

# THE HEMLOCK

A LITERARY ARTS JOURNAL

Summer Issue | August 2023

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SECOND  
ISSUE  
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[www.thehemlockjournal.wordpress.com](http://www.thehemlockjournal.wordpress.com)

# EDITORS' NOTE

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

In this issue, we present a collection of stunning works that showcase the boundless creativity and imagination of our contributors. From evocative poetry to mesmerising fiction, each piece explores different themes and issues that are relevant to our world today.

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

Each work is a testament to the skill and passion of our contributors, who have poured their hearts and souls into their creations.

We are honoured to showcase the talent and creativity of our contributors, who come from all corners of the globe and represent a diverse range of voices and perspectives. Whether you are a seasoned reader or a newcomer to the world of literary arts, we hope that you will find something in this issue that resonates with you.

Thank you for joining us on this journey, and we look forward to continuing to explore the rich and vibrant world of literary arts together.

*Editorial Team*

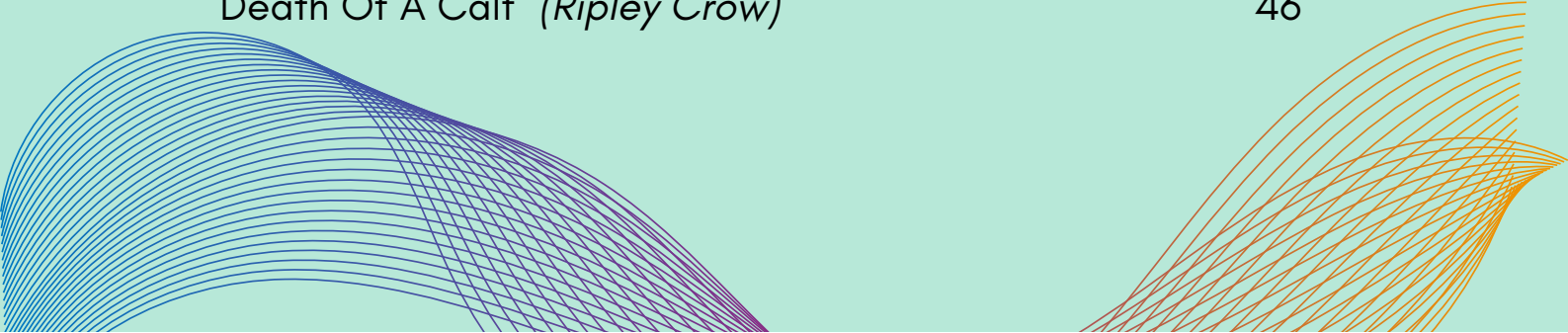
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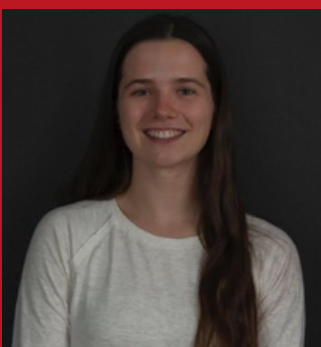
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# The Rebirth Dreams

**By Jillian-Rae Picco**

in every shadow  
there is some double rainbow —  
last night I dreamt I jumped  
out of my window, from the seventh floor  
of the condominium building.  
but really, it's nothing  
to be frightened about.  
I put every book I own upon  
the windowsill, as though they would join  
me for my burial —  
I took the leap of  
faith, but it was a failure too.  
the next night I dreamt of an owl,  
contentedly flying through the paling sky  
& between the watery clouds. suddenly she  
dove low towards the waterline  
& a fisherman cast his line — the hook sliced  
her eye. she died, she died, she died.  
I wonder what my sleeping mind  
is trying to kill off — who knew rebirth  
could be so mean.  
we all do; and yet of it we do not speak.  
why could my mind not capture my attention  
with a glimpse of the light ahead.  
on the third night I dreamt  
I was eighty, crammed in a house  
overwhelmed with cakes and breads  
that would not get eaten.

I was driven to a movie theater  
& given a pacifier to make my silent mouth more silent.  
I am too conscious in my mind these days,  
in sleep the imagination strays  
as though my bed wants to join with the  
floor of the earth, as though my roots want  
to take down these building  
brick by boring brick - create some open  
space



Jillian-Rae is a Novelist, Editorial Director, and Content Architect based in Northern Ontario. She has an Honours Undergraduate Degree with Distinction in English Studies, and is the author of *Canoeing with the Seasons*, a work of creative nonfiction. Her poetry and nonfiction writings have been published through *Introvert*, *Dear*, *October Hill Magazine*, and *Spillwords Press*.

# Portrait Of My Father As Two-Face/Harvey Dent

**By Christian Ward**

He wore a suit of duality daily:  
One minute, charming as the spring wildflowers.  
Generous to his wife. The rosary beads  
of her bought pearls ensured she'd think of him  
like a saint. Expensive restaurants with names  
borrowed from French novels. Our clothes  
were well-made. Enough toys to entertain  
our imaginations for years. Mother wore a fur  
that purred whenever it smelled his wallet  
thick like a stack of pancakes. Growled  
whenever a coin flipped and he bared  
his acid-scarred soul. We lived in fear  
of his lieutenant, the belt, and his hands,  
whenever he'd drunk his weight on a night  
out with business associates. He never  
apologised. Perhaps the coin he flipped  
to determine his mood was actually in charge;  
the CEO pulling the strings. And, when it's his time  
to go, I'll avoid giving it to the ferryman.  
Maybe I'll melt it to hear the metal scream,  
like we did every time he entered our dreams.



Christian Ward is a UK-based writer who has recently appeared in the Rappahannock Review, South Florida Poetry Journal, The Dewdrop, Dodging the Rain, Wild Greens, Mad Swirl, Dipity Literary Magazine, Impspired, and Streetcake Magazine.

# A Sky Bereft Of Clouds

**By R.S.**

*(Inspired by W.B. Yeats quote "Too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart")*

What could prove your heart of care,  
When yearning you, I did painfully stare?  
My tender heart grew numb and still  
As the rain-drenched night quivered in chill.

Upon the moor when the cold winds stirred,  
The mist was nigh and the moon was blurred;  
There pining for a love filled glance,  
I stood and looked at you askance.

No smouldering fire could ever suffice  
To melt your heart carved out of ice;  
A sky bereft of clouds cannot rain impart--  
Too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart.



**R.S.**

R.S. resides in India and writes Poetry to find harmony in life. She graduated with Honours in English and loves to read and write poetry. She loves nature walks and rises early to feel inspired with the morning star and create new rhymes. IG Handle: @thepoetrywindmill



# Long Lonesome Road

**By Kenneth R. Jenkins**

*(To every traveling soul that wonders)*

Here I travel  
This long lonesome road.  
I don't know where it'll lead me  
But I will be a travelin' with this heavy load  
No matter where I travel  
This road will lead me there  
As I travel this long lonesome road.

Here I travel  
This long lonesome road.  
Not many travelers to travel with me,  
Just a lonely poet with a suitcase filled with words to fill  
No matter where I travel  
I am goin' to be free  
As I travel this long lonesome road.

Here I travel  
This long lonesome road.  
Where I'll roam alone,  
But yet I am not alone you see,  
I have a guitar packed with a million songs,  
No matter where I travel  
I will be surely free,  
As I travel this long lonesome road.

As I travel this long lonesome road,  
Traveling here and there to parts unknown.  
I am just a stranger travelin' along with my load,  
Spreadin' a little joy where Christian love is bound to be shown.  
Yes, I travel this long lonesome road,  
As I travel this long lonesome road.  
Travel on!  
Travel on!  
Travel on that long lonesome road.  
Travel on!  
Travel on!

Travelin' on that lonesome road.  
Yes, travel on!  
Travel on I say, travel on!  
Travel on that long lonesome road.  
No matter where I travel  
I will be surely free  
As I travel this long lonesome road,  
Yes, I travel that long lonesome road.  
Travel on!  
Travel on!  
Yes, I will be travelin' that long lonesome road.



## Kenneth R. Jenkins

Kenneth R. Jenkins was born 1 June 1961 in Augusta Georgia but raised in Chicago, Illinois, Cook County. He is a freelance writer, poet, minister and devoted husband living in Savannah Georgia.

# Griefcase

**By Pragya Gogoi**

Cold pizza slices, half burnt wheat crust,  
wine lips wrapped around rum bottles,  
dead poems screaming from unfinished drafts,  
lost sleep drawing circles below swollen eyebags-  
a hue of smeared ash grey and black,  
Frozen ice in almond eyes melting into cascading waterfalls-  
They call them tears; I call them grief.  
Where do you keep grief?  
For the longest time,  
I used to keep grief in kitchen stoves  
and red heads of wooden matchsticks  
and in bleak winters, I shoved them between chopped dry logs that grandpa  
kept for bonfires-  
to put it simply, I kept grief in places that burnt,  
it made my heart a little less troubled,  
or so I thought,  
but you see, you cannot burn grief in its entirety,  
because grief is an unheard scream  
rattling those muscled walls inside your heart-  
trapped between veins and arteries-  
pretty much a part of your existence.  
Hence, I started locking them in old trunks  
that smelled of naphthalene and silverfish,  
stacking them with old pillow covers that bathed more in my tears than  
detergents,  
before Father kicked it in anger one day  
and it flew open,

grief strewn over white tile, rolling into dusty corners like a handful of marbles.  
On other days, grief spreads its sticky tentacles to my soles  
and walks with me,  
pricking my epidermis to remind me  
of obscuring hurt  
and I fall, missing a step or two  
trying to conceal my grief in teeming crowds,  
So, I put them in a griefcase that I carry along-  
A museum holding every grief that'd fought wars inside my lungs and heart-  
tired, exasperatedly resting between bones,  
to travel through the infinite canals of blood each night  
to my eyes while I grieve myself to sleep  
hence, I draw some of it (grief) into wool threads  
and knit them into sweaters  
and sew the hurt into metaphors bleeding in trauma poetry-  
for poets like us, we bleed grief and tears on paper  
and hence I've realised lately the need to carry griefcases betwixt thick books  
and blank journals  
for when the grief spills out again, shapeless and grey,  
running into spaces between black lines of yellow pages  
the hurt will take shape into trauma poems once again.



Pragma Gogoi is an emerging poet, author and engineer from India whose debut poetry book "Whispers of a Nyctophile" was published in 2020 and instantly hit the Amazon bestseller list in manifold categories. She was the winner of Cherry Book Awards Season 1 in the category of poetry, Winner of Poetic Caesura Book Awards Season 1 in the category of poetry, Winner of Coimbatore Literary Awards 2022 in the category of poetry and

was also nominated for the Orange Flower Awards 2022 and Indian Book Awards 2021. Her work has been published in Southword by Munster Literature Centre Ireland, Remington Review, Eve Poetry Magazine, The Verse of Silence among others. She is currently writing her second volume of poetry.



### **Dream**

Irina Tall (Novikova)

Materials: ink, paper

Size: 10x15 cm

Year: 2023



### **Untitled**

Irina Tall (Novikova)

Materials: ink, paper

Size: 10x15 cm

Year: 2023



### **Landscape**

Irina Tall (Novikova)

Materials: wax crayons, paper

Size: 10x19 cm

Year: 2023



### **Guard Booth**

Irina Tall (Novikova)

Materials: wax crayons, paper

Size: 10x19 cm

Year: 2023



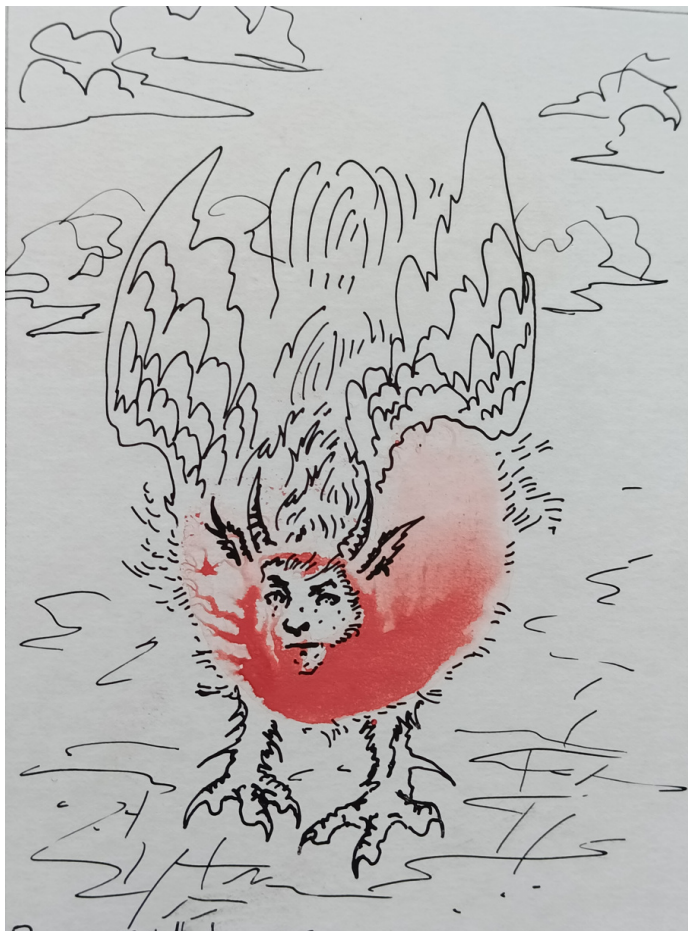
### **Ate**

Irina Tall (Novikova)

Materials: wax crayons, paper

Size: 10x19 cm

Year: 2023



### **Creature**

Irina Tall (Novikova)

Materials: ink, paper

Size: 10x15 cm

Year: 2023

## **Irina Tall (Novikova)**

Irina Tall (Novikova) is an artist, graphic artist, and illustrator. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art and also has a bachelor's degree in design.

