

short stories | flash fiction | poetry | creative non-fiction | artwork

OVERTLY

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LIT

where faith meets art

'At Peace In Time'

Cover art by Edward Lee

Sanaa Hyder Elisha Oluyemi Checca Aird Talia BarNoy Sarah Das Gupta
Farzana A Ghani Judy Lunsford Maggie Nerz Iribarne Zary Fekete
Paul Hostovsky Sarah Jasat Chris Cottom Emily Holi
Khadija Shafi Christ Keivom Renee Sande Jean Gismervik Richard Puglisi
Irina Novikova Edward Lee Jill Vance Martine Rancarani Gregg Voss
Bharti Bansal Liu Chen Ahmad Addam Maryrose Nelson Emma McCoy
Monica Fuglei Sadiq Abdulsalam Adeiza Monica Prince Richard Simonds
Fred Pierre Amenah Syed Karabo Khatleli Shane Shick Ryan Keating
Thalib Razi Erin Jamieson Kendra Whitfield Humairah Jamil
Abasiama Udom Ellora Lawhorn



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June 2023

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letter from the editors

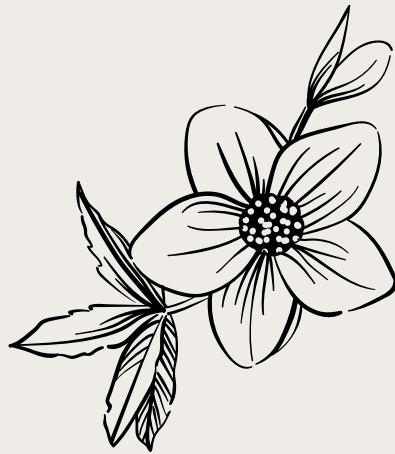
Issue Three is here and it feels like it's been a long time coming. We are always grateful for the patience of our contributors and our readers as we navigate running a literary magazine amidst Life (with a capital L). But there have been a few changes behind the scenes which we're excited to finally see come to fruition!

Poetry has always had a strong connection with faith as a beautiful way to explore the minutiae of what faith means to humans.. We are delighted to publish our first selection of poetry in this issue which wouldn't have been possible without new additions to the Overtly Lit team, our wonderful poetry editors Sagirah Shahid and Kara Dunford.

Amongst the poetry in this issue, you will find heartfelt words filled with grief such as in *A Reaper in Beirut* by Ahmad Addam. You'll encounter bodily endurance and meditations on both physical and emotional pain, put together in the beautiful pieces by Monica Prince's *Ode to the Uterus* and Emma McCoy's *God of Sarah*.

The styles in poetry are so varied and the places they come from, the avenues of faith they explore are all so unique; there is sure to be a poem that will speak to every reader.

We are also excited to introduce new prose editors who have joined the team, Sara Hassan and Sadia Akhtar, who have helped polish each piece to its best. As ever, we have an assortment of prose pieces that are emotive, striking, gentle and thought-provoking.



The simplicity of Judy Lunsford's *Walnuts* imbues power in its hopeful message and is a piece that explores how the hardest times can often bring out the strongest in our reliance on faith.

Details to Follow by Sarah Jasat is a different flavour of story altogether, offering a frank look at a very real problem, with a skilful edge of wit. *Moses* by Chris Cottom is a delightfully humorous piece that took us by surprise.

We're proud of every piece and we are always honoured by the level of talent contributors share with us. We are also incredibly grateful for the continued support of our first readers as well as new readers that have found us along the way.

We hope our third issue will give you something to connect with, reflect on or be swept away by.

love, Madeehah & Safiya

Discount(ed) Gods

by Ellora Lawhorn

i spent most of my life praying to a god that never answered me. i strained so hard that i heard voices in the mist. i thought i made them up, but maybe i heard you. i pray to you now and you forever,

god of october, god of open-front cardigans, god of picking your battles, god who encourages me to put some battles back. god of lavender green tea, god of rose thorns, god of fingerless gloves, god of keeping my hand steady while i apply mascara, god of the field, god of my eternal heart. god of blackberry patches, god of intuition, god of deductions that impress your coworkers, god of cold cases, god of iced coffee. god of taylor swift and broadway soundtracks on the way to work, god of midnight shifts, god of going to bed with the moon, god of the big dipper, god of the mysterious creature in the swamp across the street. god of the way north, god of the golden thread, god of cherry pie, god of plants you didn't expect to survive the winter, god of great lakes shipwrecks, god of home.



Ellora Lawhorn (she/her) is a queer writer from Northeast Ohio. She has been published in the limited run of Preposition: The Undercurrent Anthology in 2021. Ellora has been writing poetry and stories since she could hold a pencil, and often writes about mystery and trauma. Her instagram is @ellrosewrites.

A Reaper in Beirut

by Ahmad Addam

I'm Running from death
Running from losing someone
Someone that raised me, holding me on their shoulders.
Someone that taught me how to respect, help, laugh, and recite the Quran.
I'm Running from death and grief. From the stretching dark shadow and the dark weeping veils. From standing on that row, shaking hands. Saying words, I don't wish to say.
Running from the wails, screeches, and screams.
Running from cold corpses. Cold corpses I know.
Running from burning tears on the cheeks.
Running from entering the hollow of a mosque with a coffin on my shoulder.
Running from holding the hideously expensive shovel, digging and clanking.
Running from witnessing that wrapped corpse going down the wet soil.
Running from filling that hole.
Running from not seeing again the face that is being swallowed by the dust.
Running from grasping the last smile and lacing those warm hands one more time.
Running from missing being beaten by the *shebeb* and *khayzaran*.
I'm just running. Running toward wishing I was born knowing nobody.
I'm Running from the reaper that takes the souls of the people I love.

Becoming an author is not only **Ahmad Addam's** dream but also a representation of his soul and country, allowing his shy-engulfed emotions to be showcased to the world as an Arab-Lebanese who lives each day unusually due to the instability of the geopolitical landscape. Ahmad graduated as a biologist and recently graduated with a Masters in Public Health, all while working as an M&E for a peacebuilding and conflict sensitivity organization called House of Peace based Lebanon. In 2021, he launched his initiative, Quillers, and co-founded a pitch contest SWANApit to provide a platform for Southwest Asian and North African writers to attend workshops, apply for mentorship, and pitch contests.



First Day of Spring

by Sanaa Hyder

Some of us live with hope straining through our eyes. Even when despair threatens to needle into our skin, we whisper prayers until we feel content. Content with our Lord, who gives us another day to breathe.

I cherish this moment, drawing in mouthfuls of air. The instinctive ability to do so feeds my grand miraculous lungs.

Chlorine fumes mixed with the lingering scent of coffee beans.

The wicker chair in front of me has turquoise cushions, the same shade as the tiles and the pool water. The sun feels gentle against my face when I glance up. Leaning back in my plush chair, I stretch my legs till the points of my sneakers graze the coffee table. At its centre, the copper tray with the potted succulents shifts slightly. Thankfully, the cups on the table were empty, drained clean except for the remnants of cappuccino froth.

“My Rima, my white gazelle with beautiful eyes.” My grandmother, Onitra, has called me that for as long as I remember. Although my skin has more tones of soil than snow, with my dark-deer eyes, I trace her silver-white hair bound in braids.

The white gazelle; it is her, not me. I am only an echo of Onitra.

A vivid red gash in the shape of a lightning bolt runs across her face—from the side of her right temple to the left point of her lips. To some, the scar in all its entirety may be gruesome. But Onitra is enchanting. Beautiful to behold with gold in her eyes. A white shawl scrawled with embroidery hides her weather-beaten shoulders.

This woman has walked through thunderstorms and crossed borders without flinching.

The scar; how did she come upon it? I pondered over that question relentlessly when I was young. I remember myself as a child of four, unafraid as the words fell out of me unrestrained, “How did you get that, Nitra?”

My grandmother caressed my cheek and replied, “When the time is right, I will tell you.” So of course, every year on the first day of snow, I would ask her.

It was the closest I could come to her hues of white. The world dressed in slippery crunch and ivory sludge. I, a gazelle, strode through it, chasing not just the secret but more. The soft touch of my grandmother’s paper-thin hand against my frostbitten, questioning face. There was something satisfying—something safe—about it all.

We are a people of mercy, of affectionate gestures. Muslims, with a prime role model—the Last Prophet—who brought us a message infused with love from the Most Loving. *Al Wadood*. I love the Lord, who gave me my grandmother.

“You may ask as many times as you like, my dear. But you will not find what you seek until the time is right,” Onitra said.

Any other person would have lost their composure, given the number of times I’d asked her about the scar. But my grandmother had lived long enough to acquire the gift of patience. She seemed to believe with certainty that some secrets were left for fate to unfold.

My parents did, on a few occasions, tell me off. To stop bothering my grandmother, but I—a white gazelle with keen observant eyes—persisted because I knew she did not mind.

Most of the time, I do not see much of my parents, but I do not miss them in their absence. As dispossessed people with honey in their veins, my parents tend to move slowly, sweetly, doing what they can to give me what they never had. Still, I think I love my grandmother more than them. My parents do not mind; they believe my grandmother is a good distraction that keeps me from seeing them and their pain too closely.

Aska, my mother, is scarless but like her mother, she is graceful. Over the years, we have moved from one house to another with my quiet father. I think I inherited my gazelle stealth from him. As for my eyes, who knows? My mother's eyes are otherworldly; I swear, sometimes I see flecks of icy blue in the black of her eyes when hail falls out of ominous skies. She sees beyond this world. Maybe she sees Paradise. Jannah. Our promised, eternal home.

Once I told my father that my mother controls the ice crystal globes striking the pavement outside. He dismissed the fact by mussing my brown hair.

“Tawakkul,” he said. A Qur’ānic concept: we trust our Lord; we rely on Him alone.

I realised eventually what he meant. The hail storms were the fight we mustered up to live every day. Even now, when my mother cries, all the hail in the world melts. Then, she whispers prayers till I see her laugh again.

Over time, I noticed something else that was peculiar: a peaceful expression appearing on my grandmother’s face when it rained.

“Second chances,” I heard her whisper. “Grant us beneficial rain, grant us Your Mercy.”

Despite her thick scar reddening like an omen of misfortune, the gardens in our neighbourhood seemed greener afterwards.

It only piqued my curiosity.

Around the same time though, I was slowly acquiring the gift of patience myself. As a young woman often clad in a headscarf, I had become a pariah in a world that scowled at my devotion. My childhood naivety was trampled upon till I almost forgot what acceptance felt like.

How dare I *choose* to cover a part of my body with a piece of cloth?

We moved again—my parents and I. And Onitra remained unfazed, even when she did not see us for several weeks altogether.

We liked to keep in touch through phone calls but that year, my grandmother stopped calling me. I grew frail with sorrow; meek in voice. I did not want to call more attention to myself than I already did by existing.

I was nineteen when winter arrived, and snow fell like never before. For the first time, I did not seek my grandmother with my questions.

Instead, I turned to the patch of green in our house. There, I drew wisdom from the glistening leaves and blossoms that withered and shivered in death and resurrection.

The blade of a leaf crumpled so easily when it turned brown. But when a new rush of life pulsed back into its stem, the leaf unfolded with dark green poise.

That first day of spring, I found my grandmother's secret in my own heart. It seemed I had known it all along.

This morning, Onitra smiled at me when she opened her front door.

As always, her star-bright presence erased all the shadows of doubts within me.

“You are relentless, my dear,” she said.

“I am your granddaughter, Nitra,” I returned. A delicate series of cuts were healing across my palm. Minor scars from my gardening adventures.

I reached for my grandmother’s hand to show her scars of my own. She beamed at me as she pulled me into her almond-perfume embrace.

As dispossessed people, we hold onto our roots—our family, our first teachers.

Without quite saying it, we now knew the secret of the other. My grandmother was thunder and I was bloom. She brought rain and we flowered in synchrony.

I understood now what it felt like: being reduced to a label. A Muslim, a woman, an immigrant, a victim, a statistic.

“It is time,” Onitra said, as she finally told me her truth. The scar on her face was a shadow of her past. Many years ago, she had escaped from her village as her house burnt down to ashes. The thunder-shaped scar was yet another accolade she had earned for her survival.

My grandmother had endured more decades of injustice and discrimination than me or my mother.

“Always remember, the women in our family are more powerful than the eye can see,” she says to me now.

I nod as I trace her silver hair, bound in braids. With my black eyes, I take in her unspoken unseen powers.

Like her, there are others, nurturing the world in silence. Generations of women, from whom we inherit painful secrets but also resilience.

One day—in another world—I pray that we are rewarded by our Lord.



Sanaa Hyder is a doctoral student and an academic psychologist, based in Manchester, UK. She has an MA in Novel Writing from Middlesex University London. Anything coffee-related makes her soul sing. You can find her on Twitter @SanaaHyder

Queerly Beloved

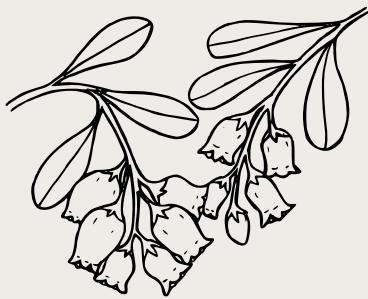
by Maryrose Nelson

I love you,
love me,
love
everything
queer, and liberated
and embodied
and in motion, progress, process
may you
love your inner child, your
funny feelings, your
inadherence to everything and all things
forced and
compulsory
and standardized

may you unlac the scratchy, ill-fit, expectations from your
itchy, aching limbs
may you peel off the poorly prescribed, one-size-fits-some? and
don the décor of your own delightful grin
dappled in dimples and wrinkles and
tired eyes
and belly laughs may you
write on cave walls the
story of your existence
may the sound of stories shared reverberate
rhythm and verse and vowel and resonance

in the chamber of your soul in the
collective of community
in the chaos of a world that wants nothing, still,
but to stamp out the possibility of your dancing and laughter and love

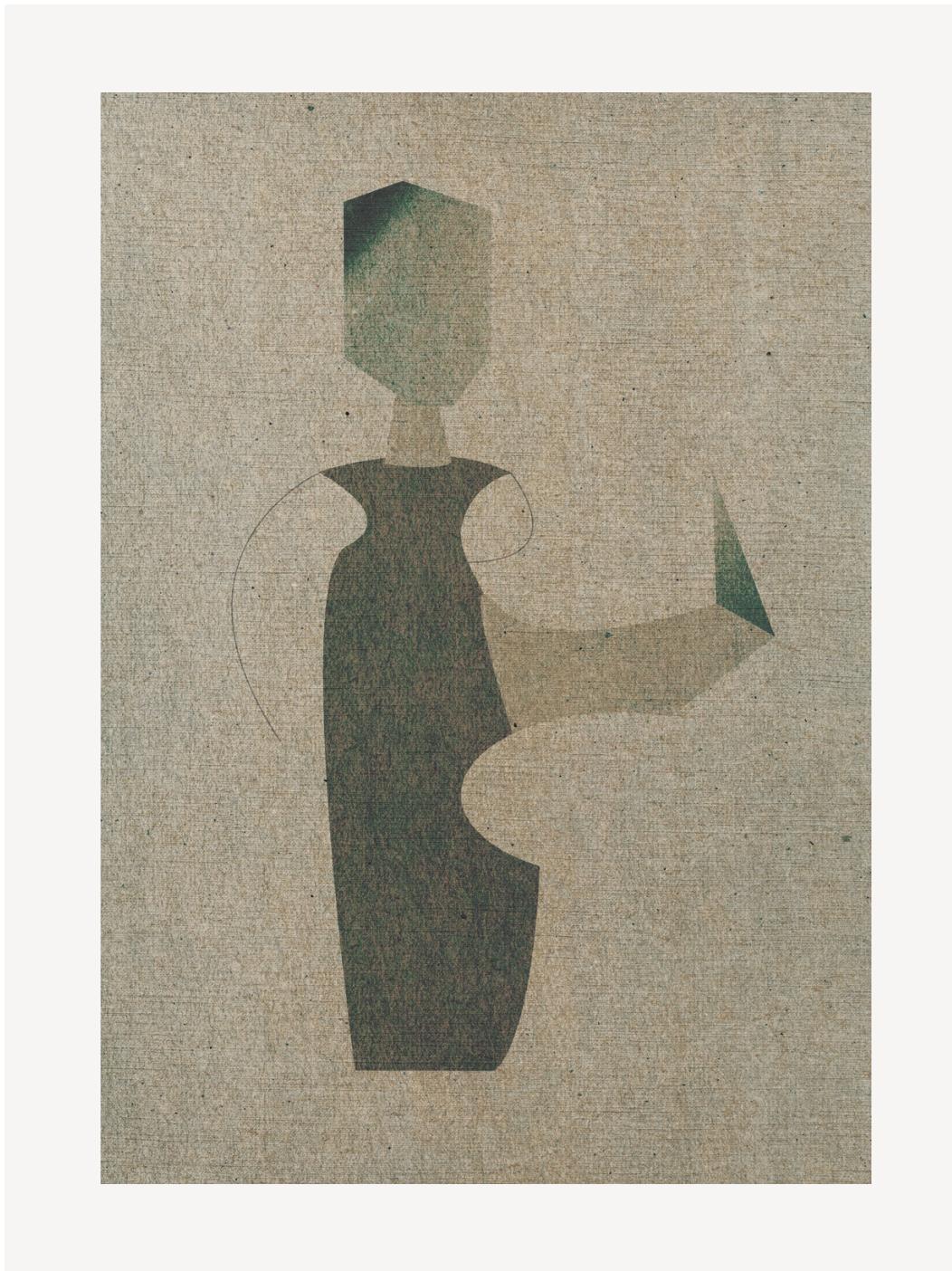
do not go quietly:
paint with brilliant strokes,
bright colors and rich shades
texture liberally and leave out no detail
and sing with bold bellows
because your existence,
your love
your frame of being, thinking, healing
is liberatory
for everyone.



Maryrose Nieman Nelson is a music therapist by profession, and a poet, songwriter, birder, and chaser of whimsy by nature in North Carolina. Her work has been published in lavender lime literary.

What are highs, what are lows?

by Liu Chen



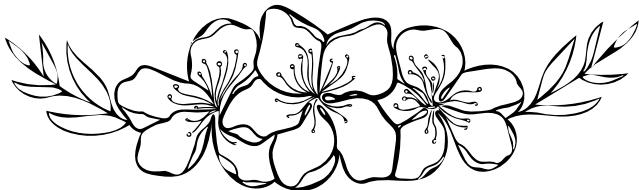
What are highs, what are lows?

by Liu Chen



artist's comment

These two artworks "*What are highs, what are lows?*" were made during the trip she deemed an undefined mixture of therapeutic and lethargic experiences. They were named after a comparatively unusual occasion when she unconsciously practised the manipulation of two languages at her grandpa's funeral: her mother tongue and English: "pha lê" (crystal) and "highs". This Diptych depicts the distinct effects two people receive when finding serenity and happiness: one with artificial highs and one with natural highs. The images are linked with 2 subjects taught at BUV: illustration and graphic design.



LIU is an aspiring artist whose practice and output shuttles and frog-leaps between the meta-digital and meta-physical, cross-medium and interdisciplinary, noetic and instinctive, inner and outer.

Deliver Us From All Evil

by Elisha Oluyemi

*All this I will give you...
if you will bow down and worship me
— Matthew 4:9 (NIV)*

14th December, 2022

Doctor Tess eases her wrinkled hands over the desk, bringing her scalding words closer to my face: "You hate to hear it, Ms Gumi. But I tell you... Lana will die."

"Shut it," I palm the desk, fuming, my voice a shaky growl. "My own daughter shall not die but live—"

Doctor Tess's face now hovers over mine, spilling heat in low degrees. "You still think you're a mother? You're just an imposter. Mothers sacrifice for their children; imposters whine! Snap out of it and find your daughter the heart she needs... You've been bringing the poor girl to the hospital for five years, hey!"

I recline into the armchair, shutting my eyes. I think about those times when Lana would stand in God's presence even with a terribly failing heart and sing in a sequin gown, leading the children choir on Thanksgiving Sundays, her voice ringing high:

*Jesus loves me, this I know,
For the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to him belong.
They are weak, but He is strong.
Yes, Je-sus loves mee...*

That is my Lana. A friend of Jesus cannot die.

I glance at Doctor Tess, and then look away; I can't match her evil gaze. "You're doing this to frustrate me, to make me do it." I shake my head, pushing back my sobs. "What else can I do? You know... Lana means the world to me. I'd give my life for her if I could."

"Not your kind of life, ma'am. She needs a life as young as hers. The perfect heart."

"Why not mine? My heart is healthy; why not mine?"

Doctor Tess pulls away from me and paces the office, hands clasped behind her. "I've tried enough for your daughter. But you're doing nothing; you're making me feel incompetent. Lana is lying there in the ICU, dying. She has less than two days to live, unless she gets the transplant. Do you have another daughter?"

