Volume 4. 2022

IHRAF Publishes

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January 5, 2022

“Interview with Apalasi Mwenebato”

Francois Bereaud

In 2016, my family and I connected with Sumitra, an upstart mentoring program for Congolese families recently arrived in San Diego. We were paired with the Mwenebato family: Apalasi, Selestine, and their four children. Over four years, Apalasi and I formed a very strong bond. In brief, this is his story.

[Note: I am writing in interview form, but this is not a transcription. I’ve edited for brevity and clarity and also translated from French—while Apalasi’s English is nearing fluency, he felt more comfortable speaking in French. Phrases in italics are direct quotes.]

*Tell me your name and where you were born.

My name is Apalasi Mwenbato. I was born in the Congo in 1985.

*Describe your early childhood.

We lived in a village called Baraka which was part of a series of villages. I lived with my father, mother, and three brothers and five sisters. We had our own home but there were many extended family members very close to us. My father was a pastor in the Anglican Church and my mother stayed home. We did not have a lot of money, but we had food and I went to school. We had no telephone. Our tribe was Babembe.

*Describe the events which led you to flee the Congo.

When I was seven, a war broke out between our tribe and a tribe of people who had come from Rwanda. The fight was over land. The two sides were killing each other like animals. I saw things a boy should never see. I saw bodies and I saw killings. Men killed small children.

My father tried to talk to both sides. He tried to be a counselor and a peacemaker. Our family called him the enemy and threatened to kill him. He said he had to follow his calling.

One night, there was a knock on the door. People often came to the house at all hours for my father so he opened the door. He was taken and we never saw him again. We do not know which

side took him or how he died. A few hours later, before daybreak, my uncle came and said we had to leave. We walked through the bush for four days with little or no food and two of my brothers died on the journey.

We arrived somewhere on Lake Tanganyika and took a pirogue boat to Tanzania. I had spent a lot of time at the lake, but traveling at night was new. I was scared.

I have never returned to the Congo.

*What did you find when you arrived in Tanzania?

We were taken to a sort of hospital. We ate what little food they gave us, food left over from the patients. We slept on the floor. We were demoralized and had no hope. After about a month, there were so many people from the Congo in Tanzania that the government decided to open a refugee camp. We heard that the land was full of vicious animals and evil spirits. Some people did not want to go there. My family had no choice. We got on a bus and rode for a day. The camp was called Nyarugusu.

*What was life like in the camp when you arrived?

The camp was in the forest. There was nothing, just dirt. People were given hoes, machetes, and tent material to make their house. My uncle cleared our piece of ground, cut trees for poles, and spread the tent as a roof. That was our house.

I was in the camp for twenty years from 1996 to 2016. The camp was the size of two of the neighborhoods where I live now. At the beginning there was nothing to do. We received food every two weeks, just flour and beans. We were always hungry. There were public toilets, only one every kilometer and always a long line. Because of the diet, people had lots of digestive problems and couldn’t wait in line. Human excrement was everywhere. For a shower, sometimes we had to wait overnight. We lived like animals.

After a year, a delegation of our intellectual men in the camp spoke with United Nations representatives regarding the question of educating kids. They said this generation would be lost without education. Schools were started under big tents. Those men served as volunteer teachers.

Very slowly, some things became less primitive. Some houses became brick abode, still with tent roofs. After some years, schools were built. Teachers were given "soap" as salary (a very small amount of money which could buy soap or other small items).

When I was fourteen, I finished middle school but there was no high school. Again the intellectual men spoke about my generation needing to be educated. A high school started, still with volunteer teachers. Lots of kids older than me joined the school because they never had the opportunity for secondary school. In the second year they paid teachers. Someone got books from Congo. Parents paid for their children's books with beans. Sometimes we had to choose between food and books. I went to high school from age 15 to 21. Every year it was a bit better and eventually we got a real building. I specialized in science and math.

*What was your emotional state in the camp?

When we got to the camp we felt no hope. After one year, my uncle left and got his family and my grandparents. They brought me hope. My mother remarried two years after getting to camp. I stayed with my uncle and grandparents. But I was able to go back and forth to my mom whose house was just fifteen minutes away. If I needed food, I could always try her house.

Thousands of people died in the camp from many different diseases including malaria. At least ten people a day. I was lucky to be healthy. I was able to explore every inch of the camp.

*As you got older, how did you feel in the camp? Did you see the possibility of leaving?

In the camp we were free prisoners. After the camps existed for more than ten years, the United Nations began to interview people who had been there so long. After the interviews, the UN personnel put people into a refugee "market." Agents from different countries examined dossiers to see if they met certain criteria to enter the United States, Canada, or Europe.

When people started leaving in 2001 and 2002, communication was poor. There were no telephones—people left and we didn't hear from them again. People in the camps thought those who left were being recruited for organ harvesting. There were stories that if you left they might take your eyes or one of your kidneys. My grandfather thought that way. He was interviewed but

decided not to leave. I couldn't leave either since he was the head of the family. When he died in 2013, I became the head of the family and could choose to try to leave.

*What did you do when you finished high school?

The camp was divided into villages. Eventually there were dirt roads. I was a good student so I went from student to teacher. I taught for ten years, 2006-2016. I taught math and science to high school students. Some were older than me.

*How did you meet your wife, Selestine?

I was a teacher, and Selestine studied in another school. Her friends were my students. Selestine would skip school and come visit them. "I like your professor," she told her friends. I was a bit serious for such talk. She came to my house for some help and she asked me to marry her the first time I helped her in math! I said she was too young and that a teacher should not marry a student. Selestine was smart and she started helping my mother. My mother liked her and wanted me to like her.

A refugee can't have a salary, it was said. But, I got something like $50/month from teaching. Now there were opportunities to buy meat, vegetables, and other items in the camp. My mother had a business selling drinks. Two years after I met Selestine, my mother gave me money for her bride price.

I put my savings with my mother's money and presented it to Selestine's family. We got married the same day. The marriage was traditional: the families give the okay, and we had a celebration. But there were no parties after 8 pm. The camp was not a place to live and laugh.

*Tell me about your life with Selestine in the camp and the birth of your kids.

Selestine and I lived in a brick house together. She got pregnant with Mishaki quickly. We were very happy and it gave us hope. He was born in 2010. I kept teaching, Selestine stayed at home. Philemon was born less than 2 years later in 2012. My grandfather died in 2013—that was a loss of hope. My grandfather helped many people.

After my grandfather died, there was a reassessment of people in the camps and I went to meet with agents. I wanted help. I came to the camps as a kid, now I was a man with a family. Where was I to go?

They took my info. At that point I had a cell phone which was a big deal for our family. One day at school, I got a phone call and was told the family had an interview the following week. I had to explain why I was fearful of leaving the camp all those years. The agents agreed that it was a dangerous situation and my life was at risk. They sent my dossier to Kenya which was a clearinghouse for refugees. That's when I became a refugee, a person unable to return to his country. We started the process to try and leave the camp.

In 2015, during the interview process, Selestine got pregnant with Charlotte and we had to wait for the birth for the process to go forward. There were four or five stages of paperwork for us to do. After the second stage, we knew we were going to the United States. We were happy. The US was our first choice because the US is a strong power and a country without war.

*Describe your journey to the US.

In November 2016, we finally left for the United States. The trip here was long and tiring but it went well. We had just the kids and a few small bags with some clothes. We had some bags sent ahead of us with more clothing and living goods like pots and pans. We flew from Dar es Salaam to Doha to LAX.

*What were your first impressions of the US?

We were surprised by everything at the airport. We had no idea where to go but we had identification as refugees which got us help. Someone from Jewish Family Services drove us to San Diego and we spent our first night in our apartment in City Heights. We were very happy with it. The neighbors were friendly and welcomed us in the morning.

We had a caseworker at Jewish Family Services and, on day two, she gave me money for a phone. I called my friend Amuri who had been here for two months. He lived in the same neighborhood and showed me around. The agency gave me money and Amuri took me to the store. Sometimes I brought stuff home on my head. People in the street found that funny and

took pictures of me. There were about 20 Congolese families here before us, "our community." Amuri's family and mine became family together.

We came on a Wednesday night and on the first Sunday we went to church at St Luke's where many Congolese families went. We got our first armchair from St. Luke's.

In December, I started English classes at a community center near the apartment. At class, I was sorted from folks who had no formal education and were illiterate in their native language. I started in the third level because of my high level of education. I quickly moved through several levels of English as I was still a good student.

The first Christmas here was great—I was amazed to get an iPad from St Luke's. The boys got computers. They started school in January. It was hard for them as their English was weak.

In the spring, I got a job as a custodian working five nights a week from 5 pm to 10 pm. At first, I wasn't happy about it because I had previously been a teacher. But one factor which shocked and motivated me was seeing homeless people, which I'd never expected here. In Africa, we thought that everyone in the US was rich. Seeing those men right near my house made me feel scared that such a situation could befall me and my family. I was glad to work.

*You've been in the US for four and a half years now. Describe your life here. How many jobs do you have? What was it like having a child here?

Now I have three jobs. Two are custodial, one is gardening. On the one hand I like them: they support my family here and I can help my family in Africa from time to time. On the other hand, it's not what I'd like to be doing. My English has improved; I can have a conversation. I'm in a better position to make a change. The pandemic slowed my job progress, but I had the good fortune to work through it.

I was happy to have a child here because she is the first American in my family.

*How do you feel about being in the US now?

For the first two years of my job, I had to take a bus to a trolley to another bus to get to work. The trip took two hours. Now, I have bought a car and the ride takes twelve minutes. I moved my

family to a bigger apartment. My wife works. My children go to good schools—the boys have gotten scholarships at private religious schools.

I began to understand how life works here. I get hope from the connections I have made through church and friends. I have created an extended family here. I am proud of my life here.

*Do you feel guilty about leaving family behind?

It's painful for me to have left family in the camp. I still have hope that they can come here, through the grace of God. I'm working with the International Rescue Committee to try and get my mother over.

[During our conversation, Apalasi took a phone call in English from someone at the IRC concerning the next steps in the process for his mother.]

*There has been a lot of political talk about refugees. How do you feel you are treated in this country? Have you felt any discrimination here?

I have not experienced or heard bad things about me or my situation as a refugee. I'm grateful that it is calm here, without violence.

*What are your dreams and your dreams for your children?

My first dream is to help orphaned children in the camps. Many children were orphaned in the war. I could have been one of them. They need basic supplies like soap and notebooks. A second dream is the dream of buying a house here. I don't want to always pay rent. A third dream would be to build a business in the Congo, maybe a shop or hotel.

For my children, I want them to be educated. I want them to reach university. I would like one of the boys to join the military because I would like our family to contribute to this country which has received us so well.

*In your life, you've seen the worst of humanity, but you're not an angry or bitter person. What accounts for your positive outlook?

I come from a Christian family on both sides. I am not a vengeful person. I believe in the word of God which says we should always be thankful.

*What else would you like to tell me?

I think you have done a very scientific interview. By that I mean, you've covered all aspects of me and my life. That's good.

Francois Bereaud celebrated turning 50 a few years back by completing an MFA at San Diego State University. He was the bosque journal's "Discovery Author Award" winner in 2017. He has been published online at Rejected Manuscripts, Sundial Magazine, The Write Launch, the Dillydoun Review, in print at Blood & Bourbon, and ABQ inPrint. He has written a novel and two short story collections which he dreams of publishing and seeing in the window of his beloved neighborhood bookstore. In his non-writing life, he is a husband, dad, full time community college math professor, retired youth soccer coach, mentor in the Congolese refugee community, and mediocre hockey player.

January 11, 2022

“ATLAS, MOVE!”

Kindaka Jahmal Sanders

The boulder on your shoulder ain’t nothing but a chip
We care not if you shrug.
Because the only thing you're holding up
Is progress.
Yeah I hear you:
"That can't be true!"
But all this means is "I can't be that ignorant"
Or “I couldn’t possibly be that much of a fool.”
But you are.
Matter fact, you have proven it
Thus far.

Some ideas speed history up
Some ideas slow it down
The worst ideas turn it back
The best ones turn it back around

Progression speeds it up
Conservation rewinds it back
But I get it,
We are our own experiments
And in the heart of every man
Who beats the odds
Is a God that looks like him.

But you forget the lust of the Angels:
The pleasure they take in being used.
That the heart is dark
That is troubled
by the love that enters it.
That forsakes sacrifice
In the worship rules.

You are matter
Because it is the only thing
That matters to you.
Not knowing that you are
But a clot
In the veins of deity

It is your dis-ease
That causes disease
That attacks the body
While swearing it's
Providing a cure.
It is cancer,
Claiming it is pure
Because it is white.
It is manure that is too slow
And too self-involved to know
It ain't shit,
But fodder for hallucinogenic mushrooms.

It's arrogance
Protecting ignorance.
Its innocence

Is buried beneath
Sheaths of emotional mud
That's why it can hardly feel a damn thing
Except for a malevolent grudge.

Atlas, you don't have the world on your shoulders.
You are stepping on its neck.
What you have on your shoulders is guilt
That the little you is fighting hard to forget.

If you are so strong
Face the music and
The truth is the loudest it gets,
It is the hardest thing
You'll ever do
But at least you'll know
The real you,
Which if still breathing
Will help the recovering you
start cleaning up
This mess of world you've created.

But until then move.
Get the fuck out of the way.
You are about to destroy
The world you think you are holding up.
And the children soon
Will have nothing else to say
And the things they'll do to you
Will put what you did to them
To disgrace

So hurry up
Atlas and move.
Get the fuck out of the way.
If not for them for you.
For if you don't move,
And insist on holding us in place.
THEY WILL,
Forcibly remove you
And the only stone
You'll be supporting
Is the capstone on your grave.

Kindaka Jahmal Sanders is a writer from Selma, Alabama. His writing reflects his hometown's conflicting legacies and the multiple worlds he grew up in. He grew up around doctors and lawyers, black radicals and nonviolent civil rights legends, politicians and anarchists, realist and college students from around the world, on the one hand, and on the other, criminals, drug-dealers, and hustlers whose most basic goal in life was mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual survival. He sucked it all up. His writing expresses the pain, suffering, and joy of the American other.

January 17, 2022

“The Hate You Feel”

Nneamaka Onochie

The blurred light cast a dim shadow over the room and made Mama strain her eyes as she worked on Ije's thick kinky hair. You watched as she divided the full hair into six sections and braided them loosely then selected each of the braids with a long wooden, chiseled, orange comb. She parted each section until the scalp shone, then she applied ori, a local hair ointment that propels the growth of hair. Ije winced in pain but Mama held her hair tight with her strong brown hands that had tilled many lands. You sat at the corner of the room with your legs folded to your chest and your hands wrapped around them. Your hair itched but Mama would rather you washed it by yourself with Dudu Osun, a local black soap, than work on it—which had never been the case with your sister.

“Mama, I’m hungry,” Ije grumbled. She looked at you, seething.

You looked at Mama and read the message in her big brown eyes. There was an underlying order in those eyes. You stood up from the little corner where you sat and lumbered to the kitchen, you came back with a plate of beans and yam porridge and carefully placed it in front of Ije and went back to your corner. Ije scooped a spoonful of beans and munched.

“You brought food, you didn’t bring water,” she accused.

Mama gave you that look again. You stood up to get water. Though Ije was your younger sister and four years younger, you knew she was Mama’s favourite. She stretched her luck of being the more beloved, much to your own detriment, and Mama indulged her. The day Mama came home with her from the hospital was the day a vacuum was created between the two of you. To her, Ije was a miracle baby after four years of waiting, and she gave Ije her undivided attention; she never allowed you to carry her even when she wailed. Sometimes she forgot you had not eaten and you disliked Ije for stealing away all of Mama's attention.