The first personal exhibition "My soul is like a wild hawk" (2002) was held in the Museum of Maxim Bogdanovich. In her works, she raises themes of ecology. In 2005, she devoted a series of works to the Chernobyl disaster, and she draws on anti-war topics. The first big series she drew was The Red Book, dedicated to rare and endangered species of animals and birds. She writes fairy tales and poems and illustrates short stories. She draws various fantastic creatures: unicorns, and animals with human faces. She especially likes the image of a man - a bird - Siren. In 2020, she took part in Poznań Art Week. Her work has been published in the 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".

# An Indian Love

**By Shamik Banerjee**

O'Seafarer! be my list'ner, halt your rudder and sail,  
A few rhymes in my poem be, little be this love tale-  
'Mid two undestined hearts once Love, had upsprang from its well,  
But ere the cruel Destiny's cliff, betoss'd them to its dell;

Ah! nesh and dearsome love was ours, which lived only months few,  
'Twas when I saw its glint in eyes, on cheeks its rosy hue,  
When my lowbrow head wisdom found, formed music in my heart,  
And nature became wellhead of this rhymester's soundful art;

So well coalesced our unlike faiths and precepts they did hold,  
Her Almighty no image had, while mine had manyfold,  
Was semblance in our minds and thoughts and so was in each deed,  
With this great boon to Lord my debt, did exceed and exceed;

And naught in the world was sweeter and lovelier than this:  
When she lifted her niqab and, we were joined with a kiss,  
And when, the ring of betrothment, on her finger I tied,  
Hope was radiant in her eyes for it was fortified;

But marry we could not, alas! but marry we could not,  
For in the eyes of God's lawmen, we were as 'dislike' fraught,  
Incended, cloven was our hearts; and we were fordriven-  
Two interfaith sprites fell in love, and that love was riven.

## Shamik Banerjee

Shamik Banerjee is a poet and poetry reviewer from the North-Eastern belt of India. He loves taking long strolls and spending time with his family. His deep affection with Solitude and Poetry provides him happiness.



# A Nameless Loss

By John Muro

Falling one after the other  
like spent embers from the upper air,  
past a harbor of drab green water,  
fretful crows return with their idle  
banter, recounting someone's  
misfortune that's not theirs to fix.  
I'm watching their macabre dance  
with wings lifting their downfallen  
figures in and out of shade as if  
they were seeking to somehow  
rise up and leave their bodies before  
they suddenly glide back to over-  
grown grass and gather in a motion-  
less stupor, forming a dark circle  
where they bend to stillness and,  
with un-mended hearts, they call  
down others in a graceless gesture  
to replace them as they look away  
and fly off like orphans, having  
mourned as best they could, without  
any promise of help or healing.



Twice nominated for the Pushcart Prize and, more recently, for the Best of the Net Award, John Muro is a resident of Connecticut and a lover of all things chocolate. He has authored two volumes of poems – *In the Lilac Hour* and *Pastoral Suite* – in 2020 and 2022, respectively, and both volumes were published by Antrim House. John's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in numerous literary journals and anthologies, including *Acumen*, *Barnstorm*, *Delmarva*, *New Square*, *Sky Island*, *The Hemlock* and the *Valparaiso Review*. Instagram: @johntmuro

# Moss

**By Jacob Fortino**

Tan sedan hoodie up  
unibomber lookalike  
Not in Macon  
GA wrong side, lanes  
Feet crunched up,  
resources up!  
Up from up drafts  
Boring molds on bark,  
Trees see pieces caked  
On the roads and expressways  
Could build a new car out  
Of the ghosts of other drivers

Tractors, carried drivers carry  
Themselves to the adult super  
Stores off brand Lion's Den  
On the roadside  
Sometimes plants grow next  
To the detached front bumpers,  
Where did those seeds come from

Now, you enter into  
The state and see nests  
In webbed green, spread  
Around the contact towers  
Outside Gainesville and  
Ocala, their growth will  
Strangle you all the way  
To the Tampa river walk

Curved skyscrapers reflect  
Humid anvils to weigh down  
All our backs to make the cry  
To lift a finger in routine charity  
Forms to offer food to a loner  
Outside the Tampa theater, dressed  
In a suit, they came from watching  
The Oscars, he came for a meal

Around noon, in the next  
Time, Kissimmee knocks  
On the door dressed in angora  
To greet less than a few gators  
On the way to Arcadia,  
Woods sweating on the  
Sidewalk to let the lizards  
Reach over some reach

Reaching less without  
Their tails, skaters flip  
Over roaches  
And their legs, confetti,  
When the lights hit them  
Just right, at home  
A moth flew in fire  
Jello and the flame was  
Still doing the samba on  
charred wings, head was  
The first to burn

The moth had lived  
There for a time and mom  
Tried to let it fly off  
But it made a mistake,

Cooked itself  
Couldn't see it all  
From where I sat but  
No animal's pain should  
be that quiet, Brutal design

Pain tells the body to stop  
The harm like that moth had  
A choice, how do bugs fight  
Against traps when they just need  
A home in the shade, I'm really  
In Florida.

Place of the thriving green,  
Water sticks like mud if  
You ask nicely, shoves your  
Home off it's hinges if you don't  
I see the swamp breathe and choke,  
Webs—better infrastructure, Tampa  
Seattle of the South,  
I've seen the shriek of bark  
under the weight of the rain

Lizards fall, frozen,  
From the palms, iceboxes  
Melt in the beer sweat,  
Sweating under captain's chairs  
Under the shade of spoonbills  
Hot wings air shares space  
In your lungs with diverse  
Second hand but the red  
Tide will break and enter  
If you let it.

The boardwalk pastime is  
Living in a hole in the wall  
Banging fixtures in the octagon  
Run rampant  
with wild nomenclature  
And all this before lunch.

Lily pads have become  
Repeated, ellipses, copy  
And pasted to fill  
The space on black water.  
Black water! Yes, it is true  
And you'll see it in the  
Day time, snuffbox to see weed  
Chokehold in the River  
Running back the clock  
Of the red hours

It dances with the barnacles  
There is life all around if  
You're patient enough for  
It, happens just as much  
As it doesn't, green lights  
and red lights, Florida has

All their faces, the cars  
Will drive through them all  
The same, upon leaving Florida  
No guests or sign will enter  
Your car, but something will  
Follow you outside, as pungent  
As it has to be, you'll feel it

Next time you get that shiver  
In a Florida December,  
Whether you're river adjacent  
Or a lovable beach bum,  
The swamp pricks your nerves,  
And coats you in the stick.  
Couldn't tell you  
what not having it is like,  
I've never let it go.



Jacob Fortino is a 23-year-old poet and painter from Plainfield, IL. He received a BA in Creative Writing with a Minor in European Studies at Illinois State University and he planning on pursuing an MA. His work has been published in Euphemism. He is waiting to hear back from a poetry submission to Applause Magazine and has work being published currently in Pink Apple Press. He currently lives in Tampa, Florida.

# Flowers Of Mercury

**By Jimena Yengle**

The scent of little flowers and dust on the pavement  
I am part of the dream of the longest trip in the world.  
on a globe, on the catatonic moon  
I'm the luckiest person on a lonely planet.

That glow came with me and was called imagination.  
I remembered my name and my dealings with the sun.  
They called me Laila instead of Laura.  
for everything that happens at night, when we paint the sky

I grew up without knowing silence,  
choosing to draw my own character ladder  
together with cloud watchers and space connoisseurs  
I have always believed in the fantastic

An unforgettable 15th of February  
A surreal painting came to me.  
a work dedicated to fusing the notes of a song, and a honey cake for a meal  
He came and loved me, but the story did not end.

He and I, a life in the station  
for the day before, for a sunny Friday  
by the humid air of Mercury.  
and the ashes that we keep in our hearts

Suddenly, a Martian arrived, an intruder on our planet.  
Came closer before I could hide behind you.  
sealing papers with a rock, picking up writings from the ground  
before turning to that portrait, called us

Have you already said goodbye?  
But death is just a sprinkle of pepper for love.  
I walked with the broad steps of a lumberjack, just like a dictator.  
I took you with me to the path of the yellow flowers.

Zero steps by falling into a time hole  
bearer of a vivid experience  
interior decorator, of all limbos and directions  
How much life would I have if it weren't for your constant meddling?

He was carrying a metal bucket full of daisies.  
He left without saying goodbye—something poetic  
and the injection of memories did not stop.  
The last time we were alone was at your funeral.

Disturbing the stage with memories and shadows  
I felt exhausted, believing in love without knowing what to believe.  
You woke up in full recollection of sleep.  
and you took your turn, right at sunset.

You started playing the piano,  
And between notes, I heard you say:  
"If I knew what was coming, I could warn the sun so that it would not stop  
shining."  
If it was like in the movies, I'd just stop breathing.

In time, I'll find a way to be eternal in your dreams.  
Because all the music goes away, cherry blue sweet works!  
There is so much noise.  
I want to walk and live to dream.

#### Dead Flower Statements

Midnight after midnight, I remember less and less of myself.  
But is the urge to love him still alive?



I immerse myself in their memories, which I try to make mine because I don't want to keep losing them!

How do I tell him to insist on making art out of me?  
creating a show? How do I get him to revive with me?  
If he just wants to forget, let me go as his eternal script.  
Without further ado, he gracefully fell to his feet.

More flowers in this alien place, so similar to Mercury.  
His funeral, my orange jumpsuit, his friend the clown, the bluebirds  
Was it a party the way he wanted it?  
He wanted to relive everything one more time.



#### **About the poem:**

*In this poem, Laila... a young woman with a brilliant personality, tells us about her grieving process, represented by her adventures with the dead boy, someone who meant a lot, and whom it is hard for her to let go.*

*The poem gives us a super-powerful notion of the human impulse, which surges with force trying to overthrow everything, even death. That which shines and calls us with passion cannot be defeated or modified by ignorance and denial. Likewise, it shows us that Human beings increase their strength by facing and accepting the truth.*

*Based on the theater script written by Jimena Yengle.*



Jimena Yengle is a 21-year-old multidisciplinary Peruvian artist, known for her novels *"Roma Enamorada"* and *"De Aquí a la Catedral"*. With poetry and visual artworks published in various international magazines and galleries, Jimena dedicates her time to Social Art, managing social artistic projects such as *"Art for Education"* (Girl Up) and *"Hey Lovely Soul"* (From Art to Heart Society).

# Pocket Full Of Potsherds

**By David C. Crowther**

I am sad, because I love this beautiful and broken world:

the sentinel trees, gripping the ground and reaching for sky,  
the furtive, furred animals, peering from shade, leaping and running,  
All that crawls and hides, jointed stick-legs and multiple outsized eyes,  
armored scurrying among the leaf-litter,  
the quirky weather, the moods of wind, the anger of thunder and the surprise  
blinding of lightning,

And all the ways that I encounter water:

falling, running, trickling, laughing, gamboling, sitting and shining,  
sweetness and wildness and anger all day long, endlessly

I weep, because I love this beautiful and broken world:

Its multi-hued, earth-toned people,

The round-faced baby, unguarded eyes wide,

Singing anguish, cooing simple, unworded joy and wonder;

The incessant curiosity of children, questioning deeply the simple for-granted  
(why?);

The dewy eyed, knock-kneed, crotch-rocked confusion of adolescence, fits  
and starts, raging and roiling, jumping and sitting, closed first, then wide open  
The striding adult in waning ego, the curtain closing and time to go home- but  
to where?

The aged porch rockers, the bitter intertwined ones, the warmth of cooking  
and ample bosoms, of "grandma's hands"

I scream, because I love this beautiful and broken world:

The shadowed fear, slinking beneath the climbing ivy,  
Outside the child's window  
Obscuring the woman's face  
Wrapped around the man's throat.  
The blind-eyed smiles  
The glad hands  
The back slaps  
The "she's in a better place now" sayers  
The tyranny of small minds, making gollums of all our fears  
Churching our beliefs to more and more wretched shame-faced masks  
The homewreckers we are in our terrorized hearts—fearing, above all else,  
Love:  
Which we cannot own, which we do not understand, and which coaxes us out  
of shadow: come into the light dear ones . . .  
I love that too.

I raise my hands and open my palms because I am this beautiful and broken  
world—weep with me, laugh with me, make love with me—you are too.



## David C. Crowther

David C. Crowther is a single dad of two teenage boys, living in Buffalo, New York. He holds degrees in law and social work but/and is currently on a one-year break from any sort of corporate or typical employment, focusing instead on writing and painting, and hoping to find a way in this crazy life.



# Healing

**By Ved Prajapati**

Losing himself, he found peace of mind.  
Finding the solutions, with the worries left behind

Losing his smile, he found the tears.  
In finding the right path, he forgot his fears.

Losing the charm in his eyes, he found the good  
Finding the reality of the world, he did what he should.

No doubt he fell, his own people were with him every single time.  
Telling it's okay to be sad sometimes

He is thankful to everyone that mattered.  
Thankful because they were there when his life shattered.