"Doctor."

"No! 'How can I get a new heart for Lana?' This is what you should say, Ms Gumi! Are you a mother at all?"

Before she bursts out with more anger, an alarm strikes from above. It's from the ceiling speaker, blaring, 'Code Blue, third floor, Paediatric ICU, Bed Six', each word punctuated by a continuous *brringgg* sound. Doctor Tess snatches her stethoscope and rushes to the door. "It's Lana, get up! You don't even know her bed number." My jaws slack; I want to jump up, but my legs lose their strength. "Get up!" she cries, then bolts outside, twinkling blue lights stealing through the open door.

I shiver. I rise up. "La-na, no. Lana." Now I make for the door and bump my arm against the door frame so that I stagger. The 'Code Blue' alarm rings on, the blue lights causing a quiver in me. I am sobbing, hurrying outside. In the foyer, I'm lost in the midst of medics running to and fro, hungry to save Lana. I spin round. My eyes ache.

'Code Blue, third floor, Paediatric ICU, Bed Six'

The path to the lift is crowded, so I hurry towards the stairs, running up, muttering, "God save my Lana."

I found the Paediatric Intensive Care Unit on the third floor and rush towards it. Two hospital guards stop me. I want to bite them, shove them away before I burst inside the unit. "I'm her mother. Bed Six. I'm her mother. Let me in now."

They seize my arms, growling, "Calm down, ma'am. Let the doctors do their work." But I scream on, calling for Doctor Tess.

The guards stagger and fall. I don't know how I did that, but I am a mother after all. Mothers will do anything for their children—yes, I'm not an imposter. Now I reach the transparent glass door. Then, I stop, my palms plastered on the surface. I see them: the doctors huddled around a bed. Doctor Tess holds a pair of defibrillators, rubbing them together, pushing them down against someone. Against my Lana.

Lana jerks beneath the defibrillator as though stunned with a taser. An oxygen mask is fitted to her face, obscuring her innocent beauty. *My Lana.* "Lana," I sob, the vital stats on her cardiac monitor declining. A pair of hands snatch my arms, pulling me away.

"Leave me alone," I cry, "please, leave me." And soon they do. They leave me as if they've lost their will.

I rush back to the glass door. The doctors are no more huddled up. They're removing their masks. A couple of them are smiling. Doctor Tess is wiping her head with the back of her hand. Someone touches the patient monitor. And Lana. Her hands are resting by her sides. She is calm, like a sleeping baby. *Is this why the guards have decided to leave me be?*

"Lana." I push the door open and barge inside, kneeling by Lana's bed. She's fast asleep and her little hands are not responsive to my touch, my kiss. I rub my teary face against the bedsheets and lean over to kiss her forehead. She is warm. The monitor is beeping low.

"Ms Gumi."

Doctor Tess comes over and snatches my hand, pulling me away. "You almost lost her," she says. "You should be holding her *cold* hands by now."

"You are a doctor," I snarl, trying to ignore the many eyes eating at us. "Respect your patient."

She leans forward. "There is no donor for the transplant. There will certainly be another Code Blue alarm in twenty-four hours. It will be the end for Lana at that time. No one will be able to help her." She pulls back. "So, do what is crucial, Ms Gumi. Get Lana a new heart." Doctor Tess walks out, her lab coat swaying.

I rush back to Lana, hold her hand, observe the vapour continuously trapped in the oxygen mask, and offer a silent prayer. *Let God lead me right.* I sob and sigh. "Let God lead me right."

A bell-sound rings. I flinch. *The time is 12 p.m.*

It will certainly be another Code Blue alarm in twenty-four hours. It will be the end for Lana at that time...

I shake my head. "No." I pat Lana's hand and give her a final stare. Then I hurry to Doctor Tess's office, using the lift this time. And as I descend, I reassure myself. Everything I do from now on is God's will.

He knows everything, right? *He knows everything.* If it's not His will, then He will definitely make my new plans futile. *God wants me to do something. He's been speaking to me all along.* Yes, Doctor Tess is a doctor. Doctors have a good heart. God has a good heart...

Lana needs a good heart.

Evening, December 15th, 2022

“*...do not lead us into temptation,
but deliver us from all evil.”*
—Matthew 6:13 (NASB)

I step out of the hospital with a mind poised for a sacrifice. I think back on what Doctor Tess has just told me: *The world is big. Humans are many, countless. Especially children. Children have good hearts—hearts that are suitable, matching for your Lana.* She's said the truth. She's shown me the way.

I look across the street, forward, sideways. There's an elementary school farther left. I open my handbag, fumble for my car remote. And soon I'm driving along the school. The discussion with Doctor Tess was long: full of more chiding, more advice, more orders—just for my Lana. So it's now past 2 p.m. Today is Friday; schools close early. I park my car and watch. Students are running out of the school, relieved to be free once again. School may be fun, but home is bliss. Home sweet home. Parents are holding their children's hands, walking down the pavement. Some have brought cars to transport their kids back home.

And some children are alone—very few of them. They are walking home by themselves. Maybe they have parents who are busy. Maybe they have parents who don't care. Or... maybe they have none.

A girl walks by my parked car, looking sullen, arms crossed, her ponytail wiggling over her school bag as she strides on. She appears roughly ten, Lana's age. I turn the ignition; the car coasts towards her. She senses I'm following her. She stops. Turns. Squints in my direction. I turn off the ignition switch. It is Anna. I know her. She sang alongside Lana during the previous church Thanksgiving Sunday.

She recognises me. "Good afternoon, ma'am," she greets, bowing. "I've not been seeing Lana," she says before I could respond.

I gaze into her eyes. She is as beautiful as Lana. As innocent, even. And judging by her concern for my daughter... *she has a good heart.*

I smile at her and wave and nod. "Good to see you, Anna."

She bows again. "Ma'am, is Lana okay?"

Now this convinces me. Anna cares for Lana. And considering such similarity of heart... it can't be a coincidence. *God is good.* "Anna," I call, and she comes closer. "Will you ride with me?"

Without words, she hurries over to the side door, her fingers latching to her bag strap. I'm reminded of the ram God provided Abraham when he was to sacrifice Isaac. *Jehovah Jireh*. I feel a teardrop trickle down my jaw. "Who can know your ways, God," I mutter as Anna opens the door.

She sits by my side looking so small and pins a gaze on me. "Is Lana okay?" she asks, then looks away. "She is my best friend."

Birds of the same feathers flock together, I conclude. Hearts of the same kind help one another. Now all I need to do is hand this one over to Doctor Tess. She will finish the job by God's grace and my daughter will be back to me.

"Lana is in the hospital." I keep my eyes ahead and turn on the ignition. *I must not falter. This is the will of God.*

Anna sniffs what sounds like a sob. I glance at her. She sniffs again, her face crumpling, voice quivering. "Is Lana in the hospital because of her heart?"

I raise a brow. "How did you know?"

"Lana is my best friend. She tells me everything."

"Do you tell her secrets, too?"

Anna sniffs again and wipes her face with her palm. Now I frown. Her hand is swollen and looks dry. "Are you okay?"

She nods. "Yes. But the doctor says I have a bad kidney, and that I may not live long."

"Oh... no." I grip the steering wheel tighter. *I can't question God. His ways are beyond us.*

Now, I swerve into a different lane.

"Where are we going?" Anna asks.

"Lana needs your heart."

"Uhm... My heart? Can I give her my own, ma'am? How?"

I push the brake pedal then the clutch, and the car coasts to a stop. I may be charged for illegal parking, but I don't care. I turn to face Anna, frowning. "What did you say?"

Anna smiles, a painful smile, too unreal for a kid. "Can I give Lana my heart? I don't want her to die."

I feel my hairs sticking out of their ends. "Stop it!" I mutter. I hit the steering wheel, my voice breaking, "It's painful... stop it."

Anna sniffs again, eyes shooting down. "I'm sorry."

Drumbeats resound from ahead of us. I hear cymbal sounds, too. Voices of children booming from speakers. *Isn't it a school day?*

Anna raises her head and watches them, a smile creeping into her face. The little paraders draw near us, one solemn-yet-bubbly song flowing through their mouths:

*Jesus loves the little children
All the children of the world
They are diverse in his hands
They are precious in his sight
Jesus loves the little children of the world.*

Anna joins the sacred chorus. She sings, my gaze soft on her. She sings till tears roll down her cheek. I imagine Lana also marching alongside those children, chorusing with all innocence and assurance. I imagine her singing in her comatose state, this same chorus. I imagine her waking up with her best friend's heart inside her chest. How will she feel if she discovers that her mother became the devil just to save her? How will she live her life? In joy of having a great mother? In terror of having a demon mother? How will she live? *Lana is too innocent for such a burden.* I'm also too human for that. I thought I could force myself, convince myself and do it and leave this world for Lana. Disappear from the face of the earth after destroying an innocent soul. *What was I thinking?* *What has Doctor Tess said to me?*

I shake my head, look out the window. The paraders are soon gone, yet we remain here. I pat Anna's shoulder and pull her closer to me, tears sitting in my eyes. "I am sorry, Anna. I'm so sorry."

Anna doesn't ask why I'm apologising to her. She doesn't know anything—not even the fact that I have now made a bold decision that will shock the world and shame the devil. She doesn't know how much temptations beset us in a twinkle and how God rescues us from them all. I pat her shoulder again. "You don't know, Anna. God works in mysterious ways."

My phone rings. I wipe my tears and pick it up.

Doctor Tess calling.

I frown. *What communion is there between light and darkness?* But I still answer it. "Hello, Doctor."

"Ms Gumi, how is it? Did you get one?" Her voice is ever the same, a block of ice.

"I'm coming over."

"Not to the hospital, hey. The dealers are in the location I told you; you can take the child there."

"No, I'm coming over with her."

"Hey!"

I hang up. Smile. Even though I shouldn't smile. But I'm about to help a kind soul. I glance at her. "Anna, Jesus loves you."

"Yes... I know."

I sign the agreement for the organ donation—the clause is that we'll proceed with the kidney harvesting if we find no heart donor for Lana before her final twelve hours.

Doctor Tess stands close, scowling disbelief at me. Her gaze rests on Anna who now sits beside me in her office. "Ms Gumi, how could you do that to Lana?"

"My Lana is going to save a life instead of taking one and regretting it forever." My voice trembles and I clasp Anna's hands. "I've called Anna's parents. They are coming over to complete the agreement."

Now I walk out with Anna into the lift. And we are soon standing before the ICU door, gazing at my silent, innocent Lana. Anna is sobbing. She says nothing. Till we both burst out in tears. *God. Your ways are mysterious. Who can know them?*

"For the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation..."

—2 Peter 2:9 (NASB)

Elisha Oluyemi won the 2022 Lagos-HCAF Writing Contest (Prose Category) and came 1st runner-up in both the Shuzia 2021 Short Story Contest (2nd Ed.) and 2022 Flash Fiction Contest. He co-edited the PROFWIC Crime Fiction Anthology, Vol 1. Elisha has writing published/forthcoming in journals, including Mystery Tribune, Brittle Paper, Entropy, The Hooghly Review, Iris Youth Mag, Hotpot Mag, African Writer, Salamander Ink, Erato, Neurological, Kalahari, Nymphs, Shallow Tales Review, Sledgehammer, Arts Lounge, and elsewhere. He writes in the psychological and literary genres.



The Illusion of Permanence

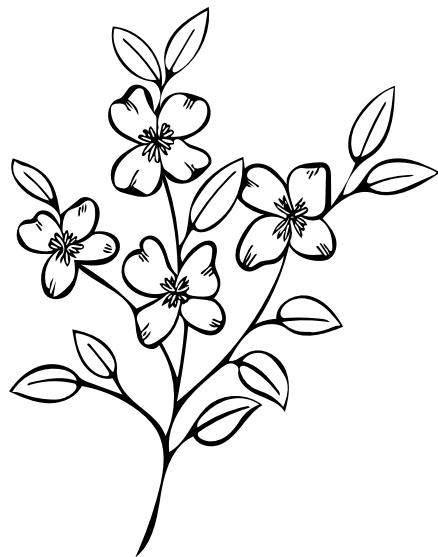
by Fred Pierre

You cannot tether the wind.
You can't hold on to lightning.
Crisis stimulates tragedy's pull.

Welcome to a world that's completely chaotic.
In these moments, god comes out to play.
They want you to believe that the world's lost it's magic,
But mundanity hosts profound miracles.

Love unfolds in the detail,
Supersedes superstructure.
All you need is love sparked between moments.

Search too hard, you won't find it,
Can't find it?
Then pledge to Soul's eternal promise,
“Love... Let it Be Here Now.”



Fred Pierre is a writer of short stories and poems, which he reads at the local Kent bookstore. If you don't find him down by the river or hiking out in the woods, you can find him on Mastodon at <https://mas.to/@informationwillbefree>

Walnuts

by Judy Lunsford

My God is bigger than brain surgery. I even have a t-shirt that says so.

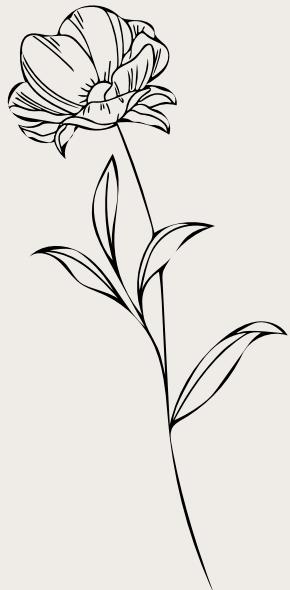
My brain surgery is scheduled for next week. I have metastasized cancer that has made its way into my brain. The MRI pictures are scary to look at. I have “innumerable lesions.” But I also have three cysts that are each about the size of a walnut. Those are what they are after. The neurosurgeon wants to drain the three walnuts.

My trust is in the hands of this neurosurgeon as well as my God. This is scary as hell, but I am putting my faith in them. The two who hold my fate in their hands.

I trust God to guide my neurosurgeon’s hands through this.

I am hoping to get my motor function back. These cysts have stolen my ability to use my left side. It’s been like I’ve had a stroke. Slurred speech, and loss of control of my left side.

I remain in the faith that my God is bigger than brain surgery. I am going to wear that t-shirt into the hospital the morning of my surgery. I want everyone to know where my faith lies.



Judy lives in Arizona with her husband and Giant Schnoodle. She writes with dyslexia and a chronic illness (Meniere's Disease) which causes hearing loss. She's been published in the short story anthology "Promises in the Gold", edited by Dean Wesley Smith.

She can also be found in the July 2021 issue of Enchanted Conversation Magazine. She is currently battling Stage 4 cancer.

Ode to the Uterus

by Monica Prince

Praise the sacred bowl,
beginning of life, first studio apartment.
Bold in your musculature,
incessantly reminding me of your strength.
Hallelujah to the womb,
the size of a palm until conception,
capable of expansion and expulsion.
Eve's apple seed blossomed—
I bow before you, beloved matrix,
keeper of blood, constructor of bone,
brain, bowel. How awesome your name—
uterus, an implied collaboration,
a union required for happy futures.
Even in this I give thanks,
your powerful contractions around never-children,
sudden cramps render me kneeling,
strip my clothing, cry out to every Heaven,
how dare I question legacy
if I can survive with you. Of course I can.
Forever your servant, eternally at your mercy,
I will give you everything—
chocolate, yoga, rest, vodka, sex,
anything to please.

Worship

by Monica Prince

You cannot treat yourself
like holy ground if you've never
tasted it. Never lain your body
down against new soil with reverence,
asked forgiveness from the trees,
given back a little of your blood
to the sky. What do you know
of holy? What do you know of protection?

You cannot treat yourself
like holy ground if you've never
learned your own silence. Asked
your heart why it beats outside
the window while you sleep.
Opened every door looking for god.
What language do you speak
when you're alone? When a climax blooms
like a well inside you?

You cannot treat yourself
like holy ground if you've never
unfolded your heart in front of a mirror,
played your soul on repeat
against the chimes of your lungs.

You bleed and call that honesty—
but what of your tears? Each
discarded skin cell raked from your scalp.
Black tendrils of hair
wrenched from pores and offering
promise. Where does your sorrow
cook breakfast? Have you seen
the sun all year?

You cannot treat yourself
like holy ground if you've never
bathed in the absence of a lover.
The moment you quit looking
for completion and accepted
the gift of wakening again and again.
If the moon rejected the sun's light
tomorrow, your legs would carry you
to the sea to watch it melt
back into ice. No prophecy can prepare
you for surrender, the quality
of acquiescing to what you can only label
as sin. Eat the apple. Kiss the body back.

Trespass against all who trespass
against you. Let every borrowed breath
refresh your tired throat, ears
still waiting for the hollow croon
of your name. Question everything,
even this: if I am holy ground,
where shall I pray?

Walk on your knees to the altar
of your undoing—today, it looks like
the eye of a hurricane named for your mother,
tomorrow, a cake without icing.

No one can give you everything
to survive. Just rest here.

Who told you the end would whimper?
Are you sure they didn't mean
worship?



Monica Prince teaches activist and performance writing at Susquehanna University in Pennsylvania. She is the author of the forthcoming choreopoem *Roadmap, How to Exterminate the Black Woman: A Choreopoem*, and *Letters from the Other Woman*. Her work appears in *Wildness*, *The Texas Review*, *The Rumpus*, *MadCap Review*, *American Poetry Journal*, and elsewhere. Find her on Twitter and Instagram: @poetic_moni.

There Is No Up

by Checca Aird

The speeding cloud bounced to a halt in front of the grandest gates McIntosh had ever seen. He searched his clothes for a suitable tip but found they'd been replaced by his most-loved flannel pyjamas. Irritated, he turned to make his excuses, but the cloud had already retreated beneath the shining entrance. Golden bars interlaced as elaborate as any royal crown and topped with giant shining pearls that radiated the warmth of the summer sun, stretched further than his eyes could see.

Did they have to take my glasses?

He frowned at his reflection in the opaque baubles, the sides of his mouth dipping all the way to the ground beneath his feet.

“But of course, it isn’t ground at all,” A smooth voice answered his thought.

They were, without a doubt, the most beautiful being he’d ever laid eyes on. With skin smooth as hard-chrome and pupilless eyes marbled with flecks of green and gold. McIntosh risked another glance at the shimmering mist beneath his feet.

“Welcome,” they said. “I’m the Arch-angel Uriel.”

“Never heard of you.” Even with their colossal stature they only stood at a third of the gate’s size.

“You wound me. Perhaps if I appeared to you as a lion? No? Well, I'll try not to hold that against you. Now then,” Uriel waved their arm and a small stone tablet appeared in their hand. “Marty Alexander Mcintosh?”

“That's right. CEO and chair of Flutter.com,” He offered his hand as he checked his tartan breast-pocket for a business card.

“I see. Another tech mogul.”

“Guilty as charged. Actually, have you considered automating this whole check-in experience? I'd be happy to spear-head the project.”

“Oh, you're lucky Peter has the day off. Let's see where he's got you staying.” They focused on the stone.

“You should get the new iPad.”

“The what?”

“It's a digital tablet.”

“Oh, Steve's old toy. Rest assured; this has everything I need.” Uriel's eyes oscillated faster than a surgical-saw before settling on an inscription written in a language McIntosh had never seen before. “Ah yes, this way please.” The lock turned with a great rumble of thunder that shook the sky. “Sorry about the noise, I've asked Gabriel to fix it but apparently it was designed that way.”

“Don’t you want to measure my worth or something? Check if I make the cut?”

“Oh no. We used to have a very strict vetting process, but these days we’ll pretty much take anyone who made the sign of the cross or bought a Christmas tree.”

Once through the gate, they floated along a wide, shimmering path. Unlike the static roads of earth, this path was alive: its alleyways and side-streets grew and shrank like the creeping stems of an ivy plant. McIntosh stared with wide eyes as they passed all manner of abodes; a Grecian temple, a tree house, even a catamaran sailing in mid-air. The breeze smelt like a flower garden brought to life by the muddling of fresh rain and each inhale tasted like his favourite scotch.

“So, who’ve they got me next to? Is there like a section up here for the c-suite?”

“JJ Whitey, although he just goes by J now. And Tokyo Prince. Ah here we are, your new home.”

McIntosh stared at the house they had stopped in front of. It was a three-story colonial style mansion with white pillars and a wooden porch. Everything he’d dreamed of but had been too scared of the potential public-backlash to buy. After-all, he’d had shareholders to consider.

“What do they do?” he asked.

“Do? Well J is a connoisseur of the windmill-bong and Tokyo mostly sits by the pool making her boyfriend take pictures of her.”

“A stoner and a millennial instagirl? Is she at least trending? What's their net worth?”

Uriel smiled at the question. “I don't think we have that information on file.” They said without checking the tablet. A steady trail of thick smoke drifted from the four-man tent to the right of his mansion while bursts of flash bounced off Tokyo's pool.

Mcintosh balanced on his tiptoes “Where's her boyfriend?”

“The camera *is* her boyfriend.”

