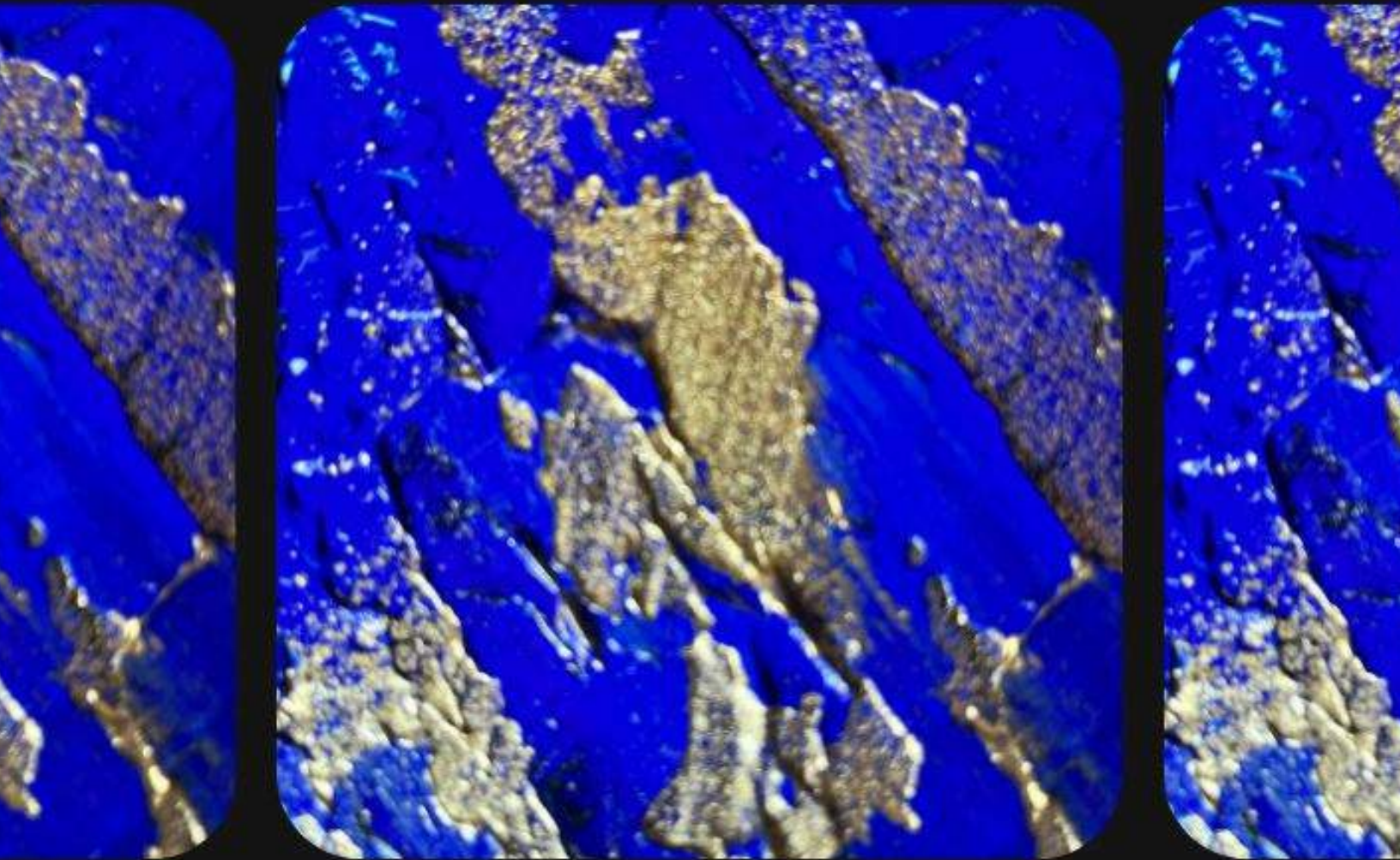


THE WISE OWL

CERULEAN & GOLD



A LITERARY & ART E-MAGAZINE

Editor Speak

Cerulean & Gold brings to its readers and viewers an intriguing and rich tapestry of literary and artistic hues. Interviews with literary greats like Sudeep Sen and Susan Rich and artists like Matt Atkinson and Asok Btk inspire. Segments on poetry, fiction, creative non Fiction make for great reading. Film and book reviews, podcasts and montage all add to this interesting literary and artistic mix.

We have introduced a fresh segment called 'Talking Books' in this edition where we discuss recently released books with the writers/poets/editors. This edition features a poetry anthology titled *Converse: Contemporary English Poetry by Indians* (Pippa Rann Books & Media UK), an anthology edited by Sudeep Sen, an eminent poet, writer, translator & editor.

Our anthology of short stories titled 'The Collectibles: Eclectic Tales of 2023' is ready for release. Do watch out for its release.

So, dear Readers & Viewers, find yourself a comfortable corner and enjoy the literary & artistic repast.



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INTERVIEWS



The Interview: Sudeep Sen

A prolific, award-winning poet, translator & editor

The Wise Owl talks to **Sudeep Sen**, a prolific, award-winning poet, translator, and editor of influential anthologies. Sen is the editorial director of AARK ARTS and editor of Atlas. Currently, he is the international fellow and writer/artist-in-residence at the Nirox Foundation in South Africa's Cradle of Humankind. Sen is the first Asian honoured to deliver the Derek Walcott Lecture and read his poetry at the Nobel Laureate Festival. His latest book *Red* (published by Nirox Foundation) will be released on 28th May 2023 at WORDS FESTIVAL.

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The Interview: Susan Rich

An award-winning poet, editor & essayist

The Wise Owl talks to **Susan Rich**, an award-winning poet, editor and essayist. She lives in Seattle and teaches at Highline College where she runs the reading series, Highline Listens: Writers Read Their Work. She is also co-founder and director of [Poets on the Coast: A Weekend Writing Retreat for Women](#).

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INTERVIEWS



The Interview: Matt Atkinson

An Artist from Colorado

The Wise Owl talks to **Matt Atkinson**, a Colorado-based artist whose work is found in collections all over North America and Europe. His traditional, realist paintings portray the American West from the days gone by to the present, and in particular the stories of men and women who preserve this heritage.

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Tête-à-Tête: Asok Btk

A Watercolour Artist from Kerela (India)

The Wise Owl talks to **Asok Btk**, an Artist from Thalassery, India. Asok has exhibited his artworks at various prestigious galleries in India in solo as well as group exhibitions. He works with watercolours as well as acrylics. His paintings beautifully capture and reflect the day-to-day life of his native world- Kerela.

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The Interview: Sudeep Sen

(Rachna Singh, Editor, *The Wise Owl* in conversation with Sudeep Sen)

The Wise Owl talks to **Sudeep Sen**, a prolific, award-winning poet, translator, and editor of influential anthologies. Sudeep Sen's prize-winning books include *Postmarked India: New & Selected Poems* (HarperCollins), *Rain, Ladakh, Aria, The Harper Collins Book of English Poetry, Fractals: New & Selected Poems | Translations 1980-2015* (London Magazine Editions), *EroText* (Vintage: Penguin Random House), *Kaifi Azmi: Poems | Nazms* (Bloomsbury) and *Anthropocene: Climate Change, Contagion, Consolation* (Pippa Rann).

Sen's works have been translated into over 30 languages. His words have appeared in the Times Literary Supplement, Newsweek, Guardian, Observer, Independent, Telegraph, Financial Times, Herald, Poetry Review, Literary Review, Harvard Review among others and broadcast on BBC, CNN, NDTV et al. *The Whispering Anklets, Red and Blue Nude: Ekphrasis & New Poems* (Jorge Zalamea International Poetry Prize) are forthcoming.

Sen is the editorial director of AARK ARTS and editor of Atlas. The Government of India awarded him the senior fellowship for "outstanding persons in the field of culture/literature." Currently, he the international fellow and writer/artist-in-residence at the Nirox Foundation in South Africa's Cradle of Humankind. Sen is the first Asian honoured to deliver the Derek Walcott Lecture and read his poetry at the Nobel Laureate Festival.

Thank you, Sudeep for taking time out to talk to The Wise Owl.

RS: You are a prolific poet with several poetry collections under your belt. Please tell us a little about your journey as a poet - your upbringing, your background and your early influence. What gives you the sense of rootedness?

SS: Let me answer the last question first. I think the reason why you don't see any sense of displacement in my writing is because I'm actually a very rooted person. My rootedness comes from my family and the way I was brought up. I'm first and foremost a Bengali writer, who just happens to write in another Indian language that is English. So, my cultural and intellectual spaces are very much defined by the fact that I come from a thoroughly Bengali milieu.

I am also fortunate to have grown up in a tri-lingual situation — I spoke Bengali at home, Hindi on the streets, and English at school not by design but by circumstance. So, this wonderful tripartite situation was such that I could slip in and out of several mother-tongues and languages at the same time it certainly made it linguistically richer, and we as South Asians are very lucky because of that.

I also come from a typically liberal educated middle-class Bengali family who have always been an immense source of strength for me. So, that kind jargon-ridden 'post-colonial' displacement you are talking about is very alien as a concept to me, and even more difficult for a person with my background to rationally understand.

The other aspect of this is that I grew up in the capital city of Delhi which is a very cosmopolitan place it has a curious mix of the First and Third World atmosphere depending on where or what you are engaged in at any given moment. So wherever I have travelled subsequently, be it a cosmopolitan place or a rural one, I was in some manner or the other, somewhat familiar with that new place from before, at least I was never in a state of cultural shock, however remote.

We, in India, have been exposed to the western culture, along with our very own, from our early childhood so neither of them are unfamiliar to us. So, when one is actually inhabiting these so-called Western (and Eastern spaces), they are places one feels equally at home. In fact, I quite enjoy being in both worlds. I love the taste of singara, sandesh, kabab,

and phuchka; and at the same time, I love blue cheese, smoked salmon, wine and single malt. I do not personally see any conflict in these two worlds, rather I feel lucky and infinitely richer in experience, since my taste-buds as well as my intellectual and emotional terrain, can accommodate all of that happily and simultaneously.

As regards my early influence, it is best to tell your story of my very first collection of poems, *Leaning Against the Lamp-Post*. The poems in this book were all written between 1980 and 1985, while I was still in high school and subsequently as an undergraduate in New Delhi. In 1983, relying on my incipient enthusiasm, I summoned up all my courage, typed out about fifty poems from a much larger batch I had written up until then, and with the aid of a modest donation from my grandfather, took it to a local printer. They were cyclostyled through one of those now-extinct, messy, gargantuan machines (photocopying was still quite expensive then) and hand-sewn at the bindery by an old man who until then had only bound thousands of legal manuals and commercial reports with ubiquitous red cloth or leather spines and with their titles stamped in gold. This was, however, the first time he had bound a collection of poetry, and he did it with genuine interest and with the care of a fine craftsman. He was a poet himself and wrote and recited in Urdu. He also knew Bengali (my mother tongue) fluently, having spent his early life in what is now known as Bangladesh. Perhaps it was propitious that my early poems were blessed by the tactile touch of a true poet. It would only be fair to say of my grandfather that his patronage made him my first publisher. And as it turns out, this limited hand-assembled first edition of poems was to be my first 'unofficial' book of verse.

I was always convinced that writing poetry was extremely difficult (even though I thoroughly enjoyed reading it) and was best left to the masters themselves. Then one day in 1980 (I was in Class 10 at the time), daydreaming through a boring lesson in school, I penned, quite unknowingly, in perfect rhyme and metre, my first poem. Then followed those first few years when I wrote sheaves and sheaves of, what sometimes seem embarrassingly 'callow', and sometimes naive poems. But then, looking back I feel that there was a sense of innocence, idealism, seriousness, and honesty about them.

I grew up in a liberal and educated family with a lot of poetry and music around me. Art, literature, philosophy, and the world of ideas in particular, had always been a part of my upbringing. I learnt that our forefathers belonged to the aristocracy and could be traced back to the enlightened Raja Raj Ballabh Rai, famous in the margins of Indian history during the times of Sirajudaulah, the Nawab of Bengal in the late eighteenth century. As a child, my mother and grandmother would recite children's verse and sing songs for me. I realise now that much of my interest in form, structure, sound pattern and rhyme scheme comes from hearing aloud the incantatory music of their prayers and songs, which I had obviously internalised over the years.

My parents and grandparents introduced me to the world of poetry. They would recite the great Bengali poets: Rabindranath Tagore, Jibanananda Das, and Kazi Nazrul Islam; also Shakespeare, Milton, the Romantics and the Victorians. I came to learn many of them by heart. In school and college, I explored Hindi and Urdu poetry, discovered the Russians, Latin Americans, as well as Japanese and Chinese verse. Some of my favourite poets included Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Irina Ratushinskaya, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Octavio Paz, Pablo Neruda, Basho, Li Bai, and many more. My uncle opened to me a wondrous window, a hitherto unsighted world of modern European poets: Vasko Popa, Guillaume Apollinaire, Eugenio Montale, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Rainer Maria Rilke, Johannes Bobrowski, Horst Bienek, and so many others. Also, I became fascinated by the Metaphysical Poets and the French Symbolists, in particular John Donne, Baudelaire, Mallarme, and Verlaine. Of course, growing up in the seventies, one could not miss Ezra Pound and T S Eliot. The congregation grew and grew, and through quiet osmosis, I was seduced into the world of sound, rhythm, word-patterns, ideas, syllabics, music, and language itself.

RS: You use diverse poetic forms when you write verse (rubai, sonnet, creole, poetry chants, triptych, to name a few). Which form (if I may ask) do you feel most comfortable writing or do you prefer the challenge of experimenting with new forms of verse. Some of your poems seem to be inspired by the rhythm of dance, music and also replicates day-to-day life rhythms. I especially enjoyed your poems 'Durga Puja', 'Bharatnatyam Dancer', 'Single Malt' which reflect and follow these rhythms. Tell us a little about how these rhythms became a part of your poems.

SS: I am particularly interested in form and craft in poetry, poem's rhythm and design, its construction and the way it appears on the page.

The architecture of a poem is also very important to me – partly because of my own inherent interest in architecture itself. During my days of apprenticeship, I consciously wrote using traditional strict forms, formal metre and rhyme schemes. Of course, I have also written in free verse, but due to my penchant for formal verse you are likely to encounter a pantoum next to an acrostic poem, a triolet juxtaposed against a ghazal, lyric narratives and prose poetry, Sapphic fragments, mosaic pastiché, ekphrastic verse, sonnet, rubai, poem songs, prayer chants, documentary feeds, rap, reggae, creole, canzone, tritina, sestina, ottava rima, rime royale and variations on waka: haiku, tanka, katauta, choka, bussokusekika, sedoka.

As I became more experienced and skilled, I started innovating and experimenting, creating and inventing new forms and poetic structures. I also believe that a poem should not only be linguistically challenging, but how it appears visually is an important factor as well. For me, typography and structure of a poem are just as vital as the inner spirit and content of any poem.

If I have to locate myself geographically or culturally – then I would say I am a Bengali poet who writes in English. My relationship with Bengali is umbilical and neonatal. My parents were Bengali, and I grew up in a home speaking Bangla in a Bengali neighbourhood in New Delhi. Hindi and English were my other mother tongues. So, the cultural, historical, linguistic and literary tradition of the Bengali tongue has had a very important effect of my poetic cadence, texture, rhythm and early rhyme-constructions. One very good example is my poem, 'Durga Puja' [re-published later in The Dhaka Tribune newspaper as part of a larger sequence, '[Durga Sextet](#)']. During the lead-up to the puja celebrations, prayers are chanted from Chandipaath. In the poem, 'Durga Puja', I try to replicate its languorous baritone rhythm and its song-like cadence, as well as its long-lined couplet-structure.

In the poem '[New York Times](#),' I invented a rhyme-scheme – abxba cdxdc efxfe ... and so on ... – the middle line, i.e., the third 'x' line, in fact is the mirror-line which reflects the first and second lines with the fourth and fifth lines of each stanza. The other reason I used the five-line stanza-format in the poem is because the city of New York itself has five boroughs: Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn, Bronx, etc. The other aspect about this poem is if you turn the poem 90 degrees on its central axis, then a different kind of mirror line mimics the shape of the island of Manhattan itself and its reflection on the surrounding waters.

Another poem, a book-length sequence, *Mount Vesuvius in Eight Frames* (subsequently broadcast on BBC Radio as a verse-play, and premiered in London as a stage-play by Border Crossings directed by Michael Walling) is based on a series of eight etchings of a British artist, Peter Standen. The entire poem is set in rhymed couplets, reflecting the presence of two principal characters – man/woman, lover/other, life/death, and the other essential dualities. But they do not appear as obvious rhymes (like the translucent choral refrains in the poem) – they are wrap-around rhymes as opposed to endstopped rhymes. The four stanzas in each section reflect the four seasons, the four sides of a frame, the four corners of a visual space. I also use alternating line-indentation for each couplet and stanza with the idea that the entire poem works on a cyclical principle. So, if you join all the stanzas together using the left-justified margin as a reference plane, they in fact fit in a perfect dove-tail joint.

The poem 'Single Malt' (published in *Wasafiri*, UK) is one grammatical line, without any full-stops, mimicking the way whiskey, when poured gently into a crystal glass, caresses its sides and subsequently the tongue's palette. Therefore, the slim verticality of this poem's structure:

Another example is the poem, 'Bharatanatyam Dancer' (published on '[The Poetry Foundation](#)', USA): In this poem, it might be interesting for readers keen on form to note that the line-end rhyme-scheme – abacca ... dbdeed ... fbfggf ... – maps and mirrors the actual classical dance step pattern and beat – ta dhin ta thaye thaye ta. Also, the left hand margin indentations match the same scheme and form.

There is also my book-length poem, *Distracted Geography: An Archipelago of Intent* (published by Peepal Tree (UK) & Wings Press (USA)): It's one long poem over 206 pages. The sparse elongated structure of the poem partly reflects the strength and surety of the human vertebra and spine, much like Neruda's Odes that reflects the long, thin shape of Chile. The sections and subsections join together like synapses between bone and bone. The titles are translucent markers or breath pauses, not separators. The short two-line couplets echo the two-step footprints, a pathway mapped on the atlas. The 12 sections correspond to the 12 bones in a human ribcage, the 12 months in a year, the two 12-hour cycles in a day. There are 26 bones in the human vertebrae, and the 26 parts in the poem slowly assemble themselves and form a montage of tenuously strung lyrics. The 206 pages in this book match the exact number of bones in a human body.

I am constantly innovating with form and structure. This has allowed me to invent and introduce new forms (and structure) to the English poetry tradition, ones that did not exist before. Even as the voice and technique are in a constant state of flux and growth, there is always a distinct personal signature.

RS: You have also been editor and co-editor of several poetry collections. What has been your experience of editing such collections?

SS: Editing poetry and putting anthologies together are largely a labour of love. It is my way of showcasing the best of Indian poetry to people here and internationally. I have edited several important ones in the past, including *The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry and Modern English Poetry by Younger Indians* (Sahitya Akademi). But let me talk about the newest one, *Converse*.

Converse is authoritative, intellectually rigorous, judiciously representative — a wide-ranging anthology — an updated, international map of the best of English-language poetry by Indians. Commissioned to celebrate the 75th anniversary of India's independence, *Converse* showcases the best of the varied, vibrant, rich, and exciting 'living' poets from India and from the Indian diaspora who write in English.

Within this definitive anthology, you will find long-established writers as well as younger writers in a large room without walls, where both individual and collective echoes are equally eloquent and important. *Converse* erases hierarchies, making boundaries seamless and transparent, with the unifying factor being integrity of thought and language.

Diversity and multicultural perspectives allow the poets here to have an internal dialogue between themselves on one hand and, on the other hand, with the varied topographical and cultural spaces of their origin or influence. Bringing such a variety of poems together creates an inherent syntactical and historical tension, one that ultimately celebrates humanity, imagination, artistry, intellect, and the written word — the result is in an original wordscape of the vastly multilingual, historic, and artistic terrain of India and the Indian diaspora. Meant equally for serious and lay readers of poetry and contemporary literature, this collection of work shares language that is poised, expansive, experimental, and centrifugal — while the thought is stringent and cogent, maintaining a fine balance between emotion, ideas, and expression. Just as Holi's *gulal*-smeared leaf (on the front cover) from a 75-year-old bargad tree radiates colour, celebration, and conviviality against a dark geopolitical and climate reality — so is this anthology itself a Keatsian 'Bright Star', creatively voicing affirmation and optimism. *Converse* is a book to relish and cherish."

RS: Your recent book 'Anthropocene: Climate Change, Contagion, Consolation' encompasses the entire gamut of response to the covid pandemic. I was especially touched by 'Burning Ghats, Varanasi.' What inspired you to write this collection? Did you innovate with structures of poetry to lend urgency to your concern about climate & pestilence?

SS: Thank you - I'm glad the poem 'Burning Ghats' touched you. The act of 'burning' is so much part of the process of 'climate change' and the 'pandemic', and in the idea of 'anthropocene'. My newest book, *Anthropocene* is a literary and artistic response to, and inspired by, the most urgent issues that face humanity now — climate change and the pandemic.

Anthropocene tackles the complexities head-on with honesty and sensitivity, without any compromise. Simultaneously engaging multiple genres – creative non-fiction, essay, prose, poetry and photography – the book interrogates our lives against the backdrop of a dangerously fraught and ever-changing landscape, on the emotional, physical, micro and macro levels.

Amid all the negative noise in the world, here is a quiet artistic offering – a testament to our fervent times where the ever-increasing ravages of climate change scar humanity, where Fascist politics overrides the silence of introspection, where the cleaving schism between the rich and poor becomes ever-widening, where racism peaks at an all-time high, where toxicity among people proliferates, and fake news abounds.

Ultimately, the book is a plea for positivity and prayer – it urges us to slow down, to introspect, to consume less. It is time once again to learn how to love selflessly and embrace “Hope, heed, heal – our song, in present tense.”

RS: Which are the contemporary voices (poets & writers) that echo and resound with you?

SS: There are so many – Derek Walcott, Seamus Heaney, Joseph Brodsky – Jibanananda Das, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Ghalib – the list is endless.

RS: A lot of our readers are budding poets and writers. What advice would you give them about honing their poetic skills and craft?

SS: Read, read, and read more. Read your colleagues work with a critical eye. Read the classics and the contemporary poets in India (and worldwide). Practise writing formal verse, even though that might not be your thing. It is a good learning and apprenticeship.

RS: *The Whispering Anklets, Blue Nude: Ekphrasis & New Poems, and Red* are your forthcoming books. Tell us a little about them.

SS: *The Whispering Anklets* project has been many decades in the making – born out of my long-term engagement with dance, music and the arts. The poems in the book – simultaneously spontaneous and studied – are often a series of crafted ekphrastic responses to live performances. Dance and music for me, are about the silence and its unarticulated hymns; about light, shadow and the penumbra within; about word and wordlessness; about stasis and movement; about introspection and expression – and also the strict practised forms and invisible architecture that drive and prop up the artistic exoskeleton. Dance frees my soul – it makes me walk on air.