You fetched water from the earthen pot and took it to Ije. You wished she would ask whether you had eaten, but you knew she never would, so you sat in the corner and watched. You weren’t hungry after all.

Mama finished with Ije's hair and applied ori generously on her scalp. She packed the braided hair with a hair band. Satisfied, she brushed the edges of her hair. Ije stood up and made for the bed. She was tired and sleepy and Mama covered her with her kirikiri star wrapper.

"Obioma, take away this plate and go to your room. Make sure the doors are locked before you go to bed."

You wanted to protest. Ije was supposed to take her plate to the kitchen before falling on Mama's bed, but you were tired. Besides, you always cleaned up after her. You took the plate and left Mama's room. Ije was the only one authorized to sleep on her raffia bed since Papa died. This made the hedge between you and your sister grow wider. You went to your cold raffia bed and lay down looking at the ceiling, but you couldn't see it because it was dark so you closed your eyes and the huge warm hands of slumber embraced you. In your dreams you saw Emeka the village boy you liked. You both sat under the orange tree eating oranges after he had peeled off the bark and given you the sweet juicy part. You ate it, looking into his eyes while he smiled at you and quickly touched your cheek. It caused you to giggle.

"Obioma, you have to wake up, it's time to cook." Your mother's soft voice, which drew and stretched like okra, woke you.

"Mama, good morning." You sat up and stretched your body, perturbed about the dream you had. Emeka was your crush but you had never spoken to him before.

"Hope you slept well," your mother inquired, and before you formed a reply she was gone. So you held your cheeks and smiled because the dream gave you hope after all.

The compound was neatly swept and you knew Mama had swept it. You went to the thatch kitchen where the firewood emitted a faint smoke which Mama had lighted. You took a hand fan, squatted and fanned the embers till fire emerged, then you placed a medium-sized black pot with water on the fire and peeled yam for porridge. Mama helped in plucking and cutting the ugu leaves. The red porridge was almost done when Ije woke up. She entered the kitchen yawning.

"Ha! Food is not ready?" she complained.

"Go and wash your face and your food will be ready by the time you are back," Mama admonished her.

Ije left the kitchen grudgingly, and when she went back to the kitchen, Mama gave her food and she strutted inside the house without another word.

“Obi, you will go to the river and fetch water,” your mother said. Whenever she shortened your name, it was to cajole you, and you frowned at it because inasmuch as you considered it manipulative, like a dagger it pierced your heart. You disliked pet names when it came from her. It churned your stomach and made you nauseous.

“Isn’t Ije supposed to wash her clothes today?” you asked, merely concealing the grumpy judgement in your tone.

“Which water would she wash with if you haven’t fetched any?” she replied, the stinging remark stuck like a stubborn fly perched at the nape of your neck, determined to unnerve you. On your way to the river you grumbled and hissed, vehemently refusing to lift a finger to the tears at the corner of your eyes.

Friends’ greetings to you hung in the air. Most of the people that knew you passed but not without turning their heads to ascertain the mystery behind a once cheerful girl’s demeanor. Then it struck you! You hadn’t remembered calling your friend Nwa since you always went to the river together, so you turned back and ran as fast as your legs could carry you to your friend’s house. She was leaving the compound with a white bucket clutched in her hand and you were glad your frustrations hadn’t gotten the better part of your memory.

“Why are you panting, is something pursuing you?” Nwa inquired. Her forehead was creased with horizontal lines of concern.

“I was on my way to the river and remembered someone was missing beside me. I remembered my chatty and troublesome friend so I ran as fast as my legs could carry me to call her,” you replied and smiled sheepishly.

“I’m glad you remembered because I was almost leaving for your house and would have been mad at you if you had made it to the river without me,” she said laughing and you laughed with her. Nwa was a breath of fresh air and you were grateful for her friendship which was a balancing part of your life.

The walk to the river was seamless and chatty as your cheek widened in smile and pleasure. Your eyes glistened as Nwa narrated her ordeal with the village boys.

“I finally got a chance to kiss Chike the church pianist two nights ago under the orange tree after we had eaten the suya he bought from Mallam Musa.”

Your eyes bulged and you opened your mouth in disbelief and stared at your mischievous friend.

“The kiss was sloppy and he practically forced saliva down my throat, his breath heavy with onions from suya, it was nothing like I dreamt and when he tried touching my breast I slapped off his hand.”

You shrieked and laughed throatily, your shoulders shaking.

“Well, having satisfied my curiosity of tasting his big lips, my attraction to him waned,” she mumbled and continued, “who would believe that the handsome church pianist is a lazy kisser.” She laughed and you joined her in the laughter and imagined your fair and tall and lanky, pious church pianist kissing Nwa under the orange tree and forcing saliva down her throat. Nwa was short and stout with slight bowlegs. Her heart-shaped face was beautiful with almond eyes and high cheekbones and a well-chiseled jaw, accentuated with long kinky hair and a yellow complexion. She was unduly pretty and the crush of most of the village boys.

“I’m never seeing that man again,” she said with a note of finality.

You were already at the river and it was crowded. Some swam, some washed their clothes and utensils, and others just stood by the corner and chatted. The water was already murky. I would have come earlier if I wanted to meet the water clean, you thought.

Nwa went to the edge of the river and dipped her feet in the water. You followed suit. The water calmed your body and soothed every string of sadness. You and your friend bent over and filled your buckets then balanced them on your heads and turned towards the road that led home.

“I can’t wait for school resumption, I miss Afam already,” Nwa muttered. It was typical of her to fill every silence. Afam was a boy in your class who had travelled to Onitsha for holidays at his uncle’s place.

“So why would you miss him when you haven’t accepted his request?” you inquired.

“Exactly the reason I missed and wanted him home, so I could give my unreserved positive reply.”

You smiled weakly at the wreck of a personality your friend was and said, “Don’t worry, he will be home soon. At least for your sake.” she smiled back, her eyes glistening. You knew the magic your words did to her. You and your friend walked home faster than normal because the bucket on your head was already drowning your neck.

Ije sat in the corridor and polished her nails when you walked in while Mama sat on the wooden stool by the corner and picked beans. You knew Ije hadn’t done any chores that morning except to eat, and it pierced your heart how you had become a house girl in your own home. You wished Papa was alive, wished that he hadn’t gone to farm on that fateful day and got bitten by a snake. You went to the back yard where the drum was and cried as you emptied your bucket. You made the trip to the river two more times before the drum was filled, then you went to the bathroom and had your bath.

As you bathed you sponged your body hard, lost in your own philandering thoughts of how Mama never took notice when you were sick. The last time you fell sick, it was your neighbour Mama Nkoli who came visiting to discuss the proceeds from the women’s meeting. She looked at you and asked your mother, “Why are Obioma's eyes yellow? Don’t you think she might have yellow fever?” That was when your mother took a good look at you and sent you to the chemist to buy drugs. She wasn’t at your beck and call like she was when your sister was sick. She didn’t boil hot water for you neither did she make the delicious banga soup with assorted meat and fish for you. She didn’t check your body temperature late in the night and didn’t take you to the village clinic. You didn’t have a hospital card but your sister did. You cried as you took your bath and resolved to never like Ije. Deep down in your heart, you resented Mama, and you swore to teach her a lesson. You had always pulled through without her and you never demanded her love or attention. You were at a crossroads that hadn’t mattered to you because you thought you had trained your mind to accept your misfortune, though you knew you lived in denial and it frustrated you. So you began your plot of undoing your own sister Ije.

It was early in the morning on a Saturday. You both had gone to the river to wash. It was just the two of you at the river. You both were washing silently when you said, “Ije, I discovered a secret in the river.” She glared at you and said, “What secret?”

“Follow me.”

You ran towards the river and she followed. You walked into the river. You knew she couldn't swim. You dragged her by the hand to where the water was deepest and left her to drown. You watched her struggle till her hands surrendered to the demands of the waves and you swam to the shore indifferent.

That day, you went home crying profusely while you told Mama that Ije, instead of washing her clothes, had gone playing in the river despite your pleas and warning; and before you could save her, the dwellers of the water beyond received her. The shock apprehended Mama; she went hysterical and fainted. Later when she was resuscitated, she was in the middle of sympathizing neighbours who surrounded her and wailed. You sat by the corner with Nwa. She patted your back and steadied your shoulders as you shuddered and shivered while she dished out words of comfort. You cried because you had to put up an appearance and not because you'd killed your sister. Deep down your heart it gave you pleasure to see your mother suffer.

Since your sister died, Mama barely ate. She cried every night while you slept like a baby, sated. You never said, "Mama, it is okay," neither did you console her. You let her languish in pain; after all, you were also supposed to be mourning and need comfort. The deceased was your sister.

As the days passed, you watched Mama transition into a shadow of herself. She was always lost in deep thought, frequently soliloquizing. Often, she broke into tears and screamed profusely, shaking her head in absolute resolve. She never asked you if you were hungry, never made your hair, never invited you to her bed to mourn with her. She totally shut you out of her world.

Then one morning you woke up from sleep and it was eerily quiet. You went to Mama's room and saw her lying lifeless.

A cold shiver ran through your body and goose bumps erupted on your skin. You panicked and rushed to her bed and touched her. Her body was so cold when you bent to feel her heartbeat, but you felt nothing. She must have passed in the night or the wee hours of the morning. You carried her lifeless body and rocked her like a baby.

"Mama, what happened to you?" you whispered. "Why didn't you call my name? I would have come. So you preferred to be with Ije in death rather than live to take care of me." You stopped

rocking her and adjusted her loose wrapper. “There were things we never said and discussions we never had.” Tears clouded your eyes as you spoke and you forbade yourself from crying.

“I hope you forgive me, Mama. If only you loved me as much as you loved her. Please tell Ije to forgive me.”

You carefully laid her on the mattress and watched her carefully. She looked pale and peaceful. Then you muttered, “I’m sorry”, stood up and went to the kitchen. You warmed the leftover jollof rice and ate, ate hungrily! After all, you would need the strength to wail and alert the neighbours of your loss.

Nneamaka Onochie is a writer, poet, journalist, columnist and a girl child advocate from Nigeria. Her works have been published in newspapers, magazines, blogs and literary journals.

January 23, 2022

“My Own Skin”

Kelly Kaur

The five-year-old unravels at home, sobbing from the incongruous assault at his pre-school. His holy hair desecrated, the proud mark of his heritage. A pair of scissors in little, lethal, young bully hands. targeted. terrorized. terrified.

The teenager tastes the gritty sand on the hostile ground of small-town Alberta. Assorted angry fists mercilessly pummel his head, face, neck, torso, groin, hips, knees, shins, ankles. Ferocious feet kick in the nooks and crannies of his twisted trunk. Petrified. He wears his palms like an inept shield. Barely sufficient for twelve hands and feet that furiously flail his trampled soul. Mocking monkey sounds infiltrate the cool April air. No promised refugee sanctuary. Bruised and battered, the young man stays barricaded in the impenetrable prison of his fear. they made me afraid to wear my own skin.

The poised and polished Asian lawyer sits in the comfort of his car at the corner of a busy boulevard in Vancouver. He rolls his window down to distinguish the yelps of the men in the car next to his. Their vicious words wallop his peaceful existence. Slurs suspend like muck in mid-air. His window repels the tossed bag of trash. “shame, sorrow, vulnerability.”

Two young women in hijabs attacked at a park a young Black man assaulted at the bus stop a Vietnamese woman slashed with a knife at the mall a synagogue desecrated a Sikh man shot on his driveway while washing his car go back to where you came from bullets ricochet through mosques, temples, synagogues, churches heads bowed in ardent prayers fervently seeking peace & love a family of five Pakistanis viciously mowed down at the traffic lights on a serene Sunday evening by a man in his eerie shadowy truck one lone child survived forever orphaned by hate

Still

Still

Still in the silence

We dream of roving ancestors

travelling descendants' dreams accumulated from all bends of the universe

Of the endless race for unanimity

Of tender words to dress profound wounds

Of the magnificence of diverse shades and vivid tongues

Of colorful hearts that love indiscriminately

Of discordant minds that connect peaceably

Of anthems of courage and love

Of accents that chant a chorus of harmony

I am honoured to wear my own skin

I am privileged to wear my own skin

I am proud to wear my own skin, eh

Kelly lives in Calgary, Canada. She has been published in The Best Asian Stories 2020, To Let the Light In Anthology (Asia), The Best Asian Poetry 2021, and The Only Question Project: Ulyanovsk UNESCO City of Literature; had a story nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2022; and had a poem in the North Dakota Human Rights Arts Festival -Traveling Exhibition. Her poem "A Singaporean's Love Affair" will go to the moon on 2 separate NASA missions: the Nova-C mission to Oceanus Procellarum on the Moon (June 2022) and on the Polaris mission to the Lunar South Pole (2023). Her novel, Letters to Singapore, by Stonehouse Publishing, will be out April 2022.

January 29, 2022

“Plastic Breath”

Alfredo Salvatore Arcilesi

* 2022 IHRAF Publishes Pushcart Prize Nominee *

After seven days of intolerable confinement, Izzy decided that this foggy afternoon was the right time to free herself. And, if she could manage, Clara.

She had been testing her crippled body since the morning darkness, inundating her extremities with signals to flex, and, with any hard-earned luck, move. Her weak arms appeared up to the task; she guessed her weight to be just shy of one-hundred pounds. Her legs, however, remained stubborn, anchoring her to the bed. For all the training she had subscribed to these counterparts, none was more rigorous, more vital than her breathing regimen.

Izzy's relationship with oxygen had always been toxic. A university athlete who had relied upon her immaculate lungs for victory, it had been an unreliable ankle that had decided that ten metres from an important finish line was the time to snap, end her career, sink her into the depths of depression, and enroll her in a new, lifelong sport: smoking. Three packs a day, four when she was feeling particularly good (or bad), for fifty years.

Now the ghosts of cigarettes past were preventing her, in spite of her cooperative arms, from liberating herself, and, more importantly, Clara.

Izzy exhaled a laboured breath, painfully inhaled another. She should have been accustomed to it by now, but the air filtering throughout her sanctuary still tasted as artificial as it smelled. She felt the rather stale intake race through her mouth and nostrils, hoping to reach the pair of black bags that kept her going for no real purpose.

Save for Clara.

The clean dose of oxygen reached her ashen lungs, then exited her mouth and nose in another laboured exhalation. Izzy imagined the polluted molecules warning the new wave of respiration about what corruption lay within her.

She looked to her right, locked eyes with the never-blinking Clara, and, with a look that said, “Don't you dare move now”—she couldn't risk precious breaths on her roommate's deaf ears—began the arduous journey.

Izzy watched as she willed her right arm across the centimetres that felt like kilometres of bed. The feeble limb made pitiful progress before stopping entirely so she may regain what energy she could.

A surge of anger propelled her arm against the plastic sheet dividing her and Clara. Her hand slid down the thick material until it landed in the crevice between the sheet and edge of the bed. Using this newfound leverage, Izzy pulled her weight with her right arm, and pushed against the mattress with her left. The juicy idea of giving up crossed her mind, just as it had when her former severely fit self, besieged by physical and psychological cramps, had desired to slow her run to a crawl at the three-thousand-metre mark. Her conditioned lungs had burned then. Now they were volcanic.

But the agony and certain death would be worth it. Not only for herself, but for Clara, who had never felt a pang in her endless life.