Mcintosh shook his head. “This can't be right. How do people move up around here?”

“There is no up.”

“Like a flat hierarchical structure? Come on, there's always someone at the top.” Mcintosh's neck burned red as he realised who he was referring to.

“I don't think he's moving on for a while, but I can find out?” Uriel didn't try to hide their amusement.

“There must be other roles. And don't be fooled by my soft hands and tech-neck, I'm not afraid of hard work. I started off working odd jobs in a lumber-mill.”

“I really should be getting back to the gates-”

“Just ask me some questions.”

“Are you asking me to interview you?”

“You bet your halo I am, actually where is your halo?”

Uriel tilted their head in disdain.

“Such a stereotype. Do all humans wear hats?”

“Look I get it. It's probably very political up here, show me a company that isn't. And don't give me that shit about it being above your paygrade. Come on, just ask me about my first company, about my five-step program for success. You won't find another employee like me. I get up at 5am every day to work out and read a new book before work even starts. In fact, I don't even think of it as work. It's my life. I dream beyond the job description, and you'd better believe no one can network like me. When I make a plan, I stick to it. How about part time? I can consult. Give me any underperforming department and I'll turn it around before year end.”

Uriel folded their hands together. “We don't really have any of that here. But you can do anything you want. What are your hobbies? Your passions?”

“My passion is problem solving.”

Uriel rolled their eyes and the resulting whirl of colours made McIntosh feel like he'd tumbled headfirst into a pile of autumn-gold leaves.

“Surely someone told you, you can't take your wealth with you when you die?”

“Honestly? I just thought that was something poor people said. But it doesn't matter, don't pay me! I need something to do. Give me something, please. What's your job?”

Uriel's eyes narrowed. Then all at once their face changed, lips spreading into a smile so bright McIntosh felt he'd go blind if he wasn't already dead.

“I think I know the place you're describing, there'll be a queue at the gates by now but...what the heck. Let's get you home!”

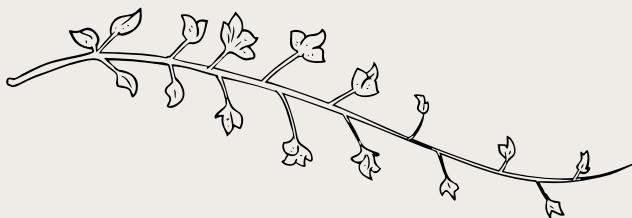
Suddenly the house and street disappeared and McIntosh found himself at the top of an icy staircase looking down into another realm. It was an upside-down triangle carved into a thick block of ice split into so many levels that to McIntosh they looked like pinstripes on a very distant suit.

“It's.. its.. a pyramid scheme,” McIntosh said through chattering teeth.

“Exactly. Nothing but back breaking drudgery and meaningless performance reviews as you work your way down promotion by promotion but with no reward. Long days and restless nights. Everyone has a value and the more you're worth the lower you sink.”

Mouth agape, McIntosh looked from the frozen dominion to Uriel and then back down again.

“It's perfect!”



When Checca was 10 years old she wrote, directed and starred in her first play. While it wasn't the smash hit she hoped, it kicked off her love of writing. By day she's an analyst, by night (and early morning) a fiction and non-fiction writer. She is fuelled by spicy food, Jane Austen, cooking shows, Diana Gabaldon, Rick and Morty, character-based plots and books set in the First World War.
You can find her on Twitter @FrankieSRivers

Moses

by Chris Cottom

Rose put down her hairbrush and waited as Edwin yanked his nightgown over his head, dropped it on the rug and ran down the passage. She knew what was coming.

‘Moses!’ he shouted as he jumped into his bath.

While she took strength from her husband’s staunch faith and regular devotions, Rose was less convinced about his ablutions. Almost as firmly as he believed in the infallibility of Scripture, Edwin believed in the efficacy of a daily cold bath. He would wash vigorously and dunk his head before leaping out, careless of the water cascading onto the cracked linoleum from his six foot one inch frame. Fortunately, the vicarage bathroom was the other end of the passage from the nursery, so Roland in his cot would usually remain undisturbed by his father’s morning routine.

When he returned, a towel around his waist, Rose paused from pinning her hair at her dressing table in the bay window and watched three Edwins in the triple mirror: Edwin the husband, Edwin the father and Edwin the priest. After rubbing his hair with his towel he crossed the bedroom, pulled back the curtains and stood behind her with his hands on her shoulders, evidently heedless of the hoarfrost tracing every twig in the garden, beyond which the church tower stood sharp against the dawn sky.

‘Another day shepherding the flock,’ he said.

‘Amen to that,’ she said, leaning back against the firm bare stomach of Edwin the husband. She took a deep breath of his clean soapy smell and wondered if he thought hot water was sinful. In which case why had God given them a boiler? This monster’s voracious appetite for scuttles of coke meant they’d dubbed it The Bunter. ‘I’ll just feed The Bunter,’ she would say, before she got their own breakfast and again before they climbed the stairs to bed.

‘Is it symbolic, the cold bath?’ she said. ‘Like baptising yourself again?’

‘You can’t really baptise yourself. That’s why Jesus needed John.’

‘So why—’

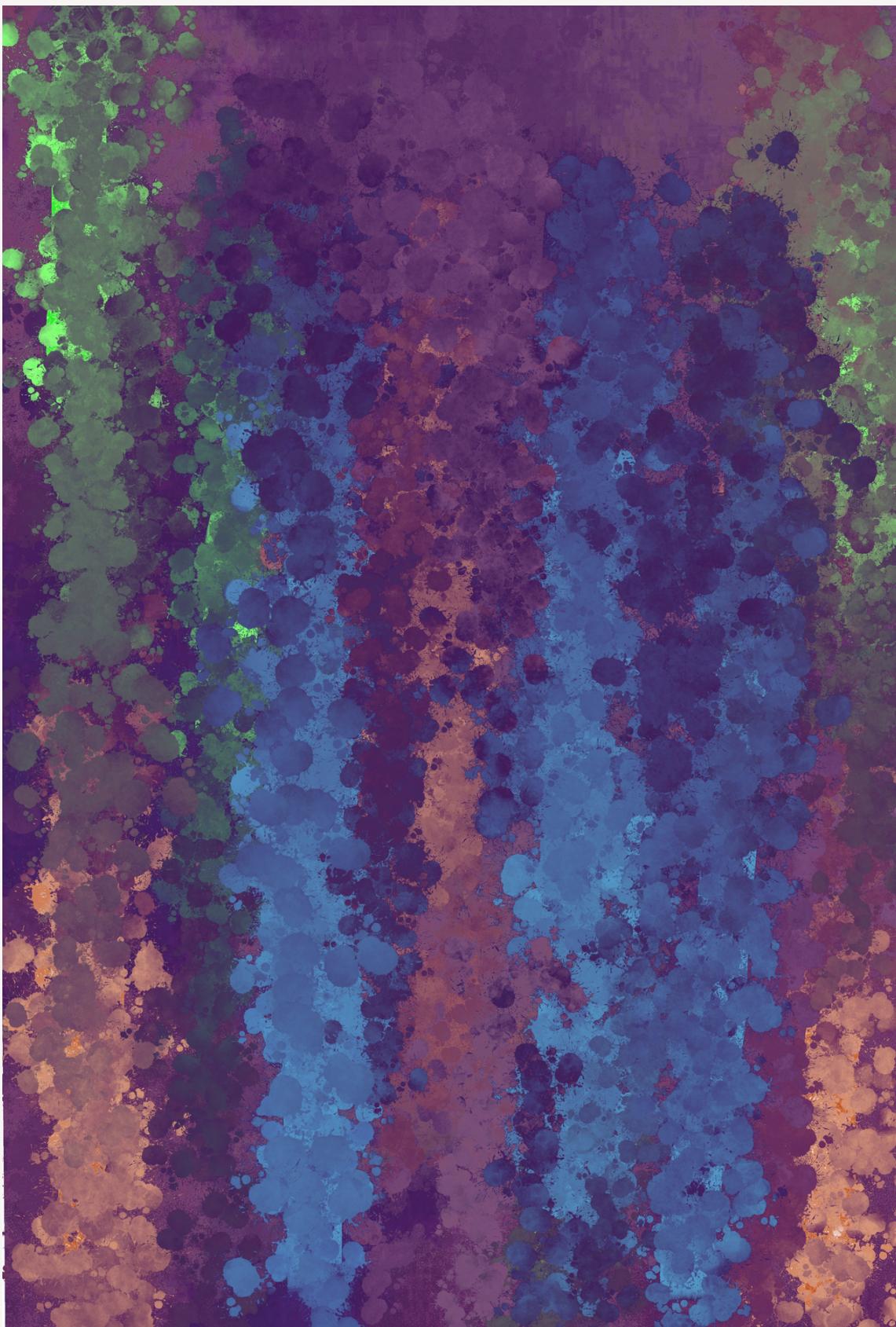
‘I’m just waking myself up, that’s all.’



Chris Cottom lives in Macclesfield, UK. His stories appear in Agape Review, Bournemouth Writing Prize, Cranked Anvil, FlashFlood, Free Flash Fiction, Hysteria, On The Premises, One Wild Ride, Parracombe Prize, Retreat West, Shooter Flash, Streetcake, The Centificationist, and others.

A Breath To Save The World

by Edward Lee



At Peace In Time

by Edward Lee



Seeking Answers In The Silence

by Edward Lee



artist's comment

A Breath To Save The World: And if all the world could take a moment to simply breathe, perhaps the world could breathe easier.

At Peace In Time: Peace found in differences.

Seeking Answers In The Silence: Waiting and listening, answers will be heard when you give them a chance to be spoken.



Edward Lee is an artist and writer from Ireland. His paintings and photography have been exhibited widely, while his poetry, short stories, non-fiction have been published in magazines in Ireland, England and America, including The Stinging Fly, Skylight 47, Acumen and Smiths Knoll. He is currently working on two photography collections: 'Lying Down With The Dead' and 'There Is A Beauty In Broken Things'. He also makes musical noise under the names Ayahuasca Collective, Orson Carroll, Lego Figures Fighting, and Pale Blond Boy.

His blog/website can be found at
<https://edwardmlee.wordpress.com>

an avalanche of tribulations

by Sadiq Abdulsalam Adeiza

seven big tangelos and one lime fruit —
the likeness of the fibroid masses harvested

from a friend's womb,
plunging her into depths of uncertain waters.

who bears the cost of misfortune when
it descends as a confluence of grey clouds,

hovering over the roof of my mother's property
in Agassa, condemning it to a pile of rubble?

who counts the creaking sounds of a heart breaking
in silence for yet another dream not coming to life?

my wife asked me once,
how does one know for sure that it gets better in the end —

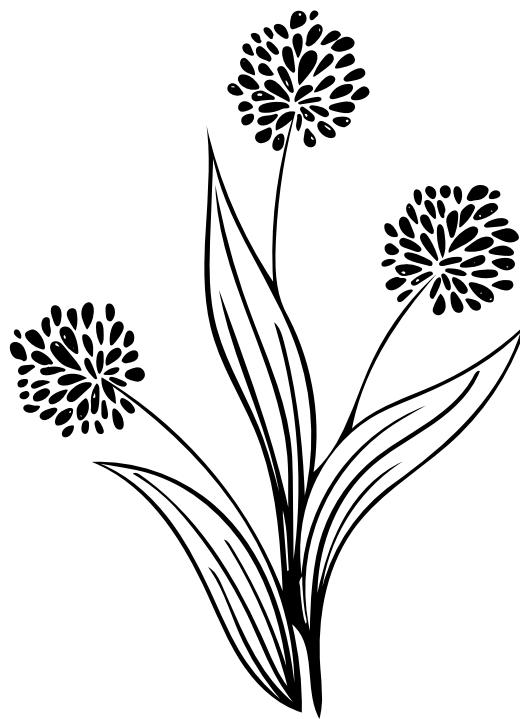
will the cold winds of harmattan nights not cease?
will the red dust not revert to moisten earth,

springing fruits once more?
is He not the most merciful of those who show mercy?

fellowship

by Sadiq Abdulsalam Adeiza

i listen for the dead and hear nothing.
everyone leaves the masjid,
one after the other —
some in groups
some in solitude
some in laughter
one who has fellowshipped with death long enough
soon forgets what laughter tastes like.
i wait till i am alone with the drowning
sound of high speeding fans.
i murmur the names
of everyone i have lost.
with each name, a prayer escapes my heart
to hunt for them in their tombs,
bearing a torch and greetings of peace.



Sadiq Abdulsalam Adeiza is a Muslim Poet, Writer and Editor hailing from the charming town of Okene in Kogi State, Nigeria. He is also a Medic in training. Some of his writings have been published in Jarfly Magazine, Kalahari Review, Ice Floe Press, The Shallow Tales Review, Feral, FieryScribe Review and elsewhere.

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To Love The Earth

by Talia R. BarNoy

Originally published by Nesh Magazine in February 2021

A holloway is a well-beaten-down path that is traveled so often that its travelers leave behind an imprint on the earth. A holloway is made through voices and shared experiences, travel advice and traditions.

There was one such holloway near my home.

I knew it was there because of the traditions of my little community nestled into the land a small distance from the Red Sea and because of the group of archaeologists who “discovered” it named it holloway. When they came, they didn’t excavate with holes in the ground; they combed through the tall grass and brushed past the trees. They seemed to be loving the earth and finding its treasures strewn across centuries rather than ripping a gash into it. They didn’t stay long after naming it.

Once the archaeologists had gone, I went to see what had been done. I liked this holloway; the smoothness of its path, the way the rocks curved and softened from so much touch and movement, the way the land loved the people and animals who journeyed across it. I saw that the archaeologists hadn’t changed the landscape at all. It was still the pathway where my ancestors took their livestock and loved the land for all it gave them.

Off in the distance, I heard someone crying somewhere off the well-worn path. I followed the sound, worried it was a child from our village who had gotten lost. I approached with speed and was met by a hulking figure made of clay that seemed to be as flexible in movement as if it were flesh. It shook as it cried, hiding its face in its enormous hands and causing the tree it was leaning on to quiver.

I stood still, my body failing me in every way. Through my body's failure came a trembling I could not control; I stumbled slightly and fell onto my backside, alerting the creature of my presence.

The creature lifted its head up to reveal hollow eyes and a thin line of a mouth etched into its clay flesh, as well as a Hebrew word carved into its forehead that I could not quite make out. It had no real eyes, but I could tell it was searching. I dared not move or make a sound. Despite my efforts, it tilted its head, walked over and reached out a thick-fingered hand towards me.

I stared at the creature's hand until it began to shake it at me. Scared of what it would do, I put my hand into it. The creature helped me up onto my feet. This closeness allowed me to have a better look at the word on its forehead. It looked like something out of one of my family's prayer books, the important ones that we kept hidden from neighbors that would not approve.

From my crude understanding of the language, I saw that the first two letters were the first two letters of the word "mother" but with a hard "T" sound at the end instead of the second "Ah" sound.

My father, who was always angry that I showed no interest in learning things to make me different from our neighbors, would have been proud that I had retained something from his teachings. I felt a strange excitement that I could recognize what I was seeing. I tried to ignore the encroaching thought of my classmates and what they might say if they knew.

The creature opened its gash of a mouth into a sort of smile.

The word fit. The word was “truth.”

I returned the smile and started looking around for an easy exit, but the creature took my head in its large hands and gently shifted my gaze to look at it. It put its hands up as if to surrender and then pointed at the word. I cocked my head. It pointed at the word more furiously. I started looking around again. It guided my head to face it. Its shoulders slumped as if resigned.

I relaxed.

Trying once more, it pointed at the word on its head and then made an X motion with its finger over the first letter. It walked back over to the tree it had been crying on, snapping off a medium-sized branch that would have taken me ages, but looked as if it had broken bread. It brought the branch to me and shoved it into my hands. The creature repeated the motion of signing an X over the first letter on its forehead.

I understood what it wanted, and I hesitated. I looked at the ground. Patches of dry grass brushed against my feet. I looked back at the creature; its clay looked brittle and worn, old and used. I guided the creature over to a rock so I could reach its forehead better. I took the branch and began scraping at the letter. This didn't seem to hurt the creature. Once I had finished, and the letter was gone, I recognized that the word now spelt "death," and in that moment, the creature smiled and began to puddle into a mound of wet clay. I stared in horror until all that was left was a tiny scroll amidst the small hill of mud.

I dropped the branch and took the scroll. Written was a name I had never seen or heard of before. I gripped it and ran back home. My father was still awake, reading. I told him what I had seen.

"I've heard tales of this creature from a westerner, one of those European types. A 'Goy-lem' he called it. Or was it 'Golem?'" My father mused. "This man was one of the archaeologists. I asked him what they were doing, and we got to talking. I'd never spoken to someone like us who hadn't been from around here, someone who hadn't left. He ended up telling me of the 'Goy-lem,' a creature made of clay formed to protect the Jewish people in a small town in the country of Poland many many years ago." He leaned forward in his chair. "If your creature is the same as his creature, it must have been wandering for so long, seen too much, finished its commands, and then was forgotten." He ruffled my hair. "I'm glad you gave it peace."

I told him of the paper, and he asked to see it. He said it was one of God's many names. He said it was a gift. He said to go to bed.

I did go to bed, putting the scroll on a table in my room. This had not felt like a gift to me.

That night I dreamt that I was journeying to the center of the earth to write the word “death” on its core. I dreamt that all the life across the earth shriveled into dust, and humans and animals alike dissolved back into clay.

I woke up, and beneath the scroll was one of the books my father hid inside the wood of our dining table. I opened it up and read about how man was born of clay and was alone until he was gifted another like him. I went downstairs to see my father making breakfast. We talked about the creature, the holloway, what I had read, about the stars in the sky, and about how lonely it was to live in a village where you had to pretend.



Talia R. BarNoy is a Queer Jewish writer and archaeophile from New York City. Talia has been previously published in New Voices Magazine, Lilith Magazine, Door is A Jar as well as in other locations. You can find more of Talia on twitter @teateemple or just shout in the direction of the Hudson River and they might hear you.

Cleveland

by Erin Jamieson

hospital nights were tortuous, lonely
beeping monitor recording my low
heartbeat, aroma of floor cleaner,
restless rustle of shift changes
I turned on one side & the other
reaching & touching nothing but
shadows- haunted by the weight
of uncertainty, the numbness
wondering if my life was worth saving
as snow fell and transformed streets below-
misty streetlight flooded golden through
semi sheer ivory curtains, warming me
as if God had heard me, as if He knew
I needed a sign to keep fighting

From My Window

by Erin Jamieson

A week after my great-grandmother died, my mother found me talking in my bedroom, staring up at brilliant sunlight. When she asked who I was talking to, I said, *Grannie. She misses us.* To this day, I wonder if this was a child's imagination—or if I was indeed speaking to an angel, if we lose touch with wonder and faith as we age.



Erin Jamieson holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Miami University of Ohio. Her writing has been published in over eighty literary magazines, and her fiction has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She is the author of a forthcoming poetry collection (*Clothesline*, NiftyLit). Twitter: @erin_simmer

Yardwork

by Monica Fuglei

*He who works faithfully,
prays twice*—Martin Luther

With raw knuckles
and calloused hands
I want to know what work
will make these sad prayers lift
to their answers.

They are not humble, but frail,
self-absorbed,
a strutting peacock on the henhouse
tail upright shining in the sun.

Working my hands through the dirt
they spill out like a mantra
I want I want I want I want
This is neither Luther's work
nor his prayer.

This year I will learn
to turn dirt to food,
to soften stiff garden gloves,
to work faithfully
and accept quiet answers
to unwieldy prayers.



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The Jewel of the Goddess

by Sarah Das Gupta

A ghostly mist crept over the *bustee*, its long fingers stretching halfway up the straggly palm trees leaning over a huddle of huts. Their trunks hidden, the palm tops seemed to be floating unanchored. Despite the early hour and the chill of the October morning, figures could be seen moving through the narrow paths between the shacks, as if behind a thin grey curtain. Women in brightly coloured saris, earthen pots of water expertly balanced on their heads, suddenly disappeared through shadowy doorways. Already men and women hurried off to work as *dhobis*, cooks, *ayahs*, *malis*, in large houses, which in Kolkata are often surprisingly close to sprawling slums. Children in various school uniforms, satchels on their backs, ran off to catch an early tram.

Suddenly, a child's crying broke the silence. This was no ordinary crying, common enough in any *bustee*. There was a sense of desperation, of agony in this terrible sobbing. It came from a hut at the end of one of a maze of muddy alleys criss-crossing the slum. Inside the hut was very cramped but very tidy. A few metal cooking pots hung from hooks on the flimsy walls; on insecure wooden shelves jars of yellow turmeric, dried red peppers, knobbly roots of ginger, tins of oil and ghee emerged from the gloom, once your eyes became accustomed to the semi-darkness. A string bed at the back of the single room was separated from the rest of the space by a saffron coloured curtain hung from a thin wire.