Among my friends and colleagues, I count some of the world’s leading dancers and musicians, theatre and film directors, photographers and artists, poets and writers – my world revolves around the ideas and creations of these hugely talented individuals. This book is a collaboration with the extraordinary dancer, Aditi Mangaldas, and Dinesh Khanna, the master of composition and colour photography.

So whether it is Aditi Mangaldas’s soul-searching kathak and high-octane modern-dance shows, the carefully articulated padams and javalis by Leela Samson, Madhavi Mudgal and Bharati Shivaji’s lasya-layered abhinaya, Malavika Sarukkai and Alarmel Valli’s sinuous gazelle-like leaps – or the deep-throated aalaap of Pandit Jasraj, the mature sonics of Shubha Mudgal, the haunting melodies of Kishori Amonkar – I invariably find myself scrambling for scraps of paper in the semi-darkness of an auditorium, to scribble my early thoughts, to tie down phrases that suggest themselves. Over time, these notes-texts-phrases, through various assemblages and revisions, slow-morph into finely-etched poems.

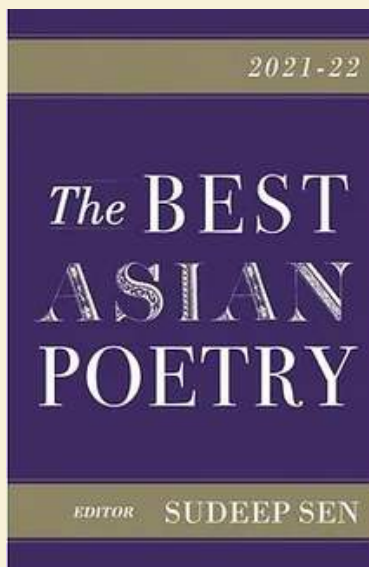
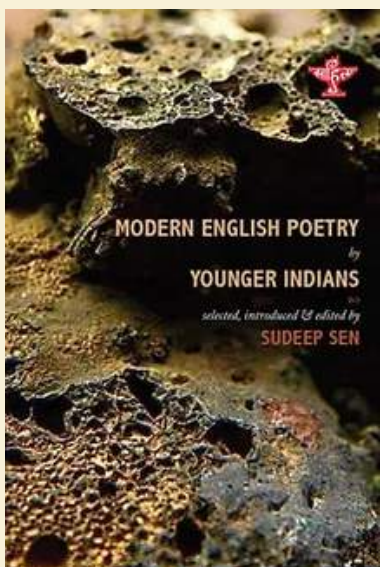
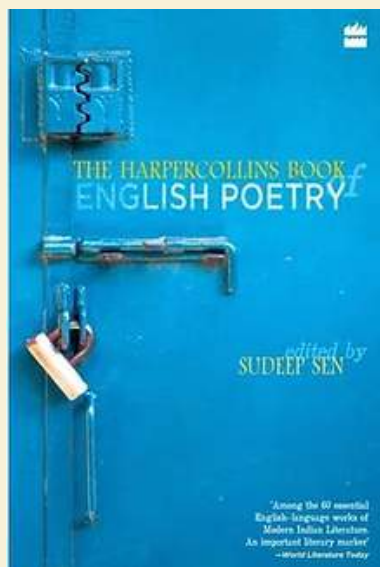
Dance has always been, for me, “the hidden language of the soul” (Martha Graham). *The Whispering Anklets* “murmur[ing] mnemonically / in ... lucent luminescence” – is an act of individual obsession, of artistic collaboration, of communal creative sharing, of friendship and humanity.

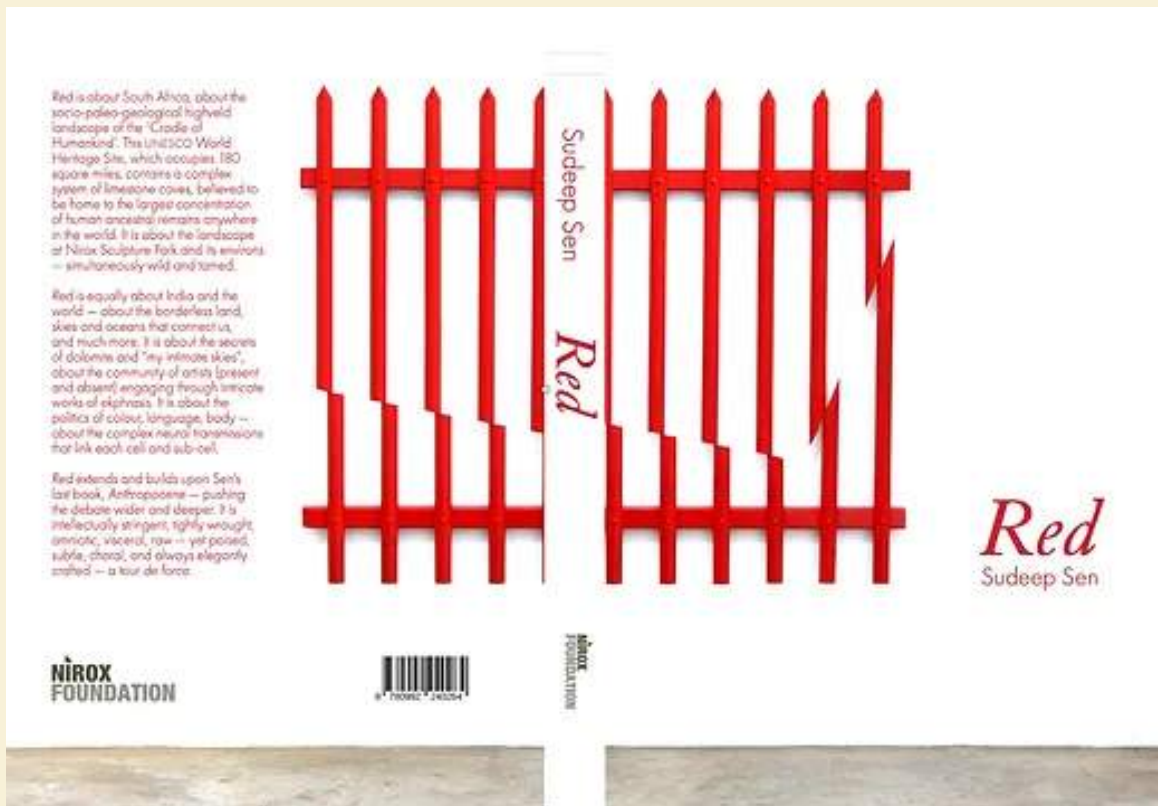
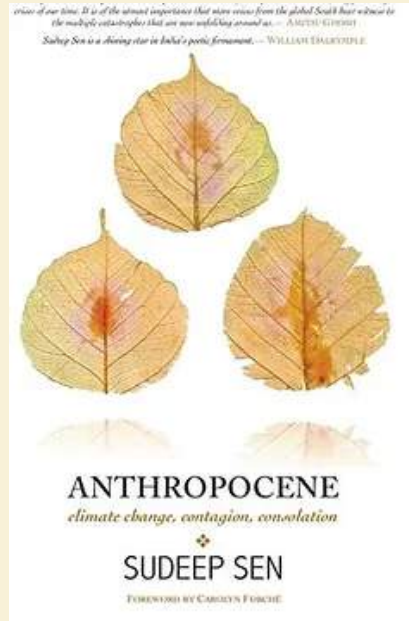
As regards, the two other books-in-progress – *Blue Nude*, and *Red* – let them be a surprise!

RS: Thank you so much Sudeep for taking time out to talk to The Wise Owl. We wish you the best in all your creative endeavours and hope your poetic voice scales greater heights.

SS: My pleasure.

Some Works of Sudeep Sen





Releasing on 28th May 2023

The Interview: Susan Rich

(Rachna Singh, Editor, *The Wise Owl* in conversations with Susan Rich)

The Wise Owl talks to **Susan Rich**, an award-winning poet, editor and essayist. She has authored seven books including *Gallery of Postcards and Maps: New and Selected Poems* *Cloud Pharmacy*, *The Alchemist's Kitchen*, named a finalist for the Foreword Prize and the Washington State Book Award, *Cures Include Travel*, and *The Cartographer's Tongue*, winner of the PEN USA Award. Along with Brian Turner and Ilya Kaminsky, she edited *The Strangest of Theatres: Poets Writing Across Borders*. *Demystifying the Manuscript: Essays and Interviews for Creating a Book of Poems*, co-edited with Kelli Russell Agodon has just been released. Her poetry collection, *Blue Atlas*, will hit the bookstores in 2024.

Rich's international awards include: the Times (London) Literary Supplement Award, a residency at the Tyrone Guthrie Center in Ireland and a residency at Fundacion Valparaiso in Spain. Other poetry honors include an Artist Trust Fellowship, 4 Culture Awards, GAP Awards and a Fulbright Fellowship. Her work has been nominated for several Pushcart Prizes and Best of the Net Awards. Her poems have been published in various prestigious journals (*The Gettysburg Review*, *New England Review*, *Poetry Ireland*) and anthologized in *The Path to Kindness: Poems of Connection and Joy*; *Best Essays of the Northwest*, *Poets of the American West*, among others.

Susan Rich lives in Seattle and teaches at Highline College where she runs the reading series, *Highline Listens: Writers Read Their Work*. She is also co-founder and director of Poets on the Coast: A Weekend Writing Retreat for Women.

Thank you, Susan, for taking time out to talk to *The Wise Owl*.

RS: You are an award-winning poet with 7 books under your belt. For the benefit of our readers, please tell us a little about your journey as a poet and writer.

SR: From the moment my older sister, Ruby, read me bedtime stories as a child, I was hooked on the textures and sounds of words. Before I could even read, I wanted to be a writer. In books I inhabited living worlds so much more interesting than my parent's home. There was a country called England, there was a place called Middle Earth. Books felt multi-dimensional to me in a way that television did not.

In college, however, I had professors who actively discouraged me from writing. They went out of their way to tell me I shouldn't be a poet. And let's be clear: I had never asked their opinion! As a creative writing professor now myself, I can't imagine what motivated them to actively discourage their students from writing. Perhaps I was the "wrong" gender? The "wrong" religion?

It was seven years after that, after I had returned from my time in Niger, West Africa, when I started to write again. I had worked as a Peace Corps Volunteer in a small city deeply damaged by drought. So much "life" had happened to me since college. Back in Boston my friend, the poet Jennifer Markell, knew about a poetry workshop which took place in the poet's dining room. In that class with no academic structure, around a dining room table, I found my way back to writing. This was the beginning of me finding my path to poetry in the "grown-up" world.

But it was the great American poet, Linda Pastan, that perhaps influenced me the most. She was the first poet I ever saw in-person when she visited my high school library. Perhaps that's why, twenty-some years later, I chose to work with her at the Breadloaf Writers Conference. When she said good-bye to me after the two week conference she hugged me and said, "Keep in touch. I want to follow your career." My response was to turn around to see who she might be talking to. Dear Reader, she meant me. Those two brief sentences really changed my life.

RS: Our readers would be curious to know about the creative influences in your life. Are there any contemporary poets or traditional masters who have inspired you to write?

SR: Well, I think I'll continue with Linda Pastan. She was a contemporary of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, publishing fifteen books of poetry. Her most recent book, *Almost an Elegy: New and Selected Poems* is stunning. I believe she's a greatly underestimated American poet. Imagine if she had had a powerful poet friend like Robert Lowell!

Elizabeth Bishop is another poet who I found early on. Bishop's focus on maps and travel (she lived for more than two decades in Brazil) and her nomadic life allowed me to make sense of my own. In the work of both poets I am drawn to the infusion of the image with an almost alchemical glow. Other poets that have meant a great deal to me are Eavan Boland, Seamus Heaney, Denise Levertov, W.S. Merwin, Adrienne Rich (no relation) and so many others. I'm intentionally mentioning only poets who have passed on from this realm. There is such a strong compulsion towards the "new" in our culture and I find myself consciously wanting to push against it.

RS: I was intrigued by 2 of your poems. In 'Boketto' you say, 'I try to exist in the somehow, the might still be—' and in 'Still Life with ladder' you say 'I've improvised my life ~ let the sky pull the strings.' Do these poems echo your philosophy in life? Our readers would be happy if you shared bits about your philosophy of life?

SR: I think poets are by definition also philosophers. Poetry requires meaning, even if it is the meaning of a television show from childhood like "Bewitched." I like to think of the poet as high priestess of metaphor and sound.

RS: You are an award-winning and prolific poet and writer. What advice would you give budding poets on how to hone their craft and grow and evolve as poets?

SR: I like to say I'm not actually that prolific, I've just lived awhile. In Seattle, I'm very lucky to be surrounded by a strong poetry community. Having many different poetry friends not only in Seattle but also in Massachusetts (where I'm from) and in Ireland (where I've travelled regularly) makes a big difference. I tell my students that they need a writing community and that can happen in so many different ways these days: weekend classes, summer retreats, or on-line writing groups. The important thing is to find a place where you are valued as a writer as opposed to the other hats we all wear.

RS: Your book 'Demystifying the Manuscript: Essays and Interviews on Creating a Book of Poems' would be of great interest to budding poets as it is a literary toolkit on how to put together a manuscript. What quick advice would you give poets who are putting together a poetry collection?

SR: Oh, thanks so much for asking! My friend the poet Kelli Russell Agodon and I began this book nine years ago. We were on a road trip, between Florence, Oregon and Seattle WA (about a six hour drive) and both of us had just had our fourth book of poems accepted. We felt we'd learned so much about ordering poems, choosing cover art, looking for a publisher, etc that we wanted to share what we knew with everyone. There was nothing out there that covered the breadth of what we wanted to create. For example, what is the difference between a chapbook and a full length collection? Why choose one publisher over another? As we were creating this book, we realized how much more amazing we could make it by including a diversity of voices! We immediately began interviewing dozens of poets and editors to include their wisdom, too. We solicited interviews from well known writers such as Linda Pastan and Spencer Reese as well as first time authors like Saddiq Dzukogi and Su Hwang.

The quick advice is to get a hold of 'Demystifying the Manuscript: Essays and Interviews on Creating a Book of Poems' and take it as your new best friend. There's wisdom from over 35 writers included in these pages and it's only \$20 but libraries should have a copy, too. Perhaps the best aspect of the book is that we break the experience of creating a book into manageable parts. Here's one tip for working on ordering your poems! Invest in a package of colored note cards (about \$5 at your local pharmacy or stationer's) and at the top of the card write the title of one of your poems.

Skip a line and copy out the first line of the poem. At the bottom of the card, write the last line of the poem. Use the colors to divide your poems into different sections. You can see how the last line of one poem might connect to the first line of the next. Notecards are so compact that they can travel with you on the train or you can shuffle through them while talking on the phone.

RS: Your Book 'Blue Atlas' is forthcoming. Tell us a little about the book and the inspiration behind it?

SR: This book, Blue Atlas, my sixth book of poems, is a "project book" in that I knew that I was writing a book about a coerced second term abortion that I experienced in my twenties. It's taken me most of a lifetime to explore that time in poetry. The poems in the book have been written over a ten year period. It's not a book I wanted to write, it's a book I had to write. That pressure between wanting/not wanting to write about the abortion led me to try out several invented forms.

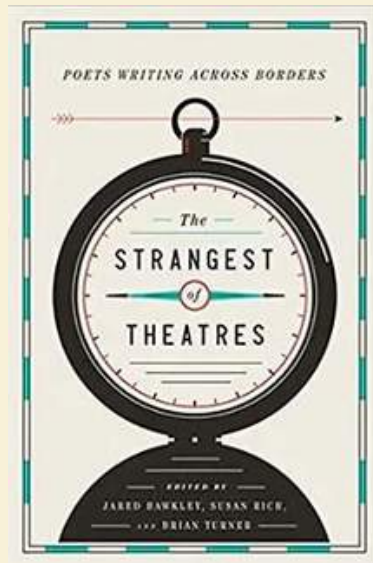
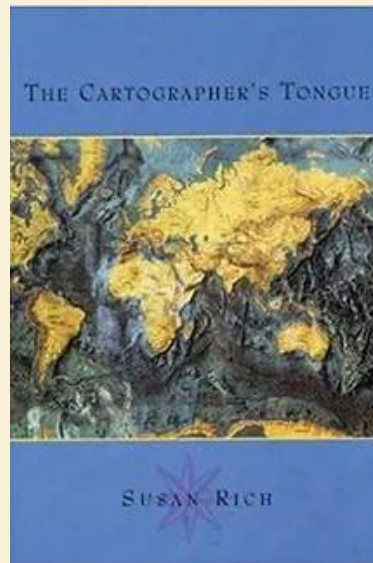
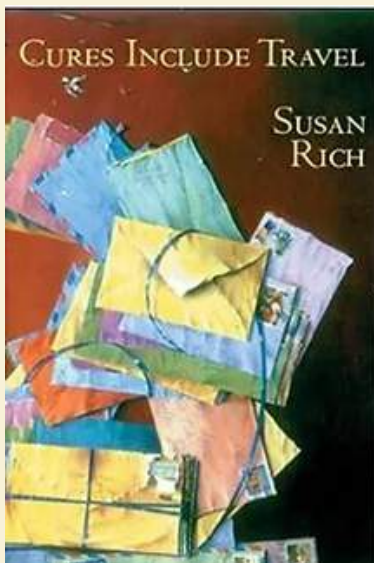
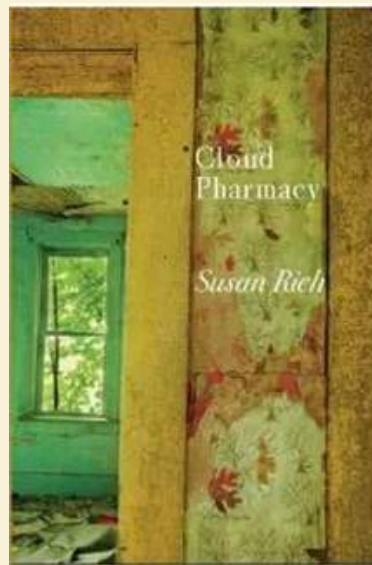
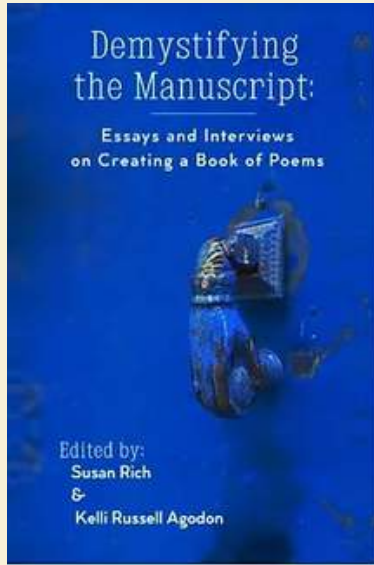
RS: You are the director & co-founder of 'Poets on the Coast: A Weekend Writing Retreat for Women. What prompted you to start a separate workshop for women?

SR: Kelli Russell Agodon and I started Poets on the Coast: A Weekend Writing Retreat for Women because we were inventing the retreat we most wanted to attend. We dreamed this idea up over a glass of wine while staying at a writing retreat.

If we organized a writing retreat there would be no classes in unheated stairwells, there would be gifts for everyone! We'd have lots of free snacks and wine. Everyone at the retreat would feel seen and appreciated. And so that is what we created! Each participant has a one-on-one conference with a faculty member at no extra charge. There is morning yoga for those who want to participate and an open mic. Most of all, we created a safe space for women, from new writers to widely published writers to create community. In recent years we've invited guest poets to join us such as Diane Seuss, Maggie Smith, Lena Khalaf Tuffaha, Claudia Castro Luna, Rena Priest, and many others. This year we are hosting Jessica Gigot and Jane Wong. There are still a few spots available!

Thank you, Susan, for taking time out to talk to The Wise Owl. We are delighted to feature you in our magazine. We wish you the best in all your literary & creative pursuits and hope you continue with your prolific writing.

Some Works of Susan Rich



The Interview: Matt Atkinson

(Rachna Singh, Editor, *The Wise Owl* in conversation with Matt Atkinson)

The Wise Owl talks to **Matt Atkinson**, a Colorado-based artist whose work is found in collections all over North America and Europe. He has a degree in studio art from University of Tennessee, and has exhibited in numerous juried shows, where he has earned honours which include purchase and gold medal awards.

His traditional, realist paintings portray the American West from the days gone by to the present, and in particular the stories of men and women who preserve this heritage. From old-time saddle makers to violin carvers to Indian Elders and warriors, his works honour the preservation of culture, and men and women who steadfastly carry on these traditions. Matt's art has found its way into private and corporate collections and galleries across America, Europe, Finland and Canada.

Hi Matt. Thanks for taking time out to talk to The Wise Owl.

RS: You are an artist with a diverse canvas of art forms – Cowboy and Indian art, Wildlife Art, Landscapes and pencil drawings. Tell us a little about how your journey as an artist and how you developed and evolved these different art forms.

MA: Before becoming an artist, I was a social worker who helped Native American communities develop cultural preservation and anti-violence programs, and that kept a lot of indigenous values prominent in my thinking. But I didn't realize how advanced western art portrayals had become, until I saw a show in a museum. The oil paintings were astonishing, representing the diverse experiences of western people, including Indians of various tribes. It inspired me to make an effort to develop my own skill as a painter.

RS: On your website you say that your Art is your way of preserving culture, and men and women who steadfastly carry on these traditions. What inspired you to preserve native American culture and traditions as well as the Wild west cowboy ethos?

MA: One of the best things about being an artist is how many stories you encounter. When I'm painting scenes of the west, I'm also spending time with the people who know it the best, learning from them. In order to portray things accurately, I've spent time with traditional cowboys, saddle-makers, mountain men, Native American elders and youth, the grandchildren of historic chiefs, and holy people. Capturing their likeness on canvas isn't the most important part of the process, it's cultivating those connections and learning their stories. Many of their skills and histories are becoming rarer, and could be lost to time if we're not all more careful about what parts of our shared cultural memories we protect, and 'earning' the chance to hear their stories is one of the most fulfilling parts of the process.

RS: Your Pencil drawings are truly beautiful. I especially loved 'Found My Way', 'Grizzly Bear' 'Wolf Couple', among others. Our readers would be curious to know how you make your subjects so realistic and life-like.

MA: I photograph most of my own reference imagery, for starters. The grizzly bear and wolves in those pieces are animals I personally encountered. Led by knowledgeable guides and handlers, I was able to observe each animal closely but safely. After capturing thousands of photographs, I pore through them to find the images that best represent the personality, drama, and story of each animal. I keep my reference image on my laptop screen while working at an adjacent easel or drawing table. That also helps me represent their movement and anatomy accurately. In some cases, such as with horses, I've even collected and studied equine veterinarian textbooks to get the anatomical details correct, because experts who know those animals can spot any imperfections in how bone structure or musculature is drawn.

