

2010 - 2020



Live encounters

POETRY & WRITING

FREE ONLINE MAGAZINE FROM VILLAGE EARTH
OCTOBER 2021

RANDHIR KHARE
Indian Writers
FEAST OF DIVERSITY

COVER ARTWORK BY EMMA BARONE



©Mark Ulyseas

Luang Prabang, Laos. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.



SUPPORT LIVE ENCOUNTERS. DONATE NOW AND KEEP THE MAGAZINE LIVE IN 2021

Live Encounters is a not-for-profit free online magazine that was founded in 2009 in Bali, Indonesia. It showcases some of the best writing from around the world. Poets, writers, academics, civil & human/animal rights activists, academics, environmentalists, social workers, photographers and more have contributed their time and knowledge for the benefit of the readers of:

Live Encounters Magazine (2010), *Live Encounters Poetry & Writing* (2016), *Live Encounters Young Poets & Writers* (2019) and now, *Live Encounters Books* (August 2020).

We are appealing for donations to pay for the administrative and technical aspects of the publication. **Please help by donating any amount for this just cause as events are threatening the very future of Live Encounters.**

Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om

Mark Ulyseas
Publisher/Editor
markulyseas@liveencounters.net

Donate

All articles and photographs are the copyright of www.liveencounters.net and its contributors. No part of this publication may be reproduced without the explicit written permission of www.liveencounters.net. Offenders will be criminally prosecuted to the full extent of the law prevailing in their home country and/or elsewhere.



CONTRIBUTORS

RANDHIR KHARE – GUEST EDITOR

ANIKET PATHAK

ATMAN MEHTA

DEVANJALI SARKAR

NADIA SEN SHARMA

NISHITA LAKHWANI

PRIYA HAJELA

RANI WILFRED

SAHYA SAMSON

SIDDHARTH MATHKAR

SUDIPTA MUKHERJEE

VANDANA PORIA

VIGNESH BALASUBRAMANIAM

Randhir Khare is a distinguished writer, artist, teacher and theatre personality. He is the recipient of numerous national and international awards for his unique contribution to culture and education. His 37 volumes of poetry, fiction, essays, translation from tribal dialects and other writings as well as his seven solo exhibitions all explore themes of identity, belonging and the struggle to stay human in a violent and fragmented world. His memoir THE FLOOD & AFTER: A Memoir of Leaving will be appearing soon. He has spearheaded an initiative to enrich formal education through the experience of the arts. Randhir is a founding contributor to Live Encounters Magazine. <https://randhirkhare.in/>



RANDHIR KHARE FEAST OF DIVERSITY

Art is not the prerogative of the arty or the learned or the specialist or the 'trained' or for that matter the 'experienced'. It is a universal gift that has been bestowed on everyone, though realised by few; this is the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is, this the common air that bathes the globe (borrowing from Whitman).

The writers and poets who have prepared this feast come from varied backgrounds and achievements as their profiles will reveal. However, what should concern us here is not 'who they are' but the experience that they are willing to share with us.

Poet Laureate Siddharth Mathkar's song-like poems are alive with youthful expression and energy powered by the bravado and assertion of his generation. Though his themes are many he explores them with a clarity and single-mindedness that are typically his very own.

Intensely reclusive, young Nishita Lakhwani's poetry comes from sources deep within. This is the first time that she is sharing her work. To her, what matters more is the healing power of poetry and the levels of celebration it raises her to.

Randhir Khare. Photograph by Rani Wilfred.



Stone relief, Hampi. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

Atman Mehta writes from a space within him that is also occupied by fiction, essays and cinema and shares their common spirit of concern, heartfelt feeling and protest. What strikes one in these poems is their empathy and penchant for taking sides.

Vignesh's poems impress with their lean and intense brevity. Sharply etched images don't run riot but sink in deep and spread within. It certainly isn't easy to pull off the effects that he manages, releasing drop by acid drop, image after image, heavy with spirit.

Aniket Pathak approaches the page with hard nosed realism pickled in certitude...he is certain about uncertainties and is constantly willing to knock himself down then lift himself up again just to knock himself down. It requires an unusual depth of honesty and courage to do this.

Sahya Samson has the gift of a story-teller, spinning a narrative effortlessly. What is interesting is her ability to bring alive even the smallest detail with a subtlety that speaks for itself. There is luminescence in her writing, uplifting the experience.

In Devanjalee Sarkar's hands, poems come alive - words dance and lines move to the rhythm that they set for themselves, acquiring a life and character of their own. She is able to make this possible because she is also a visual artist, dancer and film maker, each discipline impacting on the other.

Sudipta Mukherjee's short story is beautifully crafted with its own idiosyncratic language and syntax. It unfolds like a spoken word story, propelling the reader along and finally walks away leaving the person thinking about the mystery of being human.

Nadia Sen Sharma's narrative delicately balances between intimate reflection, simple poetic diction and the overpowering feeling of vulnerability. Its classical linearity helps the reader to negotiate hidden complexities.

Priya Hajela's finely wrought story is razor sharp, as it moves inexorably towards the end with unforgiving clarity. The matter-of-fact tone which colours the narrative is unsettling and the closure is perfectly executed with alarming suddenness.

Vandana Poria creates a space around the reader, as her stories evolve swiftly, enveloping with their atmosphere, moods and feelings of otherness. There is no 'telling' here as she swiftly delves into the very spirit of her stories through action which shakes alive the senses.

Rani Wilfred's ease with the language of poetry is remarkable. She digs deep and excavates symbols and images which are subtly expressed, blending sound and sense effortlessly while creating passageways of perception to help us see within and beyond.

Enjoy this feast of diversity and share it with others.

Aniket Pathak is the co-founder of *StoneSoup Studios*. He's a scriptwriter, filmmaker who aspires to tell stories that drive progressive discourse, help us expand our understanding of each other, love deeply & live better today than we did yesterday.



THE USELESS LOVER

There are some moments when the heart tears himself apart
for not being a genius painter,
for not being good enough to capture the beauty he witnessed in your absence.

Sometimes in the middle of the night he bleeds to write you a song,
but damn the punk is no musician either.

The tenderness of his soul is not reflected in the melody of his voice;
It comes out just as bad no matter how deeply it hurts.
He longs to wail but does not accept being any less good than Hugh Jackman!

So that's him the talentless, pathetic loser;
With no skill, no class, no beauty to show for.

He's only a silly lover,
with nothing but his hopeless ability to love.

Aniket Pathak

I'M NOT THERE

I would like to give up the need to make any sense,
And instead venture into the abstract & embrace it's ways
that are uncertain & intense;

I want to lose language & forget all the words that tell me how to feel,
disintegrate into silence & live with wounds that never heal;

I want to tell everyone I love them and run away when they love me back.
I don't know if my poetry is a prayer or a protest or just a banal existential hack!

I want to be both a hermit & a hedonist but please don't keep a score,
Don't ever ask me to stay, I am already walking out of the door.

I am on my way to nowhere,
don't call my name
I'm really not there!

I don't want a home anymore,
I want annihilation by chaos!

BEGIN AGAIN

We will fill up the empty sky with the fullness of our being again;
Our empathy will rain upon indifferent lands,
& the seeds of love we plant will find new spaces to grow again;
Our grief will shape these gardens,
where colourful flowers blossom to their unapologetic beauties,
where caterpillars are unafraid to shed their innocence & claim their individualities
as wholesome butterflies,
where kids make new friends,
& lovers of all ages find their spots of solitude again.

I am weary that these sound like empty promises,
but hey they aren't!

These are pictures that I hold in the wallet of my heart,
so that in this moment of pain,
where each day is FUBAR on a new level,
where all the cries for help are drowning my sense of perspective,
I will look at these pictures with all my hope,
And find my ways to live again!

MEETING A POEM

Sometimes a Poem visits me,
without any agenda or anything to say;
Her love language is non verbal
& I lose myself in picking up the cues,
failing to live the moment that is fading away.

I see the sun fall on her face,
finally claiming the reason for his existence;
I watch her leave with her nonchalant grace,
standing my ground in wishful protest & persistence.

I know not why a poem visits me,
But I know the privilege
of a poem finding me
when I needed to be found.

PARENTS & POLITICS

“I will marry a Muslim”, I tell my mom blatantly,
each time she engages in casual everyday bigotry.
I respond to her fears of the world
with a threat directed at her home;
Thinking that the torch of my rational angst will light up the darkness
of her prejudiced existence.
But instead, it ends up burning a thread that held us together.
Another of the handful that we have left.

My father keenly posts hateful messages on his Facebook wall;
As if it's a routine post-retirement thing to be done after a morning stroll.
He's hooked to the dopamine of the digital karma;
Feeding on the supplies circulated by the IT cells of the vanity dharma.
Of course he uses whatsapp facts to tell me where it all went wrong.
& Then calls me a communist when I persist with fact-checking for too long.
We stop talking to each other until we start watching cricket,
and then forget everything after a six or a wicket.

“Please don't bring politics into this house”,
yells my mom when we are back at it again.
“We are ordinary people, with ordinary lives!
Let's leave the nation to the ones in power”
Before I can ask who gave them the power, a week goes by.

And then when it's time for them to leave, the separation anxiety kicks in.
It delivers regretful punches to the gut,
making me blame myself for ruining their short stay
And for that you Bigoted Jingoist Patriots, I will never forgive you!

2 KINDS OF SADNESS

At the risk of oversimplification, I want to tell you that there are two kinds of sadness in this world:

1. The lesser kind & 2. The richer kind.

The lesser kind are born out of everyday disappointments that don't last the test of time.

Like toxic parents they keep reminding you of your failure to meet worldly expectations.

They are vicarious whims feeding on entitled egos.

They are attention-seekers,
messy knotters,
animal impulses masquerading as civilised compulsions.

They run the business of cages
and will make you feel guilty at not wanting to get locked-up!

Nurse them and they'll make a meal of you;
Like that of generations gone before, unable to escape the circle of time.

Then there is sadness of the richer kind;

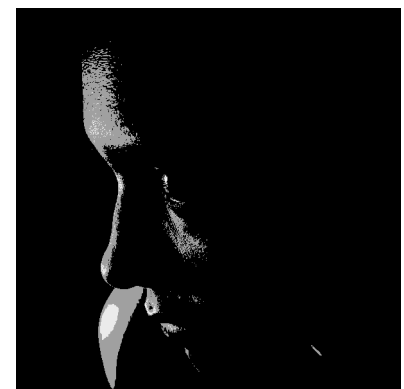
It lies in your inability to control sunsets,
It reminds you that no matter how hard you try to make time stop,
this moment with your beloved is fading away.
That in the grand scheme of things you are only here for a day.

It becomes the guiding star if you choose to embark on the uncertain journey to find grief- the vessel that can hold love.

It seeks meaning out of disappointments and failures,
and tells you a story from the beginning of time to this moment of your open-ended pain.

It attends you with the intimacy of a lover;
And liberates you to find yourself again!

The pursuit of true happiness is through the aisle of great sadness.
I wrote you a poem hoping you seek the richer kind!



UNFIXABLE

When Chris Martin said, "I'll fix you!"
I believed it.
Not because I believed him.
But because I believed that there was something in me that needed to be fixed.

Like a school kid, I carried the pieces of me as if they were art & craft items,
looking for someone or something to fix them for me;
Put them all together,
And create one magical thing of art that everyone can be in awe of.

One great love story,
One big work opportunity,
that's all I needed I thought.
I got them both.

But when I came back home, to myself, those damn pieces were still there, unfixed!

I wondered then if I was looking at the problem all wrong.
I sat down with these pieces once again;
Each had a different shape, a different colour, a different feel...a different story!

They looked different in different lights.
Uninhibited, unhinged, I started playing with them;

And each piece opened a new door for me;
And another, and another and then one more.
I realized I love opening these doors.

Time was lost on me,
Life became a playground again!

My pieces did not need fixing,
they just longed to be acknowledged.

DELIVERANCE

I promise I will build a better, safer world for you.
And I ask you to do the same for me.
You & I, we have lost beyond measure,
We are still losing...
The numbers are not just far away statistics anymore, they are you & me.
Your solidarity is what I hold onto for now;

My anger at the state,
My empathy that's too late,
My hope that's fighting the mercilessness of fate;

All are held together by your random acts of compassion.

If & when I get to look back upon these times,
times when our battles turned into a war,
I'll remember that we fought alongside each other.

