

The Wise Owl
PRINIA EDITION

November 2023



Editor Speak

November 2023

The Wise Owl steps into its second year. The last two years have been creatively very fulfilling, thanks to our poets and writers who have shared their creativity so generously and made the magazine a resounding success. We also owe a debt of gratitude to creative stalwarts who have happily acquiesced to talk with us about their creative journey, adding literary and creative vigour to our fledgling project. After two years of unstinting effort, The Wise Owl stands tall and strong, ready to take on the next year with enthusiasm, excitement and a strong dash of anticipation.

We bid a fond farewell to our Gold series. With this edition we begin a series of editions named after birds. Birds symbolise hope, freedom, strength, peace, prosperity and a host of other positive traits. So we thought they would appropriately echo the sentiments that we hold dear. Prinia, a tiny little warbler, is said to symbolise new beginnings and also remind us of the strong bond between nature and humans. So we decide to baptise our November edition, an anniversary special, as Prinia Edition,.

As part of our anniversary edition, we bring for our readers and viewers something very special. We have an interesting and very insightful interview with Paul Lynch, whose fabulous book *Prophet Song*, has been short listed for the Booker Prize 2023. We are also featuring a video interview with Audrey Magee, who talks to us about her book *The Colony*, which was long listed for the Booker Prize 2022. and is now being made into a film. Taseer Gujral pens a touching tribute to Louise Glück, who was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 2020 and who passed away last month, much to the grief of poet lovers. Our edition showcases poetry stories, musings, reviews, visual arts by poets, writers and artists from across the globe. Podcasts by poets and writers brighten up our creative e-zine.

Happy reading!!! Happy Viewing!!! Please join us in nurturing literature and art.



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INTERVIEWS



The Interview: Paul Lynch

Award-winning Author

The Wise Owl talks to **Paul Lynch**, an internationally acclaimed, prize-winning author of five novels: *Prophet Song*, *Beyond the Sea*, *Grace*, *The Black Snow* and *Red Sky in Morning*. He is the winner of the Kerry Group Irish Novel of the Year 2018, among other prizes. His latest book '*Prophet Song*' has been shortlisted for The Booker Prize 2023.

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The Interview: Yuko Kyutoku

A New-York based Artist

The Wise Owl talks to **Yuko Kyutoku**, a contemporary artist based in New York. She was born in Gifu and grew up in Aichi, Japan. Having grown up next to both nature with mountains and rivers, and urban areas, her love of nature and the outdoors is reflected in her art work.

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The Interview: Paul Lynch

The Wise Owl talks to **Paul Lynch**, an internationally acclaimed, prize-winning author of five novels: *Prophet Song*, *Beyond the Sea*, *Grace*, *The Black Snow* and *Red Sky in Morning*. He is the winner of the Kerry Group Irish Novel of the Year 2018, among other prizes. His latest book '*Prophet Song*' has been shortlisted for The Booker Prize 2023.

His debut novel *Red Sky in Morning* was published to critical acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic in 2013. It was a finalist for France's Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger (Best Foreign Book Prize) and was nominated for the Prix du Premier Roman (First Novel Prize). In the US, it was an Amazon.com Book of the Month and was featured on NPR's All Things Considered, where Lynch was hailed as "a lapidary young master". It was a book of the year in The Irish Times, The Toronto Star, the Irish Independent and the Sunday Business Post. *The Black Snow* (2014) was an Amazon.com Book of the Month. In France it won the French booksellers' prize Prix Libr'à Nous for Best Foreign Novel and the inaugural Prix des Lecteurs Privat. It was nominated for the Prix Femina and the Prix du Roman Fnac (Fnac Novel Prize).

Grace was published in 2017 to massive international acclaim. The Washington Post called the book, "a moving work of lyrical and at times hallucinatory beauty... that reads like a hybrid of John Steinbeck's '*The Grapes of Wrath*' and Cormac McCarthy's '*The Road*'". It won the Kerry Group Irish Novel of the Year and was shortlisted for the Walter Scott Prize and the William Saroyan International Prize. In France it was shortlisted for the Prix Jean Monnet for European Literature, among other prizes. It was a book of the year in the Guardian, the Irish Independent, Kirkus and Esquire, a Staff Pick at The Paris Review and an Editors' Choice in the New York Times Book Review

Beyond the Sea was published in September 2019 to wide critical acclaim in the UK, Ireland, Australia and the US. The Wall Street Journal called the book "mesmerising"; The Guardian called the book "frightening but beautiful", while The Sunday Times said it had "echoes of Melville, Dostoyevsky and William Golding". It was chosen as a book of the year in the Irish Independent by Sebastian Barry who called the book "masterly". In 2021, it was published to wide acclaim in France where it won the 2022 Prix Gens de Mers.

Thank you so much Paul for taking time out to talk to The Wise Owl.

RS: For the benefit our readers please tell us what attracted you to the novel? Were there any traditional or contemporary novelists that inspired you to write or creative influences that encouraged you to pick up a pen or was it simply the fact that Ireland is full of untold stories that need telling.

PL: Before I became a novelist, I spent a good ten years trying hard not to become a novelist. I wrote music and played in a band and worked as a journalist but in the core of my being, I could hear the calling to literature. I had read fiction with great seriousness all my life and sensed for a long time that I would become a novelist. But I did nothing about it. I tried hard not to become a novelist because I was intimidated by the greatness of the writers I loved. (Joyce, Rulfo, Faulkner, McCarthy, Saramago, to name a few). I tried hard not to become a novelist because I was afraid I could never be good enough. When you ignore a fundamental part of who you are, when you do not listen to that inner voice, you begin to feel unwell in yourself. I was thirty years old and I was not happy with my life. I travelled to the island of Lipari in Sicily where I was struck by an epiphany. I saw in that moment how unhappy I was, and how the life I was leading was a lie. I understood that in the core of my being I was a novelist. And I understood for the first time that my fear of failure was a fundamental part of the writer's journey. Samuel Beckett wrote: "*Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.*" I knew in that moment that even if it took me 30 years to write a good novel, I would take that first step now.

RS: You have authored five novels, all of which have been critically acclaimed and awarded prestigious literary awards. All the novels belong to different sub-genres – *Red Sky in Morning* reads like an American western, *The Black Snow* was a pastoral novel, *Grace* was a bildungsroman & picaresque novel. I am curious to know

whether the choice of the sub-genre (of a novel) was a conscious choice, or the story line and setting decided the genre you wrote in.

PL: I write novels with themes and don't think of them as absorbing genres. But you are right about the range of my work. The book that asks to be written is never a conscious choice, but I've noticed over the years that each book seems to adopt a theme of sorts (or a genre if you want to be particular about it) and seeks to make it new, or at least, unique to me. Philip Roth once said, by way of Northrop Frye, that every serious writer must have their own personal mythology. Each book chases something new for me, but they all belong uniquely to my writing world, to my own writing mythology.

RS: I recollect reading somewhere that you are not particularly fond of this (history) genre. However, two of your novels are set in the early and mid-19th Century. Would you elaborate on this please.

PL: In serious fiction, a novel is a novel and yet labels are impossible to escape. If you write a literary novel set in the past, publishers and readers will shunt you into the historical trap and the book will be published as "historical fiction". It's a nonsense because it attracts a certain type of reader seeking genre fiction, and it leaves cold an entire cohort who secretly believe that the "historical novel" can't speak to the times we live in, that this type of novel is making a commentary on the past alone. But any idea that a novelist can simulate an authentic past is illusion — the novel is always a dream, a contemporary dream because it is an inescapable fact that a writer's consciousness, the deeper currents in the language, and any articulation of a world view, are shaped by the times the writer lives in. The novel itself is formed by unspoken rules that govern what a modern reader will recognise, borne by the history of all the novels written before it. A novelist might claim to be summoning an authentic past but it is an impossibility to write truthfully of any other time than your own. Historical fiction is contemporary fiction and cannot be anything else.

RS: All your novels (except *Beyond the Sea*) are set in Ireland and tap its history and major events, be it the trials faced by the Irish during the Great Famine as in *Grace* or the tragedy of the emigrant (with reference to the excavation of Duffy's Cut) as in *Red Sky in Morning*. What made you delve into Ireland's past and create protagonists against different periods of its history?

PL: Every novel I write is a vessel of a kind that comes unbidden to me from my subconscious. The story is a container for my authorial obsessions, and sometimes those containers are set in the past and sometimes they are set in the present. I don't choose consciously, though I do sense that from book to book I have a preference and my subconscious usually allows for that. With my first three novels, I sought in my own way to create new mythologies for old stories, to resurrect exhausted narratives by making them new again for my generation. *Red Sky in Morning* can be read on one level as a symbol for the spectre of emigration that had beset my generation after the crash of 2008. *The Black Snow* can be read (one one level) as a metaphor for the Irish economic crash and the wish we had as a nation for a culprit. *Grace* was my attempt to rewrite the narrative of the Great Irish Famine, to relocate it outside of the perceived and problematic truths of political, sociological and economic interpretations and to return it to lived experience. In that book there was a question I wanted to answer: what is the root cause of the transmission of silence that still passes down through the generations about what happened to the Irish people during the famine? To understand our national trauma, I had to cut right down to the bone.

RS: Your book *Beyond the sea*, was for me reminiscent of Hemingway's *The Old man & the sea* and also brought to mind Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*. It was also a book where for the first time you stepped out of Ireland to sketch a 'minimalistic' narrative, in the sense that it was limited to just two characters who were also its chief protagonists, and the setting was a boat adrift on the Ocean. And yet it had all the characteristics one would associate with a universal tragedy where 'man' grapples with the mistakes of his past, the physical & mental calamity of the present and uncertainty of the future. What was the inspiration behind this novel?

PL: In 2013, two fishermen left the coast of Mexico and motored out into the Pacific Ocean where they were met with a storm. Their boat took a battering and they were set adrift at the mercy of the ocean's currents, taking them further out into the Pacific and away from rescue. The men found themselves on the boat entirely alone at sea. When one of those fisherman, José Salvador Alvarenga, washed up alone on the shore of the Marshall Islands 14 months later in January 2014, the story seized my imagination. Sooner or later, the unwanted knocks against our door and life is changed utterly. How are we to define our loss or overcoming? This is the material that interests me as a novelist. Dostoevsky posed the question: "How much human being is in a human being?" I spent two years imagining my way into the lives of two fishermen, Bolivar and Hector, cast adrift on a lonely sea, probing their solitude and isolation, seeking to know their hearts. Human beings are hardwired for social connection. What happens to the mind and the heart when we are confined and isolated? The book was my shot at the distilled, philosophical novel.

RS: Your latest book 'Prophet Song', which has been short listed for The Booker Prize 2023, goes back to Ireland with the story of Eilish and explores once again the calamity of Ireland and the themes of alienation, displacement, search for the unattainable. For the benefit of the readers, please tell us what inspired you to write this beautiful but daunting book?

PL: In December 2018, when I sat down to write *Prophet Song*, it was clear to me that we in western Europe were living in dangerous times and that a tectonic shift was occurring in western democracies. I wanted to write a novel that could see into the modern chaos. The Syrian war had led to the biggest outpouring of refugees since World War Two and a lurch to the political right of some European states. There was a feeling of unravelling in the air, a sense that liberal democracy was in peril. I wanted to find a story that could contain all my anxieties. I began to wonder what Ireland would look like with a populist government where our democracy was drifting towards tyranny. I began to wonder how much free will an individual can have within such a system. And that led me to the problem of grief. In other words, *Prophet Song* is a novel with metaphysical questions but told within a deeply political universe.

RS: All your books have a plot that is completely engrossing. But what makes reading your books even more of a pleasure is the language which is almost cinematic. The blaze in *The Black Snow*, the hair-cutting episode in *Grace* have stayed with me for a long time because of their visual impact. I was wondering if you consciously make your language visually strong or is it something that comes to you naturally considering you have been a film critic before you became a full-time novelist?

PL: Literature will always come first for me as only literature can truly inhabit the spaces that make life so painful and beautiful. But cinema comes a close second. My imagination is intensely visual and I often write as though I am watching a film. In my time as a newspaper film critic – I reviewed over 1,000 films – I absorbed a lot about narrative and storytelling. Even the most enigmatic, elliptical films have a story to tell and that is a discipline I brought to my fiction. In the literary universe there is a corner of writers who believe that in order to be a serious novelist, and to express our true alienation, you must jettison any notion of storytelling. Such notions are bizarre. The truly great novelist – the complete novelist – is the writer who can bring to bear the weight of the universe within the simplicity of an unfolding story. To get a story right, to make it true, requires great labour and skill and I harbour a suspicion that the writers most wary of narrative are those least able to tell a story.

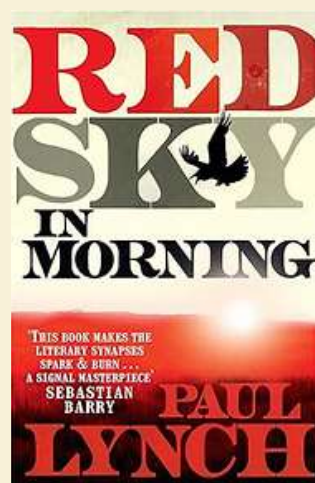
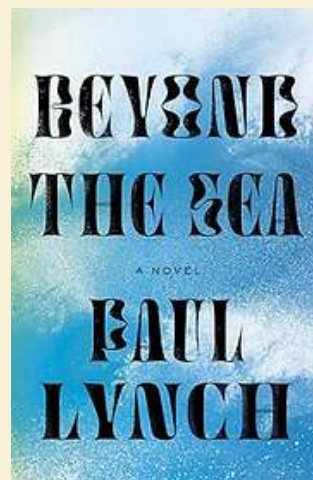
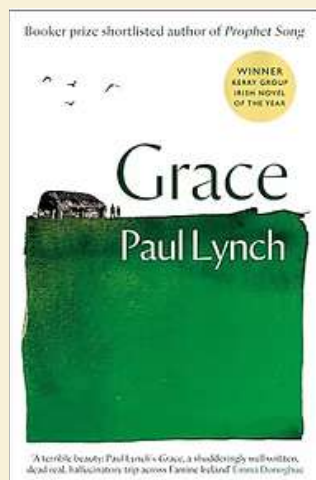
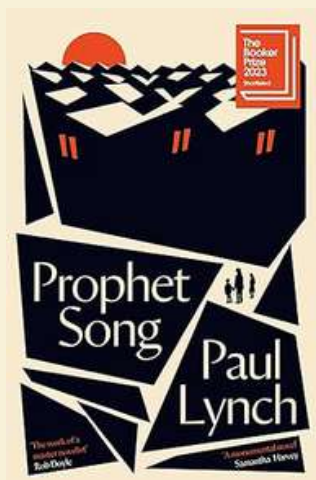
RS: You have been called this 'one of this generation's finest novelists.' How do you react to this? Does it make you happy or does it put pressure on you to write novels as good as the ones you have already penned?

PL: Recognition is useful for the writer as it's a lonely occupation. When you receive validation from other writers especially, it can be gratifying. Recognition is energy that encourages you to stay true to the path you are following. Truthfully, though, I don't spend much time thinking about such claims. Only our children will know who the truly great

writers of today are. In the meantime, I just get busy with job of writing. Ass on seat. It's all I truly want to do.

Thank you so much Paul, for talking time out to talk to us about your books and your creative journey as a writer. We at The Wise Owl wish you the best in all your creative endeavours and hope you win the Booker prize this year.

Books by Paul Lynch



The Interview : Yuko Kyutoku

(Rachna Singh, Editor, The Wise Owl, Talks to Yuko Kyutoku)

The Wise Owl talks to **Yuko Kyutoku**, a contemporary artist based in New York. She was born in Gifu and grew up in Aichi, Japan. Having grown up next to both nature with mountains and rivers, and urban areas, her love of nature and the outdoors grew tremendously. Throughout her life, Yuko has always been fascinated by images and how the world is represented through the eyes of others.

Yuko has held numerous shows internationally. She has exhibited her art in solo shows at the Obuchi Gallery, the General Consulate of Japan in New York, Gallery Petite, Cafe Grumpy, Local Project Art Space, and Yada City Gallery. She also collaborated with other artists and was a part of group shows at Local Project Art Space last year and this year. Her works and shows were featured in numerous art magazines, online platforms, and major newspapers, including Create! Magazine, Seikyo Newspaper, DoodleWash, and Globo Arte Magazine, as well as in an interview with Sakura Radio in New York.

