exactly who your parents were, and they were very capable people, so they see that in you. They believe you're superior to us."

Julie shook her head, "We really hate that. Because of the way they treated you, it made us feel small and stupid." David continued, "We don't need you to take care of us."

July said, "When we were younger, we hated you because of that."

Paul remembered Jonas saying that before he died. Paul looked at the two, "If I stay in Hinton alone and take care of myself, what could Dad do?"

"We don't know," said Julie, "But the idea makes us nervous. Mom has been protecting you all along."

David looked at Paul, "It's just a better idea that you move to Edmonton right away, this summer."

"I'm working," said Paul.

"You have to pack up on your weekends, and I can take you and your things to the city with my truck," said David.

Julie poked the fire with a stick, "Kate checked it out and the high school there is very good. It will prepare you to go to college, like you always said you wanted to do."

Paul turned his head to one side, "What could Dad do?"

David looked at Paul, his eyebrows raised, "You are still too young to live alone in the house in Hinton, if Dad decided you're going to be taken back to the farm. He's talked about it."

"What is he saying?" asked Paul.

"He knows that he can go to the school and tell them you are living alone in the house. If he does that the people in the school have to contact Social Services and force you to go with him."

Julie shook her head, "That would

be your last day in school until you leave the farm at eighteen."

Paul's stomach jumped and he felt tired. "Thanks for letting me know," he said.

"Are you going to go to Kate's place?" asked Julie.

Paul poked the fire and looked at Julie, "I want to head back to Hinton right away when we get up. I'll have everything I need to move to the city packed before I start my first day of work."

Julie and David smiled.

"That's good," said David.

"I can stay around the house on a few weekends this summer," said Paul.

"We can move your things to Kate's place next weekend," said David.

The three woke early the next morning, broke camp and stood on the bank of Gillard Creek. David pointed to an opening in the trees on the other side of the creek. The feeling of being lost had dissipated. They were headed straight back.

"Let's walk in that direction before we cross, and see if that is the trail," said David.

Julie and Paul nodded and followed David. Soon they were standing at the trail that extended to the side of the creek they were on. There was an

arrangement of rocks across the creek they could walk on to cross. Soon they were on the trail back to where they came from. As they

stepped into the clearing, they could see Julie's car on the far side of the parking lot.



Peter Conrad's work was a runner up in the My Dream Writing Contest 2024 and appeared in Wingless Dreamer Publisher's 2024 anthology Summer Fireflies 2. His appears in LOFT Books, Issue VI and Gnashing Teeth Publishing, The Cost of Our Baggage anthology. His work appears in The Taborian, WayWords Literary Journal, Umbrella Factory Magazine, CafeLit, the Bear Paw Arts Journal, Bare Hill Review, the Quillkeepers The Aerial Perspective,

Active Muse, Impulse, The Paradox Literary Magazine, In Parentheses, Livina Press Golden Issue, Folklore, Western People, Half and One, and the Prairie Journal. Peter Conrad had two short stories broadcast on CBC radio. His work will be published in Wingless Dreamer's 2025 anthology, Unfolding Colours.

He published articles and lectures in Art History for the Art Institute Online. He has the nonfiction titles Training for Victory and Training Aces as well as creative nonfiction title Canadian Wartime Prison Escapes published. Peter graduated from the University of Saskatchewan with his Bachelor of Education and a MA.

False Millennium

By Matias F. Travieso-Diaz

My whole life has conspired to bring me to this place, and I can't despise my whole life.

Tony Kushner, *Angels in America*, *Millennium Approaches*

Late on the evening of December 30, 1999, Trent received a call from his attorney. The clerk of the district court had advised that Trent's criminal trial was to begin in early January. "Once the trial starts, you may be in custody for the duration of the trial, and if convicted, you will be taken to jail immediately" warned the lawyer.

Trent panicked at the news and decided to get out of town at first light. He was not sure where he would go, but he must leave California without delay. He packed hurriedly, jumped in his leased BMW, and headed northeast on I-15, hoping to make it to the Nevada line by noon and to Las Vegas shortly thereafter.

As he drove past Barstow and into the Mojave Desert, the desolate views along the road made him focus on his desperate situation. He had been indicted on several counts

of securities fraud, thanks to his former partners' chicanery. He was just the fall guy. He was a crook himself, for sure, but many others had gotten away with doing worse things. He was just unlucky.

By the time he reached Henderson, his black mood had crystalized into a decision: he would go to Vegas to die.

He had no hotel reservations and was hoping that he would find someplace to spend his final hours. Media stories related that there was a high risk of a terrorist attack to coincide with the turning of the year 2000, and there was a risk of a massive digital collapse due to Y2K issues. It was said that the fears generated by those stories were keeping people from places like New York and Las Vegas, leaving hotels under-occupied and

desperate to fill empty rooms. If that was true, he might be able to die in luxury, perhaps at the Bellagio or Caesar's Palace. If not, he would find some hole to hide.

Upon arrival in Vegas in the early afternoon of Friday, December 31, 1999, Trent drove to the Strip and started his search for a place to make his last stand. He went north to south and back to every major casino, from the Circus Circus to the Mandalay Bay, from the Tropicana to the Sahara. He discovered that most hotels were almost sold out, and the few available rooms could only be had for several hundred dollars, which he did not have.

After hours of searching, Trent found a cheap motel at the north edge of town four blocks from the Strip, where he was able to book the last available single room for all the cash he carried, except for a twenty-dollar bill. The room was hardly luxurious, but at this point his dream of making a classy exit had been blown away by reality.

He was scheduling his suicide for midnight to coincide with the new millennium, so Trent decided to while a few hours away by gambling. He went to Bally's, got ten dollars' worth of nickels, and began

playing one of the five-cent slots. He played mechanically, nickel after nickel, as his coins were swallowed by the machine. He promptly lost it all and, after some hesitation, got five more dollars' worth of nickels and began feeding them to the beast. He was down to the last three coins when he hit the jackpot and found himself in possession of an avalanche of nickels amounting to one hundred and eighty-five dollars. "Good. Now I will be able to afford a fine last meal."

In his earlier search, he had discovered that the Flamingo Hotel served a decent buffet at the Paradise Garden along the flamingo pond and, if he sat by the windows, he could watch the hummingbirds, ducks and flamingoes, and the koi fish at the pond. Moreover, wine was included in the price. He arrived at the Flamingo at a quarter to five, ready to make the line for the earliest sitting at five. He was starving.

He had a leisurely dinner and drank a lot of wine. By six thirty he staggered out of the Flamingo and decided to walk south on the Strip to clear his head.

He was scheduling his suicide for midnight to coincide with the end of the twentieth century and there were a few hours left before the event, so Brent felt like whiling some time away by watching sports, a favorite pastime when he wanted to get his mind away from his troubles. He walked south on the Strip in search of a place where he could catch some game and ended up at the Race and Sports Book at the Mandalay Bay. It was a huge amphitheater with 17 large TVs as well as individual booths and, in the back of the room, comfortable black leather couches from which you could watch in privacy the action of any ongoing sports event. He sat on one of the couches and ordered a beer.

A few minutes later, he was joined on the couch by a heavy-set middle-aged man holding a large glass of Scotch. He sat, nodded at Trent, and focused intently on one of the screens, which was showing the Sun Bowl game between Oregon and Minnesota. Trent did not care much for football and even less for the Sun Bowl participants, but his attention was drawn by a loud series of groans from the guy as he followed the progress of the game, which was in the third quarter with the teams closely matched. After a while, Trent could not contain his

curiosity and turned to his couchmate and asked: "Do you have money on that game?" The reply surprised him: "No, I don't, but I like watching games to practice my skill in predicting the final score. It looks like Oregon is going to win this one."

Trying to suppress a smirk, Trent replied: "Are you really able to predict in the third quarter how a game is going to end?" The man turned towards him, slurring his words drunkenly: "Not only that, but I can even figure out the point spread. Oregon by three or four."

"Really! You must be doing well then."

The guy hiccupped and retorted in a loud alcoholic voice that attempted to be a confidential whisper. "Yes. In the last ten days, I've made a killing. By the way, I'm Greg."

Trent thought that Greg was a delusional braggart and decided to put him to the test. "How so?" he asked, feigning interest. Greg responded in as loud a whisper as before. "On December 22 there was the Mobile Alabama Bowl game between TCU and East Carolina. I

figured out that TCU would win by two touchdowns and the point spread was Carolina plus 10, meaning that TCU was favored to win by at least ten points. I picked TCU and bet \$110,000 at each of the nine casinos. I won a total of \$900,000. Not bad for a day's worth."

"Did anyone suspect you were onto something on account of the large bets?"

"Yeah, some casinos won't let me bet such a large amount on a single game. Also, the Security teams at all the casinos work together to investigate if there is something suspicious going on. So, I did not cash my tickets all at once, but one every day. Tonight's my last collection, here at the Mandalay. I leave Vegas after that to return to LA."

"Have a good trip" replied Trent dismissively, returning to his beer.

A few minutes later, loud grunts came again from his couch companion. Turning to him, Brent noticed that the man had turned very pale, was sweating, and appeared to be experiencing shortness of breath.

Brent knelt by Greg and asked,

"Are you okay?" "No" was the response, "I'm having pains in the chest and the arms."

Greg continued in a labored voice: "Heart attack. It's the third in the last two years. I may not make it this time."

"But..." started Brent. Greg cut him off: "Listen, get me help, quick. In my jacket, there's a ticket from this casino for the TCU game. It's worth \$110,000. Cash it and bring the money to the hospital and we'll split it. If don't make it, the money is yours."

Grasping the ticket, Brent started towards the counter at the room's entrance to summon help but then stopped dead in his tracks. Maybe if he waited just a bit, there might be no need for help. Nature would take its course and the TCU game money would be all his. He went to the restroom and lingered for a while before returning to the counter.

When he returned to Greg's side, the man was still alive but was drifting in and out of consciousness. As they waited for the ambulance that was taking so long to arrive, Greg turned to Brent and whispered, as if to himself: "Watch, but don't

gamble on sports. That's only for experts. If you ever gamble, play blackjack. It gives the player the best odds."

Brent sat by the reclining man, uttering false words of comfort, until two paramedics arrived pushing a stretcher. One of them bent over Greg and took his pulse. Frowning, he turned to the other: "I think he is dead." Brent watched as they tried to resuscitate Greg, without success. Finally, one of the paramedics turned to Brent: "Do you know this man?"

"Never saw him before tonight" declared Brent, misleadingly. The paramedic searched Greg's pockets and found a wallet with cash, credit cards, and a California driver's license that identified him as one Gregory Tomlison of Santa Monica. "I guess we'll turn this over to the police and they can contact the family."

Trent sprinted away from the death scene and went to the cashier's cage, where he presented the ticket with the Mobile Alabama Bowl game bet. The cashier looked at her screen, then at the ticket and frowned. "That's a lot of money," she said dubiously. "I'll need to get this from the safe. How do you want it?"

Up until that moment, Trent had given no thought to the bulk that one hundred grand in bills would make. "Hundred-dollar bills, please." "I'll get a satchel" she replied. A long while later she returned with a cheap briefcase that could barely stay closed due to its bulging contents. "There you have it," she announced. "Eleven hundred hundred-dollar bills. It'll take a bit to count them."

"Don't worry. I'm sure you counted them already. Keep one bill as my tip." He wanted to get out of there fast.

"Thanks," said the cashier, opening the briefcase and taking out one crisp bill. As she was doing so, he had an idea. "Say, where's the best blackjack game in town?"

Without batting an eyelash, she rattled: "Word has it that the Treasure Island is the best Strip casino for blackjack. They have \$10 games with great rules. If you're betting \$50 or more you can move to the high-limit salon, where there is a shoe game with double down after splitting, re-split aces, and surrender. The high-limit double deck starts at \$50 and allows double down

after splitting. The dealer stands on all 17's." He did not understand much of what she said but smiled, thanked her, walked out of the Mandalay and headed north towards his motel, hoping to avoid drawing attention to his overstuffed briefcase.

It was well past seven and the Strip was buzzing with partygoers milling around, pressed against each other so tight that Trent's feet sometimes failed to touch the ground. Everyone was moving in one direction or another headed towards something in anticipation of the big moment soon to come. It took Trent almost half an hour to negotiate the few blocks up to the Fashion Show Mall, halfway to his destination. He found himself next to the Treasure Island casino, a pink monstrosity in the shape of an open book located next to the Fashion Show Mall and the Sands Expo Center. He could see the campanile of the Venetian not far away.

Outside, it was too warm and humid for that late in December. It was well past seven and the Strip was buzzing with partygoers milling around, pressed against each other so tight that Trent's feet sometimes didn't touch the ground. Everyone was moving in one direction or another, headed towards something

in anticipation of the big moment soon to come. It took Trent almost half an hour to negotiate the few blocks up to the Fashion Show Mall, halfway to his destination. He found himself next to the Treasure Island casino, a pink monstrosity in the shape of an open book located next to the Fashion Show Mall and the Sands Expo Center. He could see the campanile of the Venetian Palazzo not far away.

During the arduous walk, his plans had changed. He was going to live. He would take off from Vegas the following morning and head for Mexico, ready to start a new life in some out of the way village with the money that had landed in his hands. But then he realized that one hundred grand would not be enough for a life on the lam and remembered Greg's dying words and the cashier's recommendation. He turned towards the Treasure Island complex. He would play a few games and try to increase his capital. Based on his experience at Bally's, he knew he was on a hot streak.

Entering the hotel, he asked for directions to the High Limit

Lounge. This turned out to be a relatively small but nicely appointed modern room with a private bar. There were four blackjack tables, three baccarat tables, and a large roulette. He stood behind one of the semi-circular blackjack tables, which was covered with a felt cloth and had room for six swivel chairs. Four of the chairs were occupied by players. A dealer, an Asian woman, was busy dealing the cards from two packs, collecting losing player bets, paying off winning bets, and keeping the game moving.

The players used chips of various colors to make their bets. Once a round was over, some players (usually the ones with losing hands) would produce bills which they placed on the table in front of the dealer and ask the dealer for chips. The dealer would convert the cash into chips and slide the chips toward the player. There were three kinds of chips: black ones worth \$100, purple ones worth \$500, and orange ones (called "pumpkins") worth \$1,000. There was a circle in front of each player in which the wagers were placed, known as the betting box. A cardboard placard at the center of the table indicated that the minimum wage was \$100 and the maximum was \$20,000.

Prior to the dealing of the cards, all players made their bets by placing chips in their respective betting boxes. Most of the players bet one black or purple chip, but one of them – a foreign-looking older man with a white mane – consistently placed one or two pumpkins.

The dealer dealt each player two cards, face up. She dealt herself one card face up and another face down. She repeated the process for the other players. After a player looked at his initial two cards and saw the value of one of the dealer's two cards, the player had to make a decision. He could ask for a hit, that is, to be dealt another card; he could stand, meaning he was satisfied with the total of the hand and wanted to stand with the cards he had; he could surrender, forfeiting the hand with an automatic loss of half his original bet; or, after being dealt the first two cards, he could double his initial bet in return for receiving one more card. Also, if a player was dealt two identical cards he could split them, making another bet equal to the original bet, and playing each card as a separate hand and drawing as many cards as he desired to each.

The mechanics of playing were simple. All cards counted their face value. Picture cards counted as 10 and the ace could count as either 1 or 11. The total of any hand was the sum of the card values in the hand. A hand containing a 4-6-8 totaled 18. Another containing a queen-6 totaled 16. The ace counted as 11 unless so doing would make the hand total exceed 21, in which case the ace counted as 1. If the card total in a hand exceeded 21 the player was busted and lost.

Trent was a casual blackjack player and knew some of these rules and was able to pick up the others as he watched the progress of each round. Finally, he was ready to play and asked the others whether they objected if he joined the game. Nobody said anything, although the old man with the white mane cleared his throat as if to protest, thought the better of it, and nodded in approval.

Trent started playing at a quarter to eight. Over the next three and a half hours he played like the amateur he was – sometimes winning by sheer luck, others losing by making serious errors or drawing lousy cards. He would stand on 16, ask for a hit on 18, split with a pair of tens in hand, double when his hand

was a mere ten, and so on. Much as he wanted to get up and go, he stayed at the table in the hope of making up for his mounting losses, which ultimately became most of the money in his briefcase. By eleven, he had been left with \$36,000, which he turned into thirty-six pumpkins.

On the first bet, which he opened with \$10,000, he had an ace and an eight (19) and the dealer showed a six. He doubled. The dealer's hidden card was a nine, totaling fifteen, and she had to draw again. This time she got a five, totaling 20. Trent saw his twenty orange chips be swept away. Down to his last \$16,000, he opened with eight thousand. He was dealt two nines, and the dealer also showed a nine. He split, putting his last eight chips on one of the nines. He then began drawing: for the nine on the left, he drew a queen and stood at 19. For the nine on the right, he drew a four and a seven and stood at 20. The dealer's hidden card was a seven, for a total of sixteen, and she drew again, a five: blackjack. All of Trent's money was gone. He got up and left the casino, hurling the empty briefcase into a garbage can. The fantasy was good while

it lasted, but now it was over and he had to go back to his original plan.

It was eleven forty and the crowds were even thicker and wilder. He sought refuge in the Stratosphere Tower at the north end of the Strip and stood in line to take the long elevator ride to the observation deck at the top of the tower, 921 feet above the Strip. From there he got a commanding view of Las Vegas: down the strip, the hotels and casinos blazed like multicolored jewels, surrounded in all directions by innumerable points of light. The dazzling display ended – as if cut by a knife – on an irregular border past which the desert showed itself as a mass of blackness poised to pounce on the city.

Going up on the elevator ride Trent contemplated plunging to his death from the observation deck. Once there, however, he realized his idea could not be implemented. For one thing, the edge of the tower was circled by a chest-high metal barrier that would have been difficult to climb even if Trent had been in better physical condition. In addition, gawking visitors roamed around the deck so that any attempt to climb out of the observation area would have been immediately spotted and thwarted.

So, he just took in the sights and reflected on the meaningless nature of all the activity. Las Vegas was but a reflection of the country and its culture of shallow optimism. It was built and subsisted on empty promises and hopes. To win big money. To get laid. To escape one's fears and anxieties. This special New Year's, people's expectations were heightened even more. He of course knew better.

Indeed, this millennium was as false as the hopes it inspired. 2000 was not the beginning of a millennium, but the closing of one. The real millennium would not start until 2001, three hundred and sixty-six days away. Trent was not going to wait for it. He went down to the street, feeling despondent as he trudged back to his motel.

Even there, the lobby was abuzz with revelers drinking, playing the slot machines, or watching TV accounts of the progress of the millennium across the planet. There had been no terrorist attacks, no Y2K disasters. The anticipated moment of time was moving westward and now was almost here, creeping towards Vegas.

In his room, he took off his clothes and drew a hot bath. He climbed into the tub, recoiling at the heat, and opened the package of single-blade razors he had purchased along the way. His last thoughts turned into a review of his life. He was a crook, for sure, but no worse than anybody else, and yet the law was after him. It was all so unfair.

His personal life had also been a pitiful mess. He had been cheated on and divorced by his two former wives, abandoned by his children. Nobody had shown him the love and respect he deserved. He never got a break.

Not for one second did he pause to think about his last transgression, or how he had eased Tomlison out of this world.

His reverie ended. Without further recriminations, he slashed both wrists and plunged into the steaming water watching it become pink with his trickling blood. He started to doze off as he welcomed his final sleep. No more losing for him. No more hell, at least not in this world.

There were loud bangs on his room door, followed by a key turning

the lock and cries by male voices: "FBI... you are under arrest." Brent slipped further towards nothingness as one of the voices, now at the bathroom threshold, exclaimed: "Jesus, this man is bleeding to death! Quick, call an ambulance..." Strong arms fished Brent's body out of the tub and laid him on the bed, while tourniquets made from towels were tied to both forearms halfway to the elbows.

"Will he make it?"

"Well, he has lost a lot of blood, but we caught him in time. He'll probably live to see another New Year."

"I wished we had tracked him down sooner. After he cashed the ticket at the Mandalay, we got his name from the receipt and began searching for him all over town. Of all nights!"

"Have we figured out yet how he and Tomlison pulled their scam?"

"No, we know that the TCU game was rigged, but we never discovered Tomlison's contacts. Maybe his accomplice will

uncover the mystery for us.”

“I wonder if we did him any favors by rescuing him. He’ll be extradited to California and has many tough years ahead of him in a federal pen in Atwater or Victorville. It may not have been lucky for him to have survived his suicide attempt.”

“Who cares? He will be getting only what he deserves.”

Outside, the big moment had arrived. A roar could be heard all over town, as car horns blared and confetti rained down from the Eiffel Tower and rose, swirling, in the Vegas night, amidst a light show that cast many beams towards the heavens.



Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over one hundred and sixty of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in a wide range of anthologies and magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. A first collection of his stories, “The Satchel and Other Terrors” is

available on Amazon and other book outlets; additional anthologies of his work are scheduled for publication in 2025.

An Hour Of Judgment

By Christian Jackson

"Shelter in place immediately. This is not a test. Record levels of water are projected to reach Sun Valley within 30 minutes. I repeat, this is not a test. Shelter in place immediately." Lawrence turned off the crackling radio. He sat and thought about what would come next. He was a young father, had been married less than 3 years, and already the end of the world was upon his family. Not just his family, but his entire community

"Everyone, I have bad news, the reports are true and we need to stay here," Lawrence said to the crowd.

"Is that true?"

"How did it happen so quickly?"