Izzy now found herself at a ninety-degree angle: the top half of her body sprawled laterally across the bed; the bottom half remained affixed to where it had been since she’d embarked upon this suicide mission of sorts. After a quick mental team huddle with her barely-working parts, she used her right hand to push against the plastic sheet. The damn thing was like a wall of concrete. Her reluctant body threatened to pull the plug on the whole operation, but a little bit of anger, and a lot of thinking about what would happen to Clara if she failed, helped free the bottom of the plastic sheet from between the mattresses. Izzy exhaled so deeply, the fog outside of her only window found its way to her eyes.

One breath.

Her vision slowly…

Two breaths.

...slowly…

Three breaths.

...returned.

She felt her old nemesis oxygen restore her vision. Death had brushed past her. Move it, she urged herself.

Izzy hadn't intended to escape by falling on her head, but as she shimmied herself closer...

closer...

closer, then over...

over...

over the edge of the bed, it seemed the only way.

As Izzy freed her head of the plastic sheet, the faint aroma of cooking bombarded her. She couldn't help but sacrifice a valuable breath to take in the recipe she had shared with her daughter long ago. You're using too much garlic powder, she thought, the seasoning burning her sinuses. But that was Isabelle: too much or too little of everything.

Izzy's shoulders hung over the edge of the bed and thinned blood rushed to her head. She wondered—not for the first time—what Isabelle would think when the time came to trudge upstairs, check on her dying mother, and find Izzy however she ended up. Hopefully, with Clara in my arms, she thought.

She wondered if her daughter would even care.

The pair of Izzys had lived a life of few kisses and plenty of bites. Izzy had made the clichéd attempts to live via her namesake—Isabelle's ankles were still intact, after all. Her daughter had indeed run; not on the track, but away from home, turning the typical one-off act of rebellion into a quarterly sport. When she was home, Isabelle would blame Izzy for all of her life's unwanted biographical details: the casting out of her father, the selfish act of naming her after herself, the reason for her isolating unattractiveness, the asthma and other varieties of respiratory ailments courtesy of her chain-smoking. That her only child had decided to punish her by never marrying, never having children, was not lost on Izzy. Still, when Izzy had become too ill to breathe on her

own, it was Isabelle who had rushed her to the hospital, and it was Isabelle who had brought her home, tucked her into bed, and made sure the oxygen tent kept her alive.

But after seven days of intolerable confinement—seven days of embarrassing baths and changes, seven days of no words exchanged save for begrudged greetings and farewells—Izzy had decided that this foggy afternoon was the right time to free herself. And, if she could manage, beloved Clara.

She could no longer see her only friend, but knew Clara was right where she had left her. I'm coming, Izzy thought, hoping the suffocating air wouldn't render her a liar.

Like in the old days, when slower competitors somehow cruised past her, good old-fashioned anger fuelled her cause, and she writhed her dangling body further over the edge of the bed like a fish out of water. A fish that wants out of her damn bowl! she goaded herself, and grew angrier at her handicap. The fingertips on her right hand touched something cold, hard. It took her a moment to realize she had touched the floor. Her left hand, still pushing against the bunched-up comforter, worked alone to send her over the rest of the way.

In the space of seconds, Izzy saw the ceiling, then her abdomen, then her legs, the latter two crashing down on her. Within the same seconds, she felt emptiness beneath her, then the cold, hard floor forcing itself into her neck and spine. Precious breaths were knocked out of her, and the fog returned, this time most certainly to be accompanied by death.

It took her a few moments to realize that death smelled an awful lot like garlic. A few more moments, and Izzy understood she hadn't died... and that her daughter wouldn't have heard a thing if she had. She remained alone. On the floor. Alive. For now.

Alive enough to save Clara.

Slowly, surely, Izzy wriggled away from the bed until her dumb legs hit the floor. Still, her daughter remained downstairs, oblivious, or willfully so. But in case obliviousness turned to awareness, Izzy needed to move as quickly as her lame body would allow at this late stage in the race. Last one-hundred metres, she implored.

Since sitting herself up was impossible, she needed to figure out how to get Clara to come down to her level. Could've just grabbed her, and brought her into the tent, she scolded herself, save yourself this stupidity. But she knew it wouldn't have been fair to Clara, to have her lifelong companion go from breathing one brand of plastic air to another. No. She wanted Clara's first breath to be one-hundred-percent, certifiable oxygen... even if it was tinged with garlic.

Izzy flexed the fingers on her left hand, expecting to feel a break, akin to that long-ago ankle, that would prevent her from crossing this finish line. Everything felt in working order. Hand shaped like a spider, the fingers crawled along the floor until they found the nightstand's feet. They climbed past the bottom drawer, then the middle, then—

She stopped, having reached as high as she could go. She looked at the progress her hand had made, and was angered and disappointed to see the tips of her fingers so close to the top. So close to Clara.

No longer able to uphold itself, her arm fell to the floor for her daughter not to hear. Her shallow, disparate breathing became shallower, more disparate. The retinal fog grew thicker. And she was certain the last time she would see Clara was in the memories she had very limited time to relive:

Sneaking into her late mother's bedroom—this very same bedroom—to sneak a peek at Clara, high on her shelf.

Receiving Clara on the eve of her mother's passing—in this very same bedroom—on the condition that she pass Clara on to her daughter, should she have one, when her own end was near.

Asking Isabelle to take Clara off the shelf, and sit her on the nightstand; the plan to release Clara had been confirmed, all the more so by her daughter's routine sneer and remark: “Ugly thing.”

Even had Isabelle loved Clara as much as she had, Izzy felt it was her duty to finally free her.

Come on, you useless cigarette-holder. Last fifty metres.

Her nicotine-stained spider-hand rediscovered the nightstand's feet, and, once more, began its ascent.

Past the bottom drawer.

Forty metres.

Past the middle drawer.

Thirty metres.

Past the bottom of the top drawer.

Twenty metres.

Finding the top drawer's knob…

Ten metres.

...where it hung…

Come on.

...unwilling to move.

COME ON!

Her hand sprang back, the drawer with it.

Sliding.

Sliding.

Sliding.

Until the heavy piece abruptly stopped, having reached its limit. The nightstand leaned slightly forward, and Izzy glimpsed her legacy as the dead meat filling of a floor-and-nightstand sandwich. But the nightstand had other plans; before it settled back into place, it made sure to shake free the tall, glossy box.

The impact was painful, a sharp corner hitting her perfectly in the eye, but nothing compared to the torture her lungs were putting her through. Instead of fog, there was rain. Izzy blinked the burning tears away, bringing not the nightstand into focus, but a face.

And what a beautiful face it was. Skin made of meringue. A faint smile on pink lips barely formed. Rosy cheeks forever pinched into dimples. Black eyebrows arching over a pair of

unblinking bejewelled eyes. Had they seen Izzy? All the Izzys? From Grandma Izzy to this sorry-excuse-for-an-Izzy?

They stared at each other for some time, Izzy refusing to blink, like her little friend, lest she slip into death during one of those slivers of blackness. The smell of garlic was fading. She couldn't tell if her daughter was altering the recipe in some way, or if her senses were gradually shutting down.

Last ten metres, she thought. Perhaps her final thought.

Izzy used the hand that had facilitated this final reunion to locate the pristine cardboard flap above Clara's head. Not with anger, but love, Izzy tore open the lid that had sealed the doll in her prison for three generations, and watched as Clara took in her first-ever breath of fresh air.

Artisan baker by trade, Alfredo Salvatore Arcilesi has been published in over 50 literary journals worldwide. Winner of the Scribes Valley Short Story Writing Contest, he was also a finalist in the Blood Orange Review Literary Contest, and was twice nominated for Sundress Publications' Best of the Net. In addition to several short pieces, he is currently working on his debut novel in his home of Toronto, Ontario, in Canada.

February 4, 2022

“CROSS_EXAMINATION”

Gideon Emmanuel

"As we inch closer to the new way of playing politics in the new Africa, character will be one of the biggest game-changers."

SAMUEL O. ADEYEMI.

Sometimes,
I wish the rich children of the politicians
could one day visit our poor homes & see
how our lips like cracked walls swell
in hunger, & how our body has become
drenched rivers swamped with struggles.

Your neighbor smiling this morning
tossed out with bloody exhaust tonight.
The girl you held in your hands five years ago
is now a mother of two with sagged breasts & wrinkled faces mirroring soar scenes
her mother once redeemed herself from.

It's best that I tell the stories that hit the spot more than incisions on the skins
of the icebergs laceration from local areas where drones & camera lenses wouldn't capture but
keep blur their sights & sounds under their fingerprints.

We wouldn't have asked for a better life
other than dwelling in a garden without thorns & thistle & these filthy promises.
We too were looking for tunnels with
rays of halogenated lights, of stairs that

leads to Aso_Villa & the many mansions
our hands do paint & eyes visualized.

But then,
The children of the rich politicians are
like beautiful roses tendered in the streets,
with fragrances adorned only by our noses,
They are the lilies in purple apparels
only our naked bodies could feel & not wear.

One wish would make me dream.
Two would help me sink into illusions
about getting married to the daughter of
a top politician. Three would drive me to
build a castle of love with her & in retribution
for her father's sins, crash down the castles.

& like an angry sculptor, lifts the muds of old
memories out of me, dissect this poem with
timed grenades, pass it to the post office
& make it into the first poetry_letter bomb.
Because forgiveness is an untwined rope in my country. & justice is no retribution lens.

Gideon Emmanuel (he/him) is a young poet, teacher, lover of kids, nature, orphans, & depressed people, from Lagos, Nigeria. His poems have appeared in Eboquills, U_Rights magazine, Arthut anthology, Boardspeck, Street Child anthology, Terror house, Agape Review, Poemify Publisher, Fiery Scribe Review & forthcoming in Brittle Papers & Ninshar Arts. In his leisure, you'll find him teaching, reading, writing, meditating, & mostly, cooking. Find him on Facebook as Ubaha Gideon Emmanuel, Twitter @GideonE52756732 and Instagram @gideon_emmaunel_890.

February 10, 2022

“I Chose My Space”

Alexander Opicho

I sing a song from the bottom
of the native valley, though highly crested
On the wave of my inner person
Cruising peaks of active ignorance
In the world of man in eerie looks and stares
At the beards on my face as if at the owl they look
But I carry not Luhswa* the package of death
for the men of my community that will,
your foremen’s tuition gave you false piety;
my beards kill not those that will love me,
my hirsute mars not sweetness amid my legs
just come on you sons of Africa my love is for you
my heart’s love is a theme minus motif of death
it is only foolish fear giving you mirage of death,

I convert not fortune to disgrace, want to affluence,
Life to death, success to doomsday, nor love to grief
By the power of hair that reigns my gin. I yearn to see
Good life for each and all, that will have my love as
The story of their lives, future’s vision starving my stare
Hide not behind the gospel of your juju-men, and the
Empty lyrics of time-worn grandmothers. Sweat and labour
Will earn you bread, wistful mythic earns you none, come
On love me as we labour for your ignorance.

My blood is proud scents of bi-curious whiff
Perhaps, your brains have given you sensual distortion,
But I am a girl in my space and I have a right to my space,
to surf, as I go for a walk, but no, I stop, at zero point of harm
from biology of my face to your treasured lives,
Come you accept, to learn, and we wriggle ahead,

From the depth of my heart exuded colorless struggles
Unto man for the vilified generations of owl in the myth
Labelled ugly names from all ranges of things unbecoming,

having been born without my choice or efforts,
My mother and father could not still choose my gender-type,
My marginalized feelings are not my crafty designs,
I only express what the universe has in the shelves,

Don't call me queer out of your tendentious label,
My space is soft, humble, gentle and polished lesbian,
Unwilling to contravene conventions of superior order,
So your hatred makes me feel right in the wrong body,
Having no desire to jump out of your imposed entrapment,
Allow me my rights to live full cycle of my space,
As nature have answers to your questionable phobia;
Lions, frogs, chimpanzees, lizards and the bonobos,
Have their beauty diverse in orientations,
Some bi-gender, others cisgender,
As a normal flower is ever bisexual,
So don't call me queer at all, at all,
You will only be queering a natural space

*Luhswa- a bukusu word for fate or curse of death

Alexander Opicho was given six names by his mother: Alexander Ernesto Khamala Namugugu Islam Opicho. He is a poet, essayist, cultural critic, and short story writer from Lodwar, Kenya. He has a vision to plant a million trees, learn a dozen languages, and weight-lift seven hundred Kilograms. For him, the praxis of art and literature is the praxis of freedom.

February 16, 2022

“A New Dawn”

Emmanuel Juma

I am standing alone,
High on the tallest skyscraper in the city
Tears of bitterness are racing down my cheeks
Looking back, the nasty experiences send shivers down my spine
My heart is bleeding with unceasing blood of pain and guilt
My head is loaded with traffic of suicidal thoughts.

I remember when things started to fall apart.
First of all, I don’t know how I came into this gloomy world
Someone once told me; that I was picked on the dumpsite
In the heart of the garbage of the streets; naked
I was thrown off like a litter to the dogs of the streets
I was too weak to protect myself.

I am using the word ‘Father’ for the first time in writing this
I wish I had seen one when I was alive in my senses.
Those littered in the dumpsite are believed to be outcasts—‘children of many fathers’
I don’t have a family—except that in the homeless shelter
It is there, where the world treats you with all brutality
You are the cheap labour; you are the one to satisfy the lustful pimps
Everyone sees offence before you even speak

I have not told you about my endless battles with drugs
I have tried finding solace from cocaine to hashish.
I have never gone past the community school; a project of well-wishers
Perhaps I would have known better that addiction is more expensive.

I have been arrested many times and taken to correctional facilities
But I am always on the run

I can feel my ribs, jutting on my skinny chest
My intestines are rumbling since I fed with the dogs three days ago.
I smell glue and smoke; smoke from the furnace of life
I have lost several friends of bad weather and hunger
No one cares when you are foreign and nothing.
I am trying to search for identity.

All is not lost, chances happen to everybody
I will run, I will climb, I will soar because I am undefeated
Death is more painful, I will not end my life here
I have seen that the city is more beautiful from this angle.
Even the smartest and richest in the streets look pale
But they keep on moving no matter what.

I will wipe my eyes and try again
I want to reach the end of the tunnel where there is light
Perhaps the light has the perfect solace.
I wish to make someone smile with my story
There is hope in the future.
Get your heart beating again.

Emmanuel Juma is a Kenyan poet. He has also authored several children books, novels, short stories and motivational books. He writes plays for schools and other organizations. His first published works include: Delusions of Addiction, Letting Go, and Along the Way, all available in leading online bookstores. He is a contributor to The Hunger Anthology, published by Transcendent Press in the U.S. He is also a life coach, motivational speaker, and a medical student at Chuka University.

February 22, 2022

“Mirror”

Chukwuma-Eke Pacella Chioma

This body haunts me,

taunts me.

I'm just another clone of this body

Clone with an itchy past of pain

Clone clothed with scars

Clone whose eyes witness her own violated for the figure it possess

Clone with lips that pleads sanctification

Somewhere south,

sometime ago,

Clone, same body I carry

announced its presence to her maker

as man spilled her blood before the altar

#Girl serves god with her blood (brutalized skull) (tamed awe)

Somewhere north

sometime soon,

Clone, same body I carry

would be stuffed in a travelling bag and delivered to the devil as a newlywed

#Girl turns desert for the elderly (carnivorous beings) (lust driven men)

Somewhere east,

Sometime now,

Clone, same body I carry

carries her own head in her hands

still wondering how betrayal got a hold of her neck

and soon after embraces
the warmth death offers
#Girl becomes capital for rituals (blood shot humans) (the devil's chef)

Pardon me.