Along with the oxygen beds & ventilators,
my hope was running out of stock too;
But you brought me deliverance.
And I live to fight another day because of it.
I live because of you!

THE SOLILOQUY OF SOLITUDE

I accidentally killed a lizard the other day,
The horror of his/her loved one coming to seek revenge kept me up for some time,
But nobody came!

While accepting his death sentence, Socrates said,
“How can we understand death if we have never understood life?”

While smoking his pot, Lao Tzu thought,
It is better to go with the flow,
To drink your chai,
And exhaust listening to all the songs on Spotify!

Confucius however was bound by duty,
He demanded that you obey your parents;
But what if you're a progressive born into a family of conservatives?
As they continue living in yesterday and you look towards tomorrow,
How do you meet today?

Pay attention,
There is an invasion of cacophony,
An army infected by the tribalism virus,
Addicted to tragedy porn,
Jerking off to nationalism
Is attacking all your safe spaces;

In the future history books this will be called as-
The Battle of Sanity.

Sit straight,
Meditate.

You have been a river all your life,
For a while you have to learn how to be a tree!

Hold your ground!
Anand Gandhi says,
“The world will be young again!”



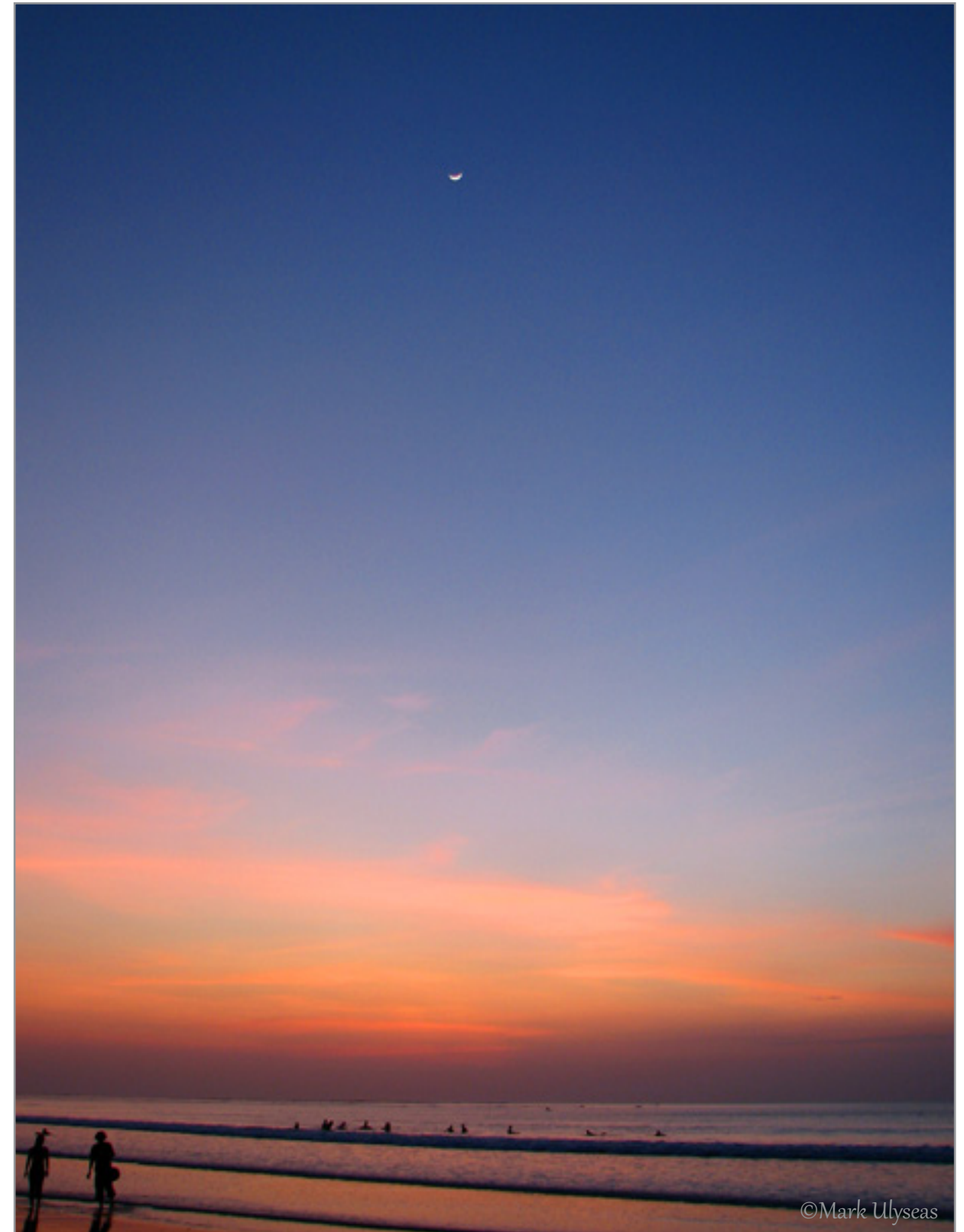
LOVE LETTERS IN PANDEMIC

You know it is not the distance between our hands,
but the distance between our hearts that defines our separation.
As much as the empty spaces between my fingers desire to be locked
in the sensory pleasures of your touch,
it is my broken heart that longs to be held by your tenderness.
My lips want to lean in and kiss the pain off your forehead,
drink all the tears from your eyes
and quench the thirst of your lips.
It's like they are destined to be the messengers between your soul and mine,
Souls that live to blossom and bloom,
to fulfill life's purpose for us existential gardeners.

You always say that you are open to love.
But are you open to the pain, longings, disappointments and unbridled joy it
brings?

Are you willing to open the floodgates of your heart at the risk of drowning the
ones who cannot swim in its currents?
Let me share the epiphany this poem has brought me for you:

It is not for you to to be open or closed to love,
For love when it finds you, when it looks you in the eye, with all its truth,
longing & gratitude
it is the one that opens you up,
like a sun to a flower,
like an ocean to a river,
like you to me.



Bali. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

Atman Mehta is a poet, writer and filmmaker based in Pune, India. He was the producer for 'Peepal Tree,' a feature film that deals with illegal tree-cutting in cities, and has written and directed several short films with social and ecological themes. The script of his current project, based on a true story about a domestic worker, was chosen for the Producer's Lab at NFDC Film Bazaar. He has co-authored a coming-of-age non-fiction book, 'The Wind In Our Sails,' which was published by Vishwakarma and launched at the Pune International Literary Festival. His love for planting trees, a zero waste and vegan lifestyle, has led him to start successful community-wide initiatives and work towards the change he seeks.



Atman Mehta

FISH & FLOWER'S CHILD

(a vegan poem)

do you wonder
how this tree
was once a sapling
that river
a trickle
we beings
a sperm
what force is this
that unites
fish
flower
and child
as one?

does greed
fog our eyes
oppression
shatter faith
violence
disfigure
dominate
maim?

as long as
there are
slaughterhouses
there
will be
battlefields

FISH & FLOWER'S CHILD *contd...*

we protest

not against a man
for another
will appear

but
patriarchy
for it will
still be present

of shapes
sizes
and forms

that uproots
trees and minds

pollutes
hearts and rivers

creates suffering

we express our protest
through every act
and choice

for this divide
of us and them
must end

we long
to be free

together

WAITING FOR WINGS TO GROW

I close my eyes
And wander

Feel an urge
Deep within

To climb the ledge
And leap

As wings
Begin to grow

A moment
Of such magnificence
Time makes itself visible
To watch it unfold

I fly among kites
Darting through the sky
Worries, hopes and dreams
Like tiny ants go by

Gentle winds
Have me light as feather
I surrender control
The wings steer further

Floating to the sun
Face to face
I disintegrate
Merge; am one



WAITING FOR WINGS TO GROW *contd...*

Becoming the rays
I journey back to earth

I am
In
The bloom of the flower
Scent of the soil
Colour of the rock
Shimmer of the ripple
Silhouette of the tree
Fold of the mountain
And heart of the beast

The breath of the world

I am wherever
There is poetry

Become existence itself

Satiated

Eternal

ODE TO ROHINI

(And many other domestic workers like her)

Rohini,

You were plump like a grape,
Round; with a jolly smile

Now, you're shrivelled
Like a dry raisin,
Skinny and toothless

What happened?

Was it the loss of your drunken husband,
Neglect from your children,
Or hunger, 'cause work hardly paid;

Your soles are burnt,
Palms shredded –
That limp is new,
Your eyes look faded

But the sweetness in your voice remains
Or is it sadness –
I cannot tell;

How did you age thirty years
In just three?
What's the secret,
Society?

Your sari and blouse
Fit you no more
Like hand-me-downs
From an elder sister,



ODE TO ROHINI *contd...*

Your tin house manages to stand
Like a house of cards –
A legless man;

If it's sunny out,
It's scorching in
And if it rains,
It's deafening;

No escape for you, I see

You don't hear too good, do you?
I asked, what's the secret,
Society?

You still smile
But your face doesn't mean it,
You're still at work
Though you know nothing's in it;

How did you age thirty years
In just three?

Rohini,

You were plump like a grape
But now, you're like a raisin

I RELENT

This morning
The sun rested
In the palm
Of my hand
And I understood
The sign

The world's an experiment
At the mercy of no one
Started by no one
With no conclusion
Suspended between
Pathways of time

You and I will come
And go
And come and go
And come and go
Reap and sow
With no goal
Into oblivion

Is this all there is?
Is this all?
Nobody's young here
Nobody old
In this chase
For fool's gold

This morning
The sun rested
In the palm of my hand
And whispered
Secrets
Of lives past
Of lives ahead

I RELENT *contd...*

Mysteries unwelcomed
 Yet unearthed
 Is this all there is?
 Is this all?
 If so

I want to quit

I don't wish to play
 This foolish game
 Of no beginnings
 And no ends
 Just the slog
 Just the grind
 Free me
 I relent

I have lived
 And I have died
 Don't remember
 The joys
 The hurt
 Or the sighs
 I relent

This morning
 The sun
 Rested in the palm
 Of my hand
 And
 I lived
 And I died

WHO AM I?

When I carry the boulder
 Up the hill
 And see it roll down
 Time and again,
 I realise
 The nature of my bane

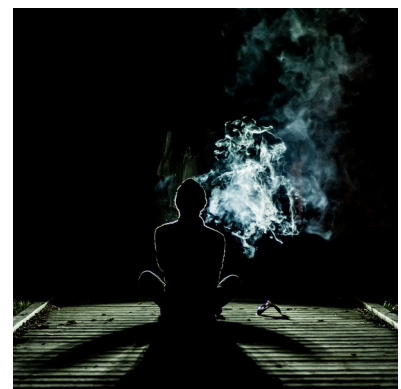
When all the pretence
 Slowly fades
 And what remains
 Is a naked frame,
 I am alone, afraid;
 Without a name

An urge arises
 From the void within;
 Who Am I?

Beyond the walls of society,
 Free from the burden of expectation
 And the hostility of competition;

Who Am I?

Beyond borrowed knowledge
 And assumed identities,
 Who Am I?



WHO AM I? *contd...*

Beyond disagreements
And the display of beliefs,
Who Am I?

Beyond likes and dislikes
And the suffocation of truth and lies,
Who Am I?

Away from crippling doubts
And anxieties,
Who Am I?

When the body is defeated
And the mind comes to a halt,
Who Am I?

Before the cradle
And beyond the grave,
Who Am I?

Beyond the illusion of reality
And the reality of dreams,
Who Am I?

Beyond the confines
Of space and time,
Who Am I?

Beyond the need for answers
And the search for questions,
Who Am I?

It is that 'me'
I want to experience
And through the act of creation I can –

Where I see green fields
Swaying in the wind,
Flowers bloom and rivers sing

Nature is creative
And I its creation;
When I create,
I connect
To the source
Of my being

The 'I' fades
And what remains
Is the act –
Pure creativity,
Creation at practice;
I am that

Devanjalee Sarkar is a poet, painter, writer/director, Butoh dancer and expressive arts facilitator. She has lived and traveled in many countries and across India, creating, collaborating and presenting her poetry, short films, independent documentary and Butoh performances. Her first published book of poetry was birthed from her time living in Himachal Pradesh. *La chambre multiple au ventilateur* is a 30 min Indo French experimental short video that she made on a French poem that travels across cultures. She presently lives in Pune spending most of her time painting and using art-based therapy, hypnosis and meditation in her work with people.



SEED OF THE HEART

1.

