

Narrow Road

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Literary Journal

Short Fiction - Poetry - Haibun



Editors

Rohini Gupta - Raamesh Gowri Raghavan - Paresh Tiwari

Guest Editor (Poetry) - Smeetha Bhoumik

Narrow Road

*A Literary Magazine from India showcasing
Poetry, Haibun and Short Fiction*

Volume 11, Aug 2020

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Editorial

In the month of June, a leading newspaper of the world conducted a survey where a whopping 71% of those polled considered being an 'Artist' to be the most non-essential of all jobs, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This, when the consumption of music, movies, poetry and fiction was at an all-time high, given that we were (and are) being held to ransom by a virus. Instagram stories, Twitter feeds, Facebook walls flooded with dignified outrage.

Artist

*I don't mind
being the non-essential*

*Even a child takes
its mother for granted.
It does not run back
to its mother until it's hurt.*

*Nobody first thinks of water
when they arrive
at an exquisite dinner party,
until they are choking.*

*I don't mind
being the non-essential
knowing you will come looking
when things are broken
and nothing else works.*

*Art is non-essential
Until it is not.*

- Madhu Raghavendra

No matter how non-essential artists might seem to be, we keep creating art. Narrow Road received a record number of submissions for the August issue. And it should come as no surprise - for essential or not - we do not know any other way to live. In the bleakest of times, it is art that keeps a little fire burning. A fire that keeps us warm and shows us the path ahead. Art also gives a voice to those who might not otherwise have one. It is a war-cry as well as a balm to soothe battle wounds and this issue of Narrow Road is further proof in the burgeoning case for the same.

We have dedicated this issue of the journal to 'Form Poetry', sensitively curated by our guest editor, Smeetha Bhoulmik. Narrow Road - Vol 11 is proud to be home to ghazals, sonnets, tercets, sestina haiku, tanka, and free verse along with the regular sections of haibun and short fiction. Narrow Road has often struggled for quality fiction, this time, however, we have a set of stories that might leave you gasping for breath. Some of these voices refuse to be turned down, others whisper in blink-and-you-miss words. But we urge you to neither blink nor miss, as you turn the pages, for what they have to say cannot be boxed into simple adjectives like timely or essential. It is instead transcendental.

As you leaf through the pages, do not miss out on our features. More than a century ago, on 31st Aug 1919, India saw the birth of Amrita Pritam, a pre-eminent poet, novelist, and essayist. We pay a small tribute to her, in form of four exquisite translations from the Punjabi by Sarabjeet Garcha. Srividya (as always) Speaks Poetry. Poornima Laxmeshwar strikes a conversation with Sivakami Velliangiri, and we have faithfully recorded it for you. We have also reviewed *Frazil (1980-2017)* by Menka Shivdasani and *The Amazing Glass House* by Susan Beth Furst.

Narrow Road - Vol 11 marks our shift from hosting the journal on third-party apps to a dedicated website. To put it simply, we now have a permanent address, and we want you to come knocking often. When you visit, bring a cup of tea or coffee, an eco-friendly bottle of water, or perhaps even something stronger, and interesting things to munch on.

Welcome to the housewarming.

Do stop and say hello to the residents. You'll find them lounging in the masthead.

- Pareshtiwari

Fiction



Shikhandin

Buffalo Train

Every day, the children went to the marsh, their eagerness catching at their throats, because it was forbidden.

There were four of them - a buxom teenaged girl and her two burly brothers, and a cousin who had lost both her parents in an accident the previous summer. The cousin was a small stick of a girl, with a complexion like corn, and a pair of dark, questioning eyes. You almost expected her to suck her thumb and stare like an idiot. Which she didn't, but that hardly saved her from her cousins.

Every afternoon, while the buxom girl's mother (who was the cousin's aunt from her father's side) took her afternoon siesta with two slices of chilled cucumbers over her eyes, the children slipped out of the house. They meandered unhurriedly through a hole in the compound wall, past the milkmen on their string cots and their buffaloes, to reach the marsh. Once in the marsh, they luxuriously squelched their feet in the mud, watching the inky slush ride up their knees. One time, the cousin sank up to her chin when she lost her balance, and the other three children pulled her up by her hair. They found this whole episode very funny. The boys sat plump down in the squishy mud, turning instantly into piebald creatures with extraordinarily white eyes. The buxom girl laughed so hard that her belly jiggled until it hurt. She felt sore for days after that. The cousin did not cry. She just stood there clutching the bunch of water hyacinths that she had ventured out for into the deep ends of the marsh. Her aunt loved the water hyacinths that grew so abundantly there.

"Water Hyacinths fill me up with a sense of peace," the aunt had once said, as the cousin watched her get dressed for a party. Then onwards the cousin obediently filled the skirt end of her frock with stalks of water hyacinths and the aunt never questioned how or where she had got them.

Everyday the children grew bolder and bolder, straying further and further into the marsh, until it was no longer a wide-mouthed mumbling thing. Then, at last a day came when they wanted to go beyond it. The children pondered how to cross over to the other side, beyond the railway line where soft grass grew in two narrow carpets, like velvet green aisles, beside the tracks. The buffaloes went there everyday to graze without fear. The children edged in closer and closer, almost bumping against the buffaloes that nuzzled the grass so lovingly, cropping them short each day. Closer and closer grazed the buffaloes, almost touching the tracks with their noses. The cousin started going close to the buffaloes, sometimes offering them water hyacinths, sometimes a piece of jaggery that she had earlier hidden in her knickers. The buffaloes took her offerings, but ignored her when she tried to coax and sometimes shoo them away from the tracks. The other three watched these docile, soft eyed beasts, looking at the world thoughtfully as they chewed. And, the children half dreaded, and half yearned for a train to pass.

One day a train did pass, rattling and clanging, rushing forward on its centipede gait, at the exact time when the buffaloes came to graze. The children were there to see it.

The children chased the buffaloes, shooing and prodding them as much as they dared. The buffaloes didn't understand the English words that rose from their thin voices; nobody had commanded them before in any language other than the deep Bhojpuri dialects of the milkmen and herds boys. So, the children left the buffaloes and waved at the train driver, thinking he would stop the train. But he did not. And the train advanced like a metal python, clanging and rattling, as before. The children stood there, petrified at the edge of the marsh, watching the train approach the buffaloes grazing so close to the tracks; their bellies touching the air where the train's belly was sure to cut through.

At first the children willed the train to stop. Their hands flailing and heads bobbing up and down like marionettes. Then they wished fervently that it would. But it did not. The train seemed intent on its destination with a single-track mind. The driver rang his warning bell; once, twice, thrice; that was all. He did not glance at the children. He did not look at the buffaloes grazing. The children could see the whites of his eyes staring at his invisible destination like a goal to be achieved at any cost. The children were that close to the approaching train, before they jumped down the slope towards the marsh.

The buffaloes fell one by one; their wide hips swinging with dancers' grace, as they were flung by the rugged hip of the train. The strip of grass was too delicate and too narrow to stall their fall. Some of them fell into the marsh, tumbling after each other and bloodying the hyacinths and the frogs below them where they landed. More buffaloes fell straight down on the highway that rushed away from the marsh and ducked under the bridge of railway lines.

The children stared as the big bellied brown buffalos fell slowly with awful, silent grace, twirling through the gray air between train track and tarmac. Their chests heaving, their hair matted with sweat and their feet rooted in the black mud that formed a seemingly indelible scab on their legs, the children stood transfixed; their eyes dry and mute. They stood like that for a long time.

The highway filled up with stalled trucks and motorists, and the wailing milkmen and herds boys. A buffalo calf rushed between the fallen beasts, mooing terribly. Stray dogs yelped at the fallen cattle as if to provoke them to stand up. Vultures wheeled far above them, while lower down in the pale sky, the kites trilled their dismay.

Finally, the children turned back. They left the carnage single file and returned the way they had arrived, averting their eyes from the empty sheds and cots of the milkmen. They walked back with the finality of knowing that the marsh was now forbidden to them forever.

Then the bigger of the two boys turned to the cousin, shoved her aside and spat, "You! You always bring bad luck!"

Rochelle Potkar

Symbols of a life

I. Silhouettes (/for apparitions)

"No, No!!" Mrs. Smita Arora woke in the darkness that bounced off the walls. She swallowed the lump in her throat. The same insect-shadow: black, claw-mouthed with a teasing tip stood at the corners of her eyes. She could feel the scorpion shape move on the floor. *Click tick. Click tick.*

clock ticking, insect clicking...

...insect clicking, clock ticking...

It had followed her through her life. Every word to describe its phantom-hood had failed. Tonight too, it circled and stopped right behind her, looming large on the wall.

She waited. It waited.

Until the splintering ring of the telephone. *Who would call at 3 a.m.?*

She dragged herself to the drawing room and slumped into an easy chair, taking in the voice of the messenger. The voice spoke of death tolls, unfortunate accidents, condolence, and a plane crash. *This was it then.*

Smita's chest thumped, her eyes hurt, her face crumpled. *GONE? Her son Sanju, his wife, young Sameer, younger Priyanka?*

THEY are -- were -- NEVER coming back?

II. Ants (/for impermanence)

Ants rose from Smita's feet to her spine. They clutched the flesh of her arms, thighs, all the way back to her knees. They spread over scalp, gripping it with tight pincers. These ants killed the scorpion in tasteless determination, sucking out its carcass.

She fell over the creak of the bed, sleeping until noon, where she dreamt of floating bodies and crocodiles, silt, spells, history, treasure chests, and hope in open dead eyes. When she woke, they were gone - the scorpion and the ants. Day spilt over every corner, inflaming the floor.

'Wait for the bodies,' the voice had said over the phone.

If she had left the house as planned, she would have missed this.

But she had decided to imbibe solitude before going for good from her son's house, and now *their plane had crashed into the cold depths of the Indian Ocean.*

The house would stay empty. Their bags would return sea-beaten, and *they* in bits making her hands tremble. She would make funeral arrangements; their passport photos would flash over the TV.

People would come - all whom she didn't know, remember or recognize. Loner, loser, poor old woman, sediment of a tragedy. She would carry the weight of their perceptions, pity and sympathy. Smita's lips welded in tears, snot, spit, her throat into a silent scream.

III. Burning giraffe (/for apocalypse)

There was still a full moon in the 5 a.m. dawn sky.

The waters the plane had headed into were no ordinary waters. It had been a battleground 10 days ago between big company fishing trawlers and fishermen who were high-sea trolls of a small island, in the Indian Ocean.

The victory was huge for Harry Ramkissoon, President of the Fisherman's Union and his friends. Ramkissoon's village plumbed, for years, for tuna, marlin, octopus, and lobsters before encroachers of large conglomerates came. With the help of environmentalists, they managed to stop the trawlers from invasion, clearing off water space and minimizing over-fishing.

This had been the first week after the battle - to operate fishing vessels on patches of that water. Harry watched the titanium sky. The sun was to shoot out above the catchment of curdled clouds at a 45-degree angle from his boat. The engines hummed a soft drone, intoxicating his ears. Water like air did not have divisible marks. Only those in contact with them knew where to draw the lines. It was freedom from the big vessels, big catch of up to 200 tonnes per day from where his catch would vanish.

Already the salt of sea was in his skin, ripening with his sweat. Because of aquaculture by the trawlers, he suspected there would be fatter fish to catch - if at all a compensation for his grief.

That's when he heard it. He looked behind. High from the other side of the grey sky a star was falling, moving fast in its trajectory marked for his village.

The star glinted as the first sunray struck it to reveal a blot of gold - fire! Within minutes it had grown large, its insides exposed, sides torn, a part of its tail hanging.

He sensed a searing in his stomach, seeing the moon in the dark mirror of ocean disappear, as the tattered star hit the waters. It was immense, it confounded everything. He thought he heard a faint muffle of human sound.

IV. The Elephant (/imbalance)

Just the other day Smita had packed her belongings, planning to stop by Suraj Nath's home, who would contact the ashram. Just a week ago the daughter-in-law, swinging her *pallu* over her taut breasts spat out final goodbyes to her over her heating auditory system.

She would miss them now: the cuss-word-spitting-daughter-in-law, the remote-control-wielding grandchildren, whose TV volume filled their room like over-spilling tea. She, their babysitter when needed, an old-hag nuisance when not.

In bitter moments, Smita had wished her son's family dead. In hurt, she hoped something heinous for the daughter-in-law, sickness and failure in exams for her arrogant grandchildren. For her son to once see what a snake his wife was. Now they were all gone in the fruition of her worst curse. *Whom could she blame?*

She, the moving presence in her son's life that he walked back and forth against, strengthening his marital bond, overlooking his maternal one.

She walked against her own shadow now. The crash redefined her, when the intended walking out should have. Instead of respect, she would now get pity.

She would have to face their absences. There would be no fight or negotiation, brief promise or betrayal. No offense heard or eavesdropped over telephones. She would not be the victim. She was the victim. Everything distanced itself - meaning, predictability...

The TV played in the background, over and over, about plane half-spins and frozen birds blooming with fire and smoke, spurting like popcorn at sea.

Debris spread 50 square miles over 20000 feet beneath ocean surface. The few bodies found were identified by DNA and fingerprint. 'Did the plane's fuel leak first or was it pilot error?' the TV asked. Political debate, case studies, man-machine failure histories, conspiracy theories... it gave everything.

Eager people could view the same thing in endless ways when the loss wasn't theirs. On the fifth day, a TV reporter threatened their channel would visit the victims' kin's homes to interview them, talk about compensation, and Smita triggered the screen into silence.

V. Drawers and knobs (/for passion)

There were three men who formed a triangulate of decision-making for Air Madhya Bharat Flight 008, Boeing 747-400: Air Traffic Controller Kannan P. Krishnan, and pilots *Captain* and *Junior*.

Krishnan had been an ATC for 16 years. On that day too he was handled 25 flights through five air routes. He frequently updated altitude, direction, airspeed, and freeway numbers for each of these coming and going flights. Handling 25 blinking dots on a screen might have looked easy to an initiated onlooker, but each moving dot carried 500 people. Nearly 12500 to 15000 lives, obtuse-angled between earth and sky, each day. Krishnan's job required calmness, alertness, perfect diction, and communication skills. He had to be physically fit with no dependence on drugs or medication.

The pilots *Captain* and *Junior* differed in age and flying experience. *Captain* had 20000 hours while *Junior*, 3000 hours; the plane a total of 6000 flying hours behind it. Though of fine airmanship, *Captain* was disgruntled. To the aviation industry that he had given the best years of his life - its goals of timeliness toward the customers only added more flights to his schedule. The good old days of relaxed working were gone.

Now he struggled with stress, escaping it by dreaming of a holiday resort that he would initiate soon upon his retirement. There, he would put his feet up, watching sunsets, as the resort would make money for itself. *Just five more years...* Retiring early would earn him sniggers from his peers and crew. Moreover, his son-in-law was still climbing the high echelons of the government; the land for the sea resort would come to him at no cost in another five years. *Captain* took nip-sips of his 30-year-old Highland Park single-malt whisky. It helped him hide his displeasures behind a somber face as he set out from the transit hotel for his flight.