This indecent grammar is only pleading that you see
the pictures it has painted
to fill up your ignorant memory of clones like me
that you see;
thousands of clones
carrying this body in agony
that you see;
thousand of clones
dancing to the beats of sorrow
that you see;
the gender,
nature has casted a spell of grieve upon

Do you see me?

Chukwuma Eke Pacella Chioma is a sixteen-year old Nigerian poet/spoken word poet and short story writer. She was the winner of the Cradle Poetry Contest in 2021 and the first runner up for the Teen Author Prize in 2022. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Synchronized Chaos, The Poetry Soup, My Woven Poetry, and other magazines. Her poems have also appeared in anthologies such as Pixie & Pexels, Rose Journal: Breast Cancer Warriors & Survivors, and My Rainbow Poetry.

February 28, 2022

“Forgive Me, Sisters”

Bruna Melo

I locked eyes with the mirror in front of me
and watched as my freshly-washed hair
stayed up in its natural state: an afro.

The hairdressers began to surround my chair.
I felt their perplexed faces observe my figure.
I noticed pale arms work their way towards my afro.
Petting it. Inspecting it. Abhorring it.
I was still.

And, a hypocrite at this moment.

I praise old speeches from Malcolm that praise Black femininity,
That swore to protect Black women and our envious bodies,
and the strands on our heads and the power of our step.
I praised these same words that I failed to protect.

How could I?

I cried later that night.
Cried in my mother’s arms.
Because no one sits a young Black girl down
and shares the ugliness of the world,
Prepares her for the world,
Loves her, despite a world that began with the rape of her sisters.

How could we?

Forgive me, sisters.

Bruna Melo (she/her) is a high school senior from Houston, TX, currently living in Angola. In recent years, she has led environmental campaigns, organized community-based projects about racism in International Schools, and is currently the founder and leader of a United Nations Girl Up organization chapter. In Bruna's free time, she reads the likes of James Baldwin, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Malcolm Gladwell.

March 6, 2022

“Conversation With The Earth”

Nina Kossman

I asked the Earth:
“Are you ready?”
and the Earth thought
I was asking if it was ready to die.
So I hurriedly said, “Sorry,
that’s not what I meant at all.”
I simply asked,
“Are you ready?”
And the Earth replied,
“I’m ready, but it is not I
—no, no, not I—
who is going to die
but you—you—you.
I will be merely transformed
and no longer fit to live on,
and all the creatures that live
on me—and off of me—will perish,
including you—you—you.”
Then the Earth asked me:
“Are you ready?”
And I said, “No, I’m not ready to die.”
And the Earth said,
“You should hurry, it’s time,”
and I said, “Forgive us,

for we know not what we do to you.”
And the Earth whispered,
“Goodbye.”

Nina Kossman is a poet, memoirist, playwright, editor, and artist. She has authored, edited, translated, or both edited and translated more than nine books in English and Russian. She was born in Moscow and currently lives in New York.

March 12, 2022

“Brazilian Women”

Luiza Louback

* 2022 IHRAF Publishes Pushcart Prize Nominee *

He whispers, I like my girls exotic,
lets a fingertip run over the edge of my hips

clasped hands against my back.
He dreams of tropical sands on my hair

barefoot on patterned cobblestones
drinking rain under the heavy trees

oily flesh dissolving
into sticky honey.

He imagines caramel-colored curves
as if my body is an open hinterland

a destination to arrive
and my smile is a red-enveloped invitation.

He looks at me: I love Brazilian women
their hunger, bruised beauty

and eyes lighting like glass bulbs.
In his mind, I belong to a dollhouse

filled with mangoes, flushed skins,
a world to sink his teeth into

and Brazilian girls who look
exactly like me.

I remember they taught my grandmother
how to sew like machines

instead, she buried me bone-deep
wove glass into marrow like strength

and I learned
there is sweetness in the scorching.

I let a freeway run between my tongue
like everything veiled, I want to be known.

With laughs echoing
my fist shocks

with his clenched jaw.
We must use what language we can.

Luiza Louback is the first Brazilian Poetry Literary Apprentice of BreakBread Literacy Project and Community Ambassador for Write The World. Her work has appeared in Bridge Ink, Kalopsia Journal, Parallax Review, Rising Phoenix Review, and elsewhere, and has been recognized by The School of New York Times, Cambridge University, and more. When she is not writing, Louback teaches English to low-income students and advocates for literary accessibility in Latin America.

March 18,2022

“Wreck”

Raynar Rogers

If only she took her fingers
To hover above the fire instead
The girl would have sacrificed her
Lust for bravery

Before this, gold knees were rewarded
The pound coin melted on her tongue
Gargling the weight of sticks
From a bridge she built when she was nine

She was tough when she was nine
She had life assembled into crates
One for her mother
One for her village
And a small box for herself
That she took down to the River Afan
To beg that it be swallowed

The girl built destructible fables
From any bits and pieces laying around
She pulled her hair out to tie together
The narrative
Marriable
Yes girl, sleeping sound after two drinks
Amongst the rats
Cartwheeling, cake-baking homebody
Awake at dawn, asleep by ten

If she ever let her fingers wander beyond the
Premises of her own body
She would burn
So bad that her bridges would shatter
To night black and float down to the grave gorges
Of her stomach
Forever to be a wreck

For the girl, it was only a matter of time
After she committed once, to her surprise
She thought not of her family
But of her village
The swinging trees in eternal rain
Damned River Afan pushing its weight about
Like a drunk idiot
She remembered the bridge she built
Only a fool would have thought that stable.

Welsh writer and lover of the great unknown, Raynar Rogers spent many years directing art and language schools throughout Korea and Taiwan. She has been involved in over 30 theatre productions, prompting her to gain a Bachelor's degree in Scriptwriting from Bournemouth University, and tour her own plays in fringe venues across the UK. Raynar's poetry collection, Hiraeth, which touches on themes of queerness, womanhood, and the Welsh working class, is among her most intimate works.

March 24, 2022

“House Arrest”

Nicole Bloomfield

Brainwashed!

Propaganda!

Hidden Agenda!

Zap.

I was bound to a chair.

Cuffed hands,

Tethered feet.

Wobbly breath,

Leaping heartbeats.

Brainwashed!

Propaganda!

Hidden Agenda!

Zap.

I bit down hard onto

My previous words.

Flimsy, colorful words,

Easily spoken,

Hard to defend.

But will they defend me?

Brainwashed!

Propaganda!

Hidden Agenda!

Zap.

They barged into
My mind's refuge.
Stripped my labels,
Toppled my furniture,
And flooded my recollection,
Where my sunken, swelling eyes
Met only icy darkness.

Brainwashed!

Propaganda!

Hidden Agenda!

Zap.

Tingling sparks of electricity
Lingered in my mouth,
Blood dripped down
And crusted on my nape.
How long has it been?
Is there anyone
Outside?

Brainwashed!

Propaganda!

Hidden Agenda!

Zap.

Was I really

A criminal

In my own mind?

Brainwashed! Propaganda! Hidden Agenda!

Brainwashed! Propaganda! Hidden Agenda—

Fine, I surrender!

Nicole Bloomfield (she/her) is a 16-year-old Hong Kong writer who has been published in more than eighteen publications. She was a finalist for the Hong Kong Young Writers Award, an intern at SCMP Young Post, worked for an international video games company, and participated in the John Hopkins Talented Youth English Program. One of her works was praised by The New Yorker, and another won the Renee Duke Youth Award. Her first chapbook, Crossing the Chasm, is forthcoming from Trouble Department in 2023. When she's not hosting creative writing workshops, she likes to play piano, run, and read.

March 30, 2022

“Tufts of Feathers”

Julia LaFond

How old were you the first time they clipped your wings?

“Don’t cry”

Snip

“—doesn’t even hurt—”

Snip

“—if you’d just stop struggling—”

Snip

“There, all done.”

The bright red lollipop made you feel better as you sucked on it, staring into the mirror.

You didn’t look any different.

They smiled so proudly.

Maybe it wasn’t so bad after all.

But your wings ached as they swept up the fluffy white wisps piled around your feet.

How old were you when they taught you to clip your own wings?

“Hold the scissors steady—”

Snip

“A little too short—”

Snip

“Yes,

like that!”

Snip

“Good job!”

No phantom pains; you were used to it by then.

You felt proud, because it was the first step to being a grown-up.

They looked proud, because you did what they told you to do.

You barely noticed the clippings, because it didn’t matter.

Only children dreamed of flight.

How old were you when you began to wish you didn’t have wings at all?

“I hate showoffs—”

Snip

“—caught in the door again?”

Snip

“FREAK!”

Snip

Never enough.

Snip

You were supposed to tear them off.

Snip

You knew that, but as you sobbed, all you could do was

Snip

Snip

Snip

Snip

Snip

Snip

Snip

Snip

Until the bathroom floor was littered with mounds and mounds of tufts of down like fallen snow.

Did anyone try to rip them off?

Lure you in close, your only warning the glint of the shears?

It's rarely strangers.

Family, teachers, friends, bosses, doctors—

Each one clamoring that it's for your own good.

It is only when one succeeds that your lost wings gain value in the eyes of the rest.

Their refrain, a sick joke: "You'll never be able to fly anymore."

Has anyone told you yet, that your wings are beautiful?

That you shouldn't have to cram them into baggy trench coats?

That they were made to carry you above the mountaintops to soar through the blue heavens?

Has anyone told you feathers grow back once you molt?

Has anyone told you it's not too late?

If they haven't, I will.

I was like you once:

Plucking my own feathers out.

Scars from dodged shears criss-cross my back.

My wings still weigh on me, heavy as a curse some days.

But I'll be waiting up here, above the clouds, for you to join me in the sun.

Julia LaFond is a geoscience/astrobiology PhD candidate at Penn State University, where she regularly attended the Creative Writing Club pre-pandemic. Her poem "The Dullahan" was recently published through a collaboration between Short Edition and the PSU library system. In her spare time she enjoys reading, gaming, and advocating for disability rights. You can find her online at https://jklafondwriter.wordpress.com/

April 5, 2022

“The Family Graveyard”

Nazarii Nazariv

How was it then
to live under the clouds
beneath the sky
unchecked by the horizon?
travelling through the nights
all by moonlight
all by one’s self
confronting no one but distance?

Fetching water from wells
fish from the rivers
silence from fields
hay from under a willow

And who would have told you
that you’d live
in whisper in darkness in wind
in evening in shadows
in willows
but never again as a human
For your life outstretched the horizon
went beyond the stars
back then long ago
before I met you
in the silence of the family graveyard

Nazarii Nazariv, PhD, was born in 1990 in a small village in Ukrainian Steppe, a protected nature preserve. Now he lives in Kyiv, Ukraine, where he works as a translator, a linguist, and a researcher. He writes his poems in Ukrainian and English. His Ukrainian poems were selected for representative national anthologies, whereas his English poems and translations have appeared in Eratio, Eunoia, Literary Shanghai, and The Tiger Moth Review.

April 11, 2022

“Kulig”

Salvatore Difalco

Kulig will drive me to see the cardiologist today. I am afraid to go alone. I don’t know why. Nothing will likely be determined today. Nevertheless, I am afraid. Kulig, my friend of longstanding, will be coming from a nearby town to drive me to the heart clinic where the cardiologist, Dr. Khan, plies her trade.

My heart failed this past summer, and though I feel reasonably well as winter arrives, lately I’ve been suffering from worrying bouts of lightheadedness. This may have something to do with blood sugar levels, or blood pressure, I am not sure, I am not a doctor. But this lightheadedness I speak of has interfered with my daily life. For instance, if I find myself in the grocery store and suddenly feel lightheaded, I begin to panic. The radical heart-pounding and sweating that ensues of course intensifies the lightheadedness and then the profound fear of fainting in a public place and its physiological ramifications—further accelerated heart rate and vertigo—inevitably leads to the fainting that was so dreaded.

A grown—albeit aged—man fainting in a grocery store represents a sorry state of affairs. One opens the eyes to find a dozen hovering faces scarcely containing their morbid schadenfreude. A tinny voice asks if you’re okay. What kind of question is that, eh? Does it look like I’m okay? On the other hand, I’ve merely suffered a fainting spell and not something more catastrophic. You can all back away. No need to call an ambulance. I will walk out of here without escort, a free and thriving man.

“You look pasty,” Kulig says, but she has worn a Russian hat and I find it difficult to take her seriously.

“What’s with the hat?” I say.

“It was a gift. And it keeps my head warm.”

“It’s quite a commitment, wearing a hat like that.”

“What would you know about it?”

“I’m just saying. Was the drive good or bad?”

“It was bad in spots, good in others. Are you afraid?”

“Afraid of what?”

Kulig looks at me.

“I am afraid,” I admit. “Wouldn’t you be?”

“But you’re taking the medications and eating well.”

“I’ve gained ten pounds.”

Kulig says nothing to this, but disappointment emanates from her. I can’t help it. I have a sweet tooth. I can cut down on many things—pasta, pizza—but my sweet tooth cannot be tamed. Donuts in particular are my weakness.

We drive in silence to the clinic. My thoughts run hither and thither. I have not seen Kulig in weeks and yet I express no curiosity about her situation. I am a poor friend. Why does she tolerate me at all? The scenery flashes by, drab as autumn comes to a close. I ask Kulig to put on some music. She knows I like jazz and accommodates me. Bill Evans on piano; Bill Evans soothes the nerves.

“What’s new with you?” I ask, at last.

“I might be moving out west.”

The news surprises me. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah. I need a change. I’m stagnating. I have a job offer.”

I don’t ask where she plans to go or what the job offer is. I know she is very capable and will manage well wherever she goes. That said, I will miss her. Not that we see each other with any frequency these days. I don’t drive and she has a busy life. But it dawns on me with a punch that if she goes west now, given my condition and the normal vicissitudes of life, I may never see her again.

“What’s the matter?” she asks.

Turning to the window, I try my best to hide my tears.

“Yo,” she says. “Tell me.”

“I’m just feeling a little emotional today.”

“Sure, you had a close call this summer. Today, as you go to see the cardiologist, full of uncertainty, you’re feeling the full weight of that.”

“Yeah, I guess.” I reflect for a moment. Am I afraid of what lies ahead? Certainly. But I am not weak-kneed about it. “I’m going to miss you, Kulig.”

“I’ll miss you, too. But you can always visit me if you’re well enough and vice versa. I still have family here. I’ll be back when I can. I need a change for me, but that doesn’t change things here, does it?”

I shake my head, wipe away my tears. I’m feeling sorry for myself—and feel ashamed for that. It’s pathetic. To think it took one summer to turn me from a vibrant and fit older man into a fragile, fearful senior. I glance at my hands. Even my hands look older and weaker. This is it then, this is what actually happens, what it actually feels like. Throughout our lives we view older people with a modicum of respect and a lot of indifference—you never think, that is what will happen to me, or that is what I will look like, God forbid, though part of you also knows it is a distinct possibility, if not inevitable. So you keep those thoughts at an arm’s length. Why ruminate on what you can’t control? But then one day, wham, it hits you. I’m fucking old. And not only am I old, but any day now this joyride will be over.

“Now you’re smiling?” Kulig asks.

“It’s funny,” I say.

“What is?”

“This. All of this. It’s like some kind of cosmic joke.”

Kulig’s brows knit under the brim of her Russian hat. Understandable. I’m being abstruse. Most of this conversation is taking place inside my head.

“How long have we known each other, Kulig?”