Yuko has received many scholarships and awards, including the Juror's Choice Award for her printmaking book from Julian Kreimer, in 2015. She has worked for the Aichi Triennale, which is an urban international art festival held at the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art and the Aichi Art Center in Japan. She works as an artist to produce artwork and plans to exhibit her recent work in solo shows this year in Japan and New York.

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

RS: For the benefit of the readers please tell us what attracted you to art? Were there any creative influences in your life who/which encouraged you in your pursuit of art?

YK: I have loved art since I was a kid. My family loves art, and they purchased and displayed many paintings in our home growing up. My father used to take me to museums and sign me up for many art classes at the local center. I also met many great art teachers who made an impact on me. My grandmother is also a painter, and she often encouraged me to create art since she believed I had a talent.

RS: I was looking at your gallery of work; you do drawings, paintings, photography as well as sculpture. Our readers would be curious to know which is your favourite art form? Or should I say which art form gives you the maximum creative satisfaction?

YK: I love working on all the mediums I use because each offers me different experiences. However, my favorite medium all the time is drawing and painting. I like using my hands to draw details using pens, as well as create texture using water fluid paints.

RS: You are a prolific painter. What medium do you like working in best (watercolours, oils, acrylics etc) and why?

YK: Thank you so much. I like working on gouache because the quality of the painting is almost between watercolor and acrylic paints. I like the thickness of the paper, which works like acrylic and creates graphic images on paper. However, if I add water, the gouache paints work like watercolors, which allow me to create expressive movements on the surface. I love the flexibility of gouache paints.

RS: While looking at your artworks, I realised that the predominant colour you use is blue, especially an indigo blue. Our viewers & readers would be curious to know if there is any particular significance of this colour for you?

YK: Blue is my favorite color all the time. For me, the blue color is a happiness color; it brings me peace, joy, excitement, beauty, and all. I also feel possibilities with the colors; I can create any artwork I want without fear or hesitation. Blue speaks to me the most.

Indigo Blue also links to my home country, Japan. In Japanese painting, *Ukiyoe*, there are lots of indigo blues you can find, and I also got inspiration from my roots.

RS: You have worked as an artist in Japan as well as USA. Is the art milieu of these countries different? If so how?

YK: There are many differences between Japanese contemporary art and American contemporary art. Japanese embrace works that are aesthetically beautiful rather than the content or ideas expressed in artworks. In the US, we embrace the ideas behind the works and enjoy how they reflect the current era.

RS: Your grandmother was an established artist in Japan. Has Japanese traditional art influenced your artwork? If so, how?

YK: I love Japanese *ukiyo-e* painting. I get many inspirations from the paintings. One of them is the use of indigo blue. I purchased Japanese traditional painting pigments every time I went to Japan, and I use the indigo painting pigments when I create my paintings. Second are the themes of the *Ukiyoe* paintings, which depict local people and nature. These *Ukiyoe* paintings embrace the ordinary cityscapes and entertainments as well as the beauty of nature in Japan. I incorporate the ideas in my paintings, and my themes of paintings often include local cityscapes and people I met in my life.

RS: You have a category of artwork called 'True Expressionism' where you use acrylic paints, beads etc. Could you elaborate on this genre for the benefit of the readers.

YK: Sure. This was one of my senior projects from college. This piece explores my spirituality and Buddhist practices. I explored calmness and my inner self through the works. Because it is about spirituality, I decided to create an abstract and organic series of paintings. To express the idea of interconnectedness with people, the environment, and the works around me, the movements of the brushstrokes and the shapes of the paintings help me to achieve the ideas.

RS: You have exhibited your artwork in various prestigious galleries across the world and have made a place for yourself in a very competitive art world. What advice would you give upcoming artists on how to hone their craft and become an established artist?

YK: Keep making art, polish your unique style, and find your voice to express in your work. It is sometimes challenging to work as an artist; however, if you do not give up and keep working hard, there are always opportunities waiting for you.

RS: Are there any artists (traditional & contemporary) who have inspired you ? What is it about their work that attracts you the most?

YK: I like Van Gogh all the time. I love how his paintings embrace the beauty of local people, farmers, and nature. Every time I see his paintings, it gives me hope, moments of beauty, and joy, and I also hope to give the same experience to

people who see my artwork. For me, the definition of good art is to contribute to people and/or society, and his paintings truly do that.

RS: If I were to ask you to describe yourself as an artist in 3 adjectives, what would they be and why?

YK: passionate, idealistic and dreamer

I am very passionate about what I do. I love paintings very much, and they give me true joy. I am also idealistic, and I have high standards and expectations for the art that I pursue and create. Lastly, I am a dreamer. I dream of my paintings, and I paint my dreams. My dreams have taken me where I am today and will take me to more places in the future.

Thanks Yuko for taking time out to talk to The Wise Owl. It was a pleasure to talk to you about your creative art and inspiration behind your art. Wishing you the best in all your artistic pursuits and hoping you continue to add colour to the world with your beautiful artwork.

Works of Yuko Kyutoku



Studio



Blue Cafe
(Mixed Media)



Metropolitan Museum



Breath

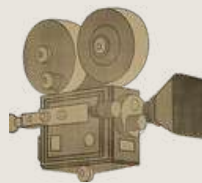


The Blue new York Botanical Garden
(Mixed Media)

TALKING BOOKS



TALKING BOOKS With Audrey Magee



A Video Conversation

The Wise Owl talks to Audrey Magee about her book *The Colony*, which was long listed for the Booker Prize 2022.

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TALKING BOOKS With Robert Witmer



A Video Conversation

The Wise Owl talks to Robert Witmer about his poetry collection, *Serendipity*, released in 2023.

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TALKING BOOKS



TALKING BOOKS With Priya Atwal

A Conversation in Words



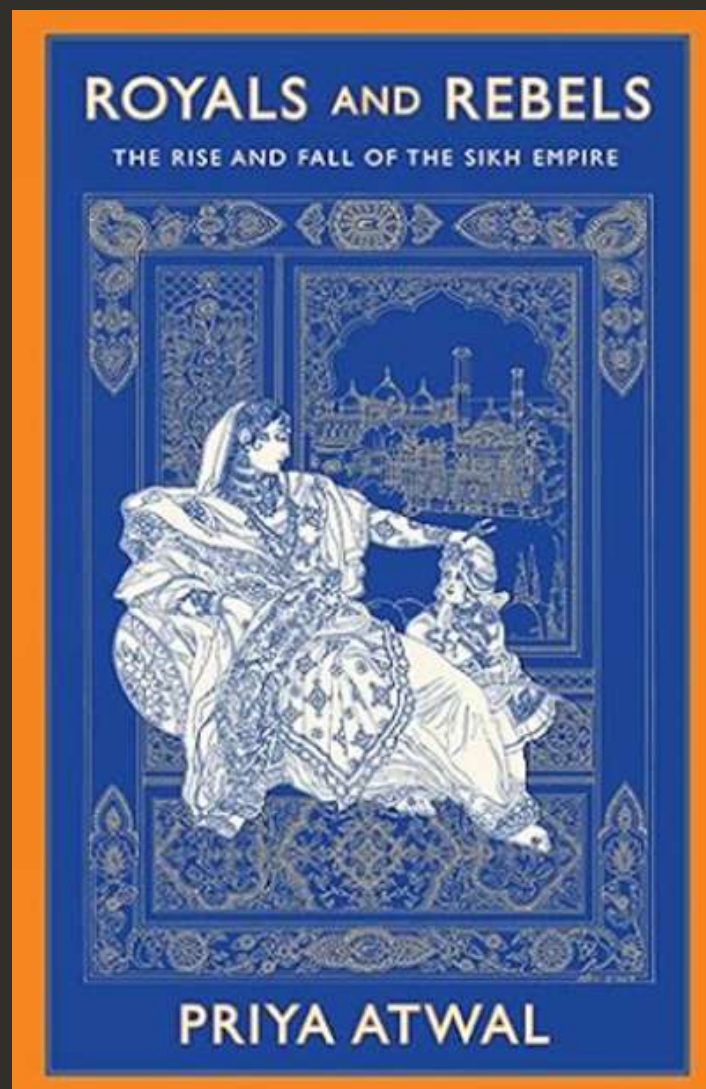
Sakoon Singh, on behalf of The Wise Owl, talks to Priya Atwal about her book *Royals & Rebels: The Rise & Fall of the Sikh Empire*.

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TALKING BOOKS



Talking Books



Sakoon Singh talks to Priya Atwal about her book 'Royals & Rebels: The Rise & Fall of the Sikh Empire,' published jointly by Hurst, Oxford University Press and HarperCollins India.



Talking Books

Vital to understand layers of 19 th C Punjab History situated at the cusp of colonialism

Sakoon Singh, on behalf of The Wise Owl, talks to Priya Atwal about her book 'Royals & Rebels'

SS: Priya, let me begin by asking you: what led you in the direction of Sikh history? You do talk about it in the preface of your book but for our readers, if you could elaborate: Was it your heritage, in the sense of becoming sensitised to a part of one's own intimate history or was it a natural progression of the academic line you were following?

PA: As a teenager, I was interested more broadly in gender history and the history of the Indian independence struggle - my focus on Sikh history came later. My interest in gender and feminist histories was piqued when I studied Virginia Woolf's works for the first time in high school. They fascinated me in the way that they challenged traditional notions of what it meant to be a woman, and to write 'his' versus 'her-story'. This intrigued me so much and I wanted to explore what it could mean for writing the history of women in my own community. I never had any opportunity to study South Asian history at school though, as I grew up in a very white area of the south-east of England. My first proper lessons came at university, where I embarked on a History degree, and from the conversations and events that I participated in at the University Sikh Society at Oxford.

A book talk I attended on Patwant Singh and Jyoti Rai's Empire of the Sikhs, organised by SikhSoc, ultimately shaped the course of my career. At that event, I learnt for the first time about the existence of the former kingdom of Ranjit Singh and the tragic reign of Maharani Jind Kaur, and couldn't believe what I was hearing. I was sad I had no clue about this history before, despite being a Sikh, and was desperate to learn more. That experience planted the seed for my eventual book!

SS: It is so interesting you bring in the Virginia Woolf and how that modified your view of perceiving history, its writing and the ubiquitous gender slant. And I think this erasure of certain details and a collective amnesia vis a vis this important period Punjab history is quite pervasive. Coming to the Ranjit Singh's empire, what is fascinating is the cosmopolitan thought processes behind its institutions wherein the foundational ideas of race/ religion/ nationality/ education, were not based on a narrow definition of national, or for that matter, Sikh identity. I think, in this, Ranjit Singh is exceptional and not just successful . What do you think?

PA: This is an aspect of nineteenth-century Punjabi history that I also find very impressive. The nature of Maharajah Ranjit Singh's rulership and government is really quite interesting in the way that it attempted to balance carefully (and with considerable success) all sorts of tensions and divergences in the social fabric of the country. I think there is certainly enough evidence to suggest that the Maharajah was not exactly a saint - he was a heavy drinker, often pretty ruthless in his politics, and at times, also quite unpleasant to members of his own close family. Yet he was also strikingly human and humble, particularly accepting the idea that he ultimately could never stand above or apart from the Khalsa panth and the Guru Granth Sahib. He accepted their direction and ruled in their name only, and clearly endeavoured to tread a very careful path in building his own dynasty's supremacy whilst following the path of Sikhi in his own way. Similarly, he acknowledged and accounted for the reality that Sikhs were a minority community in the Punjab, and that his government need to equally work for his more numerous subjects who were Hindus, Muslims or from other religious backgrounds. Unlike past rulers, he refrained from dogma and celebrated the varied faiths in the region on largely equal terms - even marrying women from these different backgrounds and appointing men from all communities to serve in his

army and administration. The kingdom he fashioned in the nineteenth century was really a big experiment in the way that it established Sikh rulership on such a grand scale, but it was certainly a success in the level of peace and prosperity that it brought to a wide range of Punjabi people.

SS: It is very clear that you have adopted a divergent look at the Sikh Empire. From the more common Ranjit Singh centric approach, you have instead looked at personalities/ Sikh ideological influences /his several wives and relationships, and even the more cosmopolitan contact with foreign powers of that time, British and the others as important in order to understand the structures in the Sikh Empire. One can see this perspective shift from the cover of your book itself, where you choose not to portray the man but his youngest wife Jind Kaur and Duleep Singh. So the shift from strengths to the vulnerabilities is evident. What line of thought prompted this?

PA: I don't actually see this as a shift from 'strengths' to 'vulnerabilities'! What I learnt through my research, and wanted to demonstrate in my book, is that the 'strength' that built this empire actually came from many different quarters: including the women and children of Ranjit Singh's family (and other key figures in his kingdom), rather than solely from the Maharajah himself. We have for too long been absorbed by the myth of Ranjit Singh as some kind of super-hero, without whom the entire fabric of the empire crumbled post-1839. This is actually a projection of many British colonial accounts of the period, which ironically championed Ranjit Singh as the Sher-e-Punjab more than even Punjabi historians did! But this was all so that they could simultaneously cast smears against his heirs and successors, and cut down their legitimacy to rule. When I started delving into the reign of Maharani Jind Kaur, and then wider primary sources documenting the experiences of other women and young princes in the family, I was amazed to find a much more complex and interesting picture of their activities, which clearly highlighted that they while they were all messy, imperfect humans; they all had made important contributions to the diplomacy, governance, military expansion and cultural life of the kingdom. It's high time we recognise this and explore further what it means for our understanding of this key period of Sikh and Punjabi history.

SS: Jind Kaur's is a fascinating case. There are drastically different opinions about her that have been 'showcased.' While a clearly manufactured strain popularised by British historians, diplomats, bureaucrats of her time proceeded to dub her "Messalina of Punjab", more than implying her dubious moral standards (especially from a rigid Victorian standpoint), her promiscuity and later her propensity towards seditious behaviour. This was obviously done to create a justification for her subsequent deportation and mistreatment at their hands. Duleep Singh was convinced at some level of being moved to surrogacy under the Logins as a fallout of the mother's "lunacy". A critical look at the writings of the British officialdom lays bare the fact that the propaganda mills were in full swing. One side was this. The other side had the Khalsa Army proclaiming her as "Mai Jindan" or Mother of Khalsa, a title that is steeped in reverence. Numerous dhadhi jathas have celebrated her courage (and continue to do so in an unbroken tradition), highlighting her difficult journey, escape from Chunar etc. In one strain of popular Punjabi imagination she is the stuff of legend. Even though in modern history writing, Indian historians generally took the line of British historiography or alternately condemned her to a footnote. So obviously a dominant undercurrent of your work is critique of mainstream history writing, similar to what one finds in writings of litterateurs Navtej Sarna and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Any findings about her that you were startled by?

PA: Yes, I definitely delve into a critique of history-writing in my book. I really tried to peel back the layers of different historical accounts that have been written about the Maharanis and the Punjab for this period, and to explore the various nuggets of information that we can glean from them - in all their contradiction and clarity. You're absolutely right that many British accounts of that time were extremely negative and nasty about Maharani Jind Kaur. However, what intrigued me most was how sometimes even those most negative of sources often contained within them a really interesting fact about her activity as a ruler, which almost seemed to have slipped into the narrative despite the best efforts of the

colonial writer to disparage her! One example was learning about her endeavours to establish a new trading town, called Duleepgarh, in the mid-1840s. The Maharani apparently doubled down in her efforts to build up this town (which was apparently established mid-way between Amritsar and Lahore) in the aftermath of the First Anglo-Sikh War, to boost trade and tax revenue, which she needed to pay off the heavy war fines that she was treaty-bound to pay to the East India Company. Mentions of her conscientious efforts to work with bankers and traders from Amritsar to boost the settlement were scattered alongside much more frequently-reported and highly spurious bazaar gossip about her supposed affairs with members of the durbar, in the political reports being sent back by British officials to the Company headquarters. It struck me as so fascinating that, despite their best endeavours to cast aspersions on her character, these news-writers also couldn't help but acknowledge and admire her town-building activity. Acknowledging this today helps us see the contradictions in these representations of her career, and better appreciate the realities of the very active leadership role that she took as Queen-Regent in the very difficult context of post-war Punjab.

SS: I feel that somewhere in the minds of Punjabis, Ranjit Singh's Empire continues to be that Utopia, which is both remembered as that lost kingdom as well as a blue print of what an ideal Punjabi state ought to be like. To that extent it continues to have an undeniable pull. What do you think and what characteristics of the Khalsa Empire for you are personally worth highlighting?

