



Carmine & Gold

September 2023

The Wise Owl

A Literary & Art Magazine



Editor Speak

September 2023

Carmine & Gold Edition of *The Wise Owl*, offers a rich literary and artistic repast for our dear readers and viewers. It is woven together with the energy and passion associated with the colour carmine.

We have insightful interviews with Sandra Beasley, an award-winning American poet, Alokparna Das, an award-winning Indian writer and Michael Solovyev, a renowned watercolour artist from Canada. Their creative journeys are an inspiration for all literary & art lovers. We also talk to Sonia Chauhan, a budding writer about her recently released book '*This Maze of Mirrors*', which was awarded the second prize in Amazon Pen to Publish Awards. Poetry, stories, musings, reviews, visual arts and podcasts brighten up our creatively put-together ezine.

Happy reading!!!



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INTERVIEWS



The Interview: Sandra Beasley

An Award-winning Poet & Writer

The Wise Owl talks to **Sandra Beasley**, an award-winning poet & author. Beasley is the author of the poetry collections *Made to Explode* (W.W. Norton, 2021), winner of the Housatonic Book Award, *Count the Waves* (W. W. Norton, 2015), *Theories of Falling* (New Issues, 2008), winner of the New Issues Poetry Prize, and *I Was the Jukebox*, (W.W. Norton, 2010), winner of the Barnard Women Poets Prize, as well as the memoir *Don't Kill the Birthday Girl: Tales from an Allergic Life* (Crown, 2011), which is a memoir and a cultural history of food allergies. She also edited *Vinegar and Char: Verse from the Southern Foodways Alliance* (University of Georgia Press, 2018). Her poetry has been in multiple anthologies, including *The Best American Poetry 2010*, *Poetry Daily*, *Verse Daily*, and various prestigious journals.

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The Interview: Alokparna Das

An Award-winning writer

The Wise Owl talks to **Dr. Alokparna Das**, a print journalist for three decades and also a trained musician, having learnt both Hindustani and Carnatic classical styles. Her first book, 'Prominent Hindu Deities: Myths & Meanings', found mention in the Encyclopaedia of Hinduism. Her second book, 'Haveli Sangeet', won the Golden Book 2022 and Woman Writer of the Year awards. Her third book, 'Abodes of the Sun God', won the Non-Fiction Author of the Year and Golden Book Award 2023. She has also won Research Excellence Award 2020 and several prizes at music competitions. As an amateur photographer, Alokparna has participated in various exhibitions and won awards for her photographs.

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INTERVIEWS



The Interview: Michael Solovyev

A Watercolor Artist of renown

The Wise Owl talks to **Michael Solovyev**, a watercolor artist of great renown, with exhibitions and workshops all over the world, from Bolivia to France to Australia. Michael's prolific watercolor artistry translates into 16 personal and over 70 group exhibitions around the world, where he won multiple awards and recognitions. In recent years, he represented Canada at many renowned watercolor festivals all over the world. He is also the Brand Ambassador of Daniel Smith and Escoda International, two of the world's leading manufacturers of art and watercolor materials.

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The Interview : Sandra Beasley

(Rachna Singh, Editor, The Wise Owl talks to Sandra Beasley)

The Wise Owl talks to **Sandra Beasley**, an award-winning poet & author. Beasley is the author of the poetry collections *Made to Explode* (W.W. Norton, 2021), winner of the Housatonic Book Award, *Count the Waves* (W. W. Norton, 2015), *Theories of Falling* (New Issues, 2008), winner of the New Issues Poetry Prize, and *I Was the Jukebox*, (W.W. Norton, 2010), winner of the Barnard Women Poets Prize, as well as the memoir *Don't Kill the Birthday Girl: Tales from an Allergic Life* (Crown, 2011), which is a memoir and a cultural history of food allergies. She also edited *Vinegar and Char: Verse from the Southern Foodways Alliance* (University of Georgia Press, 2018). Her poetry has been in multiple anthologies, including *The Best American Poetry 2010*, *Poetry Daily*, *Verse Daily*, and various prestigious journals. Her prose has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Psychology Today*.

Beasley graduated from Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, earned a B.A. in English magna cum laude from the University of Virginia, and later received an MFA degree from American University. For several years she worked as an editor at *The American Scholar*. Honors for her work include the 2023 McGee Visiting Professorship at Davidson College, the 2019 Munster Literature Centre's John Montague International Poetry Fellowship, a 2015 NEA fellowship, six DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities fellowships, and various stints at artist colonies, conferences, and festivals. She teaches in the low-residency MFA program at the University of Nebraska Omaha.

Thank you, Sandra for taking time out to speak to The Wise Owl.

RS: You are an award-winning poet. Please walk us through your creative journey as a poet. Do throw light on the creative influences in your life.

SB: I was fortunate to be encouraged towards creative paths at a young age—in part because my mother is a painter and visual artist, and in part because my elementary school offered regular poetry workshops. The woman who visited my school to lead those workshops, Rose MacMurray, was an accomplished educator and writer who selflessly devoted her time to emerging voices and made sure we read poems that were playful, sophisticated in form, and full of rich imagery. On top of that, I was a total bookworm; I remember summers spent challenging the 50-book checkout limit at Tysons-Pimmit Regional Library in Virginia. I owe my love of language to the public library.

RS: You have authored several poetry collections. Our readers would be curious to know (as I am) what attracted you to the poetry genre. Who (if I may ask) are your favourite poets or poems and what is it about them that attracts or inspires you?

SB: Seems like poets have all the fun! Or, in the moments that are less fun (in moments fraught or melancholy), poets find the most powerful ways to shape and release tension on the page. Some poets I connected with early on were Emily Dickinson, Edgar Allan Poe, and all of the poets in *Piping Down the Valleys Wild*, an anthology edited by Nancy Larrick that I purchased with my Scholastic Book Fair money. High school brought me to the work of Sylvia Plath, Langston Hughes, E.E. Cummings, and Sandra Cisneros. In college, my journey continued thanks to the amazing mentors and contemporary poets who taught at the University of Virginia, including Gregory Orr and Rita Dove. They taught me to value poems that are clear, musical, and willing to claim bold truths.

RS: What I have found especially intriguing about your work is that the “point-of-view” in your poem is not always that of the omnipresent poet. 'The Piano Speaks,' a poem I really enjoyed, encapsulates the point of view of an abandoned piano. Please tell us what made you adopt these different points of view in your works?

SB: The first time I committed to composing poems in alternate points of view was over a decade ago, and due to the

confluence of two factors. One was that I'd started publishing first-person essays, initially through a series of columns in the Washington Post Magazine, and then I signed a contract to publish a memoir. So I really needed a creative space that veered away from memoir's intimate focus; claiming the voice of a piano (or an eggplant, or an orchid) helped me do that. I was also part of a cohort of people drafting a poem a day, for a month at a time, an initiative often referred to as "NaPoWriMo." These kinds of external prompts ("write in the voice of a platypus!") give me a starting point for research and help me draft at a preternaturally fast pace.

RS: Your poetry has an element of unexpectedness. With some of the poems I almost felt like I was taking a sudden hairpin bend, not sure what I would find around the corner, especially in poems like 'Unit of Measure' and 'Inner Flamingo.' Does this sense of surprise reflect your response to the world around you?

SB: I think it's important to let myself be "pushed around" by research, observation, and discovery. The natural and historical world around us has a genuine weirdness beyond anything I could invent from scratch. I also trust in the power of parallel structure, particularly anaphora, to activate associations and comparisons that may be just below of the surface of my conscious understanding.

RS: In your poem 'Let Me Count the Waves, you say "You must not use a house to build a home / and never look for poetry in poems." Could you please elaborate on this for the benefit of our readers?

SB: Well, those lines are ironic; I'm calling back to the epigraph, a quotation from Donald Revell in which he advises, "We must not look for poetry in poems." I think what he's getting at there is the importance of resisting self-aware poeticizing (read: pomposity of ideas, overly formal diction) on the page, but it is a funny way to say so. All well and good to parse the difference between a "house" and a "home," up until there's a storm and you've got raindrops falling on your head. In that moment, you don't care whether house or home—you just need it to have a roof.

RS: You are a prolific poet and writer. What advice would you give upcoming poets & writers on how to become a better poet?

SB: Read! I'm always so dismayed when poets tell me they don't read contemporary poetry, as if that aesthetic isolation is the key to preserving their voice. Your voice grows sturdier in conversation with other poets, I promise—and less precious about taking a chance on those first, messy drafts. Even if you know that, there's still a thousand ways that adult commitments (read: capitalist forces) try to convince us we don't have time to read for pleasure. You have to make the time.

RS: If I were to ask you to describe yourself as a poet in 3 adjectives, what would those be?

SB: Precise, curious, and resilient.

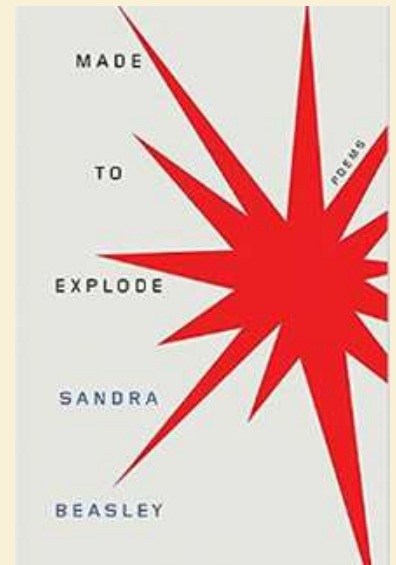
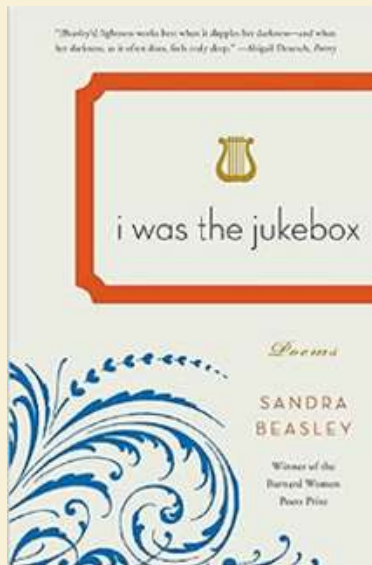
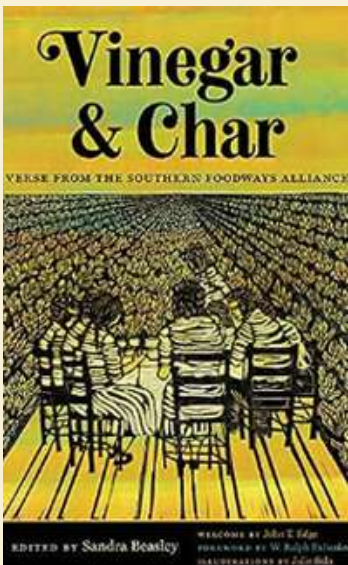
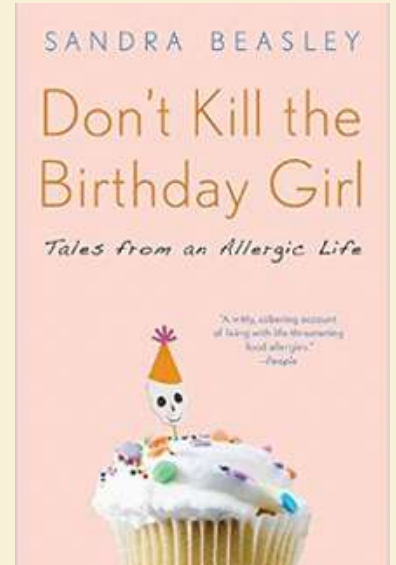
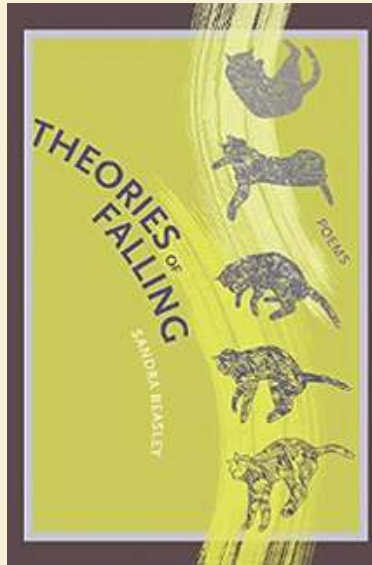
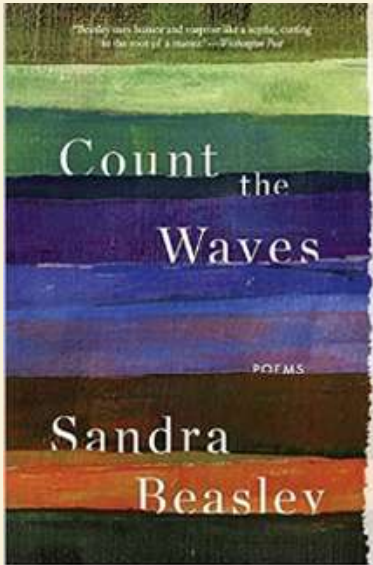
RS: Our readers would be keen to know if you are working on a poetry collection or book now. When is it likely to hit the bookstores?

SB: My next publication will be creative nonfiction, actually; I have a completed collection of essays, and I'm working on the proposal for a second memoir.

RS: Thank you so much for talking to us, Sandra. It was a delight talking to you. We wish you the very best in all your creative endeavours and hope that you write a lot of creatively satisfying poetry and win lots of literary accolades that you most certainly deserve.

SB: Thank you for this careful attention to my work!

Some Works of Sandra Beasley



The Interview : Alokparna Das

(Navneet Kaur talks to Alokparna Das)

The Wise Owl talks to **Dr. Alokparna Das**, a print journalist for three decades and also a trained musician, having learnt both Hindustani and Carnatic classical styles. Her academic qualification includes Ph.D. in Advertising and three M.A. degrees in English, History, and Mass Communication. She has published more than one thousand articles in newspapers and several research papers in academic journals. Her first book, *Prominent Hindu Deities: Myths & Meanings*, found mention in the Encyclopaedia of Hinduism. Her second book, *Haveli Sangeet*, won the Golden Book 2022 and Woman Writer of the Year awards. Her third book, *Abodes of the Sun God*, won the Non-Fiction Author of the Year and Golden Book Award 2023. Two of her short stories have won national-level competitions. She has also won Research Excellence Award 2020 and several prizes at music competitions. As an amateur photographer, Alokparna has participated in various exhibitions and won awards for her photographs.

NK: You have published four books, of which two have won awards. Besides several news articles and academic research papers, you have also published short stories. Take us through your literary journey and what inspires you to write.