Wait till the ink starts dripping...
said my friend

but it has started to bleed instead
my pages can't hold the tree inside
they have turned into skin bare

between the pen and the scribble
the page awaits a touch

it only wants you

my brain is stale...
said my friend

smash it with your stone
it has to die
to rewrite itself

it only wants you.

continued overleaf...

Devanjalee Sarkar

SEED OF THE HEART *contd...*

2.

this moon now
has decided to play

i had seen its orange
known its inside
it will capsize thought
reason

in its cosmic cycle
it cruises
into unknown territories
now only now
for me to call it by its name

a lunic drop
each night on the void terrace
sets ablaze
songs
the sky cannot contain

i have forever felt
consumed by the moon
over a thousand suns

this time it plays
to evoke resurrect
weave the songs to the stars
us entangled
in breathless wonder
for it wants to play
with or without
the us

this moon knows my void well
it plays what i fear most

3.

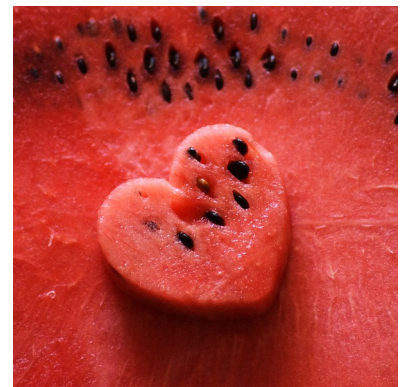
a gasp pushed its way into the night
it slept then tossed then turned
while I licked my wounds in a corner

my cities have forgotten
the forest inside their fortresses

here bodies wrapped
in semen of sea horses extinct
hung in air threads of measured time
smashed against the cynical wall
this civilisational sun

until the skull screams its prayer song
it wants to expand
to contain this garbaged humanity

the gasp
wakes from a dream
it no longer is.



SEED OF THE HEART *contd...*

4.

my mermaid wings
you can't fly with
yet you want them
for a taste

you promise earth sky and all ocean
i trust the glint in your eye

the wings made time
you wear in space

when the moment melts
you liberate
and loose my wings

i return to my grave
and sleep with icarus

the cold stings
we fly deeper into our dream

5.

you waited for the month to end
the page of calendar on the wall to turn
to bring you
another goddess to devour
and inside them you transformed
into your million manifestations

the family taught to pray
you so innocently strayed
and learnt to play
prayer and play became one

your fantasies no longer contain me
i want your nightmares
for i cannot be
your goddesses of dream

i want your nightmares
for they leave you wet
and you turn towards me
to be embraced.

SEED OF THE HEART *contd...*

6.

early morning
tea green fumes her face fragile

across the balcao
some hills of Assam begin to rise
these hills
sea waves
women as sleeping Buddha
all share the same curve
the curve of time

a spider charmed
encircles her aura violet
as her body sighs deeper
much deeper into the bamboo woven rocking chair
creek creek croak croak...
the sounds of the spider's summer of love

she sips from the cup
prayer held between her palms
the orange of last night's mauli
gently washes with the tea's green
between the sweat on her temple
her whole being a single throb

now spider desires to spin her whole
all hair all sweat even the tea in her breath

round and round in circles
spider weds her seven infinite
sits on her eyelid to kiss when she wakes

she dreams she is spinning
across the skies
each spin weaving deeper
much deeper into the womb
in this moment
she feels loved beyond time

across the balcao
some clouds of Assam begin to rise

the first drop of rain
trickles from her eyelids into the cup
she smiles

this tea has turned her sufi

summers come
and summers go
cobwebs on the tea cup
always read her mind.

end...

Nadia Sen Sharma has had a remarkable journey through two decades of leadership in the corporate sector to cultural programming and finally to working with children and young adults - nurturing their social and emotional capacities. On the way, she has allowed her own creative self to mature, powerfully and quietly building her writerly skills. A closet writer until now, she has finally stepped into the open with her own special brand of self-expression which blurs the borders of literary genres creating a personal yet universal exploration of communion with the unknown. She is working on a first collection, *Letters To The Unknown*.



Nadia Sen Sharma

A LETTER TO THE UNKNOWN

I ASK MYSELF. Ever since I was a child, into my growing years and now in my adulthood, you kept giving me indications and clues of what life was all about. How didn't I get that? You kept throwing situations and incidences that stirred something within me, the happiness that was difficult to express but deeply experienced.

I still have memories of some of those moments. The last day of my school, when I gave a farewell speech. My quivering emotional voice and simple yet powerful words, that came automatically as they were deep rooted in gratitude for the love and life lessons that my school gave me, the beautiful friends who helped me look within myself. The times that made me realise the beauty of selfless giving. I evolved and came closer to the understanding of life.

As times moved on, I was drawn to community work. I am not sure why that happened, but am very sure that I gave my complete self to it and derived a sense of gratitude and wholeness. Somewhere deep within, I was aware that you were clearing the path for me towards something, leading me somewhere but I still didn't get what that was.

Those few years when you presented me with some voluntary work with children. I was so immersed, lived completely in the moment and derived joy from every smile that I saw on those angels.

Life took over, responsibilities increased and social conditioning pushed me towards jobs that brought along their own challenges.

A room with five HODs (Head of Departments) and the CEO. Subject of the meeting? Launch of our services in our state. Five men and I- the only woman, giving our opinions, making our individual presentations and working towards the final plan.

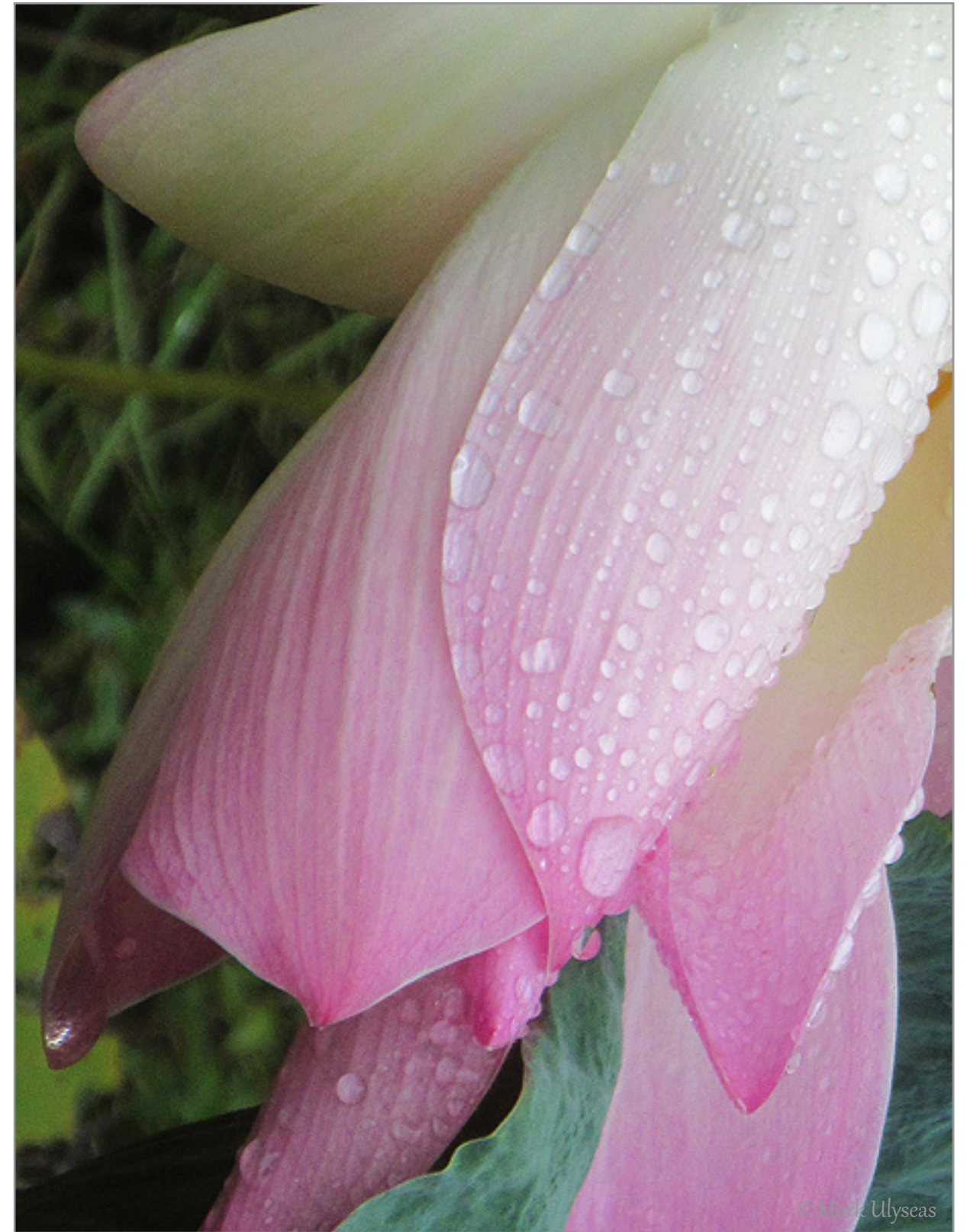
This was way back in 2002. I had already put in over 10 years in various organisations and risen to this position. The men around made me feel comfortable and I did exhibit complete confidence.

As time went by everybody around saw me as an organiser, good leader, team builder and performer. Days, weeks and years passed by meeting the deliverables, travelling, balancing the work and home. Yes, I did feel very empowered to be one among the five pillars of this large organisation. There were stressful days where nepotism and gender bias were at its peak. I soon realised that my compulsive nature of being sensitive to people's needs and my nurturing personality had no place here, rather was seen by some as an impediment to progress. But I was convinced that these innate qualities made me who I was. Was I ready to compromise on these and leave them on the wayside for the so called success as it appeared to the world?

You know well how the world perceives success and happiness? My parents felt very proud of my position. I have had so many instances of my subordinates idolising me, younger girls telling their mums that they would want to follow a similar trajectory as mine. My husband and my child also appreciated my status in the society at large. I distinctly remember that particular day when I went into deep reflection. Where was my life leading me.? What was the meaning of all the experiences I have encountered? Which were those times when I felt immense happiness? I started connecting the dots. And there came the WOW moment. I came closer to your plan for me. All those moments, situations which culminated into assignments where I connected with people at a deeper level, touched lives and contributed in helping bring about any transformations – gave a sense of happiness and fulfilment.

You continued holding my hand once again. After years of compulsive jobs and assignments, I had the opportunity to play an integral role with a foundation. And from here you guided me once again in the area of education, working with children and their parents, relooking and redefining the system and reaching out with complete integrity and commitment.

Now I DO NOT ASK MYSELF, but bow down in gratitude.



Lotus in the morning, Bali. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

Nishita Lakhwani is an Argentine Tango dancer and artist from Pune, India. She has worked with Prayas, a Non-Governmental Educational Foundation to reach out to children in need with her creative development ideas. Her interest in creative writing is complemented by her passion for different languages which including French, Spanish and Persian. She has a master's degree in business management in the U.K. and aspires to establish a cultural hub in Pune to bring together artists and musicians from different walks of life to hold workshops and organise more community driven activities.



BREATHING INTO THESE BONES

1.

There are days I'm quiet
Days I feel the pain so intensely
A flood of thoughts
All parked at the bay unwilling to leave
None to be shared with somebody
There are days I'm quiet
Not because I want to be
Looking for a few escape moments
Scared to face the reality
Sleepless nights and the cloud of darkness
Don't give up that easy
What does life mean?
When it's easier to let go of the dream

2.

I glide into this moment
As I sense my heartbeat fluctuate with each breath
I stand in awareness that I'm still breathing
It feels as though something clogged the airways like a handful of sand
I see myself from a different perspective
From a point far away in infinity
The place where I belong in its absolute calm and subtle truth
Embracing life as I breathe in and death as I breathe out

Nishita Lakhwani

BREATHING INTO THESE BONES *contd...*

3.

I drew lines on the paper
 Crooked and chaotic symbols turning into fluid designs
 Representing a different language
 The words spoke gibberish
 Conversing in a different realm of reality
 But not separating from it
 Because it was my reality
 Searching the deepest corners
 That were bleeding tears inside of me

4.