PA: It certainly is an iconic era that is easy to look back on with a great deal of romance and nostalgia, particularly for Sikhs; not least in the wake of the painful ruptures caused by British colonialism, Partition and the Khalistan struggle. For me, however, a key takeaway is the relative pan-Punjabi cultural unity and richness that seemed to be a marked feature of that period in history. I wouldn't advocate for another monarchy or empire to be established in order to achieve this – I'd certainly prefer to live in a democratic country! And it's definitely clear that subjects on the border regions of the empire, including Kashmiris, Pathans and Afghans, really didn't like being under Sikh imperial rule and regard it as a period of oppression; so empires, no matter who they are ruled by, are never a good way to run a country. However, I think the nobility of cultural life from that period is worth emulating: we had much more investment in education during Ranjit Singh's reign, and much greater support for intellectuals, artists and architects, which overall gave so much more pride and empowerment to ordinary Punjabis and their cultural world. Equally, there was much more cohesion and interfaith solidarity/harmony, which added to the confidence and stability of Punjabi society at the time. I think we could stand to benefit from all this so much today, especially if all these opportunities were provided equally to men and women.

SS: I want to ask you this, which in a way will bring our conversation full circle: One of the things you are doing as a historian is cultivating historical sense in the community at large. Especially for British Sikhs, the story of Jind Kaur and Duleep has a special resonance. I want to mention here the work of the likes of Peter Bance, Davinder Toor, Gurinder Mann, UKPHA, Ramblings of a Sikh, A Little History of Sikhs, Anglo- Sikh Heritage Trail, etc that, inter alia, manage community activities like book readings, walking tours, material collections, building museums, blogging etc that have created new channels of popular conversations about heritage with the community at large. You were recently entrusted with the job at Tower of London, of providing detailed museum labels on the crown jewels (including the Koh-i-Noor) and their sources in colonial exploits. You and others participated in the recent ceremony where Sophia Duleep Singh's house has been granted a blue plaque, thus according long overdue recognition to a Sikh icon. These events definitely auger well and indicate an undeniable interest in this part of Sikh as well as Imperial History. How do you perceive the future of these endeavours?

PA: I am so excited about all of this! It makes me so happy that we have such a diverse range of activity taking place, which is educating not only the Sikh/Punjabi community, but equally reaching wider mainstream audiences. It's so important that we do both, and it's incredibly exciting that we are today able to be so creative and open in sharing our histories, with so many different people getting involved and doing excellent work. It can be lonely and hard pursuing a

career as historian at times – funding can be difficult to obtain, and you often work long hours in libraries/archives, or at a desk writing alone on complex subjects. So to have an increasingly wide range of allies and well-wishers championing research and public education on Sikh history is such a boon. It gives me a real inspirational boost to keep going, and also makes me really happy and proud to see that diverse communities and younger generations will have much greater opportunities to learn about our history than I ever did growing up!

SS: Thanks for that wonderful conversation Priya.

PA: Thanks so much for your interest in my work, and for helping to shine a light in the exciting developments in the field of Sikh/Punjabi history. I greatly look forward to reading your novel on Jind Kaur and Duleep Singh too!

About Priya Atwal



Dr Priya Atwal is a historian and author focusing on empire, monarchy, and cultural politics. She is the University of Oxford's Community History Fellow, where she obtained her doctorate and teaches.

In 2020, Priya's *Royals and Rebels: The Rise and Fall of the Sikh Empire* was jointly published by Hurst, Oxford University Press and HarperCollins India. The book chronicled the history of the men and women who forged the far-reaching Sikh Empire in a dramatic global era of fading dynasties and ambitious newcomers. In the same year, Priya presented a 5-part series for BBC Radio 4 called *Lies My Teacher Told Me*; a series which interrogating the teaching of history in itself, highlighting the ways through which it is embellished, manipulated, and sometimes fabricated to fit political agendas, nationalistic narratives, and contemporary identity politics. Since then, Priya has appeared on various programmes and podcasts, including BBC Radio 4's *Princess and Sky History's The Royal Mob*.

Discovering her passion for history through a love of Bollywood cinema and trips to National Trust homes, Priya has acted as a historical consultant for organisations including the Historic Royal Palaces and the Royal Shakespeare Company. Most recently, she was the historical consultant on the second series of Netflix's hit series *Bridgerton*; a series which broke streaming records in logging 700 million hours of viewing in its first 28 days. While working both on and off-screen, Priya continues to deliver keynotes and panel discussions for audiences ranging from companies such as BMW and EY to government offices such as the MET Office and the Department for Education.

About Sakoon Singh



Sakoon Singh studied English Literature at the JNU, New Delhi and Panjab University, Chandigarh. She has been a recipient of the Fulbright Fellowship and currently teaches Indian literature and cultural studies in Chandigarh. She has published her academic writings extensively, including contribution to *Cultural Studies in India* (Routledge 2015), *Literature and Theory* (Routledge 2021) and *Reading India in a Transnational Era* (Routledge 2021). She has served on the editorial team of *Dialog* and edited a special South Asia section for *E3W Review of Books* (University of Texas, Austin). She has done a stint as an Associate fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla. She was a member of the selection process of Bal Puruskar, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi. 2021.

"In the Land of the Lovers" (Rupa; April, 2020)- Short listed for PFC-VoW Book awards 2021 is her debut novel. She is currently working on her second, which is a historical novel that revolves around the end of the Sikh Empire and the beginnings of colonial intervention in Punjab, particularly highlighting the story of Jind Kaur and Duleep Singh.

A TRIBUTE



Louise Glück

A Tribute by Taseer Gujral



Louise Glück : The Poet of Balance, Wit and Wisdom

Louise Glück, poet of stunning candour and deep perception, sounded almost like a sage in her first reaction to being awarded a Nobel Prize in Literature in 1990 (she was the first American-born poet to win it since T.S. Eliot, in 1948). In an early morning telephonic conversation with Committee representative, she longed for a cup of coffee and then ruminated aloud on the win, *"My first thought was I wouldn't have any friends because most of my friends are writers"*. She went on to add what is actually her leitmotif in her own poetry, *"But mostly, I'm concerned with the preservation of daily life with the people I love"*. The sentiment almost sounded sufi in its earthiness and wisdom. In her writing career spanning six decades, Glück worked rigorously and unflinchingly to preserve a state of balance - a familiar experience that many could relate with, whether talking about relationships or seasons and nature. Even if her poetic register is starkly emotional, at times confessional, it's never solipsistic. She dives into her own self with a brutal earnestness, not afraid of confronting her own monsters.

Louise Glück (pronounced Glick) passed on 13th of October, 2023, leaving behind a legacy of lyrical poetry that wove technical precision with profound insights into human nature, relationships, loneliness, and deeper existential questions. Glück was 80 and died of cancer at her Cambridge home in Massachusetts. She had recently been diagnosed, and her former student, the Pulitzer winning poet, Jorie Graham put it so appropriately when he says: “I find it very much like her that she only learned she had cancer a few days before dying from it,” Graham said, “Her whole sensibility – both on and off the page – was cut that close to the spine of time”. In her haunting poem, *Song*, from her 2021 anthology, “*Winter Recipes from the Collective*”, Glück reflects on death and art in the conversation between the speaker and her ceramist friend Leo.

There is a kind of detached look at death with emphasis on a fire that keeps the hope alive:

*I can see his house in the distance;
smoke is coming from the chimney
That is the kiln, I think;
only Leo makes porcelain in the desert
Ah, he says, you are dreaming again
And I say then I'm glad I dream
the fire is still alive
(Song,2021)*

In awarding the Nobel, the committee praised her “*unmistakable poetic voice that with austere beauty makes individual existence universal.*” At the Nobel announcement, Anders Olsson, the chair of the prize-giving committee, praised her for her intelligence and her minimalist voice:

“Louise Glück’s voice is unmistakable,” he said. *“It is candid and uncompromising, and it signals this poet wants to be understood.”* But he also said her voice was also *“full of humor and biting wit.”*

Glück was born in New York City in 1943, and grew up on Long Island. Her father helped invent the X-Acto knife, an interesting detail. Is it a coincidence then, that Glück slices with a ruthless honesty and precision in her poems, even at the risk of exposing her own vulnerabilities and foibles. She is unabashedly herself in her poems and owns her voice with elan.

Glück attended Sarah Lawrence College and Columbia University, but took no degree. When Glück was young, she struggled with anorexia nervosa, a disease she later attributed to her hunger for achieving control. Though the disorder is not her favourite poetic subject, she covertly addresses it in a section of her poem, *Dedication to Hunger*:

*It begins quietly
in certain female children:
the fear of death, taking as its form
dedication to hunger,
because a woman’s body
is a grave; it will accept
anything.*

By the mid-1960s she was working as a secretary by day and writing poetry in her free time. Soon she was getting published in magazines like *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic* and *The Nation*. Even though initially, she was not keen on teaching, she later found that she enjoyed classroom teaching and even drew inspiration from it. She enjoyed her teaching stints in Williams College, Yale and, later Stanford. In an interview with *The New York Times*, she says about teaching:

"You're constantly being bathed in the unexpected and the new. You have to rearrange your ideas so that you can draw out of your students what excites them. My students amaze me; they dazzle me".

In her career spanning more than six decades, Gluck came out with 14 books of Poetry. She began publishing in the 1960s and received some acclaim in the '70s. Her first book, *Firstborn*, was a sample of technical mastery and precision, with a sort of "embarrassed tenderness", in her own words. But what stands out is a deft use of words, clear imagery, skillfully controlled pace and tempo. You have the immediate sense that you are conversing with a highly intelligent and astute person. The poems crackle with energy and verve. In the titular poem, Gluck writes about the linear monotony of time, a sentiment very humanly identifiable:

*The weeks go by, I shelve them
They are all the same, like peeled soup cans*

In the '80s and early '90s, she produced a string of her most lauded books, including "*Triumph of Achilles*" (1985), which won the National Book Critics Circle Award. Having fed on generous readings of Greek mythology by her parents at home, she layered her poetry with philosophic and mythical allusions, imbuing it with a fascinating richness and depth. In her 1996 collection, *Meadowlands*, she weaves together the figures of Odysseus and Penelope from Homer's *Odyssey* with the story of the dissolution of a modern-day marriage.

She won the Pulitzer for "*The Wild Iris*" (1992), where she talks in the voice of the gardener as well as the flower. In the title poem of "*The Wild Iris*," she wrote, from the flower's perspective:

*You who do not remember
passage from the other world
I tell you I could speak again: whatever
returns from oblivion returns
to find a voice:
from the center of my life came
a great fountain, deep blue
shadows on azure sea water*

For *Faithful and Virtuous Night* (2014), she won her the National Book Award. While her first books had touched relationships and troubled bonds, the later ones as this take the reader on an inner journey exploring deep, intimate feelings.

Gluck's creative ability lay in creating poetry that many people can relate to and experience intensely. Her work was both deeply personal —Ararat, for example, drew on the pain she experienced over the death of her father. It can be seen as one of her most painful and disturbing works. As seen here, the power of her poetry lies in using direct, straightforward language, but also that is carefully wrapped in sharp selections of rhyme and rhythm lifting and projecting her verses in a sort of third dimension, in relief.

In her 2006 collection, *Averno* (2006), she used the myth of Persephone as a lens to mother-daughter relationships, suffering, aging and death. Stephen Burt, reviewing her collection noted, "*few poets save [Sylvia] Plath have sounded so alienated, so depressed, so often, and rendered that alienation aesthetically interesting*". In one of the poems measuring love and loss (*The Triumph of Achilles*) she says:

"Why love what you will lose?" Then she goes on to answer her own question: "*There is nothing else to love*"

At the outset, she might appear dark and austere, but with her intuitive intelligence about understanding of human

relationships and her sharp wit, Glück transcended from a autobiographical, deeply personal voice to a social and universal catalogue of human sensitivity. About writing from her own experience, Glück says in a 2020 interview with The New York Times :

.... and I assume that my struggles and joys are not unique. They feel unique as you experience them, but I'm not interested in making the spotlight fall on my particular life, and myself but instead on the struggles and joys of humans, who are born and then forced to exit. I think I write about mortality because it was a terrible shock to me to discover in childhood that you don't get this forever"

Farewell, Louise Glück, the poet of balance, wit and wisdom!



Taseer Gujral

Taseer Gujral is a poet, editor, columnist and a translator. She has been an ACC scholar from ASRC, Hyderabad and has worked on the poetry of Adrienne Rich for her doctoral thesis. Her published works appeared in Outlook, The Punch, The Sunflower Collective, Coldnoon Diaries etc. She has been on the panel of judges for the WE Kamala Das Poetry Award. Her columns on Literature and Cinema have also appeared in DNA. Her interests range from Poetry, translation, cinema, culture, aesthetics and music.

POETRY



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Ann Privateer

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Unaware

By Ann Privateer

Secrets scribbled in a notebook
Wild writings about a contentious life
Feelings crazy, poetry blows away
Into the observers joy
Eavesdrop, be essential
Spontaneous too

Don't live your life in a tea cup
Don't toil all day with nothing to show
Your memory magnet can't objectify
Dance and sing because it's summer.



Imaginations's Light

By Concetta Pipia

In the realm that we dwell, where reality collides,
An alchemy unfolds where imagination abides,
A mingling of worlds, subtle and grand,
As we traverse the border, hand in hand.

See the shifting hues of an ever-changing sky,
Luminous tapestries woven with secrets held high,
Where nimble clouds dance, stories to tell,
Imagination's strokes, painting them so well.

On the city streets, where chaos resides,
Imagination whispers, true beauty it presides,
Through the prism of mind, reality transformed,
Meaning bursts forth, in ways unadorned.

In the woven fabric, where the mundane resides,
Imagination adorns it with shimmer and tides,
A symphony of colors, melodies of thought,
Bringing forth existence, where once shadows fought.

Behold the flowers, swaying in the breeze,
Imagination breathes life, bringing them to ease,
Their fragrance speaks tales, hidden within,
Reality enriched, a world that's not been seen.

Within the depths of the ocean's vast floor,
Imagination dances, conjuring lore,
Mermaids and sea nymphs frolic and sway,
Shaping a reality that defies yesterday.

Yet, on the precipice where dreams sprout,

Reality weaves tendrils, anchoring throughout,
Imagination may wander, boundless and free,
But meaning's found when tethered, where reality'll be.

For the world unrestrained may lose its form,
In a kaleidoscope chaos, where shadows swarm,
Imagination's power, a gift to create,
Yet in reality's embrace, true significance awaits.

Though imagination's brush can light up every scene,
Reality's touch bestows the vibrant and serene,
Together they mingle, in a cosmic duet,
A harmony of existence, like no other we've met.

For reality lays the ground, a foundation it births,
While imagination soars, traversing the earth,
Both interwoven, shaping existence's core,
Reality and imagination, forevermore.



A Journey to Behold

By Dan Hardison

The time had come
to embark on a journey,
to leave family and friends,
to depart the only home
you have known.

As you stand in the doorway
the rooms behind you
filled with memories
pull at your heart and mind
to remain.

There is comfort here,
the beyond unknown,
there will be no going back
once that step is taken,
the door closed.

Voices inside you call out
with doubt and with sadness,
yet there is a new voice
a singular voice, your own,
you know you must go.

The door closes
and a darkness falls over you
covers you in confusion,
but as you turn there is a light
that brightens the soul.

All that has gone before
and all that you have learned
will be with you, to guide you,
as you begin this journey -
a new life, your own.



Midnight at Cedar Lake

By George Freek

Leaves fall in the moonlight.
Clouds drift by in pairs,
but they're here as briefly
as the dead leaves.
Stars shine with a dim light,
which reflects
off the tops of the pines.
The moon drifts slowly
as if it were dragging
an anchor.
What has been
can never come back.
I have many regrets.
And when I look at
this adamant sky,
I know they're not over yet.



Trail Conversations

By Fabrice B. Poussin

Witness to the many lives in the wild
released for a three-hour tour
meandering through the red trails
of a red rock world..

An exhausting trek in the stones
scent of sweat and sweet perfumes
laughter, cusses, and groans of pain
emerge from time to time.

She speaks of manicured lives in the city
longing for the freedom of this welcoming
desert, strange heaven for Teslas
sharp Vettes and 30-dollar pizzas.

Daughter discusses her therapy with mother
as they amble along the dusty path
ski poles in hand, water bottle on the back
why leave modern problems at home?

Bearded as his friend of same height and body style
he needs to think about life insurance
dividends, taxes, and his handicap
on the nearing golf course of pristine green.