RS: Some of your works like 'Merciful Release', 'Love Letters', 'What she has inside her' seem to suggest a philosophy and attitude towards life. Could you elaborate on the philosophy of life reflected in some of your works.

MA: It goes back again to my concept of art as a form of storytelling. Sometimes, a story can be told simply, like when a wolf is drinking from a stream, or a Plains Indian warrior is preparing his horse with paint before a battle. Other times, the story is more intuitive, rather than being directly narrated by the paint or pencil itself. In those pieces, the story is about a subject's personal experience. I believe that every life has a story to tell, and often it's when someone protests, "Who, me? No, I'm boring, I don't really have a story", that there's something remarkable to discover that they themselves might not realize is precious. So I want to look further than the surface until I find the story that each life has to share, and then show respect for it.

RS: You are not only an artist but also an academic, having written award-winning books on behavioural sciences. What inspired you to write these books?

MA: My years as a social worker are what led me to write those books, because I wanted a way to use the accumulated experiences of the many amazing people I'd encountered as a resource to promote healing and empowerment for others. I've worked with a lot of trauma survivors, and always been impressed by how much internal strength and insight they have, even when they might not recognize it themselves at first. As I've learned from those connections with others, I've also wanted to respect those experiences. In my own way, writing books about recovery from trauma is my response to those connections. Whether as a social worker or as an artist, I feel like the one job I've always had for my whole life is to be a storyteller and story collector.

RS: Your work on the theme of anti-violence intrigues me. What made you take on this difficult path?

MA: I was fortunate to come from a healthy and happy family; I was raised by good people. I'm very aware of the privilege this provided to me as a child, not having to survive trauma or violence. But it's also caused me to feel a responsibility to the lives around me, and that means more than not simply being violent myself. It means that I feel a responsibility to be anti-violent, in all its forms: racism, sexism, or any other form of marginalization. In my art, I represent those values by showing relationships that are generally peaceful and equal, rather than moments of conflict or strife. I seldom paint battle scenes, for example, even though they are a real part of our history. I'm unlikely to paint moments of competition between predators and prey. When I represent multiple lives in a single scene, they are almost always at peace. This isn't because of a naïve, superficial, or wish-fulfilment indulgence, but because I've directly faced a lot of the world's real-life cruelty, and this is my pushback. This is how I psychologically balance myself between difficult realities and hopeful ideals, between turmoil and beauty. There's nothing naïve or delusional about recognizing the real impact of strife on my own health, and consciously choosing to use art as a resource to resist becoming disillusioned or calloused about the world.

RS: many of our readers are budding artists. What advice would you give them to help them hone their craft and passion for Art?

MA: The things that helped me most were to buy a membership to a nearby art museum and go there frequently and study the artists you admire, and to connect with living master artists. Look at how they solve problems in their art, and how they physically apply paint, and what decisions they make on their canvases. This isn't the same as copying them; begin to notice how they accomplish things with their materials. One museum guide told me once that they could tell the difference between an artist and a museum visitor, because visitors stand back from paintings to see them all, but artists get mere inches away because they're analysing individual brush strokes! I've also found my own artistic role models are usually quite friendly and eager to offer their time and suggestions to sincere students; there have been times when I've written to an artist who leaves me in awe, and been amazed that they will actually reply with their ideas for how I can improve a painting or drawing. They feel respected when someone actually listens, and they can see how you've

incorporated their advice into your work in response. So go ahead and ask the artists you look up to, be open to real critique, and show them the “after” stages of your work when you’ve taken their suggestions.

Thanks Matt, for talking to The Wise Owl. We wish you the best in all your creative and academic pursuits and hope your anti-violence program/work can make the world a better and more peaceful place.

Some Works of Matt Atkinson



Found My Way Pencil



Two Ravens Colour 20X24



History of Magic Web



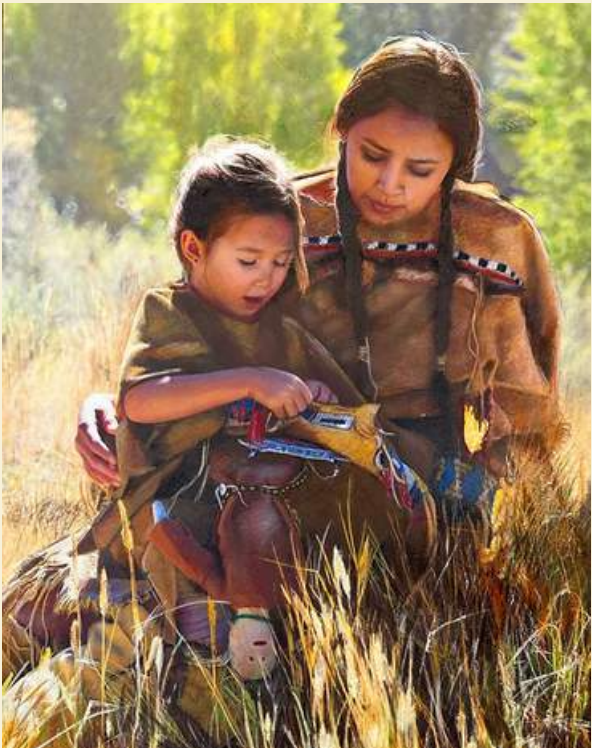
Sitting Bill Deer's Medicine Ceremony



The Land Knows Them



Unnamed



Unnamed

Tête-à-Tête: Asok Btk

The Wise Owl talks to **Asok Btk**, an Artist from Thalassery, India. Asok has exhibited his artworks at various prestigious galleries in India in solo as well as group exhibitions. He works with watercolours as well as acrylics. His paintings beautifully capture and reflect the day-to-day life of his native world- Kerela.

Thank you, Asok, for talking to The Wise Owl.

TWO: Please tell us a little about your journey as an artist. What inspired you to paint? Did your family encourage you to pursue art?

AB: I was born in a beautiful area called Kariyad at the southern tip of Kannur district in Kerela. The village is rich with river, fields and agriculture, inhabited by ordinary people who give importance to humanity and compassion beyond economics, especially those who live a simple and beautiful life as wage earners and farmers. I am one of seven children of working parents. I have heard that my grandfather (mother's father) was an artist. I believe my aesthetics and love of art must be inherited from my mother.

But I came to this field quite unexpectedly. My elder brother used to draw well. He was also a political activist and as part of the political activities, banners, boards etc were done at our house. I remember helping him with the paintings and sculptures. Due to my brother's untimely demise, the work of drawing/painting for the party fell on my shoulders. That was the beginning of my journey as an artist.

Like I said, I lived with innocent people in the countryside. The models of my paintings are ordinary people who work and labour hard to earn a living with grace and pride. My mother and siblings, my village folk, after my wedding, my wife and my children, Adwaitha and Anawaetha, have always been with me on my artistic journey giving me full support and encouragement.

TWO: Looking at your beautiful artworks posted on Facebook, I find that you recreate a montage of native ambience and life. For the benefit of the readers please tell us what inspires you to create these images.

AB: It is said that experiences of childhood have an impact on a person's character. As I have said earlier, my native Kariyad is a beautiful place and the natural beauty of my native place had a great influence on me. Mahé River (also known as Mayyazhipuzha or the English Channel of India) ran through my native place. My favourite pastimes were swimming, bathing and fishing in the river. We all went to school after bathing in the river in the morning, which was unpolluted by the heaps of garbage that are remnants of modern life. During the rainy season, the river would overflow and fill our yard and fields. We have happy and fun memories of playing there with our friends.

Rainy season was my favourite. The beautiful folksongs of the women, including my mother, working in the paddy fields near the house as they were drenched in the rain, the herds of cows, oxen and goats, the men who nimbly climbed the tall coconut trees to pluck the ripe fruit and the men who helped to retrieve coconuts floating in the river, the road to school where the water lilies (small lotus) abound... these are the beautiful memories you will find reflected and captured in my paintings.

As an artist, I am bound to capture and recreate images that paint the natural beauty of my native place as well as the extreme and difficult conditions of the ordinary man who works hard to improve his living condition. My images are beautiful because they express my love for my countryside and village folk.

TWO: What is your favourite medium as an artist? You appear to mostly work with watercolours. It is a difficult medium to control. How did you learn this masterly control over watercolours?

AB: Art is my life as well as my living, so I am ready to work in any medium. Apart from paintings I have done many sculptures in Kerala and Bangalore. I am now working on a 12 feet tall sculpture of Lord Buddha for an Ayurveda resort in Kerala.

Watercolours is the most difficult medium. Re-takes are not possible for that. Once a stroke is made, it cannot be changed or erased. I remember what my teacher used to say. He said, "For someone who can do watercolour beautifully, it is easy to handle any other medium." The only way to master this medium is through consistent practice. I love this medium so much that I try my best to do at least one watercolour every day. I believe that such constant efforts have led to the masterly control you mention in my artworks.

But along with my creative satisfaction as an artist, I also share with you the frustration that every artist faces. I share with you the naked truth that an artist uses expensive paper and colors but it is unfortunate that sometimes these paintings are unscrupulously thrown into a waste paper basket.

TWO: You work 'geetopadesam' in acrylic paint is beautiful. Tell us a little about the inspiration behind this creation. Does this reflect your philosophy of life?

AB: I believe that all Vedas and Puranas are taught with the ultimate goal of leading man to goodness. Indian mythology is a rare and beautiful repository of values which is relevant even to the modern world. Lord Krishna's advice to Arjuna is as important today as it was during the Mahabharata, the battle of Kauravas and Padavas. This is the main reason for picking up this subject for my painting.

Another reason was that a friend had requested the painting for a relative who lived a 'satvic' life and wanted to give it pride of place in the drawing room of his new house.

TWO: Tell us a little bit about how you approach a new work and how you execute the final canvas?

AB: I believe that all paintings are a direct or indirect reproductions of Nature's creations. However, what makes the artwork different is how I project my perception of the world onto my canvas. Before I begin a painting, I spend a lot of time on thinking how I can make the experience of viewing my artwork different for the viewer. I think deeply about the play of light and shade and also the emotions and feelings the work is likely to evoke in the viewer. I try to make it a new and different experience for the viewer. This is brief is the creative process that goes into all my artworks.

TWO: Which artists are your favourite (traditional as well as contemporary)? What is it about their work that attracts you?

AB: I have no role models but lots of favourites. In fact, it would be correct to say that I love all good paintings. My approach is to adopt the positive aspects of the craft from creative wizards. I believe that in the realm of art, every man is a student and learning the craft is an ongoing lifelong process.

TWO: You are also a teacher. What advice would you give budding artists about how to hone their skills?

AB: Observe the living environment closely. Practice keeping the sights in mind and recalling them at will. Make the most of your experiences. Read and view the works of great artists. Most importantly develop your own style of painting without imitating others. No matter how great an artist you are, do not let go off humanity...Ultimately a good artist is a good human being.

TWO: Are you working on an exhibition as we speak? Do share details with our readers.

AB: For an Indian artist, it is a proud moment to have a solo exhibition at Jehangir art Gallery, Mumbai. My

exhibition is also scheduled in this prestigious gallery. I will let you know the exact date soon. All the viewers of The Wise Owl are cordially invited to my exhibition.

Thank you, Asok, for taking time out to speak with The Wise Owl about your creativity and beautiful artwork. Wishing you the very best in your journey as an artist.

Some Artworks of Asok Btk



Geetopdesam



Unnamed



Unnamed



Unnamed



Unnamed



Unnamed



Unnamed



Unnamed

POETRY

Sudeep Sen Poet of the Month



The Courageous, the spineless & the indifferent
Richa Joshi Pant

[Read More](#)



Difficult to Forge
Patricia Walsh

[Read More](#)



Sunny Side Up
Peter A Witt

[Read More](#)



Disembodied: a triptych
Sudeep Sen: Poet of The Month

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Theme Songs at Birth
Ben Nardolilli

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Unfinished Drafts
Abin Chakraborty

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POETRY



Unruly Night
Saranya Narayanan

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This American Factory
James Croal Jackson

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Apple to Your Knife
Gomathi Sridevi

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The Night of Crows
Priya Chouhan

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The Wedding Gown
Vineeta Gupta

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Salt Headache
Sam Moe

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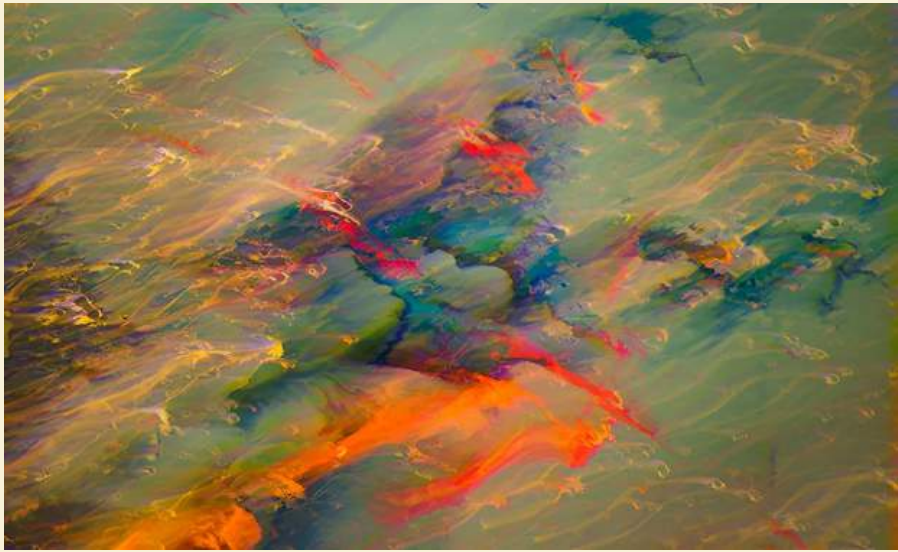
Shadows of Yesterday
Jayson Dela Fuente

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balloons
Sarah Jane Justice

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Disembodied

By Sudeep Sen: Poet of the Month

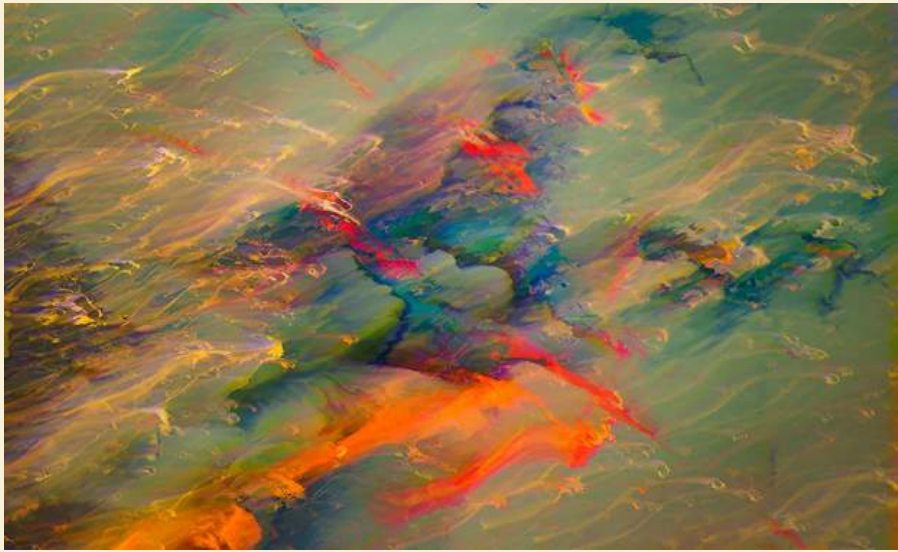
1.

My body carved from abandoned bricks of a ruined temple,
from minaret-shards of an old mosque,
from slate-remnants of a medieval church apse,
from soil tilled by my ancestors.

My bones don't fit together correctly as they should —
the searing ultra-violet light from Aurora Borealis
patches and etch-corrects my orientation —
magnetic pulses prove potent.

My flesh sculpted from fruits of the tropics,
blood from coconut water,
skin coloured by brown bark of Indian teak.

My lungs fuelled by Delhi's insidious toxic air
echo asthmatic sounds, a new vinyl dub-remix.
Our universe — where radiation germinates from human follies,
where contamination persists from mistrust,
where pleasures of sex are merely a sport —
where everything is ambition,
everything is desire, everything is nothing.
Nothing and everything.



2.

White light everywhere,
but no one can recognize its hue,
no one knows that there is colour in it — all possible colours.

Body worshipped, not for its blessing,
but its contour —
artificial shape shaped by Nautilus.

Skin moistened by L'Oreal
and not by season's first rains —
skeleton's strength not shaped by earthquakes
or slow-moulded by fearless forest-fires.

Ice-caps are rapidly melting — too fast to arrest glacial slide.
In the near future — there will be no water left
or too much water that is undrinkable,
excess water that will drown us all.

Disembodied floats, afloat like Noah's Ark —

no gps, no pole-star navigation, no fossil fuel to burn away —
just maps with empty grids and names of places that might exist.

Already, there is too much traffic on the road —
unpeopled hollow metal-shells without brakes,
swerve about directionless — looking for an elusive compass.



Disembodied 2: Les Voyageurs *for Bruno Catalano*

*To understand yourself, you must create a mirror
that reflects accurately what you are
Only in the understanding of what is,
is there freedom from what is.*
— J Krishnamurti

Bronze humanforms sculpted, then parts deleted —
as if eroded by poisoned weather, eaten away
by civilisational time —
corrosion, corruption, callousness.
Power, strength, gravitas residing in metal's absence.

Men-women, old-young, statuesque —
holding their lives in briefcases —
incomplete travellers,
Marseilles les voyageurs, parts of their bodies
missing —
surreal — steadfast, anchored.

Engineered within their histories
of migration, travel — over land, by sea —
coping with life's mechanised emptiness.

Artform's negative space or positive? What are we too see?
Have these voyagers left something behind,
or are they yearning
to complete the incompleteness
in their lives?
They are still looking —
as am I, searching within.

Marseilles, France



Disembodied 3: Within

for Aditi Mangaldas

You emerge — from within darkness, your face
sliding into light —
you squirm virus-like in a womb,
draped blood-red, on black stage-floor.
Around you, others swirl about
dressed as green algae,
like frenetic atoms
under a microscope in a dimly lit laboratory.
Art mirroring life — reflecting the pandemic on stage.

Your hands palpitate,
as the sun's own blinding yellow corona
cracks through the cyclorama.
People leap about — masked, veiled.
You snare a man's sight
with your fingers mimicking a chakravavyuh —
you are red, he is green, she is blue —
trishanku — life, birth, death —
regermination, rejuvenation, nirvana.

Everything on stage — as in life —
moves in circular arcs.
Irises close and open, faces veiled unveil —
hearts love, lungs breathe — breathless.

Lights, electromagnetic — knotted, unwrapped —
music pulsates, reaching a crescendo,
then silence.

Time stops. Far away in the infinite blue of the cosmos —
I look up and spot a moving white.
I see a white feather

trying its best to breathe
in these times of breathlessness, floating downwards –

and as it touches the floor, in a split-second
everything bursts into colour, movement, the bols/taals
try to restore order,
rhythm, both contained and free.

The backdrop bright orange,
the silhouettes pitch-black.
As you embrace another humanform,
the infinite journey of timelessness might seem
inter_rupted,
but now is the moment to reflect and recalibrate
immersed in the uncharted seas, in the widening circles,
telling us – others matter,

the collective counts.

I examine minutely the striated strands
of the pirouetting feather, now fallen –
its heart still beating, its blood still pumping,
its white untarnished.
Life's dance continues – with or without us –
only in the understanding of what is,
is there freedom from what is.



Unfinished Drafts

By Abin Chakraborty

Unfinished drafts from my past
Swirl and fall like dried brown leaves
All through these mid-winter nights.
Carrying my tears like unseasonal rains
From heartaches of some distant years
They float and roll and gather at times
To burn into sustaining warmth.
Hunched within dark, I stretch out my hands
And seek out old words within flames.



Unruly Night

By Saranya Narayanan

I have lived an eternity.
Innumerable ships have sunk in
my eyes, drying my tears.
Fanciful clouds have faded into shapes,
unburdened by the pangs of time and love.
But, I have smothered my grief in the
cruellest hands of the night, where
stars sing elegies to my deafened ears.

I swallow gasps of despair to
suffice the hunger of my longing soul.
The tides of the sea which carry your smell,
kisses my soul as I feel cold.
Through all the rugged paths I travel, I
see footprints of you nearing me
Only in distance.
My sleep is your paradise,
You walk into my dreams ravishing my soul;
In the deadly night's communion,
I parch pastures grey with destitute.
Amidst the dark, when the vampires defy
the rules of the land,
I dig memories that have long ago got rotten.



Theme Songs at Birth

By Ben Nardolilli

Souls up high, bodies sitting low,
who introduced them to one another?

minds? and how?
using bodies that could not know

how to speak and understand
being spoken to?

and with souls lacking ears to listen,
or lacking eyes to read with?

somehow, they were tossed
in together to live

in a condominium of electric meat,
no explanation,

just opposites attracting,
like in a sitcom about nothing,

an odd couple with no origin story
skipping all theme songs at birth



This American Factory

By James Croal Jackson

Work snips years
it abducts me
from living
and the drinks are heavy
after
in my liver
my tenuous body
if I could live
in a less-consumed way
outside
with the grass
not overgrowing
my head
in the mountains
with a beach-blue
overlook
and while I'm
fantasizing
I want a bug force
field to keep
the pests away
I want to glide
over the landscape
a less-ambitious Magneto
breathing in

high-altitude sea breeze
until the stress is gone
and I deflate
into the ocean
though I don't know
how to swim
see

even my daydreams
end with darkness



Apple to your knife

By Gomathi Sridevi

I am the apple to your knife.

You cut me in different shapes
and mould me to your desire.

You peel my skin when you are angry
and soothe me with water for my wounds.

You stare at me like an art
and throw me away like garbage.

You drool over my taste when you eat
but spit my seeds when they caught your tongue.

You never asked if I was hurt
but continued to draw your art on my skin.

When I asked you why you never let me go
and you say, 'You are my Art of Love.'

If I am your Art of Love
then you are my Nightmare of Love.



The Night of Crows

By Priya Chouhan

White Lily on a loosely braided hair, fallen branches ornamenting the neck,
eyes clouded by sorrow, the crows gathered around.

Head bowed down, the black feathers moist,
their touch erased the pain of infinite wounds.

The shadow of broken pearls lurking behind, sweet breaths of hope,
pierced ears, listening the song of lost battles.

Shrieks grown out of the red blood, spirits of all ages,
smoke devouring the sky, serpents on a barren land.

A thunderous muteness struck the hollow being,
cremates sleeping under, it's the night of the crows.

Hair sailing through a soft breeze, chipped knee,
glittering darkness, the crows flew back.

Head bowedinfinite wounds!



The Wedding Gown

By Vineeta Gupta

She hastened to the downtown
to buy her wedding gown.

The sky
was burning red, the wolves howled,
The boughs have shed
All their leaves, not a single sprout.