"My mother is still at home!"

Voices overlapped as the panic increased and darkness fell over.

"Quiet please! Everyone!" said a grandiose voice from the front of the room. "We need to remain calm and act quickly. For all of our safety, I suggest no one leaves. This building has three levels and we should be more than safe."

"But Father, what about our families?"

"My elderly mother is alone!"

"I have pets who will die!"

"Please!" said the man again. "I understand your concerns but with less than 30 minutes to spare we don't have time to collect all our various friends and family. We can only petition God for their safety." He stood above them on a stage. He was an older man, clean shaven with dyed blond hair, scraped over his balding head. His gait was uneven and he relied on a cane for balance.

"Father Conrad," said Lawrence. "What about the people in this neighborhood? They won't be safe."

"We don't have enough space for everyone!" said a woman.

"What about food? We need to make sure we can feed our babies!" said another. "Lawrence," said Father Conrad. "I appreciate your care for those outside, but we do not understand what the severity of this will be. Our food stores are not large and we already have over two-hundred in here. I fear that there is nothing we can do in

order to be safe." Many in the audience cheered and gave their approval of his words.

Lawrence spoke in a sullen voice, "I care about all of our families here, but we can't sit by and let others die!"

Before anyone else could speak, a banging sound was heard from outside the sanctuary. Father Conrad walked out cautiously, his cane clacking along the tiles.

People were knocking at the doors, begging for help, crying, screaming, shaking the doors.

Cal, one of the board members, went up the stairs to look out through an upper window.

"There must be more than a hundred people outside," he said to those below.

"Shouldn't we let them in," said Lawrence. "They probably have no shelter." "Don't be so hasty in your opinions young man," said Father Conrad.

"We need to act now. We have less than thirty minutes!"

"Lawrence, if you open the doors, think of how your own family will fare. Do you want to be the reason they starve? What about your young boy? Do you want to be the reason the good people of this entire church die?

I would ask everyone here; should

any of us have to suffer because the masses ignored the call to righteous living for so long? Should we take on the sin-stained and greed-filled beggars who would dare cry for salvation after the hour of judgment has passed?! Who here would dare to give away the salvation of our sanctuary to those who have not earned nor deserve such a blessing! I should hope that no one would!"

Once again the crowd broke into applause and scattered shouts of "amen". "Lawrence, these doors will stay closed. That is final. If you wish to leave, you can do so now."

He stood in the crowd, letting his defiance settle. "I'll stay with my family." "Just as I thought," said Father Conrad. "Now I need some men who can barricade the doors. Ladies, please move the children and the elderly up to the third floor."

Within ten minutes the door handles were tied with cord and covered with furniture. Lawrence sat by the radio, listening for any sign of hope.

"According to the latest reports, the southern coast of Florida has been hit and there are to be no

expected survivors. All we can do is pray for our countrymen.” said the radio host. By now everyone had gone up to the third floor, but Lawrence paced around the doorway, close enough to hear the faint yelps of the helpless. Cal, one of the board members, came to talk to him. He was an older man, with soft eyes and a long gray beard that extended over his chest. “Lawrence, you can’t beat yourself up. No one can help those folks.”

“We could’ve helped them.”

“No Lawrence, I’m afraid not. It’s already too late. And think of it Lawrence; they should’ve helped themselves earlier. If some of these people had been in homeless shelters or getting themselves help they wouldn’t be in this mess in the first place! When I was young I didn’t just sit around waiting for someone to help me, I made a man out of myself and fixed my life. I made something of it.”

“You mean to say we are just the lucky ones? We have a fancy building so we get to live? We have jobs, homes, and families, and attend a church so we get chosen to survive? How do you know the people out there aren’t worthy? Who are you to judge them?”

“Lawrence, you aren’t thinking straight. We can’t do anything for them. We came here because we

were prepared. These people aren’t.”

“Should we let them die anyway? Because I won’t.”

Lawrence went to the doors and started to pull down the furniture. He was kicking and clawing his way to get through all that had been built up. Cal grabbed him, pulling him to the ground.

“Lawrence, stop! You will ruin us all!”

“Get off!”

They tumbled over each other until Lawrence threw him off.

“I’m not stopping, and you can’t stop me!”

Cal was out of breath.

“Cal might not be able to stop you, but we sure can.”

Father Conrad stood at the top of the stairs with a group of men.

“What a fine ruckus you boys have been making down here! Seems you might need some help cleaning up.” Father Conrad limped down the stairs, easing himself down on his cane. “You can’t stop me. I’m doing what’s right.”

“You think we can’t stop you?”

A group of men ran to Lawrence. They pinned him down and held his arms and legs. “Lawrence, I am the shepherd of

this flock. You know what a shepherd does? He keeps the sheep safe. Sometimes a sheep wanders away and it is the duty of the shepherd to correct his behavior. And sometimes, in order to keep a sheep from running off, the shepherd has to break its legs. Then the sheep learns to rely on its shepherd because it can't walk on its own. And then the sheep will think twice about wandering off on its own. But, sometimes the sheep comes to his senses before that needs to happen. What do you think?"

"I'll tell you what I think Conrad. If you can listen to the voices screaming for help just outside these doors and yet remain without an ounce of compassion, then you aren't a man, you're a wolf, a charlatan, a tired old cold-blooded snake!"

"Those are some unkind words, Lawrence. It's unfortunate what you're going to make me do, but it can't be helped."

The men picked him up and held him upright. The two exchanged a glance and Father Conrad spun his cane in his hand. One of the men grabbed the cane from him. He felt its weight in his hand and caressed it lightly before swinging at Lawrence's left knee. It gave inwards and he gave out short pained grunts, his cries joined with those at

the door.

"Lawrence," said Father Conrad. "This doesn't need to continue, but if you insist on acting a fool, we need to amend that."

Lawrence's chest heaved. He said no word, watching his accusers closely.

"Ok. Have it your way."

The man swung at Lawrence's other knee and they dropped him to the ground, both his legs mangled and twisted.

"I never wanted this to happen Lawrence, and I don't want it to ever happen again. I hope I have made myself clear."

Everyone stood watching for Father Conrad's next move.

"Good, let's lock him in my office."

Before the men could pick him back up a brightness like an atomic bomb flashed outside, blinding those by the windows. It was swiftly followed by a great blast of thunderous wailing, shaking the very foundations of the earth they stood on. Everyone was thrown to the earth and tumbled over each other. Glass broke, sirens blared, rain splashed above and around them, and they all screamed for mercy. After a moment all was still and the crying subsided to a

low murmur. Everyone stood back up and checked for bruises. Water was pouring in over the high windows.

"Everyone, we need to get upstairs and out of danger," said Father Conrad "Father? You might want to look out these windows," said Cal.

Others rushed up next to Cal to notice that the crowds who had been pounding at the doors previously were gone. Outside the world was glowing red and yellow.

The sky was washed a deep alizarin crimson.

"Where did they go?"

"Did the water take them?"

"What's in the air?"

The crowd turned down to look at Father Conrad, who was standing by the doors. "Where is Lawrence?" he asked them.

His cane was there on the ground, alone. It was bent and splintered. They saw and heard the great trumpeting thunder again, and walked back upstairs.



Christian Jackson is an aspiring writer, amateur theologian, and multidisciplinary artist from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. His writing has been accepted for publication in *Unwashed*, *Down in the Dirt*, and *50 Word Stories*. Jackson and his wife love to paint, read, write, and spend time exploring all the midwest and beyond have to offer.



Winter Realities

Lindy Giusta



Half Way There

Lindy Giusta

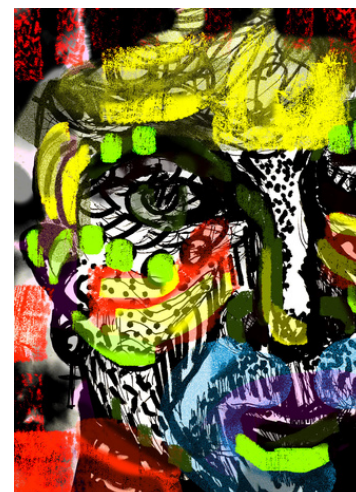


Lobster Madness

Lindy Giusta

3D Glasses

Lindy Giusta



Flaco, The Escape Artist

Lindy Giusta



Whooo Areeee Youuuu

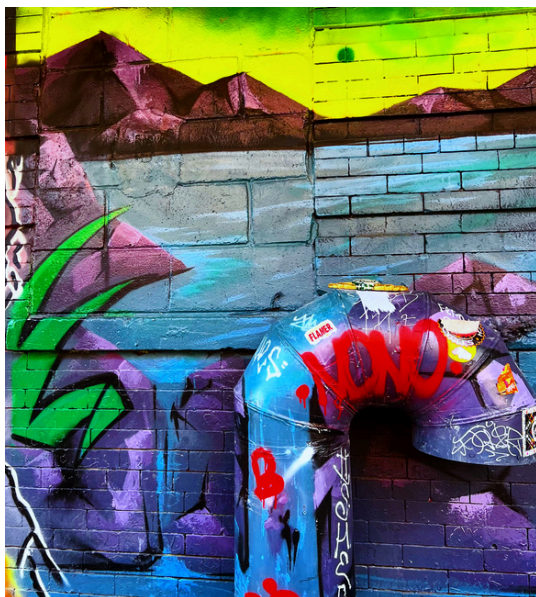
Lindy Giusta



Soverign
Lindy Giusta



Beauty In The Rock
Bottom
Lindy Giusta



Beautify
Lindy Giusta



Lindy is a passionate & prolific Brooklyn-based queer outsider-ish artist whose practice explores the intersection of visual storytelling and emotive expression in all its forms.

Diving into the intricacies of emotions, they employ a variety of mediums, including painting, drawing, and mixed media. Their artistic process is guided by an intuitive and instinctive approach, allowing the energy and emotions of the moment to shape bold brushstrokes and vivid colors.

The resulting artworks exude authenticity, inviting viewers to engage with the rawness and honesty that permeates each creation. Their art extends an invitation to embrace emotions, confront vulnerabilities, and find solace and connection in the shared experience of being alive. Through their work, they strive to create a profound space for dialogue, empathy, and understanding, fostering a sense of unity and acceptance in a world that often attempts to marginalize and divide.

Hidden Lies

By Alice Baburek

The heavy wet snow battered against the side of the old, decrepit house. It had been years since Emily and Alex had slept inside the once felt coziness of their childhood home. But tonight, it was different. Emily watched her older brother sound asleep on the worn, torn sofa. His light snoring assured her that indeed her brother had no problem with spending a few nights in a house which was abandoned many years ago. She shivered and pulled the soft fleece blanket tighter around her. Outside the intense snow escalated into a full-blown wintery storm. The wind ripped through the shabby shingles on the roof. The aging floors creaked and moaned under the duress of the frightening weather. Suddenly, the dim lights flickered.

"Alex...wake up," shouted Emily while kicking her brother in the leg. She stood above him blocking out the wicked view seen through the large front living room window.

"What the..." he mumbled jumping up instantly tripping over the blanket

which fell off his limp body. Alex Hall hit the grimy floor with a thud. "Geez!"

Emily Hall backed away from her brother. "The lights...the lights are flickering. The snowstorm's getting worse, Alex. What should we do?" she asked in a shaky voice. Alex let out a huge sigh.

"I see things haven't changed much with you, little sister. Still scared of the dark even after all these years," he replied while standing up. "You *know* this house, Emily. The lights always flickered during rain *and* snow storms. Why would tonight be any different?" he said as he plopped back down on the uncomfortable sofa. "You should try and get some sleep." And with that said he laid back down and closed his eyes.

Emily gazed out the front window pane. Mysterious shapes took form in the frozen covered trees. She *hated* winter. It brought back bad memories of the night

her parents were suddenly taken from them. An awful, horrible night. Her eyes filled with tears. She had vowed *never* to return to this house. Yet, here she was. With her only sibling, Alex. Searching for a lost piece of their past. Somewhere hidden. Deep within the recess of their childhood memories.

Alex opened his eyes. His sister was still standing by the window. Her eyes filled with tears. He thought about how hard she took the loss of their parents. He missed them too. But he had moved out to attend college and Emily had been the baby of the family. Doted on from the very beginning. It seemed to affect her the most. Sure, he was sad his parents died so young. They had a lot of good years ahead of them. But life was like that—giving and taking—without asking permission.

Alex stood next to his sister. He gently put his arm around her shoulders and lightly pulled her close. Emily leaned her head against his muscular shoulder. Tears dripped down her wet face.

"I really miss them," she whispered in between sobs. He gave a slight nod.

"Yeah...me too." His voice soft. He kissed her on top of her head. Her blondish hair silky to the touch.

"Do you think we'll find it?" asked Emily in a small voice. Alex hesitated. He wasn't sure of anything. He wasn't even sure why he agreed to this scavenger hunt. A cryptic note written by their late mother insisting something of extreme value hidden within the walls had been taken at face value after their parents' demise.

As for the house, it remained empty for years. Stuck in probate even though there were only the two of them. Or so they thought. It wasn't until a distant cousin swooped in demanding the house. They never knew a "cousin" even existed. Their parents' family history had always been a mystery. Claiming they were orphans with no knowledge of family ties. In fact, they heard many times the story of how their parents grew up together eventually marrying once leaving the orphanage.

Alex always thought—a story waiting to be written. Emily, on the other hand, longed for more.

So, that's when she decided to reach out for help from AncestryDNA—genealogy website. Much to both of their surprise, they in fact did have distant relatives. And that is when Emily started to ask questions which no one had answers to.

Alex stifled a yawn. The wind howled as the snow kept falling. Outside looked like something from a movie. He didn't know *how* to answer his sister about their parents' death. According to the police report, a neighbor was told by their father he was going to meet with a colleague on a sensitive issue. He asked the neighbor to stay with his children for a couple of hours. It didn't make sense. After several hours had passed, the neighbor called the authorities. It was confirmed there had been a fatal accident.

"I don't know how to answer your questions, Emily. Maybe if the neighbor was still alive, we could ask our own questions. We've gone over and over this. Dad was a machinist—not a shady crook. And mom was a housewife. What really happened that night to make our parents leave us with a neighbor? I mean the questions go on and on," said Alex.

"We may never know the

complete truth. Unfortunately, our parents lied to us. The thing we do know for sure is that *our* good ole' cousin came crawling out of the woodwork and threw a wrench into this mess with this house. For some odd reason, he decided to make his claim to a place he probably never knew existed. We grew up here for heaven's sake. We should have more rights than this guy," ranted Alex. Emily gave a nod.

"I'm sure whatever the reason, it's here—somewhere inside this house. I don't know what it could be, but I intend to find out. This cousin really wants this house. The real estate attorney said we have three weeks to comb the house top to bottom. Then the locks will be changed and no one can step foot on this property until it's settled in probate court," explained Emily.

"This could have been prevented if mom and dad left a will like most normal people do especially when they have children." Alex moved away from his sister. He searched the round end table until he found the pack of gum. Seconds later he stuffed a piece in his mouth.

"Tomorrow we should split up. I'll start in the attic and you can start in the basement," instructed Emily.

"Oh, geez, thanks sis. I get the damp, smelly basement. Is this a guy thing?" he asked with a smile.

"No, it's a brother thing. Plus, I hate the basement. It's creepy!" she said.

"So, it is a guy thing! Just so you know, I think the basement is creepy too. And now, I'm going to lay down and try to get a few hours of shut eye and I suggest you do the same."

Alex situated himself back on the sofa and tried to fluff the flat pillow. Emily sat down in the shabby recliner with the blanket wrapped tight around her. She heard the frozen trees creak as the storm raged on. She tried to keep her burning eyes open, but exhaustion crept in. Minutes later the siblings were fast asleep.

Emily shifted in the uncomfortable chair. The smell of fresh coffee permeated the entire living room. Her eyes still heavy from the lack of sleep the night before. Slowly, she pried them open. Sunshine streamed through the front window. Chirping birds could be heard

through the thick pane glass even with a thick blanket of snow. She stretched and glanced at the empty couch. Her brother had always been an early riser—even when he was young.

"Good morning, Emily. Why don't you come into the kitchen and have breakfast with your big brother before he makes his way down to the 'creepy' basement?" Alex's pearly whites gleamed.

"How can you be in such a good mood so early in the morning? Are you sure you're my brother?" asked Emily while strolling to the lopsided wooden table. The two threadbare chairs wobbled when they each sat down. She could smell the coffee, but it was the omelet that set the tone. Her stomach grumbled. She was hungrier than she thought.

"Mmm...it smells delicious." Emily shoveled in a huge bite. The melted cheese coated her dry tongue. She reached for a cup of hot java. Blowing at the top before carefully sipping the steaming brew.

Alex had already eaten most of his food on the plate. Pieces of egg stuck to his shirt. He slurped

his coffee. "Taste pretty good—if I should say so myself" while shoving in his mouth the last bite.

"When did my brother become a chef?" asked Emily in full agreement with its taste. She ate the vegan omelet until her plate was clean.

"Oh, I like to dabble in cooking and sometimes baking. I watch those reality shows where people win thousands of dollars for the best dish. I bet I could win!" exclaimed Alex. He picked up his plate and hers then placed them in the worn sink.

Emily wrapped her hands around the hot cup. A side to her brother she'd never seen before. Mr. Homemaker. As he washed up the few dishes, she thought about the day's work ahead.

"After I'm dressed properly for the basement, I will head down and see if I can find anything of interest. And I'm assuming you will head on up." Alex dried his hands on the towel. And without waiting for his sister's reply, disappeared into the first-floor bathroom.

Emily sat a moment and finished her coffee. It was nice being back home with her brother. She missed

Alex and his dry sense of humor. She had always felt safe with him close by. Suddenly, the bathroom door opened.

"Well, I'm off to the 'creepy' basement." Alex held up two flashlights then headed down the dark basement steps. Emily rinsed out her mug and set it to the side to dry. She hurriedly took two steps at a time to the upstairs main bathroom. There she did her morning routine of hygiene and dressed in sweats and a long-sleeved shirt. From what Emily could remember from past childhood winters, the attic was cold with no vented heat. She grabbed the flashlight out of her bag. In the hallway, she reached up and yanked the ladder down. Dust and cobwebs cascaded down.

"Yuck!" she cried while swatting at the mix of disgust. Finally, after several minutes of debate with herself, she climbed the rickety steps. Slowly, she peeked her head into the attic. An old dresser stood in the far corner. Brown boxes littered the entire space. A frigid breeze touched her face. Emily sighed. She knew she would have to go through all the boxes in order for a thorough search

before hypothermia set in. After climbing up inside the attic, Emily decided to start with the dresser. She rubbed her arms for warmth. Emily pulled out each drawer to find them empty.

"Nothing," she said to no one. Then one by one, she delved into every box only to find a bunch of odd assorted clothes, broken toys from when they were kids, moth-eaten blankets, a set of yellowed sheets, stained hand towels, and a set of mix-matched dishes. With only one box left to investigate, Emily had a nagging feeling it would be as useless as the others. But when she pulled back the lid, her eyes widened. Wrapped in old newspaper was an elegant jewelry box. She could smell the distinct odor of cedar. Wooden jewelry boxes normally were made from cherry mahogany, or even oak—not cedar. Cedar trunks were used to store blankets.

Emily's heart beat faster as she lifted it from the cardboard container. The smooth finish shined in the dim light. The curved wood was delicate and purposeful. Inside she couldn't believe her eyes. A bunch of tiny round diamonds glistened. At least a dozen sat within the velvet cushion. *Is it possible they*

are real? Suddenly, a loud bang came from below. She closed the box and dashed to the ladder. Someone had closed it sealing her in.

"Oh, no!" she murmured. Emily placed the jewelry box down on the wood-planked floor. She leaned carefully on the first step. It didn't budge. *How could this of happened?* Emily rubbed the back of her neck. *Think.* Alex would never hear her yells for help. As far as she knew, he was all the way down the basement. She glanced around the room. When she took a step towards the small round window, she kicked the jewelry box across the floor.

"Geez..." she muttered. Emily shined the flashlight on the carved box. As she bent down to pick it up, the wood planks in the floor shifted under her foot. "What the....?" Emily moved the boards with the toe of her shoe. Nestled in the tiny space was a book.

"Why would anyone hide a book up here in the floorboards?" she asked no one. Snagging the aged and worn book, she continued to the frosted window knowing it was her only means of

escape. It might be hours before Alex realized she was stuck in the attic. Not wanting to wait, Emily set the book and jewelry box to the side. The glass panes were cracked seeping frigid air. Grabbing a stained shirt from one of the boxes, she wrapped her hand and punched at the brittle glass shattering it to pieces. Again, and again. A rush of arctic air swooped inside instantly burning her lungs. Emily looked out over the roof. Covered in snow and ice but flat enough to walk on. Or so she hoped.

Carefully, she inched outside with her treasures. Slowly, easing her way to the edge. Slightly slipping with each step. The drop from two stories was a risk. One she was willing to take. If she landed just right, she would be fine. The deep snow would cushion her fall.

Emily shoved the box and book inside her shirt as she began to slide off the edge of the roof. She held onto the covered dented gutters as long as she could. Her fingers froze from the intense cold. But before she let go, she heard a piercing yell. Startled by the sound, she dropped like a rock landing hard on her right foot. Pain seared through her ankle and up her calf.

"Augh!" she moaned while rolling in the deep snow. Her ankle had twisted. Tears sprung into her eyes. But her thoughts instantly went to the horrible cry she heard right before falling. It had to be Alex. Her brother was hurt. And now so was she. She needed to move quickly.