In the intangible drawers of being, *Captain* stored years of parental pride from his many children's achievements in business. In yet another invisible pocket, indulgences of all things fine: expensive cigars, alcohol, transient beautiful women. In another abstract compartment, he stored disdain for people who weren't *uber* enough for him - which was almost everyone. This day too, he bullied his way out of a breath test and didn't greet *Junior* rather smiled at with derision. *Captain* could hide his scorn in a secret box behind his smirk.

The season was one of rains and the report in *Captain's* hands forewarned of a tropical revolving storm along their planned flight route. Before the flight could take off, *Junior* said, "Captain, we should deviate and go around this."

"Uh huh, that will make it longer. Don't you think of time, money, fuel?" *Captain* turned to his controlling space in the cockpit, cutting out any further discussion.

The take-off of the plane was fine. When they climbed to 40000 feet above sea level, 80 miles away from the airport, ATC K. P. Krishnan's voice radioed, "Air Madhya Bharat Flight 008 you might be entering into bad weather."

Five minutes later, they were hit by a stroke of lightning. The aircraft's electrical circuits burned leading to a total electrical failure with the Inertial Navigation Systems (INS) disrupting. *Captain* and *Junior* were suddenly in the dark about position, orientation, and velocity.

Junior troubleshoot for failure - shifty and panicky - feeling a dissociation from the knobs in front of him; his previous flights had all been good ones. He turned on many knobs with sweating panic-palms, in the process disengaging the auto-pilot.

The plane began a gradual descent.

"We are going down! ...a graveyard spiral! Left rudder... Left rudder!!" shouted *Junior*. They only had standby pressure instruments to guide them. "Captain, look at your

instruments!" Junior shouted, referring to the Vertical Speed Indicator (VSI) that gauged air flow and pressure.

HE was going to teach him HOW-TO-FLY!?! HE!?!?

"We're doing fine. It's a straight path," said Captain calmly.

K. P. Krishnan's voice radioed again, "Air Madhya Bharat Flight 008, you have descended by 10,000 feet. Your altitude is way below your assigned level at 400. You are a danger to traffic around."

K.P. Krishnan voiced again, "Climb and maintain flight at level 350."

"Right the plane!" shouted Junior.

In a corner of his mind, *Captain* had a quick switch for temper. In another, an instant rationale for ceasefire-quiet. He used it now, looking at the way his first officer was behaving. *Young fellas knew everything!*

"Left. Left. Left. Left. Left. Left," said Junior.

Relying on his judgment, *Captain* applied the right rudder and began a fast and simultaneous turn and climb. That day not only had the INS systems failed but the *orientation triad* of human senses that gave cues during a dynamic motion of flight.

Vision responsible for 90% of orientation cues, derived from the Earth's visual horizon gave *Captain* no perception of up-or-down orientation. Being late night, his body was up against its own bio-rhythmic levels of tolerance, craving for sleep.

The Vestibular labyrinth of the human ear - otolith organs of the saccule and the utricle that judged changes in horizontal movement and vertical acceleration lagged in secreting fluid into Captain's ears, causing him spatial disorientation. This sent conflicting messages to his brain that disagreed with...

His Kinaesthetic system or theseat-of-pants sensation.

Captain had no feelings of tilting s the plane buoyed and slanted.

"...this can't be happening!"

Junior made preparations to salvage the fall, when a grinding noise from the business class released a thud that rattled the whole aircraft. The forward cargo door blew out, the pressure differential caving in the main cabin floor and the ejected debris damaged engine 2.

From the black box recordings found weeks later, the investigation team heard, "Oh no! Oh no! There it goes!" amidst siren-like Klaxon calls.

"That's it."

Klaxon signals grew louder, "...this can't be happening!"

K.P. Krishnan's voice radioed, "Air Madhya Bharat Flight 008, do you hear me?"

Loud siren wails punctuated a calm voice, "We're finished."

"Ma, I love you," said a quivering voice.

The siren calls led to a wave-like sound that exploded into absolute quiet.

K.P. Krishnan radioed, "Air Madhya Bharat Flight 008? Air Madhya Bharat Flight 008??" as a blinking dot on his screen snap-disappeared.

No. no. no. no. no... no. no. no. no. no...

Sweat broke on K.P. Krishnan's forehead, cramping his body, as he was nailed for interrogation.

VI. Locusts (/for waste)

Ramkissoon's vessel capsized. Its lifeboat acting like a helmet when wreckage flew, dotting the sea: wallets, purses, plastic cards, devices, eyeglasses, dinner trays, life vests, hand luggage, food carts, suitcases, packing crates, cartons, and one *sitar* that ripped open from its case and sunk. Bodies torn or strapped to their seats floated. The only living but stiffened man's tears mingled with the sea.

Once it grew quiet, Ramkissoon gripped the grab rail of his lifeboat and climbed over top. He trembled on his haunches watching the sun. Though it was bright, the day was as dark as a scorpion. An hour later a life jacket, a food tray, a ripped tire, an ID card and a headrest gathered around his boat.

It was then that he screamed.

VII. Crutches (/for weakness)

In a blur, the days passed. Linearly they were two days but otherwise they were the past, present and future, memory-springs of childhood, the naiveté of adolescence, exuberance of youth, the day ATC Krishnan got married, his first, second, and third jobs. His final job. The building blocks and bricks of his future with life-and-medical insurances, mutual fund investments, a second holiday home, a good retirement plan.

Monitoring planes all through his waking hours made Krishnan a grounded man. Abstract, lofty ideas were for other people, who lived on the ground and hence needed flight. Not for him, whose mind was tuned to air, 24 hours.

Even the worst years of his life of cost-cutting and frozen pay scales, attrition and overwork were okay. Or the ones with no major technical glitches, hijack, terror alert, false alarms or the year his aviation employer made maximum profits. Any year but this. Anything but today.

He receded into himself, recoiling from the blur of interrogations where he announced his answers with precision and alertness. His words played into his ears. He could hear his own heartbeats, clear like klaxon calls. He forgot his address, sometimes his name. Sometimes his voice wouldn't come out, or tea or water go in. Sometimes he lost diction and words bent to show how they could have misbehaved on the day of the accident which was – yesterday. His syllables broke around their knees with every new piece of information from the crash site.

He could hear reverberating voices. *Proof and clarity*, as he moved from table to table, room to room, authoritative person to more commanding persons. 'The complete failure of CRM (crew resource management)' resounded everywhere.

And then just like that, he was asked to leave and report to his worktable. For a week, every time he heard news of the crash, he could see outlines of people in two's and three's. His arms, legs, back arrested with tingling numbness of marching ants.

VIII. Butterfly (/for souls)

From here her journey would be a vast one, between the times she had loved her son and the years of intangible disconnection. *Could feelings seep into hardened unfeeling, cracking its walls with warmth? That too old love? Did it have a place?*

She had been his mother for God's sake. Smita rose to phone Suraj Nath. He would be the first person to know. She wouldn't be coming to his house. He shared her imaginings of the last moments of her family's lives. The ache of being unpredictably dispensable.

She slipped her palm over a swollen wet face. She would have to note things down. It would have to start from somewhere, but it was better if it started from the beginning, when emotions were clearer, untainted by the miseries of expectations, the strife of emotional bargains and trade-offs.

...The way she used to run after Sanju, after school on his road to freedom. The way they planned a calendar for his 10th board exams. The way he told her every detail of his first job; she had known the names of so many colleagues then...Priya, Raul, Wilson, Ajay and the one with that funny surname...

She stood in front of the children's bookshelf, searching for an unused diary. It could then move to Sameer and Priyanka when they were babies. *No. Not so fast.* There was more to her Sanju's childhood. She would have to go slower over things - his first crush with that girl from the opposite building - *VanitaMaddappa?* Or farther back when he had stood first in Class V.

There was a lot to catch up on. A lot to live. Before condolers came and the doorbell rang, and clumps and pieces of her son's soldered future and her present came flying in. Her umbilical knot easing...

II.

Krishnan's job taught him to lean on nothing. Not his wife's apprehension, his friends' concerns, or his colleagues' support.

He replayed each way that he could have guided or anticipated flight 008's arc and fate a 100 times over, scrutinizing every quiver of his mind and body before gathering back into the gridlock of monitoring new flights, where every moment's alertness was the real zen, where the dregs of misfortune had to be winnowed to stand on the spine of the present moment.

Weeks later, the black box recordings were thoroughly analyzed. It confirmed what the interrogations had revealed.

A butterfly, chitin-veined, iridescent, flits...

...away from the blue, where human tissue feed fish as Harry Ramkisson's boat bobs to a complete standstill.

...atop Smita Arora's window, taking away many things that break off as words forming in her diary in a clean hand-writing, filling pages and crevices.

...over Kannan P. Krishnan's desk and coffee, drifting away the ill-feeling of human fallacy, both in judgement and behavior.

*(Dali symbols)

Jahnavi Barua

Birdsong

“So, what have you decided?”

Directly above her is a scarlet minivet; he is a striking bird, with his scarlet and black plumage, and is sitting patiently, as if presenting himself to her. She tries to find the best angle for the picture. The branches of the tree are bare, it is almost winter and the bird is flamboyant against the stark skeleton.

“Are you going to answer?”

Her foot snags on a jutting out root as she presses on the button and the bird flies away, casually, as if judging that enough time has been given and now he must move on.

On the viewing screen, she is left with a red blur, the exact colour and ferocity of anger. His voice is tinged with that colour, now, and every so often.

Across the small water hole, a scarlet flash in a jackfruit tree. She makes her way swiftly to the foot of the tree. The bird is perched, motionless, above her, his long tail balancing him just so. She raises her head, peering through the viewfinder trying to position the bird.

Warm breath against her neck. “What the hell do you think you are playing at?” he tugs at her shoulder, she loses her balance and throws an arm out, gripping the tree trunk. The bird flies away noiselessly.

“Listen, you have to decide one way or the other.” His voice is now jagged with fury.

She is keeping him from the cricket match on TV; even on holiday, in the middle of the forest, he remains glued to the screen. But, he too, is keeping her from her birds. Her jaw assumes a stubborn set. She thinks of all the times he has remained wedded to the television : when she lay ill in bed with the Dengue fever, shivering and frightened; when she walked their newborn son to sleep at night, frantic with pain from the C-section incision and worry; when she wanted to watch the birds on a late night programme.

“Excuse me,” she says and pushes past him, to the steps at the base of the small hill. She runs up the steps easily. He follows, she can hear him cursing, as he pants his way up slowly.

At the top of the hill is a small pelt of thick woodland. Tall silk cotton trees rise into the cloudless sky. A bulbul, a red whiskered one, sits on a lower branch. It is so fat it is almost like a small ball. She smiles at the sight. This has been a good idea after all. Her mother had urged them to come away for this weekend. “I will take care of Neil,” she had said, “Go sort out things with him. Divorce is not a solution.”

Divorce. The word terrifies her mother. In the beginning, she had been afraid too. How would she bring up a fatherless child? He had been confident, cocky almost. “You will never manage without me.”

Would she manage? She does not know. But she is less afraid of the word now. She has carried it with her for a long time now; it has grown familiar and no longer possesses the menace it once had.

She pushes deeper into the forest. It is dim here, even in the daytime. The path is narrow and uneven; she has to be careful, she has to watch her step. It is deceptively silent here. She knows there are eyes watching her, although she cannot see anything.

He is behind her. Stumbling and swearing. She feels a frisson of anger.

“He is not bad, darling,” her mother always said. Not bad, but that did not mean good.

Her mother went on. "He has never been cruel to you." By that, her mother meant he had never hit her. But cruelty came in all shapes and colours and sizes. She thinks of how he often looked at her, a look so blank it chilled her heart.

Her son needs a father. She realises that. Divorce really is not an option. Only an idea she toys with to pretend she has a way out.

A cuckoo calls out from above. She looks up in delight. The bulky bird, sits half hidden behind the leaves of a tree.

Then, from the corner of her eye she sees the flash of a red tail. The minivet. It has followed her here.

He is almost at her shoulder when she lifts her neck and arms to point the camera. If, this time, he asks her, she will tell him she has decided against leaving him.

She looks into the viewfinder. The scarlet bird is sitting patiently, framed against the dark leaves of the tree. She almost presses down with her finger when there is a movement. A yellow and black bird has appeared and settled down gently next to the red bird. It is the female minivet! The male leans in towards his mate and she nuzzles him and draws closer.

Unexpectedly, she is desolate. Her chest tightens. She lowers the camera and turns to face her husband, the father of her child.

"All right, then," she says. "Let's get a divorce."

Susan Beth Furst

Between the Lines

A hot summer breeze blows across the cement. It rustles the ivy climbing the chain-link fence. Pap wipes the sweat from his forehead as we sit at the kitchen table, chopping salad. I ask him about the farm, the coal mines, the family he left behind.

“It was so hot out that day; you could smell the tar burning on the roof. I remember thinking that I needed to remember.”

“Remember what?” my daughter asks.

“Our conversation,” I answer, “Pap was getting old.”

The German Shepherd across the alley pushes his nose through the fence and barks. Pap throws him a piece of raw hamburger and mutters something about people who don't take care of their animals. Pap is getting a little cranky. It's almost time to pick up Tom.

“Who's Tom?”

“Tom was Pap's nemesis. Grandma had a way with men, they loved her, and she loved the attention. Tom came to the house almost every night, and Pap was his Taxi.”

It's seven o'clock. Tom has arrived safe and sound, along with Pap's other passenger Aunt Louise. Pap is in a good mood, like when he would give us lunch box cakes from his bread truck, and his eyes would sparkle like Santa's. He's telling corny jokes and laughing. Everyone calls him Sunny, and everyone loves him, except maybe Tom and Aunt Louise...

“You believed in Santa Claus?”

“Everyone believed in Santa Claus!” Rachael rolls her eyes.

“I'll never lie to my kids!”

“Um-hmm...”

We bury Pap the first week of January. The seats in the limo are cold. I slide across the black leather as we turn into the cemetery. I stand by his grave in my winter coat; my scarf pulled up past my nose, exhaust billowing around me like a dense cloud. I suck the bitter air into my lungs between sobs, unable to feel my face, unable to feel anything.

“I remember not wanting to leave Pap behind in the cold.”

“Really, Mom?” Rachael looks at me suspiciously.

“Whippersnapper!” Pap says.

It's Memorial Day 1972. The sun is out, and a warm breeze rustles the trees in the cemetery. Pap sits on Great Grandma's pink granite tombstone, surrounded by my sisters and me. He is smiling for the camera, being himself, Sunny.

“It's my favorite picture.”

Rachael is silent, thinking.

I look at my beautiful, stubborn, brown-eyed daughter and smile. Just down the street, the neighbor's dog starts to bark.

Manoj Narayanan

Chrysanthemum Diaries

I was in love back then, like every other young man. She was with her sister in the village square where we had all gathered for a festival. She threw occasional side glances at me as I kept ogling at her. Her sister, ten years younger, persistently giggled, looking at me and her in turn. I put my foot forward towards her; she took two back. I smiled as if my masculinity had won a small victory by making her shy. That was when the shooting began.

Time has taken away many things from this cursed land, but even time cannot erase memories.