Shut the windows
 Seal the doors
 I will still know the feeling of being up in the hills
 Or down in the valley
 Surrounded by shrubs and wild flowers
 I will still know the feeling of holding the chafa between these fragile fingers
 Imagining their vibrant reds and faded yellows
 Captivity holds only prisoners
 Who can't express
 Who can't scribble crooked lines
 I had my turn in captivity and escaped it a while back
 Even if the windows are shut and the doors sealed
 Indescribable view
 Same old terrace of my same old guest room

Light drizzle of the rain
 As I can see its lines
 From the bed where I lay
 Cozy under the blanket
 Indescribable view
 Nothing different, nothing new
 I only changed the way I look
 Light breeze as it hits the face
 I have this moment and I want no more

5.

The lockdown makes me empty
 A great despair looking inwards
 With not much to reason
 No count of the days
 We're told to stay in for as long as it takes
 It's like time is still
 Or is it just what I feel?
 And the others on a summer vacation?
 I miss being out in the trees listening to the sound of the peacock
 That at times drops by to greet
 At the Yoga studio where we once would meet
 To dance an intimate Tango
 How the noise of the next door café drowned in the sensuality of the melodic notes
 Blended with the heaviness of the bandoneon
 As I scribble, my chest is numb of all the pain
 Of how long would it be, before we meet again

BREATHING INTO THESE BONES *contd...*

6.

Herbal flavours and refreshing undertones
Birds chirping in the trees like they have something to say
A language I can only understand when I feel one with them
And I do sometimes, as hard as it may seem
To be one with nature, the newness of the green
The subtle yet sharp wind chimes as they cut through the sounds of the breeze
Breathing into these bones and reviving the lost energy



©Mark Ulyseas

Dragon fly, Luang Prabang. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

Priya Hajela is a fiction writer who lives in Pune with a husband and two dogs. Writing is a second career for her. She graduated with an MFA in Creative Writing from Goddard College in Vermont in 2017. Prior to taking to writing seven years ago, Priya worked in a variety of telecom and IT organizations in senior marketing and business development roles. One of Priya's short stories, *An Affair*, has been published in an online journal called *Indian Ruminations*. Her first novel, *Ladies Tailor*, has been accepted for publication by Harper Collins India.



THE TATTOO ARTIST

The rain is relentless. I hear it thrumming on the metal roof and running down the broken pipe into the mud, and I moisten my cracked lips with my tongue. I wonder if they'll bring me food and water. I wonder if they're coming at all. I wonder if I want them to come. It may be better if they don't. I wonder what Sid has said to Norm. They haven't done anything to me yet, if leaving me alone for eight days without food doesn't count. They also haven't left me any water but if I hadn't drunk any for all these days, I would be dead, wouldn't I? Maybe that's what they wanted but I've been drinking water out of the toilet, I have. I haven't gone in the toilet, obviously. I've urinated in the drain and what's to defecate if you haven't eaten in so many days. You'll be surprised though. There's been something everyday. I do that in the drain too. It smells much worse than usual. It's old stuff that's been in the intestines for months. I have to run my brain through anything I can, otherwise I'll go crazy – which is also probably what they want. What better than a crazy undercover agent, I say to myself but I feel like I've said it out loud. I listen carefully to see if anyone is coming. I look at the metal box in the corner. I miss my work.

10 Days ago

I wake up at my usual time, 11:00am which may seem late but it isn't. That's because I don't sleep till three or four in the morning. On busy nights, it can get as late as 6am. I have clients that come in at 4, drunk, looking for something they are hoping they can find with me. I'm not the only one who keeps these hours. There are several of us who know the proclivities of drunk or stoned men with money and a cause. Sometimes it's women but very rarely. When women come, they are as sober as schoolteachers, a few are schoolteachers seeking a little adventure, something they can hide comfortably and never need to feel guilty about. I am a tattoo artist, a good one. People make weeklong appointments with me to do both sleeves and full backs. I don't need to do late night gigs but that is when I get to be creative. I have never had a drunk client come back and complain about what I did for him.

Priya Hajela

My first client that day is Norman. Norm, as he wants me to refer to him, has brought his own design. He wants it on his back, an intricate web of text and symbols that I can't make much sense of at first. Clients do bring their own designs but they are usually off the Internet, something that's been done before. I don't believe in that. I take their design and spend a few days with it, come up with my own variation and do that. Just like the drunks, my sober clients also like that what they have will never be done again – has never been done before.

I do extreme right wing symbols and insignia. Many of my colleagues don't. I do the usual Swastika and KKK symbols, the hood, the white cross, Schwarz Sonne (Black Sun), variations of the confederate flag, Identity Evropa flags – I keep track of everything white nationalist, right wing and anti-anything and ink it for my clients, both drunk and sober.

Norm comes for four hours at a time. His back is lean and muscular. It will hurt when I start with the needle. For now, I'm writing in what he's brought scribbled on a torn page of a yellow pad, on the top section of his back. I write with a Sharpie, slowly, painstakingly, with Norm softly whispering, "no mistakes, not a single mistake, every comma, every symbol just the way it is," every five minutes. I write, then I check, then I write and check again. It looks like a manifesto of some sort. He shows me only the part I need for today. I ask Norm what it is. He tells me to focus or I'll make a mistake. "No talking", he says. I write and after about an hour, I begin with the ink. I do the black work or outlining with a single tipped needle first. That takes the next hour. Then, I wash the wound with soap and water, dry it carefully and begin the shading. This takes darker ink and Norm's bony back stretches and contracts with pain but he keeps waving me on. Two hours of work and we are done for the day. His next appointment is two days later and then one more after that.

He comes again, right on time, the same torn out sheet from a legal pad. I look over the second section, trying to make sense of it. "Don't bother," he says. "It needs brains." I'm taken aback. He wasn't rude the last time. This time, he's jumpy. He wants me to lock the door from inside, bring down the shutters even. I tell him I can't do that. "But you can't work on two people at once, can you?" I ignore him and get to work, absorbing as much as I can as I write, then ink, then shade. I have brains. I know what this is. It's scary shit – that group, what's it called – Kekistanis, inhabitants of a fictitious place called Kekistan.

I am inking the flag and logo of Kekistan and what looks like the group's manifesto on Norm's back. It includes words like 'inferior mud people' and 'feminazi cunts' and moves along from there.

Norm looks at me, twisting his torso, "can we finish this today? Can you work late, I mean?" He knows he can trust me with what he's putting on his back.

My reputation as a white nationalist tattoo artist who can turn any Fascist/Neo-Nazi symbol into original art is secure. My access to the leaders is consistent. They come to me and they talk while they squirm. But this, I don't think anyone has ever done this before – a whole manifesto, painstakingly scribbled on a yellow pad and then inked for posterity.

"I can," I tell him, "but can you handle the pain? Your back has no fat to absorb anything."

"I can handle the pain. Let's finish it."

I continue, not looking up, not stopping for coffee, not even realizing that there's someone at the door. I had locked it after another request by Norm but I hadn't put the shutters down. Norm looks at the door without raising his torso. "Shit. Shit. Shit," I hear in his whispery voice. I go to the door to unlock and open it. It's Sid. Norm lies back down and breathes. I lock the door and get back to work while Sid sits down close to Norm's head and they whisper back and forth. I can hear them, obviously. They are talking about some Texas politician who wants to retire from the Senate. He hasn't announced yet but plans to soon. "He can't," says Norm. "We won't let him. He's one of us, unless he doesn't want to be."

"He says he can't do this anymore," whispers Sid. "He doesn't want to. The Liberals are after him. They don't let him eat at a restaurant or even go to a movie with the family in peace. Plus, he's thinks the party has lost its way."

They go on as I write and ink and shade, on and on and on. Words come out of my head and into my motorized needle and ink pot. I add them to what's on the yellow paper. I take some of the words on the yellow paper away. I do this consciously, using my brain. I don't know why I do it. This was not my mandate. I have been identifying as right wing for so long, I didn't know I had anything liberal left inside me.

They put me here ten years ago. I trained as a tattoo artist along with my regular training. I thought I would do it for a year or two but then they forgot about me. Sid is my partner. He didn't have to learn anything new. He's been embedded with me and they've forgotten about him too. Our salaries are being deposited somewhere under our real names – I have even forgotten which bank. We can't have any trace of that life anywhere around us.

I make enough money as a tattoo artist for Sid and I to live. We don't need more. This life is not bad. It is not dangerous because no one acts on any information about white supremacists we pass on so nobody gets suspicious. We are just two regular people who are trying to make ends meet. That is, until the ink that has buried itself deep under Norm's skin reads as something it shouldn't.

I finish his back; a Greenpeace flag has appeared, to complement the Kekistan flag. I even add an LGBTQ rainbow and giggle softly as I replace the ink pot several times. Norm is deep in conversation with Sid and doesn't notice. I place gauze over the wound and tape it down around the edges. "Norm, remember you can't wet this for about a week. It should feel tight and stretched out like a scab before you can have a proper shower. Till then, sponge baths...or whatever," I mumble, realizing I'm getting too personal.

"I got it. Hand me my shirt. Sid, call me tomorrow."

I forget about Norm and get on with my day, and the next day and the next. I have that cake-mix-in-my-stomach feeling, where you've added all the ingredients but haven't turned on the mixer. By day six, the eggs begin to rot, the butter spreads around in a slimy film and the flour gets clumpy. I am working on an Indian client. He wants a tattoo of MS Dhoni's winning shot in the 2011 World Cup. He brings me a photo but I do my own research and create a sketch. I surprise myself by how much I learn about cricket in a couple of days. The tattoo is on his calf, a strong muscular calf but far enough away from bone that it stings and not much more. I've done the drawing and the inking. The shading is the best part on this one. That's where I get the facial expression and the twist of his wrist – it's the wrist I'm working on when the door opens. I haven't locked it. I haven't felt the need. It's Norm and Sid.

Sid looks at me, his eyes big and round but says nothing. Norm stomps in. I feel the cake mix begin to stir. "It's been six days, Carol but I'm not feeling stretchy or anything. What do I do?"

I feel the settling in my stomach and ask the Indian man to stand to one side for a minute. I make Norm lie down on his stomach and remove the gauze. The tattoo is healing just fine but needs to be opened now. "I'm changing the gauze and applying some antiseptic. Wait another two days and remove it." I have bought myself two more days.

Norm gets off the table and the Indian man lies back down. Sid follows Norm out of the door. I hold up my hand with two fingers raised indicating that I'll be back.

"Sid, one minute," I call out. I make sure Norm continues walking down the street as Sid turns back around. "We need to leave, Sid. Tonight."

Sid looks at me, his eyes big and round again. "What?" I ask.

"I know what you've done, Carol. I opened up a corner of the tape to check his back and asked him to come and see you. Why did you do it, Carol? Nobody asks too much of us and nobody asked us to do this."

"You haven't done anything. I've done it. Maybe, I should leave. I'll go to my mother's in New York. He can't find me there. I'll resign from the other job too. You can carry on. You can tell them that my mother is dying or something. I had to rush back."

"And what happens in two days when he sees what you've done. That flag with the dove – what is that? This is a mean, vicious man. He can't be seen with dove tattoos on his body, not to mention what you've written – respect for all regardless of color and race, women's right to abortion, ban all guns..." Sid spits as he speaks.

"I have to go in and finish that cricket player. I'll leave after that."

"Ban all guns, Carol – that's what you've inked on Norm's back," splutters Sid again and then turns around and walks away.

It takes me three more hours to finish the shading. I am distracted but once I get into the design, I forget about everything else. When I'm done and the man has paid, I pack my implements in a metal box I had made just for this purpose. I had gone to a metal working course at the community college. This was my project. I lift up the box and hang my purse cross body, lock the door and pull down the shutters. I don't bother to lock up.

I walk to my car, parked on the next street. The cake mix churns in my stomach now, making me visibly gag once or twice. I keep walking without looking back. I hear footsteps but I don't falter. I hear the footsteps coming closer and turn around sharply, my mouth twisted in anger and I say, "Norm, I told you, keep it on for two more days."

But the man standing before me is not Norm. It is Sid holding a gun, a big gun, like the gun I had inked on Norm's back and then put an X through.

"Keep walking till you get to the van. You want to take away my guns, do you?"



Twilight, Bali. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

A poet and essayist, Rani Wilfred grew up in the countryside, nature becoming the bedrock of her religion and philosophy and her very first love. Passionate about animal rescue and animal rights advocacy, she has involved herself in related activities and awareness creating endeavours and as an enthusiastic biker, she has explored the countryside and rural communities. Rani believes that food can be powerful medicine by itself and is a certified plant-based nutrition consultant, inspiring people to delicious and healthy food. Writing, for her, is a spiritual experience because of its creative, cathartic, invigorating, quickening and grateful escape into worlds within worlds. She writes spontaneously, naturally letting her true self speak with words that are waiting to be shared. Her first volume of poems is ready to be published.