The curtain had been drawn back for the day. It was from a wicker cradle, on this string bed, that the unbearable sobbing had come. Swaddled in blankets, like a tiny, embalmed mummy, a baby was continuously crying. A young girl, hardly a woman, her green sari draped over her head, sat unmoving, frozen into statue-like stillness. In the doorway, a young man stood almost as traumatised. His white *dhoti* and pale, yellow shirt gleamed in a pool of sunlight suddenly flooding the entrance.

'If I get to work today,' Ram spoke wearily, 'we can try the new medicine.'

His wife lifted her head for a moment. As if even this effort was too much; she said nothing. When Ram looked back, he saw a slow tear running down her cheek. He felt guilty leaving but they desperately needed the money. From the road he could still hear his son crying.

The tram back to Ballygunge that evening was crowded as always. Children in school uniform, women with bunches of dark green spinach and plump plastic bags of koi fish, which were swimming despondently in murky water, pushed their way into already bursting tram cars. Newspaper packages bulged with silver-scaled hilsa, soon to be cooked in the traditional mustard. In a wooden cage three scruffy chickens fluttered and squawked helplessly.

Suddenly the tram screeched to a halt as a cow and her calf strolled leisurely over the tram lines. Ram, who had been dozing in a corner, suddenly woke with a start. The smell of fish in the tram and the scent of incense, which had drifted in from a roadside temple, reminded him. In a few days, Kolkata would be transformed by Durga Puja into a city fit for the gods, a magic city of lights, *pandals*, new clothes, joy, faith, hope. He clutched the paper package in his hand as if it were worth at least a *lakh* of rupees!

So far, the day had been lucky for Ram. He had arrived early at the large construction site in Alipore, an affluent part of the city. Already a queue of casual labourers was waiting in hope that the site manager would recruit some men to work on the construction of a block of luxury flats. Only fifty had been chosen; Ram was number forty-nine and he felt he had won the lottery—a chance to carry blocks of stone up ladders, shift piles of sand, move heavy scaffolding, for a pittance. It was hard, soulless labour but at least he had bought the medicine from a pharmacy, safely wrapped in a green-striped bag. Every so often, he closed his fist to check again that the magic elixir was safe.

Ram remembered it was nearly six days since he had taken his son to a free clinic held once a week in a local doctor's surgery. There had been a long queue waiting: mothers with small babies, sniffling, coughing toddlers, older people, some leaning on sticks or crutches. The doctor had taken Krishna's temperature, listened to his laboured breathing and had shaken his head despondently on hearing where Ram lived.

Muttering something about a *bustee* being no place for a small, underweight baby, he had written out a prescription in the expected illegible writing and with a sigh of resignation, passed on to the next depressing case.

As he walked home that night from the tram, Ram thought about the approaching Durga Puja, the greatest Hindu festival in Bengal and a chance once a year to buy new clothes. He decided to stop for a moment at the local *pandal* and see the brilliantly lit pavilion with its images of gods. Even from the end of the road, he could see this glittering palace. He hardly noticed the familiar evening scene of squatting figures, fanning glowing coals in smoking chulhas to cook the evening meal or the inevitable collection of ragged beggars hovering outside the *pandal*. After all, worshippers would hopefully be charitable, especially in the presence of the gods!

The deities were regally housed in a magnificent, royal pavilion, its sides draped with shiny blue silk which gleamed under the neon lighting. It was truly a palace fit for a Maharajah. Jewels in the gods' gold crowns shone brilliantly in the reflected light. Here was a magic island in a sea of grey, urban anonymity. His gaze centred on the Goddess Durga in all her beauty and power. Ram removed his battered sandals, still full of sand from the building site. Her ten hands held the divine weapons of the gods: Shiva's trident, Vishnu's chakra, Brahma's kamundalam of holy water...

He thought of the tales of his childhood. Back in the village, his grandmother had held the children spellbound with stories of the gods.

Far into the night they had listened in the flickering lamplight, learning how Durga, the ultimate female warrior, returns every year from Mount Kailash, her heavenly home, to visit her parents. Riding her *Bahan*, the majestic lion, she slays the fearful demon king, Mahishasura. How powerful the stories had been, the village in darkness, the monsoon rain drumming on the flat roof, jackals howling in the distance. Ram looked into the face of Durga, the Goddess who was said to have one hundred and eight names. Her eyes were at first glance fierce as she thrust her spear into the hideous demon. Yet, as he looked closely, Ram felt a powerful sense of compassion. It is not by chance that the skilled craftsmen from Kumartuli painted her eyes first. It is at this moment that the Goddess comes alive. Clay becomes flesh!

Ram looked at Durga's four children, dutifully poised beside their warrior mother. Her two daughters, Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, splendid in brilliant pink, her wise owl perched beside her; Saraswati, goddess of knowledge and music, in a saffron sari, accompanied by an elegant swan. On the far left was the portly figure of her son, Lord Ganesh, bringer of good beginnings – a tiny mouse at his feet. The family was complete with the handsome figure of Kartik, god of war, and an equally handsome peacock. Her children stood ready to fight beside their mother against evil.

Ram turned back to the central, arresting figure of Durga. Her brilliant, red silk sari was embroidered with fine gold thread which gleamed in the light. Her eyes, strangely enigmatic, concentrated on the death blow she was about to deliver, her spear hovering over the cringing demon.

It was difficult to explain that despite her warlike energy, there was an overwhelming stillness about her. He looked at her golden crown, encrusted with jewels. At the centre was an enormous ruby like a glowing ember or the final sight of the sinking sun. He prayed silently, his eyes on the gleaming stone, his thoughts on his sick child.

Some time had passed, before Ram walked slowly home, looking back over his shoulder at the gleaming lights from the *pandal*. Despite the medicine still clutched in his hand, he almost dreaded the situation awaiting him: Rupa lost in her own sadness, Krishna exhausted, sobbing.

Approaching the *bustee*, Ram could hear the usual chatter of voices and smell the smoke from clay ovens as evening meals were being cooked. A group of young boys was playing football, thin bamboo canes marking the goals. Their ball suddenly bounced towards him. Automatically, Ram headed it back into play. He walked with growing apprehension along muddy paths towards the far side of the slum. The air was thick with smoke and from inside huts lamps gleamed, revealing interiors where children huddled around, trying to study while food was being prepared. There was no electricity in the *bustee*. Ram had often seen students, sitting beneath street lights or under lighted balconies, completing homework!

He had been listening carefully to the usual evening noises but as yet one dreaded sound had been absent. Looking through his own doorway, he saw Rupa and the baby, in a circle of yellow light which faded into darkness in the corners of the small room.

They were framed as if in a painting, sleeping mother and child. Her sari had slipped from her head, leaving thick black hair to fall around her shoulders and over her face. Yet, even asleep, she looked pale and drawn. In the wicker cradle Krishna slept, although signs of recent tears still lingered on his face.

Ram walked softly, barefooted to the edge of the string bed. Gently he touched Rupa's hair. She woke suddenly, guiltily reaching towards the sleeping child, yet afraid to wake him.

'He's asleep,' Ram whispered, 'how has he been today?' He stroked Krishna's hair softly; feeling with alarm, his unchanged hot, sweaty forehead.

'Crying most of the time, until just before you came back.' Rupa's voice sounded flat, her face drained of emotion.

'At least I got the medicine the doctor at the clinic prescribed.' Ram pulled the precious bottle from the now crumpled bag. 'We should wake him and give him a dose as soon as possible.'

This was easier said than done. It proved difficult to wake the drowsing baby, let alone dose him with the prescribed two full teaspoons. Rupa held him tightly in the folds of her sari. Ram managed to prise open the small but determinedly closed mouth. It was as tricky as opening an obstinate mussel or clam.

Somehow, he succeeded in gently pouring most of the mixture down the small throat. Krishna almost immediately fell asleep, a tiny trickle of brown liquid running from the corner of his lips.

He seemed calmer but the high fever remained. His forehead had felt hot, even to Ram's rough and calloused hand.

Later that night, as they settled down to sleep on the narrow bed, Ram tried to remember exactly what time it had been when he had been standing transfixed, gazing at Durga's ruby? It must have been just before he got home with the medicine.

The evening had come for the Goddess to return to her home and her husband, Lord Shiva, on Mount Kailash. It was after the final five days of the celebration, when the thousands of *pandals* had been visited by most of the citizens of Kolkata: children in brand new outfits, women in bright new saris, men in pristine white *dhotis*. Crowds had walked from pandal to *pandal*, looking at different images of the Goddess. Some were very modern with household pets replacing the traditional animals in the ancient stories, others kept firmly to time honoured tradition. Many had smaller versions of the Goddess and her family in their own homes.

Durga had been ceremonially ‘fed’ by groups of elderly women in the many districts of the city. Her lips were white with the remains of *sandesh* and other Bengali sweets given to sustain her on the long journey home. In the traditional ceremony of *Sindur Khela*, married women had joyfully smeared each other’s faces and that of Durga with bright vermillion powder. Prayers had been said, incense burned, drums beaten, past pujas fondly recalled. That evening the Goddess would leave but the inevitable sadness would be tinged by the faith that Maa Durga would return next autumn.

Ram was standing by the side of an open-backed lorry, its engine loudly turning over. With a group of the strongest young men in the district, he prepared to shoulder the heavy contents of the *pandal* onto the waiting lorry. As they slowly edged forward, the images swayed crazily backwards and forwards, almost as if they were dancing. Finally, Mother, children and respective animals were securely loaded. Women stood around in their new saris to catch a last precious glimpse of Maa Durga! The back of the lorry was packed with local men, boys and the traditional *dhaki* drummers, their instruments decorated with ribbons and bright strips of many coloured fabrics. As the lorry gathered speed, the drumming reached fever pitch. The images swayed and danced to the ever faster beat. With the speed increasing and the drums beating louder, the ten arms of Durga seemed to merge into one mighty limb. Other lorries appeared and soon the roads leading to the Hooghly were full of swaying images, ear-splitting drumming and chanting voices. All the thousands of Durgas, from every part of the city, were on the move, drawn by the magnetic power of the river!

At the sixteen city *ghats* along the river, queues of lorries were waiting to unload their divine cargoes. Small household Durgas, giant community Durgas, modern Durgas, traditional Durgas—all waiting for *Visarjan*, the culmination of the yearly festival! Then all these images would be immersed in the Hooghly—a distributary of the mighty Ganga. In the water the clay bodies would disintegrate and become part of the river and finally part of the sea. Eventually Durga would return home in the form of evaporated rain water, falling on the high mountains. She waited there to return next autumn, a perfect symbol of the timeless cycle of death and rebirth.

Ram and the other men succeeded in lifting the ‘ruby’ Durga (as Ram had named his own, special Goddess) from the lorry. By now it was dark and the Hooghly was flowing swiftly. They would need the help of expert labourers from the Sundarbans to carry the images slowly down the slippery *ghat* steps into the water. As they walked into the river, Ram felt the cold rush of the current tugging him forward. At a signal from the bank, the gods were released in their clay forms to begin their long journey home. The images began to drift into deeper waters. Already small boys were diving into the river, scavenging for pieces of silk, coins, and jewellery to sell in the local bazaar. Ram waded further into the dark fast flowing waters. Looking down, he could see Maa Durga, the golden crown still intact, the ruby glowing dimly through the water. Only two of her many arms were still above the surface; whether pleading or blessing, Ram was unsure. He reached down to touch the stone. Even as he whispered a prayer, Durga was dissolving, leaving her clay body, the bright sari, the brass bangles. Travelling seaward, she would again become pure spirit, back in her mountain home, ready to resume the great battle next year.

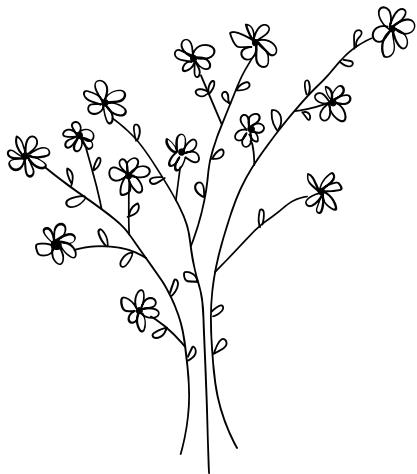
Struggling to walk back against the strengthening pull of the current, Ram heard one of the men calling out the time. It was just eight o’clock. The tide in the river was about to turn. The empty lorry dropped Ram outside the entrance to the *bustee*, which was still noisy and excited. The sound of drumming drifted into the slum from the road as every few minutes another Durga with her entourage made her way to the river. Fireworks like showers of brightly coloured petals burst across the sky. Rockets shot skyward exploding into fountains of colour.

Children were proudly showing off their new clothes, girls in sparkling dresses, boys, smart in spotless white pyjamas and kurtas while the enticing smell of festive cooking hung in the air: hilsa baked in mustard, delicious sweets—*sandesh, jalebis, gulab jamuns, sweet dhoi*—to offset the bite of chillies.

Ram walked nervously to the hut at the far end of the slum. He fought back a strange feeling of hope which, despite all his efforts, refused to be suppressed. He stood in the darkness, peering in through the doorway of the small shack. Rupa was laughing for the first time that week! In front of her lay Krishna resplendent in his new outfit, waving his arms and legs madly in all directions, giggling helplessly, as his mother tickled him. Ram was spellbound. Rupa looked so beautiful in a bright pink Puja sari, embroidered with a gold thread, her face smeared with crimson *sindur*. In the lamplight, mother and baby seemed ethereal, caught in the moment, as yet unaware of being watched.

‘What happened?’ Ram whispered, holding Krishna gently in his arms. He thought of the Goddess, looking up through the water, the gleaming jewel in her crown. He knew now her arms had been raised in a final blessing, a last human gesture before she became pure spirit.

‘The fever suddenly broke.’ Rupa sounded almost too frightened to answer, in case she tempted fate. ‘It must have been eight o’clock. I heard the hour striking in the house over the road.’



Sarah Das Gupta is a retired English teacher who taught in UK, India and Tanzania. She lived in Kolkata for some years and was married to an Indian journalist. She started writing after a serious accident which kept her in hospital for some months. She now lives near Cambridge.

on days like this

by Amenah Syed

on days like this

when the sun meekly wanes into the darkness
when the stormy clouds reign thunderously
when everything is gray and murky and cheerless

on days like this

when the wrong words have been spoken
when the hearts of the infallible have been broken
when it seems that hope itself is hopeless

on days like this

i unfold the *janamaz*
and stand for prayer

in complete submission to the Lord of all the worlds
each action performed carefully, methodically
each letter enunciated gently, precisely

the shuddering hands raise up to the sky

the desperate tears fall from the eyes

and from the trembling tongue, prayers cry

on days like this
i beg for Your mercy and love and
all the other things i don't deserve

on days like this
i cry to You
and only You



Amenah Syed is a Computer Science graduate student from Wisconsin. Besides writing poetry, she loves spending time with family, nature, and dabbling in art. Her work has been featured on Blue Minaret.

How to Care for Aloe Vera

by Farzana A. Ghani

Aloe Vera; succulent. Genus: Aloe. Evergreen perennial.

I looked it up online when I took a cutting from your plant, bedded in new soil, wiped off the side and placed carefully in an ornamental outer pot. A trip to find the pot meant all afternoon in the garden centre, tracing patterns and engraved exteriors with my fingers. Paralysed with indecision. It had to be perfect.

A medicinal and decorative plant.

The internet promised it was easy to care for. Easy to care for. The words rolled off the screen. Easy to care for. It could be done. Care for it, nurture it and it would flourish. True aloe. You brought the plant back from your last trip to Jordan and re-potted it several times, sending cuttings out to be established elsewhere. Now a cutting falls to me.

Find and place the aloe in a sunny spot.

My house is dull. Small, sill-less windows refuse house plants. You never failed to mention this every time you walked past a window after you moved in. Walls shrouded in murky paint, vivid soft furnishings always looked better in shops, and now suck colour from rooms wrapped tightly in darkness, the embrace of a mother.

You once said it was as though I had chosen to live in constant night, when really, I had no aptitude for choosing anything. Even in summer, when the sun streams in my house, it skirts around windows and open doors, skulks around bricks, creeps into corners and lies in tightly-curled balls under beds.

Once potted, the succulent had no permanent home. I carried it around the house, chasing sunlight from room to room, all the time wondering where you would put it. It sat in the bathroom, in the downstairs hallway, even on the stairs. One morning, as I tidied, it basked on the bed, lounging in the sunshine, a languid cat stretching in the sun. I brushed it as I walked by, forgetting it was there and it fell, spilling guts onto the floor. Sweeping soil, your voice in ears that burned with shame, I clogged the vacuum cleaner. After that, I resolved the plant could only live downstairs.

The only sunny spot in the living room was the middle of the floor, the only place where light inadvertently tumbled in, an accidental flower in a bed of weeds. I placed the aloe there, errant, mid-sentence punctuation, not tidied away in the corner or arranged neatly on a carefully placed table, but in the middle of the room, on the maroon rug. The rug you hate. The plant was an impediment, not an ornament. When I went to the shelf, I side-stepped it, contorting myself around unyielding leaves. When reaching for the television remote, I hopped the other way, dancing a careful dance around what was now the central feature in the room. I realised I would have to move the plant to pray, but when the time came, I found myself trudging up the stairs, each step resounding acknowledgement that the five daily prayers were affairs of the bedroom now that the rug was firmly occupied by the aloe.

Water deeply, but sparingly.

I didn't know what that meant. Did it mean pouring water into the outer pot, letting the plant drink at leisure? It didn't seem fitting that the desert plant should sit in a pool. I tried watering the topsoil. But the water ran off when I moved the rigid leaves aside, refusing to penetrate, splashing down the chin of the pot and onto the rug instead. The internet was vague and unhelpful, a battle ground where sparingly and deeply fought for space. I look around for you because you've always told me what to do.

I tried again, this time placing the pot on a cloth, dribbling water slowly over the surface. I waited before resuming the slow drip drip, stopping when water ran down the sides and into the outer pot. It looked watered. The leaves jutted stoutly toward the ceiling and, when I walked around it, there was no indication the plant was dehydrated. I looked around for you to see if you were proud. It was watered. Perhaps not deeply, but sparingly?

Watch for insects.

I studied up-close photos of the mealy brown bugs I was supposed to watch for. Evenings were always for television, but now I watched the aloe instead as it sat on the annexed crimson rug. The television played, muted in my mind, body too tense to reach for the remote, poised to descend at the sight of an insect. During mealtimes at the dining table, I glanced at the plant on the rug beside me, looking down, reassuring myself it was still free from the pests that threatened to gorge on its succulent flesh.

I cleared dinner things and examined it again, turning the pot around, retreating to the sofa to view it from another angle. While I watched, no mealy brown bugs fed on the meat of your aloe vera. My aloe vera.

Fertilise the aloe during growing season.

The plant would grow vigorously between April and September. This was the growing season, and I could help it through feed. I gave myself a month to think about it. I wanted it to thrive, but it might grow too big for the pot, demanding to be let out, roots straining against the sides. I would have to replant it, losing the decorative pot I had spent so long picking out. I couldn't hold the plant prisoner to the pot, but now that it had to live on the rug, the planter had to be pretty as well as functional. I decided against fertiliser. The aloe seemed content in the sunny spot in the middle of the room, watered occasionally, deeply and sparingly.

Some weekends I wiped the leaves gently with a soft cloth, caressing a baby's face, ignoring the incessant trilling of the landline that interrupted our grooming. You would bathe me as a child, your rough hands brusque in the business of cleaning. My mobile phone buzzed with messages from my sister. I ignored that too, later deleting them unread, busying myself with caring for the cutting of your plant.

Once, I sat absent-mindedly stroking a cloth up and down the longest leaf and the serrated edge bit me, tearing into the flesh of my index finger. I stared at the cut skin. It paused a moment, thinking before it turned crimson, angry at the intrusion.

The plant looked on, curious, as I reached for the tissues on the table. I pressed the wound and looked back, disbelieving. The tissue did little to stem the flow of blood.

I left the curtains drawn in your room as I rummaged in the bottom drawer of your wooden dresser. The room had a deliberate sepia glow, ageing the flowering walls and pale pink sheets, blanketing them in a thin layer of beige dust. I found the first aid kit quickly, thankful I didn't need the light, retreating, clicking the door shut again, avoiding eye-contact with the bed in the centre of the room.

Downstairs, on the sofa, a safe distance from your plant, I watched it again. It had moved. Was it an inch to the left? That leaf was facing the patio door when I went upstairs. I tried not to take my eyes off it for too long as I worked on cleaning my finger. The antiseptic stung like a slap. I winced, not at the pain but at the violence in which the blood oozed. I read online that the gel-like sap of aloe vera could be used for healing. I remember nodding as I read it in your voice, clouding the air around me. I surveyed the plant warily, considered cutting open a finger, squeezing so it would ooze: a retaliation. It looked back defiant. Or smug.