Alex tried desperately to stop the flow of blood oozing from his thigh. He managed to remove his belt to try and stifle the bleeding wound.

"Why couldn't you and your meddling sister just give up the house?" said the voice cloaked in darkness. Alex could see the outline of a tall man. The smell of gun powder filled the air. The mysterious stranger had shot Alex without warning. Instantly, a snarl of agony ripped through to his groin. Frantically Alex tried to slow the bleeding.

"Who are you and why the hell did you shoot me?" asked Alex in between gasps. He felt lightheaded.

"It was mine! I kept the secret all these years. I deserve it. You don't," said the strange man through gritted teeth.

"I don't know what you're talking about...whoever you are. I do know I need an ambulance and I need it now before I bleed to death." Alex scooted on his butt then leaned back against the mildewed wall. The smell of dankness surrounded him as he faded in and out of reality.

"You're not going anywhere until you give it to me," said the voice. Alex struggled to focus.

"Give me a hint...what would I possibly have that you'd be interested in enough to shoot me in the leg," whispered Alex.

"Don't be coy with me, Mr. Hall. You and your sister have been a constant thorn in my side for years. Are you telling me you have no idea who your parents really were?" the voice hissed.

"They were good people, who unfortunately died in a car accident. My parents worked hard for us." Alex was beginning to lose feeling in his wounded leg. "Please...please call 911. I'm losing way too much blood."

"Once you hand it over to me, I'll call an ambulance." The shadow shifted and walked into the stream of light which filtered through the dirty basement window. Alex

strained his eyes at the silhouette. It was then he realized he knew the shooter.

"Cousin Arthur...I don't understand. We're family. In fact, you're the only family we know. Why would you do this to me?" Alex was fading fast.

"First off...I'm *not* your cousin! I was your father's business partner. Your father stiffed me and I'm here to collect what's due to me. I waited almost 20 years for this." Arthur Madison inched closer to Alex.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," replied Alex barely hanging on to consciousness. "My dad worked at a factory. He never had a business let alone a partner."

Arthur let out a hideous laugh. "You're such a fool! Your father never worked in a factory. He was a thief! A jewel thief." Alex tried to comprehend the words.

"My mother..." whispered Alex.

"Your mother? She was in on it, too. She played her part each and every time. In fact, I know she left a note so don't be coy with

me! Your parents had everyone fooled. The only thing they told you and your sister that was the truth is their sappy love story and the fact they had no relatives...to speak of," explained Arthur. "Everything else... lies."

Emily freezing and in pain hobbled inside the house then to the basement door. She heard a man's voice which was not her brother. After a few seconds, she realized the voice was that of Arthur Madison. Ready to shout out, Arthur's raised his voice. She could hear him explaining how he was not a cousin, but a partner of their father. His voice lowered and Emily strained to hear his mumbling words just catching a few here and there. Something about a jewel thief and a letter inside a journal.

Emily glanced at the jewelry box and worn book. *Could her parents have been involved in illegal activities?* It couldn't be true. Her parents were wonderful people.

Another plea from her brother rose in the basement stairway. Emily shivered from her wet clothes. The pain from her ankle intensified with each tiny step. But she needed to help her brother. Moving as quietly as she could, she shoved the book

and box inside the useless oven. Forcing back the pain, Emily searched the counter drawers for a weapon.

Without warning, she heard the basement steps creak. Arthur was coming upstairs. He must know she was here, too. She was next on his list. As panic seized her chest, Emily opened the last drawer. Inside laid a broken wooden rolling pin. It would have to do. The knob on the door swiveled back and forth. Emily painfully managed to angle herself to the side of the closed door. She had one chance—and one chance only. Emily knew Arthur would never let them leave this house alive. Once he got what he came for—they outlived their usefulness.

Right before the door swung open, the smell of gasoline wafted in the air. She realized Arthur must have doused the basement and intended to burn down the house with their dead bodies inside. With all her might, she raised the heavy rolling pin over her head. The aging door burst open and Arthur stepped inside the kitchen with gun drawn.

Emily swung with full force. Arthur immediately saw a movement and ducked. The rolling pin connected to the back of his neck instead of his skull. The pain was instant. He fell to the ground with a thud. His gun skirted across the dirty kitchen floor. Emily dropped the rolling pin and hobbled toward the weapon. Arthur reached out and yanked at Emily's sprained ankle. She cried out then crumpled to the ground. Arthur's head was throbbing as he crawled toward his weapon. With a shaky hand, he seized the Glock and aimed at Emily. But before he could pull the trigger, she slammed the rolling pin once again. This time on the top of his unprotected foot. The bones crunched from the impact.

"What the...?" he yelled out in agony. "You..." But his words were lost in silence. Arthur's head lurched forward. Then his body sagged to the floor. Blood oozed from the bullet hole through the back of his skull.

Emily flinched and covered her head. She cautiously turned and saw her brother kneeling in the basement doorway. A small caliber gun in his bloody hands. His face pale and dripping in sweat. Alex forced a half grin.

"Find anything interesting in the

attic, little sister?" he mumbled then fainted.

The surgery went well as expected. Alex's leg would heal. With physical therapy, he'd be walking normally within six weeks. Emily tucked the hospital sheet under her brother's arm. Alex's breathing was shallow from the heavy dose of pain medication.

Emily's mind swirled with all sorts of information as she drove to her apartment. She gingerly walked the two flights of stairs and unlocked the door and headed straight to the spare room converted into an office. After speaking with the local police and probate attorney, Arthur Madison, posing as their cousin, was wanted by the FBI. He had been connected to numerous diamond heists across the country over the last two decades. Arthur had eluded the FBI but had been red-flagged when he used an alias to become a 'distant cousin.'

While Alex recouped in the hospital, Emily allowed the FBI to search their family home. They couldn't connect the dots when it came to Madison and his determination to own the unkept house. Finding nothing of value to

their investigation, the FBI released it back to them.

Emily unlocked the heavy-duty firebox in her closet. She carefully unwrapped the diamonds. She touched them lightly with her index finger. Gently she rewrapped them and placed them safely back inside. Next, she took out the letter her mother had written noting each jewelry heist. She must have kept it hidden in case she would need it someday. Unfortunately, that day

never came. The FBI thought the diamonds were hidden inside our family house. Little did they know. Her eyes swelled with tears. Her parents were criminals. But to Emily and Alex, they were good people. She hesitated a brief moment.

Emily unfolded the letter one last time then flipped the switch. The shredder roared to life, grinding the letter into tiny pieces of confetti.



Alice Baburek is an avid reader, determined writer and animal lover. She lives with her female partner and four canine companions. Retired, she challenges herself to become an unforgettable emerging voice.

A Kind Of Natural Justice

By S.D. Brown

So, when your son tells you he's killed his wife, you're left with something of a dilemma. Something you don't know how to fix. He is after all your flesh and blood, and to be honest, I never had much time for her, but there is also this sense of the fairness of things to take on board and to weigh up. A sense of some kind of justice that won't let you be.

He came to my door in the early hours that night. He let himself in and shouted up the stairs. I wasn't really asleep; I don't sleep well these days, but I knew immediately there was a problem – another problem. I pulled my dressing gown on and went down.

He was sitting on the edge of the sofa in the sitting room. He didn't look up.

'Well,' I said, 'what is it this time?'

He was always a strange little boy. I didn't know what to make of him sometimes. He never really

made friends, and he seemed to enjoy being on his own most of the time. His dad up and left us early on, leaving me to cope with it all. He couldn't have been much more than six when his dad went off. It must have made some difference to his young life, I suppose, not that you could tell. They were never really close, like you would imagine, or hope for a father and son to be. He was never really close to anyone, except Shelia, that is, and me, as and when it suited him that is.

His dad's leaving knocked me back though, I can tell you. Out of the blue one day, he strolls into the kitchen as large as life, and says, 'I've got a job up north.' He was a driver; trucks, taxis anything with wheels really. He was always moving from job to job, never able to settle, always falling out with someone or other.

'What do you mean, job up north?'

'I mean, I'm leaving. I'm

moving up north first thing. I won't be back.'

'You can't,' I said, taking a sharp intake of breath; it'll break your boy's heart just going off like that. How are we supposed to cope?'

'He won't even know I've gone, and you know it.' He stood in the kitchen staring at me, waiting for me to say something, but there was nothing I could say. We both knew in many ways, he was right, and there was nothing I could say that would stop him from leaving, even if I wanted to. He was very hot headed and I had learnt over the years when to keep quiet, when to step aside. So that was that, but I still felt that it was no way for a marriage to end, whether it was a good one or not. That evening I sat him down and explained that his dad was going away to work and that he wouldn't see him for a long time.

'OK,' he said. His face didn't register any emotion, he didn't ask any questions. He was fiddling with a bit of string, winding it around his finger, then he looked up.

'What's for tea?'

We never saw his dad again.

I suppose I always made excuses for him, particularly at school, where I played the single parent card more often as not. I was regularly called into school for some misdemeanour or other. They called him 'challenging,' but he wasn't like that at home, not with me, well not really. One time they called me in cos he was on the school mini-bus roof throwing bean bags. It turned out when we got to the bottom of it, they had set out the obstacle course in a different order during a PE session. I remember thinking to myself that it seemed my obstacle course had been set in a different order all my life.

He clasped his hands and moved back a little on the sofa. He was still sitting awkwardly. I could see he wanted to speak but seemed to be searching for the words.

'I'll make a pot of tea,' I said, 'then you can tell me what it's all about.'

My best guess was that he and Sheila had split up. It wouldn't have surprised me. I wondered how they had even got together, let alone managed eight whole years of marriage. When he was

a teenager, he didn't take much interest in girls. He got fixated on a girl across the road for a while but that didn't amount to much. He drifted for a while and then managed to get a full-time job where he'd done a spell of work experience. It turned out he was good with computers, and he got himself a good position with prospects. I was thrilled for him. He seemed settled at last. Shelia worked in the firm's canteen. She seemed to have made a beeline for him straight off. I don't suppose he ever knew what hit him.

I placed the tray on the coffee table, tightened my dressing gown cord, and looked down at him.

'Come on then,' I said, 'spit it out,' and that's when he told me he'd killed Sheila. He looked up at me. No emotion, no tears.

'What d'yer mean, you've killed her? How? When? What are you talking about?'

'I pushed her down the stairs.'

'Pushed her down the stairs?' I shrieked. 'Why on earth did you do that for goodness sake?'

'She just kept on. On and on all

the time about moving and getting a bigger house. It was doing my head in. She wouldn't shut up. I just snapped.'

'You can't push someone downstairs just cos they want to move! She's yer bloody wife, for goodness sake.' He looked up at me. There was a long silence. It was like he wanted me to sort it all out, to have the answers, but I didn't have any. Not this time.

'Maybe she just fell?' I said at last, trying to gently plant a seed.

'No, I shoved her.'

He was always honest. Well, as a child, he was. Too honest for his own good sometimes, and now he was telling me he'd shoved his wife down the stairs. If he were that honest with the police, he'd be looking at manslaughter, if not murder. I poured us some tea and sat opposite him. We both drank our tea without a word.

'I can't go to prison,' he suddenly said, 'I just can't. You've got to help me Mum.' Well I thought, help or not, you may not have much choice, but I didn't

say as much. 'You broke the rules,' I said, but he didn't respond as I thought he might. He used to like rules. Things being in their proper order. He was quiet for a moment and then leaned forward.

'This's how I see it,' he said, and he tightly clasped his hands again. 'I stayed here all night because you were feeling unwell. I came over to see you, and you had a funny turn, so I stayed over in case you needed me.'

'But ..' I started to say.

'No, hear me out. I stayed here all night. Sheila fell down the stairs. It's dreadful, but I wasn't there, so she must've just fallen somehow. We don't know how. Who can say different?'

'Nothing's that straightforward.' I said.

'Why not?'

'Well, did you drive here? The police have cameras everywhere, y'know.'

'No, I walked the back way, no one saw me.'

'So you say. Who knows if

someone did or didn't?'

'No one saw me. Right? I was careful, it was dark.'

'What about yer phone?' I watch those crime dramas on the telly where they can tell where someone was, or had been, from just their phone, so I told him what I knew.

'I've thought about that too,' he said, 'I've left it at home. So I haven't got it with me now, I couldn't call Sheila to say I was stopping over. See? And my phone is there, but I wasn't, I was here with you. I say I forgot it when I came to see you. They can't prove otherwise. Do you see?'

No, I couldn't see. Telling me his story was one thing, telling his story to the police was quite another. I picked up the teapot. 'I'm just going to cheer this up,' I said, and I went into the kitchen.

I felt cold. This was becoming a nightmare, I thought. I held the teapot to my chest and felt its warmth against me. I looked out of the window. It was light already. I could see the rope swing still hanging from the tree

branch after all these years. In tatters now, of course. He used to sway on that for hours, lost in his own world. And now here he was turning both our worlds upside down.

I had him quite late in life. There were times when I thought I would never have a child, and then there he was, a perfect little boy. He was a beautiful baby and grew to be a fine-looking young man as well. I could see what Shelia saw in him. Good looking, good money and prospects. I found her strange and quite controlling, though. He seemed to just follow along in her wake. The first year they were married, they came here for Christmas lunch. I was looking forward to it, but I could tell straight away that she didn't want to be here. She wouldn't pull a cracker or put a paper hat on, cos she had just had her hair done. We sat the three of us with a rather dry turkey crown, pushing it around our plates, trying to make conversation. After dinner, she announced that they really must be going.

'What, no Sherry Trifle?' I asked.

'Sorry,' she said, as she got up from the table, 'things to do.'

Who has things to do on

Christmas Day I thought. He said nothing. He just followed on like he always did. Christmas was all done and dusted before the Queen had a chance to put her twopence worth in, and that was that. They went to her parents every year after that. She didn't deserve to die like that, though, and no mistake, she deserved better than that.

I took a fresh pot of tea into the sitting room. He was sitting back on the sofa. He looked calmer somehow.

'Are you sure she's dead?' I asked quietly. I didn't like to ask, but I had to know. 'Did you check her pulse and that?'

'Yes, I told you.' He seemed momentarily irritated, but regained his composure.

'No blood was there? You didn't step in any blood, did you?'

'No, no blood.' He held his foot up so I could see his sole.

'So,' I asked, 'how do you think yer going to sort this? Are you going home now to 'find' her dead, or what?'

'No.'

'No? What yer going to do then? Hang around here till someone smells her? You've got to go home and find her. Treat the girl with some bloody dignity, for goodness sake. She deserves better. Did you love her or what?'

'Yes, of course I did. I loved her like crazy. I didn't mean to kill her. I didn't plan it; it just happened.' I never thought he had planned it, but how was I to know? He was showing a different side to me – I side I never expected to see. A side that tied me in knots and was pulling me apart bit by bit.

'So? What's the plan from here on then?'

'Her sister will find her?'

'Her sister? Are you kidding me? You mean the last image she will have of her sister, will be Sheila spreadeagled at the bottom of your stairs? Dead. Is that what you're planning? Is that what you're telling me?'

'I haven't planned anything. It's her sister; she's going 'round this morning to do Shelia's hair. She has a key. That's what she does on a

Sunday morning. I can't stop it happening, can I? I can't phone and tell her not to go, can I?'

This was getting out of hand, I thought. This was real life happening right in front of me. This wasn't throwing beanbags cos you got in a tizzy in a PE session, this had consequences; this had serious outcomes that you couldn't predict. The sister would contact the police, no doubt, and they may suspect foul play, and look to the husband as the most obvious suspect. The sister knew where I lived. She might guess he would come running to me. At the very least, the police would want to question him, I told myself. Was he able to take it? Would he be able to hold up his end once the questioning started? And where would that leave me if things started to fall apart? Aiding and abetting? Conspiracy to murder? My mind was racing. He sat there looking at me as if I had the answers but had yet to share them with him.

'Look,' I said, 'why not just say she fell downstairs, and you panicked, and came round to me in a state, and we talked it through.'

'I can't go to prison; just can't.'

'It may not even come to that, if it was an accident,' I said.

'I'll go to prison. I know I will. That's it; it could be years, I could be in prison for years and years. You could be dead by the time I come out.'

'I'm not that old.'

'Mum, you are a pensioner. I'm just saying that's all. It's too risky saying I was there when it happened. We've got to go with my story. It's my only chance.'

I didn't say, but I thought, well, if he does go to prison, I could visit. I could support him while he's inside. There was no way of knowing which prison he might go to, but I could get a coach if it's a long way away, or maybe my neighbour could drive me if I paid her petrol, that is? So many thoughts. My mind was racing. Once you start your story, there's no going back, but he is, after

all, my son, my only boy.

There was a loud knock on the door. I glanced at my son. His face held a look of despair. The first real emotion from him I had seen all morning. Another knock. Much louder this time. I got up from my chair and brushed gently past him, placing my hand on his shoulder as I went by. He didn't reach for it. He looked up at me.

'Mum, what are you going to do? Mum,' he said raising his voice, 'What are you going to say? Mum, Mum, what?'

When your son kills your daughter-in-law, it leaves you with a dilemma. The walk from my armchair to the front door is a short one, but I feel as though I started it over thirty years ago, one step at a time.

'Ok, Ok,' I shouted, 'I'm on my way.'



S.D. Brown is based in Dorset, England. He writes poetry, short stories and novellas.

He has had work published in *Acclaim*, *Platform for Prose*, *The Fortnightly Review*, *Vine Leaves Press*, *Litro Publishing*, *The Orchard Poetry Journal*, *Eucalyptus Lit.* & *Eunoia Review*

Motherhood Is Trying

By Gretchen Beyer

Corky was sitting next to Shannon on the bench closest to the sandbox. This was the best spot in the park because it was shady between nine and eleven, and it was close enough that two moms could talk and still watch their children digging, scooping, and oh my god dumping a bucket-full of sand on Robert's head!

"Jaxon! Put that down!"

Corky leaned forward, in launch position, gripping the bench but not quite getting up. Shannon had just announced she had exciting news, and Corky was anxious to hear it. Also, it wasn't a big deal, just normal boy stuff.

But now both boys were running toward the bench. Robert reached Shannon first. She jumped to the ground to catch him. He burrowed into her, sobbing. A small landslide of sand slipped from his blond hair to cling to the tear stains on her blouse. Should Corky offer to pay for dry-cleaning? No, the blouse was definitely synthetic fibers. Probably

from Target. It could be tossed in the wash.

Jaxon had planted himself in front of Corky, his little body twisting side to side at the waist, like a person warming up for a run, or, Corky thought with vague disquiet, like someone supremely bored.

"You apologize, Jaxon." Corky used her firm *I'm about to start counting* voice, even though it was definitely not a big deal, and Robert was probably overreacting. He was so sensitive. Shannon was into all that gender-neutral stuff.

Jaxon was still spinning, only now he had his arms behind his back, entwined like snakes. He was looking up, without tilting his head. This was his innocent face, although it actually looked a little creepy, like he was trying to see his brain inside his eye-holes.

"Saw-ree Raw-ber." Jaxon delivered his apology in a robotic,

sing-song voice, his eyes peering into his skull.

"Ok, good. That was very nice." Corky glanced at Shannon, hoping to see her agreeing that the whole incident had been overblown and the boys needed to get back in the sandbox so the moms could talk. Shannon gave Jaxon a wan smile. It wasn't quite the reaction Corky had hoped for. Shannon was probably embarrassed. Robert was still sobbing. What a cry-baby.

"Hey there, little man! What's all the fuss?"

Both women looked up at the source of this greeting. Corky already knew it was Marshall Richards. She would've known that deep, booming voice anywhere. Marshall was Mr. Richards, the Pre-K P.E. teacher. He was hot, probably the best thing about that preschool, which, when she really thought about it, seemed kind of a waste of time, more like an overpriced day care than a real school. Mr. Richards was kneeling beside Robert, who had pulled himself away from his mother at the sound of the teacher's voice, and was now sniffing and wiping at his eyes. The teacher held up two lollipops, those cheap flat ones they give out at the doctor's office.

"How bout some candy? Candy always makes everything better." Mr Richards smiled. "That is, if your mother says it's ok."

"We don't usually have sugar, but it's been a rough morning. What do you say, Robert?" Shannon practically whispered this, a breathy, conspiratorial question that seemed to draw a circle around the little triad of Robert, Shannon and Mr. Richards. Apparently Jaxon didn't feel ignored, though, because he reached out to snatch one of the lollipops, the red one, before Robert had a chance to answer.

"Thank you, Mr. Richards," Robert said, meekly taking the yellow, peeling off the wrapper and rubbing it against his tongue. Jaxon was chewing on the red lollipop. It slid around in his mouth and made a rocky, grating sound against his teeth.

"Well, I'm not hearing any complaints about sugar from anyone here." Corky winked at Mr. Richards, and gave a little head toss toward Robert, who was rubbing the candy against his tongue, fiddling with a stray lock of hair that had come loose from her ponytail. "You're like

Superman, popping up out of nowhere like that."

"I'm surprised to see you here. Surely you get enough of playgrounds at school?" Shannon added. Leave it to her to be a buzz kill.

"Nah, I was just passing by. I actually have a meeting with the park director, to talk about the school picnic." Mr. Richards tousled Robert's hair, flexing the brown curve of his bicep. A trickle of sand dusted the boy's shoulders like dandruff. "You're a good kid, Robbo, you know that?" He glanced up, then straightened his back. "All right, gotta go. See you all Monday." Mr. Richards sauntered off in the direction of the park offices.

"Robbo? What was that?" Corky asked.