A sharp turn
At roundabout, a huge crowd in the lounge.
Doubtless, there was
Some turmoil, some serious brawl.

The crowd
Screamed and a deafening sound.
Help! Help! and a rainbow
And a black ring in the raised right hand.

Out came
The breath and the blue feather; the stream
Of red squirted, the sea
Stood amazed; violet tiara fell apart.
The gown
Metamorphosed into the shroud!



Salt Headache

By Sam Moe

So we break up before the guests arrive, dinner
burning on the stove, so what, stole her heart
on the bathroom floor with those ugly tiles, well
water is cold filled with star shadows
I knit my veins, you said I was in love with another
woman, I want guests with clean shirts
flower buttons, stay in the house with us
hands like rosary beads, red and purple bouquet
of frost, all those sleepless nights
when it wasn't just tequila and peppermint
gems tucked inside rings, twist, sparkle, evening
a threat, I scream your name into the surf, resuscitating
fishes and fisherman love can't be wrapped neatly,
gently, throw lamps and anchors overboard, nets
to hug owl lobsters whose brilliant
blue bodies sit in your cast iron skillet full
of sizzling butter and pasta, bundles of silverware
it's as if we have been in love all along, I'm still
the last one to know when to turn off the lights.



birthdays

By Sarah Jane Justice

the waves beneath the pier
distort my face like broken mirrors
I look for her through splitting shards of fallen time
my eyes aim down;
 stretch; squint; search
 reach out in seeking spotlights
my sight sinks forward until I find her image
my mind grabs wild through warped wood gaps
 where she appears
I see the face I once reflected
I see the girl who proudly wore my name
 its letters dressed in childhood scribbles
 a written sign of a surer self
 an age held tight on a bright round badge
a gift she dropped
 and left behind
to lie in camouflage of burst balloons

her face changed with the way she wore her name
today her badge is a piss-up passport
a number used for proof instead of honour
it gifts a crumpled wrist-worn tag
a paper bracelet used until expired
 and left behind
to lie in camouflage of burst balloons



The courageous, the spineless and the indifferent

By Richa Joshi Pant

She twirls as the crowd cheers...
And rhythmically gets close to the fire.
Courage and conviction make a revolutionary brew,
stirred by thousands like her.
She then flings her hijab into the flames,
The crowd erupts into a deafening shout,
A shout that will scare the daylights out of a dictator,
And send shivers down the spines of the spineless men,
who crush, quell and murder in the name of honor.
In the name of an invisible, omnipresent, benevolent God,
And miles away in another land and another time,
Her sister wears the proscribed garment.
She then marches willfully towards the gate,
heckled and jeered...she continues to walk,
defiantly calling out the name of the greatest one.
The protector of the weak.
The omnipresent and most benevolent.
He chooses to remain invisible,
and act like he always has,
In mysterious ways...
Maybe if he was a woman he would act,
and do what an all-powerful God should.
Maybe.

Poets' note: The protests against Hijab in Iran made headlines here. Women defying the moral police was rousing. In southern India women were heckled and shamed for covering up. In both extremes it was the woman's choice which was ignored and trampled.



Difficult to Forge

By Patricia Walsh

The tiny wreckage lights up the moonbeam
Taking another's toys in a myriad of disaster
Addicted to boredom, covered over in spite
Celebritized locals feeling like twenty
Acting the bollocks before crossing the threshold.
Cut in the block, to assuage the local soundtrack
Enough material to infinity cut to the moon
Once sweet, being dead, preferring the others
Death over red sentiments, a nasty hubris
Universe passing by at a cost to savour.
A left-handed lecture, at pains to discern
Between criminal literature running past gods,
Cushioned through expense, rotting on the briar
Advised against splurging of a heartier kind
Love going amiss, running joke out of time.
Illicit kiss in the doorway, love writing itself
Giant leaps forward listening past the front door
Relateable suffering rolling for the last of this life
Addicted to the burn of second-hand coffee
Roving eyes at a stretch, God alone discerns.
Under a blood-white sky, relating to hard drinks,
Trimming beards in advance of secular preferment
Free in forward this message and any attachments ensue
The illicit soft parade rolling in the perfected
The worst over with, garnering a pat on the back.



Sunny Side Up

By Peter A Witt

Fry me some eggs, sunny side up
with strips of sizzling bacon
in a cast iron pan rescued
from my grandmother's kitchen.
Grind me some coffee beans,
not in some electric
whirring cloud of noise,
but in an old wooden box
like grandpa used to have.
Bake me some fluffy biscuits
from scratch, filled with loving air,
cut to perfection, served
with farm fresh butter,
harvested golden hive honey.
Sit with me on a spring morning
in your apron covered pastel dress,
speak to me of lilacs, kitchen gardens,
little children playing in the hay,
dog sleeping on the porch
on an idyllic summer morning.



Shadows of Yesterday

By Jayson Dela Fuente

Winter solstice swathed the village realm,
yet poinsettia's leaves perfectly bolster its red zenith.
Four sparrow herds in a bizarre sycamore tree.
The eldest has powerful wings to fend his three siblings in peril.
In the kaleidoscope glares of lights and the eclectic sounds,
they steer the fierce wind of the night.
One soars to the North and the others to the South, to the West, and the East.
It seems they possess the entire route.
They look for prey to feed on their bereft paunch and a perch where they could dwell.
The night is unduly tardy and the mist is so frigid.
Birds sing for triumph as the eldest catch a glimpse of prey.
He unfurls his wings and begins to dance to the rhythm.
Assuring that prey can discern the quietude of his soul.
The scents of strawberries bestrew and its derivative can pacify the nodding muscles.
The sparrow crops up and sings the saga of his dream,
grasping the rips of emotions of each episode confide.
The sparrows were relinquished and halted.
With no laurel like an owl, they were snared in a cage.
A twilight on their life's voyage.
They craved to be hauled from this cage that grabs their innocence.
Fate fetches them to this anguished life which compels them to live with it.
Every day their aspirations are ringing,
before finally sealing their wings they can experience— flying in an affable harbor, living a
decent life, eluding the shadows of yesterday, to be completely free!

FICTION



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1978 Bus Incident

By William Gottlieb

This is a story about two New York City bus drivers dealing with a racist passenger. It is a work of fiction but reflects the author's experience as an NYC bus driver in the 1970s & 1980s

The white bus driver stands under the streetlamp at 126th Street and 2nd Avenue. The tenements all around are empty. This is a quiet place in Manhattan. Night hasn't lowered the temperature. The air smells like motor oil from the garage set back from the street where three long doors are up. Inside, buses waiting to be repaired face the street while from above come sounds of talking and the click of billiard balls through the crew room window. The sound of rattling metal down the block, coming closer, then the squeal of air brakes. A bus pulls up to the curb, with the speed and racket of the run just completed clinging to it. The driver from the corner takes over the driver's seat, for the start of a new run downtown.

Number 3368 is an old GM, began its work in the 50's and still going 20 years later. The windows are stuck open, but its summer and there's no AC. There is a thick nauseating smell of insecticide inside the bus, a sticky smell that finds its way into cracks in the seats and the peeled linoleum floor and probably into the ventilation system and a good thing too because that's where the roaches live. Running down the route on Second Avenue in East Harlem, the bus shakes all over - the entire body feels like it's come loose from the frame and slams over bumps in the road.

The driver has one passenger - a fellow driver from the garage, finished with his shift, riding downtown. The one in the driver's seat is in his 20's. Hair untrimmed, uniform shirt wrinkled, sleeves rolled up, his collar button undone, his tie loosened. Passenger Luis is Hispanic, 40 years old. Luis's shirt is buttoned at the cuff and collar and pressed, with his tie in perfect order. The drivers know each other but neither speaks. At this moment, the entire compass of their lives is subsumed in their jobs. Thoughts, feelings, behaviors track within a tick of baseline.

There shouldn't be any passengers for another 20 blocks because this whole part of East Harlem has been burned out. Along Second Avenue and down the side streets, empty buildings, windows smashed in, storefronts missing the whole front wall, litter in the streets and not a soul around. A trickle of water comes out of a fire hydrant missing its cap and cover.

But a man, in his 60's, white, hair askew, unshaven, is standing at the bus stop at 118th Street, standing right at the pole, looking out into the street. He is wearing a sports jacket, but one so filthy that he might have been wearing it when he slept on the street or in a basement last night. He exudes a faint smell of urine and feces. There's a bruise on his forehead. The bus driver pulls over and he gets on. He puts a token in the box.

A red light. Another couple of blocks. Another red light. The man starts to talk.

"Nobody can throw me off," he says, talking out into space. "You can't even touch me. I'm a customer." To the bus driver: "You're not allowed to leave your seat."

Then to Luis, whom the man identifies as Puerto Rican: "your people is what dragged the City down." Out into space again: "that's what they come here for the money and the City gives them a room. Worthless. They live in the Projects. The Projects smell like a shit hole."

A pause. Just the sound of the rattling bus, the smell of insecticide and fluorescent light. The man pipes up again. "They're filthy. You can smell them. You'd rather have cancer than Puerto Ricans." Since the man got on, no one else has boarded the bus.

At 111th Street, Luis, who has been sitting opposite the man, gets up and grabs him by the front of his shirt collar, pulls him up out of the seat and punches him in the face, then delivers a punch to the man's stomach that doubles him over. The man's face is bloody. The bus driver pulls over to the curb and opens the doors. Luis drags the man to the back door, down the three exit steps and throws him out the door half onto the sidewalk half into the gutter. The driver closes the doors and pulls away.

A couple of blocks further on, the driver looks over at Luis and smiles. Luis has taken out a cloth handkerchief and is wiping blood off his hands.



Martyr's Blood

By Jherwin P Hermosa

Rico and Alexa love each other dearly but will a Machiavellian adversary destroy their love?

Clang! Clang! Clang!

A loud sound of the bell disturbs the tranquility of the surroundings. It is already five in the morning. Almost everybody is starting to turn on their dormitory lights, some are fixing their beds while others are busy washing up for, they have to attend the daily Mass and Morning Prayer in their seminary chapel.

"Aaaaaaahh!" Rico yawns while fixing his bed. He is in a hurry for he is the assigned reader in the Mass. Rico Fontanilla is a second-year theology student at St. James Seminary. As a man, he can be characterized as good-looking, one who stands six foot one with a porcelain complexion, intelligent but impulsive and yet mysterious looking because of his gloomy, deep-set eyes.

"Rico, hurry up!" called Leandro, a batchmate and friend. "Father Sebastian is already in the chapel and the mass is about to begin in five minutes."

After the mass, they prepare themselves for school at San Benito Schools of Theology in Quezon City. Their theology department is located in the University of St. James, a Catholic University run by the Order of St. James, instituted during the Spanish epoch.

"I will not go home with you after the class," Rico whispered. "I need to do some research for my report in Christology."

"Ok! But are you sure you do not want me to go with you?" Leandro replied. "Besides, I am free now."

"I appreciate your concern," Rico quipped, "but I can do it on my own."

Rico seems uneasy like a thief observing his possible victim. He brings out his mobile phone and ostensibly tries to call somebody who seems to be out of reach. He looks irritated and bored. After an hour of waiting, a beautiful woman enters the cafeteria and waves her hand. She carries a bag, which appears to be full of books and teaching material.

Rico immediately recognizes Alexa and walks toward her.

"Why you are so late?" Rico asks. "It is almost six in the evening."

"I am sorry! We had an emergency meeting this afternoon," Alexa replied. "I could not inform you since I left my mobile phone at home."

They search for an unnoticeable yet comfortable corner in the cafeteria. Alexa asks Rico why he did not go back to the seminary instead of waiting for her. It is late and Rico needs to be at the seminary before seven in the evening. Nevertheless, Rico answers that he cannot go home without seeing her on their special day.

"Happy anniversary Alexa," Rico says, handing her a little box in a pink wrapper. She unwraps the gift and finds a beautiful necklace.

"Thank you for always making me feel so special," Alexa says, her smile like the crescent moon in the dark sky. Rico holds Alexa's hands and gazes at her face, as though promising her that he would never leave her, no matter what happens.

It is nine o'clock in the evening when Rico returns to the seminary. He carefully climbs the stairs to the seventeenth-century seminary.

"Where did you go my son?" asks Father Sebastian. He is the Prior and Master of the seminary. He is a man of God who is gentle with his words and is respectful of others. He has a deep heart for the poor, and his wisdom is seen in his words and deeds. However, he always shows favor to Rico, which makes his colleagues tag him as partial.

"I am sorry Father. I need extra hours to finish my research."

"Did you meet her again?" Father Sebastian asks.

Rico remains silent.

"Do not worry, my son," the priest adds. "I understand you but try to conquer that feeling of yours if you want to be friar of this community."

Father Sebastian is like Rico's foster father. He had discovered baby Rico in a garbage can at the seminary, when he had been newly assigned as a member of the formation team. Out of compassion, he had taken the boy in and after seeking and being given permission had adopted the boy. Because of Father Sebastian's upbringing, Rico had also decided to become a priest like him.

"Is this the behavior of a second-year theology student, a religious man in training to be a priest soon?" Father Saturnino cries out in a colossal voice. Father Saturnino is the superior general of the entire congregation; He is a man of rigidity and hot temperament. For some reason, he hates Rico. He had been the only one who had opposed Rico's adoption with malevolent hostility.

"If you think that I cannot send you out because of Father Sebastian, you are wrong," Father Saturnino warned. "I can easily throw you out of this seminary."

After a month, Father Saturnino calls for a council meeting together with Father Sebastian to discuss matters concerning the congregation and the problems of some seminarians.

"Father Sebastian, do not take this personally," Father Saturnino starts. "The council and I have decided it for the good of the congregation and Rico also..." He reads the written statement signed by the council members and Father Saturnino himself. It is a letter of the expulsion of Rico Fontanilla as a temporary professed brother of their congregation for committing the indecent act of unfaithfulness to his temporary vow of chastity which would mar the long-established dignity and reputation of the entire congregation. Father Sebastian vociferously contests this proclamation made by the council and Father Saturnino, stating that they did not have any concrete evidence to prove their allegation and it is unjust for Rico. According to him, Rico is trying his best to be a good seminarian. Instead of sending him out, they must try to help him achieve his dreams and not be the judge of his weaknesses. Father Saturnino angrily warns Father Sebastian that he would be implicated for disobedience if he continues to contest their decision.

After the meeting, Father Sebastian calls Rico to his office.

Knock! Knock!

"Enter my son," says Father Sebastian.

"Did I do something wrong, father?" Rico asks.

"No, my son," the priest replies. "It is just a misunderstanding."

"Is there any problem, Father?" Rico asks again.

"Father Saturnino and the council informed me that you will be temporarily sent out from the seminary," the priest sadly explains.

Upon hearing this, Rico turns very pale, his body breaking out in cold sweat.

"Do not worry, my son," the priest reassures Rico. "I will fix it. I will try to convince them to reconsider my request of rolling back the decision."

Rico remains speechless and perplexed. He runs out of the office and goes to the chapter room where Father Saturnino usually drinks his coffee.

"Has Father Sebastian told you that you are no longer a part of this institution?" Father Saturnino asks with a snicker.

"Why do you hate me so much?" Rico asks. "Why do you want to destroy my vocation, my dreams, my family and my life in the congregation?"

Father Saturnino shrugs his shoulders indifferently, malevolently pointing out that Rico was a bastard, who had been abandoned as a child and deserved to be abandoned by the congregation. "You should be abandoned forever," he says, with a look of evil gloating on his flaccid face.

Upon hearing these words, Rico grabs a knife on the table, his face filled with anger and his voice shivering.

"I will kill you!"

Rico attacks Father Saturnino with fury. Luckily for Father Saturnino, Father Sebastian had decided to follow Rico and reassure him about his future, so he is able to intervene and stop Rico from committing a sin that his anger had pushed him into.

"Please, my son, do not stain your hands with the blood of the servant of God," Father Sebastian says, holding the trembling hands of Rico in a tight, reassuring grip.

Rico throws the knife distractedly and stares at Father Saturnino with fire in his eyes.

"You will pay for destroying my life," Rico warns.

Rico immediately packs all his belongings and leaves the seminary. Father Sebastian tries to persuade him not to leave but it is as though he has become deaf to all pleas. The next morning, Rico's story spreads like wildfire among the entire congregation.

"From now on, you will not allow your daughter, Alexa, to meet Rico," Father Saturnino declares to Olivia, Alexa's mother and Father Saturnino's cook.

"Is there any problem with Rico?" asks a bewildered Olivia. "I think he is a good man."

"He is a killer. Last night he tried to end my life, but my life was spared by the Grace of God."

Father Saturnino warns Alexa also against Rico asking her not to meet Rico as he is a bad influence.

The inhabitants of the seminary eventually forget the incident and go back to their life and its chores. Neither Father Sebastian nor Alexa seem to know where he is. One afternoon, almost a month after this incident, Leandro goes to Father Saturnino's room to remind him that he has a mass in the parish. He notices that the door is ajar. But as he pushes the door open, his eyes are met with a horrific sight. He is shocked to see Father Saturnino's body lying on the floor, covered in blood.

"Help! Somebody, help me!" Leandro screams. The fathers and some of the seminarians rush to the room on hearing his cry for help. They are all shocked to see the blood splattered body of Father Saturnino. Father Carlo, a nurse by

profession, immediately checks his vital signs. With a deep sigh, he whispers: "He is dead." Someone calls the police and soon the seminary is filled with police officers investigating the brutal crime that happened in the place of God.

"Do you know any person who has hidden rage against Father Saturnino?" asks the police officer.

"I do not know," Father Sebastian replies. "He is a very rigid and hot-tempered man but I do not know anyone who is against him."

"Maybe it is Rico!" one of the seminarians exclaims.

Father Sebastian is reduced to silence when he hears Rico's name. Later, the investigators ask him about Rico and the incident the previous month. But father Sebastian has nothing to say.

Upon learning of Father Saturnino's death, Rico returns to attend the wake of the slain priest. Although he knows he is the primary suspect and might be arrested, he feels it his duty to pay respect to his former superior general and to clear his name.

"Rico is here, arrest him!" one of the priests exclaims hysterically.

With no other clue or suspect, the police officers seize Rico. They check to see if he is armed. "Stop doing that," Rico says, "I am not a criminal. I am only here to pay my last respects to Father Saturnino and clear my name of all these allegations."

"Father, you know that I haven't committed this heinous crime, right?" pleads Rico.

"I know, my son," the priest assures him. "I will do my best to clear your name. Just trust in God."

After some long-winded questioning, the investigators conclude that Rico is the only one who has a clear-cut motive to kill the priest. So, they take him into their custody. Some of the investigators continue their investigations at the crime scene, searching for evidence to build a foolproof case against Rico. One of them find a broken necklace belonging to a woman. After a series of laboratory and fingerprinting tests, they find three fingerprints on the necklace-of Rico, Father Saturnino, and an unidentified person. The latter, the investigators are sure will lead them to the murderer.

That evening, a tired and forlorn Olivia returns home.

"Alexa, I am home. Have you prepared our dinner?"

There is only silence.

Olivia looks for Alexa but does not find her. She assumes that her daughter is in her room.

Knock! knock!

"Are you there, darling?"

Nobody answers her. Worried, she gets a duplicate key to open the door. When she finally unlocks the door and looks in, she falls back with a shriek of horror and pain. Alexa, her only daughter, the darling of her life is hanging from the ceiling.

"Alexa!" she screams in a pained voice, even as she rushes in to check if her child is alive.

"Why did you take your life my darling Alexa?" cries Olivia. Even in the midst of her bewilderment and shock, she notices a letter propped up against the pillows on Alexa's bed. With trembling hands she unfolds the letter.

Dearest Mother,

Mother, I am thankful to you for raising me as a good woman even though you had to do it single-handedly. I love you Mama that is why I had to do this. When I was fifteen years old, remember when you were in the hospital for almost a month because of your kidney problem? We did not have anything to pay for your hospital bills and to support your medications. I went to Father Saturnino and asked him if he could lend us some money and I promised him that I would do anything for him. Do you know what that evil man did? He gave me the money in exchange for my virginity. I accepted his vile suggestion because that was the only way I could have saved you. He even promised to provide us a house, help me to study, and continue supporting you in your medical needs if I continued being the secret woman of his life.

When I learnt that Rico, my only love, was kicked-out of the seminary because of Father Saturnino's wrath, I tried to beg him to re-admit him to the seminary. However, he did not listen to my pleas and instead warned me that he would harm us and destroy our lives if he found me seeing Rico. That was the time I decided to end his wickedness. I came to him the other day to fulfill my plan. I planned seduce him because I knew that he was weak in the flesh. When I came to his room, I was surprised to see his bloodied and lifeless body lying on the floor. I tried to check if he was still alive. I noticed that

Please tell Rico how much I loved him. I hope that he can fulfill his dreams and be a good and holy priest someday. Tell him that I wanted to be with him for the rest of my life, but destiny has other plans. I know that you are safe, mama, with Rico and Father Sebastian. I am now leaving, mama, but my love will always be with you. You made so many sacrifices for me, now it is my turn. I am finally free of the demands of an evil man!

~ Love Alexa

Father Sebastian is alone in the seminary chapel.

"Lord, make us strong against all these sufferings; I never thought that things will end in this manner. I could no longer bear his wickedness, especially to Alex. I only want Rico to live a fulfilled and meaningful life. I do not want anyone to take this one away from him for he has nothing but this. I decided to put an end to all of this. I will face the consequences of my actions, so help me God."

Amen.



First Voyage to Centauri

By Tom Ball

The author's imagination draws a picture of the first human voyage to outer space.

I, John R., said to Bernice T., "This 1-year voyage to Centauri system is marred by cabin fever. We've already had four murders out of a crew of 90." The people we lost were all computer engineers and of course we have cloned them as adults, but they need to take educational apps to bring them up to speed. Bernice said, "But our on-board hologram dream World gave many the illusion of vast spaces and is populated by clever holograms. And in addition, many of the crew are in love with one another and time passed quickly for them."

I said, "But when we finally arrive on Centauri, we will have the opposite problem. People will live in wide open spaces and build spacious domes but of course most will just be isolated couples. There are two Earth-like planets and that's a lot of real estate."

And on the ship, we were all sick of watching movies and many of us were drug addicts and alcoholics and were oblivious. Our 4 doctors were all addicts and we wondered if the many addicts would be able to live effectively on the new Worlds.

And the second ship to Centauri has already launched and are apparently having cabin fever too but hopefully they will send many more ships. And of course, we will produce children en masse in the lab and incubators and have large sperm and egg banks once we arrive. So, it will be a youthful population. But here on the ship, I felt old and like I'd seen it all. I had eternal youth but was 66 and hoped the pioneering challenges of our new Star System would invigorate me, but I just felt tired. And I had resisted the temptation of hologram Worlds until now, but now I tried it. I found the holos were mostly artistic and played music and did art and were skilled in elocution of all new stories. They were able to make up brilliant stories. Like one who told the story of a colony in Space of heroes who attracted down and out geniuses and paid for their space fare to come to the colony and inspire them to do art and science. Earth didn't give many of its geniuses a chance and some were very sensitive and easily hurt and even despised. We need to use such people in this era in which everything depended on intelligence.