Rani Wilfred

FATHER

Memories
Of
You

Are
Like a house
Which I refuse to lock
And lose the key

I have gone
Time and again
Into a thousand different directions
Away
From where I have stationed you

Places new
Years lived
Moments which
Lovingly slipped between my fingers
Like oceanwater
Falling
On the insatiable shore

Adventures
Experiences
Journeys
Aspirations
Joys and Heartaches
Of growing up
And
Walking the wild
Only

FATHER *contd...*

To return now and then
To the anchor you remain
So much more to tell
So much more to share...

It seems only like yesterday
I was but a child
When our entwined
Holding of hands
Came undone

And
Child, still I remain
Tucked beneath the camouflage
Of
A greying head
A medley of learned behaviours
A disgruntled settling
Of sorts

Your little girl
Is still very much alive
The me
Who was left behind
Stuck grief-stricken
Beside mound of moist clumpy earth
Which
They would shovel gingerly
Onto that boxed coffin

A part of me
Joined you there
Forever
Sealed

In a lasting embrace
With the earth
And...
Another
Flew
Free and fleet winged
To discover
Life's
Harkening
Treasures...
Life goes on

Now
I am left with
A portable toolbox
Filled
With fragments, bits and pieces
Of my wanderings
Painstakingly
Hoarded for years
Carefully tended and held
To bring to you
A gift from your daughter

Coloured pieces of my heart
Odd shaped nothings
Little pebbles
Sticks
Withered brown leaves
Discarded feathers
Of birds that I cannot name



FATHER *contd...*

Faded and fresh memories
An ocean of emotions
Mountains
With their feet
Rooted in the hearts of the seas

Take these
Make sense of them
Make something
Out of this life I've lived
A jigsaw puzzle
Of magic colours
Bring once again to life
This love between you and I
Which
Persists beyond eyes
Never lessens
Only grows
Fading to a more defined beauty

I see you
Better now
For life does change
One's viewing glasses
And reshapes heart-clay
Into a finer channel

I have gone
My father
In a thousand different directions
In a quest
To gather the essence of you

I return
Every now and then
To dust and clean
Memories Anew
And walk through
This house where
Only you and I may enter

Walking through the sunlit passage
Sheltered by the high
Handcrafted ceiling
You loved so much
I linger
To look into the mirror
Only to find you
Standing right beside me
As if you never left
It's no surprise then
That I turned out to be
My father's daughter

Memories of you
Are
The air that I breathe
Gifts of words that live and breed
Dog-eared books I still cling to
Gold cufflinks nestle
In my palms as I sleep
These words too
And all
Which is most
Broken
Bruised
And Beautiful
In me

MOUNTAINS ON MY MIND

Mountains
On my mind
Straddle my horizons
Envelope my vistas
And occupy my senses

Lost
In my smallness
I rise to a greater glory
Ascending
Jubilant
With every sunrise on their peaks

Lost
Into my trapped waters
I tumble free
With their rivers
Leaping down
Gushing
Over ancient boulders

Lost
In my living and dying
I am born anew
With each naked fledgling
In twig hewn nests
Perched on high canopies

Lost
In my longing for love
I find rest
Leaning against
Their accepting roots

Cradled
Laying me down
For another eternity

There's
No more me
All I am
Is
The Mountains on my mind
And their love songs
Spoken into the wind



MEMORIES

Long shadows
Stretched
By the setting sun
Fall
Lopsided
Without a care

Russet
Rusty
Tangerine
Dust kicked by hooves
Of cattle returning home
Bells tinkling
Windchimes on bovine bodies
Mellow music
Of angel rhythm

All day
They
Have grazed on
Undulating mounds and meadows
Heavenly manna
Of
Little wildflowers
And new born grass
Bursting to its blades

No hurry
No rush
Easy
Almost meditative
Side by side
Then apart
Meandering away
And back again
A hypnotic cameo

I am them

IN BETWEEN LIFETIMES

We
Have made love
A thousand times
Through eons and ages

Our
Eyes hold stories
Hearts
Hide silences
Which
Travel
Through lifetimes
As
Wind travels
On the face of the deep
Leaving no footprints
To mark and measure
Treasures which cannot be sold

Memories
Arise
Like fireflies in the forest night
Like temple bells ringing

Like the rush of the wind
Through tall trees
Which feels
Like the distant sound
Of waters
Travelling to meet ocean shores

Warm
Wet
Soft
Lingering and deep kisses
Intoxicating
Heady
And
Full
Like the musky fragrance
Of temple incense
Pervading
All
And the entire being

Embraces
Sheathed in warmth
Cocooned
In longing and belonging
Soothing
Completing
Accepting
Receiving
Giving
Sharing
Fulfilling

You and I
One
As a flame housed in the lamp
And lamp before the deity
Simply there
Content, complete



IN BETWEEN LIFETIMES *contd...*

Quiet passages
Quickened breaths
Heavy breasts
Racing hearts
Touch tender

Forehead kisses
Like fleeting dreams
Burnt into the soul
Lingering beneath the surface
Of afterlife

The weight of you
Traps the breath of me
I'm caught
Between
The earth and the sky
Melting
Into a nothing
Becoming you

You own me
As
The sun owns the light
The forest owns the scents
The river owns her paths
The ocean owns the waves

I hold you close
Inside of me
As
A seed in the soil
Water in the deep
Fragrance in the grass
And rhythm in the heartbeats

Morning light
Birdsongs
Languid lingering
Sated sighs
And knowing that
We
Will make love
A thousand times

Through eons and ages
Times and Lifetimes
Through
Being and not
In Silences
And non-touches

A thousand times more

HOME

I had to walk through
Broken glass
To let my feet reach
The sanctuary of your heart

Why?
Was this arduous detour
Ordained or deemed required
To qualify receiving
This unequivocal grace?

Isn't Grace
Anyways undeserved?

I see you from afar
And I've already arrived

No amount of Heartache
No miles of lost wanderings
No number of ruptured dreams
And no ocean of wishful sighs

Could ever ready me
For the relief
That descends on me
When I realize
That
I've finally arrived home in you

TAKE ME WITH YOU

Let us make home
In those unattainable
sacred spaces

In between moments
In between heartbeats
In between turning of seasons
And the many blinks of an eye

In between sunset and dusk
In between dusk and star-spill
In between never ending kisses
In between the threshold and sanctum

Take me there



AND LOVE HAPPENS AGAIN

And love happens
In broken bits and pieces
In shards of shared stories
And quelled silences of listenings
In Arrivings
And leaving for awhile
Parting to be gone
Yet estranged never

And love takes root
In the tiniest of gestures
Often unseen by the waking mind
In the tenderness of words
Which sound like a symphony of a thousand angels
When uttered by the beloved

It takes root
In the letting go
In the waiting
In questions which will never be asked
And answers which never need words anyways

Love embraces
Breaks
And
Builds

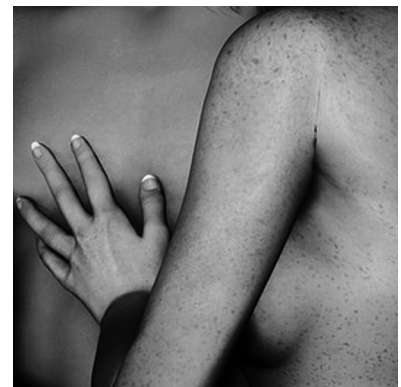
Washes over
Like rain with huge, urgent drops
On a cleansing mission
Without stopping
To think about the rewards

It
Alters
Changes
Reaffirms
And reinstates
All what was already there
And all which
Is waiting to manifest

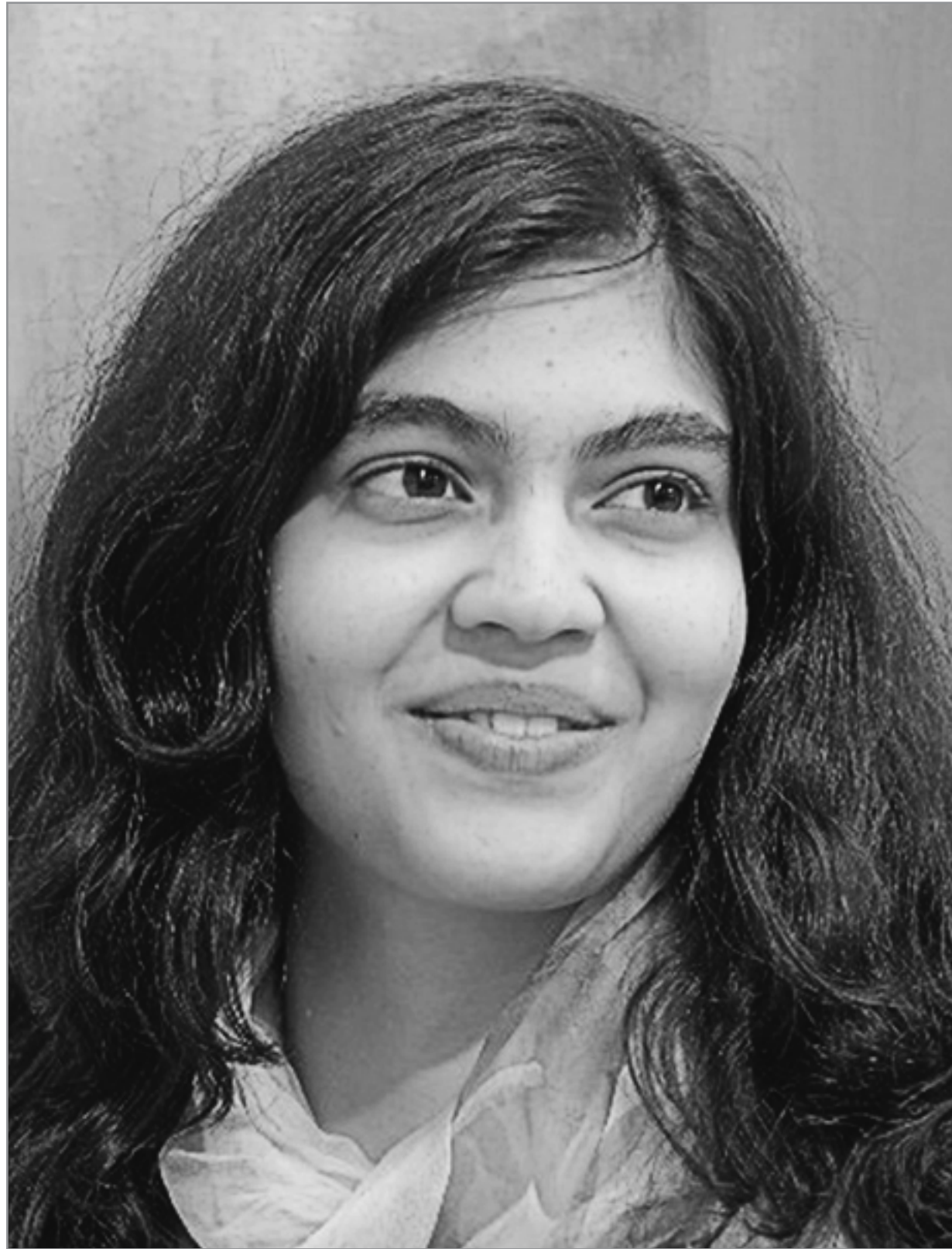
Love is nothing
Yet
By being absent
Still lives on in the deep chasm
Filling it with beauty
Grace, wisdom and a little innocence still

For
Love has far from disappeared
It visits again
Like a spring bloom
And a reborn river
A revisiting wind
Which never forgot you
Dreams which grew wings
But chose to return home

Love happens again



Sahya Samson is an author, playwright and copywriter. She has contributed artist perspective features to online international magazines and self-publishes her fiction and poetry. She is always looking for ways to help artists and writers communicate and promote their work through copy and content writing.



MIRROR MIRROR

“I’m going to do it,” I tell myself, holding my hair firmly in one hand with the scissors poised to take the snip.

“Let today be the day I get rid of this wispy, flyaway hair that has annoyed me every single day of my life. It’s time for it to go,” I declared to my reflection.

I looked at the stretched-out strands, then at the mirror, at the strands again as the scissors are closing in and freeze, just before the steel flats slice through the fragile, fickle locks.