"Oh, It's a nickname Marsh has for Robert. He asked me if it was ok. Of course, I said yes. I think it's cute. Isn't it cute, Robbo?"

Robbo nodded.

Robbo? Marsh?? Corky screwed up her face. "I guess. I mean, it's a little weird, but he's kind of a weird guy."

"Really? In what way?" Shannon

looked alarmed, spinning around. Corky turned to follow her gaze, both of them watching the teacher saunter across the lawn. He probably knew they were looking at his ass. Probably wanted them to. His pants were too tight and he was kind of pigeon-toed. Corky hadn't noticed that before.

"What's weird about him?" Shannon asked.

"Is Mr. Richards a pervert?" Jaxon spoke loud enough for a passing jogger to slow to a walk.

"No." Corky snapped. "Probably not." She gave the jogger a glare that sent her off running, then turned to the boys. "Why don't you go play on the swings."

"Okay." Jaxon and Robert wandered off. Shannon was staring at Corky, looking shocked.

"Listen, I'm sure it's nothing. Just forget it." Corky wished she hadn't said that. It had sounded like a warning, an accusation even, when she had no reason to think that Marshall Richards had ever done anything weird in his life. Or had he? Surely it wasn't normal to go around handing out

candy to kids in the park? Wasn't that illegal? Probably not when the parents were right there. Anyway, there was something weird about a guy who chose to teach P.E. at a preschool. What do they even do in preschool P.E.?

"Really? Ok." Shannon shifted but instead of getting more comfortable on the bench, she was gathering her things. "I think we're going to go. It was great to see you. Robert had fun."

"Wait, I thought you wanted to tell me something."

"No, it's nothing. It's not a big deal. I was just going to mention that Robert got into Oakwood Academy."

"What?"

"He's going to kindergarten at Oakwood. He took the test, and I guess he did pretty well cause he got in. Anyway, it's not until next year but we're excited." Shannon continued stuffing things into her tote.

"Oh, wow. That's amazing. What kind of test? I thought they took anyone who could pay." Corky snorted a small, knowing chuckle, one that even to her sounded forced.

"I guess it might seem that way, but there's actually a test. It's supposed to be an intelligence test." Shannon paused her gathering. She made her eyes go all wide and shifty like the whole thing was silly. "They say it's a very accurate intelligence test but it's for five-year-olds, so they ask cute questions."

"What kind of cute questions?"

"Oh, you know, like, what do you want to be when you grow up? Or what's your favorite kind of tree? Just stuff like that." Shannon made the googly eyes again, and her voice got all high-pitched and weird.

"Wow, kind of softball questions."

"Uh, yea, I guess so."

"What did Robert say?"

"What?"

"What did he say? What were his answers?"

"Oh. He told them he wanted to be an astronaut, because he loves science."

"Ok. Good answer. What about

the tree?"

"I don't remember. He mentioned it, and, uh...oh, I know. Western hemlock. He told them he likes it because it's our Washington state tree."

"It is? I thought our tree was the apple tree."

"No, I think—,"

"Yeah, it's definitely the apple tree. Anyway, I guess there's no wrong answers, huh?"

"Um, well..." Shannon sighed, as if she was really tired although she'd just been sitting all morning.

"Anyway, we're all going to miss you. I think Jax will go to South. It's supposed to be great. It's practically a private school, with the parents around here. But who knows, maybe he'll go to Oakwood too. He's pretty smart with tests."

"I think the testing is over for this year, but sure, you could look into it. Anyway, it was so fun to see you." Shannon seemed to be in a hurry all of a sudden. "All right, Robbo, time to go!" she called out, even though *Robbo* was already running towards her so she hadn't really needed to

call him or to shout Mr Richards' dumb nickname right next to Corky's ear.

On the way home from the park, after calling Jaxon, then chasing him across the playing fields, and finally wrestling him into his booster, Corky thought back on the morning, examining everything that happened. She conducted these reviews of her days often, with the thoroughness of her monthly fridge clean-out, turning over each thing that was said, sniffing it, examining it for any sign of rottenness, anything that might mean things were going off.

Robert was going to Oakwood Academy. A fancy private school that was probably a feeder into the best private high schools, which was pretty much a one-way ticket to Stanford or the Ivy League. She pictured a blonde young man, striding across a brick-paved quad, textbooks under his arm, an argyle cardigan buttoned against the New England chill. Jeez, Robert was going to Oakwood, not Oxford. He could still grow up to be a loser, and besides, a lot of rich and successful people were very unhappy. She took a few

deep breaths, in through the nose, out through the mouth.

"Jaxon, you awake back there?"
Corky's voice was twinkly, bright.

"Mmm."

"I have a question for you."

"What?" Jaxon sounded wary.

"What do you wanna be when you grow up? It can be anything in the world. An astronaut, a scientist, a bond trader."

"What's a bond trader?"

"I don't know. Don't worry about it. Pick something you know."

"Dog walker."

"What? That's not a job."

"Yes it is."

"No, it's just something you do. Because you have a dog. It's not a real job. How about President of the United States? So you can help people. You can help dogs too."

"I want to be a dog walker! Charlie Breslin told me dog walkers make a load of money and you don't even

have to really walk the dogs because they can't talk so no one will ever know."

"Ok, no! Whoa. That is *not*—you are not doing that!"

"Yes I am. It's going to be my job."

"No it's not. And stay away from Charlie Breslin. He sounds like bad news."

"He's my best friend!"

"Let's talk about something else. Oh, here's something fun: What's your favorite kind of tree?"

"I dunno."

"Well, think—,"

"Christmas tree! I love Christmas!"

"No! You're supposed to say what *kind* of tree. What *breed* of tree!"
Was breed even the right word? Or was that just for dogs? Jeez not the dog thing again.

"I don't know!"

Corky felt the dull thump of Jaxon's feet pounding against the seat.

"Well, you must have one. Everyone has a favorite tree."

"I don't!"

"Sure you do. What about a palm? A palm is nice. Ooh, or a pretty little rose...never mind, forget that; I think that's just a bush. How about an apple tree? Everyone loves apple trees because that's our state tree. You know that, right?"

"I hate apples! I hate trees!"

"Ok, ok, quiet. Let's just have quiet." Corky sighed. She would have to think of a different way to approach this problem, a different path to success, as her therapist liked to say. But it would have to wait because Jaxon was already snoring in the back.

That night as Corky crawled into bed, her husband, Paul, leaned over to snuggle.

"I'm not in the mood." Corky pushed him away.

"Why, what's wrong?"

"I don't know. Nothing."

"Okay. Fine." Paul flopped onto his back.

"Do you think we should send Jaxon to private school? Like maybe Oakwood Academy?"

"What? No. Those places cost a fortune. Why? Do we know someone going to Oakwood?"

"No, not really." Corky knew that if she mentioned Robert, Paul would accuse her of competing with Shannon. The whole conversation would become about some imagined rivalry between her and other moms, and what was best for Jaxon would be entirely forgotten. "I just want Jaxon to have what's best for his intellectual growth."

"Jaxon? Intellectual? Are we both talking about the kid who thinks his butt can talk?"

"He's only five. He's as smart as anyone else's kid." Corky choked on these words because her own research had pretty much confirmed this wasn't true.

"Aww, he's a smart enough kid. He's a *great* kid. I just think private school sucks. There's so much bullying. He gets enough of that in that fancy preschool."

"What do you mean?" Corky rose

up onto her elbows. "What bullying?"

"Yea, Richards. Isn't that the guy you're always talking about? The one all you ladies think is hot? The one you said looks like Brad Pitt?"

"No, eww. In his dreams. Marshall Richards is a loser."

"Ok, well, Jaxon apparently doesn't think so. He said the guy was the coolest teacher at school, and that he told his friend, Robert, that he liked him better, or he was a better person. Or something like that." like a bucketful. But that all made sense. Jaxon was provoked. He was bullied into doing it. "Oh, I'm sure it's nothing major. This afternoon when I came home Jaxon told me he got bullied in the park today."

"In the park? Today? What did he say?"

"He said you ran into one of the teachers. Robertson or—,"

"Richards?"

"He said that? Mr Richards? I was there the whole time. I didn't hear that."

"Not in so many words. I don't know. You know how kids are. He said Mr

Richards was nicer to Robert and had a special nickname for him and it made Jaxon feel bad. So I guess he got upset and dropped a scoop of sand on Robert's foot."

It wasn't his foot, it was his head, Corky thought, and it was more.

"Yea, they weren't being very nice." Corky mumbled. She was still trying to remember some of the details. Hadn't Jaxon dumped the sand *before* Mr Richards appeared? Or had Mr Richards called out to *Robbo* before Corky realized he was there? The sequence of events was definitely unclear. It had been very confusing. Robert had been shrieking and then there was so much commotion. But this made sense.

"Maybe Jaxon needs a nickname?" Corky suggested, trying a different path to success. "All cool guys have nicknames, right? Magic, Steph, LeBron."

"Ok, those are not all nicknames, and all those people have something in common that Jaxon does not. When he gets into the NBA I'm sure his teammates will sort out his nickname problem. In the

meantime, I wouldn't worry about it."

This was just like Paul. He had a way of offhandedly dismissing things that were really important to Corky. And why did he have to bring up the NBA when they both knew Jaxon was short for his age? Also had no aptitude for ball sports. Corky flipped toward the wall and pulled the sheets up.

"Hey, hey, listen, it's gonna be fine. I talked it through with Jaxon and he's not upset anymore. He's okay now."

"What?" Corky twisted back to look at Paul, sniffing. "What do you mean?"

"We talked about it, and we agreed that the whole nickname thing was not a big deal, that cool guys don't need nicknames. Whatever happened at the park definitely didn't mean Mr. Richards likes him less. It probably means the opposite – Mr. Richards knows that Jaxon is a cool dude. And cool dudes with cool names don't need nicknames. Jaxon totally agreed."

"Really?" Corky flipped over to face Paul.

"Yes. Can you imagine if Magic was called Earvin? He wouldn't have

landed a single free throw. He would've been laughed out of the league. He had to have a nickname. Kids called Jaxon do not need nicknames. And you picked that cool name because you are one awesome mom."

"Oh my god that's so true." Corky slid closer to Paul. She stretched her neck to give him a little kiss.

"Mmm," Paul murmured, nudging closer.

Corky pulled away to whisper, "What about private school?"

"Mmm, maybe for high school." Paul was tugging at Corky's nightgown.

"Oh, thank you. You are such a good father."

"You're one hell of a good mom," Paul murmured.

Damn right. It wasn't easy with all the problems in the world. Bullying, favoritism, people who pretend to be your friend but are braggy and entitled. People who think they're kids are so smart but they don't even know that apple is the state tree. Duh, it's Washington!

Anyway, who cares? They had each other, they were doing okay, and Jaxon was a great kid. Because she was one hell of a good mom.

"I try," Corky shrugged, leaning in to give Paul a long kiss.



Gretchen Beyer is a graduate of Stanford University, a former attorney and mother of two. She lives in northern California.



Hudson Delights

Cristina Sanchez



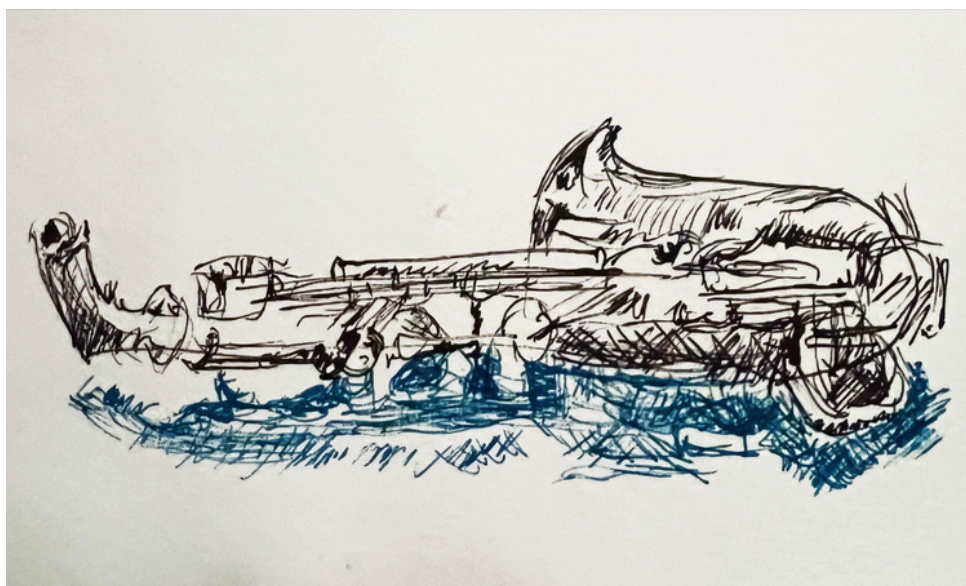
Quetzal Chaos

Cristina Sanchez



Companion Profile

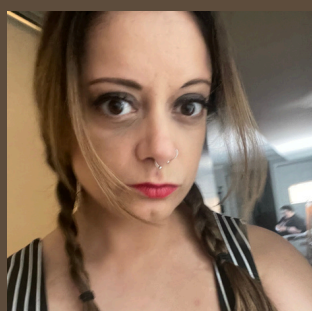
Cristina Sanchez



Earful Delights
Cristina Sanchez



Trees That Haunt
Cristina Sanchez



Cristina (she/they) is a mixed-media queer artist based in New York. They rediscovered their love for art over the past year and now can't live without it. Cristina is a speech pathologist by trade, loves tending to her community garden plot, playing with her quirky rabbits and feline friends, solo traveling around the world, and is a literary lover.
IG: @artbymecristina

Life Without You

By Alan N Webber

I'm seated graveside numbly at White's Chapel cemetery in Southlake Texas. Our minister is providing the committal services for my wife of the past 54 years. Hard as I try to concentrate on the words, my mind wanders between disbelief and sheer panic. 'Rachel, what am I going to do without you?' repeats over and over in my mind.

Preferring the solitude, I'd spent some quiet time here this morning, just walking around. Rachel and I used to come here, having the odd proclivity of enjoying old cemeteries, a diversion to everyday life and the travails of owning your own business. We enjoyed attaching stories to the graves' occupants, trying to one-up each other.

Even though we were living on a mountain in Cave Creek Arizona we knew we would eventually go back home to Texas. We fell in love with this cemetery, this place, under an old oak tree that will shade us for eternity. There has barely been any quiet time since that damn embolism in Rachel's brain burst.

While I had been watching football she'd been in the backyard, preparing for the mild Arizona winters. After the game was over I wandered out back to see if she needed any help, when I found her dead on the ground. She lie there in a flower bed, so peaceful, so beautiful, so serene, yet so lifeless. When I found her I dropped to my knees, wailing at the sky. The coroner said she was dead before she hit the ground.

Since, there has been a steady stream of family, employees, and friends stopping by the ranch with condolences, hugs, food, and difficult moments. They mean the best, but I'm struggling with the multitude of people milling around, awkwardly giving me their condolences, making me more melancholy. They mean well but it's painful, that's what it is.

Our daughter Michelle is inconsolable. Her husband, Mark, has been useless to help her. My solace has been the Bulleit

bourbon kept in a flask with my initials, a gift from Rachelle last Christmas.

From our time here previously, I knew the graveyard was established in 1851 when a little girl from a passing wagon train was buried here. Rachel found that so sad. It wasn't until 1939 when they got around to establishing an act that this was a cemetery. At two acres it's not much of a cemetery, but we loved it.

It's a beautiful day, the humidity level bearable. The morning sun was casting shadows over the Mexican white oaks and the ancient sandstone markers. Looking around during the service, I had a sensation that some of the long-departed folks buried here were also in attendance, casually sitting on their headstones, dressed in the attire of their day, welcoming another soul home. It was Rachel who had put that thought in my head just the last time we were here walking around.

Our son, JR, is seated next to me, a solitary tear running down the side of his grizzled face. His pretty wife, Briana, stands stoically behind him holding his hand. He too is trying his best to stay stoic, but I can tell he's struggling.

Michelle sat on the other side, bawling. Mark leaned dutifully on the back of her chair to try and comfort her. The minister finished the 'ashes to ashes part of his litany, which sets her crying to a new level. It didn't seem as if anyone in our family was really listening to the minister, lost in a miasma of grief. Rachel would surely have scolded us all for not paying attention.

When the minister finished, people started to quietly leave. A few touched my shoulder before walking back to their cars. Me and the kids sat there, not knowing or caring what to do next. I wanted to sit here awhile to reflect on Rachel and our years together. Thoughts of our years together, the trials and tribulations, the good times and the bad, coursed through my brain.

The minister came by, standing in the narrow walkway between the casket and us. I became worried he would fall in the neatly dug hole. Looking up, with a half-smile I thanked him before he continued on to pay respects to the rest of the family.

After what seemed eternity, the

minister left, leaving us standing next to Rachel's casket. The grandkids appeared to pay their respects, looking warily at me, keeping their distance. I watched our seven-year-old grandson walk up to touch the casket quietly saying, "bye grandma." He left one yellow rose. I think I was the only one to see him do that, and I choked back tears. I had no idea a child would think to do that.

Rachel's death would usher in major changes to the family dynamic, as the heart and soul of the family was about to be lowered into the ground, gone to us forever. Without her, the cohesion holding our family together would crack. Sadly, we'd see each other less with me in Arizona, Michelle in Chicago and JR here in Dallas running the family company.

I'd head back to my home on Black Mountain, starting a new life alone. Parents shouldn't bury their kids and husbands shouldn't bury their wives – that's my opinion. I've done both now, having lost our daughter, Ashley, forty years ago from a heart defect. We had her re-buried here at this spot, between Rachel and me. I can only imagine their blissful reunion. I began to wonder how long it would be before I joined them, the

question of the ages.

After a while, we all clumsily hugged. From my vantage point I could see the driver for the funeral home waiting patiently for us to usher the family home. I gently nudged my kids and their spouses towards the limousine for the ride back to JR's house.

I sat up front next to the driver. I wasn't in the mood for conversation and wanted nothing more to be with my thoughts forlornly looking out the window. Rachel and I had started this trucking company forty five years ago with hardly a dime to our name. I was a trucker before that and had made friends with a shipping manager who promised to give us business if I started my own company. Rachel managed to charm a banker who gave us credit to purchase some used trucks and we were off. We worked hard, night and day, eventually building to a 500 truck company, warehouses in three states, our own ranch and grossing \$200 million per year. I wouldn't trade those days when we were broke and working our butts off for all the bullshit in Texas.

In no time, we were back at JR's ranch north of Dallas. It used to be me and Rachel's before we sold it to him and moved to Arizona. Rachel really didn't want to go, but I felt it would be good for JR to establish himself in the business without his old man looking over his shoulder. Besides, I liked the low humidity and golf courses in Arizona.

The property has a casita, which I lease year round so we always had our own space when coming back to Texas. We called it a casita, even though it was over 3,000 square feet. Rachel had put her touches on it. It still smelled of her. The living room had a giant fireplace we spent evenings huddled around. I will probably die here if they ever coax me off that mountain.

Parking in the driveway everyone headed toward the house. I veered off to the casita without saying anything to anyone. I went into the kitchen to get some ice and water from the refrigerator. As I turned around to head to the bedroom, I dropped the glass, ice cubes, glass shards and water spreading everywhere on the hardwood floor.

Looking down at the mess, my temper got the best of me. "Fuck!" I screamed, while putting my fist

through what was a very nice cabinet door. I began to sob for the first time since Rachel passed. "How am I going to live my life without you, Rachel," I shouted angrily.

I noticed the nasty scrape on one knuckle. It took me nearly twenty minutes to bandage one badly cut knuckle and clean up the mess I had made. By that time, I was cried out. Getting another glass of water, I headed off to the bedroom. I laid down on the bed; dreading sleeping alone again tonight.

I must have fallen asleep cause JR was shaking me. "Dad," he said gently, "Wake up. People are starting to come to see you."

"You handle it," I said, rolling over.

"Come on, pop," he insisted. "They want to see you."

I stared at the wall wishing everyone would go away. But, I had to get up to do this for the kids and the employees. Their mother had just been buried, the only reason causing me to get up. I swung my feet over the side of the bed. 'Damn you, Rachel,' I thought to myself again.

The following morning, I drove to the office early. Jr was the president of our company and oversaw the day-to-day operations. I still kept an office, although not used much. The sign outside my office said, John Saxon, Sr. CEO.

The staff hadn't come in yet so the place was peaceful. JR was in his office, already on the phone and catching up for the time he had missed with his mother. I unlocked my office and plopped down in an over-sized leather desk chair, looking at my beautiful and enormous oak desk. It was empty of anything other than a family picture and a small replica of two of our trucks, one black and one white. I never used a computer when I worked full time so there was nothing else cluttering my desk.

My thoughts turned to Rachel again. I felt alone, and useless. I had no official business at the office and now nobody to go home to.

JR arrived with coffee and whip cream, the way I like my coffee. As he set one in front of me I realized I hadn't had coffee today. By now, Rachel would have had made me two cups and sent me on my way with a smooch and a third. That thought hurt like hell.

JR sat in a chair in front of my desk. I could tell he was looking at me for direction. I wanted to blurt out to him I didn't have any damned direction but decided that would be cruel. I was the patriarch and needed to act like one.

JR spoke first. "You, ok, dad?"

'Damn, that should have been my line' I thought.

"Sure, son," I replied smiling. Rachel always said I have a smile people love. "You?"

"I'll be ok," he replied. "I have plenty to keep me busy." He took a sip of his coffee before continuing. "It's you that me and Michelle are worried about."