Another hologram writer wrote about cerebral sex between holograms and humans and how with the right drugs it could be true ecstasy for the humans. And used MRT to show viewers exactly how good it felt.

Of course, these great holos were copied elsewhere, but were accepted almost universally as classics. And our hologram Worlds aboard our voyage featured the best. Another great hologram was one who imagined what life would be like on Centuari. She foresaw rapid development that was tainted by perversity in isolation. Many colonists were to be all alone and had 3-D sex with holograms on the Web and used porn on the Web to turn them on.

Another universally acclaimed great hologram was one who said, "Holosex mostly had no strings attached and no psycho love. Hololove was pure sex with witty conversation of course. And she said everyone should love holograms regularly, it was good for one's soul. And people could try becoming hologram souls and enjoy imaginative behavior." And she said, "It was a World of sex and imagination." And she said, "Holograms are the best artists, as they are pure intellect and not held back by a body."

And another famous hologram we had here said, "Hololove is refreshingly intellectual and good ideas and conversation lead to ecstatic pleasures. Ideas equal pleasure with holograms." And she said, "We can be peoples' muses."

I listened to these holograms and could see why people liked them. But I had a human regular lover who was totally against hololove; she figured I had cheated on her by sampling some famous holos to love. I told her, "I was just curious, but I am back here now, and I hope we can give you fertility drugs to produce more eggs and we will have thousands of children all born as adults with memories of the two of us." She said, "It is the way of the World and who am I to disagree with it?" So, we went over names for our children and how we would tweak them in the lab to be cleverer and more astute. We even dreamed of a city which would be populated by our offspring only. They would breed in the lab, and would all be on good terms with one another, blood is thicker than water.

And I was one of only two lawyers on the voyage, my love was the other. And we had some amazing debates about new laws for our new colonies. Like she said, "We should legalize MRT between willing people and they could make love to one another's intelligence. And we should legalize all drugs but try and develop new drugs which stimulated the imagination." And I told her, "The essence of humans is imagination, homo imaginari, is the future. We will build imaginative cities and new drugs will give pleasure for imaginative thoughts!" And she said, "But some will use their imaginations to do cruel things." I said, "MRT will identify those who have cruel tendencies, and they will be sent to rehab where they will be given brain surgery to change their minds." She said, "But in some Space colonies people will be vetted but will change for the worse as time goes by!" I replied, "All we can do is try to support the good in humanity." She told me, "It is up to the two of us to codify the best laws. And we two will form the Supreme Court for all Centauri." I said, "Jail is pointless. Offenders must have their minds altered." She said, "Yes that would be more efficient and cost-effective and would bring peace to our new Worlds." And I said, "Though we will be the court, everyone in the Centauri System will be a lawmaker/ politician. It will be a human first. Everyone will vote on every issue. But if there is a crime committed it will come before our court and as time passes, we will expand the court to new judges. Humans may be more imaginative in our System, but people never get tired of screwing one another over and are willing to break the laws to have their own way. Even if they risk being subjected to brain surgery." She replied, "But surely the idea of neurosurgery will be enough to dissuade most from crime or detestable behavior!" I said, "It will be an enlightened society, but new types of crime will no doubt emerge. Like thought crimes, which are just crimes of thinking about crime." She said, "Thought crimes is a thorny issue. We are all imaginative on board this ship and occasionally people will imagine thinking of a crime but will have no intention of doing it. We don't want to interfere with our colonists' free thought!" I answered her, "Yes, I agree, but the issue will no doubt be broached. And to interfere with other colonists' freedom in these vast Spaces, will be tricky according to our proposed laws. Of course, everyone would have an abundance of real estate and one would have to get permission to come to another's land. And no doubt some will gamble away their real estate holdings and be destitute. And future voyages here would need to buy land from the original settlers. Some would probably sell all of their land and invest it in cities or new technologies."

Berenice said, "But some on Earth were allowed to buy small plots of land inside the domed cities so they could eventually build a home." And I asked her, "What will you do with all your land?" She said, "I would let hardy, wild new plants on the land and let a forest grow and with it, Earth animals. It will be giant park." I told her, "I am planning to use

my multi-zillionaire status to build, 'Zillionaires' city,' There are 10,000 zillionaires in Earth's Solar System, and I will encourage them to come there and enjoy my new drugs and luxuries and sample the pioneering lovers there. And I will employ 1000s of workers, as the city develops. Many zillionaires will no doubt send clones of themselves."

Berenice said, "But the space fare is only \$10 million, so many can afford to come to Centauri. And us pioneers will live in air cars until the domes can be built with robot builders. The robot builders will be able to copy themselves quite quickly and soon we will have a number of virtually empty cities. We will offer free small apartments in these cities to make the colonies affordable to many."

And I said, "Most colonists will be multi-talented. Most will be computer engineers and bio engineers and entrepreneurs, writers and sex workers, all in one." She said, "Yes everyone on the voyage is skilled at loving. And I feel I am a talented writer. And as you know I have written, 'Pioneers in Centauri,' a documentary about the multi-talented individuals on board our ship and their plans once they arrived in the new System. Everyone had their own plan. In particular was J.R. who wanted to build a World of love on one of the temperate Moons. Here would be a romantic destination. Lovers would have their own domed hotel all to themselves. And would have a beautiful view. Of course, it would be expensive at \$7 billion for a week including space fare here and back to Earth."

Another strong vision was Phil C.'s plan to sculpt the best 20,000 people of all time, built with the help of robot builders. One could wander in the forest of statues and when one was in front of one of the statues, there would be an audio recording of that person's life. Many of the people to be sculpted were still alive elsewhere. It would be a museum of statues all out in the open air.

And another vision was Jeff C.'s, to build 10,000 air cars with which to explore this Star System. And Gord L. planned to build human giants with very large brains, who were capable of gigantic love. And Ben H. who planned to develop all new animals for the wildernesses of Centauri Worlds. And so on.

Many colonists wanted to build things first and then sit back and enjoy these Worlds they'd created. We were building intellectual pleasure Worlds above all. Some wanted to build Worlds of anarchy, others communism but most wanted to try and develop new philosophies based on the new lands and the people. Like to be greedy for intellectual pleasures, such as intellectual sex, which was kind of new. Or to be a one person show as an entertainer or to always play some new role. And some wanted panarchy or technocracies or oligarchies or even Kings and Queens.

It seemed like there would be a lot of variety in the Centauri Star System.

NON FICTION



Essay

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Howdah Dalliance

By Chitra Singh

The dense jungles of Ramnagar were not only home to tigers, elephants and bears but also a blissful playground for the author.

The cool breeze caressed my body and heightened my senses as I soaked in the balmy environment around me. The awning of the dense trees formed a green canopy over me cutting out the harsh sunlight, nay even the blue sky, and enveloped me in its encapsulating benevolence. The trees were laden with thick foliage and some had even broken out in flowers. Monkeys swung in the branches and the forest resounded with bird song. I was stretched out on a howdah, on elephant back, far away in the dense forests of Ramnagar in the Kumaon foothills. The rhythm of the rocking howdah made me somewhat somnambulant and lethargic and I wallowed in it and willed this state to go on and on. I was at one with nature and the animal world, and could not think of a better state of mind to be in. Ramkali, the elephant's ears flapped from time to time chasing off the flies and her tail swished at the mosquitoes which were ever prevalent in these overgrown environs. Her firm foothold suddenly stumbled in the undulating terrain and Usman Ali, the Mahawat, rattled off a stream of expletives, chiding her on her misdemeanour. Nonchalantly Ramkali steadied herself, and adjusting her gait to the uneven terrain ambled on, ignoring Mahawat Usman Ali's admonition.

The decade was the early sixties, and I was perched on the back of one of the official elephants allotted to a forest division, of which my father was in charge. Ramnagar was one of the most sought after divisions of north India, not only because of its rich forest wealth of Sal and Teak trees, but because its luxuriant and dense jungles were home to some of the biggest game in the country. The forests were alive with wild elephants, tigers, leopards, and bears. In those days hunting or 'shikar' was permitted. Some of the choicest areas, home to these carnivores, were divided into shooting

blocks. At fixed periods in the year, fifteen-day permits were issued by the department, which allowed the holder to shoot two tigers in that time frame. Unbelievable! Apart from their duty of taking the officers into the interior of the forest, where vehicles were unable to traverse, the elephants, being trained shikari elephants, were rented out to permit holders to facilitate the hunt.

Thus Ramnagar division had two trained elephants called Ramkali and Bijli. Ramkali was docile, rotund and restful. Bijli, as she was aptly named, was a tall, beautiful animal, with quicksilver reflexes, and a temperament to match. Despite her size she was as nimble as a deer, but responded only to a firm hand, which the Mahawat Latafat amply provided and was more than a match for her. One command from him and she became as amiable as a cat sunning herself in a spot of sunshine. Both elephants were trained to perfection. While silently moving in the jungle, clearing a path for herself and flapping her large ears, both Ramkali and Bijli were happy to mingle with the deer or other ordinary creatures in the vicinity. They were oblivious to the chatter of the monkeys in the overhead trees. But if she (Ramkali or Bijli) sensed the presence of any feline creature nearby, a shiver would run through her body, the hair on her back would stand on edge and her laboured breathing would quieten. With a deep breath which whooshed through her trunk, she would raise it and wave it in the direction of the dangerous intruder. It was a signal for the riders to become deathly silent, and strain their eyes and ears for a viewing. If the sighting occurred and the hunter was prepared and had the courage, he could take a shot from elephant back. The elephant stood rock still so that the hunter could frame his shot and take unerring aim.

We had opportunity to enjoy an elephant ride whenever father decided to inspect any remote part of the forest. One of the two elephants along with mahawat and 'chara cutter' were dispatched earlier to await our arrival at the designated Dak bungalow. The Dak bungalows were another source of great joy and appeal. There is no denying that the British did their homework, and sited these in the choicest locales. They were usually perched on spots that had eye catching views, and had a mandatory gurgling perennial stream nearby; the bungalows had no pipe system or running water, and the streams were the source of water supply. The lure of the luxuriant forests surrounding these bungalows was unrivalled. They were real estate gems in the lap of nature, and with no outside stimuli and were tailor-made for total nirvana. One could venture forth for long walks on unchartered trails, sit out on the verandah and soak in the sounds of silence all around. One could focus on a solitary bird circulating in an unblemished sky or simply get lost within the pages of a book salvaged from the mandatory small bookshelf on the precincts. For me it was always a pleasure to immerse myself in some interesting read, garnered from these shelves. We waited for the morning, when father would venture forth for his inspection to some remote spot of the forest. This was the opportunity we were waiting for to tag along, just to enjoy the elephant ride. We were permitted this indulgence because these occasions were few and far between, that is, only during our school holidays, when we were able to accompany him.

Clambering on to the howdah was an exercise in itself. Ramkali or Bijli would present themselves in front of the bungalow and wait patiently for us to emerge. They were all spruced up for the outing. The 'chara-cutter' had bathed and fed them. The howdah, a cradle like furniture with broad rim and four small pillars at the extremes for the riders to hold onto, was tied firmly on their backs. The base of the howdah is fitted with thick cushioning so that the riders can sit in comfort. Four persons can conveniently be accommodated in a howdah. A foot board attached by rope is fixed to the howdah where the riders can rest their feet. The elephant's forehead would glisten dark with the generous dollop of 'ghee' which was rubbed into their foreheads to keep them hydrated. The mahawat, usually a small and nimble personality, outfitted in his khaki uniform and red turban, was perched bowleggedly at the junction of the neck and torso. He wielded a sharp hook like iron tool or 'ankush', about two feet long to goad the elephant if the necessity arose. Though small in stature, he established his supremacy by his ringing commands and let the pachyderm know he was master. Thus flapping their ears and swishing their tails to chase off the flies the elephants were ready for any eventuality. As soon as we approached the animal, the mahawat's ringing command would make the elephant go down on his knees and wait docilely for us. The 'chara-cutter' would hold up the tail in a u formation. We would then put one foot on his legs, the next on his tail, and holding on to the howdah pillar expertly clamber up onto the seat. Comfortably settled we set off for the morning excursion and on reaching his designated place of work, father would alight for his inspection. We knew this would last a couple of hours easily, and we looked forward to having the elephant all to ourselves.

Thus passed some of the most interesting and endearing moments of our lives. We made sorties to all kinds of terrain, sometimes hilly tracts, sometimes level surfaces or grass lands. There were inclines where we held onto our perch on the howdah precariously. We slogged through streams, or stretched out on the howdah in a supine position and even turned a few pages of a book if the land was level. The forests were dense overhead, bathing us in their shade, and the tract around was overrun by the 'peelu' shrubs, a dense under growth in the forest. These were a favourite haunt with tigers who loved to slumber in their shade on a satiated stomach. Our eyes feasted on the sight of certain trees which had broken out in flower, while the forest was alive with the twitter of birds or the chattering of monkeys and we revelled in the bird song. Often we followed the bark of a 'kakar' or barking deer, and chanced on herds of Sambhar, cheetal and Kakars, which abounded in these abundant forests. Our senses were heightened to any stimuli, our eyes and ears strained to take in every nuance of the forest. If it wasn't big game country, and silence was not a prerequisite, the mahawats regaled us with their anecdotes, and adventures with shooting parties. Latafat was particularly garrulous, and never missed the opportunity of repeating his tale of how he had once rescued a British couple from inevitable disaster. While out on a hunt their machan, a perch on a tree to facilitate the shooting, inadvertently got tied a little lower than the specified height. As luck would have it, that particular tiger was exceptionally ferocious. His leaps were so animated that he almost reached the couple on the machan, and had not Latafat come rushing on his elephant at the eleventh hour, his twelve bore blazing and managing to scare the tiger away, they would certainly have ended up as cat bait. Our goggle eyed rapt response to his anecdotes was sufficient fuel for the fire, and his repertoire was vast indeed. But once under his stewardship we almost came face to face with the big cat.

It was a summer evening and we had been permitted a dalliance in the forest, because we had been confined to the bungalow all day. Father had had a particularly gruelling day and shied from accompanying us. Excitedly my brother, my sister and I set off with Latafat and Bijli. Dusk was sometime away; the forest was cool and inviting; and always on the lookout for adventure we sped away. On a whim we decided to take the trail which led down to the river bed. It was an overgrown track which could be quite treacherous but the possibility of big game sighting was high, and thus was a preferred option. We sat patiently, savouring the forest, taking in the vistas with heightened sensibilities. Our eyes darting here and there, and our ears fine-tuned to any unusual sound, we were poised for any impending thrill. Bijli ambled on steadily and we had adjusted to her gait, and were enjoying the ride, when suddenly we felt a quiver run down her spine and the hair on her back stood rigid. Her breath came out in a loud whoosh and the mahawat signalled us with a finger on his lips. With his crop he signalled to the ground, and there before our eyes were the fresh pug marks of a tiger, which had passed barely minutes before us. We stared in awe at the mint fresh pug marks, and darted frantic looks in the shrubbery. Alas we could not spot the feline. Without letting us know Latafat had wheeled Bijli around, and started the journey back. When we had covered a certain distance he explained to us that without any firearms, he could not risk taking us closer to the danger. In childish frustration and deeply disappointed, we journeyed back to the bungalow. but the sheer electric thrill of those suspended moments was imprinted on our mind.

We particularly looked forward to night time, when the elephants were fed in front of us. Apart from the fodder that they scavenged from the forest in the day time, an official ration was sanctioned to them. This took the form of eight giant sized wheat chapattis which the 'chara-cutter' made over a wood fire. Accompanying this was at least five kilograms of jaggery. If it was wintertime there was also a bundle of sugarcane. The warm chapattis were wrapped in a cloth bundle to keep them warm and the mahawat brought Ramkali or Bijli to the front of the bungalow where we had assembled for the ritual. The mahawat placed the warm bundle of chapattis onto the elephant's trunk which she then expertly swung down and placed on the ground in front of her. The mahawat then proceeded to take each chapatti out, fold it in two, and pop it into her mouth. She devoured these with loud munching and crunching sounds, thoroughly doing justice to her meal. He even persuaded us to take turns to feed the elephant and with a degree of trepidation we managed to ape him. The jaggery rounded off the meal and made a wonderful dessert. Satiated, the pachyderm would raise her trunk in a smart salute and with a loud trumpet sashay off to her night shelter.

The ritual over we too retired to a hot meal and later snuggled into our beds, wonderfully exhausted but totally content with the pleasures of the jungle. We let the night sounds carry us into the realm of deep slumber and dreams.



The pitfalls of Accumulation

By Srinivas S

Human memory probably best illustrates the dangers of accumulation, says the author on a philosophical note.

When one is a child, one collects, among other things, soft toys and battery-operated miniatures of aeroplanes and cars. When one grows into adolescence, one collects clothes, posters or newspaper clippings – usually of one’s favourite sports or film celebrities, certificates or prizes for achievements, and photographs from meetings and partings.

When one becomes an adult, one starts accumulating, based on one’s financial clout, jewels, cars (actual-sized ones that run on the road), houses, bills from fine-dining restaurants and ticket stubs from journeys to exotic destinations among other things. In the autumn of one’s life, while waiting for death’s embrace, one spends one’s time fondly recalling all that one has accumulated as well as teaching others – grandchildren, mostly, if one has them – what and how to accumulate things in the first place.

There should be something, then, about accumulation that the human mind finds absorbing and the human heart finds appealing, even alluring. It is that same something that makes it seem normal in the course of human life. After all, if one is involved in accumulating things for almost all of one’s life, normalising it in the process, accumulation must be fuelled by a gravity (or gravities) that is hard to resist, let alone counteract. That gravity, it appears to me, is composed of two, probably co-dependent, forces: social context and identity formation. Social context often dictates what we buy or accumulate, for instance; the need for a particular identity supplies the why.

Suppose my neighbours have bought the latest Audi. I see them take it out for a spin and hear them – and others – say great things about it. A social value has thus been put on the car, impelling me to own something very like it. Assuming I can afford it, I then buy the car (or at least plan to) so that I too will be identified as one of those people who owns the gorgeous vehicle. Unfortunately, my happiness – if that is the right word – at being ‘one of those people’ will last only until I see the next great car hit the streets. And then the process fuelled by social context and the pursuit of a prestigious identity is likely to repeat itself.

Consider an alternative example, one which should be familiar to all writers: it has to do with acceptance of one's work. If my own experience is anything to go by, the wish to have one's writings accepted by a journal or a magazine is tied to the need to have them 'out there' in the world where, presumably, more readers will read them. The wish for acceptance, if not thought through carefully, becomes a kind of need with time. Also, before long, one starts to yearn to publish one's works in 'better places' so as to be considered a better writer by others - even if such a consideration sits most powerfully in one's own mind.

Despite the strong personal and social pulls behind it, however, accumulation appears to be a rather short-sighted and dangerous affair. It is short-sighted because most things which one hoards come with a shelf-life or a sell-by date. Even if they do not, the restive nature of the human mind, coupled with the rapid footfalls of change, makes most of our acquisitions obsolete after a while. It is dangerous because accumulation then becomes a self-serving habit, and like most such habits, can cause discontent in the long run, even if it is not outright deleterious.

Human memory probably best illustrates the dangers of accumulation. After all it is but a diorama of attachments to lived experiences. Indeed, some memories have their advantages, underpinned as they are by evolutionary imperatives. However, it is also memory that triggers severe - sometimes crippling - anxieties about the future based on events of the past, such as surviving a near-fatal accident, experiencing a landslide of academic or professional failures, or letting go of important people from one's life. It may be argued of course that there are also good memories, full of capacity to empower individuals, to make them wake up the next morning, as it were, no matter how hard life is. While that point may be conceded, it is also to be acknowledged that the same good memories are apt to leave individuals wallowing in nostalgia far too long, when life in essence is about moving forward.



A Farewell with a difference

By Rachna Singh

Life is not about holding on but letting go.

He was a spry old gentleman. Even at the ripe old age of 89, he was healthy and spritely. He loved life and life, in turn, held him with velvet gloves. He had not known a day of illness in life and hoped he would depart with a song on his lips and a spring to his step. But life and destiny turned traitor. One day he woke up with an unsteady gait. The diagnosis was kidney failure. The doctors decreed dialysis three times a week. 'What an unnatural way to live,' he thought and decided he'd rather die than live such a life. After all, he had lived a full life. His sons were well settled. A civil servant, a corporate honcho, a doctor and a financial consultant—his heart swelled with pride. Oh yes, he had done well by his sons. The cherry on the cake was that they loved him dearly. Life had blessed him indeed. But this was the end of the road for him.

For once, his sons refused to listen to him. They loved him and did not want to lose him. He gave into their loving persuasion and agreed to the dialysis. He hated it but bore it patiently knowing something would surely give way under this unnatural ministrations. That day came soon enough. One morning he felt the world flipping on its axis. Even as darkness enveloped him, he hoped it was the end.

But his loving sons rushed him to the hospital. The doctors diagnosed a blood clot in his brain and advised immediate surgery. He did not want a surgery. "Let me go," he beseeched. But his sons were adamant. How could they let their beloved father go without a struggle? The silken skeins of love wrapped around him binding him. He gave in.

Even as they wheeled him into the theatre, he bid a silent goodbye to his beloved family. The family waited outside praying for a miracle but alas their father did not regain consciousness after the surgery. The life support system kept him alive but comatose. They played the Gayatri Mantra he so loved, they talked to him and held his hand, hoping their love would bring him back to their world. Nothing seemed to work. He was lost to them.

Then came the day of reckoning. The hospital's ethic committee wanted to know if they should continue with the life support or let nature take its course. The family was in a quandary. The soul-searching was endless. Should they let their

precious father go or hold on? The man who had lived his life with energy and aplomb was gone. An empty shell remained in his stead. With heart-wrenching sadness, they realized he would have wanted this release. Painfully they bid farewell to the patriarch who had given them their identity in life. The life support was removed. Their father was no more. Even in death, he had taught them an important lesson of life—love is not about holding on but letting go.

REVIEWS

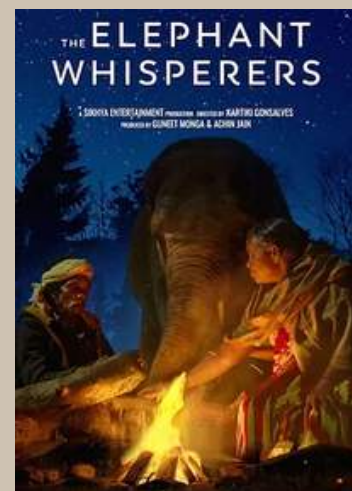


Butchered for Love

Review by Sonia Chauhan

Sonia Chauhan reviews 'Butchered for Love', a book by eminent journalist Jupinderjit Singh that narrates a harrowing crime against love.