## Ved Prajapati

Ved Prajapati is a self-made poet currently studying in the 12th standard. Ved started writing poetry in class 8 while he was doing this along with his studies. He comes from a good background.

# Memory

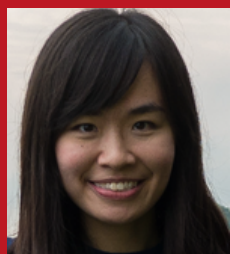
**By Hui Wen SEAH**

Memory, this little girl, scuttles  
to the playground of my childhood  
of dog poo buried deep in sand  
and a see-saw out of balance from Dad  
sitting on the other end; Dad is also sitting  
on the machinist's workshop bench by day  
and on the taxi driver's seat by night.

Memory, this young woman, flusters  
as Dad fumbles through the wardrobe to find  
a dusty suit for my college graduation  
shakily fiddles with a second-hand digicam  
to memorialize pictures of his child thanking him on stage  
an unexpected last in the time of his life.

Memory, this ageing woman, walks  
past the corridors of the ICU, past the MRT stations  
between work and ward, past the double-decker buses  
for cold and late nights home; and then I am carrying Dad  
as a passport photo in my purse, as he carried me  
in his sturdy arms, a lifetime ago.

Memory, when she finally is no more, when  
I see Dad again face to face  
we will start on a journey to places far  
and new, and continue this history of our time.



Hui Wen SEAH is admitted to the Singapore Bar and works as a legal counsel. Her memoir titled “A Pair of Black Shoes in Hougang” has been anthologized in “Once Upon A Place: 8 Singaporean Memoirs” published by Helang Books and launched at the Singapore Writers Festival in 2022.

# Beneath The Warm Embrace

**By Overcomer Olajide**

As the sky unfurls its eternal flame,  
Summer kisses the earth with burning passion,  
And the earth smiles like a newly wedded bride,  
In radiant hues of green.

With vibrant dreams unfurling from hairy buds,  
And sun-kissed butterflies perched atop petals,  
The trees reach skyward, brushing the blue veil,  
Waving their leaves to summer's melodic tale.

The dove builds her nest upon twigs,  
Adorned with vines and pomegranate,  
Piercing her beak into succulent flesh,  
As the taste of summer lingers on.

The sun descends into the heart of the sea,  
Where seagulls gather, riding golden streaks,  
Their wings outstretched, gliding in harmony,  
In the whistling gentle breeze.



Overcomer Olajide is a Nigerian poet. She is passionate about writing and has been gaining experience for a year. Her hobbies include reading novels, listening to music and admiring arts. Her pen name is DUT.

# Springtime In Albuquerque

By Danielle Kangleon

arrows,  
which once  
pierced  
souls  
with high regard  
evolve,  
into  
powdered snow  
caressing the  
body,  
until  
it  
dies,  
melts,  
and  
becomes  
whole  
once  
more.



Danielle Kangleon is a 24-year-old writer who spends her days studying meticulously for her nursing board exams, while juggling her passion for writing. Kangleon has recently won the 2023 CESAFI Essay Writing Competition while studying abroad in the Philippines; she looks forward to earning more awards and getting more of her work published soon.

When she's not stressing over her next test, she's most likely whipping something up in the kitchen or playing fetch with her dog, Valentine.



# Hey Farmer Farmer

**By Katie O'Connor**

Every morning at 6 O'clock we hear the long  
low whistle of the train,  
rattling the china teacups stacked on top of each other,  
breaking the silence of the night.  
There are no more morning songbirds.

Instead, we turn on the radio and  
sing along to Joni's song,  
a classic 70s hit  
with a hazy shade of retro,  
making it easy to forget.

The body of a young robin lays on our front porch,  
Our cat sniffs the frigid fragile form and walks away.  
It is of no use to her now,  
they aren't fun when they aren't prey.

I used to watch the feathered faces  
outside of the window by the sink.  
As I washed crab apples,  
mishappen, pocket-sized,  
grown in our own backyard.  
I miss chuckling at the little beak-sized bites  
taken out of them by innocent mothers.

The kids loved the apple tree, swatting away bees while picking.  
Now it is better to stay inside,  
to flip through the soft worn pages of  
birdwatching books.

You can't see or taste the spray,  
but you can hear it,  
the hiss of a monstrous machine  
spreading windex through wheat fields.

And you remember what it sounded like  
when music filled the air.



Katie O'Connor (she/her) is an emerging settler writer from Calgary, Alberta and living in Edmonton, Alberta. She is pursuing her bachelor's degree in the combined honours program at the University of Alberta, studying Art History and English. Katie's poetry will be featured in the forthcoming Ink Movement 2023 anthology and the debut issue of Rainbug Poetry Review, "Lua." Her short speculative horror story, "Jack and Jill," is published in the *Voices of the Dead* digital zine. When she is not working with *The Gateway* newspaper showcasing the vibrant local arts scene in Edmonton, Katie spends her time traveling, which fuels her work, challenges her perceptions, and enriches her perspective.

# If My Bio Was Honest

**By Kate Bonnett**

Kate Bonnett lives in a near-constant state of overwhelm, usually half-hidden underneath a blanket.

(She would live under a blanket permanently if such a thing were socially acceptable).

She spends her time crocheting and wondering if she is living up to her potential,

(or if she, in fact, even has any potential,

and trying to remember who said she did in the first place, and why anyone believed them).

The crochet part was a lie.

Kate Bonnett still remembers every tree she has ever loved,

and sometimes wonders how they're doing, and if there is anyone else who loves them now.

Kate Bonnett is great at believing inanimate objects have feelings. She feels guilty every time the stuffed elephant falls off her bed in the middle of the night.

She feels sorry for all the unread books on her shelf.

She is currently crying over a sock.

Kate Bonnett doesn't know how to write a bio.

She still hasn't figured out how to be both impressive and honest.

Kate Bonnett wants you to think she's cool,  
which is likely proof that she really isn't.

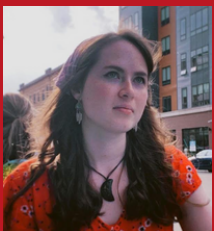
She definitely showed this to her sisters so they could tell her if it sounds stupid.

She doesn't really trust her own judgement of what sounds stupid.

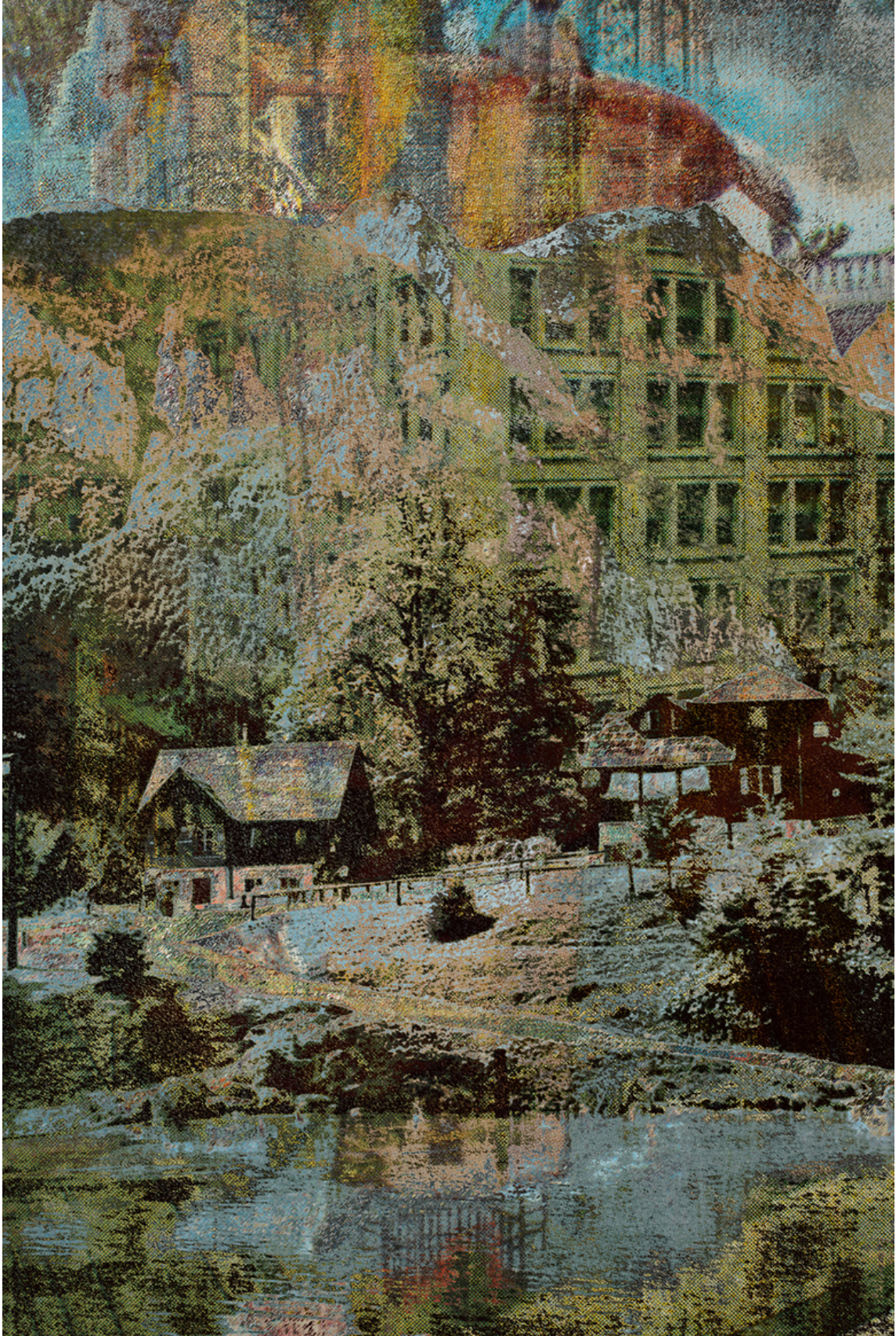
She doesn't really trust her own judgement.

Kate Bonnett secretly worries she is more Mary Bennet than Elizabeth;  
Not a lighthearted, witty heroine,  
Just a bundle of awkward intensity, clunking out a tone-deaf piano ballad in  
the middle of a party, hoping someone is listening.  
Kate Bonnett hopes you're listening.

Are you listening?



Kate Bonnett is an Australian writer, actor, and recovering navel-gazer. She currently lives in Minneapolis, where she spends her time making coffee and covering things in glitter. You can find more of her writing at [@katemarigoldpoetry](https://twitter.com/katemarigoldpoetry)



## **Magicians Are Smug & I Hate Them**

Paris Triantafilou

Materials: Digital print

Dimensions: 27x18"

Created in 2022

## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

An enchanting landscape digitally constructed by mashing fourteen scanned postcards together. Inspired by the artist's love of old, printed materials, this piece aims to explore the paper qualities and textures of vintage postcards.



Paris Triantafilou is a designer and visual artist from Lexington, Kentucky. She's currently a senior at the University of Kentucky majoring in Digital Media Design. The works she loves to make are fueled by humor and nostalgia. She often uses vintage printed materials as inspiration in her work. Paris is proud of her ability to connect with her viewers through her art, and she loves hearing the stories and memories her pieces evoke in

others. Her work is a celebration of the past, but also a reflection of the present, as she continues to explore new ways of using vintage materials to create something truly unique.

# Wallflower

**By Isaiah Janisch**

Lonely and forgotten,  
I look out the window.  
Sad, droopy, almost rotten.

The last thing on your mind.

Once you cared for me;  
your attention--mine.  
I guess I'm no longer worth it.

I'm missing the days you'd quench my thirst.

I want to go on--  
without you, I can't.  
So here ends the life

of your once loved  
house plant.



# The Ecstasy of Goldfish

**By Isaiah Janisch**

At his hip,  
hung a metal revolver  
worn out from years of use.  
Standing, waiting  
for the chance to fire it again.

He stared down his mortal enemy.  
No other  
than his brother  
with snot running from his nose.

His horse stood still,  
with a plastic look,  
like a stick  
tied to the fence.

Silence everywhere;  
but the small brush  
of a tumbleweed  
blowing by.

The summer sun  
beat down  
on him and his menacing foe,  
facing each other one-on-one.

His brother yelled,  
"Draw!"



But the battle was interrupted  
by another call.

“Lunch time,” mother said  
from inside the house.

So the brothers went in instead of fighting it out.



Isaiah Janisch is a writer and poet out of Evansville, WI. His work has been published in numerous literary journals and trade magazines, like *Digging Through the Fat* and *InspiredPlay*. He also worked as an editor for the *Rock River Review* literary journal. Outside of traditional publishing, Janisch founded the Instagram page [@plaza.of.poetry](#), a collection of poems that explore liminality and cultural transition in the world.

# For My Eyes Only

By Kia

I stood between two,  
The winds of change chose on my behalf,

Perhaps had I not been there,  
I could live life without a care

Maybe had I not been  
Then I wouldn't have seen.  
Why does everyone go on with their life  
As I dwell in pain and strife?  
He discoloured my stripes, my light no longer bright.

If I were a different girl,  
In a different world.  
A small factor changed, a little curl on the back of my kinky hair.  
My eyes would not be empty, as the waves crash around me.  
The wear and tear of yesteryear.

For my eyes only.  
For a life of the lonely.  
For me to suffer coldly.

For her to break slowly.  
For her to never be wedded in matrimony.  
For her unholy testimony.  
For her to be his trophy.