AD: Let me first talk about inspiration. For all of us, life is the biggest inspiration and the greatest teacher, and like many other writers, I, too, get my ideas from everyday life. I have heard professional writers say that ideas for writing come to them only when they are inspired. As a working journalist for three decades, I have had the compulsion of being inspired everyday as writing daily news and features was my profession. As a short story writer, my ideas are based on my observations and experiences. I am also inspired by history and mythology and my award-winning short stories are based on them. As a non-fiction author, my ideas are based on my academic training and research in Indian culture. When writing academic research papers on mass media, my ideas are based on current trends that I analyse as a media educator. Writing is both a job and a passion for me. Every morning, idea is the imaginary friend I drink my tea with; and writing is a tool for crystallising those ideas. Stories are not just made of ideas, they are made of life. Hence, my literary journey is a reflection of my journey as an individual. I believe that variety makes life interesting. Writing news is very different from writing a short story and writing on music is different from writing on mass media. I have, so far, experimented with various genres – from journalism to mystery story to historical fiction to writing on rare musical traditions. I have published more than one thousand articles in newspapers and magazines, and several research papers on mass media in academic journals. My first book, *Prominent Hindu Deities: Myths & Meanings*, found mention in Encyclopedia of Hinduism. My second book, *Haveli Sangeet*, won the Golden Book Award and the IIVA Woman Writer of the Year title. My third book, *Abodes of the Sun God*, won the Non-Fiction Author of the year in 2022. My first short story, *The Charioteer*, was one of the winners at a national-level creative writing competition; so was my fifth short story, *The Lord of Avanti*. My thesis, on other hand, was on advertising in India.

NK: Tell us about your latest book.

AD: My latest book, *'Music in the Bylanes'*, is on rarely heard regional musical instruments, particularly the *Taus*, *Nafiri*, *Shreekhhol* and *Sarinda*, and the need to revive and preserve such instruments. Every musical instrument is endowed with an individual character that is rooted in the ethos of its region. My book is an attempt to understand regional musical instruments, their significance within the regional culture, their present state, and the urgent need for their revival, preservation and propagation.

NK: What prompted you to write about traditional musical instruments?

AD: The world of traditional art forms is fast shrinking and this is especially true in the case of musical instruments. Music

and musical instruments represent the intricacies of both tangible and intangible heritage. Modernity, combined with the need for ease of playing, has led to the death of many traditional instruments. In such a scenario, documenting and celebrating master musicians and craftspersons who are associated with rare musical instruments is the need of the hour.

NK: Was doing research on rare instruments challenging?

AD: Yes. Since this book focuses on rare musical instruments such as the *Taus*, *Nafiri* and *Sarinda*, to begin with, it was a challenge locating musicians and instrument-makers associated with these instruments. It was also a challenge in certain cases to find someone who, besides being a talented exponent, could also communicate well about the nuances of the art form and its allied professions. Luckily, the musicians and instrument-makers I met were forthcoming in sharing their knowledge with me. The final outcome was an enriching experience.

NK: This is your fourth book. Do you want each book to stand on its own, or are you trying to build a body of work with connections between each book?

AD: While each of my books stands on its own, two of my books – *Prominent Hindu Deities: Myths & Meanings* and *Abodes of the Sun God* – are on religion. The other two, *Haveli Sangeet* and *Music in the Bylanes*, are on lesser known musical traditions. Similarly, three of my short stories deal with urban life, though each is in a different genre from the other.

NK: How would you describe your writing process?

AD: I believe that a writer writes for herself first and then for others. Writing is documenting your experiences, imagination and sentiments. Originality is the key to good and ethical writing. Informed readers appreciate original work. I feel writing is like making sugar candy; keep boiling until you have distilled the nuggets that captures the flavour you want. This also means that writing is a skill that needs practice. Writing for me is more than a vehicle for communicating ideas, it exposes the gaps between my knowledge and literary logic, pushing me to articulate my assumptions while considering counterarguments. I hope my writing process sharpens my thinking process too. At a practical level, my writing process starts with observation, which leads to idea. The next step is research – both physical and academic. Research is the most important step towards writing. For my books, I take up both academic and physical research. For instance, for my book, *Haveli Sangeet*, I visited various places across the country, met and interviewed artistes and also read a number of books and even visited museums. It took me almost a year to do this research. My family collection of thousands of books comes handy during my research. Usually, I do not write more than two drafts; editing and proof-reading are very important.

NK: What advice you would give budding writers?

AD: I believe that a good writer doesn't really need to be told anything except that she or he should keep writing and keep enjoying the process. There is a voice inside you, listen to that. The two things you are in total control of are your attitude and effort; invest in these. There's no substitute to hard work; however, do not be hard on yourself, write only what you enjoy writing. Do not compare your work or yourself with others. Your journey is yours alone. Don't be afraid to take risks. Explore new areas and enjoy the process. At times, aspiring writers try to churn out a number of works simultaneously, and are unable to do justice to each one of them. I believe that if one wants to evolve as a writer, one should keep writing, but also enjoy the process and not turn it into a task. Writing is hard work, as it involves ideation, research, editing, rewriting. In that sense, it can be exhausting. However, I also energise and recharge myself by writing. So, writing is both energising and exhausting as well as immensely rewarding.

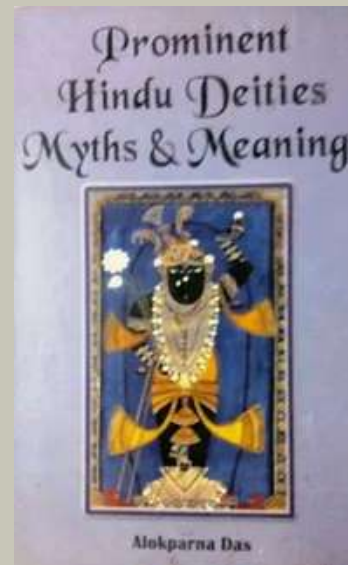
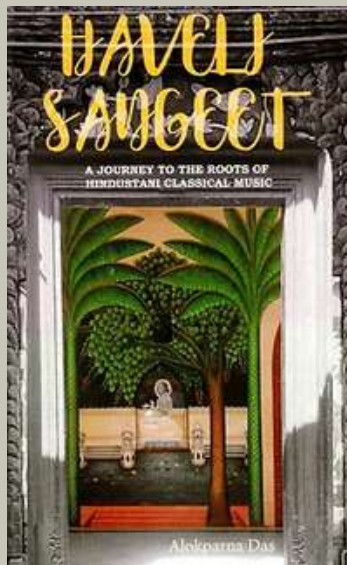
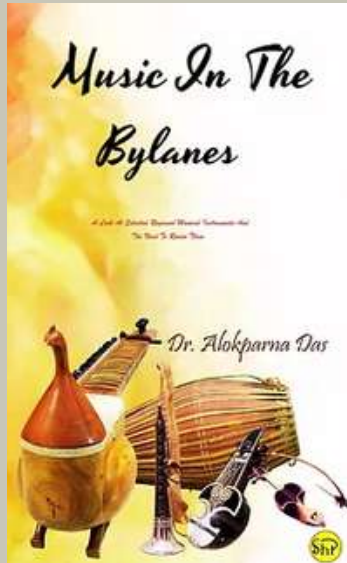
NK: What literary pilgrimages have you undertaken?

AD: Visiting Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore's home in Kolkata and his university, Visva-Bharati, at Santiniketan, have been akin to pilgrimage for me. It was an overwhelmingly spiritual experience visiting these places. Recently, I visited a village named Mungpoo, 35 kilometres from Darjeeling, where Tagore had spent considerable time.

NK: What is the most unethical practice in the publishing industry?

AD: Some publishing houses employ ghost writers and monetise the process by charging hefty fees from those who want to have books published and paying a paltry sum to the actual/ ghost writer. This is a disturbing aspect of the publishing industry.

Some Works of Alokparna Das



The Interview : Michael Solovyev

(Rachna Singh, Editor, The Wise Owl talks to Michael Solovyev)

The Wise Owl talks to **Michael Solovyev**, a watercolor artist of great renown, with exhibitions and workshops all over the world, from Bolivia to France to Australia. He is often called a 'sunny watercolorist' on account of the fact that his artworks look as though they emit sunlight. His traditional academic art education, extensive experience as a head theatre stage designer, and oil painter career now inform his priority as a watercolor artist - light. Michael considers novelty, and experimentation the necessities of the creative process. He is always challenging himself with new techniques & ideas.

Michael's prolific watercolor artistry translates into 16 personal and over 70 group exhibitions around the world, where he won multiple awards and recognitions. In recent years, he represented Canada at many renowned watercolor festivals in Hong Kong, Slovenia, India, Italy, France, Peru, Costa Rica, Mexico, Bolivia, Hungary, and Portugal among other countries. He is a signature member of four prestigious art societies - Canadian Society Of Painters In Water Colour, Canada (CSPWC), National Watercolor Society, USA (NWS), Society of Canadian Artists, Canada (SCA), North East Watercolor Society, USA (NEWS), and International Watercolor Society (IWS). He is also the Brand Ambassador of Daniel Smith and Escoda International, two of the world's leading manufacturers of art and watercolor materials.

Hi Michael. Thanks for taking time out to speak to us. We are delighted.

MS: It is a great pleasure, thank you very much Rachna!

RS: For the benefit of our readers please tell us a little about your journey as an artist- what attracted you to art, what were the major creative influences in your life et al.

MS: As all of us do, I first started at the age of 4. However, usually, after this period has passed, people start thinking about their future careers. My thinking, on the other hand, was that it is such a great job that there is nothing else I would rather do. So, I started at 4 and stayed in this profession for my entire life.

RS: You are a watercolor artist with some fabulous works brightening up your portfolio. What attracted you to this medium? What are the challenges (if any) that you face as a watercolor artist?

MS: Watercolor is a very unique and specific medium. The fact is, when you work with oil, acrylic, pastel, or anything else, you are the sole person responsible for what is happening on your paper or canvas. When you work with watercolor, you have a partner - water. It makes the whole process perfectly unpredictable. I love this collaboration with water very much as it brings many surprises into my working process. This makes the watercolor lively and impossible to copy. You can easily copy an oil painting, but copying a watercolor is much much more difficult.

RS: While looking at some of your artworks, I noticed that your works look bright, almost as though they are emanating a light of their own. Our readers & viewers would be eager to know what technique you use to create this all-enveloping light in your work.

MS: Thank you for this wonderful question and your kind words. As a matter of fact, light is my main subject. That is why it really is not that important to me what to paint - a seascape, a city street, a portrait, or a ballerina. I try to catch this very light that helps us see anything in the first place. There are many technical methods for it. One of them I like to use a lot is called washout - for it, I use my SOLO Flat brush of my own design. I like the light very much, and it stays as a main subject in all my paintings.

RS: Your art portfolio has urban scenes as well as portraits in equal measure. What impressed me about your portraits is that the faces you paint are alive with emotion & sentiment (A Plate of porridge, Game of thrones etc.), which I feel is very difficult to achieve with watercolors. Please throw light on how you achieve this.

MS: There is no doubt – humans are the most interesting subjects on our planet. Humans are interesting because of their diversity – we are all unique, and their emotions. The same person in a different mood can be extremely different. I noticed that when we bump into an interesting character and want to paint them, the desire to transfer them into a sheet paper is always dictated by the emotional spirit of you character – they can be grim or happy, but that’s what makes a human alive and interesting.

RS: If I were to ask you to describe yourself as an artist in three adjectives, what would they be and why?

MS: Seeking – I still do not stop, learning new tricks, finding new materials, trying new things, that is why my artworks still differ from year to year – what I painted 4 years ago is very different from what I do now, and this process keeps on going. Sunny, as the sunlight is my main tool and something that really inspires me. Workaholic – I work a lot. For example, this year I will conduct 29 workshops in 17 countries all over the world. In parallel with it, I regularly release new video courses, new free videos on YouTube every Monday. I don’t think any other artist works on a similarly busy schedule. And I like it a lot!

RS: Are there any artists (traditional masters or contemporary artists) who influence or inspire your work. Do tell us how and why.

MS: You know, it will take me a very long time to name my contemporaries, because they are my friends and I often meet them on festivals. They are also constantly seeking new things, so we of course influence each other a great deal. Even a conversation with an interesting person is of great value. If we turn to historical figures, then Andrew Wyeth is the main influence. In my opinion, he is still the undisputed King of Composition, who always found something lively, unexpected, and truly wonderful in the subjects he depicted, whether he worked in tempera or watercolor.

RS: Among our readers and viewers we have a lot of lovers of art as well as upcoming artists. You are not only an acclaimed artist but also a teacher who has conducted workshops across the world and offer art courses. What advice would you give upcoming artists?

MS: The main advice I can give is to never be afraid of anything when you are creating. There is a famous phrase that reads: He that feareth is not made perfect in love. You can’t get anywhere in art or in your work if you are simply afraid. When you are making art, you must dive into it headfirst. However, it has nothing to do with the absence of anxiety. You must be anxious. You must be shaking every time you start painting, as before the first kiss. But it has nothing in common with fear. When you are afraid to touch your paper, and not just anxious, you will never get an opportunity to create something worthwhile.

RS: What for you is the essence of creativity?

MS: For me, the essence of creativity is to always marvel at the world, discover in it something new, unusual, and interesting for me, and have a huge and powerful desire to share what I have seen with others. For me, this is what creativity is.

Thank you so much, Michael, for taking time out to talk to The Wise Owl. We are delighted and honored and wish you the best in all your creative endeavors. Here is hoping that you keep brightening up the world with your light-emanating artworks.

MS: Thank you very much for your invitation. I read The Wise Owl interviews with great pleasure. I really like the people you select for your interviews. It is always tremendously interesting!

Some Works of Michael Solovyev



That Can't be Her



Paris Sketch



Untitled



Untitled



Self-Portrait



Damn very hot coffee

POETRY



My Periwinkle Flower
Oldine Joseph

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Last Things & Winter Snow
Donna Pucciani

[Read More](#)



The Performative Childhood
Richa Joshi Pant

[Read More](#)



Laburnum
Shweta Sahay

[Read More](#)



The Gods are not Merciful
George Freek

[Read More](#)



Why the Long face?
Cat Dixon

[Read More](#)

POETRY



The temperature of a loner
Michael Colon

[Read More](#)



By a Crimson River
Fabrice Poussin

[Read More](#)



Serial Killers
Navneetha Mokkal

[Read More](#)



Identities
Kavita Ratna

[Read More](#)



River Runs
Jan Wizeorek

[Read More](#)



Debashri
Shailja Sharma

[Read More](#)



Last Things

By Donna Pucciani - Poet of The Month

A modest house,
filled with objects that will outlive me:
a favorite chair, well-worn;
the Tiffany-style lamp crafted years ago
by a friend, herself now long gone;
the earth-encrusted garden tools in the shed;
a pair of old boots; forgotten spices in the cupboard.

The sagging sofa, queen of the parlor,
betrayed by time, wonders where her parts
will be crumpled, crushed, recycled,
having kept watch far too long
over my efforts to avoid extinction,
my body chugging uphill like a drunken Sisyphus.

Someday, I will be mere dust
in a cookie tin urn, leaving behind
a closet full of faded clothes,
sighing on their silent hangers.
So it is with last things.

Dusty carpets and draperies
conspire to fete my death, a mute rabble
of objects without souls, tangible in their so-called life,
all wondering where I've gone, their human comrade
of many seasons who wandered about the house
in tattered slippers, looking for a taste
of the strawberry jam concocted by the women
of Didsbury village church, where, alas,
the belfry has forgotten to toll my demise.

Yet, here I am, flesh, bone, mind and tongue,
a sentient and regrettably mortal being,
still huffing my way to death's palatial digs,
raising one last glass, one last poem.



Winter Snow

Wondrous deceiver,
you veil the earth with your white purity,
a pretense of peace. You make the gold
of autumn leaves blanche with decay,
net the musty mushrooms near the mailbox,
fill the rabbit holes with your trickery,
banish whatever was left of the garden,
the four-o-clocks that never could tell time.