I expect to find debris everywhere. Rubber tires burning and rolling on the ground, carrying with them the unmistakable stench of warm blood. That is how I remember this place *when I jumped over the fence of the square, trying to dodge the bullet that eventually scraped my right hip, an injury that would leave me with a permanent limp. The army persisted, but I ran. And when I ran, I forgot about her and the beautiful scent that her flowers carried, I forgot about my mother, my little sister, my friends who had accompanied me to the festival. Everything. I only wanted to live. For thirty-five years, I ran.*

I hail a cab to go to Wellawatte from Colombo. The streets are familiar yet eerily different. The calmness that prevails is too loud, unsettling. The air is filled with a sense of gloom that seems to suggest that a storm is brewing. Or maybe, it is the reflection of the storm's aftermath. The driver tells me that things have changed in the last four years. He speaks the language fluently, but I can tell he is not a local. My daughters have many questions along the way, but the most persistent is if I remember the roads through which the car passes. I do, I tell them, the place has not changed much. There are teenagers playing cricket on the road. I wonder if any of them bear in their heart, the fire of the torch that their senior generation carried. Back in my day, joining the revolution was not a radical move, but a natural choice, though the cowards like me preferred to stay away from the fighting.

I ask the driver to stop when I see the building where my home once stood. It is now a mess, with most of it destroyed, no doubt, from the fighting and incessant bombing that has plagued this place. I had learnt a few years ago that both my mother and my sister were killed in an airstrike. The driver looks at me curiously, possibly wondering if I harbour any violence in my heart. But that is the problem: I never had the heart for violence.

That night, my father accompanied me to the harbour, leaving behind my mother and sister. Nearly a hundred of my countrymen had gathered at a narrow road overlooking the ocean, concealed from view by gigantic trucks parked tactfully. There were also a few foreigners who spoke English and moved around with urgency. They seemed to be in authority there.

The authorities – the foreigners – separated the gathering by age and made us stand in two queues. Older men were required in the middle east, they said. Along with the other young men, I was assigned to sail to East Germany. Neither were we asked for consent, nor did we have a preference about the destination. By then, free will felt like an illusionary term; I had decided to let life unravel by itself.

“What about Amma and sister?” I asked my father as we stood in separate lines.

“The army won't harm the women,” my father said.

At that age, I did not have the intellect to comprehend whether it was naivety or dishonesty that made him say that. I believed him.

My uncle receives me, and I feel his tears against my cheek when he hugs me. He is the only surviving member of our family in Wellawatte. At ninety-one, I do not think that he will continue to carry our family banner for long. Soon, our family will have no roots or ties to our motherland.

"She told me you'd come," he says. I realise that he is talking about Amma and I nod. The man before me looks and feels alien. Have I changed, or has he? "She told me to take you to her when you come," he says and walks ahead, his hands still holding mine. I walk behind him.

I worked at a power plant near Berlin. Quite a few buildings were being constructed in the premises and we – refugees and migrant laborers of many nationalities – were tasked with the lowly labours of unloading materials and removing debris. The fairer-skinned were given the privileged work of operating heavy equipment at the site. Our services were repaid with food, shelter and loose change which I saved carefully. Used clothes were often thrown in bulk in our staying chambers. We were not under arrest, but we also did not have a permit to work anywhere else. Either we slogged in silence in return for refuge, or we returned home – the options were limited.

Those were the times of the cold war, and the Russians were still around. The Soviet army who frequented the site was notorious for murdering American spies. Indians, especially, were always viewed with suspicion. There was one Indian who I remembered very well:

The Russian tapped on the Indian and raised an eyebrow. The Indian looked at the shirt he was wearing and realised his misfortune. His shirt sported an American flag.

"No, no. Mistake!" He cried.

He attempted to tear the embroidery from his shirt, and when he could not, he unbuttoned and flung his shirt away. The army-man sneered and shared a laugh with his fellow army men. I heard a few chuckles from the refugees in my camp as well. The Indian was taken away and never returned.

One day after nearly a year at the site, a person from the Hare Rama Hare Krishna fraternity promised to take me to West Germany and away from the communists if I paid him everything I had earned till then.

"I do God's work and only demand my dakshina," he said.

I agreed. A few nights after that, I boarded a mini-truck loaded with cabbages. It took me to West Germany.

There, I worked in a restaurant for two years before joining a McDonald's and became a supervisor after a decade. I married another runaway from Sri Lanka, and we had two beautiful daughters, who spoke Tamil with the undertone of a strong European accent. I was granted German citizenship and was told that I was safe if I ever wanted to tour my homeland – no German national would be arrested there. But I was scared and scarred. Soon, genocide arrived in my homeland. Governments came together to kill my kin. I frantically read six newspapers a day, until the day arrived when our leader was murdered, and the revolution came to an end.

Four years after the war ended, I am here as a German national, a foreigner to my own people. Though I recognise places, I cannot remember the people who walk alongside me.

"She often spoke of you," says a woman in a yellow dress. "She told us that you had a good heart, even if not a brave one."

I feel ashamed. Amma had spoken of me often, but I had been too scared to come back here.

"Who are you?" I ask her. She stares, puzzled, "Thought you would know". I feel ashamed again.

The night before the shooting, I had professed my love for her. She appeared shocked at first, before coyly smiling and walking away. She loved me too, I knew then. We had been playmates since childhood, but now she stood before me a fully grown woman. She took one long look at me before

stepping in and locking the front door of her house. I did not hasten, for I knew that she would come to the square for the festival the next day. I decided to force her to admit her love for me the next day. I dreamed of her that night. I dreamed of buying flowers for her. She loved chrysanthemums. I would even place the flowers on her hair myself.

The next day, I ran, leaving her to fend for herself against the rampaging army.

“She wanted to be buried here, whatever remained of her,” my uncle says. For a moment, the Hindu in me rises, ready to question his decision to bury my mother instead of cremating her. I stay quiet.

“After all of you left, she did her best for many years. She protected us, gave us money, helped construct a school, and she killed more than any man here.”

I do not understand; my mother was not capable of any of those things. “Are we not talking about Amma?” I asked my uncle, who shook his head exasperatedly.

“She loved you. Once you were gone, she had no time... for flowers or songs. She fought instead. She fought for all of us,” says the woman in the yellow dress. I take a better look at her now, and memories begin to flood in.

“Here,” says my uncle pointing at a tombstone at the village square, “This is how she wanted her name to be interred.”

ANANDHI DHANABALAN
1960–2013

Seeing my name after hers sends a shiver down my spine. I turn towards the woman, her little sister who had giggled so joyously when I had last seen them together.

“I am sorry,” I manage to blurt out after a while.

She looks hard, ready to rain abuses. Then she nods, “You should be.”

I watch them walk away, the woman and my uncle. I know that it is futile to tell them that I wondered about Anandhi many times after I ran away during the shooting. Wondering does not offer solace. For a moment, her face flashes before my eyes. Then, the memory of gunshots. I walk. I run, again, as always.

Zach Murphy

In Rotation

Aria caught the city bus as the sky donned a pinkish glow before the day's final gasp. Her daughter Millie sat on her lap, gripping her wrinkled hospital scrubs – the ones with the cat patterns on them. Millie had entered that age where she often asked all the difficult questions of the universe. Are the sun and the moon friends or enemies? Do aliens go to the bathroom?

Why do other kids have a dad, but I don't?

Ding!

"Here's our stop," Aria said.

After dropping Millie off at grandma's house, Aria hopped back on the bus and waited for it to bring her to work. She gazed out the window and sighed. The city was winding down while she was just beginning her 12-hour shift. The bags under her eyes carried enough stories to tell to the stars. Sleep was just an elusive dream at that point.

Ding!

As Aria exited the bus, she dashed past a group of five nurses who were relishing a smoke break. Aria always wondered why her fellow healthcare workers would pollute their pink lungs, but she wasn't hellbent on judging. Stress is a pervasive beast. Paranoia is a sneaky shadow that never leaves you alone. Uncertainty makes your mind spin in circles.

The moment Aria strapped on her mask and walked through the hospital's sliding doors, all she could think about was how she couldn't wait to pick up Millie in the morning, then go home and change. In fact, she had a feeling that a lot of things were about to change. And that's when she had to ask herself her own difficult question: Will tonight be the night?

Arko Datta & Ankita Banerjee

Homecoming

"Start from the beginning", she said.

One of those days, while cleaning out my grandfather's closet, to sell the stuff with the rest of his belongings, I found a journal from the time he had left home to take part in the last Great War.

On the first page he wrote, "I hid under a thick layer of snow, waiting for my death. I don't know how long it had been since the last shot was fired. Suddenly, I heard a vehicle approaching; then another one; and another one. I didn't know if it was the rescue team or the end. I remembered my mother; my sweet, gentle mother...whose last memory of her youngest son perhaps will forever be the train fading away."

You see, I know it for a fact that my grandfather didn't die that night. He had a lot of things still left to do, not the least of which was to sing *Always Remember Us This Way* on my wedding; it was the song he and grandma had their first dance to. I have heard that it had snowed on their wedding night too. It was a different world.

The last time it had snowed in Boston was the day I was born.

I remember the scent of it; or was it my mother? I can't say. She died that night taking away a part of me with her. "If you believe in magic, it happens. Look, you have made the snowfall in October!" were her last words to me, I was later told.

The first time I heard the story, when I was eleven years old. I spent that summer, at grandpa's garage, trying to turn his old, broken Fiat into a time machine.

I wanted to see if physics could make magic happen.

And it did, you know; I was in one of the trucks that night when my grandfather hid under the pile of snow in Alsace.

"The young soldier who held me by my waist and helped me walk back to safety last night reminded me so much of my father. The same green eyes, burning like the sun as the headlights of the truck hit us. I felt safe wrapped in those arms, like it was home."

I reread the paragraph and couldn't help but laugh.

Only if he knew...

I remember sometimes grandpa would tell me how I reminded him of the soldier who had helped him that night. There were so many times when I wanted to tell him, but I couldn't. It would have made things more complicated.

And things already were.

I am not complaining, though. This is the life I have chosen. Lives...the lives I have chosen: the doctor who failed to save his own mother, the soldier who saved his grandfather, the friend who...Lili wasn't my fault, though.

If time travel has taught me anything, it is the truth that some things you cannot change, and some things you shouldn't.

But Lili had no choice. The day they made me sign the NDA, she was lying down under my chair; eyes closed, ears resting. Tim held my hand and said, "The mission is greater than everything we own."

"But I don't own her, she chose me" I told him, knowing fully well, none of my reasons will ever be enough.

He repeated the same set of reasons I was told so many times in the past few weeks: that Lili was old; that there was no other way; that there was so much at stake; that China was trying to hack our system again; that we can't lose this time.

So, on 12th May, 2053 I had to say good bye to Lili. But the next day I travelled to TOI 700 d myself, to save her.

You see, I have always hated interplanetary time travel. I still do. Sometimes I wish I hadn't stumbled upon the means to travel time. Then again, the New World wouldn't have existed without it. So, I can't complain aloud.

I had left for TOI 700 d on 13th May, 2053 and reached there on 12th May, 2040. Then it began: my organs suddenly wanted to shut off, everything had become blurry, and bright, and excessively loud. I had spent the following 12 hours in a sleep chamber in order to stay alive.

But then I met Lili and everything was worth it. She was happy to see me too. In fact, she had tried to jump on me to offer one of her famous warm licks. Our face protectors had collided, and after three more tries, she had finally accepted defeat.

"Dumb as a dog, that one," I heard Tim's voice. I couldn't help but laugh. Thirteen years later - on that exact day - that very man would cry like a child when we had sent Lili to her final sleep."

I stopped to catch my breath. The light inside my head was trickling down to my bones. The woman nudged my hand and asked me to keep talking.

"Well, unless everything had gone according to my plan, we didn't have to let go of Lili. I had again calculated all the risks of setting her free, all the discoveries we would forget that we had ever made; but none of those worth her life. She shouldn't have paid for our fuck-ups. *"The mission is greater than everything we own"* my foot, Tim.

I just needed a plan. I had to somehow manage to convince them that she may not be as useful as we had thought. Given everything she had already proven she was capable of, it was not going to be easy. The plan was bound to fail, but I had no idea about the scale of it.

The memories of it still haunt me.

As I have already said, some things you must not change.

"In the bleakest of times, men must stand tall for what they believe in. For when they burn your homes and take away the remains of your dignity, you have no other choice but fight. Even when you know your bullets are only hitting the shadow of this far-reaching fascist system, you must keep up the fight. Otherwise, what's the point?" grandpa had written in one of the last pages of his diary.

I looked at his words and asked myself, what would he have said if he knew on May 13, 2040 I went back to the 18th Street station in search of Lili and found myself stuck in a paradox to the point of no return? Was there a point trying to change the past?

I remember stumbling through the rust of darkness, looking for any sound of life. I searched for a whimpering puppy shriveling under the radiation coming from the overhead nuclear power plant. I had to save her before the neutrons changed her forever. Without her ability to pass through the negative mass, no one in the organization would have considered sending a blind dog on such a mission.

I searched the high and low for days, until I found Lili trapped between the tracks at the far end of the closed subway station. I carried her in my arms and ran towards the exit.

But I didn't consider the odds of my action. When I reached the Vet, he said I was too late.

Lili's fate was sealed the day I had found her...or is it her fate that had brought me to her? I still want to believe that her death was not my fault. I have been stuck in this loop for too long. I have tried innumerable scenarios, none of which has her breathing by the end. I guess you cannot save someone who has already died, like Lili, like my mother.

I could save grandpa from the ambush that night, perhaps because he was still alive. I now realize that he was always going to survive the war, because I was already there to save him at every point in time.

I can't say the same for my mother. She was dead the moment I was born. It doesn't matter how many times I go back as her doctor, I was predestined to be an orphan, because my birth was the reason she lost her life. The only way she could survive is if I was never conceived, and I cannot make that happen as I already exist. We call it the Grandfather Paradox, and it doesn't allow me to learn the touch of my mother, her love, if she would be proud of me for changing the world forever.

All I had in this terrible world are my grandfather and Lili, and both of them are irreparably gone now. Perhaps, it's time for me to leave this place too and live in the past where I still have them."

The woman sitting in front of me signaled me to stop talking. She was in her thirties, wearing a plain trouser and white shirt. When she came to speak to me this morning the first thing I noticed was her tiny smile that brimmed with kindness. It reminded me of Lili so bad, that I wanted to run away from her, from my house, from the remains of grandpa. But then I remembered what Tim had said the other day. "The people from childcare services look a certain way when dealing with kids like you. They will try to make you talk, which I think you should" he opined in his typical know-it-all voice.

I will miss him once they will take me away. With Lili gone, Tim is the only friend I have got.

The woman cleared her throat and asked, "Where did you learn about time travel and that paradox?" She was sitting on the stool grandpa used while working in the garage. In a notebook she was writing something throughout the time I told her my story. I wish I could see it; I wish I could know if she thinks I am a nutcase.

But I said nothing. I kept playing with the cubic, looking down. I was exhausted with all the talking. I didn't want them to take me away from the only home I have and put me in foster care.

"Sweetheart..." the woman tapped on my knees. "Don't get me wrong, I believe you. I just want to know how an eleven -years old knows how time travelling works?"