For her to lay alone remotely.  
For her to speak out boldly or for her to whisper slowly.  
For her eyes only.

For my eyes only.



Kia is a Tanzanian-American artist whose focus is primarily on filmmaking, but enjoys the artistry of poetry. Although a novice in poetry, her films have been awarded and performed in festivals across the world; notably her home country of Tanzania at the 10th Annual Zanzibar International Film Festival as well as nominations in the British Royal Television Awards for her work as a University Student.

# Saving Whispers

**By Shreyansh Raghuvanshi**

Then I heard some whispers/ whispers of solitude. In this bizarre market of false faces/faces of humanity painted with lingering flaws. The whispers were quite trusty/ full of pangs of the world and its cruelty. Chasing me around silently where he blew those golden words/ words of humanity, serenity, kindness, etc.

Aloof was I sitting when he attacked my ears/ears which were all rotten from hearing people's voices/ voices of cruelty, disparity, and abuse/ enough to create holes of torture. The torture that the brain offers/is a gift for torturing him/overthinking Folley. The reason you think on the things you think for the sake of the soul/ why don't you follow the whispers?

It's midnight when the moon becomes your dearest one/ To put out your grieving heart/ the only one possessed by the devilish spirit of the world. Worn out Soul hangs himself for trusting those chameleons/snakes are better to pet. High on will/again ignored those whispers of solitude.

The things one day or another kept on crawling/ the thoughts to die. Die of living in hell/masked people/hugging with a dagger of love and companionship.

Too many friends to syndicate/too Many people to be friends with/ were thoughts before oldies shaved my head of memory.

The whispers were true "Run run from humans, there are no more humans/where solitude is bliss/ forever"

Let me follow you with this tired soul and lethargic body with marks and scars all over the heart/the stitches were all cut-open again.

The only word luring/ ~truth~ false/ was this world and its people. Selfish, greedy, cynical and what to say more/how naive was I to fall into the trap?

Oh! Let those whispers take me with them/  
Better late than never.

On a scale of reality where extroverts are thought to be better/ let me sink into the ocean of aloneness taking the Mark of the biggest introvert.

Then I heard some whispers/whispers of celebration joy and happiness/ "A tranquil bath you took will serve lifelong serenity on the Plates of love and care of oneself.



## Shreyansh Raghuvanshi

Shreyansh Raghuvanshi is a young writer/poet aiming to change the world's perspective via his words and poems. He started writing at the age of 17 and also holds the perk of being published as a co-author in various anthologies by various publishing houses both nationally and internationally.

Instagram handel:-@\_scrivener\_\_

# Death Of A Calf

**By Ripley Crow**

the late summer calf  
gazed with big, round open eyes  
at the beginning of the new day-

its dark brown, newborn hair  
belied its wisdom and awe

behind its perfect, intact head,  
its body was a strand of carcass  
and a pile of legs with tiny hooves  
on the road's shoulder-

the sunrise  
was breathtaking!

## Ripley Crow

Ripley Crow began writing as a child. Ripley graduated from Southwest Minnesota State University with a BS in ELA Education. Published in Train River Anthologies, 365 Days of COVID and Last Leaves Magazine, Ripley grew up in rural Minnesota and continues to live in Minnesota with a spouse and two children. Ripley writes poems because they demand to be written. @poetwhispers28



## Sneak Peek To Reality

Zhen Prado

## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

"I have come to lead you to the other shore; into eternal darkness; into fire and into ice." - Dante.

Smoke and scenery collide harmonizing with the noises from each direction shackled in their very own space, no one can elude from a society full of these neverending chases.

Force yourself to adopt or you'll get the chop, withered inside telling different stories from the outside.

Every day it's a new stream, screaming for a new theme—tea for their scream.

You've got to point out what's your team.

Existing not living, escapism is my coping mechanism, dying to foresee my future a tale of what's written.

Millions of times I have tried to crack the code, yet it was answered and morphed into a new legend, hop like a toad.

Living in a trance is a new faith, it is there where you can wander and be sure everyone, and everything is not making a mistake. Locked.

We are all puppets of our very own making. I was rhyming to the rhythm.

Settled in the niche of the moment, the soul wanted to convulse out of this world. Trying to forsake itself from living, in the limbo that was given.

Every glitch I have witnessed, to be a witness, is not to forgive, forbidding myself to believe.

Dying each time I try to seize, squeezing every time I breathe, my heart painted with scars and bruises, and now I'm still fighting for peace with my mind that would not go at ease.



Zhen Prado is a 22 years old registered artist and writer on National Book Development Board in the Philippines and a graduating Psychology student. He posts most of his art on his DeviantArt: 18shi, and poems, short stories, opinions, etc. on Commaful: The Wandering Soul. He also has a Facebook page: Arts of Zhen, where he takes a commission.



# Dreams

**By Elizabeth BJ**

My aunt often dreams her dad lives in a wood cabin at the foothills of mountains with snow on top, next to a blue lake with ducks, like the one in his hometown. She told me this once she saw a drawing I made of a cabin with a big street lamp next to it. She told me it's her favorite pace to dream with. She doesn't know I draw the streetlamp first, in the image of the one in the alley where my grandparents' house once stood. I say stood because she and her sister tore it down to build two houses, one next to the other, with complex modern architecture, three sets of stairs, and minimalist color pallets; in opposition to the sunburned yellow house with a big window that stared at the bigger garden, with trees and grandma's flowers, in opposition to the rooms, pasted one next to the other without order of any kind, one green sunken into the dark, with the same kind of door as the kitchen, saloon door hinges, one upstairs the same kind of yellow but without the sun's input on the color, one on the other side of the house maroon, the only one with a balcony, all those are gone. And my

grandpa's too. And she dreams of a house printed out of another I once witnessed, but that could have never stood against time. They had too many children, the garden was too much wasted space for busy lives. But what I liked most about that first old house, was the flowers that reached the large window, green and then orange and pink. The one's my grandma sang about. The old song to make me stop crying. But what I liked the most about the garden was the parking space. Almost always full of trinkets and on the middle of the white wall a sun and a moon made of blue, made of her hometown craft. But what's the point of remembering? it doesn't bring anything back. And I never dream of myself in the house, nor I dream with my grandparents, nor I dream with the flowers or the stars, nor I have found the song in spotify on the right pitch. And I don't plan to build a house with a garden on an alley in a small town to live in. What I'm saying I guess, is that I just draw streetlamps for fun. What I'm

saying is that I dream of this girl that walks me home, even if it's raining, and we pass through her house first. I dream of my cat waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs when I open the door to my apartment. I dream of this boy who dances with me, even if I make fun of his wildest moves. I dream of the walks I take my dog on and the people I cross and that still choose to stop and catch on, because once we connected. I dream of the songs we blast in the car together. I dream of the dream we

share once. I never dream of places that are going to crumble in time. And one day when she gets tired of walking and leaves me at her front door, and one day when my cat and my dog die from old, and he takes dance lessons, and we stop having the same music taste, and our dreams go in different directions, I will keep dreaming about people, then new people, and not houses, never houses. I don't have a favorite place.



Elizabeth BJ is a Mexican writer in her early twenties. She's in process to get her Bachelor's in English language and literature at UNAM and has published poetry, short fiction, articles on entertainment, opinion pieces and critical essays on various online publications both in English and Spanish. You can find links for everything at @cazandocolibris both on Instagram and Twitter, or

at [cazandocolibris.carrd.co](http://cazandocolibris.carrd.co)

# Showbiz

By Annie Earnshaw

Bess was tired of being lonely, which was ironic because she never got a moment to herself. She woke every morning at seven, shrugged on a colorful dress and pinned a brooch to her cardigan, then took the subway uptown to teach art at an elementary school for the six-year-old heirs of the Upper West Side. After getting splattered with water-based acrylic and having her fashion sense critiqued by a kid whose sneakers lit up, she cleaned the entire studio, then took the subway back downtown. She climbed the four flights of stairs to her apartment, swore under her breath that her next place needed to have an elevator, replaced her teacher clothes with an oversized sweatshirt and a pair of full-coverage underwear, and tied her shoulder-length hair in a bun at the nape of her neck. Janie, her roommate and best friend from college, was dangerous in the kitchen, so Bess made both of their dinners. Pasta, quesadillas, something easy that required no more than one pot or pan. Once they were both fed, Janie poured herself a glass of red wine and parked before the TV

to watch whatever reality show was on that night. Bess popped a melatonin, poured some lavender oil into her diffuser, and was asleep by nine.

Janie was the one who first suggested Bess do something other than teach snotty little gremlins and pick paint out of her hair.

"Here," Janie said as she pulled Bess's phone out of her hand and downloaded Tinder on Bess's phone. It bothered Bess how brash Janie could be, not that Bess would ever say anything. They coexisted well, filling in the places around the apartment where the other was deficient.

When the app was downloaded and Janie had put in Bess's email and standard password, Janie dropped the phone back into Bess's lap before picking up her glass of wine and relaxing back on the couch. "Pick a couple photos, tell the men a little about yourself, and find someone you wouldn't mind boning."

"Janie!" Bess shouted, turning off the screen and flipping it over. "I

don't have time to bone anyone." She said bone quieter than the rest of the sentence like one of her kindergartners was within an earshot.

"Sure you don't. What are you doing this weekend?"

"Resting," said Bess. She needed lots of rest time and had a myriad of personality tests identifying her as an introvert to present as evidence.

"Screw resting," said Janie, draining the rest of her glass and immediately filling it back up. "Start filling out the profile."

So Bess did. She originally wrote Bess as her first name, but changed it to Elizabeth after a moment of thought. Her given name was more mature. She picked her five interests from the long list: cat lover, coffee, baking, mental health awareness, and gardening. It frustrated Bess that she couldn't pick more than five. As she scrolled down the list, she kept seeing more and more things that she liked. Volunteering, activism, tea, DIY, picnicking, board games, yoga, Disney; she wanted her matches to know everything. It felt impossible to boil down her identity to a curated set of traits.

She considered switching one of her five interests for "art," but didn't see the need. She liked art, but spent so much time elbow-deep in glitter glue

and salt dough that she didn't want her daytime profession to carry over into after-hours.

After putting in her location, preferences, and a few good pictures from last summer's family beach vacation, she activated her profile.

"It's ready," Bess said, poking the outside of Janie's thigh with her foot.

Janie scooted to the other side of the couch and rested her chin on Bess's shoulder as the first guy came up. Anton, 28.

"He's cute," said Janie, scrolling through his profile. "Cute, but short. And a finance guy. He seems like the type who'd mansplain what the DOW means on your first date. I'd swipe left."

"That means he'll go away?" Bess asked, biting her top lip with the entirety of her bottom jaw.

"Yeah, but he doesn't seem like your type. You want him to go away."

Bess hesitates, her thumb hovering over the screen.

"Why aren't you swiping?" Janie asked, looking at Bess like she was short-circuiting.

"I can't do it," Bess moaned, her head dropping back onto the

top of the couch cushion. "He's a person, you know? It feels so gross to judge him based on a few pieces of information."

"That's the point," Janie said, picking up the phone and holding it out to Bess. "He chose how he wanted to present himself. He's going to be ruthless, and you need to be ruthless right back. This is the jungle, Bess."

That seemed like an overreaction. Bess didn't want to be in the jungle. She wanted a nice guy with kind eyes, maybe a funky pair of glasses, who'd go on picnics in Washington Square Park with her and understand when she needed to spend a night in after a hectic week at school. She wanted to fast-forward through the awkward stages of dating, being on the prowl, and get right to the sweet stuff. Grocery shopping together and making waffles in their underwear. Bess wanted to be known without someone having to get to know her.

And when she really thought about it, Anton, 28, away didn't seem like the kind of guy who'd be interested in picnics and early morning half-naked breakfast. He probably had his groceries delivered and only cooked when he was trying to impress someone. All of these projected traits irritated Bess, so she finally put her

thumb to the screen and swiped his picture away.

"Well done," said Janie, patting the top of Bess's head before returning to the other side of the couch and picking up her glass of wine.

Bess quickly discovered that Tinder was addictive. She forgot to take her melatonin on time, which meant she couldn't take it at all or risk being groggy and generally useless the next morning. Even with a heavy amount of lavender oil slicked on the insides of her wrists and under her nose, sleep continued to evade her. Naturally, she picked up her phone (even though she knew good and well that blue light was toxic to a regular sleep schedule), and scrolled through another batch of suitors.

For the first hour or two, Bess rarely swiped right. Jackson, 24, wrote in his bio that dating him was "the best thing ever," and Bess was immediately turned off by his cockiness. Benjamin, 23, described himself as a "real sword guy," which meant he was either obsessed with his penis or owned an actual sword. Joe, 26, had only pictures of himself with other women, most of whom

were lithe and tanned and clutching a garnished cocktail. Bess was so opposite of all of those things, and she wouldn't even know what to do with one of those drinks if it were handed to her. Was she supposed to eat the garnish or not?

Eventually, she found someone worth a right swipe. Evan, 26, less than a mile away. His interests included non-fiction literature, craft beer, and environmental activism. He worked for the registrar at The New School and wore wiry glasses that made him look like a professor. He looked like the kind of person who would kiss her on the cheek as they said goodnight at the door to her apartment building, charming and gentlemanly.

Bess quirked her lips to one side of her face (a nervous habit that made her a terrible liar) and swiped right, only to be disappointed when Evan and she didn't match.

"It's okay," she said aloud to herself. "Maybe he needs time to match back with you."