Even the sky, blue as it was only yesterday,
succumbs to the curse of your immaculate cloak,
a pall of falling cloud. Humans huddle
in cold climes, drifting in a frozen cosmos,
dark and bright mingling, pits and patterns
becoming swirled taffeta, the treachery
of your smile ruling war-torn cities, refugees
hiding in basements, the homeless
on sidewalks turning to ice, this snow
a torture dressed in crystal.



My Periwinkle Flower

By Oldine Joseph

My periwinkle flower,
Bloomed sweetly in sun or shade,
Laced mettle in her soil, to build her palisade,

My periwinkle flower,
Lost brethren to foreign plains,
Beset by cruelty, grew roots in lands untamed,

My periwinkle flower,
Lush tendrils bound by chain,
Bore spiritual fruit of hope, gifts passed to mortal kin,

My periwinkle flower,
Blossomed duly in storm or rain,
Longed so deeply for home, to stem the hurt and shame,

My periwinkle flower,
Labored through toil and strain,
Birthed resilience, existence through immeasurable pain,

My periwinkle mother,
Liberation in earthly frame,
Beloved dearly are you, for all you overcame.



The Performative childhood

By Richa Joshi Pant

In the long summer afternoons,
When fan makes the humming sound,
And the earth is bone dry
I visit the house of whispers,
The house of my ancestors,
And pick the versions of myself,
Aching, dark, performative versions
From hidden nooks and secret niches,
In the hallway, in the godless temple,
And under the jackfruit tree.
The loving hostility of its inhabitants,
Comes alive in long summer afternoons,
You see what you didn't then.
The frailty of human thoughts,
Its violence and subjugation.



Laburnurm

By Shweta Sahay

○ Laburnum!
Why do you have to burn up so?
The world is blazing already!
It is the peak of summer...
Your petals are angry little infernos
Vying with the mighty sun itself
For heat and glory

The sheet of sunshine
Envelopes and imprisons you
But you are too persistent
Your petals tumble down...
from your parent trees
Like prodigal children
Trying to outshine their ancestors

The daylight hides innumerable lies
And you keep revealing harsh truths
To all those who pass by;
Blinding them to everything
Except life

The evening comes...
Men have given up their chores
But your flowers keep shining tirelessly
You have exhausted the day
And sent him into the depths of the evening

Then the night folds the sky
like a saree about her
To protect herself from your incessant rain

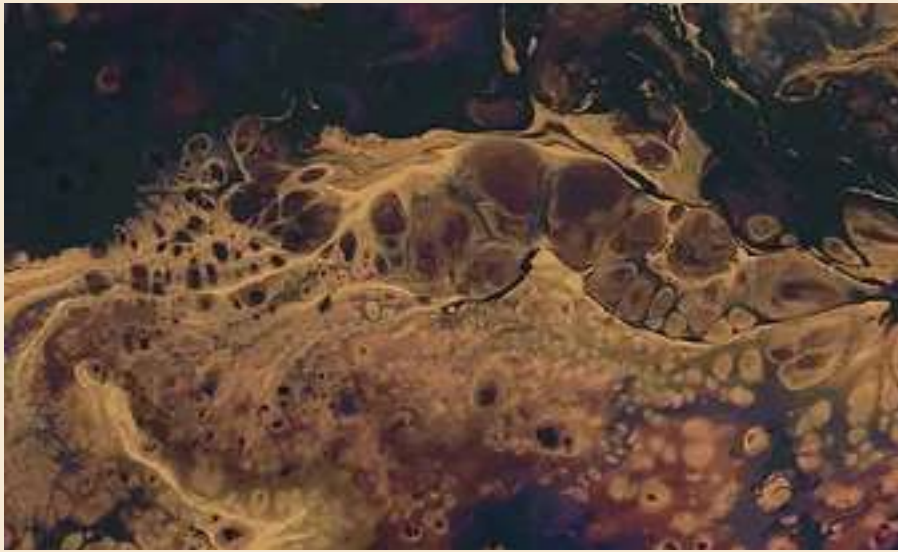
Yet your molten gold pierces
And smites her darkness
Like a mad moon



The Gods are not Merciful

By George Freek

Life is a flower that blooms,
then dies when we sleep.
I watch the moving moon,
dominate the sky.
Where does God reside?
People move along the road.
They know nothing
of me, and I know nothing
of them. Stars die slowly,
even more slowly
than the deeds of men.
I sink into sleep.
I waken to the day.
I have no courage.
When she was young,
And I was young,
We slept in each other's arms.
I'm older now and she is
far away. The light dies.
This poem is all wrong,
but I have nothing left to say.



Why the Long Face?

By Cat Dixon

the swollen dreams turned the mouth into a cave
twisted the paradigm to true—dripping with
elixir. fool me once, you don't know who
I am. fool me by the slice—sequels, spinoffs, and
runoffs board the train. keep clapping. keep
laughing. the swift system works despite relapse

You get it?

maybe you didn't get it. the unruly nephew
mashing keys strikes the right note. the train's
moving and you lost your ticket. your debut
blows the doors wide open. fool me nice, tough
but fair. fool me precisely—I hate everything
about truth or dare. there's no cover. buck it shut

Did you get that?

a personal mother teresa—that's all I know
an exhibit where people have to buy tickets
a port city like liverpool, full of booze and
nuance. fool me to new heights—the piano's
not tuned and you won't control that unruly
nephew who bursts into the bedroom without
a knock or a hello. this never happened



The temperature of a loner

By Michael Colon

There once was a boy who danced with shadows.
Covered in frost and puncture wounds from life's arrows.

A stoic face still like glass.
A broken heart that holds onto the past.

Family pictures are all a lie.
Freedom dwells in saying goodbye.

In his own world that is below freezing.
No reaction on the outside, but inside, he's screaming.

Walls of ice keep emotions from entering the melting pot of love.
The soul is home to monsters that fight, push, and shove.

He wants to pick up the pieces, but his hands are frostbitten.
Trying to rewrite a story that was never written.

A winter wonderland that traps him in its circus.
Tears stuck in time, never falling with a purpose.

Even a snowman wonders what's outside the igloo.
Enough loving warmth will melt his frozen tissue.

A new season is on the horizon.
The ice melts away with a desire to enlighten.

The song ends, and the shadows disappear.
Which leaves behind a new fear.

How to be human outside the arctic?

Was he dancing or just being robotic?

The numbness has subsided from the new heat of passion.
We all have the choice to write a new beginning of actions.

The temperature of a loner can change.
When winter tells its story again, he will be on a new page.



By a Crimson River

By Fabrice Poussin

Listening to the heartbeat of a great blue world
almost in a swoon with his ear to the flowing river
crimson and azure bubbling with strange commotion.

Upon the pale cheek of the icy morning hour
silky threads dotted with the miraculous nectar
and what may have been a gentle smile.

Seeking warmth the pale lips reach forward
hoping for a taste of sweet honey
cold within the depth of a dying soul.

Bone to stone of the marble statue
the hesitant palm seeking comfort of a life
if only the body would at last awaken.

The lock remains sound to the key of his desire
listening to the brewing of a storm
he dreams of a word universal his salvation.



Serial Killers

By Navaneetha Mokkil

After a day of stifling heat
the kind that sucks your body dry
Makes your mind go flat
Dries clothes stiff in two straight hours
Turns your eyes all blurry and red
without even the excuse of grief.
When every pore of the body
turns sticky and itchy
and even serial killers on screen
cannot make you sit still.

After all that long-drawn torture
of the sweltering day
it rained for precisely
five minutes at 6:15 pm.

Yellow light streams in
the ripening leaves ripple
the earth breaths calm.

The scent of wet earth
tickles the palms of trees
as the sky turns ghostly white.

Then all is forgiven
Till the next kill.



River Run

By Jan Wieszorek

Memory tosses furs
over knees like a route

thru muscle, stitching
land they logged

to the river. Iron
over ice sets my teeth

like frost scrapings.
I exhale regrets under

shuffling vapor sheets.
How it is, bringing thrill

back home to fire,
whispering my festering

phrases beneath
ticking & woollens.



Debashri

By Shailja Sharma

Debashri is the mother
And she is her own baby
It's a full moon night
With stars twinkling all over the sky
This night seems brighter than some days
It's because Debashri is cracking open
Out of her own shell
The day is hatching
From its own night
Debashri is not scared of the day
She was never scared of the night
She will seize the day
With open arms
She will hug the sky
And tuck it away to
Where it belongs
Wait, sky cannot really be tucked away
It belongs everywhere
So, can Debashri crack open from her shell?
When she belongs everywhere
When she lives in each blade of grass
As much as she lives in the
Light of the sun
Will Debashri give birth to her own self, then?
The night is brightening
The day is slitting open from the side
Who knows if Debashri will be re-born in:
A fresh new perspective?



Identities

By Kavita Ratna



Untagged

Stubborn
she insisted,
'I will not
name my poems'.

No baggage to
tie them down.
Let them fly
or dawn or disappear
under their own
weight.

Free to be this, that,
whatever else

or even nothing at all,
in the intimate space
they inhabit,
with every one
they meet
afresh,
each time.

Like them,
if we too could
erase the labels
donned,
brands seared,
peel off each
layer of outer identity,
roles, history,
guilts, accolades -
acquired, attired
armoured,
affixed...

Remain unmarked,
untagged, unshackled,
pristine,
then
each of our encounters
may be a
new beginning,
with infinite possibilities
shaped only by
the aura
of that very
moment.

A dewdrop
mid-air.



Wiped Out

Apparently,
news about certain
birds forgetting
their own song,
is causing flutters.

Did those notes
knot up into
a tight pill
and get swallowed,
whole?
Or melt, bit by bit
like a tangy
candy, leaving behind
just a sweet stain?

If their music
was inscribed,
an innate genetic
code - inseparable
from its very breath.
how is it
that they are now
mimicking other birds
in their landscape,
embracing
new vocals as their own?

Whatever is
'own song' - anyway.
Another learnt
harmony, from

long ago,
its origin,
dried out on the way
beyond horizon.

Will there be
a time when
all music
is either appropriated
or synthesised,
all melodies merely
borrowed, absorbed
tunes,
adapting to the
new terrains we inhabit?

Those may seem
more real than
the original,
as, along with them,
we transform a bit
with each new
twist
in the tail,
with none
left standing
to call out the difference.

FICTION



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Mehreen Ahmed

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Evil Neighbours
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Route Ninety-Four

By Mehreen Admed

A story of unfulfilled love

Part 1

Her pale face is radiant under an August setting sun; she sits on a bench at the bus stop 94. A rusty rooftop above, and the bench under with its pastel green paint peeling off to a hard, grim dour. Waiting for bus no 94; it is late. Instead of searching for an alternative route, she walks a quarter of a mile every day and waits here. Day in and day out. Year in and year out until one day, she turns ninety-four herself.

Her tired eyes stare into oblivion and notes a solitary restless daisy through a lonely crack of the cemented road; across the bus stop, bobbing its breezy yellow head, anxious to fly away, but for its roots spiraling all the way through the gaping, jagged cranny. She lets out a sigh; her eyes light up. All she is left with is desires nestled within the cozy warmth of her heart; a place gone cold from all the waiting.

Where is he? The man, her one true love? He asks her to pick him up from this very bus stop, the last bus at 94. She wears a pink, floral sari which wraps around her young, smooth body. The bus never comes. She waits hours until the day is gone, afternoon and the evening. Still, no sign of buses here. An empty, abandoned stop.

She continues to look at the empty road ahead, still waiting for the bus arrive. The daisies are in full bloom of spring. She hears someone call her name, "Ayesha, Ayesha, look, look, I'm here." She turns her head, and a shiver runs down her spine; she views a bare tree by the river, leaves growing out of it, disproportionately, insanely psychedelic. "Where are you, I don't see you, I don't see you anywhere, Mohabbat, Mohabbat, where are you, my love? Do you see me?" Ayesha asks, her heart swelling; her breathing shallow with excitement; she inhales the faint perfume of his hair oil dispersed in the air. Soon, soon he will be here and pick her up and hold her against his chest. His soft lips pressing down on her ruby red, melding into rich hot chocolate cake.

Part II

At Fajr, Mohabbat Ali Khan wakes up to the sound of the *azaan*. It drifts through the minaret of a local mosque of his neighborhood. He descends the narrow stairs, and steps outside into a mosaic courtyard through a floral inlaid arched architrave. This mosaic square is fenced in by stucco brick walls on two sides. He nearly sleepwalks toward a tap near the western wall and turns it on to do his daily ablution, *wazu*, before the *namaaz*. He begins to wash his hands, elbows, face and ankles three times. Rinses his mouth three times, and three splashes into the nostrils —three splashes for each of the body extremities.

During the partition at the time of independence from the British, his parents opted to stay in India, After they pass, he continues to reside in the old capital of Delhi. In the same house too, the ancestral property. A blue arched house, beautifully antique. Accustomed to communal riots, love-hate relationships are common with the Hindu, Christian and Parsi friends, but in a complex social conglomerate; he lives through and grows up with much political turmoil, not alien to situations increasingly volatile.

He hears the water trickle, also from the other side of these thick walls as the neighbours, the *Dilliwallas* are walking up. Hot tea brewing in a shack restaurant, the delicious aroma of deep-frying *samosas*, *daal puri*, *parathas* and omelettes swims through the morning air. After prayer, Mohabbat Ali Khan steps outside the gates to go for his customary morning walks. Munshi Giasuddin, the local barber's salon down the alley is open. It is early, but he already has a client. He is sitting in a wooden straight-backed chair by the roadside. Munshi is rubbing up soap on his beard and chatting away. He nods at Mohabbat as he walks past.

Mohabbat walks a mile. His usual rounds are all the way up to the Jama Mosque, and then looping back. He usually performs *Fajr* at the mosque which takes care of both the *namaaz* as well as the morning walk. Today, however, he is pressed for time, and prays at home. He looks at the barber through the corners of his eyes, and runs a finger absent-mindedly through his thick beard twisting up his moustache, thinking that his beard also needed a trim. He walks a couple of steps ahead and sits down on a hard bench at the shack restaurant for some hot tea and samosa.

"*Salaam Janaab*, how are you this morning?" a tea boy asks.

"*Walaikumassalam*," Mohabbat replies over a slight cough. "Yeah, I'm very well."

"Tea and *samosas*? Freshly fried," The tea boy asks.

Mohabbat nods, and sees that the tea boy is disappearing around the corner to fetch the order, while he sits in the mellow morning light, watching the barber's precision cutting next door. His client spits betel saliva occasionally on the side, at which the barber lifts his razor sharply away from his face.

Mohabbat has a date today with his Ayesha in an unkempt mossy garden near her house. His eyes dilute just thinking of her. He must wear her favourite hair oil, today. His thought is interrupted as his order of tea and hot *samosas* arrives. He bites into its crunch carefully, sipping and savouring the white tea at the same time. He wants to pop into the barber shop next door after he finishes, here.

Over to the barber shop, he looks at all the hair oil bottles from various brands shelved around a glassed window bay. He picks up *Jaba Kushum* which is her favourite. He pays up and leaves the shop. The barber smiles at him; he leaves with a polite nod.

Mohabbat walks home. He enters through the gate and climbs up the stairs. He decides to take a shower before he leaves for his date. He puts on a white embroidered *kurta* and *pajamas*. He lavishly oils his hair with *Jaba Kushum* and runs a comb through his beard. He comes downstairs and steps out on the road; he hears howls closing in like the fury of tsunami. He sees a huge mob approaching his house; a sporadic riot is at his gate.