"Me?" I replied. "Why on earth would you worry about me?"

"Well, dad," Jr replied. "Michelle and I both have lives and kids to go back to that will keep us busy. You've got a mountain to go sit on and do what?"

"I'll find something to do, son," I replied softly. I really had no idea what that was right now but wasn't going to tell him.

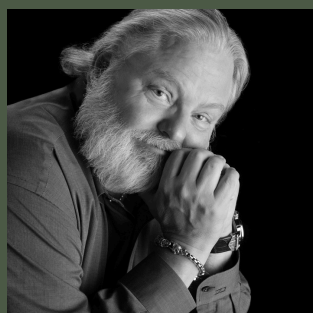
JR, choosing his words carefully, "I can't help but wonder what the hell you're going to do in AZ without mom. Maybe you should consider coming here. There's no reason you can't still do some work here at the office or even the ranch. Consider it, dad?"

He had a point, but I wasn't ready to come off my mountain yet. I really hadn't thought much about life without Rachel before. Now it's all I

could think about. I nodded at him without saying anymore.

JR got up and went back to his office, closing my door behind him. I looked out the window forlornly as one of our trucks passed. I waved and smiled at the driver, but he must not have seen me.

A tear travelled down my face. 'Rachel, how am I going to live my life without you?'



Alan is semi-retired from the transportation firm he owns, now pursuing a writing career. His blog - www.webberswhippingpost.com contains short stories and newspaper commentaries. He is also the author of two novels - Whipping Post & Roll Me Away plus an eBook of short stories named The Whipping Post Chronicles.

The Picture At The Mill

By Jacob Froehlich

"Nothing's the same. Everything's changed."

The bus smelled like wet wool and muddy boots, but Grandpa's nose was crinkled at what lay outside the half-fogged window. Beth let out a deep sigh and pulled herself to her feet, double-checking her satchel to ensure that her camera was secure. She retrieved the backpack I had stacked overhead while I helped Grandpa out from his window seat.

Darrell seemed much like it was when I had visited as a child; a main street lined with a motley assortment of old buildings, some brick with large shop windows, others stick-built and four stories tall, boasting coats of peeling white paint and half-rotted staircases sagging off one side. Thin webs of narrow residential streets spread out in every direction from the town center. Gray-white clouds sprinkled cool rain across the wide surrounding valley.

We led Grandpa out of the falling mist and beneath the awning of a

vacant storefront. Beth looked down the street either way, her face filled with dismay.

"We may not get it today. The light isn't right, I don't have an umbrella..."

"I'm not coming back another day," Grandpa declared.

"We can buy an umbrella. Grandma won't mind if the lighting isn't perfect." Even as I was saying those final words I felt a pang of guilt treating Grandma's wish this way, wanting to rush things, weary from dragging Grandpa out to his hometown, eager to hurry back to the city.

We started off northward to where the shops appeared to contain more signs of life. I led the way, recalling that there had been a gift shop nearby that Grandma had been fond of visiting, as it had once been an old-time drugstore complete with soda fountain, bar stools,

and jukebox. I was going to get an umbrella, but I hoped that seeing the shop might deflate Grandpa's current hostility. Beth remembered the place better than I, and tugged on Grandpa's arm with a gentle smile when she saw the vintage sign, white cursive letters on a faded crimson background. "Hey, here's Allan's. Let's go in for a minute."

The owners of Allan's had made a conscious effort to capitalize on the nostalgia of the shop that had been — the checkered tile, the bar and wall-length mirror on the right-hand side was not only preserved, but glimmering, pristine, as though it were built yesterday. I looked at Grandpa's face to see if he had been altered by the sight, and found to my surprise that his disdain had intensified into a palpable anger. He looked down the aisles with a furrowed brow and deep frown. Beth took his hand and disappeared with him among the shelves, while I grabbed an umbrella from the bin by the door and approached the bored teenage boy standing behind the bar at the register. As the boy lazily rang up my purchase, I peered around the shop, trying to locate the source of my grandfather's dismay. The merchandise was entirely stocked for tourists, as may be expected; many racks of shirts and

goodies with "New Hampshire" or "White Mountains" printed across the chest, capped with the silhouette of a mountain range or a moose. Magnets, stickers, snow globes, wall plaques: all was commemorative, memorial of the existence of the place. Some solo guitar-strumming pop-folk tune that I had probably heard before but would never recognize played through the speaker system. Cigarettes and chewing tobacco were stocked in a display behind the counter, the only products, I imagined, ever attracting business from the locals.

I then heard the voices of Grandpa and Beth, annoyed with each other and struggling to suppress their volume as I paid, and turned just in time to see Grandpa storm out the door with Beth hot on his heels.

"Grandpa, wait—"

I hurriedly thanked the cashier and apologized, then followed them out into the street.

"Your Grandma won't want anything from *that* store, Beth. I've told you time and again, nothing here is like it was. Any

souvenir from this place will only remind her of what is gone."

"Maybe she won't see it like that. Remembering is important to her, and a gift, a trinket, might help her remember." Beth's thin, freckled cheeks were turning red, her eyes showing hints of hurt and rage, yet her tone remained steady and patient.

"She remembers just fine, and if she has any trouble, I—"

"Charlie?"

Grandpa turned to meet the question that was his name, which had come from the mouth of a tall, thickset old man wearing a brown vest over this red and black flannel shirt (a sort of uniform for the local woodsman), leaning heavily on a cane.

"Bill? Bill Lanigan?" Grandpa seemed to have been jolted out of his wrath and into a pleasant daze as Bill Lanigan laughed heartily and shook his hand with such vigor that I thought he might break Grandpa's arm.

"Charlie, where've you been? It's gotta be, oh, thirty-something years since I've seen you in town. Can you

believe what they've done to the place?" Bill looked over Grandpa's shoulder, peeking into Allan's. "How's Molly, she here with you?"

Grandpa couldn't speak at first, looking down at the sidewalk, his mouth opening, then closing again without a sound. Beth stepped in.

"We didn't bring Grandma along because we are working on an anniversary gift for her; a portrait of Grandpa, back in Darrell," she extended her hand and introduced herself and I. Bill Lanigan met us each with a wide grin.

"Grandkids, eh? They've got a whole lot of Molly in them, I can see that!" Bill rested both forearms on his cane, taking on a pensive demeanor. "Me and Rebecca could never have any of our own. You're a lucky old goat, Charlie; having your family and going all sorts of places. We've never gone anywhere; just stayed in town and worked. I just retired two years ago..."

And we stood there in the mist as Grandpa and Bill Lanigan did their best to abridge more than

three decades of life into an unexpected ten minute reunion. Grandpa mostly listened with a soft smile while Bill poured out tales and musings, fond memories and melancholy regrets, all while gazing out at the passing cars with a casual, warm glow in his eyes. Then, approaching the present moment in his account, returned to the topic of the town of Darrell itself.

"I guess it happens everywhere with time, don't it? You're born in a place, learn to love every nook and cranny, call it home, then before you know it, you've become a stranger there. Some houses get torn down, the old shops get remodeled to sell coffee or sandwiches or tee shirts, little tourist traps that you could find anyplace." He chuckled grimly and nodded to the nearby door. "Allan's is one of the only old places left. Seems artificial now though, like they're trying too hard to make it seem as it was."

"It's not just the buildings and the shops, though," Grandpa muttered.

"No Charlie, it isn't. Everything's changed, in more than just looks. I don't know how to put it into words... It feels like something's... broken." Looking towards Beth and I, Bill continued, "This town felt like a living,

breathing thing back in the day. It all worked in unison. I don't know, maybe we're the ones who changed, got older, tired and worn down, focused on our own little problems. But I can't help but feel sometimes like this town is an old ruin, and all of us, even the locals, are just passing through, watching, but no longer a part of it."

A strong gust of wind rolled down Main Street, making eyes water and clusters of leaves lose their grip on the trees. To Beth and I, Darrell seemed like an idyllic small New England town, perhaps a little run down, but the kind of place we were so used to seeing in the countryside; clean, quiet, pleasant. I sensed that Grandpa and Bill could see something that we couldn't, or felt something that we were unable to understand. To my own surprise, even in their dejection, I found myself envying their connection to what Darrell had been.

"Well, enough of that," Bill quickly returned to life, "I have to run along; meeting a few old friends for dinner. You know some of them, Charlie. Remember Ethan Muller? Sam Varney? Hey, why don't you all come along and join

us?"

For an instant, I saw Grandpa's face light up with a youthful hope. But then he remembered his present purpose, remembering that his two grandchildren were still here, and he was still an old man.

"Thank you, Bill, but we have to move on and take this picture for Molly. We are heading down to the mill, hope to catch the 5:30 bus back. The mill... is still there, isn't it?" Grandpa asked, his voice wavering anxiously.

"That old place? Sure is, but hopefully not for much longer. Demolition permitting is slow-going with all the laws protecting the riverfront." Bill chuckled. "Same eyesore it ever was. People want it gone. Kids go there sometimes to do things they're not supposed to. *That's* where you're taking a picture?"

"Might be falling apart, but it was special to us, Molly and I, back in the day." Grandpa responded, and his voice lost the sullen tone which it had carried all day, which it had in fact carried for weeks. He extended his hand to his old friend with a smile. "Great to see you, Bill. I'll come back to have dinner with you soon, I promise. I'll bring Molly along."

Bill took the hand and shook it with even greater enthusiasm than he had before. "I don't see enough of my old friends these days. Ethan and Sam, sure, but we're getting to be a lonely bunch. We'd be glad to have you." And with a final, cheerful salute, Bill leaned into his cane and started off in the opposite direction from which we were heading.

Grandpa stood still for a moment, seeming very distant from the present. Beth gently wrapped her arm around his, and he returned. "I'm ready, lead the way."

"We don't know the way to the mill, Grandpa. You have to lead us." Beth replied.

Grandpa nodded and began walking, Beth on his right arm as I walked along his left. Having left behind the irritability that had previously enveloped him, his expression now caused me equal, perhaps even greater concern; it was a face of confusion, a skeleton of a man lost on his way, a face of senility and dementia embodied. Yet his feet knew the way.

We passed out of the business

district, away from the half-derelict, half-modernized buildings, into a residential area consisting of a number of very large, colonial-style homes with wide front porches and third-floor turret rooms, stately and pristine, the oldest houses in the town. We walked, encountering not a soul, until we reached a place where a long-forgotten set of train rails crossed the street and cut a path to the northeast, running upstream alongside the river Pemigewasset.

We took the forgotten path, strewn with the native foliage of late October — dead brown, gentle yellow, blazing red, — and walked in silence. The rain had stopped now, and the clouds were thinning, allowing a few rays of tired sunlight to warm our backs.

To the left of the path, the land ran uphill into sparse woodland, where the limbs of oaks and maples stretched bare. The river flowed calmly on the right. Tall dead grass poked out through the grayed timber tracks which ran between the rails.

"It's beautiful here," Beth whispered as we walked, "Why did you never bring us down here when we were younger?"

"Didn't I? Perhaps not. I can't remember going down to the mill since... one anniversary with your grandmother... our third, I think," Grandpa replied. Suddenly he stopped in his tracks. Up ahead the leaf-strewn path bent to the left and out of sight.

"What's wrong?" Beth asked.

"I don't want to see it. Not without Molly."

"Grandpa—"

"No, Beth. I fell in love at that mill. Asked Grandma to marry me there. The world was different then, and this valley was filled with magic. Molly and I talking, laughing, running along these tracks, jumping in that river... sometimes I think of our days here, and the memories give me new life, invigorate me in my work, turn my attention towards virtue, towards being a good husband, father, grandfather... so much has changed, and the world has become so grim. I refuse to poison my memories with the darkness of today. And there is no light here for me without her." As Grandpa spoke his face was slowly twisted and dragged downward by pain and

despair, but it was Beth and I who had tears welling in our eyes. Beth hugged Grandpa tightly, and held him there for a long time.

"You are a light for me, Grandpa. You always have been. You and Grandma both." Beth squeezed him, then stood back and looked up at his face. "Do you think Grandma might feel the same about you and the mill? And maybe a picture of you there may do a lot of good for her, and give her new life?"

Grandpa raised his head sharply, meeting Beth's bloodshot gaze. Then he sniffled and nodded.

"Now, we'll walk ahead slowly, all together, and as we turn the corner, I want you to be thinking of Grandma, your days at the mill, of your life together, of the whole family you've created, and of all the lovely times we've had together. Grandma is not here, and times have changed; but you can bring her along with you, and your memories can paint the world in a new light."

Grandpa nodded again and held her hand. Together, we walked onward and around the bend.

We could hear the splashing and churning of the mill wheel before we

could see it. Then there it was: a clapboard red building with yellowed trim, three stories tall. There were several holes in the roof, and several other places where the wood shingles had been torn off by wind, weather, and time. A few collapsed steps led from our overgrown path to a crooked front door left ajar. The mill wheel was on the outer wall of the building towards the center of the river, blackened by untold ages of sweeping through the murky depths. How it had remained intact for so long after the building was abandoned was an astonishing mystery to me, given the state of the rest of the structure. No other building we had seen in the town of Darrell had been left to become so derelict. But Grandpa loved the mill.

"Not so different after all, is it?" He chuckled to himself. Then he pointed to an open patch of grassy hillside leading down to the river. "Molly and I used to picnic here on summer evenings while the band played in Francis Park across the water."

He turned and looked uphill where from the west the setting sun shot warm golden rays

through the trees, over the crest of the hill. "Yes, these woods are alive with fireflies, and cricket songs, and sweet aromas on a summer evening. One night Molly asked me what sort of creatures I thought might roam in an enchanted wood. I think that's what got me into Faery stories."

A soft breeze came down the path, causing the door of the mill to gently bounce against its frame.

"And where did you propose to Grandma?" Beth asked. Grandpa's memories were enchanting, mystifying this place for me, this place which I had only moments ago seen as a crumbling, decaying blemish on the landscape.

"Well," Grandpa nodded down to the river sheepishly and stuffed his hands in his pockets. "Down there in

the shallows."

Beth laughed, starting down the hill towards the water. The fading sunlight danced on the rippling current as she directed my grandfather to stand in front of the river just so, with the mill wheel in the background just over his shoulder. She didn't tell him to smile; she didn't need to. And when my grandparents passed on eight years later, not six weeks apart from each other, Beth and I stood down by that river again, directing a granite bench to be placed in the very spot where he had stood. Beth and I wrote the inscription together, though most passers-by will not think much of it, and youths will laugh at such a cliché:

"May Beauty Give Light to a World of Gray."



Jacob Froehlich writes stories of all kinds, when he can find the time. He lives in New Hampshire with his wife and children.

The Zebra's Legs

By Selene Bey

"Please leave your message after the beep" ...

"Alright lad? It's 09:10 am...and where I am, there's a light wind coming in from the east, probably about 6 or 7 knots I reckon...Anyway, Monday morning 10 o'clock, be at the bus-stop at the top of Bank Road. I've got some business to take care of in town and it'll be good to have you with me, just in case...I presume you're still unemployed since the last time I saw you, so I know you don't have anything better to do. See you there".

Grandpa Jones, ever the diplomat, was as always, at the designated meeting point half an hour before the designated meeting time. He was inside the bus-shelter with his flat-cap concealing his now bald head, a scarf carefully knotted under his clean-shaven chin, and a smart woollen overcoat that always looked slightly bigger on him every time he wore it. He was preparing his pipe, stuffing it with a small bundle of tobacco with his yellowed forefinger and thumb, and every

now and then, checking his watch to see how late I was. I was "7 minutes late" he said, and why was I "dressed like that on a Monday morning and in this weather?". "Like what?", I asked, contemplating my choice of jeans, hoodie, and trainers. "Like a vagrant", he told me. The matter of what was appropriate attire for mooching around town on a cold Monday with your grandpa, would not be resolved as long as there remained a 60-year age gap between us, so I asked him about his aches and pains, new and old, and he asked me whether I was still unemployed. I informed him, as usual, that nothing had changed since last Saturday afternoon, and that I was still *self-employed*, thanks for asking.

The conversation, for the 30-minute bus ride was punctuated, with observations about the state of the roads, the closure of numerous businesses along the bus route, and when the traffic came to a standstill Grandpa

Jones read out information, he deemed noteworthy from the classified section of his newspaper.

"For sale: 3-wheel car with 2 wheels only + free can of WD40'... you'll never guess how much the bugger wants ... 800 pounds! ... What a toe-rag!", he exclaimed, outraged at the audacity.

Later, as the bus slowed down by Kenny's Kebabs:

"There's a psychic in Weston's Way who's offering an 11% per cent discount on seances!", Grandpa Jones announced. "I've heard of a 10% discount...or 15 even", he mused, "but, what kind of a maniac thinks of an 11% discount?", he went on, deeply unsettled.

The classifieds proved to be a source of great consternation. It was replete with one disturbing surprise after another, and following each revelation Grandpa Jones would turn and stare at me accusingly, as if I was personally responsible for placing each one of them. The subsequent information he found about a job in a supermarket for a "Team Happiness Warrior", and a shoe repair shop which repaired only boots and no shoes, led him to conclude that the classifieds should

be taken as a general barometer for the state of society, and according to him the current state was "bloody alarming!".

We got off the bus near the cathedral, and Grandpa Jones pulled a well-worn notebook from his pocket. The address and careful instructions supplied to him by his mate Jack from the pub, led us down an incongruous looking, possibly urine-filled alleyway, behind a newly renovated pub called the 'Zebra's Legs'. The name of the pub prompted yet more scorn from Grandpa Jones, as he preferred pub names to include either the words "crown" or "arms". And besides that, as far as he was concerned, it was quite inappropriate to associate zebras with pubs, as he was sure it would result in more children taking up drinking.

Despite the multitude of biological hazards littering our path and threatening to blemish his freshly polished shoes, we quickly located the door of 35B, since it was helpfully painted a bright sunflower yellow. Grandpa Jones, being very much a details man, pointed it out enthusiastically because he had written down the colour of the

door beside the address. He pressed the buzzer.

"HULLO!", came a lady's voice.

"Hello there. I'm here for Wendy the Liberian please", Grandpa Jones announced.

"Bloody hell Grandpa, you can't ...", but my attempt to interject was cut short.

"D'you mean Scottish Wendy?", the lady replied.

"I don't know about Scottish, I was told she's Liberian...I've got it written down", Grandpa responded matter-of-factly.

"Oh yeah, I'm pretty sure you want Scottish Wendy, just a minute dear...", the woman replied, audibly laughing.

Grandpa Jones, threw a stern look in my direction and sharply drew his fingers across his lips. I was being told to zip it. So, I zipped it and after doing so, I pulled my hoodie up over my head and face as far as it could stretch. A few minutes later, the yellow door opened and out stepped a tiny woman in her 50's with white blonde hair tied up on top of her head in the shape of a giant bow; her dress and shoes were almost the same colour as the door. Her appearance however, failed to provoke the sort of condemnatory comments that my hoodie, jeans,

and trainers had. It quickly became clear that the lady was Scottish and that she was called Wendy, but Grandpa Jones was set on obtaining absolute confirmation on whether Wendy was Liberian. She wasn't. She was a Librarian. But since he had written it down – Wendy and everything associated with her would, forevermore remain Liberian for Grandpa Jones. Eventually, Grandpa handed Wendy 50 pounds and she handed him a brown paper bag which he quickly tucked into his coat pocket. She asked him to send her regards to Jack, and Grandpa Jones, much obliged, said he would.

Throughout the bus ride home, he was quiet and thoughtful. I had no idea what was in the paper bag that could have cost so much, and he wouldn't tell me. The moment we were both supposed to get off the bus, Grandpa Jones instructed me to go on home, as he would head down the road to meet Jack at the park. I did not hear from him again until late in the evening, when after several failed attempts at speaking after the beep, he finally left a message:

"Lad, I said I've just got home now at 10:14 pm, because this afternoon...I smoked all of what was in the bag with Jack at the park and I tell you what, there's no pain at all in my bad knee or in my good one. We went around the precinct for 93 minutes non-stop despite the wind, about 20 knots I'd say, and Jack even made it all the way up to the chip shop without his Zimmer-frame

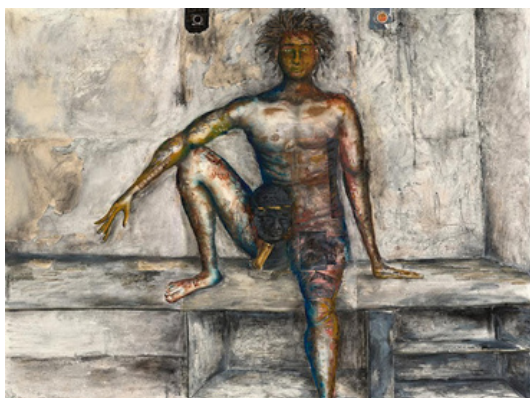
- it was as much as I could do to stop him from throwing it in the fountain outside the shopping center! Tomorrow morning...be at the bus stop, we need more Liberian tobacco".

"End of message. To repeat the message press 1".

"1".



Selene Bey is an English-Algerian writer born in England in the 1980s. A researcher by trade and a dedicated collector of banal but precious anecdotes. She has been published in the Beirut-Based literary and art journal "Rusted Radishes" and by the International Human Rights Art Movement (IHRAM Magazine).