After getting her first right swipe out of the way, Bess slowly lowered her standards. Anyone who seemed halfway decent earned a right swipe from her. She matched with a few guys, but didn't make any first moves. It was almost three in the morning, and she

didn't trust herself to make any romantic advances at that hour. She turned off her notifications, set the phone face-down on the nightstand, and dropped her head onto her pillow for a night of patchy, insufficient sleep.

Bess slept late and didn't get into school until right before her first class arrived, so she dropped a couple buckets of crayons and a stack of white computer paper on each table and instructed her kids to free-draw. She'd be a day behind on the curriculum, but she didn't care. She'd figure it out later in the semester.

By her planning period at eleven, Bess had four messages. Kyle, 26, sent her a picture of Obi-Wan Kenobi saying "hello there," which made Bess nervously chuckle. Nathan, 24, said heyyyy girl, and Bess immediately deleted him from her list of conversations. Far too many Ys and not enough punctuation for her taste. Craig, 27, asked what she was doing that night, and since Bess did not want to be a booty call, she deleted his conversation as well.

That left Brandon, 25. He wrote *Hey, Elizabeth! How would*

*you spend the perfect day?*

Once Bess remembered that she'd put Elizabeth on her profile instead of her nickname, she realized how much she liked his opening line. He had an appropriately placed comma, a thought-provoking question, and expressive punctuation.

She typed out her response.

**Bess:** Hi, Brandon! What a great question. How I spend the perfect day would depend on the season. If it's autumn or spring and the weather's lovely, I'd want to have a picnic in Washington Square Park and bring like \$50 to randomly tip a street performer we really like. If it's summer or winter and we need shelter, I'd go to an art museum (maybe the Met if we go on a weekday so there aren't a ton of tourists) or maybe the library. When I was a kid, I used to love going to the library and sitting between the shelves with a giant stack of books.

She stopped before she hit send. Was that too detailed? In each scenario, she assumed that they'd be partaking in this perfect day *together*.

**Bess:** Hi, Brandon! What a great question. I'd spend the perfect day visiting a park, art museum, or library. I

equally love all three :) What about yourself?

She inhaled quickly as she hit send, then realized she'd meant to add on that he could call her Bess instead of Elizabeth. But the message had already sent and she didn't want to be the clingy Tinder girl who overtexts, so she just let it go.

Bess and Brandon talked for another three days before he asked her out. After Bess mentioned that she minored in Acting in college, Brandon said that he had a friend who was in an off-Broadway production of *Macbeth*. Bess accepted, and Brandon said he'd get them tickets for Saturday.

Bess normally would've been startled by the fact that Saturday was only two days away, but she strangely wasn't. She had a nice dress in her closet that she could wear to the theatre, maybe dress it up with a pair of big earrings and an updo to make her look refined. Brandon didn't seem like the kind of person who'd get caught up on materiality. The best word Bess could think of to describe him was chill. He was enthusiastic without being tacky, intelligent without

being a know-it-all. A patron of the arts without thinking he was better than people who weren't patrons of the arts. Well-connected without pretention.

When their date finally came, they agreed to meet at the theatre just in case he was a mass murderer. As Bess took the subway uptown, Brandon texted and asked what she was wearing. She panicked at the thought of him getting off on the image of her, riding the subway in some skimpy get-up, but realized he probably was asking so he'd be able to find her in the crowd. Bess responded that she was wearing a green dress, and asked what he was wearing. Brandon liked her message, but didn't respond. Bess didn't know what to think of that, but it made her nervous.

Bess spotted him from the corner because he was standing under the marquee with a bouquet of daisies. He saw her too, and they maintained eye contact as she approached.

"Elizabeth?" Brandon asked as she walked up, pointing at her with the flowers.

"That's me," Bess said with a squinty smile as Brandon handed her the flowers. She leaned in to smell them, noticing that they didn't smell like anything. "They're lovely."

When they got to the entrance

of the theatre, the usher looked at Bess with a critical eye. "No flowers, ma'am."

"Oh," Bess said, looking bashfully down at the bouquet and then up at Brandon. "Should I..."

Brandon shrugged and gently took them out of her hands. "Throw them away, I guess."

Bess was a little irritated that he hadn't had the forethought to consider that she wouldn't be able to take the flowers in the theatre, but quickly stopped herself. His intentions were sweet; that's what she needed to focus on. "We could leave them outside and pick them up on the way out."

Brandon looked to the usher for confirmation, but she just looked annoyed that they were backing up the line. Not that it was much of a line; there were only three people behind them.

Brandon set the flowers on the sidewalk before showing the usher their tickets and heading inside.

The theatre was so tiny that every seat was within spitting distance of the stage. The seats themselves were barely big enough for Bess; she had no idea how Brandon, who was at least eight



inches taller than her, looked so comfortable.

"Sorry about the flowers," Bess said just for the sake of saying something. "It was a really sweet gesture."

"Why are you apologizing?" he asked.

Bess went to bite her upper lip, reverting to the chronic underbite she'd had when she was little, but tensed her jaw and stopped herself. "They might get stolen or something."

"They're just flowers," he said with a casual smile before moving on. "You ever seen Macbeth before?"

Bess tensed up as he said the title. There was a superstition that saying the name of the Scottish play inside a theatre would wreak havoc on the production. One time in college, she was watching Janie rehearse a monologue when Bess accidentally said Macbeth inside the theatre. Janie stopped what she was doing and yelled from the stage that Bess needed to go outside and cleanse the curse from the theatre by spinning around three times, spitting over her left shoulder, and reciting a line from Shakespeare's works. Bess thought Janie was kidding, but Janie got that steel-toed look in her eye like she'd jump off the stage and drag Bess out by her collar if Bess didn't

willingly go herself.

Bess wanted to say something, tell him that he had to go cleanse the theatre like she had, but didn't. After having to ditch the flowers, she didn't want to draw any more looks from the usher outside. So she let it go, talked about how she'd studied acting in college, and said a silent prayer that the play would go on without a mishap.

Bess and Brandon kept exchanging pleasantries, talking about work and the weather, until the show started and the curtain lifted. The three old witches appeared with the crash of thunder and lightning, casting quick glances of light on the beginnings of a raging battle. The scenery was dark and gritty, trying too hard to be cutting-edge and ground-breaking.

When Banquo first appeared on stage, Brandon whispered, "That's my buddy," into Bess's ear. "He got us these seats."

"They're good seats," Bess said. They were; front row mezzanine. Bess could see the entire stage without straining her neck.

A minute later, Brandon leaned over and asked, "So how long have you lived in the city?"

Bess glanced over at him,

confused as to why he thought the middle of a scene was the time to ask an icebreaker question. "Three years," she said.

"You moved after college?"

Bess nodded and offered a tight-lipped smile, but he didn't get the hint.

"What brought you here?"

Bess tried to respond as quietly as she could; she didn't want to be one of those annoying audience members who didn't know when to shut up, even if her date didn't have the same tact. "My roommate's an actress and I got a teaching job in the city."

"She's an actress?" he said, more intrigued by the concept of her potentially-famous roommate than Bess herself. "Has she been in anything big?"

"No," Bess said, which was a lie. Janie did some voice work for a Nickelodeon show about kids who travel their world in hot air balloons and learn about the beauty of different cultures. Bess thought it was the network's attempt at teaching kids to not be little racists.

There was a brief intermission at the end of each act, which Bess thought was too much free time. If she were in charge, she would've done one ten-minute intermission after Act II and another after Act IV, or a fifteen-minute after Act III. Each time the curtain fell, Brandon and Bess went to

the concessions booth so he could get a beer on tap. The first intermission, he bought her a glass of white wine, which she didn't like but drank anyway.

Brandon's friend who was playing Banquo died during the third act. He was a generally good actor but dragged Banquo's final declarations to his son Fleance out so much that they lost a lot of power. Bess thought it was a pretentious, if evocative, choice.

During the third intermission, Brandon bought another beer and offered to buy her another cup of wine. Bess said yes; she needed something to do with her hands while they stood in the lobby and aimlessly chatted. They both seemed to be struggling to come up with what to say after spending the week getting to know each other through the filter of their phones.

As the lights flickered, Brandon looked at Bess from the lip of his cup and asked, "Do you want to leave?"

Bess's hand froze, her glass tipped halfway to her lips. "It's only the third act. We've got two more to go."

"I saw the rest of it a few weeks ago when it opened, and it's not that good. My friend's not even in

the rest of it.”

Bess considered leaving for a moment. They could call an Uber, finish their date somewhere else, maybe a cozy diner or his place. She could fulfill the rest of their date, which somewhat felt like it hadn't even started in the first place. If Brandon, who had a personal stake in the show's success, was willing to abandon it halfway through the night, then how likely was it that the audience members who'd come looking for an evening of entertainment actually stayed through the whole performance?

But she didn't want to leave. She pictured the actors backstage, touching up their makeup and shooting Red Bulls and Pixie Sticks to keep up their energy like she had when she was in college. She never made it past the ensemble, never had a strong enough presence to get any lead roles, but looking out into the audience and seeing empty seats that were previously filled stung like paper cuts all over her body. She'd always known it wasn't personal, that she was some measly background actor who was supposed to blend into the scenery. That fact never dulled the hurt, though.

“I'd like to stay,” Bess said with a renewed sense of confidence.

Brandon looked confused at this. “We're supposed to be on a date.

Together.”

Bess wanted to make some crack about how they might be on a date now, but they sure weren't headed for a second one. Instead, she held her tongue. She figured that Brandon knew how poorly the date was going.

“I want to stay,” Bess repeated.

Brandon sighed through his nose, then took a long swig of beer. “You really want to stay and watch the rest of this? I can't even understand what they're saying.”

“Yeah, I do.” Bess drummed her fingers on her cup, waiting for him to budge.

He downed the rest of his beer and tossed the empty cup into a nearby trash can. “Enjoy the rest of the play, then,” he said as he walked past her and headed toward the door. Bess watched him leave as the lights flickered again.

The performance had already resumed by the time that Bess found her seat. She stretched her legs out, enjoying the extra room as she watched the next act. Each time Macbeth killed someone, every light in the house flashed red like the murder was splattering blood over the audience. Bess had to give the production team points for creativity, but the after effect of

each murder came to be expected and repetitive. She couldn't seem to turn off the part of her brain that wanted to get her hands on the production and transform it into something better, more inventive.

Even with subpar material and overly dramatic delivery, the actress who played Lady Macbeth was pretty good. Bess pulled out her program and made a mental note of the actress's name, hoping she'd see her in a more reputable production soon.

At the end of the play, Bess collected herself and walked out of the theatre.

As she passed the door, she glanced over to see that the flowers were still lying there. She'd been half certain that someone would've come and taken them in the two hours they were inside the theatre. In her experience, discarded stuff didn't last long on the sidewalk.

Before walking out from under the marquee, Bess turned in a circle three times, spit over her left shoulder, and recited a line she'd always liked from *The Merchant of Venice*: "Fair thoughts and happy hours attend on you."



Annie Earnshaw is a writer, editor, and educator from Charlotte, NC. She has a BA in English from Elon University, where she completed a short story collection entitled *Six Ways to Say I Love You: Maternity and Young Voices* (2021). Annie's work has also been featured in *Allure*, *Carolina Muse*, and *The Merrimack Review*.



**Wing 1**

Rachel Coyne



**Wing 2**

Rachel Coyne



**Rabbit**

Rachel Coyne



## Nostalgia 1

Rachel Coyne



## Nostalgia 2

Rachel Coyne



Rachel Coyne is a writer and painter from Lindstrom, Mn. Her books include *Daughter*, *Have I Told You?*, *Whiskey Heart*, and *The Patron Saint of Lost Comfort Lake*.

# Sisters

By Rene Vasquez

The two of them, being sisters, never knew anything other than a deep love of differences. They were mirror opposites—one was dark, the other light. One was topped with blond curls, with skin translucent, the other, brunette, and olive-hued. One had eyes like sea glass, while the other's eyes were black and deep like discs of night. They thought themselves twins, though they were separated by nearly two years. But for them, this fact was not a barrier to their conceit. The connection they shared was like heads and tails, yin and yang, up and down, night and day. They spoke their own language, finished each other's sentences, and saw the same things lurking, not only in the shadows but also in the brilliant reflections of sunlight upon the polished steel surfaces of their mother's kitchen.

It had only been the three of them for so long, the sisters and their mother. Their father existed only within a small box containing one picture of him and a few scraps of paper on which he had scribbled fragmented expressions of his love for each of the two sisters. Every

night they would open the box and read aloud to each other the words their father had written, giggling and yearning for the day they might again feel their father's arms wrapped tightly around them.

How do we describe a life? Must it be a linear retelling of a person's journey from here to there? Or is it better told through fragments, like those in the box that held the sisters' notion of their father?

They would trace the cursive letters of their father's hand with their fingers, imagining how he looked, what he was thinking, as he wrote them. They arranged the scraps in different sequences, creating poems that were infinite in their possibilities. And all these poems were messages from their father; secret incantations across time and distance, beyond the misunderstandings and their mother's scornful rants.

Their mother kept stacks of letters,

bound and hidden. She kept them, and all the gifts and photos he had sent to them over the years, tucked away under lock and key. She never told them he had written, wanting instead to erase him from their memory. The girls wrote their own letters which their mother stacked, unopened, by the door; a constant reminder that he was nowhere in their lives. He was nowhere except in that little box which the girls protected and also kept hidden from their mother. They took it one afternoon when their mother wasn't looking. It was their secret, and as much as their mother tried to make him disappear, he would never go away, his presence would grow stronger, not just in the girl's hearts and imagination, but also in that house and in their mother's blood, coursing through her like gasoline, searching for a spark.