I stop, turn around possibly frown
the sunset upon the cathedral rock in my eyes
in intimate complicity with a passing mule deer
homeless in his world of drought and trees.



Make it with You

By Chad Sokolovsky

Thousands of tiny explosions
are happening under the hood
every second while I'm driving
obliviously listening to
the band Bread on the radio.

Although I don't know why anyone
would name a band
after the chemistry of wheat,
water, and yeast or where
the inspiration came from.

Maybe it's a philosophical metaphor
so deep that it is lost on me.
Maybe they were thinking of the dawn
of civilization when the Nile river delta
over-poured like a bucket left in the rain

and granaries sprouted up
to store the wheat
that would become a staple
allowing humanity to rise.
But I'm too distracted

by the couple jogging
down Telegraph Ave -
his shirtless perfect pecs
and her lavender sports bra
like a fistful of irises

that I almost sideswipe a bus.

I'm envious of the kind of drive
it takes to just spill out of your front door
onto the street and start running,
or to break from the gravitational pull

of the event horizon separating
what you want to be from what you are.
But I find out the band was simply stuck
in traffic behind a Wonder Bread truck
somewhere in Los Angeles.



Caryatid

By Jan Wieszorek

Feature the museum's porch,
where a stone woman

w/ eyes like grapes
imagines beyond marble.

She minds oaks across traffic
w/ out dropping her pose

or dangling her feet.
Across exhaust, she sees

black-tailed squirrels cry
w/ out her nursing.

Call her cold
in created posturing,

but see her from this
slant angle

above all the gnats
of pretense.



When her Wings Unfolded

By Debra S. Mascarenhas

When her wings unfolded
she fluttered them
she was excited
she knew she had gained her liberty;
and she gently lifted her wings
she flew far far away.

As she flew she felt
the wind on her face
and was ready to brace
any oncoming storm;
she faced them well
and flew higher and higher.

She did not turn back
but kept flying
further and further
higher and higher
she flew to where the eagles dared.

When her wings unfolded
she got her freedom.



Torn apart

By Saranya Narayanan

The night has pulled out, piles
Of pearls from the storms of yesterday,
When the rain that lashed the city,
Generously untouched my backyard where
I buried your memories afresh.

The dry patch of land that feeds on you,
Is the fruit that I bore,
For the love we loved.
I loved you each creepy night,
Crawling day, and lovely evening;
Painting the sky with penumbras.
Suns have dried up in my eyes,
And the rains have conquered my tears.
The autumn, like a full moon, is coaxed to
Glow through my windows;
Where the roses I kept for you have already,
Died a million deaths.
Through the hazy windings of the
Desolate streets,
I listen to our memories reverberating in the
Wayside blooms; but
They droop within my virgin hands.



Falling Asleep

By Joan McNeerney

Curling into a question mark
eyes shuttered
lips pursed
hands empty.

Dropping through
long dusty shafts
down into dank cellars.
Leaving behind faded day.

That last cup of sunlight
pouring from fingertips.
Lulled by rattling trains,
sighs of motors.

Bringing nothing but
memory into night.
Now I will untie knots
tear off wrappings, opening
wide bundles of dreams.



Tongues in Trees

By Sharon Whitehill

*And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
Find tongues in trees, books in the running brooks. -As You Like It*
Long before Goodnight Moon was composed,
I said hello every night to my pillow, my lamp,
and my woolly orange blanket: a cozy reunion,
after the long day apart, with companions alive
and as connected to me as the family cats. An outlook
my parents indulged, dissipating as I grew up,
a human habit of mind that sees each living
and non-living thing as a being, a self.

A lost gift, Wordsworth opined, which he equated
with memories of heaven that fade as we age,
though according to Freud it's merely an immature
cultural stage superseded by reason and science.
Not so different, to me, from the woman
who thrilled to the image of Jesus, burned like a brand
on the tortilla she scooped from her griddle.
Not unlike those wee faerie folk in green scarves,
light dancing around them, acknowledged not only
by Scottish villagers but by the Galloway doctor
who hid from them on the dark road as they trooped past.

Perhaps we too easily dismiss such a pre-pagan ethos,
everyday objects and places imbued with mysterious magic.
Like Mauna Kea, the mountain revered as the eldest
of ancestors god in Hawaii. Like Taranis, thunder deity
of Roman Celts, but also the thunder itself. Like spirits
who live inside the masks of the Bwa people of Mali
and Burkina Faso.

Projection, psychologists say: ideas and feelings
imprinted on concrete locales. And yet they survive:
in the storm hag of Scotland who washes her tartan
until it turns white and falls as the snow; in the divinities
of the tribal Malaysian Semang, who dwell in stone pillars
and under the earth; in sacred Navajo beings like Ma'ii,
the coyote, Niltsi, the wind, or alien gods like the Monster
Who Kicks People Down Cliffs.

And even the otherwise secular person who once
had a vision of all things in nature as one:
every tree, leaf, blade of grass, he said, lit from within
as if incandescent. Such moments, most often granted
to mystics and very young children, serve others,
serve me, as a humbling reminder of how small we are
in the vast network of being.



Thirst

By Padmini Krishnan

Drought-torn eyes rest
on patches of black
between the folds of blue skies
while droplets float below
the clouds,
teasing the barren ground.
A silver-bellied sparrow
rises, casting its ash-shadow
on the pavement,
carrying the
thirst of the earth,
croaking for tiny drops,
her angry eyes piercing the
hot blue sky
as if to tear it open
and steal torrents
of water, waiting
to burst out
from the blue cage.

Burrowed insects peek
in and out,
inhaling the
manufactured petrichor
in my garden
as I stack my
guilty thoughts
behind locked doors
wondering if the water truck
will arrive tomorrow
and the day after.

FICTION



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Sandor DeGrazia

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Mathemagic
Chinmaya Rastogi

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Dog Days

By Sandor DeGrazia

Caught in the febrile spell of a pathogen, the writer reminisces about the wonderful day spent with Willow on the beach

When luck provides, I find myself imbued with the gifts of nature found at the meeting of realms, in the sultriest of seasons, on an island named Fire. The ocean breeze filters past beach pines enchanting the narrow strip of sand with negative ions and positive energy. The salt air sings the song of the sea, serenading Persephone in bloom. The sky is bright, and the vibe cool in the late July heat. Here, the planet feels at peace.

Free of cars and chaos there exist only dunes, trees and wood planked boardwalks crisscrossing through a collection of charming cottages harboring souls searching to ameliorate themselves from mainland conformity. This is a place of mending and magic, a special spot of terra firma, founded on tolerance and built by love.

I am only a guest in this mystical place, a visitor partaking of its ambrosial delights for as long as possible, which is never long enough, but I'll take what I can get. The offerings here are exquisite but ephemeral and I am not fool enough to think otherwise. I have come to accept the fleeting nature of physical experience, but the essence of a moment endures, preserved in the unexplained periphery. Nothing lasts forever, they say - but I wonder. I am not young or naive, yet my heart allows its self-capture when here, always hoping to be swept away in the evanescence.

With every visit comes a gift, often in unpredictable form. But on this day the reward is expected and anticipated with delight. Today I am to spend the afternoon with someone wonderful. Willow.

As I approach my destination, three houses from the beach on the right, heading oceanward, my heart is already full. The temperature is perfect, my skin mostly bare and I carry a pace of easy intention. When I arrive, my date is there waiting. She lies quietly splayed in her spot of shade, keeping cool as she simmers with hope under the afternoon blaze, waiting patiently for her day in the sun. She's perched on the second-floor deck; blonde paws hanging over, facing the boardwalk so as not to miss a moment. Any opportunity for an escort to the bliss beyond the garden gate will not escape her, for she was born for this. Embedded beneath her golden coat are the instincts that animate her spirit of freedom

and dedication to a cause. Deep within is the DNA that makes her the perfect partner for the afternoon ahead – to run, dig, swim and retrieve!

She knows only how to live her truth; married to the moment, loyal to her motives, impresario to impulse and completely committed to her human. And for the next stretch of afternoon sun, that's me! She springs from her prone position, tail waving enthusiastically, smiling in all the ways she knows how. Her head rears up as visceral glottal groans announce her glee. She is too elegant and well-mannered to bark but her behavior speaks volumes. A few paw stomps accompany excited exhalations, punctuating her approval, imprimatur of what my arrival portends – the beach awaits!

Willow is an extraordinary beast of purebred beauty and winsome charm. She is slightly on the small side of standard with a soft yellow coat kept just right, strong legs, sturdy back and handsome head. Her paws seem somehow oversized and consort with her amiable nature and irresistibly adorable furry face to present a puppy-like effect even at middle age. She can win you over with a single head tilt. She possesses a generous amount of aesthetic appeal, but it is her personality that is most compelling. There are no traces of anger or aggression in her quiddity and no living soul she would hesitate to make friends with. Her unwillingness to approach the moment at hand with anything but optimism and wonder is admirable if not enviable. She is the essence of innocence with only the purest of intentions: to love and be loved.

She scurries down the ramp that allows her access to meet me. Her leash is slung over the wooden handrail at the bottom, deposited there by her daddies, for me to fetch. They embarked a short time ago, off on their own island adventure together. The joy and gratitude I feel when she is left in my care cannot ever be adequately expressed. I remove the partition that separates us, a very lightly fortified section of framed chicken wire. This is merely a representation of a command to respect a boundary. She could easily push past this barrier, if need be, yet she obeys it without fail – evidence of her mild and dutiful nature.

Unrestrained, we embrace like best friends reunited after an extended separation. It's only been days since we've seen each other last, but who knows how dogs understand time. Nothing matters now but the present anyway. She sniffs, snorts, kisses and dances enraptured circles of celebration. I do the same. We're not that different, really. It occurs to me I might never be greeted by anyone else in this lifetime with such pure abandonment, a notion that is perhaps as melancholic as it is marvelous. But taking Willow's lead, I stay in the positive. I scoop up the leash and together we head toward the gate.

There is something remarkable about this creature that grounds my soul and sets my spirit free. We have an uncommon bond. We are at peace in each other's presence. I make no audible demands on her nor she on me. We quietly interpret one another. There is no explanation of our easy union, only the awareness of a synchronous harmony spun by the magic of this place on a mystical thread, weaving us together by invisible force, indefinable yet absolutely understood. I am not her owner or her master. When we are together, we belong to no one and all we have is each other. Whether for an hour or a day, we exist fiercely in the moment without regard for our frolic's inevitable end. When we are together, time falls away and the whole world seems on our side. I do not remember our relationship growing into its current state over a period of time. It simply burst into being, forged from a single outing on an afternoon just like this one, years ago, as if it had been there all along waiting patiently for us to discover it.

The short walk to the beach is full of play. Willow follows her nose; hurrying ahead a few excited steps before quickly returning to my side with nuzzle nudges and sweet-hearted growls, ensuring I haven't backed out of the bargain. The leash stays in my hand, unattached. I pet and praise her. My steady advance eases her mind. After a few repetitions of this pattern, we arrive at the boardwalk's end. We inhale the charged air, exhilarated. Fidelity to feeling has paid off.

All that separates us from the expanse of enchantment below is a long set of stairs. Momentarily mesmerized by brilliance I take in the environment with giddy fascination, swiftly seduced by sand and sea. Offshore a pod of dolphins decorates the waterscape, amusing themselves, so secure with their place in the world. I wonder what it feels like to be

them. I wonder what happens in the deep unknown.

Patiently standing at attention, Willow looks at me longingly to fulfill the next part of our unspoken contract. The ball. A retriever by breed, she lives to answer the call that ignites her dharma, and who am I to deny her that? I provide the object of interest that's been bundled up with the leash in my hand, a fact she's been wise to all along. All part of the fun. Standing at the precipice, I raise my arm quickly overhead, all the cue Willow needs to bound down the stairs, releasing herself into the wild.

Witnessing Willow in action, awakened to her purpose, I am gifted a lesson in being. Clarified of personal distortion and distanced from the clatter of a noisy mind, a pathway to bliss is unveiled - The Transparent to the Transcendental. Entangled by distractions, humans have trouble accessing this portal to purity. But watching a dog at play can illuminate the way. Chase, catch, chew, roll, dig - repeat. Willow, unfurling every fiber of her being, enthralled with her ball on the beach, melding with the moment on a molecular level is a master class in fulfillment. It is the presence of being rather than the pursuit of achieving that enlightens.

I'm down the stairs and halfway to the water now, hot sand soothing bare feet, salt air infusing every cell. Willow meets me, proud and triumphant, presenting her ball unabashedly. She teases my hand but does not relinquish her prize, instead prancing blithely into the lapping Atlantic that is the great alembic. She splays herself in the same way I found her on the deck, belly down, facing inland, keeping an eye on things. The wax and wane of ocean water cools her undercarriage, occasionally cresting over her body from behind, caressing her in canine aqua massage. I meet her in the wash zone. A piece of driftwood wanders in on a wave. Willow flirts with it briefly, then returns her affections to the ball. It captures my curiosity momentarily. Where has it been? Where will it go next? What will be its end? Everything has a story...

I'm now lying flat in the sand with my equal, half wet and entirely happy, enamored of her beauty and entertained by her antics. The leash and my swimsuit were abandoned on the beach at first chance, rendered unnecessary. This is one of the few places I know of where both dogs and people can run naked and off-leash.

Together we roll and flop further into the mercurial motion of the water world. We are drawn into the surf like some misplaced marine species anxious to return to the mother realm. We are beguiled by the ocean's influence. It's as if we've been biding time, serving some silly solid-ground obligation, waiting for the chance to absorb back into the sea where we belong. We feel at home in the earth's end zone. Possessed by predisposition. After a bit of ball banter in the shallows it's time to go deeper. Willow concedes the ball into my care. She knows where the next throw will take us - into the blue.

Now we're racing, away from land, toward the depths of our desire, the boundlessness and buoyancy of open water disguised as a ball. I dive under, working my way through walls of water, enduring the onslaught, engaging strategy and physical force to get beyond the breakers. Willow follows. Managing the waves can be intimidating to many, especially if you're a dog, but she overcomes the challenge with rare finesse, even for a water breed. She is keenly aware of the oceans power and possesses exceptional aptitude for deciphering its language. She is highly in tune, approaching the situation with measured amounts of courage and calculation. Deploying a combination of bravery and brainpower, she maneuvers through the crashing surf, examining the elements, looking for opportunities and seizing moments, advancing herself toward her goals - the ball, me, and the immunity of the sea. Out here we are untethered, beyond burden, exonerated, exhilarated and exalted. Out here, together, we are free.

Now, free of the break, we swim as the world dissolves. We sway with the swells, aboard nature's thrill ride, surrendered to the sea, seduced by its majesty. The ball is securely muzzled. Willow will ensure its safe return. We stroke, pant and paddle, soon falling into a sort of aqua marine ballet that blossomed organically the first time we took to the water together without premeditation or preparation. We swim elegant circles around each other, paying homage to a cosmic choreography previously slumbering in our systems. We will stay in our wonderful water dance for as long as possible

(I'm convinced I would tire and need to swim to shore before she), and it is here, locked in our primordial pas de deux that I peer past sea-soaked fur, into the eyes of innocence and see the face of God.

We are satiated in our swirl, the sea floor far beneath us, blue sky above and water all around. Our activity requires effort but is not work. Only when the pull of our mortality interlopes our fun do we consider a return to dry land. We are still subject to the circumspect nature of our physical existence. But if our bodies would allow, I suspect we might stay in the ocean's embrace indefinitely. If only the world could stand still in the moments of our choosing.

We push the limits. Perhaps thirty minutes have passed, hard to say. Our spirits remain light, but our limbs are growing heavy. Willow's eyes still radiate bliss. She snorts softly as her mouth mauls the ball, the only other companion on our journey, that's paying the price for its passage. I flank her and we swim in synchronized harmony. I occasionally caress her submerged belly with affection. Everything feels different in the ocean. I send out an appeal; just a few more minutes, just a bit longer in this liquid wilderness, please. Eventually I acquiesce. I nudge Willow's shoulder with mine, then dive under, breaking through the surface shoreward to swim in. With loyal determination she follows, happily resolute.

She manages the return nearly as expertly as her entrance into the waves. But now, facing the beach and without the benefit of visual assessment of the swells behind her, the ride in is a bit more precarious, so I stay close. We soak up the final moments of our ocean expedition, thrilled, enhanced by the experience. We are close to shore now, back in the breakers, bobbing like buoys. I provide Willow a healthy boost from under her chest, a final burst of momentum to propel her above the swell that will deliver us back to dry land. Sometimes we take a pounding but today our timing is spot on.