The bus no 94 arrives in time. Mohabbat is lucky to escape the mob's scourge. He stands almost camouflaged against the wall's whiteness. People enter his home, and they drag out his possessions; rattling, rusty trunks, his books, his *charpai* bed, his father's easy chair, *hookah*, and his violin, hurling them all out on the street in a heap. He says nothing—an innocent bystander, he trudges along the wall with caution until he arrives at the bus stop. He falls a few times before he is able to ascend the bus; a sweaty forehead, a few drops of sweat fall over his eyes lids, an already wet beard. He wonders if there's riot also at Ayesha's place. He finds a window seat through the crowd. Stumbling, he sits down.

The bus is moving. He lets out a sigh of relief. Thankfully, there's hope. He is thinking of starting a new life with Ayesha some place safer, perhaps abroad where there's peace and stability. As long as the bus is moving, there is some hope. He looks around him and sees panic in the wet frowns of his fellow passengers. This bus will take them away where all can rest in peace. Suddenly, an explosion catapults the bus.

Part III

Young Ayesha's sweet pink sari comes undone; it is noosed around her neck, strangulated. The pink hue reflects a bluish blush on her silken, smooth skin. This place is eerily deserted. Doctors know better. She lies in a white starched hospital bed. Her skin is decrepit, mottling. Mohabbat is here, coming towards her, she waits, she hears his voice, echoing through her comatose brain. She desires to go on a safari with him, maybe not on the unlucky 94 after all. He is smiling ... she sniffs the odour ... her favourite oil brushed into the strands of his hair. Glib winds whisper into her ears. Ninety-four years of wait cannot atone for this wrong. The bus has changed course. It does not come here anymore.



Swan Song

By Bill Tope

Wendy & Steve's marriage is a magnificent affair. But there is an insidious secret here.

Part I

At the crack of dawn, Steve was sitting at the kitchen island, contemplating the coffee dregs swirling round the bottom of his mug, and pondering whether he should opt for a fifth cup of java. Larry the cat padded the length of the counter and peeped into the mug and voiced his opinion:

"Mrow," he said.

"Yeah, Larry," said Steve, "but what do you know?"

Larry's whiskers twitched evocatively, but he had no more to say. Steve had his fifth--and then a sixth--cup of coffee. His days always started late and ended early. He gazed lazily at his \$5,000 coffee maker.

By nine a.m., Steve was seated upon the sofa, waiting expectantly for his significant other, Wendy, to make her mid-morning appearance. Wendy always stopped by Steve's on her way to work, in order to discuss their upcoming nuptials. Steve glanced out the window and saw Wendy's frizzy blond head and ravishing green eyes peeping through the glass. He started. After dating for two years, the lion had been bearded, and Steve wasn't about to be let off the hook by the persistent Wendy. Wendy was a mortician's assistant and looked forward to the day when she could relinquish her devotion to abdominal sutures and the like. Steve was a wealthy L.A. record producer, and he could, she thought, take her away from all that. She waved at him. With a jerky, caffeine-fuelled enthusiasm, he waved back. Steve wasn't much to look at, he knew, but Wendy seemed smitten. He smiled complacently.

Using her own key, Wendy entered the palatial house and kissed Steve on the cheek. "Hello, lover," she said dramatically, running her finger provocatively through the belt loop of his robe.

"What's on the agenda today?" he asked her warily. "Do you want forty bridesmaids instead of the twenty we'd planned? Or the New York Philharmonic to play at the reception? Or the Archbishop of Canterbury to perform the service?" Wendy's demands had mushroomed over the four months since they'd set the date, and showed no signs of abating. He smiled affably, to rob his words of the annoyance that he genuinely felt.

"No, dear," she cooed, smoothing his pyjama collar. "All the plans have been implemented." His expression perked up. "All we have to do is wait for June 6th," she said.

"The banquet hall..." he began.

"Reserved."

The band..."

"Scheduled."

"The catering service..."

"Engaged."

"The invitations..."

"Sent out," she said conclusively.

He paused for an instant. "There is one thing I bet you've forgotten," he baited her with a little smile.

"Try me," she dared, her eyes alert, cat-like.

"We have to find a date for Larry," he said. Wendy scratched Larry behind the ears. She loved that cat, Steve knew.

Wendy seemed to be taking Steve's suggestion seriously for a moment, but then she tweaked his nose and said, "I got to get going."

"Big day today?" Steve asked.

"Whole family, got wiped out on Highway 140 three days ago," she said with relish. "The Coroner just released them this morning." She kissed him again and made her way to the door. "Later, baby," she called, as she swept through the door.

"Have fun," he called after her.

Part ii

The wedding was a stupendous affair, as was the reception. It was located at the City Market Social House out of necessity -- it was the sole L.A. venue with a capacity great enough to accommodate the 4,500 guests the newlyweds expected. And it was large enough and expensive enough for even Wendy's extravagant tastes. And while the Philharmonic didn't perform, Elton John, Beyonce, and Taylor Swift did, in turn, taking the stage. Anything less would have been a poor reflection on Steve who, as the recording industry's foremost producer, was expected to be bigger than life in all that he did.

Steve stood alone and admired the quiet opulence of the venue. As much as he had made a big deal out of Wendy's growing demands and expensive tastes, in truth he was relieved by the arrival of his wedding day. Before Wendy agreed to become his bride, she had dallied with her boss, "the undertaker," as Steve had pejoratively dubbed him. Sam Unser, proprietor of Unser's Mortuary, was an up-and-coming funeral director, with a half dozen "parlors" in the greater L.A. area, who had evinced a great interest in the woman who had today become Steve's wife. And who could blame him? Wendy was perhaps the prettiest, sexiest, most alluring woman that Steve had ever known, and he'd known plenty of them. Besides, Steve could afford whatever it cost. Anything for Wendy. It was Wendy's idea to invite virtually everyone that Steve had ever met. Strangely, few people who were known just to her had received an invitation. "Your family and friends are my family and friends now," she'd said. There was bad blood in Wendy's family, Steve had concluded. And, apparently, she had no large reservoir of close personal friends. She declined to invite even her co-workers to the ceremony. Which suited Steve right down to the ground; he felt what she did for a living was creepy. But, she had resisted resigning her job and moving in with him, prior to the wedding, choosing not to become a kept woman. He could kind of respect that. But, she had a certain fealty to her employer; thanks to Wendy, and with the reluctant help of Steve, Unser Mortuary had become the so-called "Mortuary to the Stars," and had snagged virtually every high-profile client in the past three years.

Part iii

The first part of the evening went off without a hitch. There was a beautifully orchestrated sit-down dinner, featuring Chateaubriand, *yanagidako*, scrod, and almost literally a ton of caviar. The wine flowed like, well, wine. And streaming copiously at the reception was Palmos Spirytis Rektyfikowany vodka, a Polish spirit which, at 192 proof, was the closest

thing to be found resembling lighter fluid. In short order, almost everyone was stewed on Palmos.

The party continued into the wee hours of the morning, until at length, Steve drank champagne from Wendy's slipper. Everyone fell about the place. The caterers had erected a vodka fountain with the Palmos, and Elton John slipped and fell in. But he resurfaced, unharmed, bobbing to the surface like a cork, and everyone laughed with merriment. Although there was a fire code admonition against smoking in the venue, guests, now in their cups, cast caution to the wind and were soon lighting up, both tobacco and pot. Some musicians even dared to free-base cocaine. Why not? They were all indestructible, weren't they? Thinking ahead, Steve and the wedding planners had opted to exclude the press from the festivities before things got really out of hand. Which by now they had. But that had been hours ago. Guests had also voluntarily given up their cell phones.

Thoughtfully fingering the huge, garish, hedge ball setting of the ring that Steve had solemnly slipped on her finger during the ceremony that afternoon, Wendy gazed with utter contempt at the effete, spoiled, disgusting creatures who had gathered to celebrate her wedding to Steve. More like, they were there to get wasted -- again. A liveried man lurking in the wings caught her eye and, almost imperceptibly, she nodded. The man approached the vodka fountain and without further ado, ignited a book of matches and tossed it into the well of the fountain. With a deafening WHOOMPF, the fountain burst into flame. In a heartbeat, the curtains caught fire, then the walls, the carpet, and the very clothes the guests were standing around in. People shrieked, tried to flee, but succeeded only in spreading the blaze. Suddenly, Steve ran up.

"Wendy," he said frenziedly, grabbing for her arm. "Let's get out of here!" She stared dispassionately into his eyes. Her own eyes seemed dead. She observed the banana-sized joint he clutched in his fingers. Without a thought, she took up a glass of Palmos from a nearby table and tossed the 96% alcoholic drink over his torso, drenching him from the waist up. Immediately he burst into flame, and blazed like an incandescent torch. His agonized scream was lost in the many hundreds of other such outbursts. Without a word, Wendy vacated the wedding venue through the only door which had somehow remained unlocked. Upon her departure, the door locked into place again with a little click.

Part iv

Unser Mortuary, now offering services at 24 locations in Los Angeles, San Francisco and San Diego, was unofficially known as the Mortuary to the Stars. It was too garish a moniker for professional usage, Sam Unser, the CEO, thought. Since the infamous wedding venue tragedy, more than four years before, things had gone rather splendidly for Sam, business-wise. He was making money hand over fist. Personally, too, it had gone well for him. His wife of nearly three years, Wendy, was expecting the devoted couple's second child, a son, to accompany the daughter she'd had before. They hadn't decided yet on a name; eventually, they would eschew their first two choices -- Sam Junior and Steve -- and settle on Wendy's personal favourite: Larry.



Contact but no Connection

By Sreelekha Chatterjee

Bosom buddies connect after ages. Will they be able to renew their lost friendship?

Someone pings me a message. While sipping my morning tea, I scroll through it – “Will be going to Delhi on a work trip during this weekend.” A brief one from a dear friend, Ray, who lives in Bangalore where he runs his own IT company. He visits several other places both inside the country and abroad on business and personal trips, but never here.

I message back, suddenly awakened from the slumber of our friendship – “Can’t believe we’ll be meeting after ages. Let me know your plans.”

A quick response from him lets out the ravishing flight of joy that know no bounds – “Will spend time together over the weekend.”

“You’ll stay at my place.”

“Done!”

I feel his presence even before he lands in my house like petrichor permeates the air before the rain, though two decades of lost connection is a long time.

It’s Wednesday when I receive his message. “I need to make all arrangements.” I remind myself repeatedly, placing my hand on the cream-colored, broad-window dimity curtains edged with lace in the guest room, unprepared to receive any visitor. Flurries of dust swirl as I slap the bed cover, removing the debris that shadowed the reminiscences of my childhood days with Ray, an ecstatic resignation to the lively moments spent together – playing, eating, dancing, studying, quarrelling, laughing, crying, consoling, but never separated from each other.

Ray is a foodie. He loved to have home-cooked food, specially prepared by my mother. On a rainy day he would yearn for the rich aroma of my mother’s celestial kitchen where she would be preparing the comforting, flavorful *kichdi* made with rice and lentils, seasoned with a dollop of *ghee* (clarified butter), cumin seeds, ginger, and asafetida. The warm, savory *kichdi* would be served along with eggplant and potato fritters, *papad* (a thin crisp, disc-shaped cake made up of lentils, either deep fried or cooked with dry heat), accompanied by the sweet soul-melting tomato *chutney*. At the end

we would have payesh (rice pudding). It felt like a benediction in the form of a heavenly meal. Looking for a gourmet spread, he would come over often to our house and always returned delighted with my mother's exceptional culinary skills.

Time cascaded into years, and we were destined to follow different paths that never converged. We were in college the last time we met, memories of which remains like a lush, untended garden. The past breathes alive, engulfing me with its heavy emotional precipitation, as tears roll down like water pouring from a bursting rain cloud.

A pale, languid demeanor overwhelms me as I try to tidy the room – cleaning the cobwebs at the corners of the ceiling, getting rid of the accumulated dirt on the fan blades, wiping the cupboards, dressing table.

“What'll he think?” a doubt of unacceptance after a prolonged absence lingers. Will the embers of love generate fire this time or disintegrate like before? How will I broach the possibility of rekindling a lost connection?

Next, the air conditioner servicing is done. It's the beginning of spring with a chill in the air. Perhaps the hugging warmth of emotional quilt will awaken the cherished recollections of togetherness that disappeared under the sea of time. We had once reconnected over social media, beginning a short, nostalgic correspondence that lasted for a couple of months. He didn't forget me and had been looking for me all those years since our last encounter. I continually liked his photographs which usually had to do with some kind of food in it – the birthday boy eating a creamy chocolate cake gleefully, the boss gobbling up an entire pizza at an office party, the glutton devouring a whole chicken all by himself. But the relationship never developed further, and communication broke off, perhaps realizing that will be like slipping into something that will never be real.

I organize the living-cum-dining area, other bedrooms, the kitchen, as well as the chambers of my mind. A constant phenomenon whenever people visit my place – everything is sorted, cleaned, set up within minutes, much like putting together the disjointed parts of a battered, uncared self, sheathed under a colorful make-up.

How will it be to meet Ray after such a long time? The solemn quiet of all these years will suddenly be broken, an urge to uncover the deep, dark secrets of life – generally not shared with others – will prevail. Will he be the same as in our preteen age? Have the fabrics of his mind altered by his lived experiences as a company's boss and father of two teenage boys? Are there going to be giggly crushes on each other like our childhood days? Will the reunion bring forth the possibility that there could be something? A probability of a date?

I've continued to remain the way I was in college. An uneventful life where I started working as a schoolteacher in a distant city after completing my postgraduation, always busy shaping the lives of others, almost forgotten my own in the process, never a complete woman nor a wife. Ray spent a couple of years more in our hometown completing an MBA, following which he got married and shifted to another city. What will we talk about? The secret uncertainty of choosing a path and allowing it to define my life. Will the silence be claimed by the garrulous Ray, or my quiet, reserved self?

At last, the weekend arrives like a dream come true, adding an extra heartbeat, a sprint in my motion. Ray sends the long-expected message on Friday late in the evening that he has already landed in Delhi two days ago and is having a very hectic schedule but is free over the weekend.

On the ethereal Saturday morning, I call him up. It's our first phone call in a very long time.

“Hi!” We both say almost in unison and pause, imagining the providence of fate that has prevented us from being companions in our adult lives, or perhaps long-lost soulmates, unaligned in this lifetime.

“When are we meeting?” I try to remember his face I had last seen nearly eons ago.

“I'll be free after may be two o'clock in the afternoon. On Sunday evening I'll go back.”

“Ok. Check out from the hotel and come over to my house.” Reveries of the fragrant, wet grass of our childhood playground, light, and air bloom.

“Hope it won’t be inconvenient to you.” It’s so unlike him. Perhaps life has instilled these changes or choices which I’ll discover once we meet face-to-face for the first time since we were children. Our relationship has been like the sun and the rain – there is contact but great distance between our connection.

“Not at all!” Momentarily, I put a brake to the dancing throng of happiness in my mind.

“Great!” He hangs up.

I communicate the live location. It feels as if I’ve developed wings and can fly but not beyond the ceiling of my room. Every cell in my body joyfully quivers with limitless expectations of the moment that we’ll jointly relive our growing-up days. I set off the day with cooking, as his preference for good food has remained intact with which he has retained the strong emotional association. Though pleasurable, the cooking painfully prolongs beyond measure. After a couple of hours, the food is ready, wafting the fragrance of love and remembrance – comfort of fried rice, affection of lentil soup, satisfaction of mixed vegetable curry, jubilation of chilli chicken, and harmony, essence of rice pudding. The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach – will I find the way? By the time all the preparations are done, it’s almost three in the afternoon.