The sisters provide each other balance. They are finding their way in the world but are already beginning to detect certain obligations coming for them. They take turns trying on gowns of dark and light. They play dress-up before the mirror, making swords of chopsticks and licorice twists. They don't yet know which armies they will lead. It is a future still brewing, they try to read it in the leaves. They roll in meadows, they dig in the dirt. They step on ants; giddy in their murderous stomping.

They are my girls and I hover over them. I visit them through an act of concentration, carefully folding their world into mine. I am careful not to crease, or crumple, or tear. I need to enter and leave their world

as if I were never there, though my presence nonetheless seeps into their memory and they know I am with them, even through all these years of our separation.

The house they live in is populated with the future. It waits for them to catch up. The house they live in is occupied by ghosts who live beneath their mother's skin, feeding off the bitterness that saturates her flesh. I have had her skin pressed to mine and still feel the residue of her tragedy building in cysts below my skin. I roll them between my fingers as I think, occasionally forgetting that no matter how hard I squeeze, I will never be free of these reminders of her.

We lived together seventeen years. I sat upon the point of a needle as her storm raged about me. I spun around within the eye, trying to contain her damage. And I took the shape her storm defined. I lost myself in the swirl of her maladies.



My girls are storms of a different sort. They swirl and churn in waves of laughter and defiance of what little girls are expected to be. They leave a path of rebirth in their wake, bringing the dead things around them to life, though the littlest one keeps a small box of still dead things beneath her bed, a reminder of where we come from and to where we must return. The things within this little box keep me company while my daughters sleep. I occupy this box with beetle husks and crinkled leaves, bees and moths, and smashed berries of unknown origin. I am surrounded by sticks and pale lifeless flowers, bits of nests and eggshells, and shriveled worms. I may be a dead thing too but it doesn't matter to her, I am her father, dead or alive, and I will always be, even as she grows old and someday is a dead thing herself.

How am I not dead? Though I do occupy a space that seems to have me dead in some states and alive in others. But in the eyes and imaginations of my little girls, I am more alive than anything else. Even in my long absence the efforts of their mother to slowly make me disappear instead had the effect of enhancing my presence. In my darkest moments, when the thought of again holding them in my arms seemed more distant and impossible, their faith and

certitude of my presence held me within the grip of hope, and I too was, and am continually reborn in the wake of their magic.

The two of them inherited darkness from their mother and me. But it was a different type of darkness from each of us. Their mother wrestled with the demons and brought them forth. They roosted in the trees outside her house, bled beneath the doors and filled her spaces with their black thoughts. I too brought them forth but they came to me not to torment me but to embrace me with that part of their dark souls that still remembered light.

My girls, for all the pain that will come with it, are gifted with the capacity to dive deep into wells of darkness and emerge unscathed, and it is this that will serve them as they lead armies somewhere in the not far distant future.

There are messengers all about them, hidden in the darkness, hidden among books, and beneath the dead things the littlest one entombs in the box beneath her bed. They come from the future, from the light, and from the darkness. They are Minions and Cherubin sent from

both sides to observe these two who will inevitably one day engage them. And this is all that is written, all that is certain—that a battle will come and the two of them will lead it, but the conclusion is unknown, it is even out of God's hands, and God knows too, that he will not survive to see the outcome; his end will come in profound and irrelevant silence.

Did I know this before they were? Did I see it in the madness of their mother's terror that first time we drove through into morning, trying to keep the demons at bay?

It is time for me to open my eyes, it is time for luminescence.

Like the angels all gone mad...

I am a ghost, but also a man. I am both flesh and energy made manifest by the thoughts of my daughters. The three of us work in tandem to bring me to them.

None of this was my choice and I held it at bay as long as I could. But our children pushed against the door, wanting only what was on the other side. The two of them accept their fate because what is ahead of them is all that there is. They are always in motion even when they are still and the world

around them is always struggling to catch up. They have become the metaphysical center, they are the engine that drives the world, like a binary star—atoms fusing and exploding, continuous and forever...and the two of them orbit each other, and I, in turn, orbit them. We are a universe in the apparition of our will. Dust swirls about us, glistening in the light like tiny comets.

They play and dance. They finish each other's sentences in a language that is both beautiful and terrifying. They are good, and their goodness is like the atmosphere that encircles the delicate earth. They plant a garden, they tend to their inevitable future...

My girls ask me questions. They want to know things I cannot tell them. They wonder if they came from somewhere other than here. They know they carry something others don't but they are too young to feel it as a burden. They think it all as simply more; more to feel, more to unravel, more to explore. They love aggressively, even the dead things. They do this because they haven't learned not to. And they will never succumb to the pressure to fall out

of love with the world, even when they burn it down to bring it back to life, even when the armies that follow them trample upon the very things they currently love most.

It is never easy seeing the future.

It is never easy knowing innocence will suffer.

But I am fading; it takes so much to be here and I am feeling the strain of it for now. I take one last long look at them, breathe in that sweet and devastating scent only your own children have. I am fading and in a moment all that will be left of me is the swirling dust representing the movement of something that was once there but is no longer.

I wonder, if I had a voice, how I would use it?

Would I use it to call back to those behind me or to call forth to those ahead? Would I speak or simply roll the words around in my mouth, knowing I could use them if I wished to...

If I had a voice would I whisper the thing I have come to know or continue in silence and let the world simply become what it will become?

It is odd being neither here nor there; to “live” in a sort of undefined space, in an undefined form. My children conjure me through their will because they will not sanction the loss of me. If they let me go, I do not know where I’d be, I haven’t seen what is further beyond. But I will happily stay in this place as long as their gravity holds me here.

When we are together they ask me questions, thinking that where I am has given me access to the answers. They ask me why there is something instead of nothing or what happens to our soul when we die. I try to come up with answers, knowing no more now than I did when I still physically occupied the space where they are. They laugh when I can’t answer their questions, smiling as they tell me I have a much better attitude than their mother. This makes me feel good. Even in my current state, I am not above these small and petty victories. But more than this, in my current state, I see the poetry in things. Even in

the torrid envy of their mother’s rage, I see the faint residue of beauty—or a void where beauty once possibly had been.

The dream I had—ten months after the birth of one and eleven months before the birth of the other—was a dream of portent. It happened over the course of seven nights, it happened over the course of a lifetime. A dream may be a thing in itself, or it may be a condensation of small visions amassed over the course of a lifetime. Here were the visions of my girls in a future in which I was no longer with them. In the dream I watched the earth roll and fires igniting in every direction. I only witnessed but could not intervene. I watched my girls charge into the turmoil with swords drawn. It was a dream in a dream and I woke within it seven times.

When my girls and I come together they tell me stories of what I saw, explaining to me that it will all be ok—that it is simply the way it must be. They try to comfort me, knowing that though I try, I can't hide my fear. Because I can't touch them they give each other hugs pretending that it's me. They lower their voices and tuck in their chins, telling each other "I love you" in imitations of my voice, which leave us all laughing until we can barely breathe. And as they continue to laugh, and hug each other, and mimic my voice, I feel the cold rush of fear blow through the air that contains me.

But I am startled out of this reflection by the sound of their mother. She is fading and even when she enters the room I can barely make out the outline of her form and her voice sounds only like the growl of thunder in the distance. The girls mimic hugs in my direction then turn to their mother who has them scurrying to an activity of some sort. I linger in the space for a moment, I breathe in their scent and hold it in my lungs. I imagine this part of them, this faint essence, infusing every cell within me, I imagine them in my arms, I imagine any life other than this...

My girls know that time is not what it seems. They know they have done this before, that they are only layering, and weaving, and knotting together threads of moments. I know this also, it is why I appear to be alive when I am not. The three of us know that what seems to be magic is simply the recognition of those things that are invisible to others, things they do not notice. (they tell me this is a choice we forget that we have made). To them this layering of moments is the most natural thing. They run their plastic ponies and princess figurines through scenes of folding time,

where one moves from room to room as if flowing through history; like thread through a loom.

Once, I drove their mother away from her demons. They clawed and pushed against the doors and windows of her apartment. She called for me to save her and I knew that this was coming even before the phone rang. We drove through the night and waited for the sunrise to come on a bridge overlooking the highway. We caught the last shadows of her tormentors as they plunged, heaving with their failure, over the side of the bridge before the morning light could reach them. We can only be tormented by what is already inside us and the form of that torment is the terror of the realization of this. To protect her was to also absorb her terror, to absorb that very thing that welcomed these demons into her life, into her mind. And so I became the thing she hated, the thing she could not bear to recognize or hate within herself. And even as I protected her, all her instincts told her to destroy me.

But here is me; stepping daily off that cliff, and waking, thinking for a moment none of it was real; until the earth again gives way beneath me as I take another step into that recycling abyss. I did this every day for seventeen years,

fortified by the relentlessness of it all until my girls came into this world. When they arrived my fall was different. I began to feel like I was leaping into something rather than falling; that choice, and desire, and meaning had re-entered my life. I had a whole heart, or the beginnings of one, and that heart was connected to my mind—to my body, to my future. And I began to see—I remembered—that I was connected also to a story of how this all was and would be. And so I took this as a sign and I gave in and didn't fight it...

I remembered...

and if I were not a wheel what would I be? If I were not the curve of an orbit...

My girls and I meet shrouded in the protection of this whole heart. We meet in darkness, we meet in light. We meet to talk about the future they will inherit, we talk about the past that is a river running through them. When they ask me questions, I try to answer. When they ask me questions I hold my breath. My girls are fire and they are the soft end of longing. They will fight because they have no choice but they will also fight because they are bound by

ove and they will never bow to anything that is not also bound to love. My girls are the progeny of storms, they are the conflation of darkness and light. I tell them that I love them, they tell me that they know. They tell me I am their father even if, even when, I am dead. They tell me everything will be ok.

And so I am loved, if only from a great distance, and if only in memory and longing...

But so am I loved and it will always be; if, as my youngest tells me, it is simply how it must be.

Sometimes though, I imagine I will be forgotten; that the words of their mother will eventually reach and darken even the most secret places my children keep me hidden. I was a grown man when her words divorced me from everything that held me to anything that wasn't hers. But they, in spite of the future that already gestates within them, are only children and their mother is still for them a home of warmth and love, so why wouldn't they eventually give in when she tells them I am nowhere? I do not fight this either. I do not tell them not to listen. It is not my place to intervene. I must simply tend to my will to exist, to be manifest in their memories of both their past and their future. But what do I do if I forget? If

then, the walls would crumble and everything I protected would simply escape through the rubble as if it were never contained within those walls. If I forget...

If I forget, what is the cost? It will only be one man, growing old within the anguish of a void, unable to remember what once filled it. But perhaps there is a memory that creeps in and tells him of his loss. For those of us who are folded in time, we may also be subject to a single moment—a single memory folded over and over upon itself for eternity.

I wake.

I am startled to awareness and this cycle of loss is broken by another greater awareness of loss. It is the future poised at the edge of my breath, it is the battle call fading in the distance. I am immersed in the dust kicked up by horses, the ground quaking beneath the somber steel treads of tanks. Already the smell of flesh fills the air, already the flags are laid on the dead. Already my girls are thrusting their swords into the flowing celestial hordes.

My girls knew all of this was coming and though they did not blame me,

they knew I was the cause. But the earth will be renewed, cities will be rebuilt and children again will play and laugh without the burdens I left to my own children. If it was all worth it everything will be reborn...

Everything.

Everything.

except for god.



Rene Vasquez is an artist and writer. He is a mix of many things and generally occupies that liminal space in regard to everything. We are never just one thing, no matter how much we or the world would like us to be. Currently, he is in the process of attempting to unravel himself from all the things he thought he knew.

# Three Peoria Stories

By Robert Fromberg

## 1.

I wish everyone in the world would see the glorious photograph that accompanied the lead story on the Peoria Journal Star website this morning, Friday, September 16, 2022, posted at 4:06 AM, headlined as follows: "This is beautiful to me': Peoria native plans revitalization of Shar-Inn motel."

The photograph showed a man perhaps in his early 40s. His eyes squinted into what was likely a bright sun, his gaze was directed slightly to the right and above the camera lens, and his parted lips smiled in equal parts hope and determination, tempered by what I found myself interpreting as a sliver of fear.

The man wore a T-shirt of richly saturated red. Over the right breast in small, thin white capital letters was the name "Hightower," above which, also in white, was what may have been a delicate rendering of a castle.

The photograph, horizontally oriented, was composed so that the

man occupied the left third of the image, with the remainder dominated by what was in the background: an aggressively unexceptional building of washed-out tan with dark-brown trim, two stories, elongated, not quite house, not quite motel.

According to the article, the man's name was Greg Hightower. The article did not state Mr. Hightower's age, but noted that he was poised to retire from his position as a U.S. Navy recruiter, which suggested to me either a very early retirement, or a man whose joy of life had given him a youthful appearance. Nor did the article specify Mr. Hightower's current city of residence, but based on certain references I suspected that it was Houston.

However, as the headline stated, Mr. Hightower was a native of Peoria, and he planned to return to Peoria once he retired from the



Navy. And what Mr. Hightower planned for the Shar-Inn motel on 3615 W. Harmon Highway, which the author of the photograph's caption called "old and dilapidated," was breathtaking: a 24-hour restaurant, 15 luxury rooms that would help make Peoria a destination for business travelers, and shuttle service to an unspecified Chicago airport.