“Do it,” I commanded myself forcefully. “Do it!”

The tension in my arms releases, like a dam bursting and I find myself hanging over the bathroom sink breathing fast. Sobbing, tears running down my face; the scissors lying on the side, blades open, without a strand of hair between them.

“I deserve a life,” I say, under my breath.

My head shoots up and I stare into my own feline eyes. “I deserve a life worth living,” I repeat, gritting my teeth. I stared intensely into the mirror and suddenly the reflection speaks back.

“Are you not satisfied with your life?”

“You call this a life? No, I’m not satisfied!” I start to tear up again, face contorted, sobbing.

“What life are you after?”

“First off, I wish I hadn’t this stupid, flimsy hair. I hate it. I want to strangle it.”

Sahya Samson

“What exactly is your complaint about the hair?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Look at it! It’s like cotton that’s been ripped loose, fraying at the ends, hanging about, droopily, it’s just...”

My words are tied up into a small knot on top of my head.

“It just doesn’t behave the way I want it to – nothing in my life is the way I want it to be!” I wailed.

“What do you want from life?”

“How much time have you got? It’s a long list.”

I find myself suddenly smiling, running my fingers through my hair, turning profile to the mirror.

“Wouldn’t it be perfect,” I lean against the sink’s edge and talk sideways, “if I were to walk into the room tonight and make all his friends turn their heads?” I laugh and spray myself with perfume.

“Just picture it: half the room falling in love with me and the other half envying me. That’s what I’m talking about.”

“But he’ll look at everyone in the room before he even notices me!” The fantasy is over. I smash the perfume bottle on the wall.

“Why doesn’t he notice you?” it asked brainlessly.

I pointed to the dark circles under my eyes. “This! And my shabby eyebrows. This! My boxlike jaws. This! My bony shoulders that resemble a wire-rack. This!” I sob again. Then laugh.

“It hurts so bad, it’s hilarious,” I said, quiet at last.

“If I could just have a life of stability, my mind would be at peace.”

“Is your life unstable?” The mirror wanted to know.

“If I could only find someone who really loves me, even though I look so weird. Then I wouldn’t need to go to all these wild parties. I’d quit drinking, first off. I wouldn’t have to work at the bar anymore. Oh yes, and I’d stop sleeping with men who didn’t love me.

I wouldn’t need him anymore.”

“He doesn’t love you?”

“Of course he doesn’t! He just uses me as he pleases. And I let him. What else do I have? I feel like a servant. He has no heart, no sense, to be treating me this way. I’d drop him in an instant if I found someone else to take care of me.”

“Is that all?”

“That’s all.” There’s a sick feeling in my gut.

“He’s all I have!”

“He’s all you have?”

“He’s the only man in my life.”

“You like him?”

“I did, once.”

“How did you know you liked him?”

“It was this strange, sick feeling in my gut. A dizzy longing to be with him... I feel it now, too.”

“Now?”

“Oh, what the heck...”

The reflection and I stared at each other.

“I’m going to the party!”

It is quiet.

“I have to see him. I can’t not see him!” I get out my makeup from its pouch.

“Say something,” I said, powdering my face.

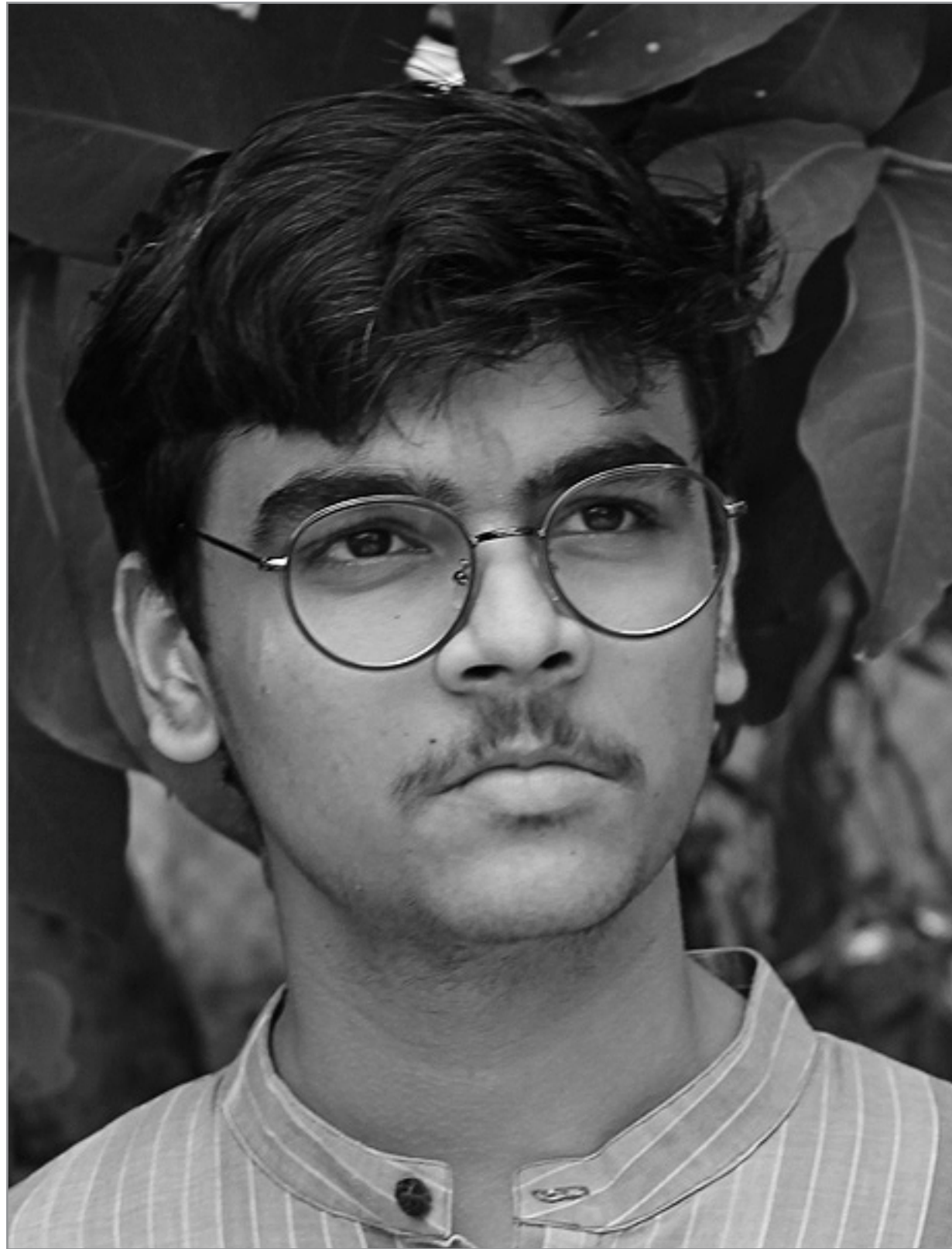
“Well?” I smile and brush my hair.

“You know what? This hair isn’t so bad after all.”



Reflection in a pond. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

Siddharth Mathkar was nominated Poet Laureate 2020-2021 by CSE, a platform for the encouragement and promotion of creative self-expression. He stands out from among the poets of his generation, with his uniquely individualistic voice and passionate concern for Nature and the Environment. He has performed his work for various groups of poetry lovers, focusing a great deal on the inherent musicality of his poems.



FORGETFUL

I took off my shoes, and walked the breeze
Of glowing warmth this eve
Stony path upto the river
Goosebumps letting go a shiver

Turning my face towards the sunset,
Things I was desperate to forget,
Cold water relieve my feet
Closing my eyes, reliving the heat

Phone rings upon my thigh,
Destroying this ethereal high,
Taking in a breathy air,
Fists clench in despair

I asked myself, "Why?"
Living, to earn, to work, to die,
Why break myself over these ways?,
Missing the sun's golden rays

I looked at myself right then
Earth, horizon and heaven
Sitting at the evening shore,
Breathing, smiling, open the door

I didn't know what was the time
I sat there, salt brimming my eyes
Beginning to get dark, the sky
My heart and soul came alive

Siddharth Mathkar

BEYOND BOUNDARIES

A thundering noise splits the skies
Ceiling soaked in navy dyes
Children around close their eyes
And taste the showers of earth

Rivers erupting in our blood
Upon the streets and through the mud
Colourful gardens begin to flood
As Bombay cats and canines leap

Roads dissolved, boundaries beyond;
We're all swimming in the same pond
Feeling this electric bond
That once flowed from the clouds

SNAPPING STITCH

Hidden within the deepest dark
Inside my solid iron bark
Behind the folds of human holds
Does a throbbing fear unfold

It dances up my shivery spine
And stomps upon a quivery mind
I shake and tremble, stammer my way
Playing the helpless lion prey

Through my pulsing veins of red
I wish to kill myself instead;
Twist my mind and knot my heart
As this fear rips me apart

I can't escape this painful ditch
And in my side I feel a stitch Snapping,
and the vapour's gone I wait for its return at dawn

FABRIC MASK

When the world was rushing by
Hues of yellow, Scarlet dye
Young love, taxi journeys
Little chocolates, coffee stories

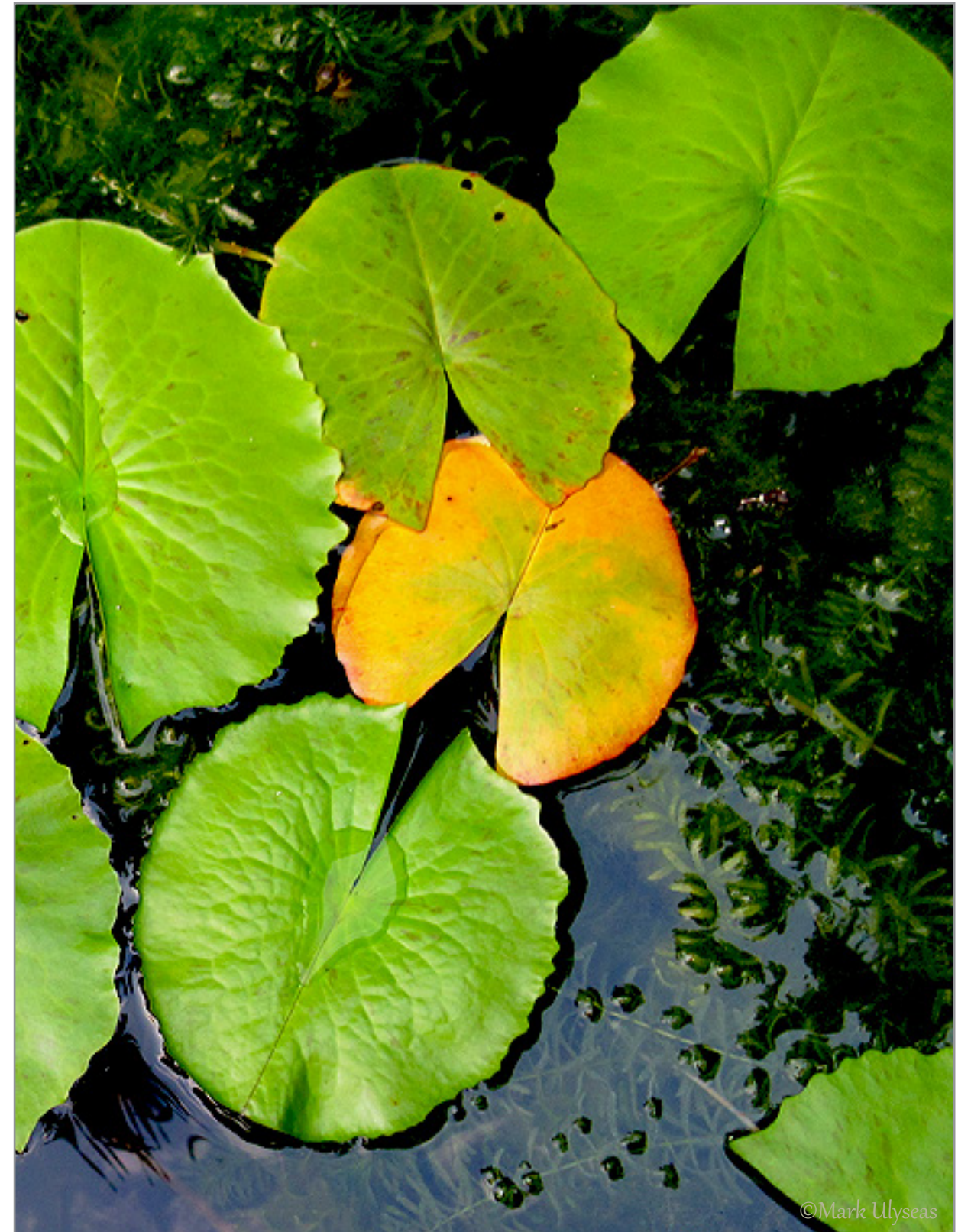
Bicycling the afternoon without
A fabric mask, And when in doubt
I made a left, phone's at home
Ecstatic me and the road alone

Bus rides, we're in the back
Laughing aloud, sharing a snack
Listening to the silent tune
That plays when I'm with you

When life was full of green and blue
Before my heart was hidden from you
Memories of ice-cream together
Football in the changing weather

Footsteps we should've taken slower
Forgetting that we're growing older
Little rays of bubbly smiles galore
That I now remember from before

In a moment, clutch of time
Life had lost its rhythm and rhyme
Writing poetry, asking my mind;
"Had I ever been alive?"