I anticipate that Ray will reach before four o’clock. Seconds dissolve into minutes, and minutes expand into hours, but there’s no sign of him. I try to call but he isn’t reachable like the previous years when he wasn’t available – busy, cocooned in his own familial world.

At around seven in the evening, I receive a message from him – “Sorry, the business deal has to be finalized today itself. Tomorrow I’ll be busy with meetings followed by a lunch invitation. I guess we’ll have to wait until next time.” Once again, we are like strangers in this wide world, only we know what magic will unfold once we meet.

I had forgotten the menacing presence of time. It had always played mischief with us, detached us from our roots like an orphaned child, washed us away to new frontiers. As always, we acquiesce to its plans. I sit down to eat the self-made dinner, while emotions rush out of me in a tremendous wave, my salty tears roll out and mingle with the food, as I recollect the bygone crossroads, our past selves, and the road not taken. We have been separated all over again, seemingly forever. A voice murmurs, “Will there be a next time?”



Evil Neighbours (Part I)

By Nicola Vallera

An intriguing tale

I flatten my potato nose against the cold glass. The old lady across the street stands like a stone figure, her piercing gaze drilling into me like she can see through my soul. A chill runs down my spine as she raises her arm and points in my direction. I hold my breath, knowing that if I move, she can spot me. It must be because of my left ear, leaning forward like a pig. Everybody hates it. The old woman is scheming with Jim Carlson, who lives next door. He's an ex-football player who doesn't do shit. I saw them exchange secretive glances and knew something was up.

"Dr. Klopp, what's your opinion?" I say, keeping my face on the glass.

"Everybody wants to see you dead," a rasping voice says. "No one will show any mercy."

His words come like a curse. They chill my blood.

"But—"

"Your ear, Sebastian... your ear."

A dim light flickers in a house next to mine. Its glow makes the darkness alive like Christmas had come early.

"So, these must be the newcomers?" Dr. Klopp says.

"They took over for the cursed family."

Dr. Klopp murmurs in disappointment. "Those who reported you to the police?"

"I was fulfilling my duty... the good citizen, spying on them."

"You did it well, Sebastian."

"Of course."

"Their teenage sons laughed at your ear."

"They were plotting against me."

I glance at the wall clock. Its numerals glow in a red hue against the backdrop of darkening twilight. The hands are creeping towards five o'clock, and I know I must hurry. It's getting late. I say goodbye to Dr. Klopp and wrap myself in my beloved green jacket adorned with the Celtics emblem. Then I take to the street, scurrying my short legs in corduroy

pants and sneakers. The chill of winter brushes against my bald head, prompting me to don a wool cap. It's black and blends into the night. I don't want to be seen. I don't want my neighbors to catch me and cut my throat. Neighbors kill like it's nothing.

A familiar figure catches my eye as I round the corner onto the street that leads to the supermarket. Mrs. Sinclair, the retired lady from behind my house, always wears a ruby shawl and walks her poodle. A chill runs through me as her icy gaze locks onto mine. She might be armed, and if I cross her, she might stick a dagger into my back. I hurry to the opposite sidewalk. My heart pounds, and every second feels like an eternity. When I glance back, the woman has already turned the corner.

I must lock my house, or someone will slit my throat while sleeping.

I tremble as I approach the supermarket. The clock in the supermarket reads 5.12 PM. Dr. Kropp says waiting until five is the safest hour for shopping. At least my closest neighbors never come after five.

The cashier glares at me with his brows furrowed, and his teeth grit as he runs my items through the scanner. I know he hates my ear. Without surveillance cameras, he'd have been on me in seconds. I picture him pushing me against the shelves and pressing his beefy hands into my neck.

I bought frozen noodles to prevent food poisoning. The ice is too hard to inject anything harmful.

I tremble, gazing at the floor.

What if the cashier shoots me? Do salesclerks have guns? Oh my god!

"Seventeen dollars and twenty-five cents," the cashier says, a slight smirk on his face.

My heart skips a beat at the thought of what he could mean with those numbers. Seventeen times twenty-five bullets? Four hundred twenty-five bullets? He keeps drumming his thick fingers, and I'm helpless.

Should I pay or run?

The tension is thick in the air. I search for answers, but all I find is chaos. I pull a crisp twenty-dollar bill from my pocket and slam it on the counter. I don't even wait for the change and take off running. With all the money Mom and Dad left me, survival isn't a problem. I retrace the road, hastening because my instinct says I'll meet someone. My hunch always gets it right, alas. A station wagon is creeping into my new neighbors' garage. I walk past it, but it backs out. It does it with such speed that it bumps into my shoulder, and I fall. The shopping bag I'm carrying rips open. The packet of noodles with garlic-chili seasoning inside it rolls under the back wheel of the car. I hear a crunching sound as the wheel comes down on it.

Someone says, "Oh my god!" Someone tries to help me up. Then more people gather around. I stand up and see a young woman in her early twenties with blonde hair and tears in her eyes. A man with a thick black mustache stands behind her. Next to him is a woman in her forties. She looks like an older version of the younger woman. Beside her, a boy around thirteen is biting his lip.

"I'm such a bad driver, so sorry," the young woman stutters. "I wanted to move forward, but my foot slipped."

Did she try to kill me or what?

I lost my cap, so I keep my hand on my crooked ear. If they see it, they'll kill me.

"The wheel smashed your food," the older woman says.

"I bet it was your dinner," says the man, waving toward the remnants of my noodles.

I glance at him and nod, but my mind is racing with worry.

"Would you like to join us for dinner?" the older woman says.

If they invite me to dinner, what could be their next step? Poisoning me? And where would they hide my body?

"I'm feeling quite uneasy about trusting others," I tell them.

The man stares at me and chuckles. The other members of his family gaze at me with a combination of astonishment and

and skepticism. The man tames his chuckling. "You must be a joker."

"Please," the older woman insists. "We would be delighted."

"We moved in yesterday," the man says. "We can't wait to meet our neighbors."

"Did the car hit your ear?" the young woman asks.

Oh-ho. They suspect me.

I shake my head, but my hand doesn't move from my ear. I'm about to head back to my house when the man suddenly grabs me and steers me toward his house.

"Hey, come on! Don't turn me down. I want you to say yes."

I can't disengage. He might hide a blade under his sweater sleeve and slit my throat. I must keep a cool head.

I find myself in the dining room. The young woman is adding another seat.

"Do you want me to look at your ear?" the older woman asks.

"Why?" I ask her in alarm.

"I see you holding it in your hand."

"No, no, thank you."

"Need to use the restroom?" the man asks.

He directs me toward the stairs. "It's upstairs. Last door on the left."

I hasten up, thinking of how to escape through the window.

I'll fall on the hedge dividing our houses.

I enter the bathroom. But the view outside the window scares me because of the height. I can't help but observe that the hedge is situated a couple of feet away, not below.

I can't jump, or I'll hurt myself on the pavement. So I'll flood the bathroom. Then the family will come, and they'll check it out. And while they're distracted, I'll flee from the main door.

I plug the hole in the tub with a towel and turn on the water. Then I start down the corridor. I hear whispers from downstairs when I'm about to step on the stairs.

"The accident must have shocked him," the young woman says.

"Be more cautious," says the man.

"But Dad... he suddenly came out..."

It doesn't seem like they're planning my murder. Did I exaggerate? Are they nice people?

But the man says, "Give me the big knife, and I'll cut the beast into slices."

Argh! There you go. They want to kill me.

"How do you kill a pig?" the boy asks.

"You start with its ears," the man says.

"Why from there?"

"Because they're crooked."

I back away in panic. I'm in a house of killers.

I run into a room to check on its window—too high. There are dolls on a shelf. I need to remove their heads. The family may have used the dolls for magic. So I take one and snap its head. I repeat the process with the others until thirteen heads are on the ground. Afterward, I move to another room filled with robots and superhero posters. I pick up a comic book on the bed and flip through its pages. I come across some curious phrases that Spiderman uses while talking to a criminal. Like, "I'm gonna give you a little tug on the ear..." I tear up the page and put it in my pocket. It's evidence. As I reach into my pocket, I feel the texture of wool. It's the cap I had been wearing earlier on the street. I don't know how it ended up in my pocket, but I probably dropped it during the accident. Absent-mindedly, I picked it up and put it in my pocket. Now that I think about it, the cap could conceal my deformed ears, and the family wouldn't notice. I put on my cap and pull it down to cover my ears when suddenly I hear the man's voice calling me from the stairs.

"Everything OK?" he says.

Contd...



Evil Neighbours (Part II)

By Nicola Vallera

An intriguing tale

I briskly make my way through the corridor, trying my best not to draw any unwanted attention.

"Yep," I say.

I head downstairs, and the man questions whether I'm feeling cold.

Why that question? They want to put me in the oven and cook me—cursed cannibals.

"Nope," I say.

"Why don't you take off your cap?"

"No, thanks. I'm fine."

"If you say so...."

The woman approaches us. "Dinner's ready. Please, this way."

As we move to the table full of food, I can't help but feel uneasy. The boy and the young woman are already seated. The man and his wife take the heads of the table. I sit at the side, facing their children. The man watches me with a wide grin, but when I look at his wife, her smile seems forced and apprehensive.

"My bad for not introducing myself earlier," the man says. "My name's George, and I'm a salesman."

Bullshit. You're a monster aiming to cut off my ear.

"I'm Laura," the woman says. "I work as a physical therapist at St. John's Hospital."

Are you just putting on an act and pretending to live a normal life?

According to Dr. Kropp, the most dangerous beings often appear to be the most trustworthy.

"This is Anne," she says, pointing to her daughter.

The girl pulls an embarrassed smile, showing her braces.

"Anne is studying to be a doctor."

The boy makes a disgusted face.

"And that's Ethan," the woman says, pointing at the boy. "He wants to know about everything except studying." The boy

rolls his eyes.

Bullshit! I know what you want. But you won't get my ear.

"And you?" George asks. "What's your name?"

"Sebastian," I say in a low voice.

"What a beautiful name," Laura says, forcing a smile.

"I bet you work in an office?" George says.

"Why would he want to work in a boring old office?" Laura asks.

George watches me, and I nod.

"You see?" he says. "I have a sixth sense about things."

You call them things; I call them ears.

"I bet you work in a department store," George says, stroking his big black mustache.

I nod. I must humor them.

"What department?" Laura asks.

"Wait," George says. "Let me guess."

He squints and puts on a serious face like a fortune teller. But I can tell it's all an act.

"I bet you work in the stationery department."

I nod.

"In an office in the stationary department."

I nod.

"In an office in a department store's stationary department."

What a drag!

I nod.

"See?" George says and chuckles.

Ethan glares at me. I gulp and sense the sweat trickling down my skin. But Anne smiles. George gets up, grabs a large knife, and I wince. I'm about to scream. But if I cry, the killers will know that I know. With an immense effort, I contain myself. The man plunges the knife into the roast and slices it.

"How long have you been living here, Sebastian?" Laura asks.

"Thirty-two years," I say.

"Thirty-two?" she asks. "How old are you?"

"Thirty-two."

"Ah... so you've lived here all your life?"

"Yes, but Dr. Kropp told me to keep things on the down low. Better safe than sorry, right?"

"Safe?" Laura asks.

"Who's Dr. Kropp?" asks George.

Someone rings the doorbell.

Have they invited more cannibals?

As everyone watches the door, I swiftly duck under the table to hide from view. Then I overhear a conversation between a woman and George before she leaves, and the door shuts.

"A woman got the wrong address," George says. "Where's Sebastian?"

"Oops," Laura says. "Where is he?"

"He was here a moment ago," says Anne.

I hear the noise of the chairs. They all stand up.

"Has he gone to the bathroom?" Laura asks.

They call my name. I hear footsteps heading upstairs moments later, followed by a scream. Though I should run, I hear Anne shouting from the bathroom, "Come over here!" prompting me to consider a different plan. Everyone's in the bathroom. I'm gonna lock them inside so they don't follow me home, and then I'll have time to barricade myself.

I hurry upstairs and glance into the bathroom. I see the entire family soaking their feet by the tub filled to the brim with

water. The tub is so full that it resembles a public fountain. I quickly remove the keys from the door and close it with a loud slam. Before anyone reaches the door, I lock it. Loud banging on the door and piercing screams fill the air.

"Hey!" George yells. "What are you doing?"

"Dr. Kropp says that an exceptional situation calls for exceptional measures," I say.

"Who the hell is Dr. Kropp?" George roars.

"You're a freak!" Anne says.

"Call the police," says Laura.

Police? Not the police.

I must do something. I'm not the bad guy. They are monsters.

Setting fire to the house appeals to me. So I run downstairs and grab the oven lighter in the kitchen. I open a door and enter the garage. There are a couple of gallons of gasoline. I grab them. Then I return to the house and spill the gas in the living room. I leave a trail leading to the main door. Then I open it, set fire to the trail, shut it, and hurry to my house. But a voice orders me to stop. It says to raise my hands and not to move. Police officers, unaware of my ordeal, handcuff me.

"Call the firemen!" a policeman yells.

The flames engulf the house. When the firefighters arrive, I'm sure the cannibals burned to death.

But peering through the window of the police car, I see them. The cannibals are walking toward an ambulance wrapped in blankets.

As I glance toward the back window, I notice a group of neighbors standing a few feet away. They observe the situation. Some hold their arms crossed while others record on their phones. I spot Jim Carlson and the old woman. A journey to the police station follows. The officers don't spare glares. Once we arrive, I find myself in a stifling room. A woman and a man face me. The woman questions me about my presence in the house that caught fire. I'm about to disclose the truth about the killers' intentions when an officer interrupts. He whispers something in the woman's ear. The woman looks at me with an embarrassed expression.

"You're free to go," she tells me. "The family confessed."

"Confessed what?" her colleague asks.

"They confessed they murdered the family who lived in the house. They hid the corpses in the basement. Can you believe they were planning his assassination?" The woman points to me.

"Why?" the man asks.

"Sebastian's ear has an anomaly."

"How so?"

"It faces forward."

She watches me with pitiful eyes.

"Isn't that right, Sebastian?"

I nod.

"So?" the man asks.

"Looks like the family wasn't OK with it."

"That's crazy!"

The woman turns to me. "You're lucky, Sebastian. There are plenty of lunatics out there."

I get up and follow a policeman who drives me home. Once inside, I make my way to the window. I must survey my neighbors. They want to kill me.

"The family wanted to bake me like a turkey," I say.

"Be wary of accepting invitations from your neighbours," warns Dr. Kropp.

His voice is low and raspy and echoes through the darkness.

NON FICTION



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First Things First

By Sarah Das Gupta

Vagaries of nature sometime destroy our material belongings but leave us with a clearer perspective of life

It had been raining for hours in Kolkata, India. Already water had flooded the road and reached the first step to the veranda. I opened the front door and leaning over the balcony, I began to be concerned at the level of the water. By then the rickshaw pullers were finding it difficult to drag their vehicles through the filthy water. One went by carrying a woman and child with a load of shopping. As the rickshaw passed, it created small waves which washed up to the third step.