“Hm. Maybe thirty years, something like that.”

“That long, huh?”

“We worked at the Star on the same floor, remember? You were going through an ugly divorce and dealing with addiction issues. You were a mess, brother. People in the office were scared of you, said you had a temper and so on. But I found you very human, and vulnerable, unlike a lot of those dickheads. And you never tried to come on to me, which I respected. I don’t know why, but you took to pouring your heart out to me, and that touched me.”

“You’re a good listener. Actually, you were the only human in that building who would listen to me whine about my problems.”

“And that was the beginning of our beautiful friendship.”

I smile. It never became more than that for many reasons: I was twenty years older than her—and she was never attracted to me that way. Frankly, a relationship with a woman minus any sexual tension appealed to me. Kulig offered me—despite her relatively young age—counsel and friendship, and a neutral female perspective I respected. She had been the one person in my life—even beyond my oldest and most trusted male friends—that I could talk to about anything.

“I’ve never said it enough,” I say, “but I hope you know I love you and cherish our friendship. You’re the first person I called when this happened. In my darkest moment, it was your voice I wanted to hear.”

“I know,” she says. “And I know you don’t like the idea of me being far away from you. But I need to do what I need to do. We can always video-conference, and like I said, I’ll be coming back for visits. My roots are here.” She glances at me. “We’re almost at the clinic. Anything else you want to confess before you go in?”

“I shit my pants this morning.”

She makes a face and bursts into laughter.

“I’m serious,” I say. “So embarrassing.”

She laughs harder, leaning into her steering wheel. The sound of her laughter makes me laugh and lightens my heart as I steel myself for the last leg of my journey.

Salvatore Difalco lives in Toronto, Canada. He is the author of five books including Black Rabbit (Anvil Press). His recent appearances include Cafe Irreal and Brilliant Flash Fiction.

April 17, 2022

“Elegy for the Last Man”

Enriqueta Carrington

The last male of the Juma Tribe, Amazonia, died of COVID-19.

Aruká Juma, your memories!
What forests did your mind wander
when each breath was a heavier load and you
in your hammock fought to heave one more?

Perhaps your grandfather said remember, as grandfathers will.
You promised and you stored images,
how the Juma sang, how they hunted, how they laughed,
loved, talked to the spirits.

How the Juma were thousands in your grandfather’s time,
how the invaders came with their gunpowder and steel,
their raping of the forest
their smallpox their measles their influenza
their murders.

How the Juma were hundreds when you were a boy,
you recall every one. The last massacre,
yells of kill, kill, kill in Portuguese,
so many friends shot down, you remaining
to remember

your playmates’ faces, your parents’.
Life rebudding with your wife, her eyes, her touch,
your daughters’ baby cheeks, their first words,
their silly jokes, pink orchids in their hair.

How your daughters' children are not Juma,
but belong to the waning tribe of their fathers,
and speak only Portuguese. You hold out memories
they try to grasp, which slip like water through their fingers.

How the great ceiba tree will be lonely with no one
to speak to him in Juma,
the sovereign river will have no one to listen,
the forest herself forlorn.

Enriqueta Carrington is a Mexican poet, literary translator, and mathematician. She grew up in Mexico City, got her BSc and MSc degrees from the National Autonomous University of Mexico and her PhD from Rutgers University. She received a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts as a translator of poetry and has translated several books into English, including three poetry collections by Lourdes Vázquez and two books by the Israeli poet and novelist Mois Benarroch. Enriqueta's poems in English and Spanish, as well as her poetry translations from the Spanish and Sicilian, have appeared in Rattapallax, Blue Unicorn, 14 by 14, The New Formalist, The Society of Classical Poets Journal, Descant (Canada) and several other journals and anthologies. She is a member of the editorial committee of the poetry journal US1 Worksheets.

April 23, 2022

“The Last Cigarette”

poembutterfly

Just one more cigarette to numb the pain
I feel rising in my chest.
Maybe the smoke
will make everything better.
Maybe the sound of the cigarette burning
will muffle the sound of the voices in my head.
The ashes on the ground,
as grey as my heart,
as loveless, as dead.
Maybe this one last cigarette
will kill the hurt inside of me.
Yes,
it might kill me along the way,
but it's okay,
I just wanna get rid of the pain.
The pain in my chest,
That is never gonna fade.
The ashes on the ground,
as grey as my heart,
as loveless, as dead.
This is my last cigarette,
my last hope
for killing the thoughts,
for killing the hurt inside me.

This is my last cigarette,
hopefully my last one,
before I move on…
The ashes on the ground,
as grey as my heart,
as loveless, as dead.
Now it is time to move on,
to start fresh...
But before I go,
I need just one more cigarette,
for the pain is still rising,
rising in my chest.
The ashes on the ground,
as grey as my heart,
as loveless, as dead.

Cindy Pieterse (poembutterfly) was born in Pretoria, South Africa. At the age of 2, she was adopted and raised by a loving and supportive family, who inspired her to write. Her artistic goal is to inspire and help other people and to show them that they are not alone.

April 29, 2022

“The Essence of Fatherhood”

Murzban F. Shroff

A father is one who raises you by example. Through his deeds and actions he inspires your journey and imparts certain values that help you navigate your own life.

When my father Fali passed away – he transited sweetly, gently, my mother and I beside him on the bed, where he had spent his last days expressing his gratitude to the Lord and to us for the care we bestowed – several people showed up. Among them were some we hadn’t seen in years: people who had wronged or slighted us, now profuse with apologies. A good man has passed, they said, a man who had never hurt a soul, who only exuded kindness, goodness, and humility. They hoped that my father’s soul would forgive them. Looking at their faces, it was evident that Dad’s passing had woken something in them.

What mattered to us, his family, was that he passed away peacefully. Not a spasm of pain did we see in his eyes. Nor discomfort, nor confusion, nor panic. Nor the fear of a final blow telling him he’d be wrenched from his loved ones. It was a death chosen for the few.

The thing about my father was that he believed in the essential goodness of humankind. He kept himself free of negative thoughts: anger, bitterness, hostility, and cynicism had no place in his mind. He refused to doubt his fellow humans. For to doubt them would be to doubt the Lord’s design, something that was unacceptable to him.

A few incidents sit vividly in my mind. Reflecting on them makes me realize I was born to a man from whom I had much to learn.

My father was born into a poor family, where life was a struggle, marked by scarcity and hardship. So he took up the first job that came his way – in a nationalized bank – where he rose over the years to become a manager. For some reason, he would turn down further promotions, refusing to make his way up the corporate ladder. At the time, this irked me, made me suspicious. Does he lack the confidence? I wondered. This was in my early days, when luxuries and the

trappings of success mattered greatly to me. With all the impatience of youth, I believed our family was worse off than others, that we had been deprived of our rightful dues.

One day my father explained to me his reasons for refusing the promotions. The entire top layer was corrupt, he said. They were all on the take: for sanctioning bad loans, for waiving bad debts, for cooking up biased evaluations. It was a system that fed on itself, and those who fell in line made tons of money. Dad said he didn't need that. He had what he wanted: a loving wife, a nice home, kids he hoped would follow some of his ways.

But our cousin K didn't see it that way. K, young and ambitious, had gotten his job at the bank thanks to Dad, but unlike Dad, K was unburdened by scruples. Cousin K rose rapidly up the corporate ladder by cozying up to the right people. Then, seated in a position of power, he made his demands: in cash or in kind. If his clients relented, it was because they saw in him a banker who asked no questions, who raised no objections; instead, he fast-tracked their projects and got them approvals, loans, and credit.

Making money hand over fist, K surrendered to the good life. He threw lavish parties, he drank the best of whiskies. At family get-togethers, he would strut around, boasting about eating at the best of restaurants, about buying the latest of gadgets, about choosing premium holiday destinations for his family. The elders would listen intently, for it would be K who would have brought the food and whiskey. What they didn't know was that it would be some poor client of the bank who was footing the bill. On such occasions, K would make it a point to gibe at Dad for his lack of enterprise, and Dad, much to our distress, would not retaliate. He thought himself to be more fortunate than K.

Some of K's clients would complain to Dad. "Please, sir; he is unceasing in his demands. Ask him to go easy on us."

Dad would plead helplessness. He couldn't tell K anything, because, by then, K had far surpassed him. He wielded great authority and could take independent decisions without consulting his bosses. Besides, K had become the management's cash cow. Through him they saw their fortunes rise.

Whenever clients would talk about K's demands, Dad would lapse into silence, and we knew he was mourning K's downfall. According to Dad, "K, poor man, was misled by his frailties and trapped by his greed." Dad would look pained when he said these words.

Over time, K's greed increased. He started asking clients to deliver consignments of food to his doorstep: kilos of kingfish, tiger prawns, crabs, and lobsters. Every month, a new gadget would enliven K's home, and once every year his house would be painted at some poor client's expense.

His flamboyant lifestyle started showing in his appearance. His body bloated up, his cheeks puffed out, his eyes appeared small and shrewd. He had health problems, too, which he never discussed, but which saw him rush for his tablets after every meal.

Undeterred, K declared a new goal: his son, now eighteen, would go overseas for his education. Of course, K wouldn't pay for it. He simply sent word into the market: he could sanction bank loans for unviable projects.

The son was bright; he secured admission into an American university.

Promptly, K threw a spate of parties, where, for the first time, the old aunts and uncles had no advice for the young man who was to set off for foreign shores. What could they say? The boy had such a smart father.

"Look!" said an old uncle to the boy, eventually. "Whatever you do, don't get an American wife. She will make you do all the housework."

"He won't have to worry about that," said K. "A maid will come in twice a week. What is the point of him having his own apartment if he is going to spend time doing housework?" That was K's way of informing us that his son had been well provided for.

Around that time, trouble was brewing for K. One of his clients, harried by his demands, filed a complaint with the bank's vigilance department and sent a copy of the complaint to the Central Bureau of Investigation in Delhi. A colleague of Dad's who worked in the vigilance department phoned Dad and told him of this development.

That whole evening Dad was pensive. If the CBI team were to find any evidence at K's home, they would arrest him in the presence of his family and neighbors. Overnight, his reputation would be in shreds; he would become an object of contempt. Worse, he would be arrested on the eve of his son's departure, and that would demoralize the boy and destroy him.

After much reflection, Dad came to a decision. He called a mutual friend and asked him to warn K about the investigation, requesting the friend not to let K know that it was my father who had helped him.

"Why, Dad?" I asked him. "Why deny yourself the satisfaction of letting K know that it was you who stuck your neck out on his behalf?"

"Because I don't want to embarrass him," said Dad. "I don't want him to feel he has lost the respect of his family. He is in for a hard time, anyway. No point adding to his troubles."

That was one such instance when I realized the kernel in my father.

Another time was when I had gained representation for my book of short stories from an agent in New York City. The agent was excited and wanted to sell the book at the Frankfurt Book Fair, where the biggest deals were signed.

Earlier that year, there had been a flood in Mumbai, which occurred soon after a major flood in the U.S. My agent was keen that I write out a synopsis of a novel that I could potentially work on, a novel about the Great Mumbai Flood, which had seen my city submerged and paralyzed. That sort of novel would fly with publishers, the agent said. They would pay a heavy advance.

I could not bring myself to work on a prefabricated theme like that and told the agent so. But he was insistent. "You don't seem to understand," he said, over the phone from Frankfurt. "There is some serious money at stake here. Just write that damn synopsis and you will never be short of dough. You can write to your heart's content, thereafter."

After he hung up, I drafted out an email, expressing in strong words my disapproval of his approach. Before sending it, I showed it to Dad, who read it carefully and then said, "Son, whatever you say, remember: it will reflect on your country. This agent will form an opinion of Indians on the basis of what you write to him." With that, Dad had transferred a huge

responsibility onto me: the fact that I would be carrying forth an impression of my country in every communication I wrote. It was a lesson I would remember lifelong.

Going back farther: to a time when I was struggling to perfect my craft. I would spend long hours at my workplace, writing and rewriting. An average workday would stretch to eighteen hours, and it would be three in the morning by the time I got home.

Walking home in the early hours one morning, I found myself attacked by street dogs. Seeing me alone, they came up snarling and snapping and leapt at me. It took all my shouting skills to keep them at bay.

The next day I set out armed with my grandfather's old walking stick, a staff of solid teak. When the dogs came up to me, I thought, I could keep them at bay by simply wielding the stick. I was worried, though, that it would take only one of them to slip through my defense and sink his teeth into me. When, later, I shared this story with Dad, he said, "Have you tried carrying some biscuits and feeding them, instead? You might just make some friends…."

I was doubtful of this, as the strays seemed uncontrollably ferocious.

Nevertheless, the next day, I carried some biscuits, which I tossed to the strays as soon as they approached. They stopped in their tracks and snapped them up instantly. I realized how famished they were.

Thereafter, every morning, I would be given a royal escort home, with the dogs prancing alongside and wagging their tails. The stick was back where it belonged: in the closet. Even when I would forget to carry the biscuits, the dogs would be pleased to see me. And their joy at seeing me was consistent and unchanging.

Looking back, I am sure these were the kinds of choices my father would have faced in his lifetime: To be the aggressor or the victim? To attack or be attacked? And each time he would have chosen to opt for kindness over aggression, the biscuit over the stick.

It has been eight years since my father passed away. And yet I remember him daily, many times a day, in fact. Every morning, as soon as my eyes open.

Sometimes I lapse into a deep inner silence, thinking how no child can be complete without a parent, it is the parent that completes the child. And how you never really get over the passing of a parent; it is a void that can never be filled. So the best thing you can do to honor them is to live by the code they lived by, tough as that might be.

Murzban F. Shroff is a Mumbai-based writer. He is the author of 4 books: Breathless in Bombay (stories); Waiting for Jonathan Koshy (novel); Fasttrack Fiction (digital shorts), and Third Eye Rising (an Indian collection). His stories have appeared in over 70 literary journals in the U.S. and UK, for which he has received 7 Pushcart Prize nominations. Shroff is also the winner of the John Gilgun Fiction Award, a Commonwealth Writers' Prize shortlisted author, and a finalist for the Horatio Nelson Fiction Prize. His latest story collection, Third Eye Rising, explores issues such as caste, dowry, child apathy, female exploitation, migrant identities and personal loss, and was featured on the Esquire list of Best Books of 2021.

May 5,2022

“The Name Before”

John Grey

Everything is his, she says,
even my name.
The consonants, the vowels,
of my old life
are pronounced by no one in this house,
not even me.

Sure, there are photos in drawers.
The people are dead
so skimming through albums
must count as visiting hours.
It is a prison, after all.
The warden is his family label,
tracing back to the potato famine.

Letters in the mail,
Messages left on the phone,
add years to her sentence.
Sometimes, her first name
is forgotten in the rush
to slam shut her cell door.
She is Mrs. O'Connor
and that woman got life.

Her children go along with it.
The boy was born in triumph.

The girl doesn't know better.
He will take his prisoner
when the hormones are willing.
She may think herself free,
but there'll be sounds in her shackles.
Maybe she will struggle
to hold onto who she is—
O'Connor-Woods,
O'Connor-Brown.

Behind bars, a file is
better than nothing.

John Grey is an Australian poet and US resident, recently published in Sheepshead Review, Stand, Poetry Salzburg Review and Hollins Critic. His latest books, Leaves On Pages, Memory Outside The Head, and Guest Of Myself are available through Amazon. His work is upcoming in Ellipsis, Blueline, and International Poetry Review.