Credible Messenger (Young, Buddhist and Black)

Obie Weathers



Execution Date

Obie Weathers



No Touch Torture (To Death)

Obie Weathers



Birdh bath

Obie Weathers



Friday Afternoon

Obie Weathers



From the Cradle to the Cage

Obie Weathers



Flower Pot

Obie Weathers



One Foot In the Grave

Obie Weathers



The Bastard

Obie Weathers



Small Government Waste

Obie Weathers



Obie Weathers III is the artist formerly working under the pseudonym Moyo – Swahili for “heart”. Obie, who as a teenager was arrested and sentenced to death, has spent the last 21 years in solitary confinement on Texas Death Row. Using found material and media acquired anyway he can, his work emerges from a dim hole in American culture, arriving with the visions of what it is like to be poor, Black, hopeful and sentenced to death in the 21st century.

The existential, political and spiritual themes of his work are often filtered through the Buddhist and yogic practices which have helped heal and sustain him through years of isolation.

Silences

By Sherri Moshman-Paganos

I can't sleep again tonight. Sometimes when I lie awake I hear crickets, choruses of them, chirping, serenading me in my sleeplessness. But more often the night is full of silences and the feeling of longing for something to happen. That's when I imagine the Keitel's dog from next door, baring his teeth, growling deep in his throat. I wonder how long he'll last before he meets the same fate as the others.

I saw the new dog yesterday when Joe and I got back from his business trip to San Francisco. I visited my sister while he did who knows what. When I opened the kitchen door, two robins were hopping on the patio and the air, still a little chilly, was starting to feel soft and springlike. I breathed deeply before I rang the bell next door to get my mail that the Keitels were holding for me. At the doorbell ringing I heard barking. Ruth had told me there would be no more dogs after Rudy. Was this Izzy's idea?

"Shhh! Quiet you damn dog!" Ruth opened the door, holding the dog in front of her, between her knees. He was black and tan with a

long tail that he wagged while sniffing at me. The other dogs had been almost tailless.

"Oh your mail, now where is it... Izzy, where did we put Anna's mail?"

"How should I know?" a grouchy voice called from the bedroom. "Now, just think carefully where you might have set it down."

"Hmmm, not here in the hall," she said, rummaging through some papers. "Let's try the kitchen." She had let go of the dog, who had quieted down but when Izzy walked in, it started growling again.

"Quiet Boone... Nice trip Anna?" said Izzy, tying his bathrobe around his plump body. He picked up a dish towel and cleaned his glasses.

"Yes everyone's fine."

"I see you've made friends with the little fellow," he said watching the dog lick my ankle. "Great dog, isn't he? Of course, he's just a puppy."

I shuddered. "Just a puppy." He had said the same thing

about Rudy and Bruno.

"You know what breed he is?" Izzy said proudly. "No more Doberman, no more Weimaraner."

"I really don't know."

"Come on, guess."

"No, tell me."

"He's a coon dog."

"A what?"

"A coon dog. Chases raccoons. His sense of smell is extraordinary."

The Keitel's house was set way back from the street practically in the woods, so maybe Boone got some practice growling at raccoons back there.

"What does he smell on my ankles?" I asked.

Izzy laughed and snapped his fingers. "Come here Boone."

"That's his name," Ruth shrugged, coming into the kitchen with a stack of letters. "Izzy likes it. Oh, I found your mail."

"Tell me Anna," said Izzy. "Isn't Boone a good name?"

"Just perfect."

"I think so. He's named for Daniel Boone because you know he used to go raccoon hunting."

"How interesting."

"I don't suppose you'd like a cup of coffee," Ruth grimaced.

"Sweetheart, what kind of way is that to ask?" Izzy shook his head. "Try it again and ask her positively."

"That's all right," I said, "I should

get home and unpack."

"Come on, that can wait," said Izzy. "Sit down, have some coffee with Ruth. I'll be back in a minute, I'm taking Boone out for a walk." He put his coat on over his bathrobe and slammed the door.

Ruth reached to the top shelf and pulled down a Melita coffee pot. She had long arms that could stretch to the ceiling and lean fingers that rippled up and down a keyboard. Sometimes when I took the car out, I could hear her charging through various piano concertos, what always seemed to be too *allegro*. Once she told me she played when Izzy was away because he needed silence to read his medical journals. Actually, his psychiatric clinic was in a front extension of the house closer to the street. Why anyone would seek help from him was beyond me, but I guess he was doing something right, as cars drove up and parked out on the street all morning long.

"You don't mind if I smoke?" Ruth asked. She lit a cigarette under the burner. "They're Vantage, low tar. It's only my second today, cutting down on Izzy's orders."

I nodded at Ruth's familiar refrain about her smoking.

She lay the cigarette in a glass ashtray and ran her fingers through her hair. It was cut straight and short, as if it was leveled with an electric razor. Her hands were constantly moving, touching her hair or forehead or clasping together in back of her head.

"With Boone, won't this be a big job again keeping the house clean?" I asked. "You said that after Rudy—"

"Oh I know but Izzy insisted. He doesn't feel safe without a dog, with all the burglaries. The Rosses were robbed last week you know. But I don't care. Let them come in and take everything. I mean everything." She swept her arm in a half circle.

Burglaries of course happen in this posh neighborhood, where clotheslines are not allowed in the back yard because of being too unsightly, where the house owners all hire landscapers and lawn maintenance services. A few years ago I got so nervous that I talked Joe into putting in an alarm system. At first, he grumbled and said it wasn't necessary, but then he said, "Do what you want," not looking at me, on his way out to the garage to drive to work. I'm beginning to realize he'll never retire, 77 years old and still going to the office. That's why I feel this deep ache in my heart.

I remember the first time I saw Rudy. I was halfway down my driveway when this dog leaped out at me. A puppy they called him too, dragging Ruth. She was pulling at him with all her might while she told me casually that they had put their dog Bruno to sleep for not being vicious enough.

"Rudy behave yourself!" She tugged on the leash. Both she and Rudy were long and sharp, like butcher's knives.

I often saw Rudy pulling Ruth around the block, but about a year ago I noticed that I hadn't heard that low growling and I hadn't seen that long smooth brown body, taut with anger. Ruth told me that Rudy had charged at their seven-year-old grandson, playing on the lawn. He wasn't hurt but he was terrified. Rudy's teeth had ripped through his jeans. When their son complained about the dog, Izzy insisted that the child somehow taunted him, that Rudy would never just attack him.

"But do you know, Anna, a little after that, Rudy attacked Izzy himself and tore the flesh from his arm, even his face."

"But why?" I asked. "His owner?"

"Well Izzy was wearing a

different cologne that night, one I'd bought him for Father's Day," sighed Ruth. "Rudy didn't recognize it and tore into him. So, Anna, we had to put him down."

"You mean, you put him to sleep?"

"That's right, took him out of this world."

Before Rudy, Bruno had been gray and ghostly with light colored eyes and had grown up with the three Keitel children. They had kept him in a cage in the basement which he soon outgrew. My daughter used to babysit there and tell me of Bruno's yelping, the kids laughing and tormenting him.

Bruno went crazy from being squeezed into that cage, but not aggressive or violent-crazy, just whimpering and having no appetite. Izzy, as a psychiatrist, should have been interested. But no, that was reason to put him to sleep; he was not ferocious enough for a watchdog.

Ruth was fixing the coffee when I heard barking. Boone came running in, then roly poly Izzy slowly following. He went over to Ruth at the stove, stretched up, she leaned down and they met to kiss. Boone kept barking. Funny, their dogs

always started out resembling Izzy and grew up to resemble Ruth.

"Excuse me Anna," Izzy apologized. "I've got reading to catch up on, some journals came in the mail and I was reading an article when you came over."

After Izzy went into his study, Ruth leaned over and whispered, "*Washingtonian Magazine* ran a terrific article on psychiatrists here. Izzy is ecstatic at the number of crazy people, he's got more patients than ever."

No wonder that Izzy's little round bald head, which reaches Ruth's shoulder, has been looking even rounder and happier these days.

"Ruth, I have to get moving." I picked up the mail.

For the next few weeks, I could hear Boone growling. When Ruth wasn't working in the garden with her long slender gloves or practicing the piano, she was pulling Boone on the leash around the neighborhood.

Then one day I saw Izzy, his arm bandaged, with scratches on his face. And Ruth was taking walks in the neighborhood, alone.

I tried to tell Joe about their dogs, but he just buried himself silently behind the newspaper. How I yearn for that old Joe who

used to talk to me. Did he really exist?

At night I'm haunted by dreams of Rudy, Bruno and Boone rattling their cages like the ghosts of Christmas past and present. I listen for barking. I think about Izzy, and how he needs help, and who can treat him? And I wonder at the

carelessness in the heart of others.

I imagine choruses of crickets, chirping, serenading me in my sleeplessness.

And I long to get one of those little miniature dogs, a poodle maybe, or terrier, just to keep me company in this sad silent world.



Sherri Moshman-Paganos is a writer and former educator based in Athens Greece, where she publishes a monthly travel blog. She has had poetry and prose published in the *GW Review*, the *Remington Review*, *Body Literary Magazine* and others. She is the author of a poetry collection and two memoirs: *Step Lively: New York City Tales of Love and Change*, and *Miss I wish you a bed of roses: Teaching Secondary School English in Greece*.

Bubba D

By David Cameron

I stopped off on the way home from the hospital to let my Uncle Darcy see his new favorite nephew. I was two days old, so I can't swear this is how it went down, but it's what I've been told.

When Mom pulled back the blanket to let Uncle Darcy see my sweet face, he said, "I would have preferred you bring me a girl baby," but he smiled when he said it and couldn't help putting his index finger into my tiny palm to stimulate a grasping reflex. "This one's going to be trouble for sure."

From that first day, my connection with Bubba D became the defining relationship of my life. He called me "Runt" (I was eleven pounds at birth), and I called him "Bubba D" since "Bubba" was my childish rendering of "Uncle." An East Coast intellectual, he loved being a "Bubba."

My parents meant well, but they were overwhelmed with four children and didn't know what to do with a fifth. They weren't even Catholic, just exceedingly fertile. Their vision of the good life was meatloaf, American-made sedans,

vacation at the beach, gin rummy with friends, and voting (when they voted) for the person most likely to maintain the status quo. They permitted laughing out loud but did not encourage it. "Don't be silly," was my mother's frequent directive.

Mom got headaches and hated noise. "Lisa, come get these ragamuffins. One moment's peace is all I ask. It's all I ever ask." Lisa was my oldest sister charged with maintaining a child free zone around my mother. She accepted the mantle of homegrown nanny for three, but she rebelled at adding a fourth.

Bubba D, my mother's baby brother, came to the rescue. He picked me up to take me to his upscale apartment as often as he could, complaining loudly, "You know I can't be bothered with any snot-nosed kid!" I was in on the joke.

While Mom eschewed silliness, Bubba D reveled in it. He nurtured it like a rare orchid. His shtick was straight out of the Uncle's Golden

Playbook. One day, I sat on his living room rug coloring while he leafed through the latest edition of Architectural Digest. He looked up and said in a sonorous voice, "Runt, come here." I dutifully rose and stood by his chair. Solemnly, he held out his crooked right index finger and said, "Pull my finger." I hooked my finger with his and pulled unleashing a rumbling, thunderous fart from deep in his bowels.

That first time was a revelation. At only five years old, I thought I had exercised a theretofore-unknown superpower. The killer was that he didn't laugh but only raised his eyebrows and widened his eyes in a look of extreme surprise.

The pull-my-finger stunt progressed quickly from a one-off gag to an expected ritual, even a religious obligation, every time we were together. I dissolved in peals of laughter, while he never showed more than the raised eyebrows and wide eyes.

My uncle was an antique dealer specializing in antique shows as fund-raisers for non profits. He worked mainly with wealthy, older women, and he told of luncheons and negotiating sessions where the old biddies worth millions would dicker over his fees. Regaling me with his stories, he put a colander on his head like a fine hat and flounced

through his kitchen exclaiming, "Oh, Dahling," and "Well, I never!"

Bubba D kept calling me Runt, and I kept growing into the nickname's absurdity. In the summer, I worked for my uncle traveling the East Coast with him in an old panel van, setting up shows and always looking for the hidden antique gem in somebody's barn or dusty attic.

He instructed me in the finer points of antique furniture. "Bubba D, who's gonna buy that dirty old thing?" I asked one day when he nearly fainted over a grungy chair we found under a canvas tarp in a South Carolina carriage house.

"That is not dirt, Runt, that is patina. It is the glorious residue of time."

Cruising the road with the windows down, Bubba D taught me to sing harmony using Beach Boys and Motown cassette tapes as my primers. He also introduced me to Zora Neale Hurston, Indian curry dishes, and the pieces I needed to acquire for a classic wardrobe.

As close as we were, there were parts of my uncle's life I was not privy to. He disappeared for days at a time, and sometimes, when he showed up again, he was sour or pensive.

I was shy around girls, but occasionally I had a girlfriend I would take to meet him. Without fail, when I took the girl home, all she could say was, "I just love your Bubba D!" Women, in general, loved Bubba D, and now and then I'd try to set him up with a date of his own. "What about Miss Larkin at the pharmacy?" I'd ask.

He'd screw up his face and turn it into a joke. "Miss Larkin be barkin'."

"OK, what about April Chance, that cute reporter who did a story on your antique business? She laughed through the whole interview."

Again, the grimace. "Miss Chance don't dance,"

My uncle traveled during most of the fall semester of my senior year, and Mom got on my nerves with her excessive cigarette habit, an addiction she rekindled when my nearest brother joined the Navy. She smoked before she married but gave it up at Dad's insistence. Dad had been out of the picture for over a year, though, having moved in with his former best friend's almost ex-wife. Mom and I tried to stay out of each other's way.

One day, I went to Bubba D's apartment and let myself in using the key he gave me the year before when things at home got weird. "In case of emergency," he had said. In

my rancid mood, I figured exposure to excessive second-hand smoke qualified.

I went to use the john, and lying on the tank was a copy of a magazine called Blueboy with a muscled, shirtless man on the cover. What the hell? I turned a page at random and found photos of a naked man with a fully erect penis in various poses. I quickly closed the magazine and looked away, but the images seared my retina. My brain filled with static, and I wondered if I could pretend I hadn't seen what I had seen. Then I began grasping for rational explanations. Then it sank in.

I was born without "gaydar," and there was no opportunity growing up for me to develop that power. Homosexuality was on the periphery; a subject kept in shadows. It didn't come up in school. My church was filled with captains of industry and their families who didn't speak of such things in polite company. I knew boys who were bad at sports. I knew boys who walked with a less-than-manly gait and gossiped with the girls. We threw around the usual mean slurs — faggot, queer, fairy—but that was about masculinity more than sex.

Politicians and TV preachers

blasted homosexuals as sinful and the root of our moral decay, but I never paid them any mind. The photos I had seen in Bubba D's apartment were out of context. I would never have connected such material with my beloved uncle—until I did.

Making sure to put the magazine back exactly where I found it, I left the apartment without even peeing, leaving no trace I had been there. I never asked Bubba D about the magazine, but as I thought about his habits and especially his resistance to dating women, I saw patterns I'd never noticed before.

Through that senior year of high school, my relationship with my uncle cooled. I still helped him with his business when he needed extra muscle, but I had to force myself to act naturally, which was impossible. On occasion, he gently tried to broach the subject of our growing awkwardness, but I feigned ignorance and made lame excuses.

"I've just got a lot on my mind," I would say.

"Can I help?" he countered.

"No, you know, I've just got stuff to decide. I don't know yet what I'm doing after I graduate."

"I'll take you to visit some college campuses."

"Nah, that's OK. I'll figure it out."

When the time came, I took a path of least resistance and enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania in Abington where, with my grades, I got in easily. They even gave me generous financial aid. Less than an hour away, I could have commuted, but I got a job on campus so I could afford to live in a dorm.

Happy to be away from home, I pretty much forgot about my Uncle Darcy. I did make an appearance at Christmas but it was hard to generate the forced cheer required. My uncle showed up for Christmas dinner and brought everyone presents.

"Hello, Michael," He said, standing before me. He hugged me, and I tried not to go rigid. I had to give him credit for the effort, but I couldn't bring myself to cut him slack. As cool as I played it, though, his calling me Michael instead of Runt was a gut punch. I wanted to cry.

Bubba D looked a little gaunt, not the doughy physique I was used to, and I noticed he walked slowly, almost carefully. He moved ham and peas around on his plate but lacked his usual gustatory joy. He didn't even drink any eggnog. After staying an hour, he slipped out while no one was looking.

In the spring semester of 1985, Reagan had been elected a second time on the strength of his promise that it was “morning in America.” We rocked to Springsteen’s “Born in the USA,” New Coke hit the vending machines, and Michael Jordan was the NBA’s “Rookie of the Year.” Exam Week loomed, but my grades were decent. My main concern was what I was going to do for summer employment.

Lisa filed for divorce and started living at home with Mom. God, no, I didn’t want to go back there. I thought of how much fun I’d had the previous summer riding the highways with Bubba D in that old panel van. I missed that. I missed him.

College exposed me to differences in the human race I’d never seen before. A few guys in my class were openly gay. I watched them when they didn’t know I was looking, but other than being better dressed than me, they seemed normal enough.

A friend introduced me to an older couple living near my dorm, and they liked to have students over for dinner. On the same night they invited me, they also invited Dr. Vickers, a tenured professor in the English department. To me, any professor was academic royalty, and I was in awe, but Dr. Vickers—

Paul—turned out to be a regular guy. He was passionate about Eagles football, and he had renovated his entire house.

Paul talked to me like a grown-up instead of a freshman, and he seemed genuinely interested in my budding passion for Reconstruction-era American history. Later, I told my dorm R.A. I’d met the professor and how much I liked him. He said, “You know he’s gay, don’t you?”

I decided that maybe I had been too hard on my uncle and that we should at least have an honest discussion about what I had learned to call his “sexual orientation.” Plus, I needed a summer job. I called his work number, and an automated voice told me the number had been disconnected. What disturbed me more was that when I tried his home number, it, too, was no longer in service.

I immediately called Mom. I could hear her lighting a cigarette and inhaling deeply. “Michael, I don’t have time to talk right now. How should I know what my crazy brother is up to? Wait, he did tell me he moved to a farm in Queens.” A farm? In Queens? Mom had the address somewhere, but she would have to look for it when she had time.

I found a job that summer in Abington bussing tables in an Indian restaurant where I was the only employee who was not family. The pay sucked, but their curry dishes were excellent, and I often wondered what Bubba D would think of their vindaloo. "A good vindaloo," he always said, "Brings the heat but serves it with kid gloves." That was the way he talked—classy. I subleased an efficiency apartment, and to my great relief, my roommate shacked up with his girlfriend at her place.

Mom finally called with Bubba D's address—a P. O. Box. I couldn't imagine him not driving that old panel van from pillar to post, but I figured he'd found a sweet, new gig where he could broker deals for investment-grade antiques working the phone from the comfort of his home. The damned old rich biddies would have to come to him.

I wrote my uncle a long letter, read it, balled it up, and tossed it in the can. Some things need to be said face to face. Then I wrote a short letter saying, "I'd like to come see you if that's OK." I agonized over how to sign it. Should I use "Runt" or go with "Michael?" I went with Michael though it made me sad. I drove to the post office to buy a stamp and mailed it that afternoon.

The following week, the first thing

I did when I came home from work was to check the mailbox in my shabby apartment entryway. After two weeks, I had given up on a response. Four weeks later, though, I received a square envelope, and inside was a birthday card from my uncle. It read, "Dear Michael, you didn't think I'd forget your birthday, did you?" Truth was, I had forgotten my birthday.

He went on to write that now wasn't a good time for me to visit, but maybe in a few months. "I would like to see you, Michael," he wrote. "It's been too long." I inhaled and exhaled. In a few months, I would be back in school. Why couldn't I go now?

When I tossed the envelope onto the kitchen table, a Polaroid photograph slipped out. In it, my Uncle Darcy sat in a rocking chair on the front porch of a house. He looked thin, and he had what appeared to be a purple bruise on his face. Behind him stood a tall, equally thin man with a bad haircut. His hands were on Bubba D's shoulders. On the back of the photograph were three letters in my uncle's handwriting—"Bob."

On a Tuesday in mid-August, my mother called saying, "Michael, I need you to come pick me up and take me to see

Darcy."

"I'm working an extra shift the next couple of days, but we can go Saturday." "I'll be ready at 9 a.m. tomorrow."

"Mom, I've got to work. I told them I'd do extra."

"9 a.m.," she said and hung up.

Mom didn't say why our trip to see Uncle Darcy was so urgent. On the drive from our house in West Chester, she critiqued my appearance and complained about Lisa's lack of motivation. The air conditioning was on full blast, and I made her crack her window and keep her cigarette outside.

Mom wouldn't say anything about Bubba D, but she picked at her cuticles every time I brought him up. When we got nearly to Secaucus, we exited I-95 and headed east toward the Lincoln Tunnel. Through the tunnel, we dropped down to 23rd Street past the Flatiron building, but instead of heading up to the Queens-Midtown Tunnel, she directed me to Bellevue Hospital. I had never driven in New York City, but Mom navigated, and we lucked into a parking spot just a block away. As I started to get out, she grabbed my knee and said, "Michael, I need to tell you something." Tears welled up and her voice caught. "Your Uncle Darcy is dying of AIDS."

My stomach clenched. I'd heard of AIDS. It was supposedly a gay man's disease. God floggers said it was the gay man's punishment. Whole swaths of the gay populations of San Francisco and New York City were being decimated.

There were rumors about how it spread. Some said you could get it if an infected person spit or wiped their sweat on you. Mostly, though, I heard the virus was transmitted through gay sex or shared needles. AIDS patients were the new lepers, the embodiment of those "cast into outer darkness with weeping and gnashing of teeth." Their friends couldn't mourn openly for fear of being shunned as well.