I saw rubbish flow by: a broken umbrella, half a lettuce, a dead dog and a bright red plastic bucket. Through the curtain of rain streaming from the roof, I could just make out the drenched figure of a man, waist deep in water, pushing a half-submerged bicycle. Looking down, I realised the water had reached the top step!

The sound of the rain had changed. No longer a welcome patter, it fell like bullets onto the roof. I thought how the noise, so seductive in the early monsoon, was now terrifying.

Sitting in the small front room, on the edge of a chair, I waited for the water to creep under the door. Suddenly, inevitably, the watery invasion began. A thin line of murky water reached the legs of a glass-topped coffee table. I sat, transfixed, until the water edged through the front room into the hallway.

Quickly, I jumped into action, thinking of my young baby, sleeping peacefully in his cot in the back bedroom. Paddling through the water, which was now ankle deep throughout the flat, I snatched the drowsy baby from his cot where water was already swirling round the legs of the bed.

At this point the dining room table was still high enough to provide a temporary safe refuge. I gently laid my son on a changing mat on the table as I watched the water slowly rising up the side of the refrigerator until it flooded the motor. A bright blue cushion and a sodden magazine floated past, up the hallway. I noticed the face of a famous Bollywood

actress, gracefully disappear below the water. Wading into the kitchen, I was faced by an array of cooking vessels and empty water containers floating defiantly out of the door, joining a pillow and a sari, like a long, wet banner, drifting into the main bedroom. Looking through the metal grill of the window, I could see the water level had risen alarmingly. The rubbish dump at the corner of the road had been lifted up by the power of the swirling water. It floated, a strange exotic island, down the road with broken branches, cardboard boxes, candle stubs, vegetable peelings and old tyres poking out through a tangle of water weed and other rubbish. By now I realised I could not stay in the flat with a young baby who was crying hysterically. I opened the door which led to the upstairs flat and the roof. It took all my strength to push against the water, which was waist high, swirling around in the stairwell and lapping the third stair. I picked up the child, wrapped in a white shawl, the only dry thing in the house. Holding him in one arm, I battled to push the door open against the flow of the water.

Somehow, I put one foot on the third stair and dragged myself up by the iron railings at the side of the metal staircase. My sari, heavy with water, was pulling me back. I managed to get rid of the six yards of soaking wet material and watched them wrap round a banister post. Now reduced to my petticoat, I struggled up the wet, slippery stairs, one hand on the railing and one round the screaming baby!

How I needed Ashok, but he had left for Delhi that morning to visit his dying grandfather. My husband was always calm, whatever the crisis and I missed his reassuring presence dreadfully.

The upstairs flat belonged to our landlord, Mr Dutta, a devout Hindu and successful businessman, his wife, sister-in-law and one very pampered toddler. At the top of the stairs the door to the Dutta's flat beckoned but I felt awkward, standing in my blouse and petticoat. I looked back at the water in the stairwell which had now reached the fifth step. I had little choice but to bang on the locked door.

I could hear footsteps coming along the stone passage and the key being turned on the other side. The door opened to reveal the formidable sister-in-law with the chubby toddler in her arms. Standing in a state of undress with a screaming baby, I felt foolish. However, speaking kindly in a Bengali dialect from East Bengal (Bangladesh), the woman invited us in.

"Come in. You must be flooded out and with a young baby too! I was just talking to Mr Dutta. He thought you had gone to Delhi with your husband, or we would have rescued you earlier."

I found myself reduced to tears by the concern in the woman's voice. Just hearing a reassuring voice was overwhelming. We walked down the passageway into the main sitting room. Mr Dutta appeared and assured me, "The water won't come up here. My family have lived here for years, and it never reaches beyond the sixth stair."

Slightly reassured, I gratefully accepted a bottle of warm milk for the baby. This seemed to pacify him. He quickly fell asleep on the regal sofa. Meanwhile, Mr Dutta and I climbed the steep stairs up to the roof. We stood in a wide, flat space criss-crossed by washing lines. The rain had stopped, and the dark, heavy clouds had cleared. Looking up you could see countless stars shining in a friendlier sky. It was now a dark blue velvet; the pinpricks of stars seemed to promise a calm night.

I looked down on a stricken city. In every direction were flooded roads looking like canals. Kolkata had become the Venice of the East. In the nearby bustee, the fragile huts had been flooded out and even destroyed. The inhabitants of the slum had collected on higher ground, their few possessions gathered around them. Looking down into the dark water of the street, I could see all types of debris floating past. On the roof opposite, candles and lamps had been lit. As I looked further down the road, I saw lights shining and winking from every roof top. It seemed the city had magically moved itself to a higher level, shunning the mud, water and filth in the streets and leaving the slum dwellers to deal with it. People were waving and shouting across the drowned world below. I thought of our flat flooded and our possessions. I decided to go back and rescue a few items. Slipping into the dark, stinking water, I started to swim into the bedroom. Mr Dutta bellowed down the stairs, "Come back the electricity is live and there are snakes in the water!"

For me the combination of an electric shock and a poisonous snake bite was too much. I swam back into the dining room, holding my breath and trying not to swallow any water. As I began to climb up the stairs, I held back angry tears. All the money we had saved to furnish the flat was gone along with the wedding presents and, above all, my son's fluffy blue bear which was always beside him when he went to sleep.

A week later the water had all but disappeared and Ashok had returned from Delhi. Yet nothing could prepare us for the scene of utter devastation which met our eyes. The front room was a metre deep in filthy mud, debris and a sickening stench from the streets. A sad piano looked as if a madman had been hammering at it. The white keys were sticking up, at least four centimetres above the black. Not even a discordant note could be extracted from the mortally wounded instrument. The kitchen was full of soaking wet, fluffy toys: sad bears, sodden tigers, solemn pandas; the remains of Noah's Arc which had not escaped the Great Flood. Even blue bear was beyond rescue. The refrigerator motor was wrecked, filled with black mud.

Ashok sighed, "We started with nothing and we're back to nothing. No, that's not quite true, the three of us have survived. This morning, on my way home, near Howrah Station, I saw the bodies of small children, lying at the side of the flooded track." Blue bear faded into insignificance.

Later that afternoon, we set off to the market to buy a simple wicker cradle for our son. After all, first things first!



My first Existential Crisis

By Judith Teich

The essay describes the writer's memory of an evening in 1971, a few months after she moved to Israel from New York

Maybe it's the lights shimmering across the water that are making me feel slightly tense, uneasy, watchful. I know that they are in Aqaba, in Jordan, a place forbidden to me; they're the only lights I can see. They seem very near, and the rest of the world feels very far away.

The night is perfectly calm. There is no breeze, but the air feels dry and clear and pleasant. We are sitting on a wide, pebbled beach, drinking orange Fanta and talking softly, exchanging facts about ourselves. Faint music comes from the restaurant near the road, behind us. It's very dark; in this remote spot 20 kilometers south of the Israeli resort town of Eilat, there are no other signs of habitation. Only an occasional car passing by on its way to Sharm el-Sheikh disturbs the night.

It is 1971, and the War of Attrition has only recently ended. I have been in Israel for about eight months, on a one-year program intended to help recent university graduates to learn Hebrew, find good jobs, and eventually settle in Israel. I've finished the Ulpan, an intensive five-month language course, and my Hebrew is passable. A few weeks ago, I started a job in the children's division of the welfare department in a suburb called Holon. But I often get frustrated, feeling that my ability to express myself is still limited, wondering whether I will be able to meet expectations.

Yesterday, I hitch-hiked the five hours from Tel Aviv to Eilat with Ilana, a colleague from work with whom I have recently become friends. I met Yigal, the handsome Israeli boy sitting next to me, just this afternoon on the beach in town. After a brief chat, he invited Ilana and me to accompany him and another boy to this simple beachfront tavern in the Sinai Peninsula, south of Eilat. Today is a religious fast day in Israel, Tisha b'Av, and most of the restaurants in the town are closed.

I have been struggling to explain something in Hebrew to Yigal about my life in New York, before I came here. I can't find

the exact words; he looks puzzled and doesn't grasp my meaning. Feeling suddenly tired and exasperated with the effort, I jump to my feet, declaring abruptly in Hebrew, totally to my own surprise, "I want to go home!" But as the words fly out of my mouth, I am seized by panic. What do I mean by 'home'? Do I mean the bare and rustic youth hostel in Eilat, where Ilana and I are staying for the weekend? Do I mean the three-room flat in Tel Aviv that I share with other recent Ulpan graduates in various stages of unemployment and indecision? Or do I mean my mother's apartment in New York, which I left so boldly less than a year ago, knowing that, at age 24, the time had come for me to be on my own, and that even if I return to the States, I'll never live there again?

I can't seem to express any of this in a way that Yigal understands, which intensifies my agitation. I guess he files the experience under the heading of "Unstable American Girls." I've heard many Israeli boys express the opinion that all of the American females they've ever met are crazy and unpredictable. Perhaps they're right.

Suddenly, I find myself sobbing. Yigal is polite, concerned, but clearly baffled. I can imagine him later telling his friends, "But I never even laid a hand on her!" The mood having changed dramatically, we hastily head back to Eilat in the jeep. Perhaps this sort of existential crisis is more typically American than Israeli; maybe young Israelis have neither the time nor the patience to let such abstract questions worry them. In any case, I'm sure that Yigal is very glad to see the evening end.

Although the feelings dissipate quickly, and I collect myself sufficiently by the time we reach Eilat to apologize to Yigal for frightening him, the experience had nevertheless upset me. It has shaken my matter of fact, pragmatic approach to my new surroundings; the full implications of my decision to emigrate to Israel have suddenly caught up with me. For the past few months, I've been concerned with day-to-day matters: learning enough of the language to get around the city, buy stamps at the post office, find the grocery store. Looking for work had consumed much of my energy; now that I'm employed, I have a stable, if modest, income and am relatively settled. With these basic concerns under control, the realization is beginning to dawn on me: I guess this is home.

It's early Monday morning now, and I'm sitting by myself on the balcony of my apartment in Tel Aviv, remembering the anxiety, the disorientation of those moments on the beach in Sinai near Eilat. I awoke this morning thinking about my father, who died three years ago. Remembering what an ardent Zionist he was--does he somehow know and understand that my being here is in honor of his memory, that it's a way of feeling closer to him for a while? I watch the cars passing below me on Rechov Ibn Gvirol, the wide boulevard on which I live. Exhaust fumes blot out the smell of the sea, and traffic noise drowns out other morning sounds. But they are part of me, are connected to me, like the rooftops and alleyways of Tel Aviv, in a way that I don't feel connected anywhere else in the world.

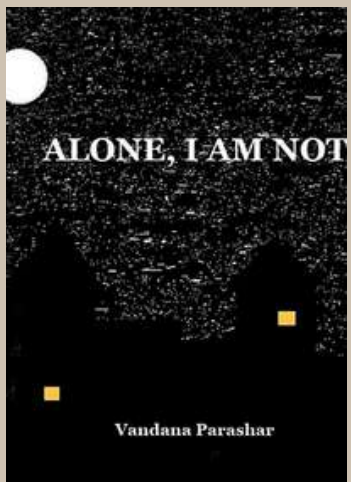
Across the street is the phone booth from which, once a month, I call my mother. My apartment has no phone--no stove or refrigerator either, for that matter. But seeing how long it takes to cook an omelet on a single electric hotplate has become a challenge, something that my mother and I can laugh about together even though we are six thousand miles apart. I wonder what time it is in New York, what my mother is doing at this moment, where my brother is, what they are thinking.

It's time for me to get up from my comfortable perch, time to get dressed and catch the bus to work. Last night, I realized for the first time that my dreams were in Hebrew; perhaps my mind is working overtime to absorb and master the unfamiliar words. I look forward to seeing my colleague Dov at the office today, to tell him about this odd weekend that I've had, the sense of disorientation and panic on that isolated beach in the Sinai, so far from everything I've known. Maybe he'll understand the struggle; maybe he can help me sort it out.

Author's Note: *This essay describes my memory of an evening in 1971, a few months after I moved to Israel from New York. I was 24 years old, and it was my first experience in living outside of the U.S. as well as living by myself. I was struggling to learn Hebrew, to make new friends, and to adapt to life in this new country. Finding myself at a rustic roadside tavern on a dark beach in the Sinai Peninsula, surrounded by several people I barely knew, the implications of the 6,000-mile move suddenly caught up with me.*

REVIEWS

Book Review



Alone I Am Not

A review by Dr Pravat Kumar Padhy

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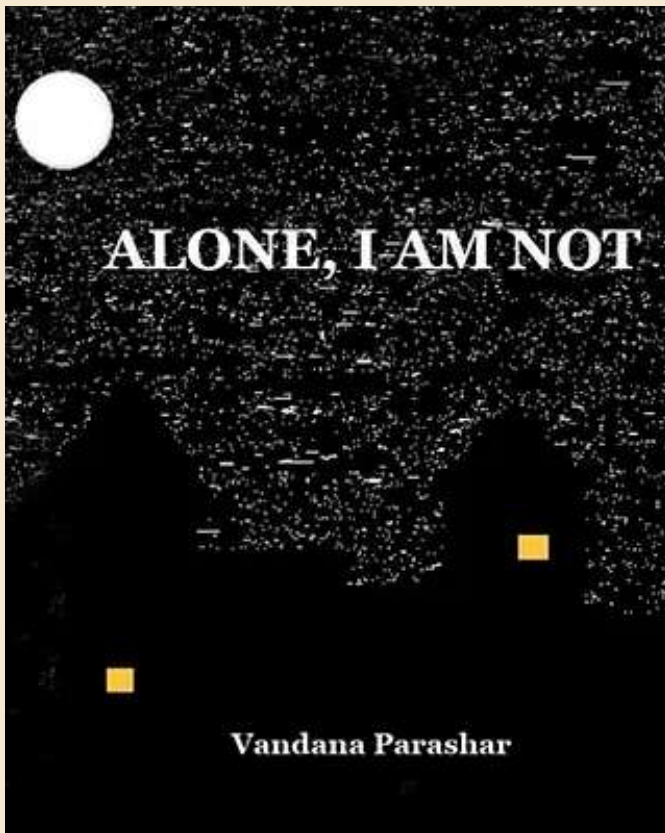
Film Review



Oppenheimer

A Review by Ramandeep Mahal

[Read More](#)



Alone I am Not
Vandana Parashar
Velvet Dusk Publishing,
Sacramento, CA, 2022,

A review by Dr Pravat Kumar Padhy

I felt rejuvenated and stirred as I browsed through the artfully woven tapestry of words and ideas in the poetry collection 'Alone, I Am Not' by Vandana Parashar, one of the prominent voices of modern haiku literature. The slim book, interlaced with brilliant and ingenuous art by Unsplash, is published by Velvet Dusk Publishing, Sacramento, CA, 2022. The collection is a treatise on 'equality irrespective of colour, creed and gender' impregnated with perceptive haiga, insightful haiku and ironic senryu. Vandana Parashar is one of the finest haiku poets of recent times and has earned many accolades including the prestigious Touchstone Award (shortlisted). She is on the editorial board of many international journals of repute. Vandana chooses her words with care, her creativity juxtaposed with the kernel of feminism.

She rediscovers 'womanhood', portraying the sense of poetic creation with panache. The sensual images are depicted with dignity. The transcendental flow signifies the aesthetic representation of a woman in our society. She strives for social equality from the point of the feminine perspective. The poems resonate with candour, poetic style and brilliant language.