Across the summer, the succulent started to decay, browning slowly, intentionally. I looked up remedies, scanning through a horticultural tome in the library. Still, the leaves sagged, too tired to hold themselves up, no matter how deeply and sparingly I watered it.

Water spilled over the soil, running off and saturating the rug as I willed the plant back to life with ever-deepening stares. Liquid pooled at the ornate foot of the pot and the rug darkened, a blackened cherry. I sat back, wilted, watching the dying plant, sometimes thumbing through the pages of a library book filled with promises to revive any species of plant with simple, effective steps. I knew you would know what to do. As long as the roots were intact, there was always hope.

I know you would know what to do.

Check the root ball.

Lifting the aloe from the decorative pot, exposing the terracotta inner, I carefully eased it out, paying no attention to the soil spilling onto the wet rug. I stroked the wispy tendrils as they pulled away from my hands. Inspecting thoroughly, I cradled the tangled ball of grey-brown roots like a baby's head. Everything appeared fine. The roots were intact.

Re-pot the plant.

I did it right there on the rug, ignoring the claggy wet mud now smashed deeply into the fibres. The old pot lay on its side, a corpse, clumps of earth spilling onto the carpet, reaching towards the ornamental planter discarded a few feet away. It had rolled in an arc away from me, resting a few feet away, mouth gaping in death.

You could care for any plant, nurse it back from the brink of ruin. I sat on the rug and thought about what you would do. Did the soil get too saturated, so the desert plant drowned in her own fluids? Was there too much light in the middle of the floor, scorching her leaves as the sun poured in, concentrated through the sharp glass of the patio door? Did she need the food I denied for the sake of keeping her contained in the ornamental planter?

I know you would know what to do. Once I sat in your room to help me think, but the musty room took me farther away from the mother who regularly threw open windows, whatever the weather, determined to air out rooms.

Get these windows open. *A house needs fresh air or it will die.*

I get up from the soiled rug, not bothering to brush the brown dirt from my jalabiyyah. I trudge up the stairs to your room and finally open the curtains, pushing the window wide as you always did. The first blast of Autumn assaults my face and I move, leaving the window wider than possible. Light does not flood the room. Instead, it trickles slowly, passing over the space in a wave. I leave the door open and head into the hallway.

Who are you? *I don't know who you are.*

I am a stranger in this house I once called mine. I stop at the bathroom door and look inside. Your hand cream sits atop the cabinet, tube indented, as though squeezed and put back that morning. I ignore my own bedroom across the hall, go down the stairs.

Clothes spill over the bannister like lacerations; coats, scarves, woollen shawls you were always too warm for but I acquired regardless. At the bottom of the staircase, a table with a bowl for keys sits next to a pile of papers, curling at the edges. Words are obscured by a large glass paperweight of the Ayatul Qursii you brought back from a trip to Jordan. The prayer for protection wraps around itself, intertwined like love, over and over. Habitually, I brush my hand over the ornament, allowing my fingers to trail over the cold glass, onto the wrinkled edges of the paper and it teeters precariously. I watch it tumble, the words of Allah shatter over and over at my feet. I look down at the heavens and the earth, looking for the intercession I deny myself as the shards reach upwards, splintered fingers clinging to the hem of my jalabiyya.

A paper from the pile finds itself face down on the floor. The words burn through me. I know there are telephone numbers, a WhatsApp group, a Facebook page. I know there is a picture of you, face framed in a maroon headscarf.

I don't know who you are. Where is my daughter? The pretty one. This house is musty.

I know the paper says ‘Beloved Mother’. I know you hated that picture but we used it regardless. A relic from the last renewal of your passport. I know it does not say fury pushed you towards the mouth of the gaping front door. I know it does not say I gave you your fresh air.

A house needs fresh air or it will die.

I open the front door and leave it wide once more. Stepping back through the shattered glass words, the Arabic script coils, daggers at my feet. Glass catches, cutting my ankles and I head to the plant in the living room, carefully picking it up, sitting cross-legged on the rug. The spilled water has spread, the rug now an oozing wet wound, almost black. I sit in the sunniest spot, cradling her in my lap.

It's alright. I'm here. Everything will be alright.

I whisper the words awkwardly and bury my head in your serrated leaves as they fight, one by one, to cut my face.



Farzana lives in Leeds with her husband and two daughters. Having recently completed a Masters in Creative Writing and Critical Life, she divides her time between her laptop, books and her knitting needles. She recently bought a cat thinking it was correct writerly behaviour—she was wrong.

God and the Night Sky

by Richard Simonds

I'm told that when
I look up at the sky,
the universe
does not end at the firmament,
but reaches to event horizon,
and they can't describe its shape
in a sensible way.

*Stars scattered specks
under dome of dark night,
stretching across the expanse.*

Spinning endlessly
on a helpless rock,
orbiting a blazing sun,
in a monstrous galaxy,
endless galaxies,
endless universe.

*I close my eyes
float up into the vastness,
spread enormous wings,
look down at the people below.*

The best proof of God is that only God could create this universe.

*With my binoculars I seek out
and find the Pleiades,
the bright light by the southern horizon
a planet or a star?*

The best proof against God is the existence of this massive universe without letting us know for sure.

*The crisp autumn air,
the smell of ocean and trees,
the distant sound of waves far off,
tide rising, the shoreline disappears.*

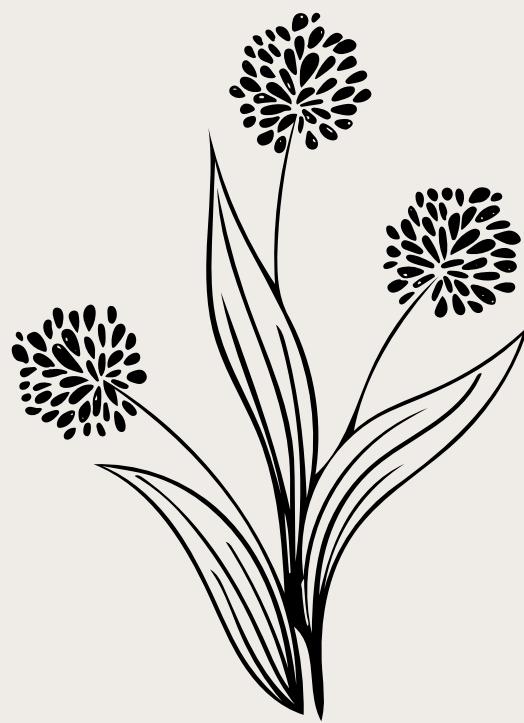
“Do you know the ordinances of the heavens?
Can you set their dominion over the earth?”

*I feel enormous, the entire
cosmos is centered in myself
one consciousness,
my consciousness
is the universe.*

But why was the insignificance
so necessary?

*Infinite beauty of dark night
and starlight
that renders thought irrelevant*

Wait for an answer,
in death, perhaps.



Religious Experience

by Richard Simonds

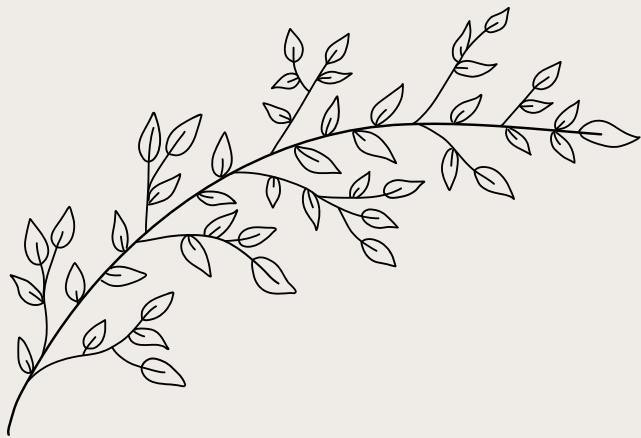
I said the *actual words*, and from some
external source, the Holy Spirit
entered my spine, and I was born again.

Matins at Wells Cathedral,
pure, soft beauty, in a white cavern
of limitless echoing magic sound.

On Easter, Tim Keller preached
about the *truth* of the resurrection,
a historical fact, that others saw.

I feel it an empty field, hear it
in the waves, see it in the stars.
With God all things are possible.

Botticelli's paintings at the Uffizi,
a sunset, a flower, a cloud, a drop of water.



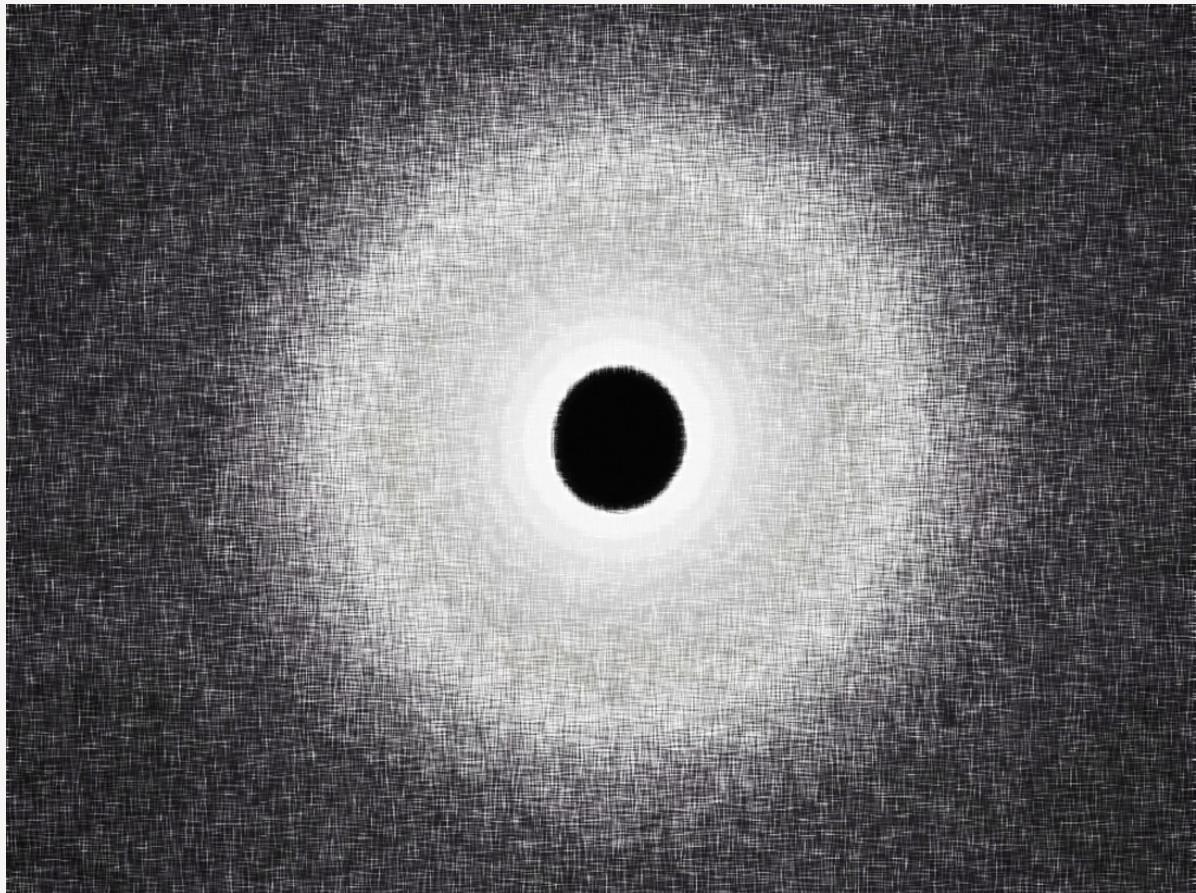
Richard Simonds' poetry is wide-ranging in topics and styles, although much of it is religious, and reflects his Christian faith. He has had a long involvement with poetry through publishing and is now writing public poems. He receives guidance from the poet Peter Money, Grace Bialecki and his many other writer friends. He lives in New York, New York.

From the series:

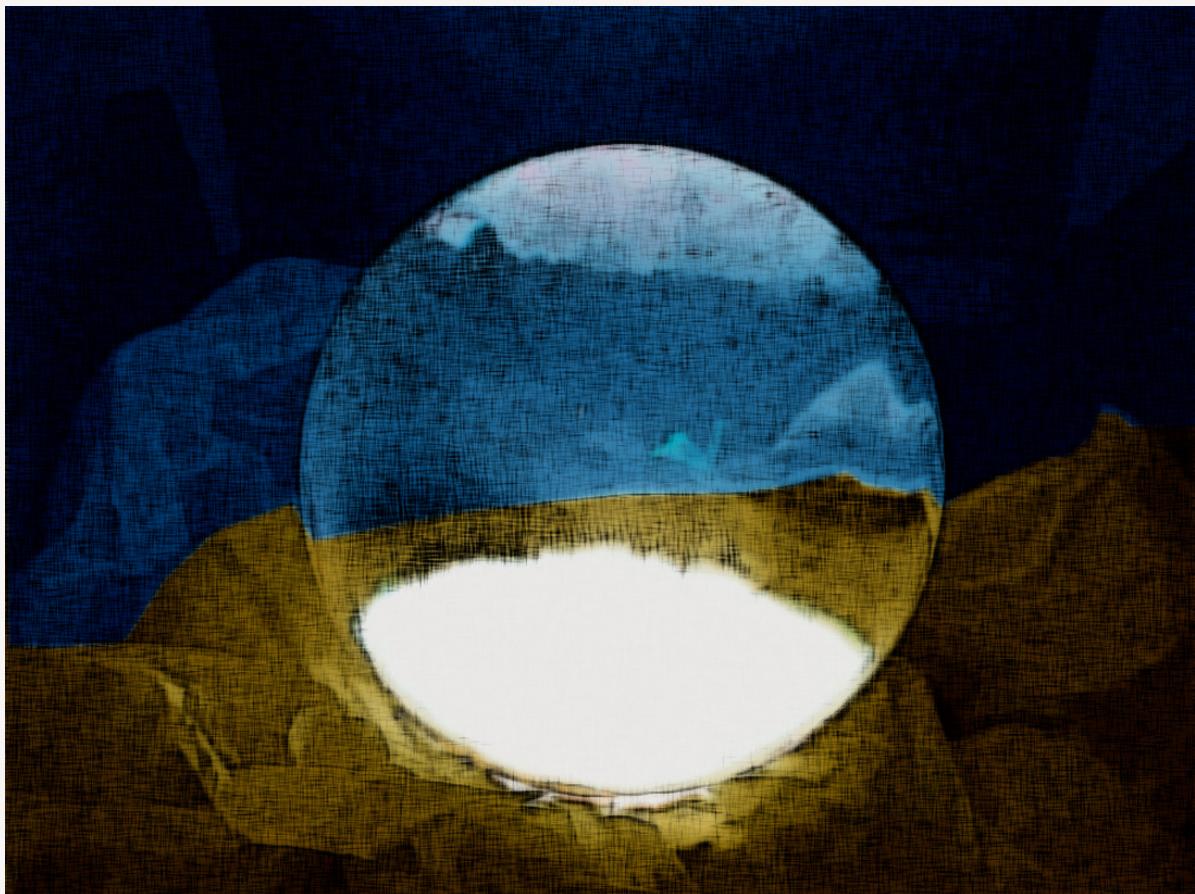
Tales of the Sun and Moon

by Martine Rancarani

conte soleil 7



conte soleil 8



conte soleil 9





Martine Rancarani teaches Arts, and she practices every day all its different techniques. As an actress and a spectator of her visual art, she puts in perspective the image and the technique used to produce it. Ecology, body language, the image and the position of women in society, clothing, and nature vs. culture are the major issues she considers through her work.

Byrne, 1982

by Maggie Nerz Iribarne

The Blessed Mother statue in front of our school received a blow when I was in seventh grade. Her head, knocked to the ground, was left sitting in a puddle of rubble. Principal Parisi sent a letter home, decrying the horror of this act and the broken-hearted feelings of the old priests at the rectory, but they left her there. Every day, I watched Mary's head on the ground from my classroom windows, her eyes staring off into the garden.

Our math teacher, Miss Byrne (we reduced her name to just Byrne) was awful, or so we thought. I once heard Mr. Cope, the religion teacher, saying as much to another teacher on the playground. He said, "Theresa is awful." Mr. Cope, a layman, not a priest, led the folk group with his guitar and taught us fun songs—*The Lord said to Noah, we're gonna build an arky arky...*—and about the birds and the bees. Mr. Cope, a gentle soul and free spirit, was not awful. His opinion seemed valid.

Why was Byrne so awful? Something just seemed missing with her. Even when she forced herself to be nice, we kind of got the feeling that she wished she were somewhere else. She inhaled deeply when we didn't understand something.

She slammed the textbook with her hand right before saying, with a kind of fake sweet voice, “OK, let’s do some quiet desk work.” On top of all of that, she got really mad about anything and everything. If say, we didn’t return her scissors, her tiny coral-colored lipsticked mouth, the mouth with the wrinkles all around the outside like Gran’s, would get really big and she’d just let it rip. She blew up into a terrifying teacher blob monster very quickly.

I already mentioned the Mary statue, the one that got vandalised. Before that, she was beautiful, her white head crowned with stars, her dainty feet stamping out a snake. Each year, in May, we gathered around her for the May crowning, a common event at Catholic schools and churches, where a junior May Queen places a floral wreath on the head of the statue. Every year we stood and sang out in the sunlight commemorating spring and the Blessed Mother. Mr. Cope strummed his guitar and we shouted out the lyrics to Immaculate Mary and Hail Holy Queen.

By the time I got to seventh grade the school’s neighborhood, the place my father grew up, had deteriorated. Industry had been replaced by drugs and poverty. Lewd drawings appeared on the school’s brick walls, taunting us as we entered and exited. Swear words sprayed on the side of our building caused us to poke each other in the side, smile and look down, perhaps giggle a little, feel embarrassed.

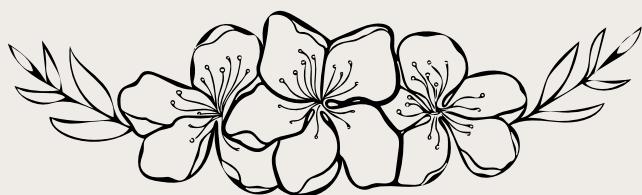
One day, I stood on the playground waiting for my bus and for some reason my attention stretched out of my self-absorbed little world. I saw Byrne walking to her car. A light rain sprinkled down. She had a plastic hat pulled over her hair and wore a wrinkled khaki raincoat. She carried a leather briefcase and walked with a middle-aged slouch. I watched her as she fumbled with her keys and opened the door of a dented Chevrolet Caprice Classic. My face heated a bit, surprised by feeling a kind of pity for her. Where did Byrne live? I never thought of that before.

From that point, I began to look for Byrne at the end of each day as she slumped out to her car. Eventually, I caught the back of her familiar raincoat walking in a different direction, carrying something. I kept my distance, following her slow tracks as she made the way around the school to the front garden.

I hid behind a protrusion of brick wall, watching her put down the items she carried and place her hands on her hips. She stared at the broken Mary statue for a little while, her eyes squinting up. Then she crouched and started pulling weeds, moving on her hands and knees right and left, her head low and focused on her work. Next, she swept up some of the crumbly stones around the statue. She struggled to lift Mary's head, moving it to a place behind the statue, hiding it from view.

She continued working, removing her rumpled jacket, her knees stained with dirt. I noticed she shed her sensible, low-heeled pumps and wore a pair of discoloured Keds.

When she glanced up again at the statue, I thought I saw something different on her face, not quite a smile, something else. I never saw Byrne look that way before; happy. I smiled, too.



Maggie Nerz Iribarne is 53, living her writing dream in a yellow house in Syracuse, New York. She writes about teenagers, witches, the very old, bats, cats, priests/nuns, cleaning ladies, runaways, struggling teachers, and neighborhood ghosts, among many other things. She keeps a portfolio of her published work at
<https://www.maggienerziribarne.com>.

Missionary Kid

by Zary Fekete

The autumn that my grandfather died was during the second full year that my family lived in Hungary. I was five. My sister was two. My parents moved us there in 1979 after feeling called to do missionary work in an unreached part of the world. Hungary, behind the Iron Curtain during those days, could not be considered entirely unreached, yet it must have met the standards of my parents' evangelical perspective on the unevangelised world.

Most Hungarian households did not have telephones back then. The government wait-list to receive a phone was 10 years long. Payphones were plentiful, but if my parents wished to make or receive an international phone call they could only do so from a government office in downtown Budapest.

I remember seeing the bright yellow molded plastic chairs that seemed ubiquitous in most Hungarian office spaces. I can picture my parents huddled together behind a wall of glass in the small telephone cubicle. My mother suddenly began to cry. My sister and I, desperate to calm her, asked her what was wrong. When we learned that my grandfather had died of a heart attack, we told my mother again and again, "But, we'll surely see him again in Heaven."

My mother said, "That will be such a long time from now." I later asked my mother why my father had not cried that night when he heard the news.