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

Author of two novels, *The Crossroads*, *The Space Between Us*; a non-fiction anthology, *The Wind In Our Sails*. Sudipta has authored numerous other novels (yet to be published), and a collection of short stories, titled *The Road Not Taken*. Her relationship with short stories began as a series of assignments that she undertook. Yet, each of her stories is a world out of its own, self-contained and totally independent of the other. Sudipta is a screenwriter, writing screenplays for various OTT platforms.



THE HATMAN

It was the summer of 1990 when I first met him - this man, Hatman as I would eventually call him. Technically speaking, he was the neighbor who owned the top floor of our apartment. But our paths rarely crossed. I was in the sixth grade then, in the middle of my summer vacation, when one day he arrived at our doorstep like an unexpected shower.

Our doorbell rang and this neighbor stood outside, small and stout, topped with a tan hat. He introduced himself with a name; actually there were two of them, which were weird enough to have slipped out of my juvenile head immediately. Fascinated by his hatted head, I named him Hatman. Because, he was the first and perhaps the only man I had seen who could risk wearing a hat in the broiling heat of a Calcutta summer.

He walked slowly, talked even more softly. I never heard him speak aloud or with visible aggression of any kind. When he sat, he could sit for say eight hours straight. When he stood, he could stand even longer. Astonishingly he did both without appearing in the slightest bit inconvenienced. He claimed he could sleep more easily sitting on a sofa than lying in bed.

That was not all. His eating habits were equally bizarre, if not more. Hatman said he could eat one entire fish, of say 5kgs, in one go. He could wipe out a dozen eggs in one supper, and his stomach would not complain. He could finish one litre of milk in one giant sip. On and on his stories went. And my eyes grew larger and larger in awe. It was like an unending string of extraordinary tales, as weird and wonderful as the narrator himself. Likewise, he claimed he could remain without food for an equally unreasonable length of time. Hatman would say, "I am not hungry", and there he was, without food for about a fortnight at the least.

When I met him he was a teetotaler. No alcohol, no smoking, no coffee, no paan. Not even a sip of the Darjeeling tea that my mother made and never forgot to offer him. He politely declined every single such offer. Mother was patient with him.

Sudipta Mukherjee

And then, on top of everything, all his apparent and asserted idiosyncrasies, once in the middle of a conversation, Hatman claimed he was a virgin. Obviously, he did not put it as directly as that; he was too gentle for that. He put it this way – ‘I have never had a woman’s company all my life.’ As for me, I too was a virgin, but only twelve then. Hatman was sixty-five. Can you believe it - a virgin at sixty-five? He was unmarried and hooked himself to this idea of celibacy without any motive whatsoever. In my country, countless people remain virgins till they reach their graves, and there is never any fuss about it. Nobody questions their celibacy or makes fun of it. Celibacy is a virtue, we are taught. But my parents found it ridiculous and nearly unbelievable, that he had not experienced an essential delicacy of life.

Of course, they had their own reasons for not believing, which were good enough for solid argument. For example, Hatman was a resident of England, a successful businessman, who went there at the age of 18 and never returned to stay; he had three properties in UK alone, two in Calcutta; and he trotted the globe at a frequency that would put any traveller to shame. Surely, he would have had a discreet fling or two along the way.

Nevertheless, I was impressed by his immense propensity for travel. If not a husband, I fantasized about having at least a boyfriend like him. I imagined exploring continents, hand in hand with that fantasy friend.

Quite like his untainted manhood, there was one more failure of his life. And that was his long and incredible chronicle of missing flights. He had missed more than a century of flights in his lifetime. And he said that with a confidence, which men often show while boasting achievements. He had missed every third or fourth or fifth flight that he was scheduled to board. He was ridiculously and shamelessly late in all of them. There were times, actually many of them, when he entered the airport and discovered his flight darting heavenwards with solemn determination. He never got a refund. A businessman that he was, he actually kept an account of all the flights he had missed so far. My jaws dropped hearing the numeral. He could have bought another apartment with the sum, and still had a portion left.

“Don’t you regret losing such a big sum?” I asked him that day.

He shrugged his shoulders uncannily.

“I am not certain that I do,” he replied flatly. His comment was emotionless.

I raised no further questions. Not that I was not curious, but I focused on that one word, which Hatman used - ‘certain’. For, he was the most uncertain and unpredictable man I had ever known. Uncertainty fitted on him like the tan hat on his head - perfectly, like a second skin and without an exception. He would come, he would chat for hours together, and then he would leave. He had an apartment on the top floor of our building, empty at his service. And yet, he never stayed there. He’d travel in a public bus to the other and extreme corner of the city to another apartment that he owned, to spend his nights in. What was so special about that house, I never knew and neither did I question. When he visited us, he came every single day. When he vanished, he was gone for what seemed like forever. Where he went, which country, which city he never revealed in details. What actually he did was still a bit of a mystery to me, although he said he was a businessman.

Once he said he had come from London, the next he said St. Petersburg. Another time, Portland, or Prague or some such place, each mentioned disparately and at random. We never checked his passport. And he never believed in giving gifts - duty free or otherwise.

I grew up, but he remained stubbornly the same. Clean shaven, clear complexioned with that hat on his head. He neither shriveled with age, nor did he turn plump. He wore the same kind of clothes and shoes. His speech too remained the same. In other words, he remained time proof. It was difficult to gauge any kind of addition to his character or profile, other than of course, the number of missed flights. That increased dramatically with each unexpected visit.

Hatman could be time proof, but I was not. Keeping pace with age my worldly experiences grew; I learned to be suspicious too. Now, while I listened to his strange and bizarre stories, a part of my mind already knitted my own version. I speculated he could be a gangster or even a drug dealer- that justified his global presence. He could be an undercover RAW agent, or a smuggler of foreign goods. And that his show of bachelorhood was bullshit. It was equally possible that he had ten wives in ten different countries. Mother was furious when I said that.

“From where on earth did you get such cheap kind of ideas?” she questioned with grave shock.

I argued that it was 2001 and almost a decade had passed since we'd met Hatman. In this world anything could be possible. It would be stupid of us if we believed all what he said. He could be a totally fake guy, I debated. Mother did not speak to me for one entire week. I gave up and stopped arguing about the authenticity of Hatman. Mother was important to me, Hatman was not.

Around the second week of August that year, Hatman did something he never did before. He revealed the destination he planned to travel in a short time. For business, he said. New York, he specified.

"See, I told you he is a genuine guy," mother remarked, elated. As though, it was she who would be travelling to New York and not Hatman.

That night I felt guilty for having mistrusted him so gravely. Perhaps mother was correct in her judgments. Perhaps he was really as innocent a guy as he claimed to be. Perhaps too much worldliness was corrupting my mind. In the middle of the night, I promised never to doubt him again.

After a few days he was gone, with a good and proper goodbye. We had a telephone line then, and requested him to inform us when he had reached his destination, safely. He nodded his hatted head. But a call would never come.

September that year began silently, and changed the destiny of the world. When we saw the devastating recording of the twin towers turning into smoke and crumbling like house of ash, something inside us broke down too. Hatman was in New York, we said collectively and not without worry. For some time, we did not utter his name, fearing the inevitable. Mother prayed all her Gods and Goddesses for his life and safety. Every time the telephone beeped, my heart stopped for a while. Every time the doorbell rang, we hoped to see Hatman, standing at the door with his hat on. But nothing of that sort happened. No phone call came, whether from him or from anyone giving news about him.

We did not realize that an entire year had passed like that. Without any news of any kind. Although we did not discuss him anymore, I felt somewhere down that we had accepted the fact that Hatman was no more. Mother no longer prayed for his safety.

"May he be in peace, where ever he is," she would say instead.

Not often, but yes, sometimes, I thought of him too; his weird stories, his awkward habits. I had a special friend now, who was a boy, and with whom I was secretly knitting a future. When he spoke of going to America for higher studies, and how this 9/11 attack would make things difficult, I could not help but remember Hatman. Of course, my friend was no business man like him, but he too had an ambition of seeing the world. Flying from one corner of the world to the other corner, the way Hatman did.

I once asked him what he would do, I mean how he would react if he missed one such flight.

"Stupid people miss flights," he said smartly.

I argued that people who missed flights were not necessarily stupid.

"Can you name a person who missed, say half dozen flights?" he said raising his thick brows.

I shook my head. I could not say that Hatman was one such, because that was not his real name. And by that time, I had forgotten both the names that he had mentioned the first summer I met him long ago.

In the end, my boyfriend won the argument that evening. I returned home thinking about Hatman. I did not realize when under my breath I too prayed for his peace.

Back at home, I rang the bell and mother opened the door in less than a second. She was all smiles, from ear to ear. Hatman was there too, sitting on our sofa.

"Are you alive?" I blurted without a thought.

Mother rolled her eyes at me.

"Oh that's ok. I deserve it," Hatman said with his habitual ease; a perennial sport that he was.

"Guess what? I almost died," he started immediately and enthusiastically.

For the next half an hour, Hatman told us his best story so far. I listened to him unbiased, and without forming opinions. I was not surprised by anything that he said. Because, by then I was convinced, that when it came to Hatman, anything could be possible, well almost anything.

Anyway, talking about the story Hatman narrated, he said he missed his flight to New York - which was of course nothing unusual. He took the next flight, but that got delayed a great deal. Disgusted, he got down at Heathrow and cancelled the remaining leg of his journey. He rescheduled his meeting with some financial honcho, which was supposed to take place in the World Trade Centre. When he was on board from Heathrow to New York, following his revised itinerary, the towers collapsed. He was hanging in the air, when countless others turned into ashes or got buried in the rubble. The honcho died while preparing for the meeting, scheduled to take place the following day, but Hatman was saved.

Here, he breathed out a sigh of relief. Perhaps he was reliving that precise moment of his life when unaware, he had escaped death. Or perhaps that rare moment when he learned of the honcho's death and realized his own luck.

I noticed a glow in his face that I had not seen before. A glow born not out of material abundance, but of an inner contentment, observable in people of sagely disposition. "I never felt as happy, first missing a flight and then cancelling another," he said as an afterthought.

We nodded our heads unanimously, in stunned silence.

"Not stupid but sometimes lucky people too missed flights," I said to myself.

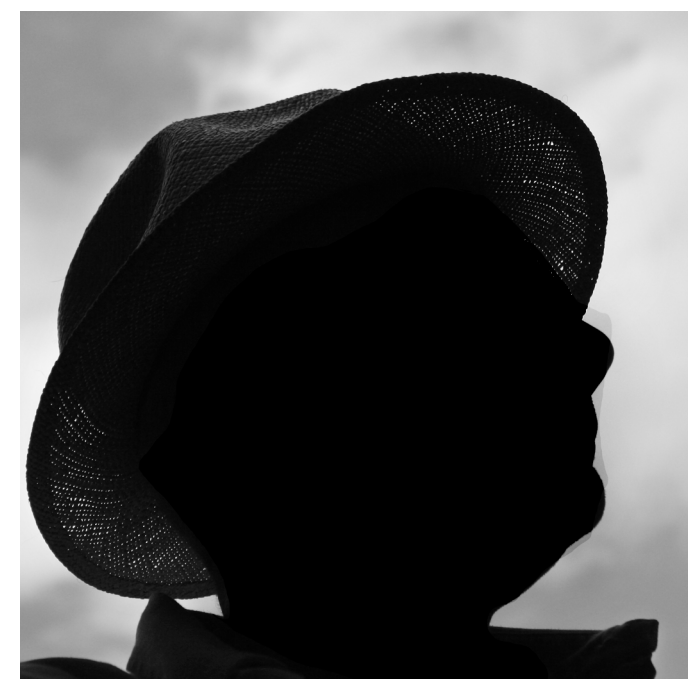
That was the first time Hatman had dinner with us and after that, spend the night in his apartment on the top floor. Although he ate a small meal, he nevertheless praised mother's cooking a great deal. He appeared to be in a good mood; talking a lot, smiling all the while. Something in him had changed, and that was obvious. He asked me about my future plans, suggested that I should travel the world and not remained in one place like a tree. I could see the true colours of the world that way, he emphasized passionately.