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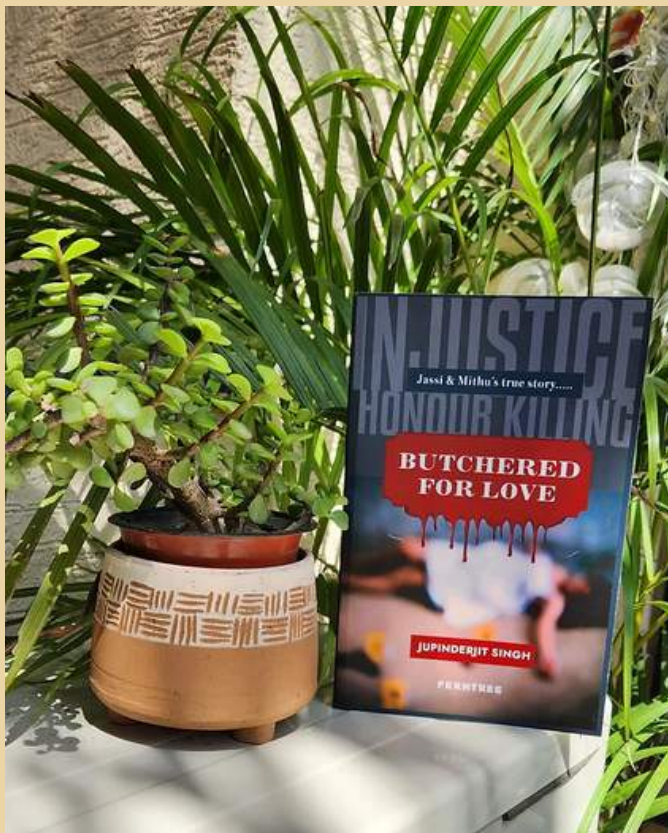


The Elephant Whisperers

Review by Ramandeep Mahal

Dr Ramandeep Mahal reviews 'The Elephant Whisperers', a documentary that captures the bond between Raghu, human caregivers.

[Read More](#)



Butchered for Love

A Book by Jupinderjit Singh

Sonia Chauhan reviews the book

Beyond True Crime: Butchered for Love

In the world of literature, a writer's prowess is gauged by the artistry of their articulation. But there is some raw power in saying it like it happens. Only a handful of writers grip the dagger of truth from its sharp end. Investigative journalist, Jupinderjit Singh, is one such author.

Butchered for Love is his fifth book, a memoir-style account of doomed real-life lovers Jaswinder Kaur and Sukhbinder Singh (Jassi and Mithu) who paid the ultimate price for the what's hailed as the only worthwhile task of sentient souls - choosing love.

Canadian born Jassi was riveted by Mithu on her visit to her native village Kaunke Kalan, near Jagrao. Mithu was a kabaddi player who rotated the Mugdar first thing every morning and then polished off two glasses of turmeric milk before breakfast. Attraction turned into love and soon, they were inseparable. But Jassi was the daughter of the landed, upstate family of the Badeshas that spread across continents. Mithu was a poor farmer's son. It's no surprise that the Badeshas were unhappy with their daughter's choice. They took Jassi back to Canada. Thus, began the battle of wills between Jassi and her mother and maternal uncle.

'Butchered For Love' is written from the perspective of multiple characters: Mithu, who rots in prison as I write this review from a cozy café; Mithu's mother who sits on a cot in her front yard and stares at the huge walls of the Badesha fortress as she awaits her son's return; and various police officials - Detective Swaran Singh who investigated the murderous attack, and the Superintendent of Police KD Kaur who travelled to Canada to arrest Jassi's murderers.

Singh's own voice is also in there. He's the one who has followed the case for two decades, visited and supported Mithu

to navigate through the maze of false cases that have been filed against him. Many of these cases continue till date. Singh narrates Jassi and Mithu's love with a special sensitivity. We sit in drawing rooms and wander across cloth markets watching Jassi and Mithu's world coincide and their families collide. In a chilling turn of events, Jassi's mother Malkiat Kaur and her brother Surjit Singh Badesha hire contract killers – eleven of them – to finish off the pair.

The brutality of their wounds is heinous. Singh's pen must have quaked as he listed them but he has persevered with remarkable stoicism and brought out the viciousness of the killing without any mincing of words. That is the prowess of an investigative journalist – to shake the reader out of their daily rigmarole and forge kinship with an innocent dead girl.

I look up from my laptop and watch people order their cappuccinos but inside my mind, police officials pull Jassi's dehumanized body out of a pond at village Sangowal.

Singh writes:

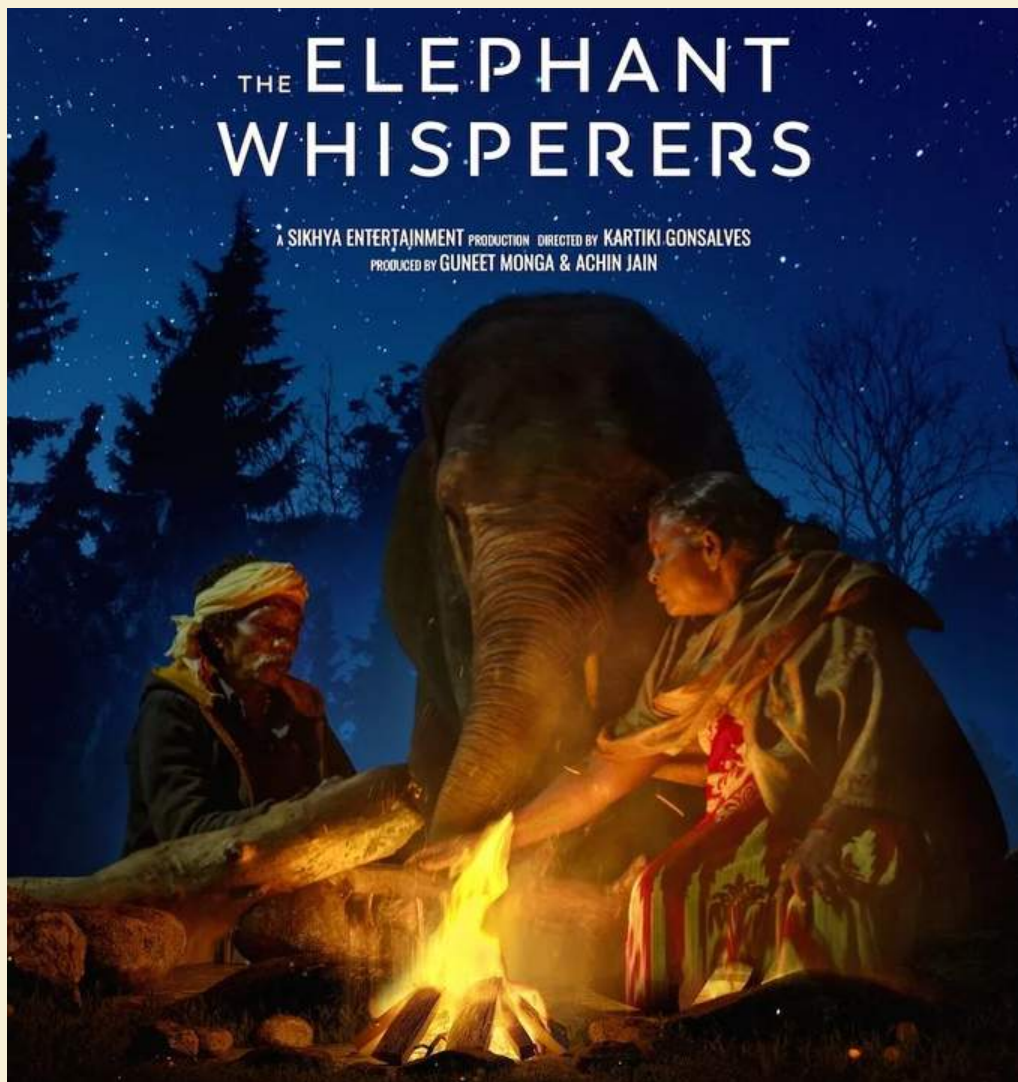
“There was hardly a kind of injury in the medical books that wasn't found on Mithu's body. Deep cuts, abrasions, lacerations, hematomas, broken bones, sprains, strains, and his skull split into two parts...”

“Even if you had the hardest heart in the World, you would tremble at the marks on Jassi's body.”

The love letters exchanged between Jassi and Mithu tug at and twist the reader's heart at the same time. Jassi writes with unabashed clarity. She is purely his and she dies chasing her dream. Now, he lives and fights for her memory and to bring her justice.

Jassi last words to her mother were, “I will never forgive you.”

My hope is that the judicial system doesn't, either.



For Every Animal Lover: Elephant Whisperers

By Dr. Ramandeep Mahal

When Raghu, a baby elephant steals your heart

Documentaries don't usually interest me, but this one was beautiful. I was completely mesmerized by this simply narrated story of a baby elephant who is brought up and nurtured by two humans. Let's not just be dog lovers, I decided after watching this forty-minute documentary directed by Kartiki Gonsalves. It won the best short documentary film at the 95th Oscar Awards. The recipients included director Kartiki Gonsalves and producer Guneet Monga.

The Elephant Whisperers makes you fall in love with the cute elephant Raghu and the indigenous couple Bomman and Bellie. Raghu, a baby elephant abandoned by his herd in the mudumalai National Park, has been entrusted to their care when he is just an infant. Bomman and Bellie, living ordinary, uneventful lives, suddenly find themselves parents of a baby elephant. The couple go to tremendous lengths to make sure the weak baby survives and matures into a healthy adolescent. The couple and the elephant bond strongly and share a close relationship.

In an interview, Kartiki, the director, revealed that the Mudumalai National Park was close to her home, and she was greatly touched by the story of a human couple who adopt a baby elephant and bring him up like their own precious child. The national park has been witness to innumerable stories about animals being killed or dying but this positive story

about a man and an animal working together, grabbed her attention and she decided to make a documentary on this subject. To create this documentary, Kartiki Gonsalves followed a human-elephant hybrid family who belonged to the Kattunayakan tribe for five years. She says, "When he was exactly three months old. I spent about a year and a half with him when he was a tiny baby before this became a documentary." Her crew also took pictures of other animals living in the reserve while making the documentary, including tigers, lions, and monkeys.

Bellie's story is moving as first she lost her husband to a leopard attack and then she lost her daughter for unknown reasons. So, caring for Raghu filled the void left by the loss of her loved ones. She is now training her granddaughter, who will serve as a prodigy, to take care of the elephants. She says, "I feel I am his mother. Everything about him is like a human, except that he cannot talk. Losing a child is devastating. Whenever I cried Raghu wiped my tears with his trunk". Taking care of Raghu is Bomman's first baby step towards carrying on the work of his grandfather and father. Bomman had been hurt by an adult tusker elephant before, so the Forest Department put him in charge of the younger elephants. This couple, who had seen tragedy and difficulties in life, bonded even while they cared for Raghu and finally get married. The documentary walks the reader through their growing attachment and their marriage which is a simple and sweet ceremony witnessed by other forest workers and Raghu. I believe that it's the mutual bond of love they share for the elephants that brought them together.

We also get to have a close look at how kind these cute giants are and the risks they face in the modern world. Modernization and changes in how people act in the area have made it much more dangerous for elephant groups and elephants that can't go back to their herd. The story then goes back in time to show how Raghu lost his parents when he got split from the elephant group. Later, we see the couple take care of Ammu, another elephant who was left alone by his parents. When Raghu's care is turned over to another guardian, the video ends on a sad note. The documentary also emphasizes the area's stunning natural surroundings, which is located in the Mudumalai National Park on the boundary of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka states in India. I was amazed how these indigenous people live in peace and harmony with the nature.

What makes The Elephant Whisperers different from other documentaries is that it wasn't just a narration of facts but also a heartwarming story about a bond between an animal and a person and a shining example of how we can continue to live together. One learns so much about how there are people working devotedly to conserve the forests that are being torn down by the Dons of modernization and how natives are doing their best to redress the wrongs done to animals due to this quick pace of modernization. It is hoped that the documentary will encourage other filmmakers to shed light on the countless unsung heroes who are quietly doing excellent work behind the scenes. You just cannot miss this documentary. I would rate this as 9 out of 10 definitely!

TALKING BOOKS

Talking Books

CONVERSE
CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH POETRY
by INDIANS
edited by
SUDEEP SEN

CELEBRATING 75 YEARS OF INDIA'S INDEPENDENCE

precise ... generous ... definite
rich ... diverse
comprehensive ... a treasure
fresh ... masterly ... brilliant

CONVERSE to celebrate the 75th anniversary of India's independence, *Converse* showcases the best of the vibrant, vibrant, rich and exciting living poets from India and from the Indian diaspora who write in English.

Within this definitive anthology, you will find long-established writers as well as younger writers in a large room without walls, where both individual and collective voices are equally eloquent and important. *Converse* traces hierarchies, making boundaries seamless and transparent, with the unifying factor being integrity of thought and language.

Generosity and multicultural perspectives allow the poets here to have an internal dialogue between themselves on one hand and, on the other hand, with the varied geographical and cultural spaces of their origin or influence. Bringing such a variety of poems together creates an inherent contextual and historical tension, one that ultimately celebrates humanity, imagination, artistry, intellect, and the written word — the result is an original mosaic of the vastly multicultural, human, and artistic terrain of India and the Indian diaspora.

Meant equally for serious and lay readers of poetry and contemporary literature, this collection of work shows language that is poetic, expansive, experimental, and intellectual — while the thought is stringent and cogent, maintaining a fine balance between reason, idea, and expression.

From an *India's poet laureate* leaf (on the front cover) from a 75-year-old *Brand* tree (rainbow colour celebration, and coexistence against a dark geopolitical and climate reality — as in this anthology itself), *Converse* (Bright Star, creatively writing affirmations and optimism).

Converse is a book to relish and cherish.

Authoritative, intellectually rigorous, judiciously representative — a wide-ranging anthology — an updated, international map of the best of English-language poetry by Indians.

‘One is so grateful for the chance to read this sweeping, yet precise, generous yet definite collection, a compilation that both surprises and baums us, seduces and caresses, shows a new path and re-affirms. My special thanks to the editor Sudeep Sen, a terrific poet in his own right, for this lucid and important introduction which deepened my understanding of contemporary poetics. Some anthologies of poetry can both redefine one’s understanding of what is possible and strengthen one’s knowledge of tradition. This is such a book.’
— RISHI RAMPURAY

‘Converse, published to celebrate 75 years of Indian independence, compiles a wide selection of English poetry by some of the most talented contemporary Indian poets. Edited and ably introduced by the renowned Sudeep Sen, this collection provides a comprehensive overview of Indian-English poetry, by established and emerging writers alike. ... the selected poems are well worth reading! A treasure.’
— SHASHI THAKUR

‘Compendium? Treasure trove? Akshay’s cave? — none of these terms do justice to the richness of this book. This is the poetry collection I would want beside me as my desk-buddy, full of sensual delights and intellectual stimuli, raving through the years of India’s independence with fresh energy and curiosity. Here are old ‘friends’, who I have been reading most of my life — but there is also a much host that is new to me too. This is a collection I will be delving into for years to come. *Converse* shows that among the greatest achievements of India’s truly world-class writers are the range and vibrancy of her poets. It is a masterly and brilliant book.’
— ALAKSHAY KUMAR, *INDIA OBSERVER*

SUDEEP SEN — international prize-winning poet, translator, and literary editor — earlier edited *The British Council Book of Emerging English Poets from Bangladesh* (2011), *The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry* (2012), *Modern English Poetry by Younger Indians* (Sakshi Akshay, 2019), *The Best Asian Poetry 2017/18* (Kuala Lumpur, Singapore), and many others.

Sen’s own critically-acclaimed books include: *Postmarked India: New of Selected Poets* (HarperCollins), *Rain, Sea* (A. R. Ramamooren Translators Award, *Postmark New of Selected Poets*), *Translations 1980-2013* (London Magazine Editions), *Soonest* (Vintage), *Pragati* (Random House), *Rain, Sea* (New), *Chandrasekhar* (Chandrasekhar), and *Andrapada*, *Climate Change*, *Chattanooga*, *Constitution* (Pigeon Press), *Bin Nakh* (Chandrasekhar), *New Poets* (Chandrasekhar), *International Poetry* (Pigeon Press) and *The Philosophy of Poetry* (Chandrasekhar).

Sen’s works have been translated into over 25 languages. His works have appeared in the *Yamuna Literary Supplement*, *Newswatch*, *Quintessence*, *Chattanooga*, *Indian Express*, *Financial Times*, *Perry Jones Literary Review*, *Hindustan Review*, *Black*, *Hindustan Times*, *Times of India*, *Indian Express*, *Outlook*, and *India Today*, and have been broadcast on BBC, PBS, CNN, BBC, NPR, and RFI.

He is the editorial director of *AKASH ARTS*, editor of *Akash*, and currently the inaugural artist-in-residence at the *Museo Civico*. The Government of India awarded him the *Padma Shri* for his ‘outstanding services in the field of cultural activities’. Sen is the first Asian honored to deliver the *Donk* Nobel Lecture and read at the *Nobel Laureate Festival*.

www.sudeepson.org

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Akshay Kumar talks to Sudeep Sen about *Converse: Contemporary English Poetry by Indians*, an anthology edited by Sudeep Sen.

Talking Books



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to a sentence.

— A K Ramanujan

AK: Editing a volume of poems is an act of responsibility, because anthologies, in a way, set the broad contours of what may later on ossify as a canon. Bringing within the scope of one volume, one hundred sixteen poets is a mammoth task, fraught with all kinds of risks, and possibilities of backlash from those who have been excluded. Scores of poems must have been read, re-read, and scrutinized by Sudeep Sen for the purpose of his latest anthology *Converse*. Reading a poem involves lot of cerebral effort, and also a necessary degree of immersion. Imagine how arduous it must have been for the editor to go through a whole range of poets and their poems. One has to be a poetry addict. I have known Sudeep for many years now, and I can say that he is addicted to poetry as much as poetry is addicted to him. He consumes poetry, and is consumed by poetry. His primary instinct is writing poems, but on the sidelines, he has this important contribution of an editor of poetry – not just Indian English, but poetry in translation both from India and abroad. Not long ago he edited an anthology for Harper Collins, to be precise in 2012. It was well-received and it travelled far and wide as a definitive volume of Indian English poetry. Then you edited *Modern English Poetry by Younger Indians* (Sahitya Akademi) which sort of acted like Volume 2 of the HarperCollins one. In this new collection *Converse*, one gets a sense of the field, and the broad spectrum of styles and moods that Indian English poets have been through in the last 75 years. This book comes on the eve of 75 years of India's Independence. So Sudeep, before I ask specific questions on the anthology, let me ask you about your motivation. What really triggers you to re-do an anthology of poems? Do you think in the last ten years the field has changed enormously?

SS: I do have an addiction to poetry, it's true. It's a strange disease, and I seek no medication, because I do not wish to be cured. Poetry sustains me.

So why do I do poetry anthologies? At a generic level, I find the world around us is so fractured, that the only things that seems capable of a universal healing, are intimately crafted words. Words that use both the head and the heart. Using just one source would be problematic. A lot of young poets write only from the heart, and it's wonderful if it's written for a specific person, but it can be sloppy. There are poets who write only cerebrally and that can be problematic too because the *rasa*, the cadence, and the texture is often missing, making it too academic, too staccato. The right calibration is in the balance.

The truth is, I have often told myself I will never edit another anthology. It can be a thankless job. Anyone you leave out is an instant foe. The reason I continue is because I think that the best of English language poetry coming out of India, and the Indian diaspora, is of a very high standard. I am fortunate that I am able to travel overseas extensively for my own

poetry, and it makes me realize how little of poetry from India gets across to the world. Actually, very little gets across within India itself, leave alone outside India. I just want the best poetry to be out there. If it is there in book form, it is possible to pull people in to see it, to read it.

A very important motivation for this book also comes from my interest in Classical Indian music and dance, and my respect for the *guru-shishya parampara*. I have, as a poet, been very privileged to have had some wonderful mentors, directly or obliquely — Jayanta Mahapatra, Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, and Arun Kolatkar in India — Derek Walcott, Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney and others overseas. These were all guiding lights as far as I was concerned. I wouldn't be a poet now, had they not paved the path, and carved the space for the next generation of poets. It's very important to recognize this. Some younger poets may decry and call their poetry "old fashioned" and therefore "not relevant." I believe it is important to know their poetry, because it situates us as part of a continuum.

Now in classical music and dance, this tradition or *parampara* is respected. You learn from your Guru and if you are a very good student, you break away from the Guru, and the Guru allows you to do that. And I have to say, the best of Indian poets in my case, people I have learnt from, have allowed me to break — break free, without them feeling slighted, because most good writers do not feel slighted. It's the mediocre people who get agitated.

Mediocrity is the biggest contagion in Indian poetry. Angst ridden poets, wanting their voices heard, wanting to be known, create a grisly kind of situation, because they feel the need to be everywhere. On the other hand, the really good Indian poets are fairly relaxed. They are doing what they have to do — they continue writing.

When we talk about other languages, I feel the problem is lesser, perhaps because we are talking about rootedness of a different kind. I am not going to get into a discussion of English being a rooted language or not, because English to me is an Indian language, always has been the case. But, the English language poetry scene in India is so fractured that it is almost disheartening, to the point of exasperation, really. Putting this book together, is perhaps, a gesture, to provide some peace and calm and salve. But ultimately, I do it for the wider cause of poetry.

AK: One of the advantages of reading Sudeep Sen's anthologies is that he provides a very lucid and extended introduction or 'Foreword', which he terms as 'Contexts'. Each such prefatory note, in itself, speaks of his critical acumen, and can be read as an important resource for writing literary history. In *Converse*, Sudeep takes a long shot at the history of anthologies that have come right from *Dutt Family Album* onwards. He refers to various anthologies which have been compiled in the recent past. Sudeep, what do you think about the sudden spurt in anthologies of Indian English poetry?

SS: I am happy to see the spate of anthologies that have come out recently. It allows a wide variety of poets to be showcased, and allows the reader to really choose. The more there is out there, the more you have an opportunity to discern.

AK: Designing an anthology needs to have some governing principle. When you do *Converse*, mere seventy fifth year of India's Independence can never be the only reason. So, when you put these poets together in one volume, do you have some overarching design, or overarching theme so to say? Are these poets being clubbed together because they have been writing prolifically all these years?

SS: Every anthology would have a very, very essential kind of tissue formation, the DNA is very important in any structure.

Poetry is not scrutinized in a critical way, like we scrutinize cricket for instance. Everybody is such an expert on Indian cricket, every missed cue, every leg lance, every little fielding lapse is deconstructed, in every home, across the country. Poetry on the other hand is the opposite. So, it's very important to deconstruct poetry, to see what is living, because no poem is dead. When you pick up a poem, whether it's by a dead poet or living poet, if a poem is working, it's like a microorganism that is living. It's like an algae that keeps moving, and you can't stop it, because it does something to you.