She assured me that later in the evening, when we were in bed, he had also cried. I couldn't picture it. I still can't.

In those days the only way we could receive international mail was if our American friends and family sent the packages to an address in Vienna. The road trip between Budapest and Vienna took four hours, and our family made that trip once a month, both to retrieve the mail and also to renew my parents' visa, a tourist visa, the only kind that foreign missionaries could use to enter Hungary in the 1980s.

Vienna was a breath of fresh air to us. It was cleaner and stricter than Hungary. It was filled with coffee shops and pastry conditerei. It also had a McDonalds. I was permitted two cheeseburgers each time we visited.

Because the visa processing took several days, Vienna also gave us the chance to stock up on purchases from the local super markets which could not be obtained in Hungary. These items included breakfast cereal and brown sugar. After a trip to the supermarket our family would stop at the post office for the mail from America, and then spend the evening reading through the news from home.

It was a few months after my grandfather died that we received my uncle Harland's cassette tape. My father's younger brother was a great talker, and, in order to keep us supplied with stories from home, he would occasionally record himself telling us news from Minnesota.

This particular tape he had recorded on both sides. Side 1, my and my sister's favourite side, contained a long and detailed story of Uncle Harland's hunting trip to northern Minnesota with two of his friends. He had finally shot himself a black bear. We listened to this side so many times that eventually the tape was worn to the point that the faint sounds of his voice from side 2 of the cassette could be heard.

I only remembered hearing the second side of the tape once. On that side my uncle's voice was much more subdued, haunted even. Side 2 was for my father. My uncle talked about how it felt to know that his father was gone. Gone, and yet, in my uncle's words, perhaps not completely. He told a story about coming home one winter's evening shortly after the death and wondering where his father's picture was; it was supposed to be where it always was, above the fireplace. After searching for it, my uncle found it next to the rocking chair where my grandfather would sit when he visited.

My uncle's voice on the tape paused and then he said, "I think that must have been Dad's way of telling me that he was still there."

My father forbade us to ever again listen to side 2. When I asked my father why, he said, "That's not how God works."

It wasn't until years later in 2018 that my father told me how much he regretted his attitude toward his brother in 1980. My father said, "He was desperate to believe. I should have helped him."

Church Talk

by Zary Fekete

My bulldozer disgorges plumes of diesel exhaust into the morning mist, a curious mixture of the natural and the industrial. There are eight strips of overturned earth already, each of them with the vague shape of agricultural promise. Except these are not designed for planting. They are the first steps in the expansion of this church's parking lot.

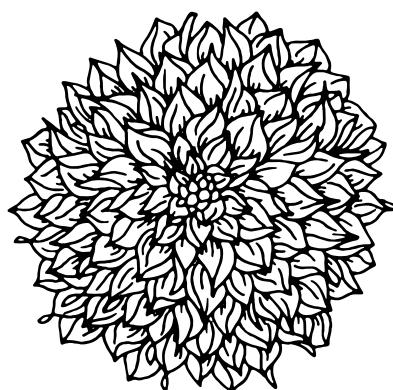
I see the parking lot is quite full even though it's a Thursday. I've been out here for the past three days, and I've gotten a general sense that this church is quite popular...or at least it's busy.

This is my last day on this site. The pastor told me yesterday that he was very pleased with my work, and he invited me to church on Sunday. He must think I know the Bible like he does. I don't and I don't expect I'll be there, but I joked that if I do come I'll definitely know where to park. He smiled at that but seemed overcome with weary. I asked him about that weary look and he finally admitted that each new parking spot was going to cost the church \$2000. Two grand for someone to park their Ford F-150 for an hour on a Sunday morning (two hours if they stay for Sunday school).

It seemed excessive to me, and I said so. He said that the church needed to expand the parking lot, otherwise people would be forced to park on the streets nearby, clogging the neighborhood arteries.

The neighborhood coop would complain and if complain they did (his words) the local government would get involved. I muttered something sympathetic back to him. I don't envy him his job. But it's not my job.

I reach the end of the field, swing the dozer's wheel, and now the moist lowland wetland field next door is on the horizon again. I'll probably pull over when I reach that side and take my morning break. I know this time of morning by now. I know the church's steeple throws a nice bit of shade and that there's a rock over there which makes a fine sitting stone. I know that coffee in the shade of the cross's outstretched arms is the most pleasant place a man can be for his morning break. I know worshipful silence under the wide blue sky won't cost me a cent.



Zary Fekete has worked as a teacher in Hungary, Moldova, Romania, China, and Cambodia. She currently lives and works as a writer in Minnesota. Some places she has been published are Goats Milk Mag, JMWW Journal, Bethlehem Writers Roundtable, and Zoetic Press. She enjoys reading, podcasts, and long, slow films.

Twitter: @ZaryFekete

You and Me

by Karabo G. Khatleli

If I wasn't a bride of the effervescent moon
A hill built out of old religion and lost power
A temple for the child, the mother the moon and the holy grail
If I weren't a melody in the wind
Heavenly quarters of the living stars, and breathe of the gods
Then maybe I'd wallow in mediocrity
And ask my peace, where have you gone?

If the lilies didn't grow where I stood
If boars didn't lightly nod to my periphery
And if I wasn't magic
An endless force of constant rebirth but never death
Braced duality of the god and the beast, the best of both
If dust didn't settle like specks of gold on my palm
And if I didn't acknowledge myself in it: the wildfire,
the dainty doe, the glaring hound, the light of day, and the holy sacrament
Perhaps my potent seeds would scream me awake
Into divinity, one step at a time, gloved and kept

But I am all that, I know the goddess
The caped priestess rushing into the ruins
I know the embellishments of the soul, the beauty of the tides
The absence of damnation, the caution and the mother,
The passive and the child, the omnipresent and the moon,
The learning spirit and the holy grail
I know to be impeccable in my existence



Karabo is a writer based in Lesotho, Maseru. She passionately writes poetry centered around emotions and the human experience. She is currently working as a Laboratory Analyst and has a background in Bsc Biology and chemistry. She writes part time while celebrating art in literature with local poets and script writers.

Gracie

by Paul Hostovsky

After the surgery, when I was still in the hospital, married to the commode—couldn't get up and walk to the bathroom, couldn't shower—a nurse's aide washed me where I lay. I was a pale, naked, helpless thing, and she whispered to me in her melodic Island or maybe African accent that it was okay, it was alright. And I'm not ashamed to say I wept quietly, thanking her between sobs, blessing her for her work, her understanding. She told me her name was Gracie, and how perfect is that, because it felt like a kind of grace, though not right away, no, in fact at first it felt like an indignity, an imposition, a well-meaning torture of sorts because I was weak and vulnerable and unable to do for myself, and here was this large smiling Black woman with big hands and a musical accent standing beside my hospital bed and informing me that she was going to wash me where I lay, right now, because it was her job, and because I hadn't washed in days, had I, and because I needed to be washed.

At first I felt embarrassed, mortified, violated as she lifted my hospital gown and went to work, gently maneuvering the warm soapy washcloth across my chest, then my belly, my genitals, my thighs and knees and calves. It was when she got to my feet, after she had rinsed the washcloth, wrung it, dipped it back in the basin of soapy water, wrung it again, and then began washing each of my toes, one at a time, with an almost this-little-piggy tenderness, that my resistance began to melt away.

And in its place a warm gratitude suddenly gripped me so tightly that I couldn't stop whispering the little choked thank-you's that seemed to be escaping like too much air or too much love from my dry, constricted throat, which was still sore from the breathing tube. She said you're welcome my dear, and then she tactfully untied the hospital gown and asked me to try to turn on my side so she could remove it completely and wash my back. And though it hurt, I did as she asked, I gripped the handrails and pulled myself onto my side, trembling a little as I heard her behind me rinsing the washcloth and dipping it again in the basin and wringing it again, and then I felt its wet clean warmth sliding firmly across my back and my shoulders, and I whispered thank-you again as she washed my buttocks, the backs of my thighs, then gently parted my legs and briskly but thoroughly washed my anus before returning the washcloth to the basin. Then, expertly, nimbly, she towed me dry and helped me to turn onto my back again, and helped me into a new, clean hospital gown, and raised the angle of my hospital bed a little higher, and then a little higher, until I was able to look her in the eye—because I hadn't looked her in the eye yet.

And so we looked each other in the eye, and again I said thank you, thank you for your good work. It's a blessing, I said. You're an angel, I said. And I meant it more than anything I had said to anyone in a very long time. And she said thank you, and you're welcome, and she called me her dear again. And then she was gone, wheeling her little cart out the door of my hospital room, down the hallway to the next patient, and the next patient, and the next.

Builder of Cathedrals

by Paul Hostovsky

I can tell by the angle of his shoes that he's kneeling. Plus there's something in the air like straining. And the sibilant hint of a whisper. No toilet paper either—I know because I considered sitting down in there myself before settling in next door, here where there's paper, and even half a newspaper. But the news in the neighboring stall has gotten my attention. The trouble is there's no story. Not even a headline. Just a pair of shoes, toes to the floor, like a ballerina's. And something in the air like leaping. So I do the neighborly thing, I make up the story myself because I haven't written anything all month, and everywhere I look these days there's construction, things going up all over, and why not here? I start to build the story in my head, of my neighbor, praying. I give him good reasons, grown children, a short lunch break, bald head, small ears, an enormous craving—the kind you need a Higher Power to relieve you of. All of a sudden he sniffs. Then he shifts and his story shifts with him. He sniffs again, sniffles. A shudder. An unmistakable sob. I hold my breath, stare straight ahead at a fuck gouged in the metal door. "Excuse me," says a voice that sounds like it's drowning. And here's his hand waving beneath the divider. "Have you got any toilet paper?" I unravel a generous portion, for who knows how much he'll be needing—my weeping neighbor, builder of cathedrals—and I donate it wordlessly in a tenuous scroll.



Paul Hostovsky makes his living in Boston as a sign language interpreter. He has won a Pushcart Prize, two Best of the Net Awards, and has been featured on Poetry Daily, Verse Daily, and The Writer's Almanac. Website: paulhostovsky.com

For Common Creatures

by Ryan Keating

We caught a brown lizard
Flickering fast and filling the cracks
Like a puddle of wax and a wick
In a shadowy niche of beige
Bricks in the sunlit stone wall
Outside the tall Barnabas Church.
She crawled into a broken place
Bowing through the space above
The bolted door much more open
To her than me and facing east
As a priest expecting dawn before
The flame has gone dark and worshipped
Among the iconic witnesses
Casting her sight upon what is
Created for light, a glory revealed
In the temple for common creatures.
We could not follow. And God let her go.

—1:39—

by Ryan Keating

I can't be present in all of space
like you. So, what is left for me?

Mostly anywhere and sometimes
more relation than substance,

always a little farther than I realize
and less here than you,

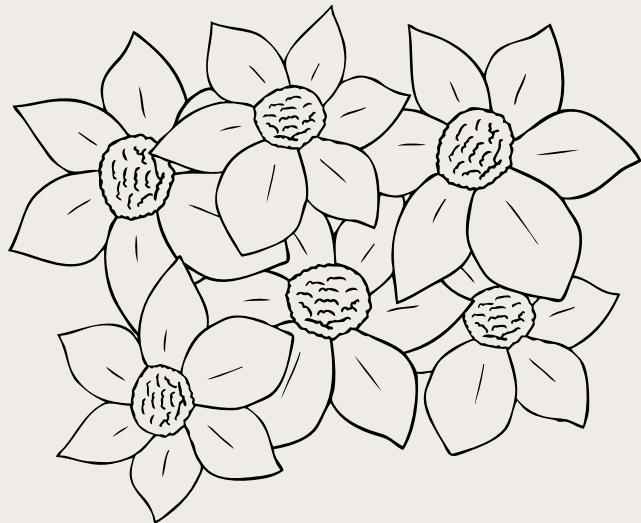
I wish I could fill the whole cup
and still see the sunrise up close.

I can barely see you seeing me
in the evening swirling

a glass of wine that matches your sky
and my reflection in it trembling

as your great eye closes for the night
so we can stop seeing

until morning.



Ryan Keating is a writer, teacher, and winemaker on the Mediterranean island of Cyprus. His work can be found in publications such as Saint Katherine Review, Ekstasis Magazine, Amethyst Review, Macrina Magazine, Fathom, Vocibia, Roi Fainéant, and Dreich.

Reflections

by Irina Novikova



untitled

by Irina Novikova





Irina Tall (Novikova) is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design. Her first personal exhibition "My soul is like a wild hawk" (2002) was held in the museum of Maxim Bagdanovich. The first big series she drew was The Red Book, dedicated to rare and endangered species of animals and birds. In 2020, she took part in Poznań Art Week. Her work has been published in magazines: Gupsophila, Harpy Hybrid Review, Little Literary Living Room and others. In 2022, her short story was included in the collection "The 50 Best Short Stories", and her poem was published in the collection of poetry "The Wonders of Winter".

Silence and a Vow

by Abasiama Udom

there lies my silence,
beautiful and sweet.
There lies my silence
Her ruby eyes dancing
My beautiful jewel of nothing.

I have purchased my silence
In stripes and wipes,
It took me a while but,
I learned sure
To watch uncle steal into the room
To watch his shirt fall, my heart rising in fear
I have become the grand master of no words
The voice I possess lost to even me.

It is silence they say is golden
So I lay here while he spanks my backside
My aunty is in Cotonou now
Haggling for goods she would re-sell
Me, I do not haggle for my goods
I have bought it with my tears
And the wincing beneath a threat filled knife
I have bought it clean.

There lies my silence, like a rattle snake
She smiles, her ragged edge surfacing

A Thousand Nothings

by Abasiama Udom

Waiting on the sidewalk
Wings flutter in assurance
Eyes alert, watching
A thousand nothings ripple in the cold breeze
The words are never spoken
Whispered in the silence of night
Shrouded by pillows and wrappers
But what else were we to say?
As if to say our voices were yet un-lost
Like fire doused by ice
Its smoke rising, a familiar choke
So we say nothing
Swallowing the words down
A bulging Adamic apple
We pack and unpack our silence
Into the basket with wordless songs.



Abasiama Udom is interested in new chocolate and pad brands.

When she is not reading or writing books, she is watching FC Barcelona, trying to understand humans, writing music or dancing to songs she may never understand. Her works have been featured On Isele Magazine, Conscio Magazine, Stripes Literary Magazine and elsewhere. Connect with her on Twitter @abasiamaudom

Details to Follow

by Sarah Jasat

Mr and Mrs Mahood are delighted to announce the engagement of their beloved daughter, Kulsoom, to a man they hope will not murder her.

This summer, Kulsoom will wed Abdul Chootla, a chartered accountant from Nottingham and—fingers crossed—not a murderer.

Kulsoom is well known in the masjid for running the weekly sisters' craft sessions and also netball club in the half term holidays. She has been previously mentioned in the newsletter several times, notably when she achieved all level 9s in her GCSEs and when her charity skydive raised over £5000 for Syrian orphans. We hope Abdul knows what an incredible partner he's getting and that he doesn't turn out to be addicted to heroin or pornography.

“Kulsoom has always been a wonderful daughter and has a good head on her shoulders,” said Mr Mahood when we asked how he was feeling about the wedding. “We never had to worry about her messing around with unsuitable boys. Instead we have the terrifying task of helping her choose a suitable husband. We’re hoping Abdul won’t try to pawn her wedding jewellery to gamble with, or smash her face against the mirror if she oversalts the curry.”

When we asked Mrs Mahood the same question, she let out a low keening noise and wailed ‘my daughter, my only daughter, oh Allah, please have mercy.’

Everyone’s duas are humbly requested for Kulsoom as she transitions into the next stage of her life. Specifically, please pray that her fiance isn’t being forced into this marriage because his father found a well-worn copy of Boyz magazine tucked under his mattress.

Keep your eyes peeled, the next issue of our newsletter will report on the wedding. Who knows? After that we may have some happy news!

Or an obituary.



Sarah M Jasat grew up believing she was strange, but later discovered she was Indian. Part of the 2018 cohort for the Middle Way Mentoring Programme, her short fiction explores individual struggles within traditional families. She dreams about writing a novel for older children if only she could get her own children to go to sleep. She lives in Leicester where she works in a virology laboratory, and rides her bicycle very slowly.

Valentine

by Emily Holi

He couldn't resist the temptation to stop at Augusta's domus and stare, if only for a moment. The sun hung low and heavy in the sky, exhausted, beaten, and his mother would be expecting him home for dinner soon. Still, there she was, white skin glistening in the dusky light. A large pot sat on the table in front of her, and she gently stirred the heavy dough inside of it with a strong and graceful twist of her delicate wrist. Eyes blue like shallow springs, cheeks the color of red wine, lips like rose petals. It was all he could do to keep breathing.

Subtly, Augusta's demeanor changed, and Felix knew. She felt his watchful eye. Her ever-rosy cheeks burned deeper and her posture straightened. Abandoning her pot, she used her free wrist and delicate fingers to push long glossy hair over one shoulder, creating the silhouette of a goddess more beautiful than any of those etched on the temple walls. In the corner of her perfect lips, Felix spied a familiar sight that never ceased to thrill him—the slightest trace of a secret smile.

Staring wistfully at her moving shadow, Felix mused on the multitude of great philosophers, so beloved and respected by his father and all of his teachers, calling love 'life's greatest treasure, God's most sacred gift, a favor from heaven.' And yet he was asked to deny the love he felt. Not just deny it—replace it with brutality, mortification, a cold heart.

How empty it felt reporting each day, straightening every line in his body to a sharp angle, turning his nose up and curling his smile into an indiscernible expression. “Never let them read anything in your eyes,” the leader told the men. “Not terror, not happiness, not anger. Your eyes should be blank; your hearts, empty. Your body is a machine. You belong to your fellow man.” But maybe not.

Maybe now, I really can belong to whomever I choose.

The smell of baking bread wafted from her window into the outside air and reached Felix’s nose, tempting him away from Augusta, stirring a deep hunger that could only be satisfied at his own table. The only hunger that she could not satisfy, he thought, though he would happily go without bread for days if she ever asked. Raising his hand toward the window in a clandestine good-bye, he left and continued down the road, pushing his hunger deeper into his belly. The spring in his step surprised him. He’d been down this path many times before, always dragging his feet and consoling his heavy heart with a secret mantra: “bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” The writings of Paul were wise. But had Paul ever known the love of a woman? Yes, tonight would be different.

The burden of love had weighed heavily on Felix for months until finally, like a sign from God, the heavens had opened up and delivered an answer in the form of a riddle. He was dipping his pail into the well when he first heard the whispers. Asterius’ young daughter, once blind, could now see. As he continued about his day, he heard groups of men in the square gossiping—many of them had seen the young girl with their own eyes. Walking, skipping, running. A miracle.

Asterius was a wise and faithful man who lived past the great hill, among the tall bushes where many of the country's outcasts lived —those who followed the emperor in tax only. Felix had seen Asterius once or twice praying in the small crude church behind the great hill, but only after sunset. Asterius didn't pray in the daylight—none of the Christians did. Still, Felix believed that if Asterius was righteous enough for a miracle, perhaps there was a miracle reserved for him, too.

The air was heavy and cloudy as he moved through the dust towards the great hill. Lights flickered in the distance. But which light belonged to Asterius?

He couldn't continue wandering the streets without fear of being caught. Making his way through the crowded insulae, Felix slipped behind the hill and approached the church he'd seen a few times before. A shadowy figure passed across the threshold and moved deeper into the sanctuary. Felix followed the figure towards the altar, rough, carved from a piece of driftwood, filled with burning lumps of wax. He extended his arm and placed his hand on the old man's shoulder.

"Asterius," he said.

"I have been waiting for you, child."

The two men knelt together, and the candlelight danced across the old man's face in shades of sunset and dawn. Asterius breathed heavily, overcome by emotion. Slowly, he turned to face Felix.

“I know what you’re looking for,” he said, laboring to speak as if his words were hard-won. “My daughter. He healed her. He can help you, too.”

Felix’s desires and dreams, zeal and faith, the consuming love that filled his heart—everything teetered precariously on the edge of the old man’s lips.

“You must go tonight—he doesn’t have much time.” Asterius drew in another shaky breath. “The Emperor knows, and he isn’t happy. He will not be free for long.”

Impatience grabbed him by the throat as Felix sprang to his feet and begged a question.

“But who? Who must I seek? I will go anywhere, I will travel all night, just tell me who!”

A rare breeze swept through the tiny church and rattled the dancing flames. Dust blew across the ground and covered the feet of the men who stood and kneeled and prayed. The moon shone brightly in its infinite wisdom.

“His name...” With a careful pause, and a glimmer in his old, tired eyes, Asterius leaned forward and held the boy’s hand in his own, whispering his answer, “...is Valentine.”



Emily Holi is a PB/MG/YA author, a disabled mom of five, and a member of the National MS Society, with stories recently published by *Cerasus Magazine* and *MoonFlake Press*. She currently balances freelance writing with caring for her awesome kids—four girls, and one very spoiled baby boy.