We splash onto the beach like penguins at play, shake ourselves out and celebrate our success. We embrace the sand with mixed emotions, satisfied by a safe return but already pining for more... out there. Chewing her ball, Willow plops down on the beach to rest, making no overtures toward home. We will remain among the elements, entrenched in our Eden, chasing, digging, swimming and dancing as long as possible, until the world ended if we could. Paradise found. But the world keeps spinning, bringing our day to an end. The sun sets the sky on fire with its descent. I'm sure I've never seen such intense color before. I get a glimpse into Van Gogh's mind as the heavens are ablaze with saturated strokes of surrealism that echo off the water in bewildering ways. Every second is a priceless original one and only.

I gather the leash and begin the slow march toward the wooden stairs. Willow lingers on the beach pretending not to notice, hope still prevailing over practicality. Begrudgingly I climb, knowing she'll stay behind in case I change my mind, as if I might suddenly realize this whole "going home" thing is a terrible idea, a colossal mistake, an absurd miscalculation that should immediately be reconsidered. But I persist. I stand alone at the boardwalk's edge, waiting. Willow holds firm on the beach with her ball. She looks at me with an expression of incredulity, a confounded face of wistfulness, nearly impossible to resist. Why would you? How could you? Don't you realize...? She says with longing eyes and tilted head. I know she's right, but I succumb to less poetic demands. I need not beckon her with my voice. I simply remain where I am until she lovingly relents, slowly sauntering up the stairs to my side. We return to the house, naked and free, sun kissed, salted and simmering in the delights of the day. At the depths of our souls, we know it will never get better than this. Ever.

It's winter now. The Island seems impossibly far away. Willow's magic lingers in my mind. Memories of our summer together wash over me like the waves of months ago. How I miss their mending. There's a pandemic raging now. The city is under siege, dying in so many ways. I'm infected, alone, quarantined. Everything I love, all the good and healing forces I've relied on are out of grasp. I'm gasping for breath, full of uncertainty and fear, daydreaming of the dog days long swept out to sea. I am driftwood. Lost in a storm, not knowing where I might land. Perhaps it's my time to sail away, to become reabsorbed, recycled into the circulatory system of the planet. Maybe I'll come back as the sea creature I sometimes felt I should have been anyway. Perhaps I'll soon swim with my pod. Or maybe I'll survive to play more summers away with Willow, off the shore of our enchanted Island. I cannot see the future. But when I close my eyes tonight under the all-consuming, febrile spell of my pathogen's grip, I will see the furry face of God and drift off with a smile.



Where my Legacy Treads

By Aaron Becker

The protagonist is unhappy with the treatment meted out to him by his alma mater and wants to teach them a lesson. What happens next?

29TH APRIL 1998

If only they knew how much damage they'd inflicted. My alma mater, St Delvards's Primary School, seven miles down the road from my cottage. The venue of unbridled misery, misfortune, miasma – until 1st July 1988, at which point I gleefully strolled out its doors for the final time.

Headteacher Mrs Mandell and her horrendous cadre of "teachers" still preside over the place, waging war on creativity and perpetually telling their favourite kids how brilliant they are. Each and every "lesson" a deluge of drivel and insanity, with no room made for understanding or kindness, drowning out any dissenting voices with a deafening, desiccated drone.

6TH MAY 1998

As I softly close my hotel room door, ever careful to avoid detection, Ceefax's local news section alerts me to a "celebration event" at that godforsaken pit. It just so happens that the tenth anniversary of my delightful departure coincides with the 100th year of their execrable existence. Who would have thought it?

Mandell's demonic influence clearly extends beyond the school grounds; it spreads well into the local area and those unfortunate enough still to reside there. I consume the hotel's complimentary coffee, fully cognisant of the ace that fate has played me.

13TH MAY 1998

With my fastidious planning notes for the grand mission safely concealed within my trusty Funfax Organiser – itself hidden away inside a drawer – I head for the local skatepark, a place of limitless joy where "yo, bruv" forms the preamble to every conversational gambit and the "winner stays on, loser gets a forfeit" philosophy holds sway.

I sit on a beach in the spring warmth, feigning a twist of my Walkman radio dial whilst actually listening to a conversation of teenage skateboarders regarding how this “celebration” imbroglio will play out. My ears take in some useful information on who may be in attendance, what they might be occupied with and when these festivities are taking place. Hello, hello.

20TH MAY 1998

Taking this mission from the outposts of my imagination to reality requires immense nous and strategy, plenteous courage and artistry. It may seem nebulous and intangible to me now, rather like the beauty of these resplendent hills I am climbing, seen by nobody and thought of by nobody.

I am to them the forgotten nonentity, the enigma who tried to apply imagination where it was not welcome, who drifted into reconditeness and perpetual self-destruct mode. Therefore, I must show them – in the grandest way imaginable – how wrong they were to underestimate me, just as I underestimated their near-infinite capacity to destroy the confidence of infants.

27TH MAY 1998

Shall we take a whistle-stop tour of the enemies, then? Where do I start? Mr Valecue: the twisted sadist who wilfully ignored my cries after I’d been stung by a wasp during his lesson. Doing so in such circumstances does not strike me as adjuvant – or for that matter clement; rather, it was an egregious act of child cruelty, to the point of turpitude.

Then there’s Miss Diskin, whose lessons consisted of anodyne and vacuous clichés stapled together, designed primarily to resect all and any creative thinking from her pupils’ brains. With strong competition, Mrs Mandell takes the gold medal, having expelled me for “vandalising school property” – even after it was proven not to have been my action – as well as refusing to recognise my perfect spelling test record (ten out of ten every week for four years). It truly is enough to turn one’s stomach.

3RD JUNE 1998

Yes Mr Paperclip Man, I am indeed writing a letter. A letter of complaint. To Mrs Mandell. Four parts reasonable, one part vitriolic. In the spirit of negotiation, perhaps she and they can be reasoned with.

What Tony Blair managed to achieve in Northern Ireland at Easter has given me hope. Hope that they might just see my angle. Let’s give them a chance to come back at me.

10TH JUNE 1998

As César Sampaio heads in World Cup 98’s opening goal, I stare at the mound of letters on the cabinet with an acute sense of disappointment. No reply.

Either they have yet to read my missive, or – the more likely state of affairs – they have and are retreating into the comforting certainties of tradition by non-engagement with someone whose credo is at odds with theirs. Well, they had their chance. Not taken. Game over.

17TH JUNE 1998

Those limpid lines of demarcation between me and those who damage will soon be inapplicable, thanks to my fool proof formula: high-test hydrogen peroxide, with manganese oxide as the catalyst. Those two faithful friends should initiate a catalytic explosion and ignite a fire, tearing through large chunks of the Delvard premises, obliterating classrooms, damaging computer equipment beyond repair and with a bit of luck, rendering all or most of my old teachers dead/insentient.

I am fully prepared to sacrifice my own life in the process; a life effectively over in any case. At least I shall die wearing my lucky trainers, safe in the knowledge that St Delvard’s will likely never recover from such a cataclysmic event.

24TH JUNE 1998

This is a script destiny could never have written. On the eve of the tenth anniversary of my exit, here I am again - with the whole place to myself. How could they have foreseen my ability to find out what the four-digit code was for the back entrance? Then again, they always did underestimate what I was capable of.

Bang! That splendid sound resonates across this clear summer night, the stars and moon powerless to stop me cutting off the voltage to the entire school premises. One-nil to me! As I set up camp in the underground storage base, I reflect upon the fact that tomorrow's special guests will be denied the excitement of Tim Henman's Wimbledon quarter-final, not to mention the opportunity to view CCTV footage of the unannounced main event.

1ST JULY 1998

In the words of a song that's out at the moment, "I'm going deeper underground...there's too much panic in this town". Having studied the layout of St Delvard's in infinitesimal detail, I am confident that detonating my material here will inflict maximum damage upon this institution of damagers.

The scent of the past is suddenly everywhere, as the past invades the present. Stealthily peering out the back window, I can see Valecue and Mandell - two-thirds of the toxic ternion - on the lawn, gleefully oblivious they are soon to be consigned to the past. Now is the moment; there aren't many more...

EPILOGUE: *As the emergency services were clearing the detritus and beginning to identify the numerous casualties from the carnage, the local media reported that several former pupils were to be honoured at a surprise awards ceremony in the main hall - including the individual who never got a spelling wrong.*



Mathemagic

By Chinmaya Rastogi

The magic of patterns and numbers fascinates our young protagonist. A Fibonacci tale unravels.

Students of all grades sat cross legged on the carpet, a sea of jagged lines. I saw the teachers sitting in the back on plastic chairs. The older students joked and flirted. The young teens joked with more enthusiasm and tried to flirt with more courage. Us fifth graders added to the din of conversations, fiddled with strands of nylon from the carpet, fired spitballs, observed the degrees of facial and leg hair of the older boys and tried to ignore the stench of sweat hanging in the air—the fans were too small to provide comfort in a capacious hall with a high ceiling. I did all of these things to kill time. I was wondering if this talent contest could be half as much fun as the lesson on Fibonacci we had left midway. I like numbers and patterns.

The contest organizers send anchors to schools to pick four kids from each city to participate in the statewide competition. They were supposed to be here yesterday, so most of the students' excitement had vanished, and what remained was fast evaporating in the balmy heat.

My eyes met the girl's from seventh grade, who sat in the line next to ours. It had only four students of different age and size, their backs resting on the wall.

"Were you in the middle of art class?" I asked, pointing to the drawing book she held close to her chest like a magic tome. She looked cute despite her glasses that were two sizes small for her face and too-steady eyes. If only those eyes were on me. I crossed my arms to hide the sweat patch on the armpits of my white uniform—I could feel them growing.

"I'm going to draw a portrait," she said and nodded at the marble platform that served as the stage. The boy sitting beside her looked at me. "What are you staring at?"

I shrugged. I hated him but couldn't do much since he was three grades my senior and at least twice my size. My friends tell me it's no use liking an older girl who's dating an even older guy. But I'm rather mature for my age. Everyone says so.

"Are you here as her cheerleader?"

He scoffed. "Kids. Always trying to be clever. I'm going to spin this notebook on my fingers. I can go all day. And night," he chortled and elbowed the girl. I didn't know what was so funny. Neither did she I suppose. Her eyes didn't move. There was reluctant applause and mumbled cheers as two men, one in a bright orange T-shirt and the other in yellow, showing a flexing squirrel with the words "Always nuts", strutted to the stage. Both had stupid smiles. We whispered chi chi chi in mock disgust. The sound took me back to Fibonacci. It was annoying to be in this corridor, more so to watch the anchors salute and bow to our rather reluctant welcome. The worst thing was seeing Portrait Girl smile at the duo and tuck her hair behind her ear.

"It's so good to see you all here! We're eager to see what you guys have in store for us. Let's get going already! Unless you guys want to stay with us longer?"

I wanted to kill.

The first student walked up to the stage to muted applause. Plain face, dead eyes, crew cut hair, he sat with his back perpendicular to the chair.

"And how will you entertain us, young man?" The anchor turned the mic to the boy.

"I challenge you to make me laugh. I find nothing funny."

The pathetic duo shared wide-eyed glances to our boisterous cheers and claps. "Seems like we have to earn our keep!"

Oh my god the kid wiped the floor with them. And just by sitting still. They tried a knock-knock joke, which earned mocking chuckles from the crowd, as well as miming and pranking each other. The tenth grader remained stoic. When they tried to tickle him, he slapped their hands away. The boy didn't smile even to our adulation and celebration.

"Ok, we're not on our game today. How about you stay on stage until the end as an entire hall of students watches you for the slightest hint of a smile?"

Stoic Guy gave a curt nod.

"All right then! Up next, we have an eighth grader."

Notebook Boy tried to copy the anchors in his gait and on-stage behaviour. Even I laughed at how bad it was. The idiot took that as praise. I wondered if Portrait Girl had a thing for miserable guys. He sat on the chair next to Stoic Guy.

"I'm going to spin this notebook on my finger."

The anchors chuckled. "I'm sure all of us here can do that, son."

"My notebook only stops moving when I want it to. It's magic."

The echo of Oohs rang a bit too long, probably because of the high ceiling and the strange acoustics. Magic, humph.

We all watched his black notebook with undivided attention, looking for the slightest tip or topple. It spun like a basketball although he didn't touch it like one. He also wore an unbearable smirk. He then waved at someone in the crowd, rubbed his eyes, and looked at the nails of his left hand to giggles and applause. Bloody showoff. Once things quieted down, I could hear the fans' murmur fifty feet above. It seemed the notebook synchronized with the fans' blades. I counted the seconds, starting from zero, and waited for him to fail.

"Well, I think we can bring the next student up here while we keep an eye on this notebook. Let's keep it spinning!"

Some kids chuckled; some teachers made a show of laughter. Most others grunted. Portrait Girl's undone shoelace and swinging ponytail chalked semi-circles around her head and feet.

"I'm going to draw your portrait."

It seemed too drab now, but she received scattered applause as consolation, nevertheless. The anchors went rock-paper-scissors and the one in the "Always nuts" T-shirt won. He walked to stand in front of her chair next to Notebook Boy and copied the squirrel's posture. I marveled at how no one had killed him yet.

Portrait Girl was drawing with her eyes fixed on the subject.

"All right. So as these two talented students go about their business, how about we get the next student up on stage?"

The sweltering afternoon heat and the minutes of silence and inactivity had subdued everyone's energy and enthusiasm. A couple of coughs rang louder than the dull encouragement the crowd offered the young fourth grader.

"Come on, sing with me!"

No one was prepared for the injection of life. It took the crowd some moments to react to her performance. She wasn't simply humored—this was genuine admiration for her singing and dancing acumen. Even Stoic Guy clapped to the beat of her song.

"She nachi like Fibonacci," said a boy from our class. Although it was tongue in cheek, we all knew it was praise for her dance. It soon became a chorus. The teachers shushed with all their might. I was more pleased by how her multiple talents had formed a Fibonacci sequence on stage. It's a wonderful world full of patterns.

The crowd's newfound interest fizzled out when Song+Dance Girl began her third act. It didn't help that it was a tired old number remixed more times than the girl's years. Even her high, melodious voice couldn't keep the silence at bay as it descended on the crowd heavier than wind from the fans.

Stoic Guy had gone back to being stoic. The notebook continued to spin. The pencil kept scribbling. Dance+Song Girl started a fourth song. All the while, Portrait Girl's eyes didn't move from the subject. My shorts were stuck to my thighs with the sweat. I wiped my head, looked up and closed my eyes. I wanted to feel something, a gust, a tiny miniature lick of wind.

I heard gasps and opened my eyes.

The ceiling was a little closer to me now. I hadn't planned to participate in the talent exhibition.

There was the slightest draft on my head. The blades were rather noisy actually. They drowned the screams coming from down below and were also faster than the notebook. I felt hundreds of glances hit my rising body from all angles, yet Portrait Girl's too-steady eyes wouldn't budge. Dance+Song Girl, Notebook Boy, the other anchor, and even Stoic Guy, all watched me rise. Somehow the notebook continued to spin, the little girl still danced+sang, albeit with much less verve. I felt bad for her punctured enthusiasm, so I beatboxed to the song. The nuts anchor looked up at me. But Portrait Girl...

She is drawn to misery, right?

I could feel a lot more wind from the fan now. It looked small even this close. I clicked my fingers and Notebook Boy's finger snapped. It was only right to maintain the Fibonacci series of talents, so I kept the notebook spinning. I don't think anyone noticed. The wind dug into my face. I turned up my beatbox tempo. Dance+Song Girl's energy went down in inverse proportion.

I looked at portrait girl one last time.

Finally.

It's a wonderful world of patterns.



The Boomerang Effect

By JB Polk

Ruby Bieber defends the Second amendment with all her might. Will her defence smite her?

“Our next speaker, Ruby Bieber, is not yet forty but already a successful Congresswoman. A mother of four, she has virtually pulled herself out of the gutter by sheer willpower. She is one of the brave people who dare to speak the truth. No cancel culture for the Honorable Lady! Today, she represents you and your un-woke values in Washington.”

Chewing on the end of a pen, Ruby evaluates the wording of the script for tomorrow’s event at the local Rifle Owners’ Association.

All of it is true. She is a successful (and popular!) Congresswoman. She is a mother of four, barely out of her mid-thirties. And she is not afraid of speaking up for her constituents, especially in defense of the Second Amendment. At all times. At all costs.