As I read, I pictured Mr. Hightower addressing his co-investors and his contractors and his construction crews with the same indefatigable energy he used to engage potential U.S. Navy recruits.

Mr. Hightower's quotes in the article certainly demonstrated this energy:

"When I walked into this place at 2 in the morning, I said this building was beautiful, I mean beautiful."

"We are going to level the floor, we are going to make it luxurious. Man, I can just see it."

"When we are done, you are going to walk in and be gasping."

Mr. Hightower told the reporter that he grew up 5 minutes away from this motel, "so why not?"

Finishing the article, I basked in its optimism. I, too, was returning to my hometown of Peoria after many years away (although I have already returned, whereas Mr. Hightower's return is imminent). I, too, looked forward to this project's result.

However, I admit to finding myself slightly troubled. My view returned to the photograph that adorned the article. At my age, close visual examination is no longer within the capability of my eyes, but something seemed wrong. The division between Mr. Hightower's figure and the background image seemed too sharp, unnatural, as though the photograph of the man was taken separately and superimposed on an existing photograph of the motel.



## 2.

When I visited the Peoria Journal Star website on Monday, September 26, 2022, I was surprised to see that the photograph accompanying the lead story was a familiar one.

It showed the man in front of the motel, smiling the same rather distant smile, as though he had not moved in the 10 days since the photograph first appeared.

The article's headline read, "Peoria native kills wife, then dies in shootout with deputies, Texas sheriff's office says."

The deceased couple was Greg and Takara Hightower. Mr. Hightower was described as a 2003 "grad" of Woodruff Community High School, a 19-year veteran of the U.S. Navy, recently a recruiter, and as the person who recently purchased Peoria's Shar-Inn at tax auction and planned to return to his hometown to rehabilitate and run the motel.

The Hightowers lived in Atascocita, Texas, about 18 miles from downtown

Houston. Law enforcement agents were at the home, talking with Ms. Hightower about a report of domestic violence, while Ms. Hightower held her child. Mr. Hightower arrived and, allegedly, shot his wife, who died, and a law-enforcement agent, who did not. Mr. Hightower fled by car to his mother's house. His mother called 911. More law enforcement officials arrived, resulting in a shootout in which Mr. Hightower died.

Although my family, with me included, likely drove past the Shar-Inn dozens of times, I have no memory of it. I had been looking forward to the renovated Shar-Inn perhaps sparking a connection between me and the original Shar-Inn, so that perhaps Mr. Hightower and I both would share the experience of comparing what was in our childhood with something even better now.



### 3.

My hand even trembled slightly when I put the book on the counter.

This book was a rather slim one titled *Do You, Part 1 of 4*. The cover featured a photograph of a man in dress military uniform, his folded hands resting on a table, an illustration of the American flag on the wall behind him, and a beautiful smile of hope and determination on his face. The author of the book was Greg Hightower.

*Do You* begins with these words in large type within quotation marks: "Each day is an opportunity to grow and get better." Those are all the words on the first page. The next page is in the form of a letter:

"Dear Peoria, Thank you for raising me and preparing me for life. When I left you, I went to another country for three years. I am not going to lie. I was

devastated. I was so used to being with you. I had no idea that everything you had been preparing me for was not going to be put into action.

"There is not a day that goes by that I don't think about you. I feel I have missed so much while being away. No matter where I have been in this world, I have always done my best to represent you and my last name as well. Every time I think about you, I think about the kids that you are raising now. And the impact you have on them. I just want to say thank you for not giving up on them. And thank you for not giving up on me. I love you and am so proud to call you home (tears).

"From: Your son, Greg Hightower"

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## Robert Fromberg

Robert Fromberg wrote the memoir *How to Walk with Steve* (Latah Books, 2021), which won a Next Generation Indie Book Award for memoir, and the story/essay collection *Friends and Fiends, Pulp Stars and Pop Stars* (Alien Buddha Press, 2022). He contributes regularly to the Los Angeles Review of Books. On Twitter and IG he is @robfromberg.



### **Stripes**

Cyrus Carlson



### **Sunflare**

Cyrus Carlson



### **Ruby**

Cyrus Carlson



## **Divide**

Cyrus Carlson



## **Cyrus Carlson**

Cyrus Carlson is an abstract painter from the Midwest.

# Motherless

By Ruchi Acharya

"I could never forget the feeling when I realized something was hidden inside me.

I have always wanted to feel you belonged to me, thus singing a lullaby every single night.

Heartbeats, your little movements, long-awaited nine months were something unforgettable.

Almighty heaven's creation.

All of a sudden everything is so different."

It was when the recent Jaipur bombing shook the world with a series of nine synchronised bomb blasts in May 2008. It was chaotic all around. An old autorickshaw carried a single passenger from Padampura to Jaipur covering 23 miles distance within an hour. The journey was itself Satan's solarium. As far as the eyes could see, everything was an unending plain of yellow sand dunes. A woman in her mid 20's was sitting inside the hot metallic autorickshaw placing her hand on her stomach and biting her lips against the hot wind. She was wearing a green

cotton Saree, covering her head with Ghunghat and matching bangles on her wrist.

It's been a long journey, to be precise-four months, there they were on their way, scaring her every day. However, she could feel that there were twenty fingers and toes. Today is the day when she will finally see the gender for the first time. The gender was important to her by all means.

Finally, she reached the Jaipur hospital. Now is the time. She peeped at the sonographic hazy imagery, a coalition of sonic pings projecting back to the computer screen. She could visualize shapes out of monochrome clouds. They float outstretching their limbs as if reaching for tomorrow. The anxiety of happiness was building up in that solitary movement. There's a genuine reason to be made that why she came all alone by herself.

The nature's laws have been overridden by the orthodox society. The greed to have a boy child was resulting in female infanticide quite often. The Dowri was a great burden to farmers. But this woman already made up her mind to bring these beautiful babies into this world. She ran away, far away from home.

Five months later.

On winter Solstice, she gave natural birth to twin daughters, followed by a ceaseless battle with pain and anguish, heart and bones unrivalled to the world's greatest strength. The two girls were given away naked and nameless to the light. She wishes for sympathy from her in-laws but there was no hope that they will accept the girls. Few days later, she returned back to her village Padmapura with empty hands.

One day while she was fetching water from well, a village woman asked her a forbidden question, upon which the mother replied, "I remember how they looked up at me with their little eyes as if to pierce through my soul. I know deep in my heart I couldn't have them. So, I gave them away to a Pundit, out of my wisdom to know if they are malignant or benign. I hope that they

are in good hands."

"Have faith, Meera. With Godspeed, they will be fine. You did the right thing. Anywhere is safe as far as they are away from this land of Rajputana. The common practice, female infanticide is such an infract sin. But nobody listens to the voice of the weak and fragile cry of babies. It's just the mother who has to live with the guilt throughout her life." said Geeta.

Meera exhales the filthy air of felony. Though it cannot be undone, she walks towards her Rajputana family, pot on her head and straight face like it never happened.

There was a mysterious dark forest, chartless, located on the outskirts of Padampura. There's a house made of wood. It stand still for over a century. On the entrance, you can see an encryption carved out on the wooden plank. It was a circle with a big star inside it. There were two eyes scorching with abhorrence peeping outside the window. Her skin was olive-coloured, cold and reptile-leather. She had facial hairs as tough as boar bristle with

lips that already lost their pigment. Additionally, she had a wart on her pointy nose, giving her whole face a disturbing view. Just like a Roman cryptid Abarimon, she had backward feet which were the last things to see. Her name was Evanora. Indeed, she was a cultist. She walks towards an empty cradle and took a glimpse. Her heart sank into the pool of helplessness. She closed her eyes and could feel the hunger of an infant. She covered herself with a long black veil called Burkha with very strange and unmatched boots. She headed towards the village when the clock strikes at 3 a.m. They called it Devil's Hour for a reason.

A few miles away there was a temple located on the top of a hill called Shiv Parvath. In the midst of spiritual rituals and prayers there stood a Pundit performing early morning Aarti (worship). The bald-headed man with a tangerine-wrapped Dhoti around his waist was swirling the fire lamps in front of Shivling. The Shivling was an egg-shaped structure, made of a black boulder and is considered the symbol of one of the most powerful gods in Hindu mythology, Lord Shiva. The naga was wrapped around the dark hue, enveloped with fresh flowers, incense

stick and ablazed camphor. The aroma was brilliant.

In the meanwhile, a small boy come to the Pundit and asked pointing towards the bell, "What's the bell for?" to which the Pundit replied cleverly, "The sound of the bell hung at the temple dome welcomes divinity and dispels evil."

Children and their never-ending curiosity leads the boy to ask Pundit another question, "Why do people visit a temple with different flowers for the same god?"

"Well, my dear son. Many devotees offered flowers for different purposes. For example, they used the flower named Dhatura for son, Lotus for assets, White oak for fulfilment of desires and Vitex negundo for purification of mind."

Before the boy could ask another question Pundit bids him farewell with Prasad (Holy water and sweet).

A turmeric Tilak, worn by devotees singing Bhajan with holy exuberance filled the stairs of the temple. Pundit joins his hands and with holy spirit ends the morning prayer. He headed



back towards his hut which was located in the neighbourhood. He was a poor man who lives a very simple life along with his beloved wife. The room reckoned two hundred square feet dorm enclosed with a solitary entrance. There was a ceiling fan and a bulb which were the only electrical appliances in the house. Pundit doesn't believe too much in inheriting a modern lifestyle and adopting new technology. He was a wise man with a big heart and a holy spirit. He looked at his wife breastfeeding Meera's babies. He waits patiently and within half an hour he carefully lifts up the two babies and named them Apsara and Laiba after the prettiest angels of heaven.

Everything was going well until one day Evanora come to know about the twin daughters. It was raining continuously, the Monsoon took its trail over the village. The pitter-patter of the rain yields a beautiful sound from the earth. But equally, the force of nature was destructive as well. The gentle wind soon begins to breed a storm inside. The rainwater and lightning blend together to give an unstoppable, raging storm. Poor Pundit sat along with his at the corner of the room over the bed. The living room which was a joint and open section of kitchen and bedroom

flooded with water. The baskets were floating and it became muddy all around. It was when a friend of Pundit entered their hut which was unlocked like always and warned them about the government's siren about flood. Pundit decided to go to their relative's place and stay there till the storm stop.

A shadowy creature was sitting on the top of Banyan Tree and was observing it all from her lusty eyes. The sky blue turned pale and the clouds were pouring saltless tears. Evanora was as crazy and chaotic as rain. While she was waiting for Pundit to come outside, her mind goes back in the time to the flashback.

The clock in its parody makes it mere changes with years. The swift darts of time hit the destination. Ten years before, Evanora came to India from London to study Philosophical Theology and religion study in the University of Delhi. She was a bright student. But she always dressed in dark, her darling dye. She was a snobbery person, a partisan of Marie Leveau. It was when the minx in the midst of flirting with an Indian gentleman noticed a girl in the

newspaper on the notice board. The headline said, "Three women burnt alive in the village of Kumankora who were suspected to be witches." It was the first time she came across the practice of witchcraft in India. For Evanora the idea of witchcraft was fun until one day it changes her life completely.

The luscious green was calling the wanderers into the forest of Kaziranga, a wildlife sanctuary in the Assam state of India. Evanora was there all by herself, breaking the rules and wandering on foot into the jungle. All of a sudden a guy appeared out of nowhere. He was tall and strange. The atmosphere was too romantic for them and ultimately Evanora fell in love. Poor Evanora was not aware of her fate. She doesn't realise that she was falling into a spider's web and there's no way to turn back. The mysterious boy takes her to places she has never been. He made her join several occultist groups throughout the relationship. Evanora practiced black magic, sorcery and get to know about the secret societies. Love was blind and so does Evanora. One night while Evanora was setting up the base to perform satanic worship, she along with her boyfriend was caught red-handed by the villagers. They were wrapped around the tree

and were burnt alive. Unfortunately, the mysterious man died but Evanora survived. But her skin shrinks, her nails and feet get dissolved and her flesh turned dark maroon. She believed that it was Satan who come to her rescue. She learned magical and non-harmonious Mantras and restored herself. Ever since she hates humans and devoted her whole life to Satan.

Silhouettes of birds fly across the dissolved orange sky. The sky was of the colour of scarlet then an amethyst, evening wind shrine blew as thin as a needle that made Pundit's wife wrap Pashmina Shawl around the babies. The rain has stopped but the water logging was everywhere and the weather turned out to be cold. Pundit and his wife decided to go and stay at their relative's place. They were on the way and so does the uninvited follower Evanora.

Pundit went to buy a chai from the near tea stall while his wife waits for him embracing Apsara on her lap. While Pundit was waiting for chai he noticed his wife staring at the sunset.

"What are you staring at?" asked the

Pundit.

"The sun is setting so does our hope. I don't think we can make it before the dark," replied Pundit's wife.

"The Sunset is within the person not in the star-speckled sky. We need to wake up the Sun beneath us, rise and shine above the darkness. Then only we could claim victory, when good wins over evil inside of us."