Rapture

by Christ Keivom

What ark can I fill for you when the world goes wild?

—Anne Sexton

The preacher said the war is the herald
Of the apocalypse. & I said Yes because
When it's too late to pray for the end
Of the flood. We pray instead to survive it.
Before tomorrow (which may yet come) is only
An image remains of what was. There's so
Much I want to tell you: How after all this sadness
The feeling will always renew its ineffable
Continuance of blue. How very early on
In my life it was already too late when
I met you. They say as long as the sky is pinned—
No one will believe it is happening now.
We have never known, will never know
Neither before nor after what will remain
Of all this? Still, there's so much I want
To tell you— but I'm given only one life.
& I know nothing of it and not even that.
Nothing. Like a timeless oblivion without exits.
The preacher kept saying the war... the war...
And I stood there at the finish line of this
World. Waiting for time to return to its
Beginning. & You were there too.
You were the ribbon at the end of it.

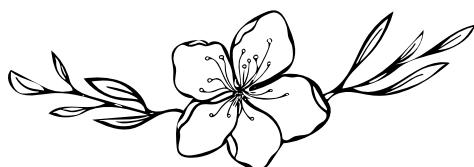
Your Name

by Christ Keivom

Is the morning bird
Perched on the peepal tree
Which declares its arrival—

Like a comely angel
Who flew down,
To sing of God

And the clearer the song is heard,
The smaller the bird.



Christ Keivom (he/him), is currently pursuing his master's in English Literature from Delhi University. His work has previously appeared in Novus Literary Arts Journal, Mulberry Literary, Monograph Mag, Farside Review, Spotlong Review, The Chakkar, Write now lit, Agapanthus Collective, and Native Skin to name a few.

Finding the Light in My Fourteen-year-old Brain

by Renee Sande

She found the sun a little too bright and hot that day—its unforgiving rays beating down on her like a spotlight, making her feel as if something was expected of her.

She knew she needed to find a way to climb out from under that suffocating lead blanket of glum and face the day with pluck and grace, but her brain and body felt unable to abide any thought of it.

The motor of the boat gently churned. The water had always made her feel better and now it lulled her to close her eyes. Her body swayed with the waves that were gently splish-splashing against the hull.

The motion soothed her a bit and she found herself thinking that maybe now would be a good time to dig deep and say a little prayer of thanks. After all, her mom was always saying how it made her feel better, and she couldn't be wrong *all* of the time.

So she thanked Him as earnestly as she could for her family and friends who loved and cared for her, her house that kept her warm and the good food she had to eat, healthy legs to run her heart out and lungs to breathe in deep. She also prayed for some assistance at banishing the juvenile, ninja-like ghoul who liked to sneak up on her and suck the ever-living joy out of her, just when she felt like things were going quite well.

Eyes still closed, she waited for something to change. Then she waited some more.

She could hear her mom and dad talking quietly at the other end of the boat. Then there was the muffled conversation of her brother and his friend on the beach, surely saying things that were quite unintelligible and very eleven-year-old-like.

And she waited. But all she felt was the weight of that miserable blanket bearing down on her, seeming to settle in even a bit more, like an unwanted house guest who clearly has no idea of what unabashed loathing looks like.

Why didn't she feel lucky and joyful and blessed and happy and all those other adjectives her mom would chirp to her, annoying her like a half-a-dozen birds pecking at her brain?

What could possibly have happened in her fourteen year-old biology between two nights before and now?

She was on top of the world Thursday night, hanging with her bestie, Hunter. Life was great, singing and laughing together until they cried, at the way they had both proclaimed - on the count of three - their undying love for Austin, the younger, slightly-less worldly version of Justin Bieber.

And now—now—every cell of her body seemed to have just stopped caring, and like dominos, collapsed one into the other until they all congealed into one big bummer of a slug—named Maddie.

“Wow,” she laughed to herself. “I really need to work on my self-image.”

And then it happened. The ever-so subtle glimpse of blue sky appeared in her cloudy brain and like a warm wave of water rushing over her, she felt an overwhelming calm, causing her smile to slowly spread, connecting one freckled cheek to the other.

The boat had stopped rocking and the voices of her family seemed to come alive in her ear.

The sun felt warm and nurturing and an intoxicating scent overcame her. It felt as if she was being guided, lifted, supported. She opened her eyes and stood up, effortlessly, as if she had no choice in the matter.

Then she smelled that lovely smell again and, looking out over the water like it was the first time, she gasped.

Surrounding the boat were hundreds upon hundreds of blooming lily pads, their colors nothing short of vibrant and intoxicating.

“Heart-pounding pink, good-to-be-alive green, connected to the earth by beautiful nearly-crimson veins, floating down through mercurial, cerulean-jade water,” she narrated in her brain, enjoying the feeling of her cogs once again clicking in rhythmic motion.

Ooh, those were some good adjectives, Maddie-girl. You may become a writer yet, she smugly thought, mentally high-fiving herself.

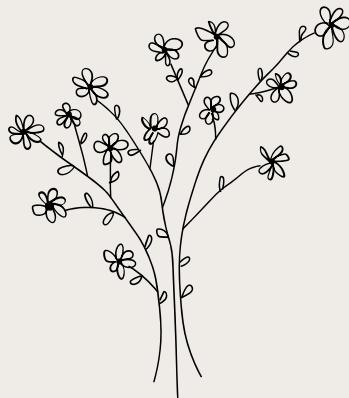
Then she remembered her last-minute grab as they were headed out the door this morning.

With excitement at the thought of capturing this moment, she rummaged through her sack, her hands deftly finding the cool, smooth, rounded edges of her Nikon D4 - instantly comforting her like an old friend, who was always at the ready when needed.

Pausing for a moment, she sent a little “Thank You” upwards, her negative thoughts from just moments ago, retreating like a weary, defeated enemy, and in its place, the undeniable hunger of wanting to feel life in its full 360-degree beauty.

She breathed a sigh of relief.

I did it, she thought. I found the light. This is going to be a good day.



Renee has been putting words on the page since she was old enough to write; it's how she finds her place in this big, beautiful mess of a world. But what she's allowed the world to see has usually been with parameters - assignments to follow, word counts to stick to, other people's stories. And while she loves putting the spotlight on the extraordinary human beings she's met, she's ready to tell her own story, through the words she's compelled to write.

Worship

by Khadija S.

No one worships nothing.

There must be some
one.

There must be some
thing.

An idea, perhaps, or a name.

Wealth, fame.

Life, or love.

The body, the self.

Idols of stone or words or flesh.

Everyone worships something.

It is a void that must—oh, it must!—be filled.

Gulping anything, from air to molten lead.

from honey to blood.

A hunger that demands to be fed.

A thirst that thunders if left unquenched.

The human hand reaches out in the darkness,

Grasping for something—anything!—that can be held.

There is but one handhold that does not fail.
A rope that does not fray. Always within reach.
It does not betray the hand that seeks it.

When all else shrivels and fades, it stays.
Nourishing as the naval string of the unborn.
Deeper and closer to the heart than any vein.
Hold it tight!—for it guides to light upon light.

Inspired by the following verses of the Qur'an:

Al-Jathiya (45:23), 'Ale Imran (3:103)

Al-Baqarah (2:256), Surah Qaf (50:16)



The Whale

by Khadija S.

It is dark and damp inside the Whale.
It smells of decay. It smells like regret.
No sound is heard in this lonesome cavity except:
From within, the steady heartbeat of the Whale.
From without, the constant murmur of the waves.

I touch the Whale's flesh. How like my own!
A lonely traveler, like me. Where are its kindred?
In this desolate darkness, how does it see? What does it eat?
How long ago was it born and when will it die?
Does it know it has become my shroud and grave?

O Creator, You provide for the Whale like You provide for me.
Like You provide for whatever creatures dwell within me.
You create what we do not know. Unlikely livelihoods, unseen.
They all glorify Your praises and prostrate to You.
It is only us who turn away, if it were not for Your Grace.

There is no god but You. Glory be to You.

The Whale prays in sounds I cannot fathom.
The Whale is patient. It does not falter.
It does not complain about the weight of the waves
Or the length of the journey or the burden it carries.
It does not wish it was created differently or born elsewhere.

I have certainly done wrong.

No sound I make can escape
These walls of flesh and bone
And the water like mountains above me.
But I know You hear my supplication,
For not a leaf falls without Your Knowledge.

There is no god but You. Glory be to You.

I have certainly done wrong.

Thank You, my Lord, for guiding me to these words.
For turning toward me and turning my heart toward You.
For turning the Whale upwards, guiding it toward the light.



Khadija S. is a first-year medical sciences student who loves
poetry and linguistics.

Faith

by Jill Vance





Jill Vance is a poet and interdisciplinary artist. Her poems have appeared in Truth Serum Press, Pure Slush, Dirigible Balloon and Green Ink Poetry. She hopes one day to have a pamphlet published of poetry and artwork.

The Underwear Tree

by Jean Gismervik

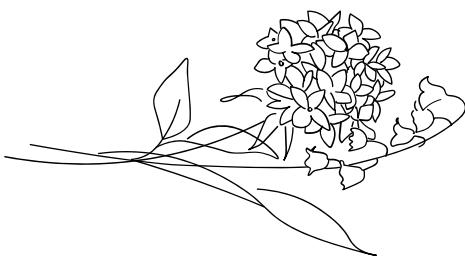
The tree had not carried fruit for years. Micah's grandmother had told him stories of when she was a girl and the apple tree would burst forth first with delicate, white blossoms, their fragrance light in the air and hiding in the soft pockets of breezes. Grandmother now used its withered branches to hang laundry out to dry. The Underwear Tree they called it, as its boughs were too weak to carry anything but the lightest of clothes.

Three seasons full of Sundays, Micah would play and watch the backyard sprout, erupt, and then wither into golds and browns, and as the world changed so did the tree. Dungaroos turned into tightsy whiteys, and then billowy boxer shorts with bright cartoons became boxer briefs with muted colors. Micah would ask his grandma where her underwear was and she would laugh and whisper that they would need a bigger tree.

One day, when Micah was home from college he stared at the bare boughs of the Underwear Tree and thought of his grandmother who they had buried earlier that spring. He thought the tree looked so vulnerable out there in the elements, how barren it seemed and unnatural just as the sounds and smells of the house had also become more austere in the recent months. When his parents and sister had gone to bed, Micah went into his grandmother's old room and opened the trunk at the end of her bed.

It smelled like cedar and the lavender soap she washed with. Inside was a ball of yarn and the idea came to him so easily. There was only one problem, he didn't know how to knit. Stuck to the back of the yarn was his answer, a fuzzy red pom pom. Inside the trunk there were at least two dozen more.

The next morning, while sipping her coffee, Micah's mother had to take a second glance out the sliding glass door that led to the backyard. Not since her youth had the Underwear Tree bore fruit, and yet, to her own impossible wonder, there, hanging in voluptuous clusters were bright red orbs. In his room, she could hear Micah waking, the soft padding of his feet on the floor, the deep gruff of his man's voice coughing. She still could not reconcile in her mind this man who had been so long her boy. But now, here, having him home, the tree, the fruit, it was as if time could move backwards.



Jean lives in Westchester, NY, where she works as a Director of Special Education. Her writing has appeared in Rollingstone.com, Urb Magazine, Lavender and Lime Literary, Tamarind, Superlative, and You Give Me the Sun (St. Mary's Press). She is currently working on a novel about New York City that examines themes of memory, time, and climate change.

Thanks Giving

by Richard Puglisi

No, I am not referring to that annual holiday that comes at the end of November when people gorge themselves on turkey and watch football all day. I'm talking about the practice of giving thanks for all that we have or better yet, just being thankful.

The concept of giving thanks is nothing new. Its origin goes back to the Bible. And thankfulness to the creator is a central element in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In the Old Testament, Psalm 30 says, “O Lord my God, I will give thanks unto thee forever.” While in Psalm 100 it says, “Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise: be thankful unto him, and bless his name.”

There is a special holiday called Sukkot which is celebrated by Jews around the world. It is called the Feast of Tabernacles or the Festival of Shelters, and is all about giving thanks for the fall harvest and remembering the 40 years the Israelis spent in the desert after escaping slavery in Egypt. The holiday name itself comes from the huts, or booths, that were built while in the desert. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul stressed many times in his letters the concept of giving thanks. In 1 Thessalonians 5:18 he says, “give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will.”

In Islam, Shukr is an Arabic term denoting thankfulness or gratitude. It is an important aspect and virtue of high esteem. The Qur'an says: "And whatever of blessings and good things you have, it is from God" (16:53).

The concept of giving thanks or gratitude as in the Abrahamic faiths also exists in eastern religions. Gratitude is an important virtue in Buddhist teaching. The Buddha taught that gratitude is a reflection of someone's integrity and civility.

While every Hindu festival is about counting one's blessings and thanking God for them. Gratitude is exalted as one of the most important virtues (dharma) in many Hindu texts:

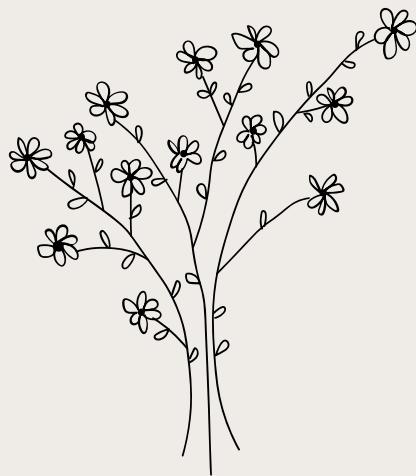
*To repay a good deed with another
Appreciate all that you have in life
Share with the less fortunate*

Pongal is a Hindu festival celebrated to mark the harvest of crops and offer a special thanksgiving to God, the sun, the earth, and the cattle.

Robert A. Emmons, professor of Psychology at the University of California-Davis, and Michael E. McCullough, professor of Psychology at the University of California-San Diego, have conducted studies on giving thanks. The results of their studies determined that giving thanks is actually good for you both psychologically and physiologically. It showed that grateful people had less depression and stress, lower blood pressure, more energy, and greater optimism. And for older adults, a daily practice of gratitude even slowed down some effects of neurodegeneration that often occurs as we age.

Gratitude helps people refocus on what they have instead of what they lack. Gratitude, especially in times of difficulty, helps us to stay positive and thankful rather than allowing ourselves to be crushed by adversity. And remaining in a state of gratitude helps us to recognize how much we have in our lives. To count our blessings rather than look at what we are lacking. There is a sense of fulfillment that comes not from wanting more but rather from knowing that we are already blessed with what we need. Remember not to take the fortunes in our lives for granted.

Finally, if we are truly blessed and thankful for what we have, how about giving to those who are not. How about giving as a way to say thanks. Giving thanks by helping others. Thank you.



Richard is a poet and writer of nonfiction articles and essays. He lives in Yardley, PA with his wife and talking cat.

The Rubaiyat of Ibn al-Razi, the Lensmaker

by Thalib Razi

"For gaining access to the effulgence and closeness to God, there is no better way than that of searching for truth and knowledge..."

—Ibn al-Haytham, medieval Ash'ari Muslim scientist
and father of modern optics

My mind wandered during prayer to
Places far from, places near to
God, these thoughtless thoughts I think
Might break - or salvage - every momentary link

To You, five times a day, imperfectly
Perhaps some punctuality
Or purpose might result, but these cracks
In ego are like sunbeams in a dark room. Relax

On seat, or street, if you say your creed
And close your eyes, then you won't need
Them, who argue for fallacies: eyes-shut reliance
And say, "We've faith, so who needs science?"

Or, "Science triumphs, so who needs faith?"
When the eyes of glass we cast today
Focus nanometers or light-years away.
But there's a middle path. See how she prays

The short prayer in the morning, kneels
Prostrates and rises, and she feels
Contentment, inhale, through nose, past eyes
To brain, to soul, which never dies

But what she fixes her eyes upon
The rug, the dawn, the dew-spiked lawn
Beyond the window, the wall's pale plaster
Distracts her, or attracts her

From or to the One she worships.
How can she know? Is all this worth it?
At these thoughts, they stray her eyes
But sometimes, they help her see the light.

Is there a devil or an angel in the details?

For when she rises from the rug
Her eyes stay down there, while sleep tugs
At them to close, but she doesn't let
It take her, make her the verses forget

Why she woke, tripping on carpeted stairs
So her heavy lids stay parted, taking care
That the skirt on her eyes, black silk lashes
Doesn't weigh down her slender, care-taken lids, flashes

On goes the lamp the next dawn. She decides
That rather than open or shut tight her eyes
She won't take her spectacles, purple-black frames
And sand, off her bed-stand. The prayer time came

Under cover of clouds, they soothed her with rain,
So she scrambled to face the black box of this plane
But the beauty was, this time, it all went to fuzz
The pixels were larger, but lovely, because

It was like a Monet, she could look all she liked,
For the details would not snap her gaze left and right.
Her mind stays awake, as her eyes don't give in,
But the sharpest of lenses is focused within.

It was as if Rumi and Razi had joined
Their medieval philosophies in marriage, a poignant
Affair where heart and mind join hands
In a pact to not intrude on the other one's lands

Except at a mist-blurred, no-man's place: prayer
Open to your inner sight, if you dare.



Thalib Razi is a Sri Lankan American Muslim singer-songwriter, poet, and novelist, whose most recent publication is his debut Islamic fantasy novel, THE ENCHANTER'S COUNSEL, imagining "Middle Earth in the Middle East." When he's not writing novels or poetry, he's busy telling his infant son to not eat that.

A Tiny Exodus

by Shane Schick

A bug lands on the page
of my book, smaller than a fly,
standing amid the vast white plain
that we only see as the margins,
surveying long rows of letters
like a black sea that was sliced
up into a series of narrow partings
by a Moses who must have been
as methodical as he was minuscule.
Despite so many available legs
and the added ability to take wing,
the bug seems to be weighing
whether to follow him in crossing
over to the possibility of safety,
to the shadowy horizon of spine.



Shane Schick is a freelance writer based in Canada. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Loch Raven Review*, *South Florida Poetry Journal* and many others.

More: ShaneSchick.com/poetry. Twitter: @shaneschick

What Passes for Dreams

by Kendra Whitfield

I don't know who needs to hear this:

It's okay if what passes for dreams today
Is the to-do list scrawled hastily
Between bites of toast,
Shoved to the bottom of your purse
Beneath a notebook and an apple
As you hustled to the car.

It's okay if "buy bread" and "pay property taxes" is
All that your heart aspires to this day
All a heart really needs to do is
Beat and beat and beat.

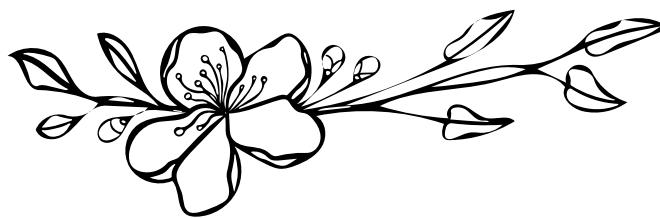
It's okay if the surest thing in your day
Is that crumpled list,
That paper touchstone consulted in
Frantic scrambles between obligations and errands
Because it ultimately leads you back
Home.

I don't know who needs to hear this:
Home is where your heart beats.

A student wrote this week:
“I don’t listen to my heart because hearts can’t talk.”
I commented:
“You’re not listening close enough.”

It’s okay, today, if you can’t hear your heart
Under the music in the coffee shop where you paused
To catch your breath and check your list.
Your heart is always there.

Today it is saying:
“Enough.”



Kendra Whitfield lives and writes at the southern edge of the Northern Boreal Forest. Her work has been published by Community Building Art Works and Beyond the Veil Press.

The Hard Things

by Humairah Jamil

write about the hard things.
about the war that's waging within mothers
and mother lands. about tears that were shed
in refugee camps. about living on the cusp of
constant death. about learning. unlearning.
about moments that came once and then
gone too soon. hoping. yearning.
flowers that don't bloom. dreams that don't
make it past sleep. plans that don't make it through.
bones. broken homes. unturned stones. love
that doesn't feel like love. trying to put your head
up above the water. don't just write
about the weather. or how the sunlight
makes you sneeze, or the languid way
the clouds part for you. or how monday isn't
your most favourite day of the week. don't even
attempt to write a love poem. no one needs to know
how love drowns you in an ocean. don't use
grand metaphors to explain how insufficient
it is you love. your sappy sentiments,

your vapid romance. no life is changed from it.
from starstruck lovers with foolish intent,
only ending up hurting yourself and the other –
we don't need another toxic romeo & juliet
obsession. so here is my confession:
write what hurts you, what heals you, from within
and without. there's already too much spilled ink
vacillating between love songs and self-indulgent
ventures and first world problems poeticised
in frivolous breaks. but the world
is still breaking. still stuck between
waking and sleeping. and these words aren't used enough.
we could wake up every day, to appreciate
the blue sky for what it is and let gratitude
and prayers melt on our tongues while our minds
never stop thinking about those
whose only sight upon waking
is the caress of dust, bombs, guns, waiting
for the other shoe to drop. it is not easy
for you will carry an insurmountable weight.
but the weight is only to lighten,
to give a hand to hold;
we owe the world nothing more valuable
than our heaviest stories in gold.