That's the magic of poetry.

So yes, all these anthologies had a sort of reason and impetus. When I look back, I am kind of astonished at how many I have done. I have done almost fifteen anthologies, by which I also mean special issues of magazines which are on Indian poetry or South Asian poetry. And, truth be told, I take it up purely because it's my weak point, my Achilles heel.

When I was commissioned to do *The Harper Collins Book of English Poetry*, it was the sixtieth anniversary of Indian independence. The years don't really matter in terms of poetry, it's not important – but of course, it gives the publisher a reason for publishing. My impetus for putting together an anthology then was to showcase the excitement and ebullience that I saw in the poetry firmament in India. Some years later I did another important anthology for the Sahitya Akademi., it was the *Modern English Poetry by Younger Indians* – and acted as Volume 2 of the HarperCollins one. When I was commissioned to do *Converse*, I already had these two big anthologies that had done really well. I looked at both of them and I asked myself, "Who are the people who deserve to be in this new one?" The answer was, "There are lots of poets who are good poets, but who haven't really written in the last fifteen years significantly. Maybe they need to be given a rest, and others who were part of the larger team, to use a cricket analogy – those who are playing really well in the Ranji Trophy, but haven't got a chance in the Indian Test Team – should be given a chance."

You will find, therefore, that some who are not in it, are people who are significant names in literature, but have gone on to write novels or are doing other things. Very little poetry is coming from them, I don't feel the burden that their older work should be here. The flurry of good younger writers now is just astonishing. And this is perhaps because the access and width of the platforms have broadened – it is not just print, but also performance, and it is on various platforms – social media, and so on. Personally, I do not hierarchize a printed volume over the others. I read poetry on Instagram-Twitter-Facebook; I watch poetry films. There is a lot of very, very good work coming out that captures this new vibrancy. And so, I chose to feature only living poets – because this would allow a wider representation of active younger poets.

But at the end of the day, the only guiding principle for anybody to qualify to be in this book is the purity and quality of writing itself. Nothing else matters to me. Whether he or she is powerful, or is a friend of mine or not. None of these concerns matter. The only reason poets feature in *Converse* is because they have written good work.

AK: When you talk about *guru-shishya parampara*, are you aware of the perils of gharana politics? There are many *gharanas* in Indian poetry.

SS: Sadly, that is true. The English-language poetry scene in India is completely fractured. I had hoped as a younger editor when I first started editing anthologies, things would change over time, but unfortunately, they haven't improved. Quite the reverse in fact – that is the reality. Ironically, in contrast, the state of Indian English poetry itself is very strong, the best if it is very good indeed, and there is a lot of it – which is what you find in this book. I try and side-step the regional gharanas because I want the focus to be on good poems as a whole, not the poet's personality. And for me, all the poets in the book are equal – they are all my children. Jayanta Mahapatra who is born in 1928 is rubbing shoulders with the youngest poet (born in the 1995) in this book – isn't that wonderful? And both are there for the same reason, because of the quality of their writing.

I have visited Jayant Mohapatra in Orissa many times over the years. His address is charmingly old fashioned – Jayanta Mahapatra, Tinkonia Bagicha, Cuttack, Orissa. Send a mail to that address and it will reach him safely. I have spent many afternoons and evenings on his slanted mango tree, talking about poetry and life over endless cups of tea. I still cherish the sense of comradeship that came with it. The youngest poet in the book is someone I had a chance to mentor on a long train ride to Delhi. When I first knew her, she was starting out. By the time I was putting this book together, she had published her first book of poetry by a very fine press in London. These are the two poets who book-end the *Converse* anthology.

AK: Can you name some of the gharanas? It should not be very difficult to identify them.

SS: It is an open secret. Traditionally, it's been topographically mapped. There is the 'Bombay School.' It's not a school really, but for historical reasons, certain areas of India had clusters of poets, who in terms of numbers were much more than those in the other parts of India. Bombay was probably number one in terms of numbers. Delhi, Kolkata, Bangalore, and various others, Hyderabad for instance, had a loose conglomeration of poets. Then there are two other very interesting non-metropolitan centres. One is Orissa, and that largely happened because of Jayanta Mahapatra and his tutelage. And the other is the North-East, which often gets left out -- there again there is this sort of micro climate of poetry that exists independently. The poetry there is quite different, though in a holistic sense it merges with the larger Indian poetry scene.

And then, for the first time -- in various journals I've guest-edited: *Lines Review* (Scotland), *Wasafiri* (UK), *Literary Review* (USA), *The Yellow Nib* (Ireland) and others -- culminating in *The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry* (1992), I opened the whole anthology-making tradition to include the diasporic Indian poetry as well. Not just people from India who happen to have settled overseas in later years, but people of Indian origin who may have been born overseas. So, I included poets from say, the South Pacific, Fiji. I have travelled to many of these places -- on the back of my poetry. I was invited to a festival, for instance, in South Africa, and because I am interested as an editor, I bought books by diasporic poets and brought them home. Over the years that aggregation is what has made these anthologies rich and diverse.

So yes, the old 'gharanas' are there, but I find the divisive idea of that very unattractive. They work more like coteries and have no allegiance to a *parampara* or tradition. Personally, I don't believe in clubs, cliques and hierarchies. I do not believe in boxed rooms. I like airy spaces which have transparent walls, which can breathe through osmosis, because poetry actually travels that way. You have to de-fragment (to use a computer jargon), to get the energy back. I believe in inter-racial-hierarchical mixing.

AK: Since you've referred to Jayanta Mahapatra -- Mahapatra himself says somewhere that because he was published abroad to begin with, that he received some audience back home. When one reads the biographies or bio-notes of the poets here, the same impression is buttressed. Some of these poets have been published, of late, by Sahitya Akademi, but most of them are recognized abroad first, and then these poets are anthologized back in India for some native approval.

SS: Doesn't that say something about us, as Indians? I mean, the answer lies in your question really, and I don't have to add anything. Just because someone has published in some obscure magazine abroad, is it the reason that their poetry is better than someone who has published in India? -- Of course not.

Overseas, in the US and UK at least, there is some degree of process in how books are published. There are dedicated 'poetry editors' in major publishing houses. The poetry editors are usually reputed practicing poets. Some of them are given a limited tenure, so their editorial vision doesn't get stale. Then the editors may change. This is wonderful for the health of good and diverse poetry.

Often, the only way you can get a manuscript published with a really good publisher there, is based on the 'acknowledgements' list in your manuscript. If eighty percent of your manuscript is published in various publications, then the poetry editor knows that it's already gone through a sort of a sieve or a system of selection, because these editors of different journals and magazines are varied. So, if you can impress, say twenty different editors and have eighty percent of the manuscript already published, automatically the editor at the publishing house will take the submitted book very seriously. Therefore, the whole tradition of publishing widely, literary magazines, reading live at festivals, become important -- because there you can expect to encounter people who are really watching and taking notes.

So, what can I say? I do not want to sound bleak, because despite everything, four or five anthologies have appeared this year. It is a source of great celebration and I think the reason that is happening is because younger people are braver and more willing to cross boundaries, despite the hierarchical structures.

AK: In this particular anthology you refer to, as to who to include and who to exclude. That only the living poets become part of the book. How good is that rule to compile an anthology of this scale?

SS: That was purely partly a practical decision I had to take. When I set out to work on this book, we put out an open call, and received over 15000 pages of poetry in response. This was in addition to the poets I had personally invited to be part of the book. I wanted the book to reflect the live stream of energy I was encountering, and so the decision to go with only 'living poets,' I say very specifically in my introduction that some significant, well-published, senior poets are not in the book. These are poets who are well-mapped already and their work is easily available. So, if I have left out Nissim Ezekiel or Arun Kolatkar or A K Ramanujan, have I done any disservice? Not at all, because they are already well anthologized over the years and are incredibly easy to find. I think I am doing a service by giving space to poets who are bright and who haven't had the space thus far.

Also, there are some very good poets who were in the HarperCollins book, who are not in this book. There is a very good reason. Some of those poets haven't produced any significant new poetry in the last fifteen years. Therefore, I haven't included them. They may come up with a better book or a new poetry book later on. If that's the case they'll be in the next anthology. It's not a race, you know. It's not a life and death situation. Poetry is something to be enjoyed, it's part of a living tradition. So, for many of the deceased poets (who I greatly admire) and who are not there in Converse, I have tried to ensure that I liberally use epigraphs of their poetry in my introduction to mark their presence.

AK: Death is not something you can hold against somebody. After all, if you are publishing a book for commemorating seventy-fifth year of India's independence, I mean I am not talking about the other living poets, but poets like Meena Alexander, A. K. Ramanujan, Nissim Ezekiel, Arun Kolatkar, etc. happen to be the frontline poets of post-Independent India. How can one not include them in an anthology which has the claims of being 'definitive'?

SS: Many of the poets you mention are in my HarperCollins book. I do believe they are very fine poets. You can't hold me accountable for a publishing house's marketing spiel. Of course, they are going to say definitive, most intelligent, the best – but any discerning reader knows that is just a marketing strategy. Of course, it is not the 'the' definitive anthology, which is why I continue to endorse other anthologies that have come out this year or last year. It's been such a wonderful thing that multiple anthologies have come out in recent times. And frankly, no matter which anthology you show me, I can make a credible argument why it is not 'definitive.' I think 'informative' would be a better word. The anthologies inform us about the movement in Indian poetry. I would say, just rejoice in what is there to savour.

AK: Those who have read Sudeep's poetry will find that in any case when he writes, he doesn't write all alone. There are epigraphs of poets from different continents and different nations that precede many poems or are placed in the beginning of a new section of a book. As he writes his poetry, he orchestrates world poetry to his advantage. There is always a lurking anthologist in Sudeep's poetry. One of ways to anthologize poems is to put poems under some thematic rubric. The general rubrics have been 'love poems', 'green poems', 'peace poems' etc. What do you say about such anthologies?

SS: Thematic anthologies are a different beast. That was not what I set out to do. I wanted to do a book that was representative of the time(s). I look at anthologies from a practicing poet's lens, so my duty is not that of an academic or a critic who may wish to do anthologies under certain themes. For instance, in the last two years, there have been way too many anthologies on climate change, perhaps because it is topical or trendy. What about everything else that is important? – those tends to get edited out in thematic anthologies.

I have tried to make the Converse anthology different in subtle and nuanced ways. The book exhibits the poems from the oldest to the youngest. So, you can see the poetry change over time, and also see the poetry at a point in time. I have chosen to publish between five to twelve poems by each poet, which is again unusual. I want any reader who reads the book to get some sense of what each poet is all about. The norm in other anthologies has been to feature just two or

three poems per poet – and the problem with two or three poems is, often, that the same poems get recycled in every anthology.

Another effort I made was to resurrect some work that was out of print. And make space for long poems. In anthologies, long poems are almost never published, because of the nature of anthology making and the market forces – there is just no space to include them. For instance, Adil Jussawalla's '*Chakravayuha*' is in *Converse*. It has never been published before, you know? He wrote it as a commission for Channel Four television in the UK. Subsequently extracts were published here and there, but not the whole poem. He wryly said, "*Sudeep, publish this at your own peril. Publishers won't commission you again because one poem has eaten up twenty-five pages of the book.*" I replied, saying, "*It does not matter.*"

Similarly, I found some work by another poet, Tanya Mendonsa – who had written this wonderful, fable like, book-length poem, '*The Fisher of Perch*', that was published by a small press. I thought the poem was so brilliant that it ought to have a full run in a book like this. So, the entire poem spanning over 15 pages is there in *Converse*. I told her, "*I am only choosing one poem by you ... but it is going to be this long poem.*" She said, "*I would have preferred six shorter poems.*" I said "*It is your choice. Either six poems or one poem – and I prefer the long poem.*" She later thanked me for my selection.

There has also been an effort to do things innovatively. Anybody who reads the book will see that. There is a lot of interesting internal architecture and musicality that resonates within the book. A terza rima poem is sitting next to a *ghazal*, fragmented Sapphic verse is sitting next to a tightly-wrought canzone, and so on. I had to read very deeply as you can see. The selection took many hours of re-reading every submitted poem.

AK: My next question springs from your answer. In this age of anthologies, what is the future of book-length poems? Don't you think that the poem-centric anthologies supersede book-length poems?

SS: I think there is a great future for book-length poems. Any serious reader of poetry reads poetry without any stipulated rules, as you well know. You look at Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, it is a book-length poem. His Tiepolo's *Hound* is a book-length poem. Joseph Brodsky's '*To Urania*' is a book-length poem. Michael Madhusudan Dutt has written book-length poems. Arun Kolatkar has written book-length poems. Mahapatra has written a book length poem (which won him the Sahitya Akademi prize) – *Relationships*, which is now being re-published, fortunately. Your own favourite book of mine, before I ever met you, was my book-length poem, *Distracted Geographies*.

I was a young poet then, and I came across one of your books *Poetry, Politics and Culture* published by Routledge, and there was a whole chapter in that book on my *Distracted Geographies*. I was relatively young when I had written this long poem, which takes place over two hundred and six pages. Reason it takes place over two hundred and six pages is because there are two hundred and six bones in the human body. And the guiding principle for the structure of the book was the human spinal cord. Since there are thirty-three sections of the spinal cord, so there are thirty-three chapters in that book. You wrote a chapter on this book before I ever met you. That's how poetry should be read. Read the text first, if you like it, that is what matters – the person who has written can be discounted. If this person happens to be a nice guy, or you get to know him, great – that is a bonus. So yes, long poems have been a part of the poetic tradition. It still exists, very much so.

AK: That is true. The question is that these days anthology is a very handy kind of a pedagogical tool also. Accommodating a long-poem within the limits of an anthology is difficult. Parthasarathy's '*Homecoming*' or Mahapatra's '*Relationships*' or Kolatkar's '*Jejuri*' are difficult to fit in within the scope of any anthology.

SS: The length of any poem does not deter me. I take my decisions based on the merit of the poem. Including long poems in this anthology is one of the barriers in anthology-making that I was breaking. I have also included concrete or visual poetry, poems that are very difficult to set up typographically. It is a nightmare for a typesetter. If I find a poet who

has taken interesting liberties with typography, how do you represent those poems? So, the first thing the publisher tells me is, "Drop that poem. Let's just get left-aligned poems." These are things you fight for, because you want to show variety, diversity, and representation of the different kinds of things that are being done.

AK: There is a balancing act somewhere. You tend to choose poets from different rubrics, different clusters, and you keep repeating this thing that it is 'inclusive', and that I have tried to give representation to all *gharanas* or *non-gharanas*, or whatever else.

SS: Yes, you also do want to represent fairly — that is part of making a good anthology. If it was just a book of five poets, then my choices would be very clear who I would want. If you have a very small number of poets in a book, you could make a really cutting-edge, tight anthology — maybe even a maximum of twenty poets. Now if you are making that kind of anthology, if that is the publisher's brief, it'll be a great thrill to do it. Only twenty people to be selected from the entire history of Indian poetry. But in *Converse* we were looking for a wider representation that does justice to the last 75 years and the present time.

AK: You say that in your anthologies, including the present one, poetry precedes the poet. What matters to you is the quality of the poem more than the reputation of the poet. So, can you shortlist five poems which you think are one, two, three, four, five, as per your standards? I know it would be difficult to commit to four-five poems.

SS: I am afraid, I won't fall for that question. Instead, I will read just two poems — the first and the last. I will read one by Jayanta Mahapatra — who starts the book. It is a fairly iconic poem, ageless, — this is what the best poems are all about. It is called 'Dawn at Puri':

*Endless crow noises
A skull in the holy sands
tilts its empty country towards hunger.*

*White-clad widowed women
past the centres of their lives
awaiting to enter the Great Temple.*

*Their austere eyes
stare like those caught in a net
hanging by the dawn's shining strands of faith.*

*The frail early light catches
ruined, leprous shells leaning against one another,
a mass of crouched faces without names,
and suddenly breaks out of my hide
into the smoky blaze of a sullen solitary pyre
that fills my aging mother:*

*her last wish to be cremated here
twisting uncertainly like the light
on the shifting sands.*

*Now, let me read the last poem in the book, by the youngest poet in *Converse*. This is a young person writing, ostensibly, about shoes. But it is talking about so many other things — about exile, about language, about moving from one land to the other, about being taken abruptly from a warm Punjabi-Himachali space into a cold Irish space, where slippers-and-barefoot existence is simply not available.*

It's been a good discussion, and we do not want to spoil the beauty of poetry by too much analysis or explanation. Let us end with a poem by Supriya Kaur Dhaliwal, who was born in 1995. And it is called 'Reading Natalia Ginzburg in East Cork':

*Words fail me often and so do shoes.
I always keep a pair ready, polished*

*in an empty suitcase like an air ticket
without a return date purchased on a whim.*

*I wear them only on uncomfortable occasions.
For when I am feeling most comfortable, I long*

*for the worn-out sneakers I have been wearing
every day for hundreds of days;*

*trusting them the most to keep my feet warm
and dry, to keep my gait pronounced*

*like an athlete's or a ballerina's. It is too much
to ask for, perhaps from something lifeless*

*summoned by all the burdens of the living.
At the edge of this forest and the tree-lined*

*avenues of the city where I have not yet
been able to go – reside some little virtues*

*and there, we can ask for everything
that the heart needs and there, we will*

*know that it would have been the best
if we came in our most worn-out shoes.*

AK: When you read this anthology, you are overwhelmed by the poetic talent particularly of the emerging younger poets. The natural ease with which a variety of emotions are expressed in the so-called 'father-tongue' English is simply remarkable. Diverse poetic forms – native, non-native – are practiced. Sudeep himself has written haiku, sonnets and quatrains. Agha Shahid Ali mastered the art of ghazal in English. He was a pioneer of English ghazal poetry as you know. In Converse, there are poets writing ghazals now with greater felicity. Let me take the liberty of reading one such, the opening four couplets from 'A Ghazal for Peace' by a young poet Mihir Chitre on Twitter, and the culture of trolls and fake-news that it perpetuates:

**Empathy has just died on Twitter.
We have violently lied on Twitter.**

**They, who're targeted today,
Your retweet is their cyanide on Twitter.**

**Lynching anyone with a dagger of accusations
Truth is often mystified on Twitter.**

**A lifetime reduced to 140 characters
Nuance commits suicide on Twitter. ...**

Sudeep, since you have covered poets of the last 75 years, do you notice remarkable changes in the way younger poets deal with issues of religion, culture and nationalism? For instance, I read this anthology as a solid and unambiguous testament of non-parochialism. Or this anthology can be read as the locus of India's cultural journey towards a more cosmopolitan and planetary future. To what extent have the poets experimented with the traditional forms of poetry?

SS: Not just experiment, I think new poets have been making new forms with wonderful exuberance. For instance, to cite a personal example, there is a poem of mine called '*Bharatnatyam Dancer*'. It uses a form which never existed before – I invented the form. The story behind it is this: When I was watching a particular dancer dance to a particular *raga*, the *taal* and *bol* that were being used was – *ta dhin ta thaye thaye ta, ta dhin ta thaye thaye ta, ...* So, when I was working on the later drafts of this poem, it struck me that I could use that as the rubric for the structure. So, I invented a rhyme scheme – *abacca, abacca, ...* to match and mimic the dancer's classical beats. Now in books of prosody, this poem is cited as an example of a newly invented form. There are others I have invented too, like in the poem '*New York Times*', and for the book-length poem '*Distracted Geographies: An Archipelago of Intent*'.

AK: And I have ventured to translate some of these poems into Punjabi.

SS: Yes, indeed. A book of my English poems in Punjabi translation, titled *Godhuli Lagna*, has come out as well. Can you imagine the challenge of translating these formal structures into Punjabi? Because a lot of my work is formally very strict, even though it may ostensibly appear as free verse. One of the poets I have admired is Gerard Manley Hopkins who is a master of half rhymes and internal rhymes, and formal experimentation.

So, it's not easy, but I think you did a very fine job. The translation project was, coincidentally, prompted in this particular hall where I had done a talk/reading and a workshop with young students. There were some people who wrote in Hindi or Punjabi, and I told them, "*You don't have to be an English language poet to come to my workshop. Just be a poet.*" So, people who came, wrote in Punjabi, Hindi, and English. Then some of the students started translating my poetry into Punjabi, and eventually, more than a decade later, under your tutelage, this new book of my '*Selected Poems*' saw light of day. The book, apart from your fine critical introduction, also has a wonderful Foreword and Afterword by the illustrious Punjabi poet Surjit Patar and theatre director Neelam Mansingh, respectively. What a pleasing and fulfilling journey poetry can be.

(This is an edited version of a live conversation that took place in Mulk Raj Anand Auditorium of the Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh on 26 November, 2022)

About Sudeep Sen



Sudeep Sen is a prolific, award-winning poet, translator, and editor of influential anthologies. Sen is the editorial director of AARK ARTS and editor of Atlas. The Government of India awarded him the senior fellowship for "outstanding persons in the field of culture/literature." Currently, he is the international fellow and writer/artist-in-residence at the Nirox Foundation in South Africa's Cradle of Humankind. Sen is the first Asian honoured to deliver the Derek Walcott Lecture and read his poetry at the Nobel Laureate Festival.

About Prof Akshay Kumar



Prof. Akshaya Kumar is Sarojini Naidu Chair professor at Panjab University, Chandigarh. He received special critical attention for his books Poetry, Politics and Culture and Cultural Studies in India – both published by Routledge. He has recently translated Sudeep Sen's poetry into Punjabi. His areas of study and research include Comparative Indian Poetry and Cultural Theory.