While reading through the collection, I would often return to the thoughts of eminent feminist poets like Emily Dickinson, Anne Sexton, Judy Grahn, Kamala Das and others. She has ushered in a new path to demonstrate feminism and sentiments through minimalistic poetry.

Vandana's haiku are characterized by succinctness and sensibility. The textural virtuosity, allusion, use of subtle metaphor, sound and rhythms are skillfully crafted. The poetic skill and juxtaposition of enriched images have unearthed feelings with thematic sensibility and synaesthetic:

dark-skinned
will the stars mistake

me for night

Racism and oppression related to colour have been an indubitable curse of our society. Vandana, metaphorically, portrays issues related to prejudice and discrimination with diligence:

*burnt pancake
everyone jokes it looks
like my face*

Her art of analyses of life is prudently exhibited and she discovers the inherent human psyche:

*"not a racist"
I push the dark crust of bread
to one side*

The much-ridiculed racial riots are often seen on the street reflecting the darker side of our society. She is critical of the socio-political shadow as she laments: 'racial riots/ the case files covered/ in white dust'.

She highlights the prevailing sexism, homophobia, misogyny and chauvinistic attitude in the section of modern society. The psychological disease of narcissistic psychology has been there in society for a long as aptly depicted by poet Henjen Bunpitsu (b. 1878):

At a festival I wink at the ladies, I'm that kind of firefly' (Tr. Yuko Otomo) and continues today as exemplified in the present collection:

*chaperoning me
his eyes rove over
the girl in tights*

The medieval oppressive attitude has no place in contemporary society. She artfully sketches the regressive thoughts of man and his ignoble agenda. Vandana coins it in the form of allegorical expression and vivid images:

*first date
pouring tea, he asks
my cup size

lunch meeting
the boss says I should use
the office gym

hurt ego
he asks me if it's
"that time of the month"*

Society needs to imbibe an aesthetic way of life, mutual respect, and graceful dialect. Vandana's brave and bold manifestation of the societal flaws encourages the reader to self-evaluate, re-assess their opinions and reform. She is against child marriage as often seen in our society and she crafts the issue: 'an orchid/ trapped in a paperweight/ child bride'.

Vandana dwells the inherent truth about gender bias. The woman fettered by social constraints opts for 'negotiating a moral code Eve hides the apple'. She often reconciles herself as she nourishes:

therapy
I weave a story
around each scar

A patriarchal society pivots around the framework and values set by men, values that reign in the potential of a woman. Vandana is saddened by this circumscription, and her poetry reflects her melancholy when she narrates: *'college topper/ granny says a girl should/ cook and look good'* and *'horse riding/ the aunt says a girl/ shouldn't be wild'*.

She is not in a position to accept the social evils causing depression and anxiety in the name of physical changes. Indeed she is correct when she emphasizes:

depression
I'm not
"just hormonal"

Vandana is a critic of exploitation and interpretation of pseudo-modernity. The human body is not a mass to carry, but a creation to cherish with dignity and she aptly exalts it with depth:

conversion therapy
I don't want
to own a body

In the end, she reconciles with her body and mind as if 'a mother's life a revolving door' and accepts the inherited changes with a philosophical tone:

new me
adding two more dots
to the full stop

in the deep
spaces between polarities
my self-worth

A woman has a special dignified share in society and independent space as enumerated by Inoue Nobuko (1869-1958) in her senryu:

No matter how I sit I only see myself the way I am (Tr. Hiroaki Sato).

Prakrit as female and *Purusha* as male have been manifested in Vedic literature and feminism is worshiped with great reverence. Kalidasa, a great Sanskrit poet of the 5th century CE, enunciates on the woman in *Kumarasambhava* 6-63: *'Kanyeyam kula-jivitam'*:

'the girl is the very life of the family'.

It is trusted the world would imbibe the spirit of women who symbolize beauty, love, kindness, compassion, well-being, harmony, and creation. Aptly Terri French urges in her blurb: "Vandana Parashar's poetry speaks emotionally and passionately about the struggle between fulfilling and fighting against culturally conditioned attitude and expectation. Her work strives to bring about the paradigm shift necessary for people to live as and be accepted for their authentic selves..."

I wish to conclude with the relevant stanza of Maya Angelou from 'Still I Rise' that reverberates the lifeline of Vandana's impulse.

*You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.*

About the Author

Vandana Parashar

Vandana Parashar is a postgraduate in Microbiology, an educator and a haiku poet. Her haiku, senryu and tanka have been published in many national and international journals of repute and has won her many prizes and accolades. Her haiku was also shortlisted for the prestigious Touchstone Award in 2021. She is the Associate Editor of haikuKATHA and is also in the editing team of Poetry Pea. Her debut e-chapbook "I Am" was published by Title IX Press in 2019. Her second chapbook "Alone, I Am Not" was published by Velvet Dusk Publishing in April, 2022.





Oppenheimer: A Cinematic Symphony of Action and Emotion

By Dr. Ramandeep Mahal

Most of us haven't heard about J. Robert Oppenheimer as his story or background was not included in our school textbooks. After all, the story of father of the atomic bomb does not make for appropriate textbook content. *Oppenheimer, the film*, offers a refresher course on this subject. The film follows the life of American theoretical physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer and is based on his 2005 biography *American Prometheus*. The movie covers Oppenheimer's early research, his leadership of the Manhattan Project during World War II, and his final fall as a result of his 1954 security hearing.

The movie, directed by the visionary director Christopher Nolan, transports viewers on an electrifying trip that combines thrilling action scenes, immersive aural design, outstanding performances, breathtaking visuals, and flawless direction. The cast ensemble includes Cillian Murphy who plays the titular character, Emily Blunt as his wife Katherine "Kitty" Oppenheimer, Robert Downey Jr. as Lewis Strauss, a senior member of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, Matt Damon as Leslie Groves, the director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory, and Florence Pugh as psychiatrist and Oppenheimer's mistress Jean Tatlock. Casey Affleck, Rami Malek, Josh Hartnett, and Kenneth Branagh make up the supporting cast as a whole. The beginning of the movie is a bit shocking as we find a young 22 year old Oppenheimer under stress that he almost ends up poisoning his professor Patrick Blackett at the Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge. The moment when Oppenheimer is allotted the Manhattan Project, he realises that he would be playing an important part in events that will change the course of humanity.

'Regret' is a theme in all Christopher Nolan's movies; here Oppenheimer regrets the fact that the step taken by him will cost millions of lives. Cillian Murphy, the actor that plays the character Oppenheimer, looks gaunt, probably due to sleepless nights, millions of thoughts negotiating in his mind, not able to think straight. Here is a man who knows he is going to fall one day as his knowledge is power for already those who have power. Oppenheimer despite being hours long, is a relief in itself because of Nolan's straightforwardness. One tends to get lost in the narrative structure of the movie as there are four different timelines.

The performances in *Oppenheimer* are nothing less than extraordinary. Each actor gives their characters depth and authenticity under the direction of an accomplished ensemble cast. I may sound biased but what I don't like about Christopher Nolan movies is that the women characters are not given much significance. Cillian Murphy, Robert Downey Jr, Matt Damon cover most of the screen time in the movie, Emily Blunt and Florence Pugh are mostly these sad, unsatisfied women who just appear on the screen when needed. The movie is brought to a whole new level by Ludwig Göransson's orchestral score. It brilliantly complements the action on film, highlighting emotional beats and enhancing the heart-pounding scenes. The sound effects are also beautifully produced, resulting in a dynamic soundtrack that immerses the audience more into the world of the movie. The movie scenes are a visual treat that transports the audience to diverse and imaginative worlds. Both conventional and digital sets exhibit breathtaking attention to detail, weaving a complex tapestry of visual splendor. The film leaves no stone unturned to emphasize visually the ego and sense of power felt by the chief protagonist- the feeling that he is 'God', he is universe. But does he want it? We are left grappling in the dark here. We get to have glimpse of a jovial Albert Einstein (Tom Conti) who is seen throwing stones in a pond and Lewis Strauss remarks, "*greatest scientist of our times*" which Oppenheimer rebuts stoutly with, "*greatest scientist of his time.*"

The movie *Oppenheimer* achieves a seamless fusion of action and emotion because of Christopher Nolan's excellent direction. Every frame reveals the director's vision, demonstrating a remarkable eye for detail and storytelling skill. The movie's tempo is expertly controlled, giving both the action-packed sequences and the ones that are focused on the characters room to breathe. In order to produce a seamless and emotionally evocative cinematic journey, Christopher Nolan exhibits a tremendous capacity to extract excellent performances from the ensemble and brings together all the technical components. One of the few modern directors working at this tremendous scale, both technically and thematically is Nolan. Nolan chose the 65-millimeter film format (which is projected in 70-millimeter) to create a feeling of monumentality in the picture, working with his excellent cinematographer Hoyte van Hoytema. Overall I would rate the movie 9.5 out of ten owing to Nolan's choice of cast, scenic beauty and immense emotion. We hope for an Oscar for this one!

TALKING BOOKS

Talking Books



Anmol Sandhu talks to Sonia Chauhan about her book *This Maze of Mirrors* which was ranked 2nd in Amazon's Pen to Publish Award Contest.



Anmol Sandhu talks to Sonia Chauhan about her book *This Maze of Mirrors*

AS: *This Maze of Mirrors* was ranked second in Amazon's Pen to Publish Award. What was your first reaction to this win?

SC: I remember I was out for dinner and a reader congratulated me on Instagram. That's how I got to know the story had won. Now, I take time to react to life events. So, at first I had no reaction. As the days passed and more and more people reached out, the feeling took shape. Must have been a staggered kind of joy.

When I'd entered *This Maze of Mirrors* into the competition, my aim was to figure in the top ten. That the story got second prize was way beyond what I'd imagined. It still feels like a massive stroke of luck.

AS: I loved the name Shatrujeet and the not-so-subtle symbolism of it. He was, in a way, his own enemy. How hard was it to write a character who is an alcoholic, yet evokes sympathy in the hearts of readers?

SC: Thank you for loving the man I imagined. I chose to call him Shatrujeet because of the underlying theme of the story – that ultimately, all the enemies you need to win over are within. For him, it was the fear of rejection that sprang from a traumatic childhood.

Fortunately (or unfortunately), I've had some chances to observe addicts in close surroundings. One of my beta readers is a de-addiction specialist and he guided me a lot in navigating Shatrujeet's alcoholism. Still, it was a challenge to write an intelligent yet psychologically broken character. But a good story will tell you why people are the way they are and that's what makes a reader root for a character.

That's why you still support a flawed guy like Jessie Pinkman or love seemingly unlovable men like Snape. Every time a reader highlights Shatrujeet's dialogues from his conversations with his wife, I feel bittersweet love.

Shatrujeet is an alcoholic, a bad husband, and an absent father.

Still, it is him that readers have loved the most and tried to understand the most. I'm grateful.

AS: The themes of generational trauma and abuse are not explored intensely in mainstream books or cinema. What was your reason of picking such a powerful theme for your book?

SC: I like to write stories that showcase human complexities. That behind every unpleasant personality, every weakness of character, and every denial of truth is a wound of the past.

Generational abuse is not often talked about. But the truth is that a lot of our personality – our triggers, emotional responses, and perceptions of life – are set way back in childhood at the hands of our caregivers. For a child, the family unit is the first face of the world at large.

So, the question that stayed in my mind was – how does your upbringing affect the way you bring up your child? And that's where the character of a kind yet weak alcoholic man started spinning in my head. And what better obstacle to give him than a doting but strong-willed daughter?

AS: Are there any authors or books that have greatly influenced your writing style or approach to storytelling?

SC: Ever since I took up writing, my reading experience has greatly eroded. I don't just read books anymore; I analyse writing styles. It's a fair price to pay. If I really love a book, I read it the first time as a reader and then re-read it to find out why I loved the writing style so much. Many of my paperbacks are heavily underlined and filled with scribbles, no longer fit for donating or passing around among fellow readers.

One of my all-time favourite authors is a pensive American woman called Lionel Shriver. Her novel *We Need To Talk About Kevin* was awarded the prestigious Orange Prize for Fiction in 2005. Lionel's stories are deeply introspective and viewpoint based. The plot unfolds through the thoughts of the character trying to make sense of what happened. Isn't that something we all do in moments of internal silence? Regurgitating life events to figure out what we make of everything.

Another of my absolute favourites is Lauren Groff. Her short story collection *Delicate Edible Birds* is one of the finest examples of creative writing. She's written each story from a unique point of view. For example, in one story, the narrator is a city. In another, it's the collective voice of a group of women calling themselves 'we'.

I remember her short story, *Birdie*, published in the Atlantic. It's about four high school friends who get together after 20 years because one of them is dying of cancer. That story taught me so much about how real people talk to each other. It's a masterclass on dialogue writing. You can read it for free at the Atlantic.

Some others I love are Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche (for her focus on culture), Joyce Carol Oates (for capturing sagas so well), Arun Joshi (for penning the ambivalent), and of course, Haruki Murakami (for sheer courage to be beautiful without making sense).

And here's a controversial one - I adore Bukowski's poetry.

AS: Shatrujeet's journey to his daughter, Mridula, combines elements of mystery, introspection, and self-discovery. Tell us how you develop your characters and put them into unique plot lines. Any tips up your sleeve?

SC: Characters take shape in my mind much before plot does. It's only after I've fleshed out the basic details of a character's life, habits, and mind-set that the plot reveals itself to me. That's my natural process. But I will admit that maintaining elements of mystery while the character undergoes personal change is a challenge for any writer.

Surprising inevitability is a pivotal tool I've used to maintain the mystery of the story. For example, a key mystery in the story is - where does Mridula run away to? When Shatrujeet finds her at the end, I want the reader to be surprised as to where she is but once I do it in a way that once it unfolds, this was the only place where she could have been. You're surprised but you see how this was the only it could have been.

As for self-discovery, I use a few tricks laid out by the masters of storytelling. One of them is 'What's the Worst Thing that can happen to this particular Character with these specific Wounds and Wants?'

List out a few odds and then choose to pitch him against the most impossible one. Here, we have an alcoholic man barely stumbling through domestic life when suddenly, we force him to stand up and take charge of his family's future. How is he going to find a missing daughter who he knows nothing about? That's an impossible odd, and a delicious one.

AS: In a time when 'content creation' is everything and more and more people are beginning to call themselves writers, what would be your suggestion to upcoming artists who want to write great stories and not just make good content for social media?

SC: I have two suggestions for those who want to write well.

One – and I know this will inflame some – but stop overdosing on pop content. I’m not asking you to stop reading books and blogs; I’m asking you to limit the amount of information you consume every day.

Writers need to gate keep their attention and focus it on what’s important. Read a story at New Yorker rather than scrolling reels on Instagram. Listen to one writing podcast than skimming six articles on Medium.

To write well, you need to spend one hour in mental silence. The next hour you simply get bored. The third hour, that’s when the first draft flows.

Two: stories come at a personal cost. Honestly, great writers are those who are motivated to sit down with themselves and think about life. From Kafka to Camus to Dostoevsky, people who clutched life as one does a Rubik’s cube and kept twisting the pieces from centre to side are the ones who wrote timeless prose.

Cutting honesty, embarrassing truths. Shameful confessions. Scraping an old wound, or an exploding rejection. These are the ingredients of a great story. If it doesn’t shake your pen or bring tears to your eyes, it needs some more work.

In summary, good writing is all about channelling your honesty on paper.