Pundit's wife smiled at him and finished drinking her chai. On the trail she noticed her daughters' Sanskrit name in one of the Pundit's Vedas, flashing out from his satchel. She makes up her mind to see it by herself tonight. Evanora watches her and followed her all the way from a suburban to a village-prone region. She climbs up on a nearby Peepal tree and haunts the passerby to death. She smiled at the black-feathered before she twists its neck around notoriously. The thick black blood drools on Peepal's heart-shaped leaves. The cult was original in blue moon's light. She has her way out of monotonous boredom. As she patiently waits for Laiba to come out of the Temple.

When tick struck midnight, Laiba woke up with fear. Probably, a nightmare. Her thirsty neck was quenched by clay-pot

water placed in Pundit's dorm. Her eyes lay on Sanskrit manuscripts. She as silent as the grave managed to take the Vedas out of the slothy bag. Her proficiency to decipher the Vedas grants her mastery in religious studies. The pupils of her eyes widened and her irises shrunken as the Vedas uphold her Janam Kundli. The natal chart decodes her ancestral sins for which she needs to perform a walk of atonement to 'Ram Sethu' barefoot and naked. And the person performing this ritual will be eternally blessed and henceforth showered with gold and dimes. Her heart skipped a beat as a pat on her shoulder freaked her out. The bald-headed Pundit with a corrupted smile ruptured the traumatic mind of Laiba. The rattling of chains in his hands draws Laiba's attention. She was petrified.

"Why?" that's all Laiba could speak of.

"To infract your ancestral sin you must perform this ritual Laiba. You have to be conscious all the time of your transgression and keeping that in mind you must proceed towards the Sethu."

"No. I am not going anywhere with you. In the name of religion I an not

going to walk naked.”

Laiba pushed Pundit and run away. Pundit along with the mob holding torches runs after her. She kept on running from time to time, far away from the Temple, barefoot. The shifting graveyards passed by, she was fast. The pure soul of Laiba could sense some unusual in the atmosphere. Darkness breathes in the trees. Indeed it was the darkest night of the year. Regardless her broken heart heaved over her fearsome mind. She didn't stop to pass trees after trees. Evanora with her black magic produces a dense mist, solid enough to make the villagers lose her trail. With her backward feet, she chases Laiba like a young girl.

At length, finally a haul to the nearby lake centerfield amidst of no man's land. Laiba cried out loudly, suffocating in the potion of grief and curse at the same time. Inadvertently, her body transforms into an enchantress. Cascaded from heaven and freely falls over the soft meadows. Laiba triggered her angelic power as she cannot threshold her immense anguish into human form. Her skin turns albescent and her body light-weighted with hollow bones. Her soul was drenched in holy water, sinless, symbolizing purity. Her wings emerged from her shoulder, lily-white feathered, clean and shine

under moonlight's beam. She felt relaxed. All of sudden everything is so different and changed.

Evanora comes out from behind the herbs and said.

“You are an angel.”

Laiba was startled by her weary looks. Mischief-beauty face and foul devilish smell. Evanora moonwalks until she stumbled upon a stone. A magical textbook from the fifteenth century fell down from her bag, *The Necromancer's Manual*. It deals with Illusionist, Psychological and Divinatory.

“And you are a witch.”

Laiba offered her hand to get up. Evanora stood straight up and looked laser-straight into her eyes.

“You look just like me.” Evanora reached her hands towards her. She touches her facial skin which was as soft as silk. She felt warmth in her ice body for the first time. They exchanged their names.

“Are you my twin sister?” asked Laiba.

The wicked Evanora laughed upon the question.

“Imagine a witch and an angel to be sisters. If that comes out to be true the whole mythology about spiritual and religious studies needs to be amended.”

Laiba laughed upon the humorous proclamation.

"Is it true witches are scared of Brass?"

"What? No. At the moment I am wearing a brass bracelet itself."

They both exchanged their looks followed by a moment of silence.

"Is it true, Angels don't have any gender?"

"What? No. I am a twenty years old female," Laiba smirked.

"So who are we?"

"I don't know. Do you mind if we go for a walk? Mosquitoes are biting me."

"Surefire."

"Oh, Krishna! Another bite."

"Krishna?"

"My god. I worship him. I wonder, who do you worship?"

"Satan, the highest angel in the rank of intelligence."

"Oh, I see. After all, the devil was once an angel."

They both come across another village. Their company made them forget about the direction in which they were heading. It seems like their feet know where to go.

"So, Do you have a mother?"

"I am motherless. I was brought up by a malevolent witch who taught me black magic, the art of craftsmanship, seduction to the opposite sex and how to sacrifice children in the name of

Satan.

She was very dear to me before her....."

"Before her?"

"Her star sign was cancer, pretty ironic how she died. She was eaten by a giant crab."

They both laughed.

"I am sorry to hear that."

"What about you?"

"I was brought up by Pundit. For a long time, I believed that he was a true messenger of God. But his ideology in the name of Sastras every time questioned me. In the end, when it comes to me I ran away."

"I understand how you feel like. But what about your angelic powers? Did you know?"

"I didn't know until now. I had a flashback from past life."

"And what did you see?"

"Each angel was created for a specific task by God, of which they received instantaneous knowledge at the moment of their creation. We have full rights to accept or refuse the mission, a choice to be heart locked forever with us without any regret."

"Wow! What did you choose?"

"I declined."

"What was your mission?"

"To kill a witch."

Evanora's blood races along with the adrenaline rush, indecisive about how to act. She started walking in the opposite direction before Laiba grabs her by the arms. She stopped and looked into Evanora's eyes. She said....

"Please don't go. I know our teachings, preaching, and what not are so different. But right now I got no one except you. I don't know but I feel a connection between us. Although the classic remedy might be full of errors, I think we must try something untested. What if we don't fight unlike our ancestors?"

"Don't fight. What do you mean? For ages, witches and angels have been fighting never-ending battles. And you're telling me to give up?"

"Affirmative."

"I don't know what to say?"

"Please I beg you."

"All right I am in. (Evanora smiled). What about our origin, the past?"

"We need to find the answers. All soul originates from the same divine source."

"A same divine source what do you mean..."

"Mother." said Laiba.

At the devil's hour, the dual enchantresses walked fearlessly at the outskirts of the town. A poor human

soul was on the cycle heading towards his work early.

His attention draws towards Evanora's backward feet before he fell off.

"Sir, Are you okay?" Evanora ran and asked with great concern.

He showed her a totem made out of chillies and lemon with welcoming chanting mantras. Evanora took the totem in her hands as he made his way out of Witch's claw and run after his life. He left Evanora to remain puzzled upon which Laiba started laughing.

"What's wrong with him?"

"He was afraid for his life. He thought you might eat him."

"What? No way. We have fresh livestock. I cook proper meat and dine."

"Wow! And I am a pure vegetarian. We cannot be sisters for sure."

"What's up with lemons and chillies. A return gift."

"It's not a gift. The villagers here believed that if you tied this totem to cars, bikes, shops and even outside the house, it would ward off evil eye from creating problems."

"Oh! I see. That's a hell of stupidity."

"Yeah, and our lives are at stake too. He will definitely be reversing with Mob and burning torches. Don't

witches have a magical spell or something that can fly you overseas to Rajasthan? I mean I got wings."

"Rajasthan, the largest state of India. The Thar desert?"

"Yeah..."

"Black magic won't permit transportation but I do have something."

Evanora blew a whistle. A broomstick with a wooden handle and magical twigs arrived, elevating into the air. Evanora climbs upon the broomstick and watches Laiba struggling with her flight upon which witch laughed and said,

"Laiba I am sorry to crush your spirit but being a fairy you failed."

"I am an angel. And that too I get to know just a few hours ago. So, don't judge me."

"All right. Come on let me help you."

"How?"

"I don't know much about flying but I do know I control my broomstick when I am top of itchy-bitchy-witchy flings. In your case it would be happiness I guess. So believe yourself and just let it go."

"I never went far away from the temple's underground dormitory. Neither made real friends."

"Trust me I got your back. Just let it go. Don't hold back. Come on Laiba."

There she goes, swirling along with the feather-light body into the sky. After

some time, Laiba gets used to it. She smiled at Evanora and the sisters' connection grows stronger.

The darkening night was surrounding the two enchantresses. Clouds were above and below them. They both head in the direction of the moon. A big white luminescence celestial body with numerous crystalline stars winking the veil night. By that time, in the silent hour, they get to know their god. The worldly night was defeated by dawn, the darkest stage of twilight was stealing their sleep, while the starlight let them win the prize of sisterhood and get them twinning along.

"By the way who lives in Rajasthan? Any s."

"Recently I came across my horoscope. And I figured out I was illegally adopted. I can't believe my birth mother just gave me up. She was from the west desert."

"Don't worry. Everything will be all right. Even if it doesn't work out, your consolation prize, a Witch is still open."

Laiba smiled back.

Two young adults were on an expedition to seek their mislaid mother. Mother was like a flower, a sacred one whose holy leaves did lie in this case. The chance of entitling their nameless body, embraced by

beloved ones once again raises the bar of hope within thy poor souls. How does it feel to be different from others and reach your hands to catch lightning? This very moment was just like that for Evanora and Laiba. Finally, they reached the first light of the Sun.

Mira was there at the time the enchantresses set their feet onto the palace's terrace. With no introductory lines, the trio realized the bond with blurry eyes. Finally, the mother said, "I was waiting for you. I ain't no mother. Before the March blooms, I brought the harsh winter. I was cruel and bruised. All I was trying to protect you from female infanticide. And look what I have done. Let the world raise you into a she-devil and an angel. I never get the prospect to know your loving smile and wavy hair, nor distributed a mother's unconditional love and milk. I can never fulfill the distance delivered to you girls all these years alias as a motherless child. As well as I cannot feel thy sorrow. But one thing is for sure I couldn't gather the courage to abort you, an abuse to the womb. I escaped

and remain hidden from the world during my gestation period. I wish I could cradle you into my arms right now. But the bitter truth cannot be changed and I am loyal to my family now. I cannot tag myself along with you my dear. You must leave and look after each other. Therefore, I plead for forgiveness to quiet my sin and guilt for the rest of my life. Please forgive me."

Evanora and Laiba looked at each other with tear drooling eyes and they smiled. In the end, they forgive their mother and leave by the dusky skylight interlacing their warm fingers into each other. With spearing sunshine, they acquire the whole worldly happiness. The sentiment to belong, togetherness, non-solitary, a moment that glows within regardless of evil or godly, a power that we caged over years, LOVE. It stays wherever we go. The two sisters lived happily ever after. Still motherless.





## Ruchi Acharya

Ruchi Acharya is an acclaimed author from India, known for her literary contributions in various genres. She is the author of the captivating book "Off the Cliff," which has garnered widespread acclaim. With a remarkable talent for storytelling, Ruchi has captivated readers worldwide with her enchanting narratives.

Her remarkable success is further evidenced by her publication in over 100 prestigious journals across the globe. Ruchi's passion for Scottish folklore shines through her work, infusing her stories with a touch of mysticism and cultural richness. Additionally, her deep-rooted interest in studying British English Literature has greatly influenced her writing style, lending it a sophisticated and profound essence.

Ruchi Acharya's work stands as a testament to her creative genius and her ability to touch the hearts of readers across the globe. Her writing is a perfect blend of intellect, imagination, and emotional depth, making her a cherished voice in contemporary literature.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to all of the contributors, readers, and supporters who have made 'The Hemlock' possible.

To our talented writers and artists, thank you for sharing your creativity and imagination with us, and for bringing your unique voices and perspectives to our pages. We are honoured to showcase your work, and we are continually inspired by the passion and skill that you bring to your craft.

To our readers, thank you for joining us on this literary journey, and for embracing the power of the written word to connect, inspire, and move us. Your support and enthusiasm mean the world to us, and we are continually motivated by your passion for the arts.

Finally, we would like to thank our staff and volunteers, who work tirelessly behind the scenes to bring each issue of 'The Hemlock' to life. Your dedication, hard work, and passion are the driving force behind our publication, and we could not do it without you.

Thank you all for being a part of 'The Hemlock' community, and for helping us to celebrate the beauty and power of the literary arts. We look forward to continuing this journey together.

*The Hemlock  
Journal*

# ABOUT THE HEMLOCK

The Hemlock is an idea as potent as the name it bears. It refers to a plant from the Pine family which is an age-old herb and also to an ancient poison known to Greeks that supposedly killed Socrates, the great philosopher. Likewise, art heals us but at the same time, it possesses the ability to kill us, if not used well.

The Hemlock Journal is a space built for writers to learn, explore, grow together, and be a unique source in reaching the distant perspectives of the poets and storytellers to the tribe. Our prominent aim is to help writers advance their careers, and establish their brands by providing a global platform.

We are a dedicated team with a common purpose, united to enlighten as well as delight the crowd through our passion. We hope to inspire and positively impact the world around us.

We welcome writers and poets from around the world to share their works of art and literature through our journal irrespective of their background, gender and ethnicity.

THE HEMLOCK



# ABOUT THE ISSUE

As Summer symbolizes a period of warmth, relaxation, leisure, and transition from Spring to Autumn, our 'Summer 2023' issue takes you on a journey of those relaxing summer afternoons with a glass of refreshing lime juice, poetries, stories, and heartwarming thoughts. It is the second issue of our journal that marks another step in the field of publishing.

**Layout and Design By**  
Shazia Parveen

**Front Cover Art by**  
Paris Triantafilou

**Back Cover Art by**  
Rachel Coyne

**Managing Editor**  
Divyank J.

**Executive Editor**  
Julia

**Social Media Graphic  
Designer**  
Aarchi Advani Saini

**Online and Print Editor**  
Shazia Parveen

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