May 11, 2022

“Elegy to the Vertebrae”

Stella Hayes

I imagine that after this many years
He isn’t the same, his eyes weathered

& what was once a tall skeleton
Imbedded in the dirt like breadcrumbs

If I could undig the grave—lift him up
Like a shoe box—reach in with both hands—

I should have been allowed inside
The hospital room to be with him

Instead, I watched him become null & void
Through a plastic cutout in the door

I held my breath to keep the scent
Away. Here in springtime, his lilac tree

Rains blossoms on every grave making them look
Like vases—today I’ve come to see him as he is.

I press my hands against the pile of leaves
Undig the grave, lift him up like a shoe box

Reach in with both hands—to find three
vertebrae. I hold the pieces close together

So as to keep him—I’ve come here
To groom my father’s remains

Ukrainian-American poet Stella Hayes is the author of the poetry collection One Strange Country (What Books Press, 2020). She grew up in Brovary, a suburb outside of Kyiv, Ukraine, and in Los Angeles. She earned a creative writing degree at University of Southern California and is a graduate student at NYU studying for an M.F.A in poetry. Her work has been nominated for the Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize and has appeared in Poetry Project's The Recluse, The Lake, Prelude, Spillway, and is forthcoming from Stanford's Mantis, and Poet Lore, among others. She is the assistant fiction editor, as well as the online features editor, of Dispatches from Ukraine at Washington Square Review.

May 17, 2022

“We are sorry for the mess we made.”

Lorelei Bacht

From muddy hiking trails to slick newly-
built offices, from ministry to morgue,
I ran, I ran—they said a stamp;

they said another one, in triplicates;
they said it would help if you had
a name.

You name a thing, you name a quality,
but would you name a cloud, a ladder,
chimney, cake of soap?

But would you name the meat that
roasts, the white space between the
letters of your family name that grows,

that grows and promises to devour?
I have done it. I have read the poetry
of the enemy, and found: everyone needs

a well, a bridge, a bottle of something
strong or other, some form of bread, and
for the heart of their children to continue

to beat. It may be falafel, or it may be
cornbread, and the number of years
does not matter. Everything red suffers.

Lorelei Bacht is a poet of complex European heritage living in Thailand. A former political analyst, Bacht has been using poetry to explore the universal, psychological, and embodied nature of political violence through history. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in The Antonym, Abridged, The Rialto, Agapanthus Collective, Harpy Hybrid Review and elsewhere. Some musings on Instagram: @lorelei.bacht.writer and on Twitter: @bachtlorelei.

May 23, 2022

“We Are Cassandra”

Akshitha Unnithan

We are Cassandra;
cursed to speak the truth and never to be believed.
every altar stained in the ink of my agony,
distorted by putrid tongues to be labelled madness.
My knuckles blanched where they clutch at blind ivory gods,
primordial temples tremoring with the ache and fury of my prayer;
heaving, raw and fissured with grief I am the solitary keeper of.
Yet, all the wounded chaos of my being is nothing more
than another raving throat contorted with suffering
for the deafened heavens to turn away from.

We are Cassandra;
and so he presses his talons into the softness of me.
Tearing ligature of light after light from my flesh
till I am no more than wasted wrath.
To the insouciant hand of the divine, my fate given.
Enough flame in me to torch the skies;
yet, here, I am let fall,
broken frame of burdened bones
before the helpless tears of warrior goddesses.
I make only for another thing to be claimed with soiled hands.

We are Cassandra;
my gut and spine in his fist without language in fear,
my bones cleaved open in his palms.
A heap of crushed daises for the taking;

a spoil of war, plate to carry man's penitence
vessel for vile desire
an instrument for the rage of gods
and never anything to and for ourselves.

We are Cassandra;
his touch is acid on my skin,
and my lungs flutter like broken-winged birds
in the clenched jaw of cruel creatures.
My heart remains only as a collection of bruises.
I need not heavenly prophecy to know
the tomorrow in which my ruin will be laid out;
as gospel on which scorn pours like ceaseless rain,
in lies that absolve the sin and quell the suffering.

Because we are Cassandra;
cursed to speak the truth and never to be believed.

Akshitha Unnithan is an Indian poet based in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, who seeks to explore the different aspects that constitute her personhood through poetry. Her love of poetry is a manifestation of her love for the world, a plea to hold the hands of others in solidarity and create a better future for all. She is currently an undergraduate student doing a Double Major in Political Science and Sociology at St. Joseph’s College, Bangalore.

May 29, 2022

“Meditation at the Garden of Remembrance”

Joseph Milosch

May 29

According to a Dublin Taxi Driver, the British called the Irish ‘Wild Geese’ and chased them into the swamp, hunting them not as the enemy but for sport. Dublin, Ireland 2019

This place of knowing raises
the ghosts of soldier and revolutionary—
recalls the sluggish tidewater,
ebbing among the reeds—
the dampness of the fall wind.
I come to the street end
of this excavated cross—thirty feet
across the top—twenty feet at its base.

A cross-shaped Koi pond
lies in the middle of its floor.
No soldiers are buried
in this memorial, but swords
are fixed in the bottom of the pool.

Rain soaks my shoes, and my bones
drum a slow march as I descend
the stairs. Passing between
the benches and the water’s edge,
How does the spirit of wrath
becomes the spirit of blessing?

At the head of the cross,
I pause near the flight of steps.
As I climb the stairs, mist drifts
over the two bronze geese,
struggling to lift a pair of rebels,
executed in the marsh.

The British called the Irish
Wild Geese and chased them
into the swamp, hunting them
not as the enemy but for sport.

Standing at the head of the cross—
the spot usually occupied by
the sorrowful face of Christ—
I ask, Were the Irish rebels innocent?
When the hand of war rose like a fist,
they could not turn it aside.

Joseph Milosch's Homeplate Was the Heart & Other Stories (Poetic Matrix Press, 2020) was nominated for the American Book Award and the Eric Hoffer Best Small Press Publication Award. His other books of poetry are The Lost Pilgrimage Poems (Poetic Matrix Press, 2005) and Landscape of a Woman and a Hummingbird (Poetic Matrix Press, 2014). He has multiple nominations for the Pushcart Prize. You can find him online at www.josephdmiloschpoet.com.

June 4, 2022

“my lips with his”

Nazarii Nazariv

He coveted to cover
my lips with his
I have a sore throat I told him
It doesn't matter he whispered
right into my mouth
he licked my chin
his stubble stabbed me
piercing through my chest
and hips
I didn’t dare to embrace him
I just collapsed
into the smooth abyss
of his

Nazarii Nazariv, PhD, was born in 1990 in a small village in Ukrainian Steppe, a protected nature preserve. Now he lives in Kyiv, Ukraine, where he works as a translator, a linguist, and a researcher. He writes his poems in Ukrainian and English. His Ukrainian poems were selected for representative national anthologies, whereas his English poems and translations have appeared in Eratio, Eunoia, Literary Shanghai, and The Tiger Moth Review.

June 10, 2022

“Brighton Beach Memoirs”

Pavel Frolov

1

an old friend alerted me
‘bout Standing Up for NYC
a Russian
Facebook group
running a
Neighborhood
Watch
of South Brooklyn
in case of
Looting
as the Black Lives Matter protest
marched
through the Five Boroughs
in early June of 2020

2

checked out
what seemed like a hate group
posts with comments referring to
Black folks using
Slurs
but only in Russian!
you Had to be Russian to know—

and I did Blow the Whistle
my Tweet achieved
engagement: I was
Doxed
and received violent threats
with medieval homophobia
on social media

3

the Brighton Beach Elite
nicknamed me
Pavlik Morozov
the snide remark
implied a
Death
threat, since Morozov was
a Soviet Communist Youth
who in 1932
denounced his own Father
for backing the Kulak
Resistance
to the Collectivization Drive
so Kulaks killed Pavlik in reply

4

a radio journalist
covering Neighborhood Watch groups for
WNYC DMed to
thank me for taking an unpopular
Stand

in my community, wanted to
interview me but I
missed her deadline;
Local cable news RTVi
reached out too, claiming
my opinion important
I wasn't fooled but took the bait to
Zoom
Knowing they could vilify me

5

and vilify me they sure tried—
told me I would have a
Moment
to Defend my Opinion
after a Community Woman
states her Opposing
Position first
so I made a decision to be
Brave
I shaved, ironed a dark green shirt
rehearsed some things to say to let my
Generation
of Russians know they have a
Voice

6

a Russian biker DMed me
to offer protection
alleged he heard some guys were

Looking
for me, and knew what I looked like
told him I was talking to the press
so he advised I mention how
I take it in the ass

7

RTVi consoled me
an attorney was to join the
Conversation
to explain the legal
repercussions
for those who sent me threats
but on air, the host implied
the lawyer would somehow advise
that I don’t have a right to
Speak my Mind
well, the lawyer never joined or
declined
to put a blind eye on spinning facts
upon request

8

refuting propaganda
from Standing Up for NYC
there was no Looting nor a
Riot
on the Brighton Beach
boardwalk where
the BLM protestors marched

yet the RTVi coverage
had a Local Resident Bella
utter in dismay that
All Lives Matter,
that She won’t Kneel for those
that She herself Never
Enslaved

9

all my tweet said is that
Racism
in Russian communities
of Brooklyn is
disgusting—so They
called me a Faggot and a Snitch
well, you get my Pitch

Originally from Moscow, Russia, Pavel Frolov (He/Him) is a queer-identified New York City-based performer and writer. He holds a B.A. in Communication from Brooklyn College. Pavel's recent poems have appeared online in Elevator Stories, Ariel's Dream, Milk Carton Press, Visible Magazine, and in print in anthologies from Beyond Words and Wingless Dreamer. Also, Pavel's short story "The Appetite Zone or Penny Dreadful for a Marxist" was published in Mixed Mag Issue 13 (2022).

June 16, 2022

“Coming of Age”

Fadrian Bartley

Undiscovered scenery for wardrobe and closets,
Lock and keys with night and moonlight
Private poems are sweet potatoes when marinaded
With salivating splendor,
Sweats that molded up into vogue and a beard
With exposed nerves and excited veins.
Reality comes in the palm of throbbing sweaty hands
And pink bras with a loud wig that speaks fluently to the rainbow.
This is the world where spike heels have their gathering
Taking stands in strong legs and thick calves,
Using nature to pave the way for silk stockings and male tones.
Some of us are born to be poems with a flawless matte finish
Written by Mac and Revlon and using street corners to express themselves
Between brick walls and touching night winds,
Which prevents their body heat from taking away their makeup blushes.
Even though the cloud is dark now,
The future will love when the rainbow attaches to it.

Fadrian Bartley is a creative writer and customer care agent from Kingston, Jamaica. His work has appeared in various literary journals, including PIF Magazine, IHRAF Publishes, Ramingo, and Mixed Mag. He is the author of two e-books, Family Curses and Can These Dry Bones Live? Fadrian is available on Instagram @FadrianAdrianBartley.

June 22, 2022

“To Her Body”

McKenzie Moser

I’m the only friend invited to the crematorium. The family has given me time alone in the small room. It’s me, off-brand tissues, and my dead best friend laying belly-button-ring up in a brown casket. Her blue and green hair is washed for once and I’m so proud. Someone forgot to paint on her cat eyes. Then her voice registers in my brain: Perma on that wavelength. They got me all propped up like giving me two chins?! Wifey, what the—

I hold her cold, white face. Studying the handiwork of fentanyl, wondering if she overdosed on purpose. Unable to ask. They say trauma destabilizes functioning in the language part of the brain. Broca’s area. Inside a scanner my brain would match that of a stroke victim. I remember her words but literally cannot form my own. If I could think, we’d tangle, as she’d say. I’d answer:

You duplicitous motherfucker. You dumb stubborn bitch. We had plans. Fuck both your chins.

And at the same time, as she’d say…

I swear to sobriety, Syd, I’d donate a limb and my twenties to charity if it meant we could go on one last drive beneath the moon. If it meant you could lift up your fuzzy little armpit one last time for smell check, if it meant I could sniff and demand you slather on Old Spice. If it meant we could chain-smoke Marlboro Blacks in your vomit green SUV, count shooting stars while your ice cold toes smash into my own. If I could hear you snore one last time, cry one last time, laugh again and again and again. I’d untangle every lie with vigor (again and again and again) and I’d slip inside your mind and let you slide inside of mine (again and again and again). To me, you were iconic.

And at the same time…

When you fucked my ex-boyfriend, could he stay hard for you? Forgiveness denied, by the way. I have resentments predating my ability to do basic math. So give me three years. Then I'll scream at the sky and when it rains, I'll accept your apology.

And forever and for all time, I need to ask (again and again and again):

You got me sober. Why couldn't I do the same for you?

Remember the night at Anna's? We were huddled on her couch and in pranced Ron. The rapist. My body flinched, flopped, and froze, and I disassociated into another dimension. You pulled me down from the ceiling. You took my hand. You held my fucking hand and it was real; it was intimacy safe enough to return.

I still need you here to hold my fucking hand.

Light reflects off a crucifix nailed to the wall. Thanks for the prayers, they didn't help. Simmer, she would say. I inch toward escape. Desiring a tree somewhere with which I can hold silent conversation. When wind licks my back, I'll know it's her.

I take one last look at her body.

Wondering who washed her hair.

No One Tells You

The taco-binger in your Eating Disorder Recovery group tells you to "be positive." You're positive the fentanyl will kill your best friend. You've seen it before, you know how it ends. But you've learned to say thanks. No one tells you proselytizing experience ostracizes your audience, lack of hope ruins their day.

The nutritionist can't remember her name. You say, No, SYDNEY died last year. KAYLA was my first best friend, turned second best friend, promoted back to first best friend after Sydney's overdose. And now, KAYLA's on fentanyl too. I'm really afraid she's going to die. The nutritionist says, she might not. What she calls catastrophizing you call inevitable.

Taco-breath cries. I ate 14 tacos last night. You want to say, Throw up. You can solve tacos.

Kayla overdoses on your birthday. Leaves redden. She overdoses again. Snow drops. Paramedics find Kayla abandoned, asphyxiating in a car. They save her. Science has given us naloxone, which reverses opioid overdose. Science has not cured addiction. Kayla overdoses again.

No one tells you sometimes, you'll hope she'll get it over with. Overdose for the last time.

You've seen it before. You know how it ends.

You scream at her. She feigns fentanyl freedom, spins illusions in which you willingly partake. It's made easier by the mood stabilizer you multiply in strength. It's groundhog year. With Sydney it was Adderall, with Kayla it's the mood stabilizer. Blinders needed to exist. It really helps take the edge off, you report. And it does. Emotion comes and like a rubber band it snaps back to neutral. It's stability asparkle. It's a lie.

You refine your "let's keep her breathing" tactics. You couldn't say no to Sydney but you'll chant it to Kayla: No, I won't take you to the city. No, you can't have your purse back; stop stealing your mother's car.

No, you're not "some addict." You're Kayla. You're you.

No one prepares you for the call. No one recommends you buy knee pads so you can collapse comfortably. You get rug burns on your forehead, knees, and nose. No one tells you to vacuum beforehand because you'll be on the basement carpet for an hour while your mom rubs your back. No one predicts you'll swallow dog hair as you scream why and not again.

No one knows you'll do some things right. Like spending every moment available with the friend you love, the tombstone on two legs, while she's breathing. When she's not, you'll look at the sky and introduce Kayla to Sydney. You'll decrease your mood stabilizer.

No one knows you're lucky enough to grasp the point of existence. It's loving and being loved. It's time. It's people. And you get to learn it young.

Your eating disorder will disappear after she dies. You won't need it anymore. You'll always need her, but no one has to tell you that. You've seen it before. You already know.