But she dislikes the “pulled herself out of the gutter” phrase. “Gutter” has such a foul-sounding ring to it. And although she has always admitted to growing up in a dirt-poor family, the word just doesn’t cut it for her.

“We was so poor, chil’, that you and your Bubba had a tumbleweed for a pet,” her Ma used to say.

Ruby’s Dad was not in the picture. Not ever. It was Amber, her Ma, who left town and went to earn a living operating pump at Oakdale Dam. Meanwhile, MeeMaw Opal took over child-rearing.

As dutiful Presbyterian, MeeMaw taught them to brush their teeth, pray to God, and wait for him to speak. Sadly, whenever Ruby talked to Him, He never answered. Like when she asked whether MeeMaw was telling the truth about the little-known 11th commandment instructions: “Thou shall only fornicate for the purpose of procreation.”

And as He was mute on the matter, she did the dirty with Brandon at sixteen. But guess what? True or not, she was still in the clear because she got pregnant the first time round!

Eventually, she stopped asking Him but kept the habit of brushing her teeth after each meal, which led to her having a set of pearly chompers a catwalk model would die for. So, on life advice, MeeMaw came up trumps in one out of two!

She keeps reading the script Jasper Kendall, her young assistant, left on her desk an hour before. A Purdue graduate, he's been with Ruby for nearly a year. Given that she has only a high-school diploma, she earned aged thirty, Jasper writes her speeches, sees to the minutiae of her engagements, and runs her errands, including fetching her daily pumpkin skimmed latte with just a hint of vanilla. No sugar.

"You must keep trim and attractive when you are a popular Conservative Congresswoman," he keeps reminding her.

"After you are introduced, an ovation will follow, and you will answer thank you, thank you very much."

Ruby likes this part. She knows that "ovation" means clapping because she found the word in one of the previous speeches and asked Jasper about its meaning.

"In Latin, it means to rejoice and shout with delight," Jasper explained patiently like he always does. After a brief pause, Ruby continues.

"I am standing here today to reassure you that we will not listen to the foolish folk who wish to trample on our Second Amendment rights. Our nation is governed by a constitution - a document that separates us from monarchies, communist regimes, and dictatorships. That same constitution protects our right to bear arms. Yes, people have died, and yes, it is a tragedy. But so did people in cinema fires and road traffic accidents. Yet we don't ban either. All these tragedies are essentially anomalies (Ruby knows that word, too), and just because they occasionally happen, we must not sacrifice our constitution."

"Followed by another ovation," the script says.

Her eyes turn dreamy at the mental picture of the audience standing to the sound of her voice, clapping furiously.

"Yes, apart from the gutter part, the speech is perfect! Just as perfect as Jasper's tight little ass," she smiles.

"And don't fear! We will not let those who want to tread on us do so without consequences. We will fight, and we will win!"

"Here, speak loud and clear and look directly at the spectators," the script instructs.

"Why, you ask me? Because everything you do creates either a positive or a negative outcome. Because whatever energy you put out, you get back. Some call it karma, but I prefer the boomerang effect. It's like gravity - there, but so unnoticeable that we don't even know it exists. But it does!"

"Another round of applause," the script indicates.

Yes, Jasper is a brilliant speechwriter, worth his weight in gold. She would have never thought of it by herself. But what the hell is a boomerang? She opens Google and types the word. The online dictionary explains that it is a curved flat piece of wood that can be thrown so that it will return to the thrower, traditionally used by Australian Aboriginal people as a hunting weapon.

"A brilliant idea to mention a weapon in a speech about defending gun rights," she muses. One thing she has learned since becoming a Congresswoman is to check things before she says them out loud. She doesn't want to make another gaffe on live TV, like when she said the former president, whom she hero-worships, was a 'hexagon of virtue. Jasper later explained that the correct word was "paragon." He also explained that what happened to her on the show was ... wait a minute! What did he call it? Malpractice? No, malpractice is careless professional behavior. It sounded like malpractice, but it wasn't... It's on the tip of her tongue! Yes! There it is! Malapropism!

asper reminded her of another Representative who'd accused the "gazpacho police" of patrolling the Capitol. At first, Ruby wasn't sure what was wrong with that, but Jasper clarified that gazpacho was a cold Spanish soup made from tomatoes, peppers, and other salad vegetables while the word the Honorable Lady mal-appropriated was Gestapo. Ruby laughed, hoping Jasper would not think she was an uneducated ding-dong.

To tell the truth, she was not a ding-dong, but she was uneducated. Not because she was not smart enough but because she got knocked up in the ninth grade and had to leave her full-time education. When Tucker, her first-born, was one, she started an apprenticeship in a hair salon and then got pregnant again - with Tyler. And then again with twins - Todd and Tennyson. By twenty-eight, she and Brandon had four boys, all under twelve. At thirty, she was promoted to stylist and colorist, and Brandon started earning good money running his Dad's sawmill. So they both relinquished the upbringing of their brood to MeeMaw Opal, who became their babysitter, cook, nurse, friend, and spiritual shepherd. Amber kept operating the pumps at Oakdale Dam.

A year after that, when she thought she would take over the salon and turn it into a spa with hot tubs, foot massages, body wraps, and mud baths, she was offered to run for a seat in the state legislature and two years later, in the national one.

And here she is now - Ruby Bieber, who barely finished high school but who could write an encyclopedia about shampooing and conditioning and a dictionary of chemical coloring processes, getting ready to talk to some big shots about the Second Amendment and something called the boomerang effect.

She is unsure how it all happened because, born and raised in Middlebury, population 2,513, she had barely noticed national and international calamities and triumphs before she became the Honorable Ruby Bieber. She voted Republican because MeeMaw and her mother did. But politics figured low on the list of things that mattered to her, somewhere between power tools and public libraries. Suppose someone had asked her about her ambitions ten years ago; she'd probably have answered that she was too busy just living and raising four kids to have any, never mind talking about them.

But a quick learner, she learned that the Second Amendment was very important in her State, especially the part granting the American people the right to bear arms. If possible, concealed. So she made it her campaign slogan and, forever after, spoke about that God-given right at rallies, in Congress, and on talk shows. And to prove her point, she kept a collection of Smith & Wesson Model 10s and Remington Model 870 Pump-Action Shotguns in an unlocked cabinet in her now much more ample, six-bedroom, four-bathroom house. And, being a loving mother, she's taught her kids how to use guns, trusting that they will use them wisely. Hopefully, to shoot bears or defend our Great Nation's borders from foreign invasions.

Ruby knows she is right because she's convinced that good guys with guns have stopped bad guys with guns all the time going back to the ole' Wild West. And besides, it is not guns that kill people but people who kill people. So there.

She thinks about the boomerang effect Jasper mentioned in the speech. Was it the Aboriginal Australians' God-given right to carry concealed boomerangs? If so, where? She's seen pictures of the bushmen, and all they wore were strings around their waists.

"I'll ask Jasper," she thinks.

She is about to go back to the speech when the door to her office bursts open. Jasper, his hair disheveled, runs in. He is not wearing his customary Dries Van Noten navy blue jacket and tie. This fact alone indicates that something terrible must have happened.

"Ruby!" he shouts.

"Ruby! There's been an incident!"

The sheath of papers in her hand falls onto the floor. She stumbles but manages to get up.

"Wheeeereeee?" the word is one prolonged gasp.

"The school, Ruby. Osborne Senior..."

Ruby's legs buckle. She is about to fall but manages to hold on to the edge of the desk.

"Please, God, please! I hope Tucker didn't take one of the guns to school to show off. He's still waiting for his permit. It'll ruin my career!" she screams in her head and aloud enquires: "What kind of an incident?"

"A shooting, Ruby..." Jasper stammers.

Fear blossoms in her mind, its predatory cold fingers squeezing her heart then creeping into her guts. If they squeeze any harder, the pumpkin latte will come out in a torrent.

"Tucker?" she whispers.

"Was it Tucker?"

Jasper is silent for a full minute.

"Tell... me...damn...you! Was... Tucker... the... shooter?" she slices the sentences word by word, intense panic marking each pause.

Jasper shakes his head.

"No..." he says finally.

Ruby feels the icy claws loosen their grip on her insides. She can breathe again. A whoosh of air escapes her lungs as she sits down. The latte stays in.

Jasper looks at her with renewed dread, then says: "Tucker is one of the victims...And so is Todd..."

The arctic sensation she thought was gone unfurls itself from her inner core again. A pulse throbs in her ears, and a bitter tang of despair fills her mouth. Then comes the latte, completely covering the sheets with tomorrow's speech.

All she can think of is the boomerang effect... And her boys... Because it no longer matters if you call it karma or any other name. She is sure that damn thing has no menu, and in the end, one gets served what one deserves. And Ruby knows that she does. Oh, how she deserves it!

NON FICTION



Personal Essay

Smoke in my eyes

Debra J.White

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Essay

Just One of Those Days

Dan Hardison

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Travelogue

Kannur Chronicles

Urmi Chakravorty

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Smoke in my eyes

By Debra J. White

Despite a debilitating accident, the writer says she has much to be thankful for.

In February 1982, I no longer needed a book of matches. I puffed on my last cigarette. To stay smoke free, I took up jogging. That saved my life until a car accident in 1994 almost ended it.

Back then, smoking was permitted nearly everywhere including airlines, movie theaters, restaurants, hospitals, and college classes. Vending machines sold cigarettes at newsstands alongside candy machines. Pretty young ladies handed out sample packets of cigarettes at busy city intersections.

By the age of 26, I was barely able to walk up a flight of stairs without gasping. A friend bet me I couldn't last a day without smoking. That wounded my stubborn New York City pride. I'll show you, I said to myself, doubting that I could take up the challenge. One day led to two and that was it.

To keep from smoking, I chomped on wads of sugarless gum to avoid dental bills. I bought a plastic cigarette to squelch my desires. I pretended that I inhaled, especially in prickly situations like the day I got fired from my managerial job at a major manufacturing company. They downsized and considered me expendable. The audacity of them.

I finally ditched all my pacifying toys. I relied only on jogging. I had packed on about ten pounds. Nicotine must've jarred my taste buds because suddenly everything, including white bread and corn flakes, tasted like imported Swiss truffles. Jogging would melt away the post-smoking fat off my fanny.

During that brutal New York City winter, I rose at the crack of dawn and dragged myself up to jog. My lungs pumped over-time, my cheeks were rosy red, my hands were frozen, but I made it home without collapsing from years of smoking. How, I'll never know.

By late March, I was confident enough to enter my first five-mile race, sponsored by the New York Road Runners Club. The NYRRC oversaw dozens of races in public parks. For a modest fee, runners received a T-shirt and the chance to

compete against other runners. That was a healthier option than hanging around a bar with a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other, a routine I had followed for too long.

I straggled near the end of that five-mile race on a cool, overcast morning yet I finished in less than one hour. Nothing could stop me now.

Next up on my agenda was shedding my fast-food connections. I scarfed down my last Big Mac. No more Whoppers with salty limp fries on the side. I never ate another hot dog heaped with fried onions and relish. I quit slurping sugary sodas. I met vegetarians and discovered the health benefits of meatless meals, whole grains, fruits and vegetables.

Finally, my apartment smelled clean and fresh. Stinky cigarette smoke clings to curtains, carpets and even pets. My breath smelled better too. I welcomed the changes.

I found a stray dog in 1985 and named him Scottie. He was my faithful jogging companion for many years. When he died in 1992, I spread his ashes in Central Park.

In 1986, I ran my first of three NYC marathons. The mammoth race started at 10:40 a.m. always on the first Sunday in November. In yesteryear, marathon entries were handled by mail. Once that much anticipated letter arrived saying you are in the marathon, training began. Each week, I pounded the pavement 30, 40 and 50 miles to whip myself into shape.

The night before the marathon the NYRRC sponsored a huge pasta party. To accommodate everyone, the NYRRC set up hundreds of tents in Central Park. Volunteers dished out free plates of spaghetti, crusty Italian bread and tossed green salad. We runners chowed down hefty plates full of pasta and all the fixings, talking among strangers about the long race ahead of us. I was nervous but eager to run in my first marathon.

Anticipation built around 10 a.m. when the massive sea of runners swarmed to the starting line. The clock ticked away towards the starting time and the air was electrifying. News helicopters hovered overhead with views of nervous bodies jammed together. A canon boomed and off we went.

As throngs of runners from all over streamed across the huge bridge, it swayed back and forth. Always terrified of heights, I picked up my pace, worried that the bridge might cave in. I wanted to reach Brooklyn as quickly as possible. When we rounded the curve and jogged off the bridge onto Fourth Avenue, a main drag, thousands of fans smothered us with cheers and well wishes. School bands played uplifting music along the way. People handed out water and orange slices to thirsty runners. Medical stations were set up to heal us wounded warriors with massages for our aches, pains and blisters. Almost everyone applauded us. I appreciated the support at a time when my hair must've been a mess and my skin had to be the color of a cadaver. I was exhausted yet I had miles to go.

How I crossed the finish line still conscious was a miracle. My official time was six hours and nineteen minutes. At the end, I collected my backpack, slipped into my sweats and then realized I had no carfare. What the heck. I just ran 26.2 miles. I walked another two miles to my apartment. I took my dog Scottie out for a brief walk, fed him then soaked in a warm relaxing bath. I skipped dinner. My friends asked me to meet them at the runner's disco, a tradition put on every year by NYRRC after the marathon at a downtown night club, but I was asleep by 7 p.m.

My third marathon in 1990 would be my last. A careless driver plowed into me on January 6, 1994, while walking my two dogs, leaving me with disabling injuries from brain trauma.

Had that careless driver swerved and missed me, my life would've gone on as usual. The accident changed everything. I've struggled a lot, both physical and financially. My income level plunged, leaving me reliant on meager Social Security Disability payments that barely covered rent, utilities, food and car insurance. I drive an old car. I water down dish soap and laundry detergent to make them last longer. I shop in thrift stores and buy day old bread. On the other hand, if 1/6/94 was an ordinary day, I would likely never have become a pet therapist and volunteering with homeless children.

My job would've prevented me from spending so much time as an animal shelter volunteer serving unwanted dogs and cats. The opportunity to answer the phones for former Gov. Janet Napolitano would never have come along. Neither would the opportunity to assist in the English language program for refugees. I also became a published writer. I would've missed out on so many volunteer chances that enriched my heart and molded me into a better person. My life is fuller as a result. I have migraines, loss of mobility and a battered short-term memory. Do I regret the accident? No, not at all. I have so much to be thankful for.



Then You'll know what I know

An essay by Dan Hardison

A It's just one of those days you can't explain

– Guy Clark

When a writer is faced with a blank page and the task of putting words together with a mind that does not want to cooperate it is called writer's block. But artists can face the same problem with a blank canvas. Just getting started can be a difficult task. Then there is the problem when the image that is developing on the canvas does not match the image visualised in the mind. Examples are many where even great artists have painted over sections of canvas that did not suit them, or simply painted a different image on the back of a canvas.

Then there are the times when a work of art has been completed, installed in a place of distinction, and something really goes wrong.

Ben Long has made a career as a teacher and a painter of frescos. He has created stunning frescos in churches and public buildings. Beginning in 1988, Ben Long spent two years creating a very large fresco for historic St. Peter's Catholic Church in Charlotte, North Carolina. Over 1500 square feet and 30 feet high, the fresco depicted *"The Agony in the Garden"*, *"The Pentecost"*, and at the centre *"The Resurrection"*.

In 2002, the unthinkable happened. The entire centre section of the fresco crashed to the floor with remaining areas severely damaged. A heart-breaking disaster. While it would be determined that numerous construction projects in the immediate area surrounding the historic downtown church was the cause of the destruction - with the foundation work on a high-rise bank building next door delivering the final blow - the loss was still devastating.

The creation of art can be difficult and often frustrating work. To render an object that reflects one's thoughts, vision, and passion, can be exhilarating. The late folk artist Sybil Gibson once said, "I have had so many adversities related to my painting - along with some notable successes - that I sometimes wonder at my determined drive to keep trying in the face of some of my disasters. Everything one creates doesn't turn out a masterpiece, but it is such a joyous thrill to bring off something you recognise as being good from your innermost self."



Kannur Chronicles

By Urmi Chakravorty

A Travelogue by Urmi Chakravorty

As an avid traveller, the allure of the mountains has forever beckoned me. Sea side trips have always figured right at the bottom of my list of must-visits. The crashing waves, the roar of the waters, the sheer rocks sans vegetation – all appear ever so dark and ominous to me.