After dinner he also had a cup of tea with us. In between sips, he expressed his desire to visit Darjeeling. He said he had heard a lot about Kanchenjunga. He wished to see it once, before he grew old. Ironically, he was old enough already.

Mother gave him a mosquito repellent, sheets and a pillow for the night. Initially, he hesitated, but finally accepted. Father went along with him to set his bed.

That night we went to sleep happy and contented, having got back our Hatman.

The next morning, a Sunday, around 11 o'clock, when Hatman did not come for breakfast, as he was supposed to, father went up and knocked on his door. We forced it open and there between the sheets, Hatman lay, lost in eternal sleep. The autopsy revealed that his heart had stopped working somewhere around 3 in the morning.



Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

Vandana Poria is an award-winning, serial entrepreneur and founder of *The Human Alarm Clock*. Although Chartered Accountant by profession, she has been writing both fiction and non-fiction for many years. Her articles on finance and mindset have been published in the international press. She has lived and worked in over 15 different countries, so has a unique perspective of inter-cultural business, diversity and communication challenges with individuals and organisations. She was honoured with an OBE from HM Queen Elizabeth II in 2007. She has two books coming out in 2022: *In-Coded* a speculative visionary fiction novel, and *Let me Hijack your Mind*, which she co-authored with the late Alyque Padamsee. Vandana lives in Pune India, with her two children and cocker spaniel, Trixie.



Vandana Poria

AMAZING MORNING

Amazing morning. Sunshine. An empty bench in the park. What more can I ask of life?
He sat down, breathed the scented air and shut his eyes. It's great to be able to do this ALL BY MYSELF.

But was he really ALL BY HIMSELF?

And that was always the struggle for him, wasn't it? Still, the birds were chirping and the wind rustling through the autumn leaves. He swore he could almost hear them fall to the ground behind him. The last whiffs of fragrance from the dying flowers settled on his nose. Waves from the lake pushed up and over the concrete shore and he felt droplets of water in the air find their way onto his face. It reminded him of the times he used to bring Benjy and Arnie down here to play with their electric boats. How much water they used to spray when they first went in! That was a far cry from when his own Uncle Marty brought him down here. No such things as electric boats then. They only had paper boats to sail and they wouldn't cause more than a tiny splash. He and Johnny would make ten of them with any scrap they could find – from newspapers to the posh cartridge paper they would sometimes find outside the mill. And always have a competition to see who's went the furthest before sinking.

Abe's face scrunched up as a cold wind swept past. Even with the sunshine, it gave him the shivers. He pulled his scarf close. When was the last time Benjy and Arnie had come here with him? A dark look came over his face. It must have been over two decades ago. Two decades? Had they been gone for that long? He still talked to them every day. He always felt it was his duty to start the conversation. Tell them how his day was and what he had been up to. Even though they never talked back. The bench was cold and had a film of water covering it. The uneven wet wood wobbled where he sat and jugged into his trousers. If he wasn't careful, he would rip them. Then he'd have trouble. When would they get this bench fixed? Still, it was nice to be here again. It reminded him of the old times and he was grateful for that. ALL BY HIMSELF. Each time, it would get easier.

A new noise took him by surprise. It was a whirring, whishing sound. Kids' laughter broke onto the scene as he heard running and skidding nearby. A pang of sadness hit him. Benjy and Arnie would never get to do that with their kids – laugh and bring them here with the latest gizmos. They would never shout at them or watch them grow. The family tradition had died when they had.

© Vandana Poria

He must have looked a sorry sight. An old man sitting on the bench, next to the lake, sitting there with his thick scarf, coat and hat. Wearing dark glasses and rocking himself gently backwards and forwards, tapping his foot to an unknown rhythm. Face wet from tears or sprays of water. Black cane on the bench, next to his hand.

As he lifted himself off the bench and grabbed his cane, he heard a soft voice next to him. "Are you all right? Do you need a hand?" He reached out and smiled. "No I am fine."

"Come on let me help you. I can take you up across the road if you like?" her voice was pressing, with an urgency that he felt compelled to accept, yet did not want to. What did she look like, he wondered. Did she have long or short hair? His thoughts were interrupted by a tugging on his coat sleeve. The woman's voice was shocked. "Why Martin, don't grab like that! You might knock him over!"

A high-pitched voice answered back in a rush. "Sorry Mom I just wanted to help. Can't be nice being blind. Hey Mister, shall I tell you what I can see? I can see two red boats on the lake, one a bit further than the other. And I can see lots of trees with no leaves and dead flowers... It's win..."

"Martin, where are your manners?" she was embarrassed, "Poor man might not want to see what you want to see. He might want to be on his way!"

Abe reached down and felt the freezing little hand. He can't be more than six or seven. "No, no, it's alright Missus. How nice of you to tell me about the red boats. Electric I suppose? Can you believe that I used to sail paper ones on here... long before your mom was born."

"Never," the incredulous voice piped up, "Paper? They must have sunk straight away! Did they go at all? Where did they go up to? As far as our electric ones? Mom can we make paper ones? Can we use your newspaper?" The little boy's hand curled around Abe's fingers tightly and pulled him back down onto the bench. Abe smiled. Perhaps he did not want to be ALL BY HIMSELF any more.

BROKEN GLASS

"This vase broke by itself," she explained to the fellow across the counter.

"Don't understand Ma'am. How can it break by itself?"

"It was there on the shelf on my desk last night and I heard a loud 'crack' and it broke."

She left annoyed.

That night another glass vase cracked open, spilling the water and the flowers all over her desk in the study at home. She had just come down the stairs when she saw it in the morning. Her knees trembled. "It's just a co-incidence." She muttered to herself as she pushed her thick, straggly hair out of her eyes. Veena reached for the mop and started clearing up. So much for Alfie's flowers. They were dead and gone now.

It was Thursday, so of course Vera would go to Maude's place by ten in the morning. Vera would have to hurry up with cleaning the mess, or she would be late getting there. Maude would make, as she always did, Madeira cake that was too yellow and with too much vanilla flavouring. Maude insisted that is how the original Madeira cake tasted. Poor Maude, she may have the dark looks of a Spaniard gypsy, but she had been no farther than Brighton Pier, so really had no idea what a real Madeira cake would taste like. Still it was nice with a cup of tea and Vera would have someone to talk to, perhaps the strange incidences of glass breaking.

Vera arrived just after ten and shook the rain off her umbrella. She deposited it in the stand outside Maude's front door and rang the doorbell. No answer. She pressed the bell non-stop. There was no way her friend would miss their weekly catch-up – especially after what happened with Alfie last week. At long last, Maude appeared at the front door, cheeks rather red and black hair all out of place. "The strangest thing has happened!" she stuttered as she showed Vera into the living room. She pointed to the door that led to the garden. Vera's face dropped and she felt dizzy. The glass had splintered from top bottom. Maude continued breathless, "It happened just as you rang the doorbell Vera. I just heard a crash. I'm sorry I left you out here but to be honest I was a bit stunned."

Vera took a few steps towards the door and stopped. Maude grabbed Vera's arm, then immediately let go. "Why Vera, you've got goose-bumps! Whatever is the matter?" Vera looked down and saw speckled white bumps on her skin. Inside, she felt cold and helpless. "Oh dear. I'm so sorry." Vera mumbled, shaking her head. She dropped onto the sofa and stared at the broken door.

"Why Vera, what a strange thing to say. Whatever have you got to be sorry for? And why the goose bumps? You are not making sense." Maude looked at her friend, wondering what was going in her mind.

"Oh Maude! The strangest things have been happening. And now this. Oh, I really am so sorry. This is all my fault. Perhaps I should leave." Vera hoisted herself uneasily off the sofa, when Maude pulled her back down. "You'll do no such thing. You'll tell me what's going on" As Maude looked over at Vera's face, she noticed the dark circles around Vera's eyes and the paleness of her once-glowing skin. Maude wondered if Vera was sleeping at night or whether she was still up thinking about Alfie. She hadn't been quite right since then and of course, getting over a suicide like that would be hard to do. Especially when it was someone so close. "But what has that got to do with my glass door cracking?" Maude wondered to herself.

Vera's legs were shivering. Her shoes were making a tapping noise on Maude's wooden laminate. The glass splinters dance around. Her head was also dancing around. "Maude, I don't know where to start."

"Start where you always do silly! Start at the beginning." Maude patted Vera's lap. The tapping stopped. Vera looked up. After a long silence, Vera finally spoke.

"I think Alfie is trying to communicate with me."



Photo by Ruan Richard on Unsplash.

Vignesh Balasubramaniam is a poet and a filmmaker. Poetry for him started as trying to understand what's within, it has evolved towards creating a bridge between silence and stillness. He likes exploring themes that aren't understood easily but felt deeply.



HOPE

Does hope come from within
Does it crash
like a storm
in a dream.
Does it fly
without wings
without knowing where it comes from?
Does it run
in our veins
in the beat of our hearts?
Does it scream
Does it cry
Does it dry
Does it carry
like a whisper
travelling miles
from hearts to hearts.
Does it carry
in the eyes
of a vapid soul
plunging for chaos?
Does hope come from within?

Vignesh Balasubramaniam

MEMORY

I

Unfurled cocoons
Carry the winds
Of time.
Life grows
in the solitude
of memory.
Deep,
beyond possession
and self.
A memory of
Time itself.

II

My palms carry
the winds of time
from the drop of blood
through the drop of life
the running lines
etched in pink and brown
run deep beyond
flesh and skin

They run
through the wind
through the leaves
the same lines
run
through the eyes
through the blood
through the mother
through the child

TIME

I suddenly stop and
stare into myself.
Appreciate the noise
before time pauses and
I enter into myself.
It is a nice feeling to be aware and oblivious
of all the untangled webs fluttering
from a silent summer breeze.
Everywhere but never visible.
I take a heavy sip of air.
Once again.
This reminds me of my dog.
She sits all day breathing
Comfortably sad.



SATURDAY NIGHT

It's around 8.30 on a Saturday night.
The roads are divided in two.
On one side is the state college
on the other homeless people.
All their life and legacy in trolleys
filled with plastic bags.
It is getting colder by the minute,
just one block ahead,
the whole street is lit-up.
More-cars and more-people
but the same stillness
in the concrete and trees everywhere.
Happy holidays say the signs, posters
and boards.
Wherever my eyes manage to go.
Poverty follows me wherever I go
or maybe I am attracted to it.
I don't know.

CAVITY

I dreamt of a cavity
last night.
A sickly tooth
going inwards.
My morning started with chasing
this dream,
Trying to remember where I had
kept it,
This dark chasm of pain.

COLOUR

A man walks through
three colours of green.
A gentle leaf
falls from angels.
A dying wind
shoulders a sparrow.
In silence,
my breath
fills with colour.

CIGARETTE-SELLER

I have taken the sadness
from this world;
From the fast-hands
of the kid cigarette-seller;
With eyes
that stood still
for another second.



DEATH

I

I want my body
turn to smoke.
Smooth grey velvet
dissolving to nothing.
Into darkness - colourless
strands of breath - twirling.
Last steps
a final dance
so much joy
welcoming truth.

II

A prayer into the air,
Matchstick and incense
Into flames, into smoke
Flower-flesh decaying
Into black, into ash
Burnt memories
emerging through smoke
Ash;
Taking shape,
Taking form,
Returning to flesh.

III

Mongrels cast-away
Howl at night
Howl at the passing of time
Death of yesterday
Death of me.

Crows of tomorrow
Sit on the windowsill
Near a rain-old tree
Cry of tomorrow
Cry it will kill me.



2010 - 2020

11
YEARS

Live encounters

POETRY & WRITING

FREE ONLINE MAGAZINE FROM VILLAGE EARTH
OCTOBER 2021

COVER ARTWORK BY EMMA BARONE