I sighed and told her about *A Wrinkle in Time*. It was the first book grandpa had gifted me. "Lili was my Charles Wallace Murry" I murmured. "Until the day the truck ran over her across the street" I pointed to the place through the garage window.

"I see. What about Tim? The guy you mentioned worked with you on a secret space travel mission?" she went on. She was still scribbling something in her notebook and looked at me with narrow, piercing eyes when I spoke.

"For every great, impossible mission to work, you need an O'keefe. That is Tim to me. Please don't take me away from the only friend I have!" I cried.

She came up to sit by my side on the bed. I liked the way she gently held my shoulder and softly said, "It's okay. I will make sure Tim comes with you wherever you are going".

A house staff knocked on the door right then. The woman was called away. In a hurry she left the notebook on the table. I quickly closed the door of my cabin and opened it.

On the last page she wrote - "Tim still believes that he is at home. I haven't been able to figure out who he thinks he is."

The day I know, I will perhaps let her in on the secret.

Poetry



Guest Editorial

Spring - Summer of Tumult

The much awaited futuristic Year 20-20 arrived masked and hooded, and in an unprecedented turn of events found us enacting 'STATUE' like children back in the day, rooted to our spots! Going nowhere, yet strangely huddled as co-passengers in a long dark tunnel, we seem frozen in the face of a virus. As the daunting experiences and emotions of spring-summer '20 are being processed, some of it emerges in our writing. Fortunately **April**, the *poetry writing month*, seemed determined to keep us focused on creative realms with its daily demand for poetry.

It was Earth Day, April 22, when I wrote the invitation to experiment with form and delight in its possibilities, outlining 'A New World', as our theme for this issue.

There's a mysterious quality about form in poetry that leads the mind into hidden recesses inaccessible otherwise, opening out into spaces perceived and comprehended while working with form. Words and thoughts coalesce in illumined designs reached by narrow winding routes, a precarious path and all the more precious for making it there ! Yes, some forms can pose a challenge, and are difficult to negotiate, but the joy of arrival, say with the perfect 'Sestina', is quite unparalleled. Like hiking on an uphill trail, and then gazing down in wonder!

It is such a delight to read the submissions replete with beautiful forms, and the way poets have gone all out and were not afraid to experiment. Established and emerging voices from diverse ethnicities, age-groups, cultural & religious affiliations and academic attainments have sent us their work, making it richly-layered and inclusive. *Free verse*, the voice of the new world has finally been accorded its own space alongside established form. This was a happy though belated decision, halfway through the editorial process .

Sonnets, ghazals, sestinas, tercets, limmerick, the succinct haiku & tanka, prose poems, haibun, vers libre and translation are braided together in a resonant hum of hope in this issue.

To conclude, poetry has kept its promise this tumultuous spring-summer of 'twenty, when the world lost touch. In a torrential downpour verse has seeped into hearts and wielded its magic touch, and you just had to look around and marvel at the burgeoning virtual festivals and new literary magazines, to touch glimmering strands of hope!

My thanks to *Narrow Road Founding Editors Paresh Tiwari, Rohini Gupta, and Raamesh Gowri Raghavan*, for this wonderful experience as *Guest Editor - Narrow Road*.

Smeetha Bhoumik

Sestina

Gail Tyson

Borderland

The corner window seat becomes a moor
when Maggie lies there. Bred into her bones,
her instinct – spotting predators – now turns
on Fed-Ex uniforms, Brownies weighed down
with Thin Mints, pizza trucks. Fury unleashed,
she hurtles from window to door and back

while I bleat and bleat, *Stop barking!* Her back –
hackles high as a Mohawk – denotes more
vigilance than when she wears a leash.
I'm much the same, loving the chance to bone
up on new accounts, bored when I stare down
familiar ways. Watch border collies turn

away, run a wide arc, and then return
the flock, the way I herd projects, fetch back
the big idea to the gentler downs
of teamwork. Or did. These days I feel unmoored,
my desk looming before me, a few bones
there to pick. For me, being unleashed

isn't the same as taking Maggie off leash,
my desk a mudflat where I counsel terns
instead of clients, mark time, rather than bone
a problem like a fish. If I could turn back
the tides, would Maggie choose a highland moor
on the Borders, where she could lie face-down

in fresh-scented heather, place a paw down
in each country, as free of a short leash
as I am – these days – of the mores
of my profession? One working dog can turn
more sheep than three men, a thrill in the back
country, where Fidos prove their bona

fides like I've done, those rural bon
vivants, until their energy wears down
and they're retired – a clear-cut edge, not backed
into a corner office, hours unleashed
to prey where wool gathers, time-tufts turning

a file-swept desk into a place of mourning.

Ready for the bone yard? Not yet, we're lashed
to old habits we have down pat. When work turns
up, we back off what's boundless. What could be *more*.

Jaclyn Youhana

And, Oh, We Knew We Were Endless

Picture it: Five college students chain-smoking
and me and my virgin-pure lungs on a balcony built for two.
I wanted to be like them, so I ducked into my memory,
flipped the switch ON, a biological Nikon to record
less the outlines (surgical) but the feeling (loose), less slurrword sound
but text-book, jurored, high-court fact: Drunk people give the best high

fives, a cracking oh-yes approval, stumbled like toddlers waist-high,
but wasted. Now an adult who's been drunk before, I keep that smoking
space framed on the mantel, where I spy the spotlight guy who sounds
like your favorite professor, the one who impressed upon the two
hemispheres of your gray matter – left and right, calculus and poetry. This record
of the midnight lecturer is a swirl of cotton candy need inside the April memory.

To go there today, to roadtrip with those springed-bloom memories
that sound like the wind knocking together the leaves in the highest
trees, I hold my breath and count to three: There. His glasses black like record
albums. Fingerless gloves. Little eyes. On paper, he's no smokin'
man, as in gorgeous, but everyone wants in his bed. Maybe it's the two
sideburns, scragged strips that speak in shrugs, or the beard that sounds

like those new leaves – percussive booms and rhythmic ease. A sound
wish is granted by the 21-year-olds' lords: Love and Memories.
There's nothing else to fill our empty vessels but those two.
Professor Sideburns tips his head to the India ink sky, sips his Miller High
Life. I watch a ciggy waggle, inch-long ash: Someone forgot she's smoking,
so caught up in his story – you would be, too. The prof tells his recording

from one time at an orphanage, his recording
of the children's echoes from another dimension, sound
like rain-swollen clouds, like birds chirping in another room, like smoking,
but just the exhalation. He swears he doesn't think of it, won't keep the memory
at front of mind, a store of f-stops and dark room chemicals, but in back – a high
whine, lo-fi tremor that waits for the witching hour, 2

in the bloody morn, when the vision packs the most fright: two
handprints on the side of his car, tiny handprints, kid ghosts recorded
on accident: *Here I am. Don't forget me.* To obey, he gets high
off pipe tobacco sweet like Fig Newtons and tells us their howlsounds
of science, a spectral dimension, holdless and limitless memory.
We are the first to live this college gloaming – a fantasy smoke-

colored, the tint of the eve's high moon – and the night is made of rubies. Two
hours or less, that's all it took for smoky proofs and pie charts to confirm: The record
of the storyteller, the sound of the night, is me and my greedy memory.

Samuel Nzebor

Preacher of Love

i. about a year ago, I found a lady,
whose eyes wore the shades of jealousy.
I went to her, thinking it'd be easy.
unfortunately, she rained hell on me.
I tried to explain myself to her,
but found myself preaching love.

ii. her ebony skin glowed, and my eyes were filled with love.
I had found the perfect lady;
& all of my heart welcomed her.
other girls weaved a sign of kisses; I could sense jealousy
trying to smuggle a kiss of betrayal on me.
Forgiveness they say, is never easy.

iii. But what is easy,
is falling in love.
hot tears patiently waited for me,
& a cold bottle of betrayal was to be served by my lady.
why feed her with jealousy,
when you can't even satisfy her?

iv. every morning, God appeared before her.
praying in the dead of the night was easy,
so long sleep didn't give in to jealousy.
God is love;
God blessed my lady,
and God blessed me.

v. soon, a skyscraper of complaints was falling on me.
I failed to look at her,
& the mirror reflection of my lady.
to see was no longer easy,
and a hole in the heart replaced the love
I thought could overwhelm God's jealousy.

vi. she wasn't full of jealousy;
she had emptied them inside of me.
out of hate, I demolished the found city of love,
& offered the rubbles to her.
in the end, it wasn't easy
walking away from a twifaced lady.

right now, jealousy wears a clothe of defence on her.
there's nothing left for me, but to go easy
on the shattered love escaping on the wings of my lady.

Ambika Talwar

Svarna: Envoy to the New World

Here is a story raging in cradle of red licks of fires.
Once a long while ago in silence as Time tossed,
an old wise hum wove a dream we desire for refuge.
Traveling vagabonds were from a good pious tribe
lost in subterfuge deceived by eclipsed moon,
bruised cast out of homes and into a vast cauldron.

Scattered weak afraid, they stood at rim of cauldron,
no map guiding them away from ferocious fires.
Nightly White Owl's shrill call woke her under the moon.
Grim sad-faced ashen, she rose, cloak she tossed
onto her bare boney shoulders and gazed at her tribe –
all tired but one smiled, sparked hope for love's refuge.

Her eyes caught this single man's hunger for refuge
as moon-light circled jagged edges of mad cauldron
not welded but space to lean in for this sullen tribe.
Faces muddy scratched lit up by surrounding fires,
sighs cradling her cloak, Svarna called aloud – tossed
copper coins high in wild light of still waking moon.

*Who will sing our song under this shifting moon?
Who wants salted earth-flavored broth, bed for refuge?
What will you do but bury your only self as tossed
pieces of broken offal – into a desire-less cauldron?
Wake up! We must find hidden narrow road – Hungry fires
rage in my heart. Are we not the dreaming tribe?*

Subtle thrill lifted sagging shoulders, chin rose of tribe
once creators of arts – manifest mirrors of sacred moon
whose inspirations lit up rivers, becalmed mad fires.
Once blinded wounded lusting, they lost love's refuge.
Sly demonic trickery lured them into hungry cauldron
where voice was made mute – broken roots tossed.

With faces dusty a-glimmer, some raised, some tossed
their arms to catch dust of settling stars – symbol of tribe
dawn of new creation. At her call, they carved cauldron
into small pieces – Now each would weave theirs with moon
beaten into cosmic hour's peach, complex color of refuge.
Breath was anew – resolution strong as creative fires.

Pleased at new cauldrons' shapes, Svarna shone full as moon;
Cloak she tossed high – it became pen, sword, lamp for tribe.
New refuge is Love – blessed alive by fierce peace of fires.

Smeetha Bhoumik

In Step with Cirrus

A magic burst of Cirrus slowly floats along as I decide to step outside frozen notions that enclose me in shells, and outside is a whole new world of beginnings, of ends, of new shells, the crusts of which wait to be broken open; much like this old frame, flying around in mystic, circular symbols of love, whispering wordless fiery old odes that dissolve fear.

Before turbulence, everything was serene and quiet and no fear choked out life, my breath a cool & easy flamingo step playing with a truant breeze ! There's so much to think of, so much to do, all new invigorating notions of 'outside' also very much 'within'. Demanding notions set the frame, now that I see them in true light - new horizons, the

light is a soft glow of knowing. Clouds form and melt away, the doubts come and go, hours stay seeped in love, no fear touches inner sanctums where thoughts birth. This frame exalts itself in a vivid lucent widening embrace with every step erasing boundaries, bringing the inside closer to the outside, and the other way round too, so there's no difference to speak of!

Meeting you in those mysterious woods, by the stream of moonlit dreams, was it a fragment of my imagination? The scent of flowers on my breath say otherwise, they're outside, but seem to be centred in my very being, No fear, shuts out their fragrance and with each passing step a heady scent wafts skywards into the Cirrus, outside the frame.

Chalk out a plan, draw a map then crumple and throw the frame into the sky, wait for it to slowly circle back with words of love, inking the right path, blocking out the rest, so you step gingerly at first, for you wanted something else, didn't you? The best awaits you without your knowing as you circle the fear going around in devastated circles seeking happiness outside !

It is inside of you, you knew it all along too. Outside is just a chimera, a mere shadow of what is within, its frame a bulwark of old habits that die hard. Difficult to let go of fear though, so sail on a cloud, ride a dream, catch a handful of rainbow and never let it go, no matter the dark forces that threaten and thwart your every step.

Spread your sparkle with each step as the frame lifts fear
far above distant horizons, in invisible tiny specks,
and sailing on Cirrus & Cumulus, you feel blessed !

Ghazal

Jennifer Hambrick

Fire

in a raging fire swirls your breath
in the wind's fingertips I feel your breath

like a strand of priceless opals
lacing my neck, warm from your breath

like a lover untouched by rain
unseen by stars I desire your breath

bathed in the waves of our secret sea
unveiled in your wake I inhale your breath

like a lover loosing her hair from a tower
in silver moonlight I am drunk with your breath

like a needle stitching a seam of sky
with a shining thread I become your breath

the cloth of your flames engulfs my soul
I am no more, I am your breath

Sufia Khatoon

Call out my name

If you find the alleys barren and your palms aching
 call out my name
If the room of your mind is haunted by its quiet
 call out my name
If your eyes are tired of looking inside the periphery
 call out my name

If your tongue is enraged with disappointments
 call out my name
If your midnight lips shake with sudden fear
 call out my name
If your feet are hesitant to trace the darkness outside
 call out my name

If your lungs are gasping for air in madness
 call out my name
If your heart is sinking inside separation
 call out my name
If you have found insomnia settling in your bosoms
 call out my name

If your body fails to find handful of soil to rest in
 call out my name
If your purpose is weighed down by defeat
 call out my name
If you crave the reason to love yourself again
 call out my name

Ammar Aziz

Since ages we are locked.
In cages, we are locked.

We are unpublished words.
On pages, we are locked.

An unknown woman cries.
And rages: 'We are locked'.

You cannot set us free.
In stages, we are locked.

Some gods, goddesses,
And mages – we are locked.

The moment we make love –
It changes: we are locked.

My father, who's scared,
Assuages: we are locked.

Tushar Rishi

Quarantine

I sang ghazals for sweet love before this quarantine,
I tried again, my couplets ran indoors this quarantine.

In temples I sought explanations for this plague,
All I heard was God snore, this quarantine.

Rich or poor, we are in this together, you say,
Do tell what kept us apart before this quarantine.

Old men sleep on the pavement behind Red Fort,
I wish my verses could open doors, this quarantine.

Time on our hands, money in our banks, the middle
class will be luxuriously bored this quarantine.

And I, Tushar, sitting alone, writing to you,
I hope you think about others more, this quarantine.

Shruti Sareen

In the Woods

Beside the lake, beneath the trees in the woods
Murmuring humming buzzing bees in the woods

No daffodils, but lantana- red orange yellow pink
Music, songs and love float on a breeze in the woods

Children run jump dance and play in joy
No school rules, no school fees in the woods

The birds know no caste and the deer no politics
Human ideas of money power privilege freeze in the woods

There's no lies, malice, selfish greed in the forest
No oil pollution petrol diesel grease in the woods

A big bright rainbow hangs splendid in the sky
Across the field, a flock of geese in the woods

No dairy cows are traumatised beyond horror
Because nobody eats cheese in the woods.