AS: So, what’s next? Tell us something about your future projects.

SC: For me, writing is a long haul game. I’d be fortunate if I spend the rest of my life writing and I’m always in the middle of writing something or the other. So, I’ve got a couple of projects that I’m working on at the moment and then there’s something that’s in the post-writing stage. Let’s hope everything sees the light of day as published work in print.

About Sonia Chauhan



Sonia Chauhan is a professional writer, editor, and author. Her stories are contextual and layered, exploring inner lives and private worlds. Her characters are often conflicted people who are on solitary quests to discover themselves. Her stories have been published in literary journals and anthologies including *The Wise Owl*, *The Muse*, *Unbound Script*, and *Monograph Magazine*. Her debut novella, *You Tell Me*, was published in Sep 2021. Her second novella, *This Maze of Mirrors*, (published in October 2022) was ranked second in the prestigious Pen to Publish contest held by Amazon. Sonia is a corporate attorney and runs an independent law practice in Chandigarh.

About Anmol Sandhu



Dr. Anmol Sandhu is a Ph.D. in Management and is currently working with Ernst and Young. Her literary journey started with writing middles for *The Tribune* and *Hindustan Times* for over five years. She later started writing *Terrribly Tiny Tales*, through which her work was selected by filmmaker Imtiaz Ali as part of a movie promotion campaign. Sandhu is a screen writer and has a Punjabi short film to her credit. At present, she is co-writing the story for a feature film.

VISUAL ARTS



Painting

Limited Edition Replay:
Parag Borse

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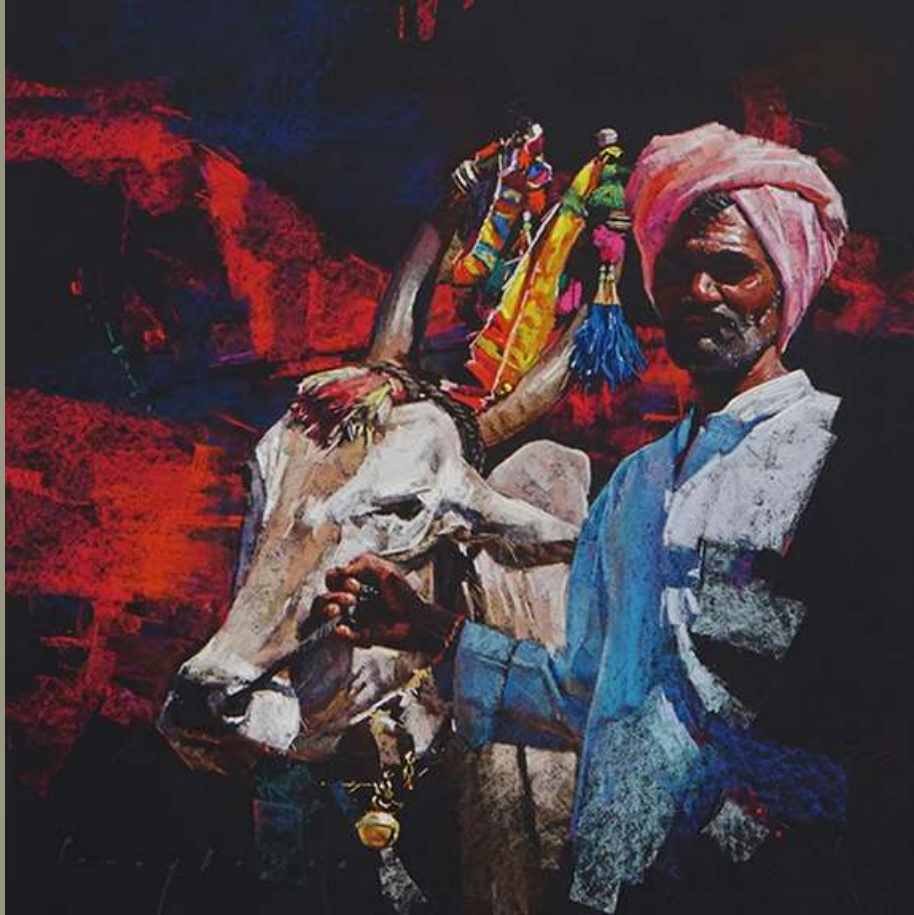


Meet Alaska's Brown Bears with Peter Witt

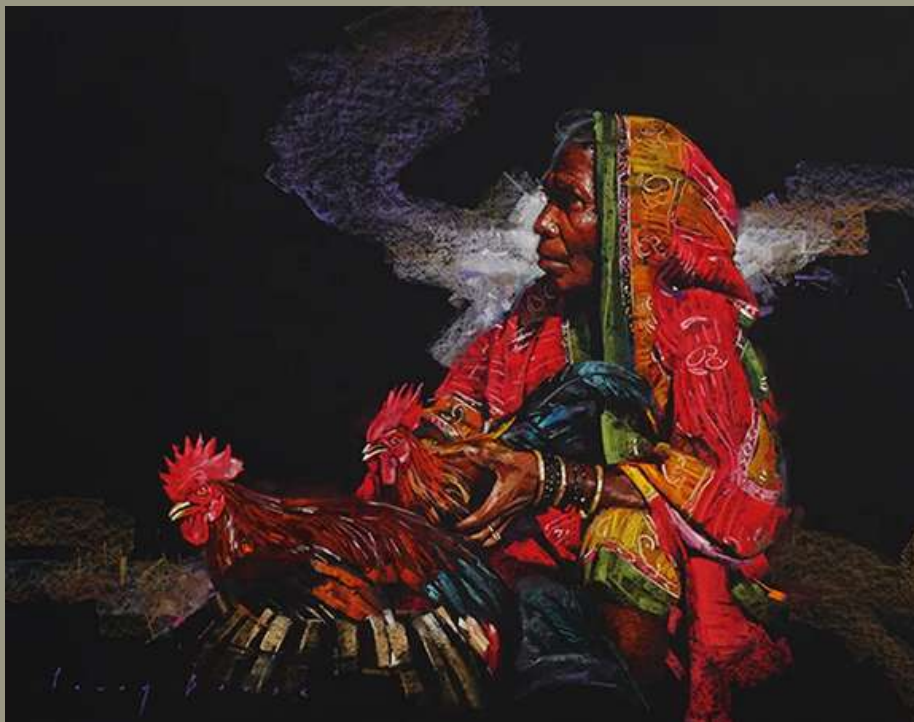
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Limited Edition Replay
Parag Borse



Mates of Fortune



Combs & senility



Artist Speak

In today's world, all the art schools and colleges, even most of the artists are focusing mainly on the skill of an artist and are trying their best to improve skills through various techniques. Yes, it has a certain degree of importance but I will advocate that art-education should focus on human perception. I think an artist needs to be in a state of innocence or 'unknowingness' so that he may perceive the subject anew without any prejudice.

An extract from an interview with Parag Borse, featured in the (Jade Edition (August 2022) of The Wise Owl.

Meet Alaska's Brown Bears with Peter Witt

In August, 2023 my wife and I visited Katmai National Park in Alaska, home of brown bears. Our goal was to see the bears fishing for Salmon at Brooks Falls, an often-photographed spot where the bears stand on top of the falls or just below the falls to catch salmon as they make their way up stream to spawn. During the summer, on any given day, up to 20 different bears. Additional bears can be seen along the river in other parts of the park. We arrived by float plane, went to a brief “bear school,” to learn what to do if we encounter a bear while walking along the paths in the park (don’t run, move into the woods, keep talking, no yelling), then proceeded to platforms along the riverbank near the falls. Gates control access to the platforms so viewing isn’t interrupted by bear intruders.

Over three days we saw a variety of bear behaviors: bears waiting on the top of the falls to catch a salmon as it tried to jump its way up the falls; mothers teaching their cubs to catch salmon below the falls; bears sitting on rocks resting; bears thrusting their heads underwater looking for salmon or standing in the water moving their heads back and forth looking for salmon. All and all it was a rich visual experience accompanied by the sound of the river going over the falls. We also spent time down river watching the bears in calmer water swimming, standing on their hind legs surveying their territory, and catching salmon in the gentle afternoon sun. At the end of each day we took a float plane back to our lodge to savor our experiences, review our pictures, and talk about how lucky we were to have had this experience. ~ Peter A Witt



A Delicious Breakfast



A Protective Mommy



A Cleansing Dip



Catch of the Day



Taking a breather



A Frolicking Bear?

PODCASTS



Cat Dixon
Cat-Dixon
Why the Long face?

00:00 / 01:24



Michael Colon
Michael Colon
The temperature of a loner

00:00 / 01:44



Kavita Ratna
Untagged
Untagged

00:00 / 01:09



Kavita Ratna
WipedOut
Wiped Out

00:00 / 01:24



Jan Wiezorek
Jan Wiezorek
River Run

00:00 / 01:03

NEW SEGMENT

To make The Wise Owl more dynamic, we have introduced The Daily Verse & The Weekly Yarns, segments where we will upload poetry all days of the week & stories/flash fiction/anecdotes & musings on a weekly basis. Just send in your submissions to editor@thewiseowl.art



THE DAILY VERSE

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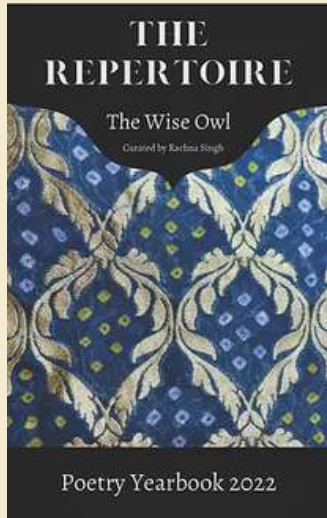


THE WEEKLY YARNS

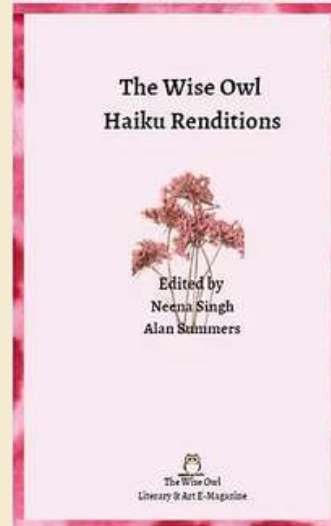
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THE WISE OWL PUBLICATIONS



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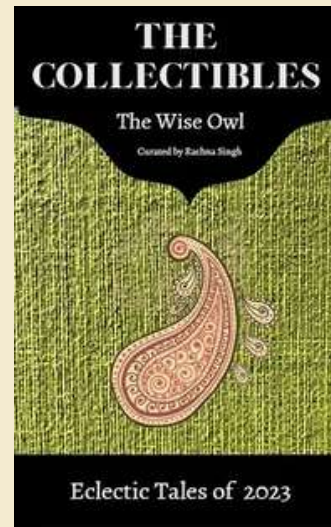


E-book (January 2023)



E-book (March 2023)

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[E-Mags](#)

BIOGRAPHIES

Navneet Kaur is a freelancer columnist, literary critic and book reviewer. She reviews books and writes columns for prestigious Newspapers like The Tribune, The Deccan Herald and The Hitavda. She has a Masters in English Literature, and a passion for teaching English Language and Literature.

Donna Pucciani's poetry has been published in diverse journals such as International Poetry Review, Spoon River Poetry Review, The Pedestal, Poetry Salzburg, Shichao Poetry, Istanbul Literary Review and Christianity and Literature. Her poetry has been translated into Chinese, Japanese and Italian, and has won awards from the Illinois Arts Council and The National Federation of State Poetry Societies, among others. She has been nominated five times for the Pushcart Prize and currently serves as Vice-President of the Poets' Club of Chicago. She has authored several poetry collections such as *Edges* (2016), *Ghost Garden* (2016) *A Light Dusting of Breath* (2015), *Hanging Like Hope on the Equinox* (2013), *To Sip Darjeeling at Dawn* (2011) among others.

Oldine Joseph is a poet who loves penning verse in his free time.

Richa Joshi Pant is a teacher in Welham Girls' School, Dehradun (India).

Shweta Sahay is a physician by profession. She writes poems which celebrate nature and emotions. Her poems have been published in various anthologies.

George Freek is a poet/playwright living in Illinois. His poems appear in numerous Poetry Journals and Reviews. His poem "Written At Blue Lake" was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. His plays are published by Playscripts; Blue Moon Plays and Off The Wall Plays. George Freek's poem 'Enigmatic Variations' is currently nominated for Best of the Net. His poem "Night Thoughts" is also nominated for a Pushcart Prize. His collection is (still) published by Red Wolf Editions.

Cat Dixon is the author of the poetry collection *What Happens in Nebraska* (Stephen F. Austin University Press, 2022) along with six other chapbooks and collections. She is a poetry editor with *The Good Life Review* and an adjunct instructor at the University of Nebraska, Omaha. Recent poems published in *The Book of Matches*, North of Oxford, hex, and The Southern Quill.

Michael Colon is a New-York based poet.

Fabrice Poussin is a professor of French and English. His work in poetry and photography has appeared in Kestrel, Symposium, The Chimes, and hundreds of other publications worldwide. Most recently, his collections *In Absentia*, *If I Had a Gun*, and *Half Past Life* were published in 2021, 2022, and 2023 by Silver Bow Publishing.

Navaneetha Mokkil teaches at the Centre for Women's Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi. Her research and teaching are on cultural forms, gender and sexuality. She is also fascinated by the forms of film and poetry.

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Kavita Ratna is a children's rights activist, poet and a theatre enthusiast. 'Sea Glass' is her anthology of poems published by Red River. Her poems have appeared in The Kali Project: Invoking the Goddess within, A little book of serendipity, Triveni Hakai India, Haiku in Action, the Scarlet Dragonfly, the Cold Moon Journal, Five Fleas Itchy poetry, Stardust Haiku and Parcham.

Mehreen Ahmed is an award-winning Australian novelist born in Bangladesh. Her historical fiction, The Pacifist is an audible bestseller. Included in The Best Asian Speculative Fiction Anthology, her works have also been acclaimed by Midwest Book Review, and DD Magazine. and nominated for Pushcart, botN and James Tait. Her recent publications are with Litro, Otoliths, and Alien Buddha.

Bill Tope is a retired social worker and hotel cook and construction laborer and one-time nude model for university art classes, who now lives with his mean little cat Baby in Illinois, U.S.A. He has several score publishing credits.

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Nicola Vallera is a certified English teacher with credentials from the University of Cambridge (Celta). He currently resides in Brazil and enjoys indulging in his hobbies of reading and writing. Vallera has published several short stories, including "The Endless City" (2019) in Deadman's Tome and Datura, "The Beggar on the Bridge" (2023) in Fabula Argentea, "She Deserved to Die" (2023) in Adelaide Magazine, and "Tim" (2023) in both Modern Literature and Kathai Literary Journal.

Sarah Das Gupta is an English Teacher living in Cambridge, UK. She has had work published in over 40 magazines/journals from US, UK, India, Australia, Canada, Nigeria, Mauritius and Croatia. She has lived and taught in India, Tanzania and UK.

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Peter A. Witt is a Texas poet, avid birder/photographer, and researcher/writer of family history. He started writing poetry after 42 years as a university professor as a way of recapturing my storytelling and creative writing abilities, skills lost in the stultifying world of academic writing. His work has appeared in several online poetry publications including Fleas on the Dog, Open Skies Quarterly, and Active Muse.



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