Our December visit to Poovar and Varkala last year, did well to spark a change of opinion. The seas there appeared largely warm and inviting. And I was pleasantly surprised to realise that our recent trip to Kannur in Kerala, catalysed a new found chemistry between the sea and me. The infinite expanse of grey, teal and emerald staring at me, trying so hard to lure me with its eternal rhythm of rising and falling waves, was hard to ignore.

We booked a resort that was overlooking the sea. This particular stretch of the Arabian Sea was flanked by low cliffs and large moss-slickened boulders. A cluster of towering coconut trees dotted the rocky shores at a distance. As the robust ridge of waves came rushing towards the shore, they crashed and broke on the boulders, sending out a spray of brine and froth. The salty, sulphury smell of the waters compounded by aquatic fauna, algae and weed, gleefully invaded our nostrils. The rolling waves, topped with white foamy crests, hit the craggy beach with a fascinating urgency.

The seascape changed colour every now and then. While dawn broke in with shades of pink, mauve and peach, the setting sun left the horizon aglow with sheets of molten gold. In between, we witnessed the proverbial 'fifty shades' of blue with glistening sun sparks encrusted all over. At night, the sea appeared like a gigantic swathe of wrinkled aluminium foil, shimmering under the pearly moonlight.



The morning hours saw a number of fishing boats spreading their colourful nets for a good catch. Every now and then, the fishermen hauled the nets up and emptied them into the boats. Large birds hovered above the boats, swooping down at every opportune moment to scoop up a fish or two. What struck me here was this endearing equation between the fishermen and the birds - it epitomised the home truth that the sea is there to provide for everybody's survival and subsistence.

On our last day there, we saw a rather curious sight - we saw a few fishermen staying afloat with rubber tyres fixed around their neck. On enquiring, we gathered that they were scouring the waters for shellfish and crabs which they collected in little baskets tied to their waist. My heart went out to these poor men braving the cold waters for hours on end, in search of a livelihood. What was just a casual 'touristy' sight for me, happened to be bread and butter for these men, caught sadly between penury and preference. Watching them, I let out a silent prayer of gratitude for my lot, and for their safety!

The neighbourhood housing our resort had a quaint, colonial charm to it. Most of the government offices, educational institutes, civilian club, military and civil hospitals, still bore the British name 'Cannanore'. The tranquil cantonment setting with old world villas, bungalows, and the burgeoning monsoon greenery made for an endearing visual treat.

The nearby Payyambalam beach presented a breathtaking canvas of sand, sun and surf. The sunset there is a sight not to be missed. Families sauntered around, frolicking in the waters, or traipsing along the wet sands, munching on the spicy savouries selling nearby, clicking endless selfies, or simply admiring the splendid sunset.



Another tourist attraction was the Muzhappilanghad Beach nearby. It offers a unique, breezy drive-in experience - the longest in Asia. The cool sea breeze brushing across our faces as we drove along the languid beach, alongside the water, made for a unique travel experience.

This was our second visit to Kannur and hence, we were not much inclined to go for an extensive sight-seeing programme. We spent most of our three days in our large L-shaped balcony commanding a panoramic 270-degree view, looking out into the waters, and soaking in its nonpareil beauty. The only vehicular sound we heard in those three days was the occasional whirring of the motorised fishing boats.

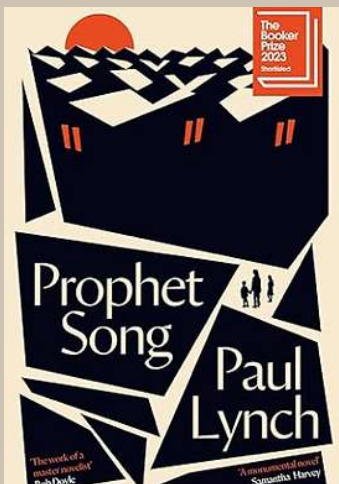
What intrigued me the most in Kannur was the curious juxtaposition of the moving with the constant. While the rocks and boulders have remained transfixed at their place for centuries...while the waves come splashing with their unchanging, enduring pattern every single day...there is also the constant movement of water, of the ebb and flow of the waves, and the natural rhythm of high and low tides. And in this eternal, abiding romance between the sea and the land, I did not mind being the proverbial third wheel...the 'insignificant other' for just a few days!



REVIEWS



Book Review



Prophet Song by Paul Lynch Short listed for Booker Prize 2023

A review by Dr Santosh Bakaya

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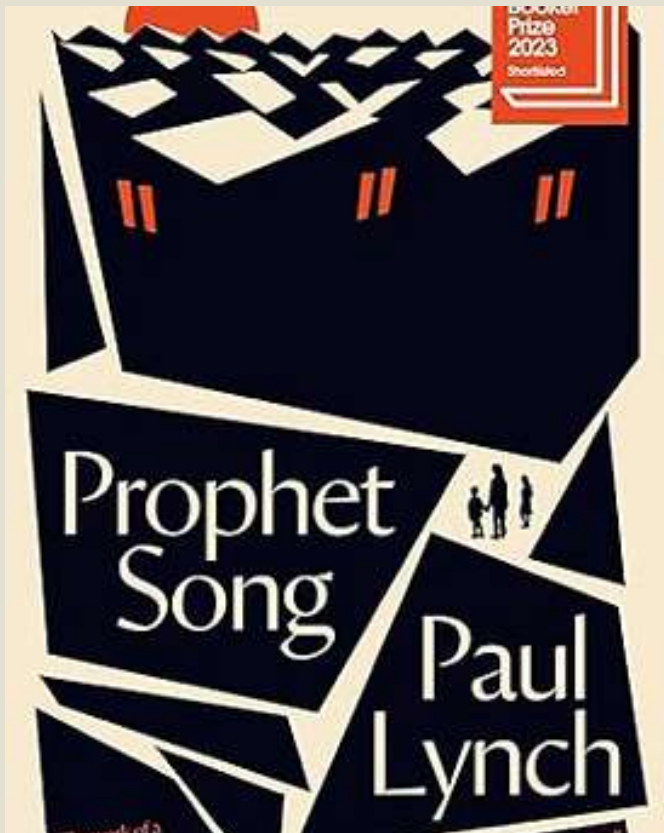
Film Review



The Wonderful story of Henry Sugar

A Review by Ramandeep Mahal

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Prophet Song

Paul Lynch

Oneworld Publications 2023

Metaphysical Questions within a political universe

Rachna Singh reviews Prophet Song, a book short listed for Booker Prize 2023.

The world gives to chaos, the ground you walk on flies into the air and the sun shines dark on your head'
~Prophet Song

A newly formed secret service police. Unlawful arrests and detentions in the name of Emergency Powers Act. Erosion of civil liberties. Civil strife. All these unexpected and terrifying occurrences disrupt the uneventful flow of life in Dublin. And caught in the midst of this turmoil is the Stack family. Eilish, a microbiologist and mother of four children, suddenly finds herself drawn into an authoritarian nightmare. Her husband, Larry, Deputy General secretary of a union fighting for the rights of teachers, is arrested on grounds of sedition and taken to an unknown destination. Many like him, suffer the same fate. Eilish, his wife, tries to keep the family together, hoping against hope that the international community would resolve the problem. *'We don't live in some dark corner of the world, you know the international community will broker a solution'*, she assures her children. She refuses to leave her home and country, even though her sister, Aine, a Canadian citizen, arranges for her to leave the madness behind, believing that this collapse of democracy is temporary and that freedom of choice would be restored in no time. The past could then be referred to as the time when Larry went away and the time when he came back. Her father, Simon, warns her that she believes in rights that don't exist. But slowly the belief that things would revert to normal dissipates and disintegrates. Her eldest son, Mark, to escape forced conscription by a totalitarian regime, joins the rebels. Her 13-year old son, Bailey, is picked up from a hospital where he has been admitted for surgery for a shrapnel in his head, and tortured to death; his nails pried off, his torso scarred by cigarette butts, his teeth broken, his knee drilled. She realises then that this country was not theirs anymore. Survival for her, her daughter Molly and her 6-month old son Ben, meant leaving the country, even if it was through illegal means. So she pays the scoundrels, exploiting the situation, and the threesome make their slow, painful way, along with hundreds of others, down the only path that offers a glimmer of life and normalcy, a perilous sea journey. Eilish realises that she has

been one with the darkness and to stay would be to remain in this dark 'when she wants for them to live'. The book ends with her chanting the manta of freedom; *'we must go to the sea, we must go to the sea, the sea is life.'*

The book is a nerve wracking and terrifying narrative about an authoritarian regime that destroys the country and its people without any scruples. Its theme is similar to that of George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* but the graphic imagery and urgency of the narrative, brings the torn world of Eilish's family into our bedrooms and living rooms. We can feel the helplessness of the protagonists, we can hear the roar of the airplanes raining bombs on innocent civilians, we are one with Mark and Carole Sexton, wondering how the government has become a monster. Talking about the genesis of the book, Paul Lynch says that he began writing this book in 2018, when *'there was a feeling of unravelling in the air, a sense that liberal democracy was in peril.'* This sense of foreboding and anxiety is communicated to the readers as they turn the pages of this almost prophetic book.

The book leaves the reader introspecting and pondering about how a democratic state with its framework of rights and duties for its citizens suddenly suspends civil liberties and even the right of the citizens to question the suspension. What leads to the creation of a regime which works on the tenet that *'if you say one thing is another thing, and if you keep saying it over and over, people accept it as true.'* This dystopian nightmare makes us pause as it leaves us with the sense that this may as well be a prophesy of doom for our world, hitherto untouched by this tumult. It also makes us question the negative rhetoric surrounding refugees. In his interview with The Wise Owl, Paul Lynch says that his novel is about *'metaphysical questions but told within a deeply political universe.'* This sums up the essence of *'Prophet Song'*

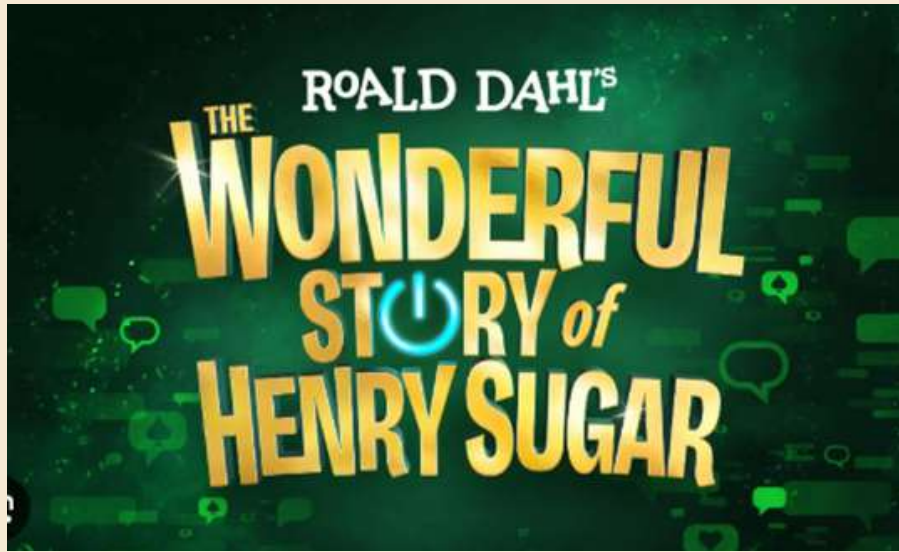
Paul Lynch, a master craftsman, offers us an image of a world that reflects the truth of a country outside our scope and yet horrifyingly close to our world, almost encroaching upon it, like some swarthy, all-encompassing cloud . It resounds with the noise and turmoil of the war-torn Ukraine, Palestine, Israel and Syria. It could be us, whispers a voice, as we trudge through this dark landscape. After all as Lynch says, *the end of the world is always a local event.*



About the Author

Paul Lynch

Paul Lynch is the internationally-acclaimed, prize-winning author of five novels: *Prophet Song*, *Beyond the Sea*, *Grace*, *The Black Snow* and *Red Sky in Morning*. He is the winner of the Kerry Group Irish Novel of the Year 2018, among other prizes. His latest book *'Prophet Song'* has been short listed for The Booker Prize 2023.



The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar: A Colourful Moving Theatre

By Dr. Ramandeep Mahal

I have finished watching *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar*, and I must say that it is quite fantastic! Through this 41-minute short film, you embark on a spiritual adventure. It's enlightening and leaves you wondering about the amazing potential we all possess. I also know that some people don't like Wes Anderson's videos because they are visually distracting, with their experimental camera angles, colour schemes, and a host of other innovative techniques. I also know that many people who think they understand film or think it should only be made in a certain way won't like that the actors tell the story almost word-for-word or that the sets are always moving, because that's not how films are usually made; that's how plays are.

The film is based on Roald Dahl's collections of short stories titled, *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar* and *Six More* which was published in 1977. Most people think that these seven stories are more for teenagers than many of Dahl's other books, where children are the target audience. Re-entering Dahl's world following the success of his '*Fantastic Mr. Fox*', Anderson uses his distinctively funny storytelling technique to combine whimsy and deep reflection. The narrative walks a tightrope along the boundary between fact and the fantastic, taking inspiration from the astounding assertions of real-life Pakistani mystic Kuda Bux. Robust performances by Richard Ayoade, Ralph Fiennes, Dev Patel, Ben Kingsley, and Rupert Friend give this patchwork of oddities deeper nuances and complexity. But the story's sheer oddity steals the show, serving as a reminder that reality occasionally seems weirder than fiction. There aren't many films like this one. It is made up of many layers. One level is the public. The storyteller is another, as are the sets and the way the stagehands move. Ralph Fiennes plays Dahl. The movie begins in an Anderson-style recreation of the author's real-life 'writing hut' where Fiennes begins to mumble a list of things that inspire him to start writing. He then starts telling what he asserts is a true story. The story is a meta-narrative (unless you accept Dahl's claim that it's true), and it starts when Henry (Benedict Cumberbatch, who is perfect in every way) steals a book from a rich friend's library shelf because he is bored. Of course, it is the thinnest book he sees. It turns out to be a thesis-like piece about a man who can see without his eyes. Ben Kingsley plays the man in question, and Dev Patel (Dr Chatterjee) and Richard Ayoade (Dr. Marshall) are the doctors who find out about his power. What interests Henry about this man is that he can see through cards that are turned over. Henry likes to gamble, but he's not very good at it. Henry uses a study method created by a cranky yogi to teach himself how to see without eyes. He also stays away from other people for a few years because of his dedication or obsession, call it what you will. Nothing can stop Imdad Khan (Ben Kingsley); he can see right through. It is his turn now to tell the audience about a Great Yogi (Ayoade again) whose powers of concentration are so strong that he could see without using his eyes. Imdad trains himself to do the same and his story (recounted word-by-word in Dr Chatterjee's slim book)

plants an idea in Henry Sugar's head. Ralph Fiennes character describes Henry Sugar as, "Men like Henry Sugar are to be found drifting like seaweed all over the world. They can be seen especially in London, New York, Paris, Nassau, Montego Bay, Cannes, and San Tropez. They are not particularly bad men, but they are not good men either. They are of no particular importance; they're simply part of the decoration."

A friend who also watched the movie and was not impressed by it questioned the narrative structure of the film. "*Why is it 'he said' and 'I said'?* Why couldn't the dialogues be normal like any other movie?" she said with exasperation. But I was enjoying the overwhelming, moving, colourful stages and sets and this thought never occurred to me. One can actually see stagehands handing the props to the actors in the movie scenes and Ben Kingsley transforming himself into his younger self by wearing a wig and applying makeup. Also, there is a lot of staring into the camera while the characters are narrating the plot. I guess Anderson did this intentionally to make it interesting for the audience. It did for me. In the end I would like to add if you like Wes Anderson, you will love this short film. I would rate this film 8 out of 10 for the fantastic colours, props, innovative layout and theatre-like quality of every scene.

VISUAL ARTS



Photography

Greece Through My Eyes: Monica Reddy

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Greece through my Eyes : Vignettes with Monica Reddy

Greece, officially the Hellenic Republic, is a country in Southeast Europe, situated on the southern tip of the Balkan peninsula. The Aegean Sea lies to the east of the mainland, the Ionian Sea to the west, and the Sea of Crete and the Mediterranean Sea to the south. Greece has the longest coastline on the Mediterranean Basin, featuring thousands of islands.