Humairah is a teacher, book reviewer, reader, writer and poet. She has performed spoken word poetry in various public and school events. Her articles and poems have been published in various publications and websites. In 2019, she self-published an anthology of prose & poetry about mothers titled ‘Untuk Mama’ together with a friend. In the same year, her debut book of poems ‘Homebound’, which talks about grief, hope, love & light, and centred around her revisit to Mecca & Medina, was published. Penning down her experiences & reflecting on His word is a pursuit she strives towards.

Lessons on Motherhood from a Dog

by Bharti Bhansal

Originally published by Polaris (Ohio Northern University)

2 Jan 2023

I don't know when she was born. Perhaps we share the same birthday. The possibilities are infinite and I would be lying if I say this thought doesn't make me smile, us entering the world together. Help me make sense of it: you look for people who see you at your utmost vulnerable; they get to know why you laugh after a long session of crying or why you look in the mirror just to say to yourself, "damn I look pretty." And then a dog enters, just out of nowhere, as if put by God just right outside your doorstep. Of course you don't think much of it, even though your first instinct is to connect the damned dots. Yet you know something has changed in your heart after she looks at you with eyes too fluent in speaking language of "I get it." I think friendships are strange that way. They transcend this funny barrier of differences, only for you to sit with your dog at 12 pm, let her wander on the terrace knowing that she will come to you once you call her name. Did you ever have that kind of privilege before, to know that someone is at a distance where you can call them back? She responds every time you say her name. Did she learn the tone of it or the way air buzzes around her ears everytime you say her name? I think sometimes it becomes necessary to identify someone with a word meant specifically for them. Ah! How special is it to call someone you love with a name that will always be there even after the body is gone. Maybe I am looking too much into all of it. Maybe she is a dog who gets hungry and eats her food and plays and sleeps. But aren't we all supposed to do that, play as we learn to notice how the playground isn't really there anymore, only the front porch of our little homes?

But something tells me she knows how a place has little to do with space and more with how well you use it to wander around because she does it all the time. I think I am yet to learn that. To be content with this fistful of space, a hall which is wide enough for her to find entertainment or a staircase which still amazes her everytime she tries to climb it while slipping and falling and looking at me as if saying, "damn it! Could you just lift me up. I really don't have a story behind it, I just want to climb these stairs." How simple is it to ask for help, how simply she does it with her little dramatic cries, unafraid of the shame of the inability to do something. How easy she makes existence look like. It isn't that hard after all. To live life and be very proud of it.

There are rarely any moments which I recall as life changing. My life has been nothing but drastic turns of boring, unimportant events which led me to where I am today. One such event was a dog crying out in pain in front of my house. Nothing different if you look at it through the lens which universe usually wears to detach itself from us shameless people trying to make ourselves significant by theorizing the “big chill” or “big rip” as our possible endings, which is just another way to say that I tried to act unbothered as long as I could. Until my sister eventually got up to see the source of noise, which was a bleeding dog at our doorstep.

The only thing I have been told about injury is that it heals eventually and as much as I like to say that I am a good person who waits for people to get better, I actually am not. Not when all my life as a person with depression (which is my only identity for so many years now), I have been revengeful and resentful of people. Neglect has a weird way of transforming us. Or that's how I see everyone around me.

An emotionally unavailable father who saw his father collect grains and sell it in the market only to be termed as vagabond, I believe men underestimate how they grow indifferent until they see their own children running away from the only home they build, a representation of their own ego, standing tall and concrete. But as much as I would like to talk about this childish approach of parenting, this is not about us, but a dog. A gravely injured dog with her leg bitten off. She didn't ask for help, but cried as she sat on the front porch, bleeding and visibly scared. I think we all are afraid that way, and wounded perhaps.

As luck would have it, we fostered her with the hope of leaving her once she got better. Until I saw her fractured leg with a piece of pale white bone jutting out, a perfect symbolism of how thorns work. They reach out sharply, almost shamelessly to anyone who dares to touch them. I think I have this weird habit of finding meanings when the meaning might be as simple as a dog with a broken bone. My parents have always taught me to be a good person, whatever that means. As I looked at my father with expectant eyes, he asked to bring a cardboard box, placed a warm cloth there and picked her up, as she cried out loud. Pain might be a reminder of life as they like to romanticize it but pain sometimes is just pain, sometimes more physical than emotional.

Over the next two days, unaware of the budding infection, she stumbled and fell and stood only to sit down a few seconds later. After so many visits to the vet, they finally confirmed that the infection had spread in her leg and needed to be amputated. Do we have that kind of say for an animal? We decided to go ahead with the doctor's advice and, after a two hour long surgery, her leg was no more a part of her body.

Under the influence of anesthesia, she was disoriented, falling, thrashing her head with the nearby railings, trying to stand back again. I had never seen that kind of grit in anyone around me. I had neither ability to stand up nor the courage after I fell into depression which later was diagnosed as BPD and OCD. I still am not sure what it is that affects me. After six years on antidepressants, I have now made peace with this new me who doesn't find the will to get up every morning. The only reason to do that is inertia. Not getting up in the morning is as scary as someone realizing about his own death seconds before. We avoid that, death and changing our morning routine.

She winced in pain throughout the night as I sat by her side, gently patting her as she fell asleep to the melody for dogs on YouTube played by my sister. It's astonishing how a child across different species behaves the same. The need for comfort never goes away. Perhaps this is the essence of motherhood: comfort, which my mother has provided me tirelessly over the years, first through childhood and a kid's idea of danger: chickenpox, measles, scraping knees badly, falling sick, getting injections. Screaming is a child's way of communication but after everything my mother did and still does for me as a twenty five year old depressed young woman who still hasn't completed her basic education, I think I don't get to complain about what depression did to me as compared to my mother.

As she tried to sleep, her painful subtle screams never going away, my father went to pick up a doctor who could inject her with painkillers. Here, in my village, things aren't as readily available as in a city.

I can count the homes on my fingertips; our community, though a small one, has its own burdens. Empathy, I suppose, is hierarchical with its roots deeply engraved in the idea that sufferings are unequal and thus there are greater sufferings which the world acknowledges and smaller sufferings that go on ignored, like a dog with a broken leg.

The next morning was a silent one, until I went to my dog, her big warm eyes greeting me as she wagged her tail without stopping. I call her "my dog" now. Sometimes it's so easy to call someone family by simply calling them family. She was now part of ours. Her recovery has been miraculous because she made it look so easy. And I think it's unfair to her, to believe that she could go through pain easily because she didn't scream like all of us. Suffering in silence should never be the benchmark for resilience. Her lean body gained some muscles and her wounds started to heal. But did she miss standing up on all four legs? Do we have a way to find out about the self awareness of an animal who responds to love every single time? Do we really want to see how an animal grieves?

She has started running now, always coming to me like a little kid who has learnt how to walk runs towards his mother. I firmly believe that there is always love in recognizing someone from afar in a crowd of strangers. I believe it is the easiest way to say thank you: *Thank you for being here. At this moment nothing matters to me more than your presence.*

She doesn't bark. She hasn't since the day she was attacked by dogs. So it was a big moment when she barked a little, so soft that it would have gone unheard if I wasn't paying attention.

A milestone really. Trauma does change how someone views success. Even though I despise this idea of a broken warrior, I do believe in the importance of quitting when required, resting when the body demands it, saying hello when missing a friend, hugging mother when things get rough, or simply asking your father which car he wants to buy just to see his eyes light up.

I think people will find it funny that a stray dog has taught me more about the intricacies of motherhood than any person ever could. I realize how mothers are asked to sacrifice just for the sake of their child, how motherhood is indeed a sacrifice of a life that could have taken other turns, how mothers are never viewed as individuals but mothers only. It is hard to grasp the reality that my mother had joined NCC in her youth, she had a best friend who wouldn't eat food without her, how shy she was on seeing my father visit her after their marriage had been arranged. I struggle to believe that my mother was a child once, that all mothers started as girls who grew into women at young ages, handled their children when they were supposed to laugh with friends, gossip about boys, follow their dreams, hike up the mountains, crash on ground filled with grass and look up at the sky just to see that the sky had no barriers, no boundaries. That flying was never a breach of trust.

My dog has now been named "jugnu" which means firefly. I think motherhood isn't a trait of one gender: motherhood sometimes is just a warm presence that could heal someone, a dog even, when needed. I wake up everyday now, with the hope of seeing an over excited dog who is happy because I exist. Aren't all of us looking for a reason to believe that our presence matters here?

I have seen her grow, take her first walk as a three legged animal, seen her fall when she is unable to climb upstairs, or how mischievous she gets when asked to come inside.

She is healing slowly. But isn't that growing too?

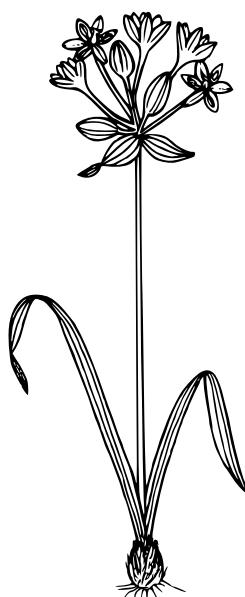
A part of my heart will always remember this feeling. Of learning how nurture is a trait we all share. The days when she doesn't respond to me calling her name, I always try to catch her attention just like my mother has done over these years. Did I tell you that she loves belly rubs and a good session of scratching?

I don't know what our future holds. People stare at her, with her one leg missing. I have heard a child screaming in fear, "mother, what is this?" or an old man laugh when seeing her. But that makes me walk straighter, taller, prouder. She walks with a little tilt now, a bounce maybe. I don't scoot into hiding knowing that people see me as a failure, or that my parents believe my depression must be the flaw in their parenting. But here, in this little corner of my house, where the windows are large enough to light up the entire staircase, my dog and I sit together, listen to music and talk. This motherhood isn't complex, it doesn't rebel against the child's growth as an individual. It sings, barks, plays, hides. Most importantly it stays as an observer of each other's trajectory in life.

People are right when they say "a dog comes into your life and changes you forever" but nobody talks about the dog with a missing leg. Perhaps a better sentence may be phrased than this, a better perspective to put everything into place but today I think it is enough to say that we have become fond of each other. We love each other, without any words to put into a promise.

A dog with a broken leg still dances the same when ripping apart the covers of the vintage sofa. I think we all grow like that too.

Tattered clothes and knowledge about our developing teeth, perhaps is the only measure of our tussle with power, and the awareness that we are capable of destroying yet wake up to hold each other softly is how I want to remember my transition from a happy girl to someone who starts to stumble on missed dose of antidepressants. This dog, which I keep reminding everyone is three legged sunshine, is for me to remember that our identities do change over time, morph into shapes and people and places. It isn't that complicated after all to live so ordinarily that the best way to soothe yourself is just by looking into your dog's big brown eyes. Healing is transcendental, sometimes you simply love a dog and everything changes forever.



Bharti is a resident of Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, India. She loves cats and has a dog named jugnu that was rescued. She loves reading and writing poetry. She can be reached at her instagram

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Phoenix

by Gregg Voss

His name was Absaar, which meant, back in the glory days of Earth's existence, one who has the power of seeing; a seer of visions.

He was true to his given name, much to the confusion of his fellow shipmates, who viewed him as everything from a mascot of some sort to an outcast disconnected from reality. But there was deep compassion for him after what had happened to his parents.

In ancient Earth parlance, they had been bushwhacked. Ahmad and Imani, along with Captain Moseley and a security team, had volunteered to meet with what was assumed to be a peaceful tribe on the far moon of the planet Omm'a for trading purposes. Absaar had remained behind, of course; a meeting with an alien species was no place for a child. Like always, he simply sat cross-legged in his family's quarters and smiled a far-off smile.

The Omm'ans were treacherous, vaporizing Ahmad and Imani and two other crew members before Captain Moseley was able to return to the Phoenix and broker the ship's escape into the outer reaches of the moon's atmosphere.

The Omm'ans pursued in their short-range ships, but the damage was done. Ahmad, with his quick wit and astute knowledge of the Persian philosopher al-Ghazali, had proven himself an effective intergalactic pseudo-diplomat. Imani, who still donned hijab, would simply not allow herself to be separated from her husband and had become quite a negotiator of goods in her own right.

They were gone.

As the Phoenix pulled away from the slow-pursuing Omm'ans, it fell to Captain Moseley to share the news with Absaar. On one knee with a bloody forearm due to a close-range pistol shot, he fought for the words to explain what had happened. He finally got the words out, in Arabic, in which he was fluent thanks to Ahmad and Imani, and fell to his other knee.

Absaar was unmoved. No tears of his own, not even the telltale appearance of anguish. Instead, he spoke in an even, haunting tone.

“Allah has released me,” he had said, paraphrasing al-Ghazali. “A light has been cast upon me by Him. It is through this light that I must seek the unveiling of truth.”

This did not placate Captain Moseley. His cheeks rose into a frown as his own eyes began to fill with tears. As ship's captain, he had wed Ahmad and Imani soon after their escape from Earth. Absaar had been the fruit of that union, born into the commerce routes of *alfada'*, or deep space.

“What is truth?” he interjected.

“The perception of truth is the greatest happiness one can obtain.”

“You speak of perceptions,” Captain Moseley said. “I perceive this to be an untenable situation for this captain and this crew, but most of all, for you. Do you not care that your parents are no longer alive?”

At this, Absaar smiled again and replied, “They will return. Truth will be unveiled.”

Captain Moseley stood, shook his head, wiped the tears from his eyes and returned to the bridge.

Absaar maintained his cross-legged pose for the space of several hours, alternating from a smile to a hard-capped neutral look that would have unnerved anyone that had chosen to stay in his family’s quarters with him. Had anyone else been there, their eyes would have been near blinded by the cone of light that settled upon Absaar as the rest of the crew slept.

They rose, one by one, returning to their stations on the Phoenix and prepared for the celebration of the lives of those lost on the Omm’an moon. It would be the *alfada*’ version of a funeral.

When Captain Moseley and his command retinue arrived on the bridge, there was Absaar, calmly sitting cross-legged in front of the ship's main video console. He lightly tapped the keyboard with what appeared to be expert finger work. From whom he learned this, no one knew, but as he pecked away Captain Moseley took a fearful deep breath.

Dead parents or not, Absaar—like every other child on the Phoenix—had been forbidden from touching any ship console. To do so could have unpleasant repercussions should the Phoenix engage with a species as treacherous as the Omm'ans.

Captain Moseley felt the telltale sign of anger creeping up through his diaphragm, a sort of rumbling that meshed with the musty scent of the bridge. He stepped to Absaar.

“You must step away from the console,” he said in as gentle a voice as he could muster.

Absaar ignored him, and when Captain Moseley tried to move his hands away from the keyboard, he shooed him away as if he was a fly.

“Absaar!” Captain Moseley said, standing back. “I command you to...”

On the main video screen, an image appeared of two figures. It was Ahmad and Imani, dressed in the clothes they had worn to the meeting with the Omm'ans.

In the background were the trappings of their quarters, including artifacts from their lost lives on Earth: a scooter, a television, several small statues. A photo of Absaar as an infant.

But this cannot be, Captain Moseley thought, as Absaar sat back and clasped his hands.

“Truth has been unveiled,” Absaar whispered.

Moments later, Captain Moseley and a security team entered Ahmad and Imani’s quarters, followed closely behind by Absaar.

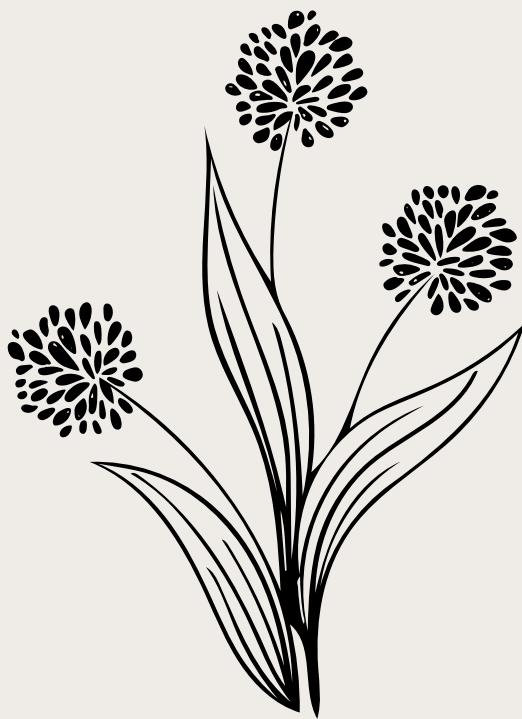
Ahmad and Imani stood and welcomed the group, but their appearance was translucent, almost as if backlit by an unseen light.

They were...ghosts?

“We are alive, Allah be praised,” Ahmad said in his deep baritone. “The light cast upon our son facilitated our return to this plane of existence.”

Captain Moseley turned to Absaar, who had sat on the floor, cross-legged, staring up at his parents.

“It is finished,” he said.



Gregg Voss is a marketing communications writer during the day and covers high school sports most evenings and weekends. In the intervening time, he is a prolific fiction writer. He wrote and published the short story collection *The Valley of American Shadow*, which debuted on July 4, 2019. His next collection of short stories, *Calling Fire From Heaven*, debuted May 2023. Gregg lives in the Chicago suburbs with his wife, daughter and dog.

God of Sarah

by Emma McCoy

When God came to me inside the tent I was kneading bread; my husband was outside with the men and they promised us a living future and heard me laugh at God (why did you laugh, Sarah?).

My husband was outside with the men, hearing dust shift in the heat of the day, but when God heard me laugh (I didn't laugh, Lord) God knew the surprise and sorrow there.

The dust shifted outside, uncomfortable, because what God hands out miracles like rainstorms? But God heard the surprise and sorrow in a laugh, knew the loneliness of woman.

Does God hand out miracles like rainstorms? My faith is thin as pepper flakes, as thin as a husband who does not know the loneliness of woman. That day God promised I would be a mother

though my faith was thin as pepper flakes. When God came to me inside the tent I was needing a miracle; God promised I would be a mother and go, laughing, into the future.

Patience and Darkness

by Emma McCoy

What did Jonah say
when he spent three days in darkness?
Did he speak in the hollow space
and ask it to say something back?
Did he prise God from under his fingernails
and weep, because he was running and looking
with equal effort, ending up
in the stomach of the ocean?
Was God in the darkness, damp and bleeding?

Picture Jonah putting Scripture to melody,
humming to keep himself from going mad
as he turned God's prophecy over and under
his tongue, over and under
without swallowing.

The River is Not Divided

by Emma McCoy

Miriam's second victory song

Miriam and I are sitting
by the bank of the Blackfoot
in Montana. I throw a rock
across the surface, it sinks.

You'll ruin the fishing
that way.

I know.

Her curly hair is held back
with a yellow bandana. Thick
eyebrows, clinking jewelry,
her hands don't stop moving.

So you're a prophet?

A poet.

Let's call it both.

Can you answer me
this, sing it or tell it,
I don't mind—

Please stop throwing
rocks. We might fish
later.

Sorry.

What do you know
of loneliness?

What does God know
of loneliness?

That's two questions.

Can you not
speak for both?

Miriam thinks on that one.

We are knee to knee, not
in the desert, but outside
the Promised land. The river
flows, but it's just water.

There are many kinds
of loneliness. The scholars
debate if Moses and Aaron
are my real brothers. What
does it matter? Their love was real.

But you are remembered.

I sang a song of victory
but I dream of drowning
men and horses,
the choked screams.

I dream of the golden gleam
of an idol, the heat
of fear and anger.

What hurts?

What is weighted?

My chest.

My hands.

I fear I will wander forever,
and God will go silent.

The river gurgles.

She has closed her eyes
and gone still, even the wind
dares not tangle her curls.

In the beginning...

In the beginning
God created.
There was only God,
and God filled the universe.

Was it because

God was lonely?
All I know is God
created, created a
Beginning
and filled it with life.

She grabs my hand.

Am I broken?

It is not good for us
to be alone.

I sang a victory song,
and did not sing it alone.

My nightmares wake
my brothers,
and we battle the night
together.

Miriam takes her bag,
pulls out bread crusty and salted
and breaks it.

Just ask.

The river rushes for a moment,
the flood of water audible.
She flinches, hands a piece
of bread to me.



Emma McCoy is a poet and essayist with love for the old stories. She is the assistant editor of Whale Road Review, co-editor of Driftwood, and poetry reader for the Minison Project. She is the author of “In Case I Live Forever” (2022), and she has poems published in places like Flat Ink, Paddler Press, and Jupiter Review.

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