Hues of orange pink purple blue red green
Peacocks and their mates tease in the woods.

The sun sets like a jewel, beyond the hill
The world is so beautiful, oh jeez, in the woods

Birds chirp and twitter, rabbits and squirrels hop
Life gets a new lease in the woods

Can we leave the muck and rot, create a new world
Won't you come and live, says Shruti, please, in the woods?

Sahana Mukherjee

*For the grief of azure and the debris of sea between us.
For the slime of the bower, this sighing tree between us.*

At the end of the seventh day, every beggar comes undone.
Who'll bear it well – *and how?* – this lying plea between us?

After the rain swept clean last month's straining leftovers,
I could touch – *couldn't you too?* – this dying decree between us.

Now that you have knelt to the halo of your own defeat,
I count every detour it took – the old flying glee between us.

First light of freedom comes seeping through the cracks of
a drought city; everything now is flaming free between us.

I wandered last night till the shadow of your summer door.
Of memory without absence no one did foresee between us.

Sonnet

Jagari Mukherjee

Quarantine Veils: A Sonnet in Terza Rima

My home is a curtain on the new world's stage,
drawn, closed, heavy with blue velvet.

I look at its deep cerulean age

and dream of the skies yet.

The printed masks I wear turn
into watercolors, whose palette

I dissemble in as I learn

to conjure yellow flowers and plants green.

Red birds of paradise, too, I discern.

I change forms in every scene.

Behind the veils of curtain and mask,

I shift my shapes in between.

Truth and lies are the golden husk
of imagination; in it I bathe and bask.

Jennifer Hambrick

Decadent Sonnet

caught in the wings
of a vulture is this memory that hulks
at my door frame and begs you
are the only one who drops the dose
of second chances and you know why
I need it the dust of broken bones
surrounds me even though the wind
keeps blowing junk gouges tracks
all over me scars don't make you
stronger only thicker you stare
down these monsters, smooth their
angled eyes and they don't hurt you
even though you know they look
for all the vein-bruised world like me

Jennifer writes "My decadent sonnets play with the "sonnet idea" by problematizing different aspects of the genre, turning the genre on its ear".

Zainab Ummer Farook

Sulaimani Sonnet

Amused, you watch me sing praise of tea
laced with lemon, mired in sugar, crowned
with a sprig of mint. I marvel at its tang,
how its balm trickles into stricken throats.

It's hard to get *sulaimani*wrong, you claim.
All too prone to error, my hands demur –
when has it taken much for things to sour?
A slip. A spill. Light sharpens, its bite stings.

And yet, a lifetime steeped in this world,
its citrine certainties, doesn't prepare me
for the suddenness of you. The deftness
of your hands straining the last of the tea

leaves me stunned, brewing a slow affection.
Its namelessness tastes soft on my tongue.

Radha Chakravarty

The Key

When home is a prison and fear is no stranger,
When loved ones are distanced, and the air chokes our breath,
When touch can be toxic and closeness means danger,
When we struggle alone with the meaning of death,

When the virus runs rampant, with no cure in sight,
When the whole world tries vainly to control the spread,
When despair goes viral, and we crave for the light,
When old certainties crumble, the mind fills with dread.

But when faces are masked, truth can shed its disguise
When the clamour falls silent, a voice speaks within,
When the world sinks in darkness, we see with new eyes,
When habit is broken, let new journeys begin.

As the old world recedes, we must search for a key
To unlock the future, a new world, more free.

Trishita Das

harbour

when I've outgrown my feet and every place I've ever seen drunk,
I'll come back to this city and smell the saltwater brine.
I'll fill my pockets with lilac shells and become a pendulum
caught between the sea and the precarious edge of the skyline.
i want to put down roots somewhere that's s a nowhere,
somewhere to grow up, grow old and grow forgotten in,
build a house made up of the treasure-chest of my depth;
perhaps I'll become rooted in myself once again.
I'll remember everything fondly and wait for everything
to happen again. I'll write today into the gaps between all words
so that it carries on, so that it never stops happening.
I'll photograph my bubbling tongue over and over and afterwards
the salt will linger. there will be nothing to waste
as body memory; I'll remember this city by its taste.

Limericks

Gautam Nadkarni

There once was a thief in his prime,
Was quite specialized in his crime...
On his nocturnal knocks
He would steal only clocks...
And now he's in jail doing time.

In Scotland a Sikh with a turban,
Once went to a pub quite suburban;
They laughed at his folly--
God gosh! Oh, my golly!...
When he ordered a large peg of Bourbon.

There was a young physicist, Bishen,
Who claimed he was one with a mission;
He drank heavy water---
Poured some for his daughter---
And went with a bang in the fission.

There once was a stuntman called Ness,
Who flew in a 'copter no less;
Though compact in height,
He leapt from a height..
Now his comrades are mopping the mess.

There was an old Parsee called Pesi,
Who dressed up in shirts very lacy;
He'd insist that his wife
Eat with fork and a knife...
But as for his drinks they were desi.

At a New Year's Eve party quite frisky,
As he brandished his sword (very risky!),
Swore a Sikh "I now choose
To lay off the booze..."
And toasted the resolve with whisky.

A prospector filled by the jitters,
Found all is not precious that glitters;
He traded his gold
And treasures untold ---
For a packet of potato fritters.

There was an old gentleman, Nick,
Who taught his pet ass every trick;
Some said he was vain ---
Some called him insane ---
But the point was he got quite a kick.

A driver who'd had quite a few
Was stopped by the constable, Hru;
To the drunk raged the copper:
"This is truly improper..."
And demanded his share of the brew.

In a limerick a lady named Lily
Once went for a ride on a filly...
They came from the ride
With Lily topside...
Which readers all dismiss as silly.

Tercets

Amita Sarjit Ahluwalia

A New World

A Utopia
We all dream of it and yet
It's nowhere near

For Concordia
Nations seeking Harmony
Ah! Euphonia

Shun Discordia
No more Wars, Displacements
Ataraxia

Darkness disappear
Fight Despair Nature repair
Light inner Diya

Hygeia, Althea
Post - Covid let sense prevail
Let us heal Gaia

Lina Krishnan

Chantal's Fifty

While the house sleeps, I lie awake
Made restless by a snatch of rain
Thunder in the air, perhaps

Rabutin-Chantal's words return
'There are twelve hours in the day
And above fifty in the night'

Standing at the window, I notice
Twin sentinel lamps casting a square light
Among the dark trees

Leaves at their feet, rustle
With anonymous life
And the owl wings by, soundless

Such riches, unsought
There's more to night
Than the world dreams of

Baisali Chatterjee Dutt

Monsoon 2020

It's one of those days.
And it's been one of those days
for two whole weeks now.

The humidity charges at you like an angry mob.
When the cloud's imprisoned drops finally break free --
the world simply sighs.

Trees sway to Malhar,
the composed mantle of earth cracks
and doesn't care about the scar.

The world shivers like an item number
as a frisson of delight
passes through the core.

But the rains. These much-longed-for rains.
They seep deep into my lungs
and I gasp for breath.

Like sponges,
they greedily soak up moisture
and I'm waterlogged.

Seasonal asthmatic.
Wheezing insomniac.
My yearly metamorphosis is complete.

This year, a year like no other,
I navigate the twin fatalities
Of poisoned rain and air.

They change me, these rains.
No gyrating with wind, trees, rain.
I am betrayed.

The rains push me into quicksand
While the air outside
is a pulsating minefield my lungs must navigate.

Betrayed by body.
Crushed like an earthworm into the mud.
Semi-alive, fully broken.

And yet...it is the rains that I long for.
Even if it means that the breaths
you take for granted, can never be mine.

I am grateful
for every unlaboured breath.
They are my blessings.

For what is life
without beauty, without pain,
without poetry?

Did you know this?
Were you aware of this sublime truth? --
Poets are masochists.

The rains, merely an excuse
for self-flagellation.
The outpouring of words, a side effect.

Tanka
& Other Five Line Short Poems

Pamela A. Babusci

forgiveness

*A Tanka Sequence *

growing up
i always felt like
an orphan
i sit alone praying
grandmother's rosary

where i do fit in?
abandonment
issues
still lingering
like hurtful words

forgiveness is a gift
like love
cleansing mud
from a lotus
i am purified

gazing
at blue water lilies
i find grace
within their
stillness

a shooting star
i breathe in
compassion
i exhale
judgment

Sudeshna Rana

life as I knew it
gathers dust
on my bookshelves -
the phone beeps
in my hand

feet made for
glass slippers runaway . . .
catcalls and catwalks -
all hear the
chimes at midnight

Haiku
Three Line Short Poems & Related Forms

Arvinder Kaur

quarantine...
reading bedtime stories
to imaginary grandchildren

layers of snow...
all the years
i longed for you

cloud cover -
the gradual fading
of mother's vision

Don Baird

without a mask –
a stray cat taps
the sliding door

hummingbird . . .
she ignores the notion
of social distance

early spring;
the mockingbird
out of sync

young voice –
hanging on, but
still in the nest

last light;
a few dogs bark
the sun away

Don Baird

Passing Star

A haiku Sequence

the world
through windows
silent

every thought
seeks its freedom
waning moon

Shiki –
writing about life
from his bed

sleepless . . .
the sad song of a
mockingbird

singing tree . . .
nothing settles
this evening

dream state . . .
the long slow glow
of pain

gentle breeze . . .
the last leaf blows
into a mirage

Rashiana Singh

meditations

her wails echo
on the ocean floor-
waxing and waning

kite soars...
into nothingness
from nothing

cracked egg shells
inside wicker baskets-
not alone

white lotus
floating in a vessel-
empty mind

emblems...
sparrows in flight
sing my song

Baisali Chatterjee Dutt

origami cranes
sadly deformed –
an overflowing trashbin

chin cupped in hand
eyes follow the fly,
boredom settles on my nose

old dog
many new tricks
...a plethora of online courses

old songs
pour out of the ear –
the tea is sweet though

Nishi Pulugurtha

the brown leaf between
barbed wires that draw borders stuck
held up and hanging

thorns on the green stem
pink blooms at all times cheerful
amid the prickly

roots of that old tree
outspread bending standing tall
alone for years now

melancholy day
as dusk and darkness settles
the sky turns dank dark.

beautiful green worm
crawling eating wrecking the
plant it feeds to death

Samrudhi Dash

Strands of Hope

The scintillating glow of an ivory moon swept up the small figure hunched over an empty canvas. Tiny bottles of dried paint, a few old brushes and a chipped bone china saucer peeling colours lined up in a corner, illumined by a small oil lamp. She brushed aside her golden strands and dipping a forlorn brush into a bottle, started running strokes over the canvas. Tears dripping like fresh dew mingled with the paint as colours bled to life, rimming over the canvas, tinting her cheeks. She smiled through the effervescence of emotions coming to life in art. Finding hope in broken dreams, stitching them together with sequins of a love that blossomed like a Phoenix over the fires of adversity, she was an alchemist who spun magic out of the discarded and derelict. A spectacular dawn kissed slivers of moonlight, dancing to the symphony of a serenade of stars. Something about this freshly painted poster told her that sometime soon an apocalypse was coming, heralding a new dawn, a better tomorrow – promises galore, hope unbound.

*a neverland heart
blooms in the wilderness -
breathing freedom*

Prose Poems

Neera Kashyap

The Leap

Only when prime was past did thinking Mouse see grabbing Crow as predator.
Was Death the cawing of a crummy gloomy shadowy one-eyed neighbour?
From his hole, Mouse took to studying maggots and one that grew into a blue bottle fly.
Bigger than the others, it was louder, muckier and could somersault in great blue circles.
For this, his duller smaller kin - who only leapt - led him to Spider's sticky shiny spittle.
In a web that danced, Mouse saw six flies snapped up; droning lazily above - Blue Bottle.
Mouse called Blue into his hole, shed Death, and dreamed he'd send Blue flying to Sun.
Dancing in circles, blue body bathed in rainbow bolts, still higher - bolts of fiery orange.
Blue could only somersault, not leap - nor learn to leap - for he did not know to learn.
For months, Mouse spun stories: of winner wingless Wasp who shed all desire to fly;
Of slithering Snake who shed skin, hood, a thousand eyes but could not shed his mind.
Of the forest battle between scorpions and flies; that Scorpion, like Crow, would ever Be.
Mouse smelt bread, tripped out, bit weakly into gold; the trap shut, his tail snapped in two.
With pleasure-pain he saw Blue leap into a beam - to vanish in Sun's million motes of dust.

Zach Murphy

Foxes and Coyotes

The tulips grew apart from each other that Spring. The ground cracked and crumbled in ways that I'd never seen before.

I watched the foxes and the coyotes battle all Summer on Cesar Chavez Boulevard, where the blood would leave permanent stains on the concrete. The reckless packs would flash their teeth, mark their territories, and steal more than just scraps.

Me, I was a squirrel. I was small. But I was agile. I hustled from sunup until sundown at a frenetic pace. I always minded my own business and stuck to my own path. I didn't want to get involved with the vicious nature of pack mentality.

My best friend was a squirrel, too. We grew up around same nest. We used to climb trees, chase tails, and break soggy bread together. We'd walk the wires between safety and danger. And when we got too deep into the mess, we'd get out just in time. Growing up, I always wondered if we would live long enough to die from old age, or if the environment and its elements would get to us first.

That Fall, my best friend got caught up with the foxes and the coyotes. Now he's gone.

The foxes and the coyotes lied low in the Winter. Me, I trotted across the frozen ground and desperately hoped I'd see my best friend's footprints once again.

Kavita Ezekiel Mendonca

Banyan Tree Dreams

In a recurring dream, I'm teaching school under the Banyan tree in an Indian village. The village children are playing 'Here we go round the Mulberry Bush,' swinging on the long roots, warmed by the sun and cooled by the shade; open-air games are more fun. They are singing a Nursery Rhyme I've taught them in English. Their voices are sweet, with faces full of innocence. Their accents quaint and refreshing.

The Banyan Tree stands strong and silent. It's a kind of 'Monarch of all I survey.' It does not speak, it possesses silent, infinite knowledge. It is the Master teacher. I've read that the Banyan Tree is a good source of oxygen. Breathing the pure air will fill the heart and mind. The flow of knowledge is easy and becomes purified.

I have photographs of my children standing under an old Banyan Tree in Mexico. Those pictures were special. The tree seemed to love having them there. It wrapped them in a loving embrace and sheltered them from the hot Mexican sun.

Trees communicate to other trees through their roots. They have their own language. My roots have started talking to me, calling to me in nightly dreams, and by day. I must obey their wishes. Trees have a heartbeat. My heart beats in rhythm with the trees. It beats peacefully under the Banyan Tree. It is the heartbeat of Poetry. I am at peace.

The Banyan tree looks like a woman with long braids. It reminds me of my mother. She had two long braids that fell below her hips. She washed her hair once a week and dried it in the sun. She braided it without looking in the mirror. Sun-dried hair. My mother was a teacher too. Like me, she taught in stone classrooms in buildings with few windows. From one of my classrooms you could see a beautiful old tree, almost like a painting. From another, you could see a long train with many carriages. The train whistled its music, and the birds sang their songs and played their mischief.