My therapist says I have a wire crossed: I learned to equate love as sex. She claims there are a variety of non-sexual ways to show love. Like buying someone a muffin. Maybe she means robotic validation: I hear you. That's valid. I understand this, but I don't feel this; touch as a love language and all.

Have you ever wanted to fuck someone sober?

I had this friend, Tom. Once I went over to his house while he was detoxing. Sydney was already dead but I was naive enough to believe love could cure addiction. I sat on Tom's bed, pushed his sweaty hair out of his eyes and I had this overwhelming urge to just… mount him. I wanted to love him off heroin.

With my vagina.

Sounds codependent, I've heard.

My mom taught me sex was something two people did to "get as close as possible." Connection and closeness and strengthening a bond. Well, if addiction steals a person it naturally follows that sex might bring them back.

"I'm sorry about Kayla," Mike says. We're naked and parallel on his certified-foamy-double king-size mattress. We met in rehab so discussing an overdose counts as foreplay. "Remember the last time we did this?" he says. And I do, because Kayla was there.

Mike smashes his chapped lips against mine and when I shut my eyes I see her. Feel her acrylics digging into my canal. Mike jack rabbits harder but I yearn for her. Stronger than the night we took nudie polaroids; I missed her and she was in the same room. High. Not yet completely unreachable. She was naked, casually mentioning our threesome. I changed the subject and she got higher. Mike wails and I answer to her. Speak to her. Please don't die. Please don't die.

Mike's really getting into it. Fine, whatever. I'm not with him, I'm moving.

To her body.

Please don't die.

I tremble. Mike takes the credit. Wrong.

I'm rubbing and stroking and eyes-smashed-shut fantasizing my best friends back to life. I think of Sydney. The night she stripped naked in front of me and touched herself. How I used to look at her: God, she's beautiful. But when her pants slid down, when her top came off, I ran. I didn't want her like that. But now that she's gone, I wish I would've. Feel I should've fucked and groped and stroked and kneaded the addiction right out of her veins. Please don't die. Please don't die. Please don't die.

"Are you bi?" I've been asked.

Pan, but it's missing the point. I'm left. Craving closeness with my severed bonds. It's not sexual; it's not purely friendship. It's codependency and trauma bonds, addicting highs and lows; it's trying to save someone. It's failure. I just want my friends alive.

I hear you, I told Kayla. That's valid, I told Sydney. I bought them pastries. Post-mortem, I've tried harder.

With my vagina.

McKenzie grew up with a single mom and five adopted siblings. After college, she worked in the addiction-treatment industry as she is wildly passionate about combating the opioid epidemic. Brief update: the epidemic is winning, so she writes to find comedy in tragedy. McKenzie holds her MFA in Writing for Screen and Television from the University of Southern California.

June 28, 2022

“Violet Girl”

Jasmine Harrell

I raise my hand to the dusk
As if to touch your skin.
Our passion’s put to bed as
Sunlight parts from the sky.
Let the remnants of my kisses
Be like a dreamcatcher, staving
Off nightmares that might disturb
Your sleep,
My beautiful Oshun,
Whose voice pours out
Like a resplendent river
And presence swells my soul
Like a song.

Jasmine Harrell is an aspiring author. She graduated from Bowie State University with a degree in English and decided to pursue a career in editing to support her creative writing ambitions. She loves writing speculative fiction, reading, drawing, and watching horror films.

July 4, 2022

“Dear Officer,”

Dominic W. Holt

Even tasers
are not for those
in shock, PTSD,
stumbling naked
down the icy county
road, nowhere
to go, exhausted
of engraving
sergeant stripes
on flesh, to feel
something, to feel
nothing. Officer,
the jellyfish
poison and paralysis
you discharged
from your belt
electro-charred
bulls-eyes
hot poker red
on the scapula
of her back.
Officer, call
the crisis line,
the emergency

social worker,
the psychiatrist
on call
with no holster.
Teach
your brothers, sisters
in arms
and Kevlar vests.
People
with serious
mental illness,
who you radio in
as bat shit crazy
are far less
prone to violence
than you. Officer,
forget the movies,
the cop shows
with crew cuts,
biceps, curdling stares.
Hold space.
Be gentle.
Let the professionals
arrive.

Dominic W. Holt is a poet and macro social worker (public policy and outreach) in Madison, Wisconsin. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing and a Master of Social Work in social policy from the University of Michigan, and a BS in astrophysics from Indiana University. His work has appeared in Wisconsin People & Ideas, Lunch Ticket, Hummingbird: Magazine of the Short

Poem, Plainsongs, Stoneboat Literary Journal, Driftwood Review, Lifeboat, Poetry Quarterly, and other venues.

July 10, 2022

“Endocarp”

Kyle Nguyen

A younger me walks out through the hallway
Shouting the cheers of innocence and purity
I march to the kitchen where my bà ngoại hands me a bowl of pears
The fruit cleaned and peeled, bearing the true endocarp inside
The smile displayed when I devour the bowl is no different than the fruit itself

My bà ngoại’s smile hides the memories of her home,
Once so safe but now so dangerous, leaving loved ones never knowing when she’ll see them again
My bà ngoại’s smile hides the fear of being caught and controlled,
By countrymen clouded by self-glory and political fallacies
My bà ngoại’s smile hides the sacrifices for her family,
Earning money for a family struggling to make ends meet in new lands
My bà ngoại’s smile hides the pain,
Of never living a normal life, forever cursed by the markings of war

Peeling away at the past that lies behind her smile,
Understanding more and more, a present me now knows more of my bà ngoại’s roots
However finding the endocarp can’t empathize with the whole truth

Kyle Nguyen is a high school student from the Bay Area in California. He hopes to portray his family’s story as refugees from war-torn Vietnam during the Vietnam War. He can never understand the struggle they went through but he hopes to spread their stories and views through his writing to honor their sacrifice and hardships.

July 16, 2022

“Today Is Our Only Way”

Jelly C. Masinag

Blood and war debris,
who is the enemy?
Politics, power, and influence
versus life and innocence.
A total blasphemy for
love, mercy, and compassion.
Massive home destruction
for what they believe is for peace and order.
An act in good faith
or out of negligence.
Does it make any sense
to let all these things happen?
It's not just a matter of question.
When these tragic outcomes determine the most real intention.
Some people don't have a home,
still struggling to fulfill their needs.
But despite the struggles and suffering,
their innocent smiles have more to offer.
Calming our sighs and anger
reminds us to see the life that matters.
Is this who we are?
Is this how we leave our mark?
War, poverty, and brutality.
Am I an enemy or an ally?

That could've been me, my family, or my country.
Knowing today is our only way to meet tomorrow.
When will we stand for the vision of love and humanity?

Jelly C. Masinag is a 26-year-old from the Philippines. She is the sixth among eight siblings and earned a Bachelor of Science in Marketing with a Business Administration major. She is not a professional writer but dreams of becoming one who inspires others someday. She believes in the power of writing, a peaceful way to express one's thoughts and ideas about what is happening in our world.

July 22, 2022

“When I Imagine The Possibilities of This Place”

Ayokunle Samuel Betiku

—after Muriel Leung

Like some child's fairy dream, the prospect
of other worlds relentlessly tickles us. How often

we imagine we can outrun the fire we have lit,
circumvent the apocalypse, bloom into a morrow

crested on Mars' ruby crust. Hardly do we consider
keeping this soil uncharred, but peering up at the night's

vast landscape, we see each heavenly dwelling radiant
with potentials, their galactic runes urging us to slight

the playgrounds shadowed with mines, the desolate cities,
the festival trees bereft of their canopies, the once bright rivers

clogged by the dead. Who perceives here may be the only life
we own? I hope we all survive the elegies we see. I'm watching

us now in the unspooling of time. All the possibilities
of the earth aglow. The weaving of many hands building up

into a greater force. Say we can dislodge the boulders
of our aversion. We can tender the inflamed firmament

of history into rain. We can grow halos from the dust.
There will only be one place worthy of us when we scan the sky.

Ayokunle Samuel Betiku is a Nigerian writer from the city of Ondo, South West Nigeria. He is a Young Writers and Creatives' Award Fellow. He won the Eriata Oribhabor Poetry Prize for 2020, the BKPW Writing Contest for February 2021 and the Wakaso Poetry Prize for March 2021. His

works have appeared in journals and anthologies including Libretto, Agbowó, Kreative Diadem, Rough Cut Press, The Temz Review, The Offing, Trampset, Rattle and elsewhere.

July 28, 2022

“She is Afghanistan, and She is Tired”

Mahvish Shah

The cries of a country that has bled for forty years

She wishes to drizzle them

In gossamer sunlight

Spirit them away

From the grey Afghan sky

Fill them with chaste

Foolish hope and delight

Say sobh-beh-khyir [1];

End the eternity of night

But her amma [2] too

Blackened the windows

Told her to hide away;

Invisible tiptoes

Now she tells her children

To melt into shadows

To blend and to break;

Run away when the smoke blows

She could try to shield them

But it’s safer if they know

They live in Afghanistan

War torn and cold.

The howling of trees;

The Cedar, and Ash

All witness the present,
And the pain of what's past
Reaped to ruin and rubble,
In the chaos of each blast
Swept silent by a sorrow,
So blood-soaked and vast

Watched their homeland become
The 'Graveyard of Empires'
The inferno bring ashes
And shrouded desires
The barren mother’s soil
Be destroyed in the fires

She questions
How did religion become suffocation?
And freedom the fight?
Against those who in the vain name of purification
Are stealing the sky from every crimson kite
Those who with no hesitation,
Take liberty to obliterate 'sin' on sight
Leaving only hungry desolation;
Dry mouths savoring the flavor of every stolen bite

She questions
Will there be a sunrise,
When she can promise them hope?
That they will scrabble their fingers
And untie the rope
On a home-spun fiber noose,
They will no longer choke?

They will lie on unburnt meadows
Joyously rolling down their tender slope

One day she will
Not cry among blood and bone
And crawl for her kith and kin
She will give her demons a real taste of sin
And drown them in their own medicine

There will come a day
She will fight the ocean of oppression
Fight the strong currents and swim
Reach the shore that she so yearned for,
And shake her mane with the wind

That will be the day
When the current reality runs thin
She will finally break all the barriers
And this War; she will Win.

That will be the day,
Each scar will have a story to tell
Each fire will be calmed and quelled
This nightmare will be bid farewell
A full stop to this timeless hell

Alas
The warmth of the sun will glisten freely
On weathered skin
And her people will rejoice
As the dawn will rise

rise

rise

and a new era
will begin

[1] Good morning

[2] One's mother

Mahvish Shah is a sixteen-year-old poet from Karachi, Pakistan with a passion for photography and film. She was the winner of a Distinguished Honorable Mention Award in the 2021 Bow Seat Ocean's Awareness contest for her poem, "Two Voices, One symphony." Her poems have been published in the online publication Empower Magazine and are forthcoming in the sixth volume of The Aleph Review, a Pakistani print literary magazine. She shares her writing via @m.ikosha on Instagram.

August 3, 2022

“Oh That The World May Be Tranquil”

Joseph C. Ogbonna

Oh that wars may cease,
Oh that peace might reign.
Oh that men may seize
brutes who are the bane
of societal peace,
so that peace and love
may never be lost
nor our fragile trust
become precarious.
May our many foes
be saved from death's throes.
May tanks be plowshares,
and guns harvesters.
May our daily cares
on neighbours be cast.
May all our youngsters
cease evil to learn
by working to earn
their wages by day.
Oh may the boisterous
child be not consumed
by his fatal fall.
Oh that people may
seek good roles to play

in a world so small
and shaped like a ball.
Oh that we may fast
comprehend the times,
as the clock bell chimes,
and all our callous
deeds be not resumed.

Joseph C. Ogbonna was born in Lagos, Nigeria on May the 1st, 1975. He worked as a history teacher for three years. He has published two volumes of poetry with AuthorHouse UK. One of his poems was used for a documentary by BBC Radio 3 to mark the bicentenary of the death of Napoleon Bonaparte. He currently resides in Enugu, Nigeria, where he is undergoing theological training.

August 9, 2022

“ETCHING/endurance of a city newspaper”

ave jeanne

dusk and mist
begin to crawl
as clouds of
gray gather
above billboards
like pebbles
in my shoe
glued for hours
vivid memory
bothers me
floats in my head
wispy continuous
circles, whip
around and around
will not let go, can’t
release this vision
of weathered man
on february
city sidewalk
asleep as
i alone notice
his breathing
slow and soft
now it flutters

again and again
the daily news
protecting his face
from sleet and snow
pages consistently
speak of changes
that will
better all our lives.

Ave Jeanne Ventresca (aka: ave jeanne) is an American/Italian author of nine chapbooks of poetry that reflect social and environmental concerns. Poetry from her most recent collection, Noticing The Colors of Ordinary, was nominated for the Pushcart Prize for 2019. Her award winning poetry has been widely published internationally within commercial and literary magazines, in print and online. She edited the acclaimed literary magazine Black Bear Review and served as publisher of Black Bear Publications for twenty years.

August 15, 2022

“Of Wolves Grieving”

Goodwell Kaipa

The world only cares
When they are hanging on trees
Forever lifeless
Unable to make out the wailing faces
That yodel in grief
When they were alive
You called them fools
At times christening them the weak
“The drug popping people!”
Was always your remark upon seeing them
So your hypocrisy knows no bounds?
You who shed crocodile tears
The camouflaging wolves that slowly killed the silent sheep

Goodwell Kaipa is a fourth-year student nurse from Malawi. His home district is Monkeybay, a lakeshore area in Mangochi, Malawi. During his free time, he likes listening to music and visiting the lake.

August 21, 2022

“The Basement of Tehran”

Caroline Reddy

Hold still dear child
to that fuzzy blanket
until the siren stops

And
when the bombs
drop:

we have this space

beneath us

that holds still
as we take shelter

Underneath

the loud alarm

And
when fear reigns
stop:

Azizam:

smell the fresh
Nivea scent of your mother’s hand;
pull closer to your madar.

I tug at my papush:

my childhood blanket
has collected

neuron memories

that can be triggered

any second

by the latest bombs

in Ukraine.

I am in R.E.M.

trapped by nightmares

that steal any sense of peace

and

as I collapse

under the eclipse

I can remember the pieces of another life

a pair of damp skis—

and

—the smell of cardamom chai

from

nahar

lunch

while remaining a child in hiding

(then) and—

(now) —a displaced refugee

in a country that often shouts:

go back home!

so I will process it step-by-step

before the rumination

spirals downward.

Stop and Assess:

sense

feet touching the moist earth
smooth fingers reaching for
the object before me:

my gray-black
life-straw
water bottle
with a wolf howling above—
pine trees sprawling at its feet,
and mountain peaks rising towards
its graceful neck.

Just breathe this scene
deep and rise upward
from the belly
to throat
to crown.

I allow myself to sink into the tub
and inhale the scent of lavender
into my lungs.

I let the epsom salt
rinse off these old aches
and soothe my nerves;
for the sound of sirens
from the basement of Tehran
has been replaced by the sensation
of Tibetan singing bowls.

Caroline Reddy's work has been accepted or published in Active Muse, Bethlehem Writers Roundtable, Braided Way, Calliope, Clinch, Grey Sparrow and Star*Line, among others. In the fall of 2021, her poem "A Sacred Dance" was nominated for the Best of The Net prize by Active Muse. A native of Shiraz, Iran, Caroline is working on a collection of poems titled Star Being which chronicles the life of a Starseed on earth.