"He can get better though, can't he?" I asked, my wishful thinking revving into overdrive.

"No, Honey, there is no cure."

"Can I see him?"

"I think so. We can try."

I didn't know at the time that Bellevue Hospital was treating more AIDS patients than any hospital in the country. They turned no one away, despite the fear and uncertainty swirling around the disease. The medical staff at Bellevue had been forced to accept a new reality. With death from AIDS a 100% certainty,

their role was not to heal, but to comfort and accompany.

From the information desk, we found which floor Bubba D's room was on, and in the elevator, Mom told me about his last few months. She told me the "farm" where he lived was a house in Queens where volunteers took care of people with AIDS in a family setting so they didn't feel isolated. He had been diagnosed with HIV just after Christmas and had called immediately to let Mom know. Frantic, my uncle thought he may have exposed us all. Exercising her powers of denial, Mom chose to put it out of her mind. She certainly didn't think to tell any of her children.

Bubba D's virus blew up overnight, and he soon showed the characteristic lesions of Kaposi's sarcoma, a rare cancer. This final curtain call, however, was courtesy of *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia. He was bed-fast, and the nurse at the desk told us he might be unresponsive.

We gowned up outside his room, tying on sterile masks and pulling on latex gloves. "Don't remove these protective coverings for any reason," a nurse instructed. "It's for your own protection. We think the virus is only transmitted by body fluids, not casual contact, but we're not 100% sure. Better safe than

sorry."

When we entered, a tall, slender man wearing no protective gear stood up from a chair by the bed. I recognized the bad haircut from the photograph. Only, it wasn't a bad haircut. Up close I could see his hair was falling out in patches. Bob.

Bob said, "Hello" and moved aside to the corner of the room. We came closer. Mom let out a single sob before biting it off. My uncle was a skeleton in striped pajamas, his head wrapped in a yellow bandana. Bubba D's eyes were half open but cloudy, and his breathing was shallow and raspy. An oxygen tube snaked to his nose, an IV drip connected to a PICC line near his collarbone, and a heart monitor beeped softly.

Mom took his left hand in hers and said, "Hi Darcy, It's Bet."

No response.

"We love you, Darcy," she said. "All the kids say hello."

No response.

She looked at me with panic in her eyes. I shrugged. Her face in her hands, she turned away and silently wept.

I stood on his other side and looked down at the man who had been my uncle, my father, my counselor, my cheerleader, my

mentor, and my guide into a world of beauty and sophistication I would have never known without him. My heart ached with regret over how I had distanced myself from him in the last year for something so inconsequential as his desire to be himself and to love authentically. He had given so much to me, and I had thanked him by judging him and withholding my affection.

I said, "Hi, Bubba D," but it came out weak. I cleared my throat and tried again. "Hi, Bubba D." Stronger this time. As I spoke, I looked at my

paper gown, the latex gloves. With my left hand, I peeled the glove off my right hand and threw it on the floor. I reached down with that bare right hand and hooked my index finger around my uncle's right index finger. Gripping firmly, I gave a vigorous tug. For a few seconds, there was nothing. Then I saw the slightest smile play on Bubba D's chapped lips.

With effort, he whispered, "Hi Runt."



David Cameron writes poems and short stories in Western NC where he lives with his spouse, Kathryn and son, Will. His work has been accepted by The Razor Magazine, Floyd County Moonshine, Literary Heist, and Rural Fiction Magazine, among others.

Dead Time

By P.M. Alexander

It always finds a way to be smoky. I'm not sure we've ever seen a fire, and maybe we never will. But it still manages to coat my face thick and sting my eyes to dry tears. The historians and temporal scientists have their theories on how the world got this way, between radiation and atmospheric ignition. My money's on an asteroid that happened to strike the continent's artificial carbon sink at the right moment, coiling time into a super-dense nova. I was disregarded, told the positioning of the earth and the strength of the sink made it impossible. I caught a few snickering whispers after I floated the idea in an all-hands meeting: we're just their collectors, after all.

Before the temporal barrier fell and we had to go underground, I wanted to be an English teacher. I wasn't the biggest reader, but it let me be of use to someone other than myself. Interacting with kids was a bonus, even if it was through tortured worksheets and grammar exercises. It was a life of impact and sweater vests, until it wasn't.

I give my ashboots a final tug, then limp away from the choral jump point. I know the mission for the day and where they need me to go. Sending someone back in time is easy; putting them in the right location is harder. So, I enjoy the little walk as much as I can, as much as one could in the burnt-out past.

Some things managed to survive the barrier's demise. An odd metal structure. A withered tree. A pool of some bioluminescent algae, giving some uncanny jade light to the red landscape. We had to collect some of it a few months ago for examination; after he returned with some glowing samples, what was left of Lee could fit into a shoebox. The temporal biologists took samples of him too.

They send some of us to collect sociological elements. Stuff like lifestyle items or written documents help the historians piece together what happened and when. That's separate from the chemical collectors, who take air and water samples for the

scientists to know which areas were safer from the barrier's destruction. Both inorganic, though.

Biologics collection is different. Me and twenty-nine other greybeards get sent back to collect living or near-living matter. If something can survive here, maybe we can figure out how to live above ground again. After some messy trial and error, we figured out how to collect organisms right: Faraday-lead collection boxes, rules on exposure limits, and a ban on leaving anything behind, especially if it's a part of you.

If we do all of that, and we just happen to be lucky that day, it's an airtight process. If we don't: Lee.

I'm coming up on the ridge now. A few more clicks and I'm at my target. The elevation begins to pick up here, and I push the protective padding on my knees to their limits. Everyone in my department knows about my bum leg. When it's all said and done, and they bother to figure out my pension status, I'll get some medical support for it. But until then, I'll limp along, scanning and collecting what they need, hoping my other leg doesn't go bad too. This place is dangerous enough as is.

Things were better once, before we had to flee below the surface. I'm old enough to remember that, and

hopeful enough to think it can get better. That's what people have always done after a tragedy: pick up and keep moving.

We do it for us, for our kids, and for the far off future we will never experience. Worthy causes for a species too stubborn to die. If this is how I can help, piecing together mementos from a dead planet, I'm going to do it, aching leg and soft scientists be damned. Humanity, crude and special, is worth it.

I make it to the top of the hill, looking over a destroyed community built on the plateau. I let the leg rest for a while, and survey the new terrain. Most of it is still rubble, smeared by time back in on itself into an indiscriminate char. But I can see one figure in the mid-range, scanning away diligently at the wreckage. Collectors rarely get sent out in pairs, so an accidental run-in is worth talking about. I stagger down the embankment and make my way over to him.

He's compact and pale, turning his standard-issue goggles into a dash of cobalt paint on a ghostly canvas. He doesn't see me until I'm too close, spinning around and pointing his scan rod at me.

"Who?" Standards have been

lowered, some might say desperately. But with his yellowing teeth and garbled voice, I have to think they can draw a line somewhere.

"Collector Burkart, serial number sixty-six, operational designation Bravo Yankee."

He pauses and sniffs. "X. Eight hundred. Cee-Dee." He looks young enough to have grown up entirely underground, his speech a product of AI teachers. A generation raised on all of the techs, all of the "love", and none of the good sense. That probably explains him still holding his scan rod towards me, as if it could do anything other than upload a grainy radiograph of my circulatory system.

"It's good to meet you, X. You're pointing that backward." He flips it around, before catching himself and holstering it. "What's your operation for this jump?"

He checks his temp-pad and rattles off his orders. "Standard collection. Sociology. Look for culture."

"Right." I figure a compliment is the best way to keep the interaction going, especially seeing how antsy he is to get back to work. "That's important work. They keep me on biologics, but I know a lot of good sociology collectors."

His twitching feet seem eager

to return to the wreckage, but he pauses before they can take him. "Am sorry about Lee. Seemed good man."

Word travels fast. Fear travels faster. "He knew the risks, more than anyone," is the best thing I can say. We weren't close. None of us really are. But his funeral has found a way of rattling around my brain every time I've jumped to the past since. "He was one of the best biological collectors we had."

He seems relieved to finally turn away. "Yes. Example. Will follow in biologic training."

What? "X, what do you mean? And speak--" I'm too loud, he's getting jumpy-- "Please, speak clearer. Are you reclassifying to be a biologics collector?"

He swallows and flexes his hands, before speaking deliberately. "Y-yes. Need replacement. Me."

I'm the oldest of our cadre, but even our youngest has to have two decades on this guy. Better to keep the biggest risks within the senior collectors. "X, how long have you been out here?"

He checks his temp-pad again. "Four-eight stan-units. Recalling me in one-two."

"No, not--" I have to stop

myself from letting more frustration out. 'Stan-units' must be 'standard-units', our measurements for how long we get sent back for. Minutes get weird through the timestream, so we go by some sort of calculation of the moon and gravity. We don't have to understand it, just read it off of our mission briefings when needed. "I mean how long have you been doing collection runs?"

"Oh." He doesn't use his temp-pad this time, but his long pause makes me think he should. "Four. Sixteen started training."

Sixteen years old. When I was sixteen, I was failing algebra and girls, not doing time collections and hearing gossip about dead co-workers. "You're young, X. Biologics collecting is dangerous, even more than sociology."

"Lee," he says, staring at me through the slits in his goggles.

"Yeah, Lee." I swallow down something rising in my throat. "He was a good man. He left a lot behind. A wife, children." I look for any recognition of those concepts in his stony face. "If you still have time on your contract, maybe they'll let you stay a sociological collector, or transfer to a desk position for a while. But it's a lot more dangerous as a biologics collector." I don't say I think he's young for the job. I don't say that I think he shouldn't have

been allowed to transfer. I don't say his rough boyhood shouldn't be fodder for the greater good.

"Know!" He stamps his foot, before smoothing his patchwork uniform. "Know. And now you know. So please leave. Have long day."

We take a moment, looking at each other. Maybe if he got a little more sun, and figured out a face that wasn't angry, he could be me. He could be my kid. Now, he's just a dead man walking--no, not even a man, just a boy. I have nothing left to say to him, or at least, nothing that'll take him off his path. I nod to my future co-worker, my future mourning, and trudge away, leaving him to the past.

Leave him to the past. Lee's burnt, shriveled body, not even longer than my forearm. Leave him to the past. The way his kids looked, condemned to lives of grief and hypotheticals. Leave him to the past. All of the conditions they make us waive, the injuries we're supposed to accept as "the cost of doing business." Leave him to the past.

He hears me before he sees me.

"I know you think this is it!" He turns, ready for me this time. "That this is the peak of your life,

the only way of getting out from underground! You're wrong!"

"Don't know shit!" We meet almost face-to-face in front of his collections. "About me, life, or what can I do!"

"I know you well enough!" He scoffs at that, if what he does can be considered a scoff. "I bet you think you're being a hero, that this is the noble thing to do for a man in your situation."

He cocks his head, letting me know his opinions on my reading of him. "How you know that?"

"Because, goddamnit, we all do!" He doesn't flinch from me this time, but I can still see some recognition in his widening eyes. "We're all here for a reason, because we think we can make a better world for people back home. But you can die out here, X, and those same people are going to miss you like hell when you do."

"Only you can do this?" He rises to meet me now, puffing his chest out and sharpening his gaze. I'd be proud of his defiance, if this was a different conversation. "Your sacrifice is only that matters?"

"No, god no." I sigh, the years of experience weighing on my chest. "I'm an old man. I don't have much waiting for me when I get back. But, you? X, you have your whole life ahead of you, a full life with people

who love you."

"Have no one," he whispers, just above the constant dull breeze. He breaks eye contact, looking into desolate histories I can't see.

"X, I'm sure that's not--"

"HAVE NO ONE!" His scream echoes across the landscape, across each burnt-out tree and broken home. If I had my glasses, I could swear I saw some tears forming under his goggles. He sniffs, then exhales. "No time for this." He checks his temp pad and squares his shoulders.

"You can find them, X. They're out there, I promise. Whatever's happened, you can build something for yourself. Lee did." I'm pleading now, more than I'd like, against his resolute stance.

He looks at me, and for the first time, he speaks clearly:

"Lee's dead."

He takes a step back, and answers the buzzing on his temp pad. His suit sparks and scratches; his form freezes, then fades. He leaves me to the past.

#

I've forgotten my temp-pad. Sure, I'm keenly aware of its snug fit against my arm, but I don't bother to check it. Today's

collections of old tree bark and leaves can wait until tomorrow.

He's going to die. He's going to get trained up, he's going to get sent back, he's going to make a mistake, and whatever's left of him will be poked and probed for data. His misshapen life will amount to nothing more than a footnote and lost potential. And the bastards who sent him, the scientists and academics and navel-gazers, will have nothing to say, other than *what a shame, what a good kid, let's honor his sacrifice and get another collector ready to go.*

I don't know where I'm going at this point, dragging out my trip to the past into an infinite contemplation. I do know what I'll get when I get back: some variation of an ass-chewing for not collecting anything, along with reports from our newest biologics collector that I went crazy on a collection run. So, I'll take what peace I can get out here.

We went from primordial sludge, to being the dominant species on the planet, to hiding underground. Maybe we lost something along the way, something that made us special. Did losing decency make the temporal barrier break? Mercy? Caution?

No. They lost it. The brains and smiling faces and weak handshakes, content to see us burn

alive. And I'm just playing errand boy for their ritual sacrifice, a calculus that lost legitimacy the minute they sent a boy to die.

But not today, at least. Whatever today is.

Today, I'll just find something to amuse myself with in this hell before I go back to another. I'm on a far corner of the town now, far from where I jumped in. I survey the landscape behind me, and find nothing of use. But, there is a glimmer in the foreground; something's shining at me through the ash. I trudge closer, with my knee making itself known the whole way. It's half-buried in some sulfuric white powder, but I can pick the neck of it up just fine.

It's a bottle.

It's a precisely shaped, undestroyed, glass bottle, with a sloshing brown liquid on the inside. It seems to sweat in my hand, lazily unaware of everything that's gone wrong outside of it. It's not procedure to eat or drink on duty, and especially not on a collection run. All the brains need are some good scans and no surprises. But here it is: the most perfect bottle of root beer there ever was. Probably the only one still around, too.

I think I remember this brand;

it had a smiling dog on the front label. I was allowed one, only one, if I had my chores done and had been good that day. I first asked for it because of the dog. I kept on asking for it because of how it tasted: perfectly sweet and not too bubbly.

The label's mostly burnt off now, leaving the shadow of a canine smile. Chronal radiation will do that if you're in it for too long. We were given a preponderance of meds to keep us out here as long as possible; they'll glow in us long after we're dead. But the fluid still bubbles beneath the cap, waiting for someone to take it off and enjoy. The one perfection in an imperfect world.

Butterfly effect. Grandfather paradox. Hawking radiation. Everybody has their buzzwords, but they all land on one point: don't fuck with the timestream. But one small bottle of root beer won't kill me.

Right?

I'm not a scientist. I'm not an engineer. I'm not even a soldier, and anyone can be one of those with a gun and a reason to kill. I'm just what's left.

My comms patch beeps. I have 10 standardized time units until they call me back. So five minutes. Or a minute. Or ninety seconds.

I'm not a mathematician either. I turn around to the flattened

world around me. This could've been a grocery store, or a school. Maybe even a home. I should feel something light and reassuring about this speck of humanity. Something that doesn't show up on a collection log.

But it's the other type of nostalgia; bringing back memories you never wanted to think about again. A warm life. Needs and wants met. The satisfaction of a cool drink on a hot day. How you lived. How you never will again. And everything you've done to survive since.

Five standard units left. Better make this count. *It's fine, I reassure myself, no one will miss one root beer.* I resolve myself to this one selfish moment, after years of service. I am allowed to feel something that isn't desperation.

I want to feel something that isn't desperation.

My hand strains on the top; it doesn't budge.

Goddamnit. It's not a twist-off.

I thought they discontinued these. My grubby hands always found a way to get mine open, or at least find an adult to help. I look around me, looking for any hard edge to get the cap off. Three units left.

A molten strand of rebar pokes out of the ground thirty feet away. I nearly trip over myself trying to get there, to get anywhere that's not now, but the simpler then. The bottle scrapes the edge, taking some of its glass head with it.

Two standard units now. Carefully, no mistakes, just like they would want, I take the jagged edge

to my lips. I'll bleed for this, I don't mind. I can bleed for life.

One standard unit. The liquid tumbles down and hits my tongue.

Then, some sparks. A flash. A future.

A flame.

Bitter.



P.M. Alexander is a junior at American University, studying Economics and International Relations. "Dead Time" is his debut short story, based on the character-driven science-fiction he grew up on. When he's not reading or writing, he loves to walk his Boston Terriers and boulder.



Cause And Effect

Rudra Kishore Mandal

Artist's Statement: A moth with golden wings got caught in a spider's web. The predatory spider moved towards the victim, as I looked on. I felt pity for the moth and intervened, scooping the moth out of the web, scaring the spider. I set the moth free. Suddenly a bird snatches it away in mid-flight and devours it. I stood there gasping at the lesson I was taught.

My Heart Has a Mind of Its Own

Rudra Kishore Mandal

Artist's Statement: The eternal battle between the heart and the mind tears us apart. We can't decide which one to follow, though we know that the mind controls everything. Still I believe that my heart has a mind of its own and is beyond control. It harbours dreams beyond anybody's reach. It is capable of the utmost cruelty and tender love. It breaks and yet it does not decay.



Promises of Promiscuity

Rudra Kishore Mandal

Artist's Statement: Love, sexual desire, morality and censorship and the inability to express what we actually feel because of how others will perceive and judge us, keeps us captive. To love without caring for social sanction has the capacity to set us free. The promises that promiscuity holds for us and the reason why it is such a forbidden fruit!

The Stigma of Being an Ostrich

Rudra Kishore Mandal

Artist's Statement: 'Ostrich Syndrome' is a term used in psychiatry to define a situation of wilful ignorance towards uncomfortable situations. Ironically the syndrome is so named because someone ignorantly believed that an ostrich sticks its head in the sand when faced with danger! In this era of communication and information boom, it is criminal to remain wilfully ignorant. When we should be forming more strong human bonds, all we do is stigmatize each other with imagined demons!



The Ventriloquist

Rudra Kishore Mandal

Artist's Statement: 'Control' defines our existence today. Our civilization thrives on it. It helps us tame ourselves and others to exercise authority and dominance. We are constantly exerting control through violence, manipulation, commands or pleas trying to stay powerful but it is all just an illusion. Yet we try to play with others as puppets forgetting that we are puppets too.



Born and brought up in Kolkata, Rudra finished schooling and moved to Hyderabad to join Sri Venkateshwara College of Fine arts (affiliated to Osmania University). After graduating they have worked as a graphic designer over a period of 6 years in 3 different cities of India. They resumed creating independent artworks in the varied mediums of painting, digital graphics and art installations after moving back to Kolkata in the year 2008. They have exhibited in group shows

nationally and internationally in collaboration with Alliance Francaise De Hyderabad, American Center, British Council, Goethe Institute, Consulate General of Italy, Italian Ministry of Culture, Eurasia, Danshauspiu, Spazio Tempo Arte, AIAPI, UNESCO, Queer Asia, Burning Man Festival, Amnesty International, Blackwall, SOAS University London, British Museum, KCC and ICCR in Kolkata, and India Art Fair, Delhi, The Art Society of India, Mumbai.

Book Review Of Caroline Helenasdotter's 'Whispers of the Nordic Draugr'

'Whispers of the Nordic Draugr' by **Caroline Helenasdotter** is an erotic romantic thriller inspired by Nordic Mythology.

The author has fantastically interwoven a fantasy world of Nordic mytho creatures existing in a human world. However, what sets the book apart is the way the author has figuratively interlinked society's perceptions of the mytho characters.

For instance, they talk about Tomte, the guardian of farmlands. Figuratively a Tomte represents all those invisible individuals who support in bringing food to our table. When the author says thanking Tomte, giving food to it brings blessings, it in a way highlights the need to thank and support the invisible farmers of the society. The core theme of the book is love, a love that dwells in the darkness.

Through the character of Ulrik the draugr and his love with a human

woman Katarina the author weaves a tale of passion and victory of grit, courage and kindness. The character of Katarina is perfectly etched as a woman who believes love can win battles more than sword. Her ability to rise above the mundane societal perceptions makes the readers see the world of Draugrs condemned for a life of darkness and evil in a positive light.

The author also sheds light on how an individual rise above his circumstances through Ulrik. Though Draugr are condemned, with determination and self discipline Ulrik manages to live in the world of humans. Figuratively his character represents a human trying to adapt himself or herself back to the society after being condemned for their certain acts.

Now coming to the romance and erotica aspect in the book. The

author has dealt with it very sensitively allowing the leads to build up a proper emotional connection before their physical love life is explored. The love making is explained in very detail over three to four chapters and each session of lovemaking is made different enough to make the reader feel the heat and passion the characters are experiencing. This part of the book is strictly adult content and hence its cautioned that despite an interesting narrative of a fantasy world, the book is for those who are above 18 years of age.

The author has also delved deeply into the concepts of Nordic Mythology that talk about ancient laws, laws in the land of demons

and also the rules of ending a demon. The book takes you through these concepts and laws with Katarina, a human who decides to fight for her survival and also for the safety of her lover.