I loved the tree and the train. I wished it were a Banyan Tree. The birds in the tree seemed to look inside the classroom, and the train whistle sounded sweet and romantic to my ears. The driver waved to us, me and the children.

You cannot see the clouds for the thickness of the foliage of the Banyan Tree. Perhaps one or two with a silver lining may be visible. Of course, there would be birds. The sparrows and the mynas, and a peacock strutting proudly by. That would be pure art. The children could get out their slates and draw, using blue and green chalk for the feathers.

When we became thirsty, we could take a trip to the well. I've looked into a well, seen my reflection and heard my voice thrown back to me in echoes. Children would stay at a safe distance of course. Lunch under the Banyan tree would taste delicious, the flavors enhanced by the loving arms of the tree. Tree blessings are special. The temple beside the tree would add its blessings. The well water would wash down the food with its sweetness.

An Indian village is unbeatable in its beauty. I hope you will understand the bias. With my brown skin, the color of lightly muddied water, I feel a strong affinity to the village setting. I have a passion for teaching children. The village teachers taught under the Banyan Tree.

Sometimes there was no money to build classrooms. Perhaps those teachers had more wisdom to impart, a different kind of wisdom.

All thanks to the Banyan Tree, a silent witness to the desires and strivings of mankind. I hope my dream shapes itself into reality soon. Many early morning dreams do that quite often. Perhaps a myth I heard in my Indian childhood from grandmother.

Dr. Subhadeep Paul

Confinement: A Poem Un-versed

A thinking subject in a walled box. Isn't that what we all are? Perhaps those with wheels under their dreams could fly. Like birds. You have to pay for the rights of passage. Migrant workers and migratory birds are not the same. Some walk on endless viral roads, while mirages vaporise their homes. Some long to tread the dewy morning pitch with their Puma pump shoes. Some have lost the old rexine under their calloused soles. The homed sleep on the roofs, looking at the stars for answers. The homeless have made the canopy of stars their roof itself. You measured your life in Insta-pics. Globetrotting was your foremost status symbol. Your backpack was the only companion you cared for. Now you know what it is to be helpless and home alone. The old spines you left back as caretakers of your desi property. We are all pandemic patients now. We are the slaughter creatures, each destined for a different death-appointment, but on a common matador death-ride nonetheless. We are the sentenced jailbirds, biding their time. We are the acid attack victims, trauma-care interneers and correction-home inmates, waiting for a judgement. We await, in railway and police stations, lawyers' chambers, hospitals and government offices, for a certification. The State calls it co-morbidity. Our rooms become our morgues. We die inside a hard womb

Free Verse

Bruce McRae

Bone Orchard

Boxing in the bone orchard.
Wrestling dragons. Contesting gravity.
The breather who's smothering in oxygen.
Mind like a rift valley. Face like a moon.

I'm the village-saved-by-burning-it-down.
I'm the no-fool-like-an-old-fool.
The last-man-on-the-planet.
A four and a half billion year-old child
bent to the rod of self-destruction

Tuhin Bhowal

Vignette

– after Jeet Thayil

As a child I painted only one landscape. A hut,
a reticent tree, the river
in pastel wax. I was Monet from an aboriginal
land. The whole moon.
One night, we'll abandon this city. The moon
will dissolve after us.
Goodbye, bus stops, Tibetan joints. Goodbye,
lover, you, me.
Ciao, new debris.
And then? Years later in Florence, you will
arrive as the shrivelled
skin of a plum on my kitchen table.

Sarabjeet Garcha

Queen

In the middle of my life
I'm in the middle of a book.
A line on page ninety-nine
locks my gaze. I mock
the gravitas it wears, as if
a line could be queen.
I love the line. I feel
I wouldn't have existed
without it. But right now
it demands to be abandoned
because, closing my eyes, I see
a reader arrested by page ninety-nine
of the same book at the same time,
the same line looking at her.
At once I begin to link
the middle of her life with
the muddle that is mine.
She may be a decade or two
ahead or behind what's midlife to me.
Doesn't matter. On the screen
that my closed book has now become,
I see her elbow touch a fountain pen,
sending it on a roll towards
the table's edge. At this end
I bend to catch the falling object.
I know if it touched the floor,
the queen who isn't mine
would merge into the line
she rose from, and I'd again
be caught in the time warp
of page ninety-nine.

Sarabjeet Garcha

Spell

Only the indoors
of children's books
could see spring this time
The outdoors is under
the spell of a shadow

Open any page
You'll find at least one leaf
that you can make into a raft
and float in rivers rendered pristine

or use it as a flying carpet
and vanish into the closed sky
of the book

Just by touching
you can send a shiver
down the tree that became
this book's paper
The place where
that saintly tree stands
exists even today

Don't move your finger
on paper like the woodcutter
must have moved his
over the axe blade
Move it exactly like his daughter
sitting in a hut on a hill
must have moved hers
to pat her doll's hair
having lifted the veil

The girl must have said,
*Look at you! That's my little beauty,
but mind you, come what may,
you've got to stay
close to me at all times.*

Dad says,
*The outdoors is under
the spell of a shadow.
Only the indoors
of children's books
could see spring this time.*

Bhupesh Karmakar

The Ashram Life

I spent many years in the ashram,
which laid the foundation of
my spiritual journey.

I found many answers reading
religious books from
the ashram's library.

As I grew old, I stepped
away from the hustle
and bustle of city life
and stayed in the farm.

I felt at peace and was deeply
influenced while living in
the beautiful ashram.

Spiritual life removes grief and
depression.

I enjoyed every moment of life
in the ashram.

Spiritual life is not about changing
diet or lifestyle . Rather about expanding
our minds to accommodate pursuits.

To search for happiness and
to reach for happiness, we need
a good environment.

Bhupesh Karmakar

I Love Parrot

I was a pet lover from my childhood.

I brought a one-month old parrot
from the market.

Her eyes were innocent and her body
was shiny green.

The cute bird filled my life with new
colour and happiness.

Now, she is about nine months and
has started to talk.

I love this cute pet when she says
'Krishna-Krishna'.

One day, she was sitting on a tree
and suddenly flew away.

I was devastated and worried
she'd never return.

The little parrot came back on her
own to my home

I felt relieved and at peace.

Young Voices

Shilpa Bharti

Time – the surgeon with cutters and staple stood beside her,
cold needle pierce veins to fit hormone jewels, uterus canals hover,
blood made it through throbbing pelvic warehouse – adolescence forge
girl's private aquarium.

Yashasvi Gaur

Kitchen Doors

Steaming pressure cookers,
pots overflowing *dal* and *rice*
overwhelmed turmeric
with addition of spice.

The sun from a small window
soaks washed kitchen rags,
and in other kitchens
dirt soaked cotton pieces
are thrown aside.

Some lurch with hunger pangs,
Some are lonely boxed compartments,
Some stay separated with tin cracks

Some smell of lingering lime traces,
some of burning *chullahs*.
While some are just shut garages,
moaning over the absence of a woman
failing to rule her only space.

I have seen tears in silence;
a mixture of sharp infusions

from sliced onions
chilly seeds and burnt marks,
palms red like bleeding vaginas.

This isn't a territory,
quenching thirst
and feeding a family of 14
it is a space,
with an open border,
and nowhere to go.

It is a territory of unpaid labour.
A diary full of distorted scribblings
and memorized recipes.

Kitchens aren't places cornered,
they sometimes,
are a passing of lineage, a continuation.
A motion unlike a
nukkad;

bustling with
cacophonous voices, sugary syrups, and, wired *jalebis*.

These are the spaces of
absence, silence, gaps, fissures, and
whispered discussions.

Have you ever seen a kitchen with closed doors?

Ridhi Bhutani

Lyrics of my minute long silence, an ode to rebellion of my words.

My words have failed me

I sacrificed my name to public records and statistics which never existed in Bold, I sacrificed my voice to *Times Old Indian*.

I wrote our revolution but in a language that doesn't belong to me so I shaped my tongue in twisted Italics.

I forgot to underline the important phrases in letters we wrote to our family far far away in villages so they forgot the importance of loving me and bargained it with a money order of 2000 rupees.

My spellings have been treacherous to me since I was twelve. I believe our words fail us, it's the music.

Always the music.

My birth was musical. My father heard drum rolls and gunshots, my mother heard Shehnai, my Grandparents heard acceptance of partition stories.

For me, I heard their voices. Since then, I've been hearing voices. All the voices except mine.

If you hear my voice for thirty seconds, you will only hear common voices that don't belong to me. If you hear me speaking for more than forty seconds,

You might start hearing the undertones of my voice. You might start smelling a rebellion, but a soft one, the one which smells of ginger and sounds like an apology sealed with courage of a twenty year old who wants to change the world in her solitude.

If you hear me speaking for more than fifty seconds, You might start hearing my silence.

My silence has more voice than any other sound bite on planet earth. My silence can slam doors and bring down tyranny.

My silence can break years of oppression and bring equality in sixty seconds, but I am not sure if anyone will hear it. So today I will gulp my own voice during dinner table conversations when someone asks about my political opinion.

But on days like these when I am not a part of the crowd, when I don't believe in this country,

I carry a country of poetic revolution within me, I let the tape of my silence fill the room with all the meanings I've been searching for all my life.

I have been listening to the song of my silence for so long that you play any other record for me and I will only enjoy the music, not the words, never the words. My words have failed me. I believe in silent wars now. Wars within myself. Wars with my own tongue, my own silence

Praniti Gulyani

Gibbous Moon

tonight, I stand bare breasted
beneath the weight of the gibbous moon
with stars positioned to perfection in the whites of my eyes
crackling with a silver flame

the way their crackle echoes

dear gibbous moon, do you dwell
in the marvelous womb of the sky
weighing down the sky, with the harsh heaviness
of a constant, celestial pregnancy

the way your heaviness echoes

and may I ask, are your craters ---
deeply set battle scars, for as they say, there is a war
within every womb

the way your scars echo

tonight, I stand bare-waisted
beneath the scars of the gibbous moon,
the bitterness of the metal in my mouth,
the throb of instruments, still lingering on warm flesh
and the throb of lingering injuries
long after it's over

the way the injuries echo

tonight, I stand bare chested
beneath the glow of the full moon
and within my belly, I feel the glow,
the woven layers of that navy glow
that emerges from the soul of the blue moon
the color of a heartbeat
but alas, this glow is that of emptiness
an attempt to cling onto what was
a new, budding life - clad in rainbow shades
and the way these colors echo

Sargam Bodh

Untitled

Ever felt vulnerable and alone
Troubled by your own existence?
Have you ever felt this ache
To be drowned in your own worries?
It's all about living your choices.
To give so much and still feel unloved
sometimes it's hard to breathe.
I look in the mirror
and see someone I don't recognize.

A New Form

Hetvi Jethwani

Microwave

Stringy, fuzzy, agraffe hair
Protects the fizzle of thought
Before it is long gone
And becomes the stuff of rotting dreams.

Lest a scrunched up glabella remind you
Of the disgrace of walking into a room
And forgetting what you came there for.

Lest you be reminded of the disgrace
Of taking a break
From being a front-line pawn.

If only you could touch petrichor,
If only you could listen to the melody of your lover's griffonage,
If only you could taste yellow,
If only you could smell your acid pit wamble,

You wouldn't be here at midnight,
Rolling up that sleeve till it reaches the armscye,
Till your shoulder aches to separate from the White collar,
And your wrung out neck screams a sigh.

You wouldn't be here at midnight,
Leaning,
Listening to a 5 minute dinner go down in flames
And eating it, anyway.

Hetvi writes :The poetic form is something I have created, inspired by 'Tercets'. I call it, "+1 in-ten-ded".Here's a description:

Find x words which aren't commonly used. This number x must be divisible by 3, it is the number of stanzas your poem must have.The method of writing stanzas: let's label them all S1,S2,S3,S4.....Sx for the sake of convenience. We shall divide these into 3-tuples, (S1,S2,S3),(S4,S5,S6)... and so on. **S1** has to have 4 lines, no syllabic constraints.**S2** and **S3** must have 3 lines each, and the syllable count of **S2** has to be greater than the syllable count of **S3** by 10.**S4**, **S7**, **S10**, and so on: all of them are similar to **S1**.**S5** and **S6** must have 4 lines each, and syllable count of **S5** has to be greater than syllable count of **S6** by 10.**S8** and **S9** must have 5 lines each, and syllable count of **S8** has to be greater than syllable count of **S9** by 10...and so on.

The 6 relatively uncommon words I used for my poem were: *glabella*, *petrichor*, *wamble*, *agraffe*, *armscye*, and *griffonage*.

Translation (Sindhi to English)

Gayatri Chawla

Do you know lovers never die? They do not return to the abode of the body (pp. 25)

1. They become insane in love,
drinking from the goblet brimming over,
lovers live forever,
immortal, warring with the world

2. They lose themselves in themselves
with wounds on their neck
their voices lost,
they speak of nothing but dwell in Allah

3. Years pass by reading in a sequence,
fasts were kept, *namaz* was prayed,
those who were lost in themselves
are unnerved by the trivial talks that reside outside them

4. They made a house abroad,
not once spending a moment of time,
these lovers can seek the truth only dwelling in the desert

5. Every moment and every breath
is an ode to the *mehboob*,
till the end there is glory in it

6. Sachu unearthed the truth,
God had showered him with eternal knowledge.

(English translation of Sindhi poem by Sufi poet Sachal Sarmast)

Haibun



Robin Anna Smith

without emptiness

through pitch i follow each feathered line. count closed blossoms with my fingertips. their shades of lavender. periwinkle. indigo. *or were they carmine, goldenrod, and poppy?*

i conduct an epidermal scan. those firm and crisp yet softly-rounded stems. bending their green into the breeze. petals atop blown back like a woman's windswept hair. *or was it a long ponytail?*

with pricked ears, i mentally stroke the hair-like bristles. their sounds rounding my ear like a finger to a wetted glass rim. *or do they hum like tuning-forks lightly tapped?*

twitters and chirrups hush as i feel something rub against my leg. *was it only the shuffling of tall grasses?*

i move forward, find a low branch, and climb as high as i can manage. wriggle my way into a crack in the sky. nest myself within its moonlit crevice . . .

remembering mistakes in the algorithm of midnight

Robin Anna Smith

Perfusion

One... Two... Four... Five... Uh...

Two a.m., I wake up,
 my right leg paralyzed.
 Both arms and legs, face, and groin, numb.
 Right eye, blind.
Tired and confused, I return to sleep.

Morning comes but change doesn't.
 Sitting on my walker, I push with my left foot.
 One room to the next.

One... Two... Three... Five... Six... Seven... Uh...

 My partner out of town and no family near,
I drive myself to the neurologist.
 Left foot on the pedal, as carefully as I can.

A steroid prescription to pre-medicate for the contrast dye.
 I try to do the math as I count them out.
Three doses of four pills.

One... Two... Three... Four... Nine... Uh...

In the afternoon, my partner returns home.
 We don't have anything to make for dinner
so he asks what I would like from the grocery.

"Chupacabra."
 He stares.

But I don't know any other word at the moment.
 I think for a long time but nothing else comes.
It grows in the ground. Has small green leaves.