*Till my soul is full of longing
For the secret of the sea
and the heart of the great ocean
Send a thrilling pulse through me
~ H.W Longfellow*



*Oh, the sky is a turquoise chalice
And the bar is a golden glaive,
As I plunge to the Sea King's palace
In the gulfs of the cool, green wave!
~ Arthur Guiterman*



*Morn on the summer sea--the breaking light
Is trembling on the mountain's misty height
~ Isaac McLellan*



*The Ocean has its silent caves,
Deep, quiet, and alone;
~ Nathaniel Hawthorne*



*Water! Water! Everywhere
And not a drop to drink
~ Coleridge*



*Timeless sea breezes,
sea-wind of the night:
~ Rainer Maria Rilke*



*Sweet was the walk along the narrow lane
At noon, the bank and hedge-rows all the way
~ Unknown*



*Fair flower, that dost so comely grow,
Hid in this silent, dull retreat,
~ Philip Freneau*



*I am empty of virtues,
You, the ocean of them.
~ Mirabai*



*Though there be fury on the waves,
Beneath them there is none.
~ Nathaniel Hawthorne*

A Field Trip with Harmeet Singh

Meet Birds & Butterflies



As usual I started around 6 a.m. in the morning in my trusty Jeep. It was slightly cool and a lazy sun was slowly making its presence felt. I drove through Siswan (Panjab, India), Marranwala (Haryana, India) and started the climb to Himachal (hill state in India). Driving past Haripur, I reached my first stop, the government nursery located on the banks of a Khud (Gorge) on Shalaghat Arki Road. I parked next to the bridge and took in the scene as I sipped a cup of hot tea. That was when I made my first bird sightings of the day (Grey treepie, Grey Wagtail, Thick billed crow, Himalayan Bulbul, Blue Whistling thrush). I was thrilled.



After finishing my tea I drove till Baandh, from where I took the steep uphill road to the right towards Shaktighat-Kasauli, a small town perched atop a hill. I had driven barely 100 metres when I caught sight of the blooming Lantana bushes. The sight warmed my heart and I spent half an hour clicking the butterflies fluttering around the colourful blooms. I then drove another few hundred metres and then parked in the shade of two tall trees. I glanced at my watch. It was around 7.40 am. I was hoping to see some birds here. My patience was rewarded as I made my second sighting of the day- Grey headed pygmy woodpecker, Plum headed parakeet, a courting pair of Great Tits, Crimson Sun bird and a few warblers (although the warblers did not photograph well). Then I drove another hundred metres. It was quiet and lonely but very green. No butterflies as yet but lot of bird chorus. Finally I reached my first second planned stop, a small khud (gorge) which leads to Bhagori primary school. I parked on the side and started the small steep trek along the side of the gorge. As I trekked, I saw an Alexandrine parakeet (nesting in a huge mango tree), Crimson sunbird, Indian white eye (a dozen), Red billed Leiothrix and Red billed blue Magpies. I climbed further and met the only school teacher of the primary school. We chatted about the school and the dire possibility of a landslide near the school because of the road construction. I then walked along and into the shallow section of the gorge where I found several Common Sailor and Common Jester butterflies salting in sand. I also saw my first Indian Owlet-moth. I then caught sight of the western Himalayan Pied Flat, Common Flat, Yellow grass and Malayan. I moved around excitedly, clicking Himalayan bulbuls and a Grey bush chat juvenile as I went along. As I was moving back I caught a glimpse of a rusty red bird. I clicked rapidly as I knew it was a lifer. I later identified it as Rusty cheeked Scimitar Babbler, not normally seen in this area. On the way back, even as I reluctantly bid goodbye to this treasure trove of birds and butterflies, I was rivetted by the sight of a Paris peacock.



I then walked to the small water tank, just below the school I had visited. This tank stores the water from the khud. I saw lots of lovely butterflies- Rustic, Yellow pansy and Sailors. I had a great time clicking the Rustic from all possible angles. After that, I started to trek downhill towards my jeep and that was when I saw a red butterfly. I knew it was a Flash. I waited for it to settle and then clicked it- it was a Red Flash. However, despite waiting patiently, I could not get an open winged shot. I also clicked Blue marsh Hawk and Great Tit. The sun was getting hotter so a little reluctantly, I started to drive back. I got stuck in a narrow stretch against a huge truck laden with logs. A lot of reversing and angling ensued but I finally managed to pass. As I drove further. I saw another small khud with a water outlet on the edge of the rutted track. I knew there would be more butterflies here. It was already around 10.30 and the sun was pouring bright sunshine on unsuspecting denizens. But I decided to brave the sun for a bit more. I was not disappointed. Lot of butterflies were salting- Rustic, Common Jester, Common Sailor, Southern sullied sailor, Line blue. More clicking. Then I saw her landing. It looked like a Vagrant but it was very bright and deep orange. Later I found that it was actually a vagrans Sinha. I thought I saw some narrow winged jesters but they turned out to be common Lascars. I saw another orange butterfly salting I thought it was Angled Castor, but it turned out to be a Tabby. Also clicked several Megisba mylan. I then drove further and stopped on road side. Here I saw Common hedge blue and Himalayan Common beak, Common Leopard and Mormons and Treebrowns. I drove another kilometre or so. This place was very moist, shady and green. Here I saw a Deep

spotted Snow flat, a Himalayan Yellow Jester, and a Himalayan Admiral. My next stop was a bowli (covered water source) where I spotted a Bamboo Treebrown, Southern sullied Sailor and Common sailor. I also clicked a mating pair of Blue marsh Hawk and it was the most interesting combination. It was around 1.30 pm. Sun was very hot. The butterflies were getting very flitty. I had also run out of drinking water. So I decided to call it a day. Drove another 7-8 km to Kasauli-Dharampur through Shaktighat, Garkhal road and had my Lunch at Dippy's. A refreshing cup of tea and I was back home after another two hours of driving via Himalayan Expressway. I was very tired but full of endorphins and a camera full of new discoveries. Phew!! What a Trip that was!!



PODCASTS

Poetry



Sharon Whitehill
Sharon-Whitehill
Tongues in Trees



00:00 / 04:35



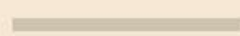
Jan Wiezorek
Jan Wiezorek
Caryatid



00:00 / 01:06



Chad Sokolovsky
Chad Sokolovsky
Make it With You



00:00 / 01:26



PODCASTS

Stories



A podcast player interface for the episode "Dog Days" by Sandor DeGrazia. On the left is a square image of a golden retriever sitting on a sandy beach. To the right of the image is a large play button icon. Below the play button are skip back and skip forward icons, a progress bar, and the text "00:00 / 17:43". To the right of the progress bar are icons for volume, playlist, and share.

Sandor DeGrazia
Dog-Days
Dog Days

00:00 / 17:43



A podcast player interface for the episode "Where My Legacy Treads" by Aaron Becker. On the left is a square image showing a person from behind in a classroom setting. To the right of the image is a large play button icon. Below the play button are skip back and skip forward icons, a progress bar, and the text "00:00 / 10:00". To the right of the progress bar are icons for volume, playlist, and share.

Aaron Becker
Where My Legacy Treads mp3
Where My Legacy Treads

00:00 / 10:00

Musings



A podcast player interface for the episode "Smoke in my eyes" by Debra J White. On the left is a square image of several runners participating in a race. To the right of the image is a large play button icon. Below the play button are skip back and skip forward icons, a progress bar, and the text "00:00 / 02:29". To the right of the progress bar are icons for volume, playlist, and share.

Debra J White
Debra-White
Smoke in my eyes

00:00 / 02:29

Daily Verse & Weekly Yarns



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



THE DAILY VERSE

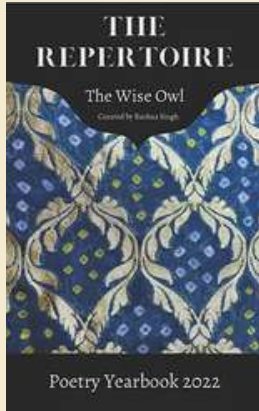
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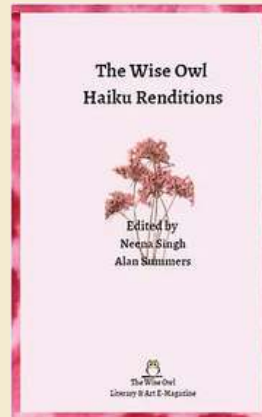
THE WEEKLY YARNS

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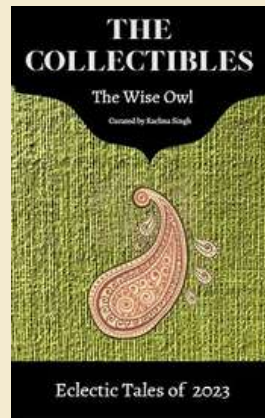


E-book (January 2023)



E-book (March 2023)

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(August 2023)



[E-Mags](#)

BIOGRAPHIES

Ann Privateer is a poet, artist, and photographer. She grew up in the Midwest and now resides in Northern California. Some of her recent work has appeared in *Third Wednesday* and *Entering* to name a few.

Concetta Pipia is a writer and poet. Her poetry is published in international anthologies including "Soul Serenade," "Force Is With Us," and others. Her work appears in literary magazines including "The Raven's Perch," *Pine Cone Review's SURVIVAL* and "GLISSADE." Ms. Pipia founded the writing group, *Aspiring Writers' Society* and its e-zine. She holds a BFA, JD, and MBA/HRM. She loves dogs and is a wheelchair user for 45 years due to MVA in 1978.

Dan Hardison is a native of Tennessee, and now lives in Wilmington, North Carolina where he is a writer and artist. His artwork is inspired by Japanese woodblocks and ink painting (sumi-e). As an artist and writer, he is drawn to the Japanese haiga - a combination of image and poem. This has led to recent work creating handmade artist books. Dan's writing is primarily in the Japanese short form of haiku and haibun, and has appeared at *Frogpond*, *Cattails*, *Contemporary Haibun Online*, *Drifting Sands*, and other print and online journals. His work can be found on his website "Windscape Studio" and his blog "Some Tomorrow's Morning".

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

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

Chad Sokolovsky's first book of poetry, *Prophecy Mechanic* took first place in *Quercus Review's Annual Book Competition* in 2016 and was included in *Kirkus Reviews magazine's top 100 Best Independent Books of 2018* as well as receiving a 5-star review from *Seattle Book Review*. Sokolovsky currently lives in Renton, WA and works in the Food Supply Chain industry.

Jan Wiezorek writes and paints in southwestern Michigan. *The London Magazine*, *Poetry Center San José*, *Minetta Review*, and *The Orchards Poetry Journal*, among others, have published his poems. He taught writing at *St. Augustine College*, Chicago, and wrote the ebook *Awesome Art Projects That Spark Super Writing* (*Scholastic*, 2011).

Debra S Mascarenhas is based in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, and has been living in Dubai for almost three decades. She is a widow and lives with her three children. She graduated in Arts and majored in Literature. Writing comes to her naturally. She has two books published in the UK, namely *Whispers from my Heart & Sail into the World of my poem*. She also loves painting in acrylics and is passionate about cooking, gardening, writing, and photography.

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.

Joan McNerney has recited her work at the National Arts Club, New York City, State University of New York, Oneonta, McNay Art Institute, San Antonio and the University of Houston, Texas and other distinguished venues. Published worldwide in over thirty five countries. her work has appeared in literary publications too numerous to mention. Four Best of the Net nominations have been awarded to her. The Muse in Miniature, Love Poems for Michael and At Work are available on Amazon.com and Cyberwit.net. A new release entitled Light & Shadow explores both before and aftermath of the recent historic COVID pandemic.

Sharon Whitehill is a retired English professor from West Michigan now living in Port Charlotte, Florida. In addition to poems published in various literary magazines, her publications include two scholarly biographies, two memoirs, two poetry chapbooks, and a full collection of poems. Her chapbook, *This Sad and Tender Time*, is due out winter 2024.

Padmini Krishnan writes poetry and short stories. Her works have been published in Stonecrop Review, Page & Spine, Balloon Literary Journal, Friday Flash Fiction and many more. Her e-chapbook, Pinewood Hills, was published in Proletaria.

Born and raised in Lincoln Nebraska, the product of a college professor and music school teacher, **Sandor DeGrazia** received a loving, liberal and creative start. Art, music and dance were abundant but it was a career in gymnastics that paved his way through college. After graduating from the University of New Mexico with a bachelor's degree he had no idea what he wanted to do next. So, he went into show business. Spanning a decade from Los Angeles to New York City, his theater credits began with Michael Jackson and ended with the Chippendales, performing in several shows in between, most notably Miss Saigon. For the last 25 years, from bartending to Broadway, he's thrived on the thrill of New York. His current profession is massage therapy. His passion is creative writing. The islands of Manhattan and Fire Island serve to inspire fascination with the great questions of life. Pondering much, Sandor has come to believe it is within life's mysteries where magic dwells.

Aaron Becker is a young writer from the south of England, and has been coming up with ideas for as long as he can remember. So far, his work has been published by a Science-based journal in 2009*, screened at a theatre festival in 2019 and featured on no fewer than five literary websites in the last year***, ****, ***** , *****, *****. The latter disappointed him very much, as it ruined his record of only achieving publication when the year ends in 9!

Chinmay did his MFA from Sarah Lawrence College. His work has appeared in Bluestem Magazine, Ginosko Literary Journal, Every Day Fiction and elsewhere. He has work forthcoming in NonBinary Review, and his translation has appeared in Anuvad (Translators' Association of India). He likes to add colour to the lives of those around him, and can often be found smiling or grumbling under a motorcycle helmet or behind a harmonica.

JB Polk is Polish by birth, a citizen of the world by choice. The first story short-listed for the Hennessy Awards, Ireland, in 1996. She regularly contributed to Women's Quality Fiction, Books Ireland, and IncoGnito. She was also the co-founder of Virginia House Writers, Dublin, and helped establish the OKI Literary Awards. Her creative writing was interrupted as she moved to Latin America and started contributing to magazines and newspapers and then wrote textbooks for Latin American Ministries of Education. Since she went back to writing fiction in 2020, 53 of her stories have been accepted for publication.

A 1994 car accident ended **Debra's** career due to a traumatic brain injury. She re-invented herself through volunteer work and writing. Debra wrote for Animal Wellness, Arizona Republic, Social Work, Airports of the World, Psychology Today, and others. She reviewed books, contributed book chapters and wrote a book for TFH Publications. Her website is:

Dan Hardison is a native of Tennessee, and now lives in Wilmington, North Carolina where he is a writer and artist. His artwork is inspired by Japanese woodblocks and ink painting (sumi-e). As an artist and writer, he is drawn to the Japanese haiga - a combination of image and poem. This has led to recent work creating handmade artist books. Dan's writing is primarily in the Japanese short form of haiku and haibun, and has appeared at Frogpond, Cattails, Contemporary Haibun Online, Drifting Sands, and other print and online journals. His work can be found on his website "Windscape Studio" and his blog "Some Tomorrow's Morning".

Urmi Chakravorty is a former educator and presently, a freelance writer, reviewer and editor based out of Bangalore, India. She is a military spouse and has majored in English Literature and Language. Her non-fiction pieces are occasionally published in The Hindu and The Times of India. As co-author, her short stories and poems have found space in twenty-five domestic and international literary journals and anthologies, including Women's Web, Writefluence, TMYS Reviews, Borderless Journal and The Wise Owl. Urmi is an Orange Flower awardee for writing on LGBTQIA issues. Her other interests include reading, music, travel, and spending time with community dogs.

A doctorate in English literature and a former bureaucrat, **Rachna Singh** has authored *Penny Panache* (2016) *Myriad Musings* (2016) *Financial Felicity* (2017) & *The Bitcoin Saga: A Mixed Montage* (2019). She writes regularly for National Dailies and has also been reviewing books for the The Tribune for more than two decade. She runs a YouTube Channel, *Kuch Tum Kaho Kuch Hum Kahein*, which brings to the viewers poetry of established poets of Hindi & Urdu. She loves music and is learning to play the piano. Her forthcoming title, *Phoenix in Flames*, is a collection of stories about women who have fought their demons and tragedies and arisen from the flames of their suffering like the mythical phoenix.

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.

Monica Reddy is a software engineer working in the Bay Area. She is also a travel buff and an avid photographer. So when she is not working, she is soaking up the beauty and variety that different cultures and landscapes offer.

Harmeet Singh is a medical doctor by qualification, a civil-servant by profession and an avid birder. He is also a butterfly watcher and has identified 231 new species of butterflies. He is an artist who dabbles in watercolours and acrylics. His website is Birds of Mullanpur <https://www.birds-of-mullanpur.com> & Butterflies of Mullanpur <https://www.butterflies-of-mullanpur>

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