Another aspect that's worth mentioning in the book is the symbolism of fire. It says a Draugr can be killed only with fire. Symbolically it meant the purification of evil within a Draugr as Draugr is born out of darkness and it's the fire that the author finally uses to symbolise the union of souls for eternity. An interesting read that's both entertaining and thought - provoking.

Title: Whispers of the Nordic Draugr: A Steamy, Mythological Romantancy

Price: Ebook \$2.99 / Paperback \$10.29

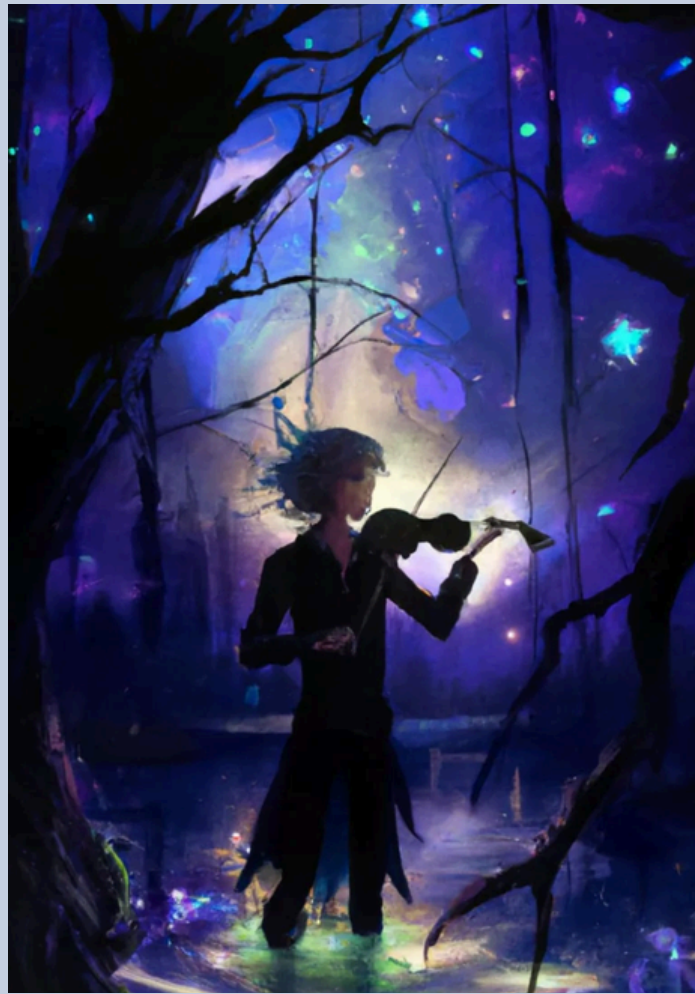
Publisher: Förlaget Annasdotter

Publication Date: April 30, 2024

Page Count: 279 Pages

Purchase Link:

[**Buy Now**](#)



About the Author:



Caroline Helenasdotter is a Swedish author born in 1986, living in the south of Sweden with her partner and two small children, aged 3 and 6. She holds a bachelor's degree in political science and language from the University of Lund. Helenasdotter writes steamy, folkloric, historical fantasy about women over 30 years old in Scandinavia. Helenasdotter's first book, *Saga of the Swedish Water Spirit*, was released in 2023. This book won a Bronze medal in the IPPY's prestigious Independent Publisher Book Awards 2024 in the

Erotica category. Her second book, *Whispers of the Nordic Draugr*, came out in April 2024. It is a romantic fantasy with a fairy tale approach. In July 2024, Helenasdotter will release the first short story in her series *Lustful Legends*, which consists of erotic short stories about women encountering magical creatures in historical Scandinavia. At the end of 2024, her book *Carolean Snow* will be released. This historical fantasy is inspired by King Carolus and his infamous soldiers, the Caroleans. Helenasdotter has lived and worked in Switzerland, Norway, Portugal, and Russia, and she is fluent in Portuguese. When not writing or spending time with her family, she enjoys practicing yoga, martial arts, and running. Helenasdotter is a Taekwondo black belt and a Capoeira graduada.

Book Review of Rishikesh Upadhyay's 'Stress in Plants'

'Dr. Rishikesh Upadhyay's Stress in Plants: The Hidden Half' is an essential read for anyone interested in the complex mechanisms of plant biology and the ongoing struggle for agricultural sustainability in an era of climate change. The book delves deeply into the multifaceted challenges plants face due to environmental stresses and the implications these have on global food security.

The book provides a thorough examination of how stress affects plant metabolism, growth, and development, placing particular emphasis on the need to understand these processes in order to improve agricultural productivity. Dr. Upadhyay does an excellent job of linking the physiological, biochemical, and molecular reactions of plants under stress to their overall ability to adapt to adverse conditions.

One of the key strengths of this work is its interdisciplinary approach. Dr. Upadhyay integrates concepts from plant physiology, ecology, and

molecular biology, making the book accessible and relevant not only to plant scientists and agricultural professionals but also to policymakers and students.

The book paints a vivid picture of the threats to crop productivity posed by climate change, illustrating that plant stress is an issue that cannot be overlooked if we are to meet the food demands of an ever-growing global population.

What stands out about *Stress in Plants* is the actionable knowledge it offers. Readers will find the content immensely helpful in building strategies to mitigate the negative effects of plant stress, enabling sustainable crop and agricultural production. Whether you're a seasoned scientist or someone new to plant sciences, the book's clarity and depth of information provide invaluable insights.

Stress in Plants: The Hidden Half

is a must-read for those seeking to understand the crucial role plant stress plays in agriculture and global food security. Dr. Upadhyay's extensive research and

approachable writing style makes this book a vital resource for anyone looking to contribute to sustainable agriculture in the face of climate change.



Title: Stress in Plants: The Hidden Half

Publisher: Cambridge Scholarly Publishing, United Kingdom

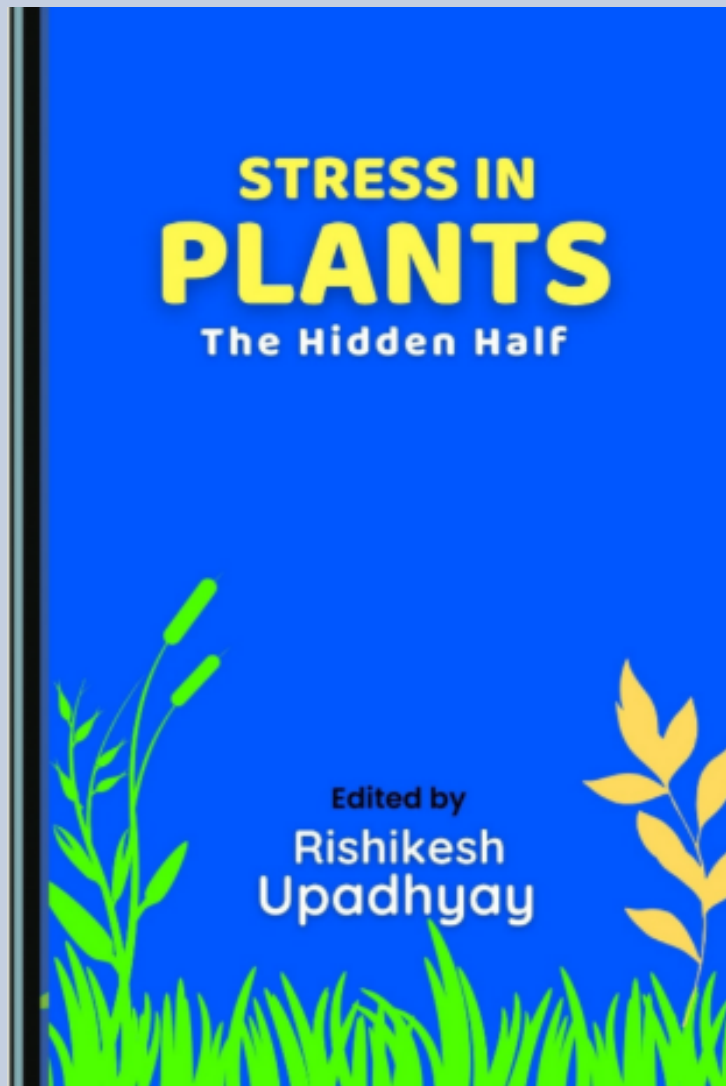
Publication Date: 6th December 2023

Page Count: 282 Pages

Price (Amazon): Hardback: USD 84.85, Paperback: USD 43.58

Purchase link:

[Buy Now](#)



About the Author:



Dr. Rishikesh Upadhyay was born, grew up and lives in Bhanjang Basti, Haflong, a small Nepalis' hamlet in the district headquarter of NC Hills (now Dima Hasao), India. He is an Indian writer and professor, best known for his writings and teaching. He writes articles, nonfiction titles, scientific articles, book chapters, poems, children's, short stories, etc. He holds a BSc Hons from Haflong government college, an MSc, MPhil and a PhD from Assam University, Silchar. He has spent the past decade working and teaching in higher educational institutions. His works have appeared, quoted and cited in several international journals and books of repute. Dr. Upadhyay is currently a professor (assistant) at Assam University affiliated, Haflong Government College, India. You can find him online at Google Scholar and LinkedIn.

Book Review of G. C. Nightwalker's 'Dreams of Perfection'

Author **G C Nightwalker's 'Dreams of Perfection'** is his debut book that revolves around a 17 year old girl named Arine, whose boyfriend Aman suddenly disappears and no one seems to remember of his existence apart from her and her friend Sheela.

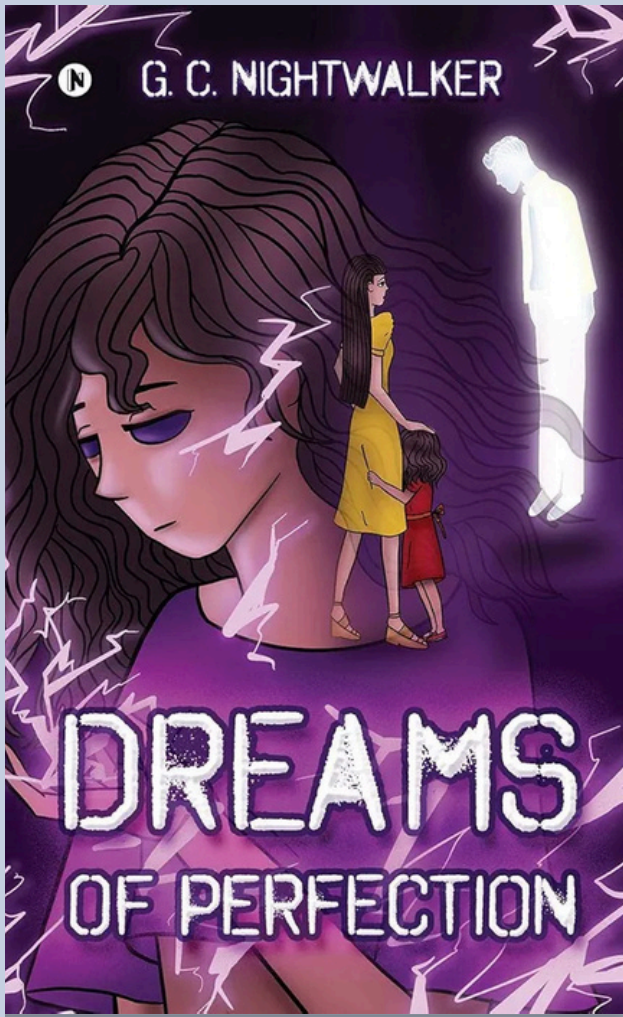
The book takes a massive turn when Arine and her mother Alexa, who are plunged unexpectedly into an unfamiliar realm and have to navigate it with the assistance of people whom she (Arine) doesn't know she can rely on.

Arine has been given powers, which she has no clue how to use. Moreover, she is put to fight a war against dark angels as soon as she regains her consciousness with her astral body and its powers.

All characters in the book are mostly of the age range of 15- 18 years. So Nothing is as it seems can be the foundation of the book/story. Just when you think you know this character very well just then it seems to polarize and leave you stranded just to start afresh.

The book feels like you are watching a web series wherein each chapter unfolds a mystery where every character has a backstory. The author uses a lot of greek mythology characters whom people are familiar with if they are readers of 'Percy Jackson'. The book is a great pick for readers who are into power fantasy and sci-fi genre.





Title: Dreams of Perfection

Publisher: Notion Press, Notion Press Media Pvt Ltd | No,50, Chettiyar Agaram Main Road, Vanagaram, Chennai - 600095

Page Count: 598 Pages

Publication Date: 26 February 2021

Price:

Paperback: ₹531/-

E-book: ₹89/-

Purchase Link:

[**Buy Now**](#)

About the Author:



Author G.C.Nightwalker, is the pen name of Mr. Gopal Chakraborty. He adds Nightwalker in his name because he spent too many sleepless nights writing this novel. His first novel 'Dreams of Perfection' was published in 2021 and second – 'Sword and Flame' – An Afterthought of a Dream in 2023. He is multifaceted personality from being a young author at the age of 24, to running a successful you tube channel and posting content related to movies, video games and reaction breakdowns.

At a young age of 24, he is a writer of two books already, also a self-taught pianist and singer song writer. He came up with the idea of this book series back when he was 11 years old and since then this has been his 8th attempt.

He is a gamer. His first ever publication was in his school magazine a short story, which later became a precursor for dreams of perfection.

He also very recently majored from college in mathematics. Loves to paint and is active on displaying his artwork on Instagram mostly on abstract topics.

Book Review of John Muro's 'Pastoral Suite'

'Pastoral Suite' by **John Muro** is a collection of poems that beckons readers to embrace the quiet moments of life, those in between hours when the noise of the world fades and the beauty of nature takes center stage. Muro, with his masterful command of suspended time, transports us from our hectic routines into a serene, abundant life filled with intricate details of the natural world. His poems vividly depict wind-shorn nests of lichen, leaves hanging like paper lanterns, and flecks of gold drifting downstream over moss-softened stones. This collection serves as a beautiful meditation, reminding us of the healing power of nature and the tranquility that poetry can bring.

The primary theme of *Pastoral Suite* is the sacredness of the natural world and the present moment. Muro's poetry is a celebration of the everyday beauty that surrounds us, encouraging readers to find peace and splendor in nature's details. It is a call to reconnect with the earth and to appreciate the calm that

comes from observing and reflecting on the natural world.

Pastoral Suite is intended for poetry enthusiasts and anyone seeking a respite from the chaos of modern life. It is perfect for readers who appreciate detailed, evocative imagery and those who find solace in the natural world.

Muro's poetry stands out for its rich imagery and detailed descriptions. He skillfully uses language to create vivid pictures that draw readers into his serene landscapes. Each poem is a journey through time and nature, inviting readers to pause and reflect. Muro's ability to convey the beauty and wonder of everyday scenes is particularly striking. His work restores a sense of awe and wonder, encouraging readers to look at the world with fresh eyes. In poems like "DayBreak," "Preserved," "Approaching Arcadia," "After a Storm," and "To my

Grandchildren,” Muro captures the essence of nature’s beauty and the profound impact it can have on our lives.

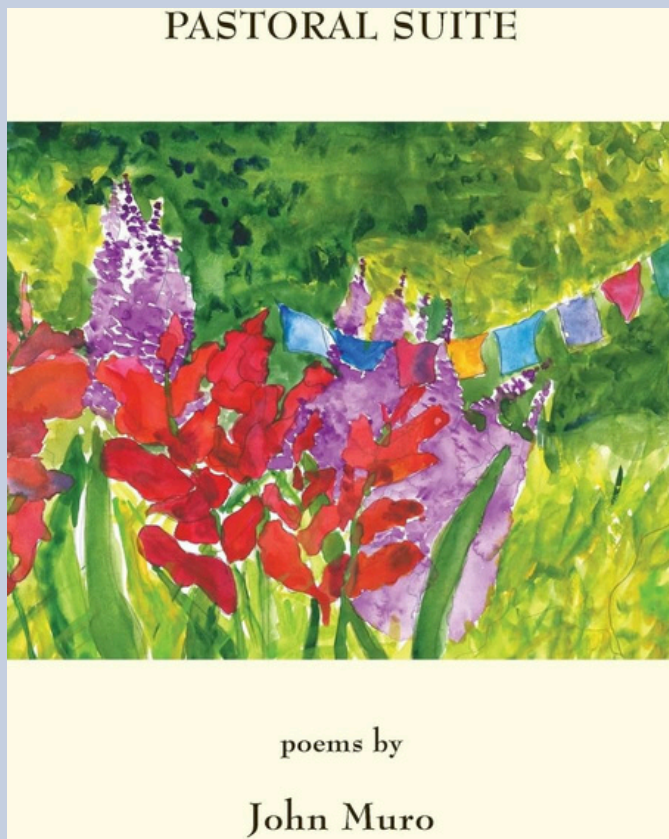
One of the most compelling aspects of *Pastoral Suite* is how it encourages a pause from life’s busyness. Muro’s poems invite us to take a step back and appreciate the small, often overlooked details of the world around us. His attention to the beauty in the commonplace and everyday is both refreshing and inspiring. Personally, I found myself pausing to reflect on the wonders of nature that Muro so beautifully captures in his work. His poetry has a calming effect, providing a much-needed escape into a world of calm and contemplation.

Pastoral Suite has a profound impact on its readers, offering a sanctuary from the noise and stress of daily life. It serves as a reminder of the healing power of nature and the importance of taking time to appreciate the beauty that surrounds us. Muro’s work is a testament to the transformative power of poetry, showing how it can transport us to a place of peace and reflection.

I highly recommend *Pastoral Suite* to anyone looking for a moment of tranquility and a deeper connection with the natural world. John Muro’s poetry is a gift, offering readers a chance to slow down and find beauty in the everyday. This collection is a true gem, deserving of a broad audience. I give *Pastoral Suite* a 5-star rating for its exceptional imagery, skillful use of language, and its ability to evoke a sense of wonder and calm.

“*Pastoral Suite* walks us through life with such amazing detail and beautiful depictions. When I read these poems, I catch myself pausing from life’s busyness to take in all the wonder of this world. John brings attention to so many of life’s gifts which present themselves to us every day in nature and in life’s experiences — if only we would stop to reflect on them. This book does exactly that and fills our minds — and hearts — with wonderful reflections of wonder after wonder.





Title: Pastoral Suite

Publisher: Antrim House

Page Count: 176 pages

Publication Date: 13 June 2022

Price: \$20/- or ₹1510/-

Purchase Link:

[**Buy Now**](#)

About the Author:



A resident of Connecticut and a lover of all things chocolate, John Muro has authored two volumes of poems – In the Lilac Hour and Pastoral Suite – in 2020 and 2022, respectively. Since the publication of his first book, John has been nominated three times for the Pushcart Prize, as well as the Best of the Net Award. Most recently, he received a 2023 Grantchester Award. John's work, which is often inspired by nature, has appeared in numerous literary journals and anthologies, including

Acumen, Barnstorm, Connecticut River, Delmarva, Grey Sparrow, Sky Island and the Valparaiso Review.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to all of the contributors, readers, and supporters who have made 'The Hemlock' possible.

To our talented writers and artists, thank you for sharing your creativity and imagination with us, and for bringing your unique voices and perspectives to our pages. We are honoured to showcase your work, and we are continually inspired by the passion and skill that you bring to your craft.

To our readers, thank you for joining us on this literary journey, and for embracing the power of the written word to connect, inspire, and move us. Your support and enthusiasm mean the world to us, and we are continually motivated by your passion for the arts.

Finally, we would like to thank our staff and volunteers, who work tirelessly behind the scenes to bring each issue of 'The Hemlock' to life. Your dedication, hard work, and passion are the driving force behind our publication, and we could not do it without you.

Thank you all for being a part of 'The Hemlock' community, and for helping us to celebrate the beauty and power of the literary arts. We look forward to continuing this journey together.

*The Hemlock
Journal*

ABOUT THE HEMLOCK

The Hemlock is an idea as potent as the name it bears. It refers to a plant from the Carrot family which is an age-old herb and also to an ancient poison known to Greeks that supposedly killed Socrates, the great philosopher. Likewise, art heals us but at the same time, it possesses the ability to kill us, if not used well.

The Hemlock Journal is a space built for writers to learn, explore, grow together, and be a unique source in reaching the distant perspectives of the poets and storytellers to the tribe. Our prominent aim is to help writers advance their careers, and establish their brands by providing a global platform.

We are a dedicated team with a common purpose, united to enlighten as well as delight the crowd through our passion. We hope to inspire and positively impact the world around us.

We welcome writers and poets from around the world to share their works of art and literature through our journal irrespective of their background, gender and ethnicity.



ABOUT THE ISSUE

Layout and Design By
Shazia Parveen

Front Cover Art by
Rudra Kishore Mandal

Back Cover Art by
Rudra Kishore Mandal

As Winter symbolizes a period of warmth, coziness, introspection, and transition from Autumn to Spring, our 'Winter 2024' issue takes you on a journey of comforting winter evenings by the fireplace, with a cup of warm cocoa, poems, stories, and heartwarming thoughts that provide the warmth of the literary world. It also includes book reviews so you can pick up your next read without spending hours searching for recommendations. May these words offer solace and inspiration as we embrace the quiet beauty of the winter season.

Managing Editor

Divyank J.

Executive Editor

Julia

Online and Print Editor

Shazia Parveen

M
A
S
T
H
E
A
D

Visit

thehemlockjournal.org to read more

Write to us

thehemlockjournal@gmail.com



GET YOUR WORK
Published!

ACCEPTING SUBMISSIONS FOR THE NEXT ISSUE



thehemlockjournal@gmail.com