"Chupacabra," I say again.

One... Two... Tres... Cuatro... Cinco... Damn it!

I pass the bottle so he can
 count the pills for me.

grandfather clock chimes in my head the stroke of twelve

Bryan Rickert

What Remains

When a friend died of cancer at the age of forty, the husband had her cremated and put into the ground with a cherry tree. There was a sense of romance in coming back as blossoms. When their daughter died of cancer four years later at age eighteen, none of us could bare to ask what they did with the body.

mackerel sky
the endless waves
of uncertainty

Bryan Rickert

Stoking the Fire

During conversation after the show, I offhandedly asked the musician how he got his start playing the Blues.

“It was my father,” he said.

“Really?” I replied. “I had no idea your father played, too.”

“No, he didn’t play but he was a local hero. He was the first black man in the whole county to go to college. Studied chemistry at Fisk. So, what was a black man in the 1930’s with a college degree do when he graduates? He got hired on the railroad to be a fireman.”

“Your dad fought fires for the railroad? I didn’t know that was a thing.”

“Firemen didn’t fight fires on the railroad! They fuelled them! My father was the man who shovelled coal and kept the fire going in the old steam engine days. It paid well but his body paid the price over time. It was a hot and gruelling job. That’s how he became a hero. It was hard times for folks. People used to cook and heat their shacks with coal in pot bellies. That would cost a pretty penny. Living by the tracks, people used to walk up and down after a train passed just to find cast off pieces of coal.

I’m not sure if those white conductors on the train didn’t know or just didn’t care but every time father passed our side of town he would toss out shovels full of coal. On the way home from school we would put it in our lunch tins and give it to our moms like it was Christmas. Father helped keep stoves burning for years that way. All on the railroad’s dime. With his salary and the money Momma saved on coal, we could afford to pay the pianist at church for lessons. That’s how my father got me a start in music.”

diminished chords
by the warmth of a stove
the old rugged cross

Alexis Rotella

High on a Hill

It overlooks New York City, the Natural History of Humanity Museum, with its graceful eyebrow window where the director has an office, it has trees and green lawn a peaceful sight in contrast to the throngs jostling each other below. The crowd so tight it's hard not to bump against the faceless man dressed in a grey suit wearing a bowler hat to whom I apologize.

A river of people moves through the city, past individually owned shops, all closed due to the Pandemic. I wonder why there is not a single bookstore, the kind where I used to escape to on Sunday afternoons, where I'd sit in a sturdy wooden chair to read Robert Frost or contemplate hand-drawn botanicals from the 1800's.

an unfinished dream fades from my pillow case

Terri L. French

The Big Book

For hours we'd sit crammed together in the old naugahyde recliner, the large JC Penney catalogue in our lap. My sister with a red magic marker, I with blue. Circling the things we hoped Santa would leave under the tree on Christmas morning. Frilly dresses and soft flannel pajamas, and of course toys, lots and lots of toys – an EZ Bake oven for me, a doll for her – the one whose hair grew when you pushed in her belly button and tugged at her pony tail. We looked forward to that catalogue, as large as a phone book, in our mailbox each autumn, along with the smaller Christmas catalogue supplement. They were full of everything little girls could dream of.

When I entered puberty I was drawn more to the male models, especially in the underwear section. Sometimes – most times – I would check to see if there was a bulge down below and wonder about the strange thing behind the slit in those Jockey briefs.

Amazon delivery
that little thrill from
popping bubble wrap

Terri L. French

Bayou Coffee Shop

A crooked lampshade on a bulb-less table lamp, origami swans lying dead on a dusty shelf. Curtains made from burlap coffee bags, posters of French quarter street scenes tacked to grimy walls, purple and green sprinkled confections behind smudged glass.

The door chimes open, another caffeine deprived soul enters, another double espresso shot's drawn.

The barista's name tag reads "Jesus."

Fat Tuesday
a naked baby
in the King Cake

Sophia Naz

Blow Whole

A word made flesh makes its own world. What worlds does flesh made into words dismantle?

Once the whale was dead, she was secured to one of the boats by a rope passed around and through its tail. Then, the harpoons and attached lines had to be removed, a difficult operation because she was floating on her back with the harpoons deep under water.

Once were mammals that came from the sea, made landfall and returned back to mother water. Buoyant as the air that escapes the twin bulbs of lips to echo a beautiful letter.

Towed back to the ship by all the boats roped together in a long line, upon arrival she was taken to the larboard side and secured with the head towards the stern, ready for flensing, the removal of her fat.

A policeman rams his knee on a pinned down George Floyd. The asphyxiation takes eight minutes and forty-six seconds. Black begins with the letter b as does blue.

Next, the body of the whale was forcibly extended, rump supported by a tackle and drawn forwards by a stout rope, head drawn in the opposite direction by means of the nose-tackle.

I was eight years old when a man beating an hourglass drum in one hand led a large black bear by her bloody nose to our street.

A band of blubber, 2 to 3 feet wide, lying between the fins and the head, known as the kent was used to turn the whale over. A system of powerful blocks and pulleys hanging from the head of the main mast was attached to the kent by means of a hook.

Many years later I saw a bride with a large gold hoop piercing her nose. There was no blood anywhere but I kept thinking of her jumping through hoops.

The rope was then pulled tight by the ship's windlass, raising the whale in the water. The whale, lying belly up, extended and well secured was now ready.

At this point the crew usually took a meal, and a dram.

Harpooners, feet armed with primitive iron crampons to prevent them slipping, climbed down onto the belly of the whale. Under the direction of the specksioneer they divided the blubber into oblong pieces or slips by means of a blubber-spade.

A hook was then attached to the slip and drawn upwards, by means of a rope and capstan, progressively flaying the strip of blubber from the carcass.

The slips, weighing up to a ton each, were winched onto the deck where they were cut up into one-foot cubes. Once the belly had been flayed the whale was rotated onto its side by the kent tackle, and the upper surface stripped.

The lips were then removed exposing the baleen which was extracted in one mass. Once safely on deck the whalebone was split, with bone-wedges, into further pieces.

The word whale comes from the Proto-Indo-European root: bhel, to blow, swell.

A heart swollen with kindness floats, becomes bhalla, but bhalla is also an ancient weapon, language a double meaning bow.

Once all of the blubber, including the kent, had been removed, the carcass, or kreng as it was known, was released, to sink or to become food for bears, sharks and birds.

The crowds are swelling onto the streets. They grow and grow, each body a ripple; the gathering river quickens but more police are waiting, their batons also swollen...

To strip a whale of 20-30 tons of blubber would have taken little more than three hours.

The first slave ship arrived in the Americas four hundred and one years ago

mouth of sea
the wail of syllables
dissolving in salt

Don Baird

In Silence

now is the time
for a star to fall
and so it does
across the skyline
drawing an arc
along the way
beyond my dreams
I make a wish
and so it is . . .

winding path . . .
a coyote's song
leads the way

Diana Webb

Cut and Stick

grey sky
with a heron's flight
the blue expands

The paths to the sea stretch out and invite and as if from a distance the swell of the waves

enough
for a sailor's patch
empty bottle

Shalini Pattabiraman

While they are gone

Steam rises from the pot. The lid hums. Rice bubbles its way to fluffiness. Emptiness yawns into knotted walls and stretches to touch the outside.

Woof!

Haar covers the outside in a blanket of soft, fine drizzle; spreads through the gate, into the abandoned school yard, following the trail used by the walkers.

The top of the meadow is alive with wildflowers.

A bee, among the yellow buttercups, buzzes!

Woof!

Oxeye daisies push out of the earth where the swoop of the meadow drops. Sweet violets sprout in shaded patches. Here and there, something thorny itches wickedly in between the soft spaces.

Woof!

Circling the yard, arriving back at the gate, from where the walk started, quiet, settles over everything with reluctance.

between corners
measuring time travel
in bark length

Ananya Rharidhi

Vegetative State

Change the sentence from active to passive voice.

It takes a while for the body to give up completely.

First, your words lose meaning, and the doctors call it aphasia. This is when you fully understand incoherence. Then, you lose consciousness. This is when you realise you can be lucid without ever being present. They check your pupils for dilation. This is how you remember that you forgot to let the light back in. Then, they prod your legs. This is how you ascertain that it's been a while since they carried you places.

Your atheist lover walks in the door, sits by the bed for hours, pleads with every god that you wake up. You feel numb.

This is how you lose all your reflexes. The doctors call it 'unresponsive to painful stimuli'. You notice you have become immune to heartbreak.

And now, the only way left for you to panic is to gasp for air. Your chart says erratic heart rate.

Weeks lapse into months and the nurses are worried about bedsores. This is how every cell in your body learns to spell the word coma.

blushing whites. . .
you carry death
in your fingertips

Riya Roy

How Does That Make You Feel?

A fallen leaf swept in by the wind finds itself being picked, dusted and placed into a journal of dreams. It is made to rest on a bed of soft words about hard things.

Cradled in the notebook's arms, the leaf tastes solitude's lips, dried raisins, a hint of spice and plenty of bourbon. On some nights, it peels off the wrappers of stars and devours their flesh. On others, it is made to lick the discarded bones of the day. A piping hot revenge too is spilled now and then, splintering the leaf's tongue into a thousand shards.

farewell of crows

his words land

in my body

Praniti Gulyani

Ever-Changing

The mother I never knew lies upon the yellowing pages of my father's college-day diaries.
There is a wisp of a photograph, surrounded by scribbles of verse.

A *ghazal* perhaps?

A sonnet?

A scattered bit of free verse?

A prose piece, perhaps?

She is still caged within, thrust into and chained to the four walls of that something that can
be called a poem.

tender breeze . . .
watching my shadow
rock back and forth

Gautam Nadkarni

The Hole Truth

When Apollo 11 landed on the moon in July 1969 and Neil Armstrong stepped gingerly onto the lunar surface all set to take a giant step for mankind I was in the ninth grade at school. Naturally like the rest of the kids I was agog with excitement. So I grilled Father over breakfast.

I asked Dad rather apprehensively whether the theory about the moon being made of green cheese still held. He lowered the newspaper he was reading and shook his head. Regretfully. I was disappointed. How about blue cheese, I said. He checked the papers again and replied in the negative. I wasn't convinced. I was quite sure that the man on the moon had questionable scruples. He was obviously trying to get the best price for himself. But I stuck doggedly on and went through the whole gamut of cheeses, both processed and uncooked. But the answer was always, No. So finally like a true scientist I grudgingly accepted the verdict that whatever else may be in, cheese was definitely out. Apparently, the theory, like Swiss cheese, was full of holes.

Now I am working on a new theory after collating all the facts gleaned from the discoveries made. This time I am convinced that I just cannot go wrong. I am working hard on the thesis that the only natural satellite of the earth is made of marshmallow. Everything checks out beautifully.

All I have to do now is figure out the flavour.

plump moon . . .
ransacking the shelves for
sugar free candyfloss

Matthew Caretti

Rearranged

A colleague complains about his marriage. Arranged by his family just over a year ago. Now he wonders about true love. Passion. Finding "the one." His bloodshot eyes tell of yet another sleepless night spent soothing his new-born son. As he confides his troubles, I wonder if he paces the infant's room late at night, bouncing and cooing, moonlight flooding the tiled floor, half-dreaming about what might have been. What might still be. Some vague fantasy about his favourite Bollywood diva.

screen saver
password keystrokes
across her breast

Kinshuk Gupta

Silence

"Why do I have to put my father's name in the middle?" I would ask my mother. To this, she would say – this is a tradition and walk away with the sharp edges of her sentence wedged in her throat.

women's day-
she draws
a wingless bird

Mary Jo Balistreri

Darkening River

Today I spent the afternoon with my daughter. She is downstairs on the sofa shivering, covered with blankets, her eyes closed. I lay my hand on her head. Intermittently, I read or write in my journal while stroking the side of her face, her hair. She doesn't talk much, has tears when I leave.

deteriorating house...
a lone dragonfly
spirals down

There is nowhere I can go from her presence. Chopping celery for tuna salad I think how she chose that salad for her bridal shower. She cannot eat it now, cannot make it for herself. Pouring a glass of wine reminds me of her favourite place on the ocean. She will never see it again. I bring back chicken broth. She takes small sips. I will remember this too.

cloud cover...
the sun slips in
slips out

Features



Amrita ke Naam

Translations from the Punjabi by Sarabjeet Garcha



Amrita Pritam (1919-2005) was a pre-eminent poet, novelist and essayist who wrote in Punjabi and Hindi. In a career spanning more than six decades, she wrote 28 novels, 18 anthologies of prose, 5 collections of short stories and 16 volumes of miscellaneous prose. After the Partition, she migrated from Lahore to India, but her work is equally celebrated on both the sides of the India-Pakistan border. Many of her novels have been made into motion pictures, including the award-winning *Pinjar*, which featured her memorable character Puro, an epitome of violence against women, loss of humanity and ultimate surrender to existential fate. She was the first woman poet to win the Sahitya Akademi Award in Punjabi literature. She was also honoured with several other awards, including the BharatiyaJnanpith, the Padma Shri, and Padma Vibhushan.

Note - Photographs Courtesy Amarjit Chandan

Where I Live

I've rubbed out my house number today
peeled the name off the lane's forehead
wiped away each single road sign

but if you certainly want to find me
then knock on the door
of each lane in each city
of every country
It's a curse it's a boon
Wherever you spot a free soul
know that that's where I dwell

Prayer

In the night-girl's lap
drop the white moon
 a coconut kernel
and also stars
 a fistful of dry dates

in the pain-girl's lap
drop the heart's wound
 whole as a coconut
and salty tears
 for dry dates

the East set up a cradle
 an ancestral cradle
the sun took root
in night's womb

the lips set up a cradle
 an ancestral cradle
song took root
in pain's womb

the sky's known
to be a wise healer
it feels the night-girl's pulse
 the pain-girl's pulse

the earth's midwife prays
May night never become barren
May pain never become barren

A Patch of Sunlight

I remember the time
when a patch of sunlight
holding a finger of the sun
while watching
the carnival of darkness
was lost in the crowds

I think fear and numbness
share a relationship
I'm no kin of his
but this lost child
grabbed my hand

you're to be found nowhere
a tiny hot breath
touching the hand
neither makes acquaintance
with the hand
nor relies on it

the darkness doesn't end
Even in the carnival's hullabaloo
silence has a presence
and my memory of you
is like a patch of sunlight

Virgin

When I got into your marriage bed
I wasn't one but two
one fully married and one fully virgin

For the sake of your enjoyment
I was to murder that virgin

I murdered her
these murders are legally justified
only their disgrace is illegal
and I drank the poison
 of that disgrace

at dawn
I saw my blood-soaked hands
washed them
exactly the way I would wash
the other stinking body parts

but as soon as I faced the mirror
she stood in front of me
she who
 to the best of my belief
I had killed the night before

O God
Was the darkness of
the marriage bed so dense?
Who did I want to kill
and who did I end up killing

Poornima Laxmeshwar

In Conversation with Sivakami Velliangiri on 'How we Measured Time'

All Experience is Grist in the Mill of Poetry

Sivakami Velliangiri's first poems were published in Youth Times in 1977 and '78. She has been invited to read at 'The Semester-At-Sea from Pittsburgh,' and Muse India's 'Hyderabad Literary Festival.' Her poems have been featured in four Anthologies. Her electronic Chapbook 'In My Midriff' was published by The Lily Review. 'How We Measured Time' is her first book of poems.