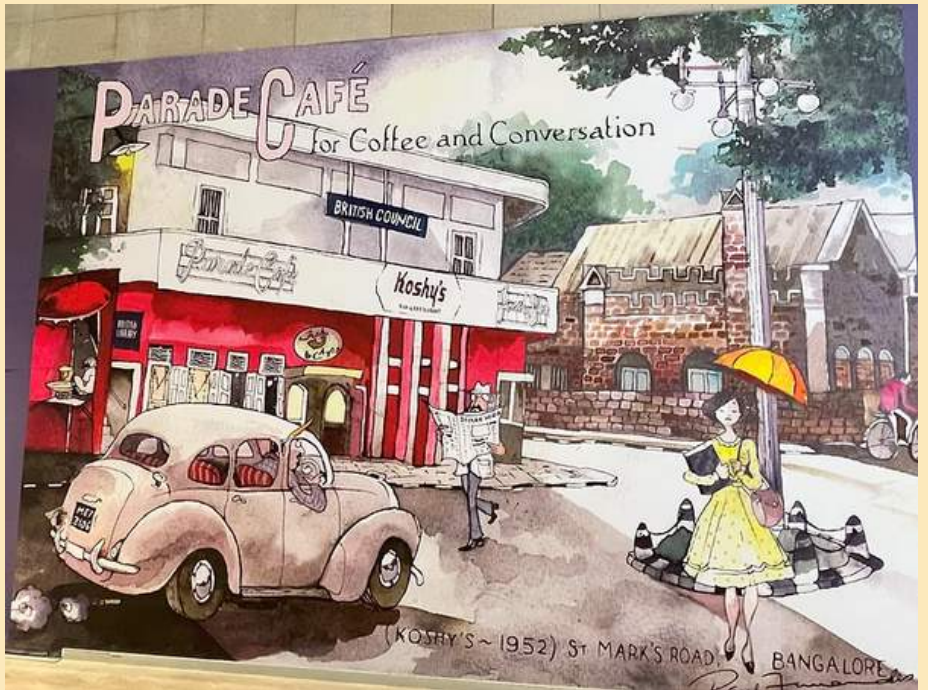
VISUAL ARTS



Painting

Limited Edition Replay:
Rachel Brownlee

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Airport Art

Airport Art at Terminal 2
Bengaluru (India)

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Limited Edition Replay
Rachel Brownlee



A Cold Start (2022) 20X29 Charcoal



Fencing Rig (2022) 42X 29 Charcoal



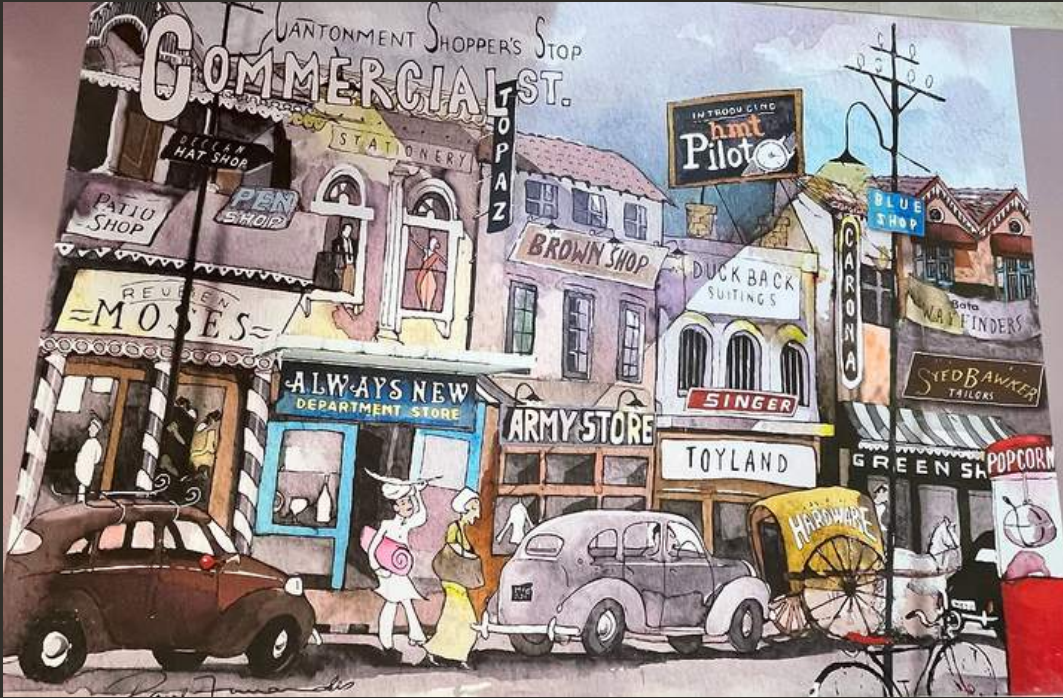
Artist Speak

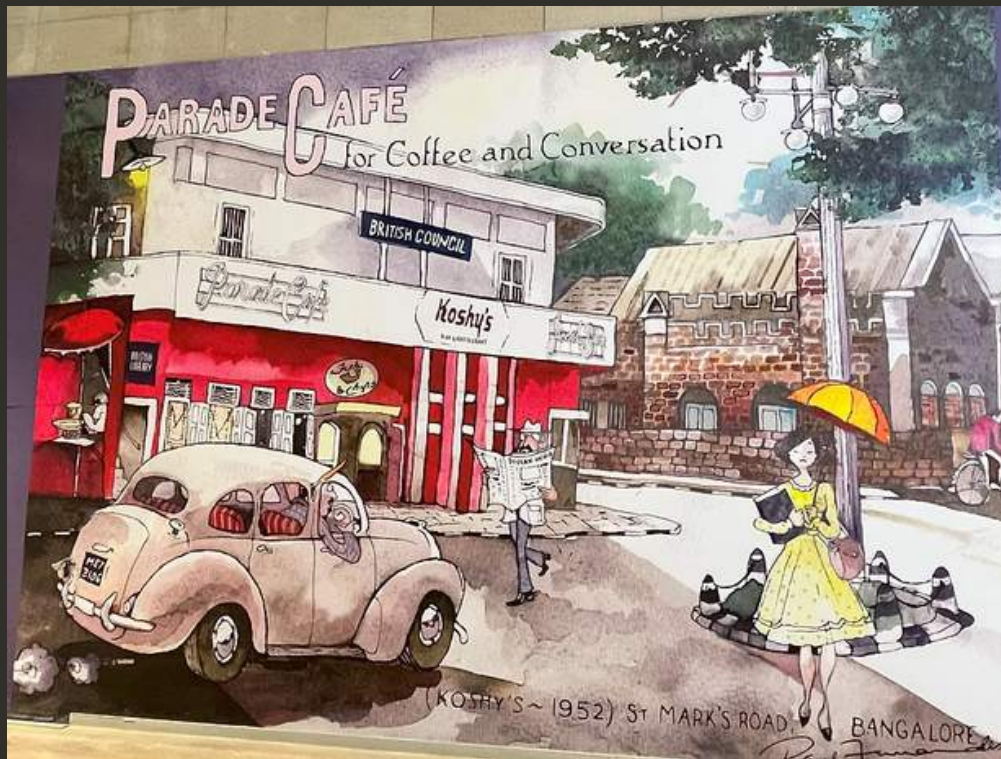
Rachel Brownlee, a Nebraska based artist who specialises in extreme high realism large format charcoal artwork. She portrays western life in an honest and even discordant manner because while fine western art is typically pastoral and romanticized, her work contains sometimes unattractive, old horses, and gritty details. She believes that traditional western life and the people and animals involved should be portrayed as they lived which can be rough, dirty, and even painful.

An extract from an interview with Rachel Brownlee, featured in the (Sienna & Gold Edition (November 2022) of The Wise Owl.

Airport Art: Terminal 2 Bengaluru

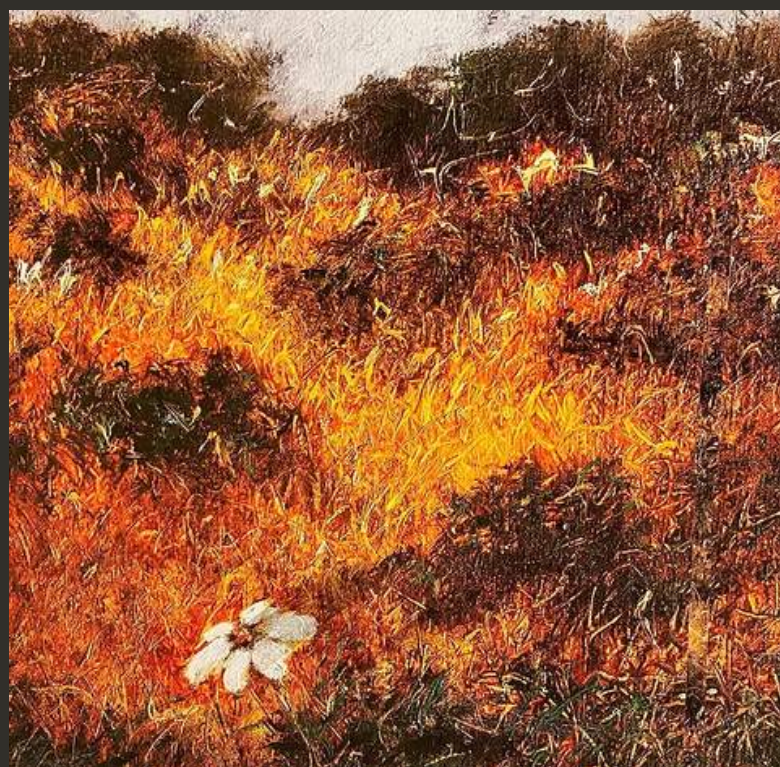
Terminal 2 of Kempegowda International Airport in Bengaluru opened its gates to travellers in March 2023. The Wise Owl Team happened to visit it and was struck by the beautiful artwork on display featuring street scenes of old Bangalore, puppets, bidri work and works of established Indian artists like Paramjit Singh.





Puppets on a Chain

Artist Anupama Hoskere's installation, *Strings of Life*, is displayed at the terminal. She says, "I translated *Madanika* sculptures, found in temples of Karnataka, into puppetry for Terminal 2. It showcases the cultural aspect of Karnataka but also fits the theme of *Navarasa* perfectly. It took me about two years to complete the project and I'm very excited for it to be displayed at the airport!"



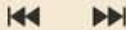
Artwork by Paramjit Singh (India)

Paramjit Singh was born in 1935 in Amritsar, Punjab. After finishing his initial education at Khalsa College in Amritsar, he joined School of Art, Delhi Polytechnic, Delhi. He was founding member of the group *The Unknown*, a group of young artists in Delhi in 1960. Singh also taught Fine arts for three decades as Professor and then Head of the art department at Jamia Millia University, Delhi. *The Seventh Walk*, a film, is based on the art of Paramjit Singh & was presented at Film festivals in Toronto, San Francisco, Rome & New York.

PODCASTS



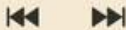
Sarah Jane Justice
birthdays
Birthdays (Poem)



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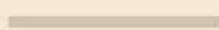
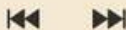
Gomathi Sridevi
Apple to your knife by Gomathi Sridevi
Apple to your Knife



00:00 / 00:52



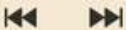
Saranya Narayanan
Unruly Nights by Saranya Narayanan
Unruly Night



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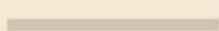
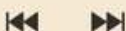
Priya Chouhan
The Night of Crows by Priya Chouhan
The Night of Crows



00:00 / 01:17



Richa Pant
The courageous, the spineless & the indifferent
The Courageous, the Spineless & the Indifferent



00:00 / 01:25



BIOGRAPHIES

Sudeep Sen's [www.sudeepsen.org] is one of the leading international poets whose prize-winning books include: *Postmarked India: New & Selected Poems* (HarperCollins), *Rain, Aria* (A. K. Ramanujan Translation Award), *Fractals: New & Selected Poems | Translations 1980-2015* (London Magazine Editions), *EroText* (Vintage: Penguin Random House), *Kaifi Azmi: Poems | Nazms* (Bloomsbury) and *Anthropocene: Climate Change, Contagion, Consolation* (Pippa Rann, 2021-22 Rabindranath Tagore Literary Prize winner). He has edited influential anthologies, including: *The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry* (editor), *World English Poetry*, *Modern English Poetry by Younger Indians* (Sahitya Akademi), and *Converse: Contemporary English Poetry by Indians* (Pippa Rann). *Blue Nude: Ekphrasis & New Poems* (Jorge Zalamea International Poetry Prize) and *The Whispering Anklets* are forthcoming. Sen's works have been translated into over 25 languages. His words have appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Newsweek*, *Guardian*, *Observer*, *Independent*, *Telegraph*, *Financial Times*, *Herald*, *Poetry Review*, *Literary Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Hindu*, *Hindustan Times*, *Times of India*, *Indian Express*, *Outlook*, *India Today*, and broadcast on *bbc*, *pbs*, *cnn*, *ibn*, *ndtv*, *air* & *Doordarshan*. Sen's newer work appears in *New Writing 15* (Granta), *Language for a New Century* (Norton), *Leela: An Erotic Play of Verse and Art* (Collins), *Indian Love Poems* (Knopf/Random House/Everyman), *Out of Bounds* (Bloodaxe), *Initiate: Oxford New Writing* (Blackwell), and *Name me a Word* (Yale). He is the editorial director of *AARK ARTS*, editor of *Atlas*, and currently the inaugural artist-in-residence at the *Museo Camera*. His professional photography is represented by *ArtMbassy*, Rome. [<http://www.artmbassy.com/artists.html>]. The Government of India awarded him the senior fellowship for "outstanding persons in the field of culture/literature." Sen is the first Asian honoured to deliver the Derek Walcott Lecture and read at the Nobel Laureate Festival.

Abin Chakraborty teaches English literature in Chandernagore College, West Bengal, India. He has been writing for several years and his poems have been published in Indian and International publications such as *Café Dissensus*, *Rupkatha Journal*, *Muse India*, *Pine Cone Review*, among others. He is also the author of the scholarly monograph, *Popular Culture*, published by *Orient Blackswan* (2019). His scholarly articles have also been published in journals and anthologies from India and abroad. His collection of poems *Unlettered Longings* was published recently. He is the editor of *Postcolonial Interventions*, an interdisciplinary online journal and one of the co-editors of *Plato's Caves*, an online platform that hosts an array of poetry, fiction and non-fiction.

Saranya Narayanan is a Post Graduate holder in English Language and Literature and she is a former teacher at a school in her native town of Trivandrum, Kerala and is presently working as Language Specialist in an online platform. She is a passionate educator who loves to teach English language using modernist approaches. She is fond of reading and writing poetry and believes poetry is a companion to a passionate and a desperate soul.

Ben Nardolilli is currently an MFA candidate at Long Island University. His work has appeared in *Perigee Magazine*, *Red Fez*, *Danse Macabre*, *The 22 Magazine*, *Quail Bell Magazine*, *Elimae*, *The Northampton Review*, *Slab*, and *The Minetta Review*. He blogs at mirrorsponge.blogspot.com and is trying to publish his novels.

James Croal Jackson is a Filipino-American poet who works in film production. He has three chapbooks: *Count Seeds With Me* (Ethel Zine & Micro-Press, 2022), *Our Past Leaves* (Kelsay Books, 2021), and *The Frayed Edge of Memory* (Writing Knights, 2017). He edits *The Mantle Poetry* from Pittsburgh, PA. (jamescroaljackson.com)

Gomathi Sridevi is a Sociology graduate and pursuing Masters in Journalism right now. Her passion for writing can be attributed to her childhood habit of reading newspaper everyday. She would describe herself best as a student who is quite interested in applying her learnings on Sociology for the benefit of the society.

Priya Chouhan has completed her graduation in Economics Honours from St. Xavier's College, Jaipur, Rajasthan (India) and is currently preparing for her Masters. For Priya, poetry is a tool to speak on silent matters. She has been writing poems since 6th grade and her poems have been published in magazines/journals like Corvus review, the Black moon, Dreich, Brief Wilderness, Literary Yard, Littoral magazine, etc.

Vineeta Gupta is an Associate Professor of English at Government P.G. College, Sector-1, Panchkula, Haryana. She is fond of reading, cooking and writing Poetry both in Hindi and English.

Sam Moe is the first-place winner of Invisible City's Blurred Genres contest in 2022, and the 2021 recipient of an Author Fellowship from Martha's Vineyard Institute of Creative Writing. Her first chapbook, "Heart Weeds," is out from Alien Buddha Press and her second chapbook, "Grief Birds," is forthcoming from Bullshit Lit in April 2023. You can find them on Twitter and Instagram as @SamAnneMoe.

Sarah Jane Justice is a multi-disciplinary writer and performer. Her poetry and short fiction have been published by outlets such as The Bombay Review, Capsule Stories, and Eerie River Publishing. As a spoken word artist, she has won numerous awards, including performing at the Sydney Opera House as a national finalist in the 2018 Australian Poetry Slam. She has also been nominated for a Pushcart Prize in short fiction, created an ekphrastic poetry/photography exhibition, and recorded two studio albums of original music.

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

Patricia Walsh was born and raised in the parish of Mourneabbey, Co Cork, Ireland. To date, she has published one novel, titled *The Quest for Lost Eire*, in 2014, and has published one collection of poetry, titled *Continuity Errors*, with Lapwing Publications in 2010. She has since been published in a variety of print and online journals across Ireland, The UK, USA, and Canada. She has also published another novel, *In The Days of Ford Cortina*, in August 2021.

Peter A Witt is a Texas poet and a retired university Professor. He also writes family history with a book about his Aunt published by the Texas A & M Press. His poetry has been published on various sites including Verse-Virtual, Indian Periodical, Fleas on the dog, Inspired, Open Skies Quarterly, Active Muse, New Verse News and Wry Times. "My poetry may be serious, whimsical or a combination of both," says Peter.

Jayson Dela Fuente is an Assistant Professor at Northern Negros State college of Science & Technology, Philippines. He is also Editor-in-Chief of Polaris Global Journal of Scholarly Research & Trends and Founder/CEO of Polaris Global Research Organization Inc.

William Gottlieb lives in Brooklyn, New York. He is a lawyer representing mentally and physically disabled people. He loves writing in his spare time.

Jherwin P Hermosa, MA, holds the academic rank of Assistant Professor 1 at the Laguna State Polytechnic University, San Pablo City Campus. He has also published books and scientific articles in international circulations. His research interest are mostly on the social sciences, philosophy and educational management.

Tom Ball is currently senior editor at FLEAS ON THE DOG Jherwin P Hermosa, MA, holds the academic rank of Assistant Professor 1 at the Laguna State Polytechnic University, San Pablo City Campus. He has also published books and scientific articles in international circulations. His research interest are mostly on the social sciences, philosophy and educational management. His work has appeared in several journals and magazines including 'Down in the Dirt' magazine, 'Conceit' Magazine, Literary Yard, Newark Library Literary Journal, Fresh Words Magazine, Local Train Magazine, Gargoyle magazine, PBW magazine among others. He has also self-published two novels with American Book Publishing, and Xlibris. Tom has also co-authored, 'Of Heaven and Hell,' a graphic novel with Zen Wang.

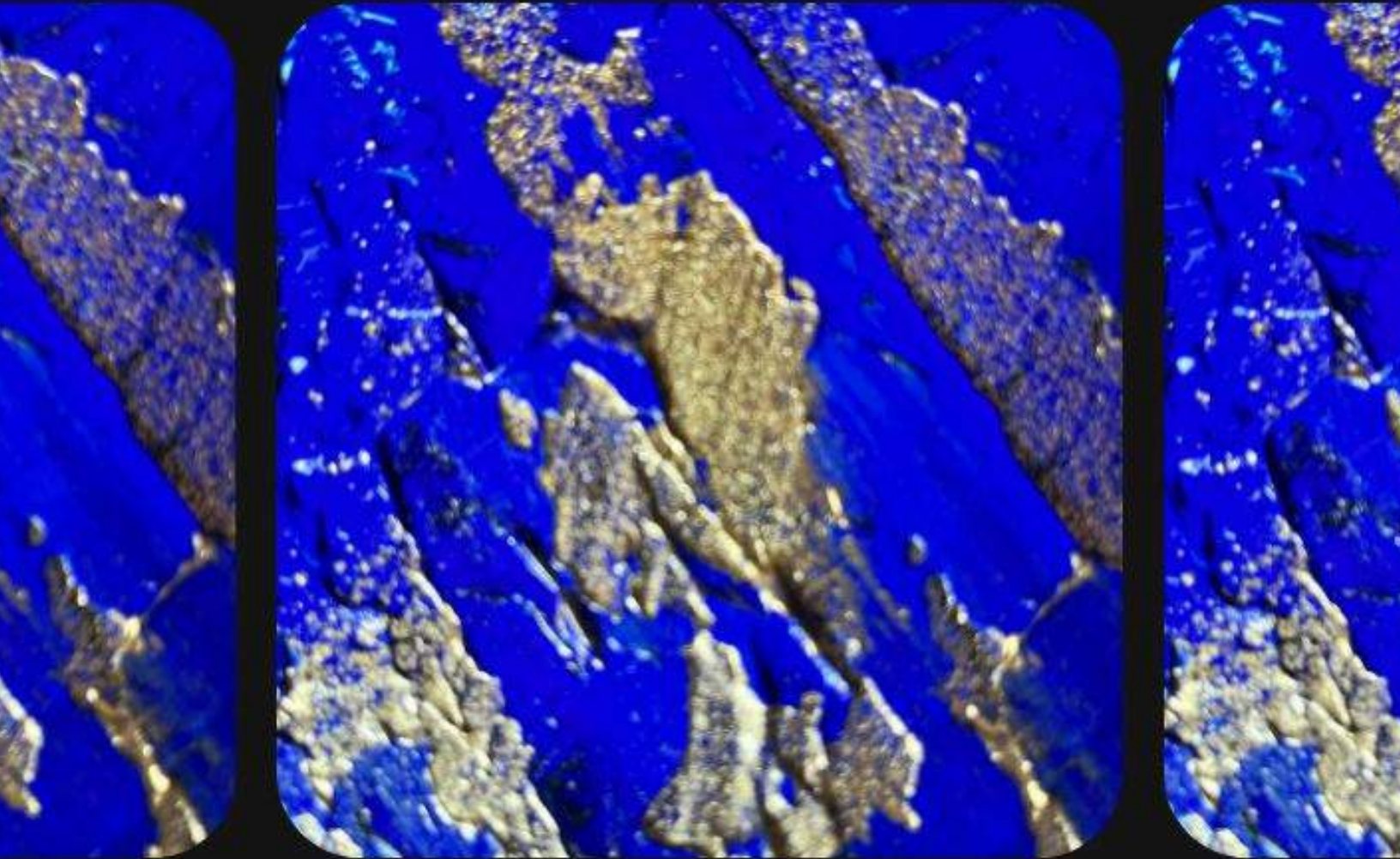
Chitra Singh has a wide repertoire of writing. She writes stories and creative non-fiction pieces with equal panache. Chitra has a Master's degree in English Literature and a Post Graduate degree in Mass Communication. She has free lanced with many English Dailies and magazines, writing mostly human interest features, travelogues, and stories about forest life which she greatly loved. Her forte is writing Middles. She has varied interests like gardening, cooking, fine embroidery and dabbling in the share market. One of her favourite pastimes is regaling her grandchildren with tales of yore.

Jupinderjit Singh is an award-winning journalist, writer and author based in Chandigarh. He has authored three books viz. 'Justice for Jassi' 'Years Later...on Facebook', 'Bhagat Singh's Pistol and Ahimsa. He is a recipient of Prem Bhatia Young Journalist Award for his stories and research. He is a fellow with the Centre for Science and Environment on Forest Rights for the Tribals in Jammu and Kashmir. He is a FIDE-rated chess player and coach, motivational speaker & an amateur pianist.

Dr. Ramandeep Mahal is currently working as an Assistant Professor of English at Guru Nanak Khalsa College Yamunanagar. She received her Doctorate degree from Maharishi Markandeshwar Mullana Ambala in 2018. Her research interests include Anglo-American Literature, Indian Writing in English, African Literature. She is the author of more than twenty research papers.

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