Sivakami spoke to Poornima about this collection of poems, her memories, people that lead to the creation of these poems, and the journey along the way.

P.L. In many of your poems, there's mention of lot of flowers. Are you aware of this? They make your poems beautiful.

S.V. I grew up in a typically Tamilian background with my mother. In the first part of the book, when the setting is in Madras and Pondicherry, I used the flowers of that area – the Hanslata, lotus buds, the Nagalinga, cotton flowers.

In Trivandrum the flowers change according to the terrain - hibiscus petals, tiny yellow flowers called Grandpa's beard, roses white and red, Atham flowers, land lilies with pink horns, ten o'clock and four o'clock flowers.

Coming of age is euphonically expressed in Tamil as, 'she has rained a shower of flowers.' Towards the finale I have introduced the puja flowers because they are essential to the story. Flowers I have used either as a simile or a metaphor.

P.L. The poem 'Mother' is extremely moving, especially the reference of belts of uncles. Tell us a little more about it and this poem, in particular.

S.V. I wrote this poem in 1977, in the third person. It was published in Youth Times. I am sure I wrote it in my M.A. class. Amma was fond of Saigal's songs. She was extremely beautiful. Her steps were that of a dancer's. The relationship between me and my mother was like that of two friends. Sometimes I felt older as I could command her to do anything. We played throughout the day, afternoons mostly, because the house slept but the evenings were lonely and boring. Not all of this is told verbatim. I do not even remember if the Dhara treatment happened at dusk.

Amma was docile when she was with me. But if she got irked, she gained strength. My stupid uncles did not know how to control her. There is violence here, which I wanted to touch upon. I also contrast our lives, and end with these lines.

Yet, Panchali our cat was somehow different. The last two lines were Nakulan's favourite. T.K. Doraiswamy would repeat these lines and chuckle.

It was my editor, Arjun Rajendran who asked to rewrite this poem in the second person.

P.L. There are so many memories captured in each of the poems. Whether it is 'We belonged to the doorsteps' or 'The Glass Board' - there's so much poetry in the ordinary and so much beauty in the mundane. Do you agree?

S.V. I wrote these poems in 2005 and I was keeping them with me because they sounded prosaic. I read a lot of poetry, and I did not know then that my voice was my own—a voice which I had invented for a child. Have you heard the saying it is easier to write a long letter than a short one? These poems were written from the child's point of view.

Memory was 'Stoked up in graphics;' snapshots which I could easily put into words. I wrote the poem 'The Glass Board' when I had the book in my mind. I did not see those spirits, but she saw them. I remembered what she said; little did I know that she was hallucinating.

Though this line 'the sting-fiery-red-spirits that scurried resembled reptiles', may seem peculiar, I was comparing the familiar to the unfamiliar to achieve the otherworldly effect.

P.L. Tell us about Bharathi mill. All about it and the influence it has had on you as a poet.

S.V. I wrote the poem 'Visiting' long before I revisited 'The Bharathi Mills', I took many snapshots of the Mill and Mill houses on an i-pad which got stolen. My intention was to bring out a book with these pictures. My earliest memory of the Bharathi Mill was between three and four years. The extended family shuttled between Madras and Pondicherry. I loved to be in Madras, to watch the jockeys exercise their horses, Punch dog, Marina Beach. I would hide when part of the family left for Pondicherry. I was born in Madras. I still think of Chennai as Madras.

P.L. In this collection, Sister Valeria is a poem that stands out. This experience is foreign. What do you have to say about it?

S.V. I wrote a poem, 'Naughtiest girl in School,' which is published in Anju Makhija's Young Adult's Anthology 'To Catch A Poem.' It has all the ten Sisters and the Head in the same order. Valeria took extra care of me because I was a special child. Every two months I would be off for a 'needling' and there was no point in being promoted. The English script I had vaguely seen but Hindi I did not know what it looked like. I had oral lessons and my Amma taught me diligently, but it was Valeria who was my looking glass. She was compassionate, brown skinned, and of our own country. I did two years in Sister Valeria's class and I liked to think she kept me because she did not want to let me go to the fourth standard.

P.L. The poem 'House Father' is unique. We all have those moments when gender roles come crashing down. Was the poem the result of such a realisation?

S.V. I wrote that to make my Amma look stronger. I did not know about role reversals. I thought it was the order of the day. I took everything in its stride and therefore did not see anything unusual or dramatic in that poem.

P.L. How much do you think experiences are important for a poet?

S.V. You might think me crazy, but I told my husband when I got married 'I wish we could be in adversity, as that would give me something to write about.' My husband had never seen a person like me earlier. Who asks for a Charles Bukowski's Poetry book when returning from a foreign trip? I was not the academic type. I learnt more out of class and haunted the library. I did my viva for my MA on my own poems and scored 9/10 with AyyappaPaniker. A poet needs to mingle with nature, people, and read the newspaper, know about what is happening not only in the outside world but also in relation to him/her/self. Poetry from the heart is more appealing than poetry from the mind. All experience is grist in the mill of poetry.

P.L. Do memories bring a sense of belonging or do they connect you to a world that you don't want to let go of?

S.V. This question is difficult to answer; I am because of my memories. However, I am a person who does not dwell on my past often, even if my poems tell otherwise. I am a poet who likes to keep up with the times.

Srividya Speaks Poetry



We All Have Something to Say

*"If you're tossing and turning all night
going, Where am I? over and over and over
and over and over, it's time to burn your bridges
and move on."*

(*Same as It Ever Was*, Mónica de la Torre)

I was quietly taken out of a book project because I stood up for myself about a payment dispute.

A speaking opportunity I had accepted and begun work on, was given to someone the organisation had no clue about till I had mentioned the person.

In both cases, I was informed in a casual, offhand way.

I've had poets praise my work, the way I read, promise readings of varied grandeur- and I've seen those sessions come and go from a distance, with not a little bewilderment.

I've seen people with an inability to string a sentence together finish doctorates and get 'highly commended' certifications because they have contacts, an influential circle, and money, while I struggled for an inordinately long time.

I am a firm believer in the idea that it is when you go through a long illness or a loss of wealth that you know who your friends really are. I've seen 'friends,' who tell you they will stay in the hospital with you, and don't bother to call, leave alone visit.

I guess it is like Elizabeth Bishop says in *One Art*,

*"The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster. (...)"*

(But losing what felt like a firm friendship can feel like a disaster.)

Then I console myself with these lines by Marcus Wicker,

*"Friend, you look well from this distance,
from my vantage, perched over here."*

(*On Small Talk*)

There are also the professional spaces, where you are condemned for just doing your job.

In an institution I taught at a few years ago, I was bullied (though I didn't see it at the time) for being a teacher who wanted students to show up on time, with their textbooks, submit assignments in time, and just be present in class. I became a joke for some students and staff. Even today, I am sometimes teased about being 'too strict' and 'not lenient' enough.

In between the sourdough and banana bread baking, the music self-learning, the wishing and the wondering, we think about things. I think about friendships old and new, and people who weren't what I thought they would be.

I find myself drawn to this classic:

*"I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow."*

(*A Poison Tree*, William Blake)

Let's not kid ourselves- it is not easy to say how we feel, to friend or foe. Every single one of us has had experiences with selfish people, toxic people, horrible people. They are in our families and our circles and our places of work.

We sometimes call them friends. *And they get away with it because we do not speak up.* We go through the same social pleasantries and niceties even when we do not want to.

We smile at them in public and then dissect everything they said and did in private. We take pleasure in speaking of them with malicious glee because we feel we are entitled, having been a victim of their terrible behaviour. We are so afraid to sever ties because what if we need them in the future? This is especially true when the person is in our immediate circle, and influential. And that great preoccupation - what will people say? We create toxicity by our behaviour and the cycle continues.

It took a crisis to change the way I do things.

I am all for moving on.
I am all for shrinking my friend circle to less than a handful.
I am all for reassessing my understanding and expectations of a person.

I am all for burning bridges to the ground.

Book Reviews



Paresh Tiwari

Frazil (1980 – 2017) by Menka Shivdasani

It was early 2019. The mild Hyderabad winter had already begun to ease out, when Menka Shivdasani walked up to the stage of HLF to read from her latest collection of poetry, *Frazil*. This was the first time I had heard her recite her poetry. Ten minutes was all it took for me to be struck by how fierce, defiant, unapologetic, yet tender her work was.

I am revisiting *Frazil*, in a quarantine facility in Bombay. The world around me is nothing like it used to be and as I flip the pages of the book trying to make sense of it all, I stumble across these lines.

*Go on,
tell your story.
The right things
must come right
to you; the world's
a wooden stage,
a box with nails
go on.*

- Marionette

Frazil, Shivdasani's fourth collection of poetry documents thirty-seven years of worth of work. Divided into three sections, the poems reach out into the viscous flow of time to pick up imagery that is at once familiar and startling; like watching a world unfold in reverse. These poems establish Shivdasani as an acute observer and a keen chronicler of the everyday. On the surface, they have a strange quietude about them, but just beneath that surface lurks surprisingly sharp violence, and a sense of unrest. Most of it understated and all the more powerful for it. The poetry in this book takes a long, hard, unromantic look at life itself.

*And I scratch the river bed
with my twisted nail,
trying to tease a trickle through.
A tide rushes up
against my swollen eye,
and the moonlight tiptoes in.
It covers my face for a moment,
then it is gone.*

- Hinterland



Sean Thomas Dougherty had written, and I paraphrase (eschewing the line breaks), 'Because right now there is someone out there with a wound in the exact shape of your words.'

Shivdasani finds the right words for wounds seen and unseen. The world she inhabits in these poems is a world seen through a woman's eye. And when I plunged myself into this world, it wasn't comfortable. At times, I had to take a deep breath and close the book. It took courage to go back to some of the poems. It made me question the privilege of being a man. And I believe that's one of the biggest strengths of this collection.

One day, feeling threatened, I took my faithful companion to a vet, who gazed, confused, at us, lapping and barking inside a single skin, and asked which of the two needed to be put away. It didn't help that my companion and I pointed at each other simultaneously, and yowled. So the vet took matters in hand and decided to put me to sleep, or rather, take me to bed, and shed his white coat along the way.

- Diary of a Mad Housewife

The imagery used by Shivdasani is striking but does not rely heavily on embellishments. It is, however, her ability to bring seemingly dissimilar ideas together that is of primary interest to me as a poet and a reader. It is what I look for the altar of words. Shivdasani uses this ability to unravel contradictions and hypocrisies of life with surgical élan.

Reading the book, at times, I had to take a tentative step back to look at the larger picture, for something more than the sum of its parts to shine through. And as that happened, I felt rewarded, fulfilled and even startled. Shivdasani explores a wide range of themes in the 85 poems collected within the hard-bound cover of the book. And just as the title might suggest, the poems are soft amorphous beings, resolutely refusing to freeze solid into something that can be straitjacketed into a singular meaning. She questions violence against women but not in the kind of setup one might naturally expect. She, instead, peels the layers of civility from the face of society. Some of the themes she explores are - memory, loss, the city landscapes, the high walls, and the glossy kitchens where lettuce is a common enough ingredient. In her hand everything turns into metaphor.

*I took a knife, its blade seductive in the dark,
and I chopped. The fragments, I noticed, as I yawned,
had begun to take the most extraordinary shapes.
Somewhere I recognised a bride,
her toenails turned to ash,
a mother-in-law and husband shut the door.*

- Why Rabbits Never Sleep

There's a sense of cynicism, an edge to Shivdasani's poetry. A dark humour that cuts not just the flesh but to the bone. She often leads her readers to a dark alley and leaves them with no choice but to face things they may otherwise pass by; their head drawn low; their hands buried in the pocket. Her poetry uses language as a living, breathing, mutating entity.

*like tantric mantras muttering down
my neckline muttering down my
neckline and suddenly
my sleeves turn wing
I raven through the sky.*

You make love to the sharks as I

circle you like a moonless halo

*and your unborn children turn
to jellyfish in the sand.*

- Buttoned Up

Frazil is a book that unfolds into new meanings with every reading and on that parameter itself it champions the cause of good literature. It's a book that rewards patience. If I am forced to pick up a chink in the armour of this blistering collection, it would be that a couple of poems in the section 1980 - 2000, seem to carry a slightly different voice compared to the rest of the work. This is of course to be expected, given the large span of time the book covers. And truth be told it is infinitely more fulfilling to see the journey of a poet. It makes everything more real and relatable.

Frazil (1980 - 2017), is one of the most powerful books of poetry I have read in recent times. I will carry it inside me for a long time to come.

Frazil (1980 - 2017) by Menka Shivdasani

Format: Hardcover

Publisher: Poetrywala

Year of Publication: 2018

No. of pages: 135

Price: 400/- INR (USD 16)

G. Akila

The Amazing Glass House by Susan Beth Furst

"You're never going to kill storytelling, because it's built in the human plan. We come with it." - *Margaret Atwood*

Susan Beth Furst's *The Amazing Glass House* illustrated by Jiliane Vilches reiterates the power of storytelling. Not only that, she has interspersed that facet with one of the most subtle forms of poetry. Her book is a Haiku storybook that has the crisp narrative quality of a short story (prose) that links with beautiful illustrations and shifts with haiku.



The scene is set in the Glass House, Pittsburg, which a little girl and her family grew up visiting. The book, a first person narrative, opens with a small introduction to this place where the little girl's Grandma was one among the inaugural visitors and takes us through the memory of the girl's visits that remain to this day, in her adulthood, as she dwells in that memory lane.

The first haiku in this book sets the tone for the memory walk.

steel city out of the smoke a glass house...

Each page is a tour of the Glass House through the eyes of the little girl's visit. The flowers, colours, the geography of each aspect or section in the Glass House, the wonders of the little girl's explorations each time she visits or sees the Glass House. The place is a significant part of her growing up. With each haiku the author has captured the thoughts in the little girl's mind as she travels through spaces in and out of the Glass House. One haiku that stood out in this context for me was when the little girl was caught in a blizzard and so was the Glass House.

snow frosts the conservatory dome cupcakes

Put yourself in that little girl's shoes, walk down the memory lane and you will find a bit of you in her looking at a gurgling pipe as a hissing snake, following a trail of footprints, naked feet, dreams, innocence...All the profound observations of a child and more that are often left far behind by the world of adults.

Each page carries a colourful illustration to support the narrative haiku, spaced well enough for the story to breathe out; a *shasei*, as it shouldered the book as a work of word paintings. For lovers and practitioners of this form, it is a well-done experiment to see the form evolve and blend with other expressions of writing. These elements make the book an interesting read. At the same time, it is designed with a universal appeal.

So, is this a book for children? Definitely. A simple story with an evocative narration and perhaps, a tool to introduce children to haiku too.

Is this a book for adults? For those who do not know anything about haiku? Of course, yes. We all love stories and never let go of the child in us, do we?

The Amazing Glass House *by* **Susan Beth Furst**

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