August 27, 2022

“An Ode to the Abolish Ladies and Breaking the Wall”

Nejoud Al-Yagout

In Kuwait, honor killings are still considered a misdemeanor. The founders of Abolish 153 are doing their best to remove this article from the constitution, so that our legal system protects women and treats honor killings as a serious crime, not a misdemeanor punishable only by three years and/or a paltry fine.

I was born and died in an androcentric realm,
They tried to save me
Five of them and more, pushing and shoving against the dilapidated wall of a stubborn patriarchy
She called me, one of the founders
Something about a shelter, something about abolishing an article—153?
They got there in time, right as he threatened to carve my skull with bullets of antagonism
Right as I lay embryonic on the bathroom floor
Woke up in an undisclosed location
They raised funds—they, the abolish ladies
But Mama told me to come back home
She promised he wouldn't hurt me, she promised he wouldn't force me to marry my cousin, again, again, again
And again won, and home meant I sat there, weeks later, dazed behind a veil of discontent
Drowning in a paradox of ululations and bright lights
Had I listened to them ladies, I would have been there in the streets chanting alongside them for who I could have been, right there with them
They were all there
They who called me a martyr-ess at the protests
And that wall?

Caving in, caving in and beyond, but still intact

They know we're better off without it

Nejoud Al-Yagout is the founder of Interheart Kuwait (previously known as Co-Exist Kuwait). She is a writer based in Kuwait. For further information, please visit her website: Interheart Kuwait.

September 2, 2022

“Ghosts of Kashmir’s Muharram”

Sabahat Ali Wani

While covering her head in an old black scarf, Shifah curses the arrival of Muharram1 in Kashmir, which promises nothing but long harsh days of rituals and extreme cold. She picks up the needles from the drawer and starts adjusting her scarf, making sure that it survives till the end of the day and passes her mother’s assessment. “Shifah! Alam hai waech,” 2 she hears her mother say. Shifah had already seen the procession coming through her room’s window—a large crowd of bearded men, wearing black from head to toe, with green bandanas tied on their foreheads, marching like fearless flag bearers and lamenting the deaths of martyrs by beating their chests and reciting Marsiya3 again and again. It is the same one as last year, Shifah thinks to herself. This year too, it seems like they couldn’t get a new writer.

She sits down on the carpet that her mother loves obsessively and patiently waits for the voice of the women’s procession to come afterwards. It usually comes up quite fast, without any hesitation or pause but today, it is not abrupt. She waits patiently but all she can hear is the chest beating. She stands up quickly and looks outside. The road is filled with men, only they are beating their chests while the women like her watch from the windows—some have prayer beads in their hands, some are reciting Marsiya but only their lips are moving and no voice is coming out, some are crying and lamenting a loss of someone or something—it is hard to tell which one. Some are just looking dead into her eyes, threatening her to look away.

Shifah adjusts her Hijab4 quickly and runs downstairs to her mother. “Why are they not taking out a procession? Why are they on the windows like mere spectators?” she asks her mother in a desperate tone. No answer, as usual. Her mother gives her an odd, sympathetic stare while her father screams at her to go upstairs. Shifah is used to the indifference and pitiful stares of her parents; it is the culture of the households here. She obediently rushes upstairs and once again dares to open the window.

The scene has changed a bit as a woman's voice now rings all over the place. There stands an angry woman, her mouth wide open, screaming at a man who had stepped on the flowers of her garden. She had her one leg propped up on the window sill while she cursed the audacity of the idiotic man to ruin her garden's flowers. With one hand resting on her hip, she points towards the man accusingly and then slices the air with her raging voice.

On the other hand, the accused man is in a trance. He hops weirdly on his one leg while reciting some lines of an old Kashmiri Marsiya, the one Shifah remembers clearly. Her mother had told her that there was once a Zakir5 who used to recite this Marsiya every Muharram but as the time passed, he kept on mumbling the lines to himself and gradually lost his sanity. It had stayed with her since then. Shifah had felt an intimate connection with this specific Marsiya. While chanting the piece, she realized that it didn't take much to lose her consciousness in the draining act of lamentation, its painful acceptance and then an absolute blissful submission—which this particular Marsiya demanded.

Shifah waits patiently for 'that part' of the Marsiya where the man and the whole crowd will lose their control over their senses and start wailing—as if it was doomsday, as if we had lost another soul to the occupier's violence, as if another child was blinded, as if the funeral marches were new to our roads and this was Kashmir's first attempt at lamenting a death.

Suddenly, everyone realizes it is time. Dogh6 was now at its peak and Shifah closes her eyes to unite herself with the crowd. She knows that now, the beating is going to reach its highest point, making sweet slow love to Madah7 and simultaneously murdering it to welcome a creeping and crawling end. The crowd will reach a point of inhumane coordination. The wailing, the voices, the movements of arms, and the moment the hands fall against the chests will be in perfect harmony. As a child, it was one of those scenes where she thought she was witnessing a grand other-worldly performance. Growing older, nothing has changed except the fact that she no longer stands amongst them.

As the air gets drunk on the sound of the hypnotic chest beating and the people give in to their physical incapability of continuing this draining act, everyone comes to a halt. Not a sudden one but the one where the Marsiya takes pity on them and releases its control on their bodies. The

one where the one reciting the Marsiya sympathizes with the audience and lets them lament all they want. That's a privilege in Kashmir, to lament freely; so, everyone takes advantage of this moment and wails for their and each other's losses. Shifah tries her best to cry for the ones who have suffered more than her but it feels as if the moment itself is mocking her. How do people lament for others? How can we feel remorse for a stranger?

She looks at the angry woman and sees the tears rolling down her cheeks while she laments the deaths of her garden's flowers. The woman keeps on looking at those flowers and starts crying more angrily. Shifah comes back to her senses as her cheeks are now wet with tears—she is crying for the injustice that was committed in front of her. Under the blanket of this mass lamentation, one can freely weep and whine all they want. It would be considered religious and in most cases, you would be seen as the most devotional being by others. So, you must lament.

Now, the procession is leaving and Shifah clutches her head with her frail hands. This has always been the product of this grand ordeal for her, a painful throbbing headache. No amount of medicine could cure this type of self-inflicted torture. It feels as if someone is hammering her head with the continuous insertion of small but sharp nails, which pierce through her scalp and stay there until a new one takes its place. The skin around her eyes burns from the tears and Shifah is sure that if she tries to clean her face, her skin is going to fall apart and she won't be able to heal it.

She closes the window and pushes her Hijab backwards; it loosely lays on her weak shoulders. She places her head on the ground directly and waits for the throbbing to end. She can't tell her mother about it; it's unacceptable. You can't complain about any mental or physical pain after a religious deed is over. It shows that you are not holy enough and He is not pleased with your worship. People will think you are a fake worshiper whose body is not blessed enough by God himself. You are a sham, a pathetic soul imitating other religious men and women to fit into the crowd and somehow trying to make it to the land of paradise.

Shifah doesn't like the incompatibility of her body with this whole sacred act. As she lays on a posh Kashmiri carpet, her mind has given up the desire to receive any form of higher knowledge while her body breaks with exhaustion and a heavy sense of regret. It's just a matter of time

before another procession will make its way to her. It will hit from nowhere. Maybe, the military will stop them from uniting all the processions together. They are scared of people coming together, marching together, or even lamenting together. It is seen as an act of resistance.

Shifah hopes it doesn't happen today. She has no power to witness or to become part of more funeral processions today or in the following days. She wants the snow to fill up every road, small paths, attics, windows, gardens, and crevices of Kashmir. She wants it to fill up their bodies too so that for once the numbness will allow them to rest and will give them some time to love their bodies.

It will not happen, she knows it. This is a harsh winter day; no snow is going to greet the valley. She has to wait for it to come and put the human activity to a pause. If not everyone, Shifah desperately needs it.

1 First month of the Islamic Calendar.

2 Kashmiri for "Shifah, Alam is here." Alam is the flag that is carried in Muharram processions and is a reference to the flag that was carried by the so-called 'martyrs' in the Battle of Karbala.

3 An elegy.

4 Veil worn on the head by Muslim women.

5 One who recites the elegy.

6 Kashmiri for the 'chest beating' performed by mourners in Muharram.

7 A part of the elegy specifically refering to the family of the Prophet.

Sabahat Ali Wani is a writer, researcher, and artist from Kashmir. She is a writer of conflict who is the product of militarization, toxic masculine culture, and oppression in Kashmir. She is the co-founder and editor-in-chief of the Kashmiri women-led initiative and magazine, Maaje Zevwe. She is the recipient of the Project We Be Imaging Grant by the American Assembly, Columbia University (USA) and the Young India Fellowship, Ashoka University.

September 9, 2022

“gun-rose”

Stuti Desai

America points a gun at me & a rose

pops out. red is red

is red is red

no matter how you

look at it but you can close your eyes,

play pretend

if that makes America seem less like an undoing. gold-film wings

chained to the floor,

red on my white shirt. how nice it must be

to not see

red at all but on the contrary how

empty

it must be to know there is red on the rose
& red on my clothes & not be able to

point your finger,

call 911. of course, this is all mere speculation but all the

gun-roses

together are almost half as long as the Wikipedia page on

children huddled on classroom floors.

it is all mere speculation because America will

never let this happen again.

America needs no

shooter drill

lockdown drill

active intruder drill.

do you remember the one about the girl who

rolled around in her friend's blood &

played dead

to survive? lemon sharks play dead too. god how I hope her teeth are

sharp & merciless now.

teach our teachers to be apex predators so that

when roses pop out of guns

they know how to crush the petals into such

fine grain that America can swallow them to feed her

second amendment baby.

when I plant the rose that

pops out of the barrel of the gun,

all that grows is my white-turned-red blouse.

Stuti Desai is a 15-year-old writer from New Jersey. When they're not working on their magazine —healthline zine—you can find them getting lost on long runs or reading obscure feminist essays. They are a hot chocolate aficionado, a Libra through and through, and incredibly honored to have you read their work.

September 14,2022

“Twelve for Anonymous Elites”

Tom Bauer

We admitted we were powerless over
systemic corruption and that our lives had
become unmanageable. Came to believe
the power of worldwide systemic upgrades
could stop greed and restore us to sanity.

Made a decision to turn our will and our lives
over to the service of our emergent
understanding of the common social good,
for the sake of all that we know and love,
to build a better world for one and all.

Made a searching and fearless moral in-
ventory of ourselves, our schemes, and our tax
evasions, and admitted to ourselves,
and all the other citizens of the world,
that most of our decisions and transactions
meant dollars trickling in for us wealthy few
and trauma pouring out for everyone else.

We admitted the current system runs on
misuse, even for good and simple outcomes,
even in the lives of ordinary folks,
and because of that we became entirely
willing to have systemic change remove
all defects of current transparency laws

and all other impediments to a full
and functioning democracy for all.

We humbly asked the peoples of the world to
forgive us for cheating with a rigged system
and benefitting ourselves at the expense
of many millions dead and countless wasted
resources. We admit those actions of ours,
those inequities, have impacted others
badly, and we agree a system upgrade
must rectify those injustices as well.

We made a list of all persons we had harmed,
became willing to make amends to them all,
and resolved to keep taking inventory
regularly, building a habit of
integrity by promptly admitting
when we were wrong instead of hiding it.

Finally, we sought through honesty and full
transparency, to improve our conscious
contact with all lives, habitats, and natural
systems, from which we too emerged, and grow
trust in new policies based on decisions
to share the wealth, power, and the well-being
we've harvested from our fellow citizens.

Having had a behavioral awakening
as a result of these steps, we tried to carry
this message of fairness to the world, and to
practice these principles in all our affairs.

Tom Bauer is an old coot who lives in Montreal and plays a lot of board games.

September 20,2022

“Adobo Variations”

Christyn Refuerzo

Adobo is the Philippines. It is not something singular—a single ingredient, a single island, a single person—it is a collection of many, like the Philippines itself—many ingredients, many islands, many people.

When you google “adobo,” it gives you something like this: “Philippine adobo is a popular Filipino dish and cooking process in Philippine cuisine that involves meat, seafood, or vegetables marinated in vinegar, soy sauce, garlic, bay leaves, and black peppercorns, which is browned in oil, and simmered in the marinade.”

But what Google fails to tell you is how not all adobo is made with bay leaves and black peppercorns. Not all adobo is browned in oil, simmered in the marinade.

Adobo changes with every island, every Filipino family you meet. No two are ever the same.

As I’ve gotten to know and become the person I am today, adobo has grown up with me. It is a piece of my childhood, while still living in the present. It stings, it comforts. It heals.

When I go to Filipino restaurants, their adobo is different. To me, it doesn’t taste like home. Because, to them, I am not enough. I am too “American.” I am a first-generation daughter who wants to be a writer instead of a doctor, lawyer, or engineer, who wants to move across the country, far from my family. I don’t speak Tagalog. I don’t eat the bitter melon, liver, all the traditional dishes. Instead of traveling to the Philippines every summer, I want to walk through the streets of France. I am not who they want me to be and their adobo reminds me of that, every time I go. To them, I should speak Tagalog. I should want to go back to the Philippines. I should, I should, I should. But I don’t want to be any of that. I want to be me. But is “me” not Filipino enough?

My mom’s adobo is her, in a dish. Like her, it dances. It smiles. It’s sweet. No one can mimic it, even though she is more than willing to share the recipe whenever someone is eager enough to

ask. Her adobo is the family secret, with her own "Anna R" twist. You can't follow her written recipe though. When she makes it, she adds a "bit" of vinegar, a "splash" of coconut milk. With time, it has evolved—healthier (at least, as healthy as it can be) so now it's served with brown rice (still made in the rice cooker and the water is checked using the middle finger method), and chicken instead of fatty pork. Still, that adobo has kept its roots, like her. It's garlicky, like her lovely lolas'. A return to the collection of islands under the sun. A paradox of ingredients mishmashed together to make something I can never forget—even if I can't quite make it the same way.

My grandmother's adobo is going back to the Philippines, finally, but to people I barely remember, who tell me they saw me grow up on Facebook. Family I don't know the names of coming up to me expecting big hugs, kisses, warm smiles, and reverent blessings. Her adobo is soaked in memories of long ago. A completely different time. The only thing I can remember from then was the Central Valley sun baking me until I burned. I take a bite and it tastes bittersweet.

Lolo Virgil's adobo is a treat. It's a luxury that I don't feel I deserve, like seeing my cousins, the ones who live both near and far. The ten of us, delirious from the good food and even better company, our faces sore from laughing and smiling. It's enjoyed only with the best of the best, the cream of the crop: white rice. His adobo is worth millions of dollars, but the memories made with my cousins… those are the ones that have no price because they are the memories with the people who love me the most. His adobo, Michelin-star level, is the tight embrace of the chosen family I was lucky enough to be born into. My home.

Christyn Refuerzo (she/her) is a Filipino-American writer from the Bay Area. She has been published in Wind-Up Mice Journal, Rewritten Mag, and The Weight Journal. When she's not writing or studying, she can be found with a cup of coffee or earl gray, listening to music, or reading. Follow her on Twitter @christynr412.

September 26, 2022

“Girl from the South”

Beatrice Ray

I don’t know why it’s named
the duty of girls here.
That she’s obliged to know—
how to cook, to clean and do
the gender-labelled chores,
serve men the right food at the right time,
to talk low or not at all,
to accept whatever given and
give up what she wants,
clawed in the hands of superstitions.
For what they say is the
marital life that she’s destined.
Like a horse with blinkers, she
is trained to the unknown dead line
for the ‘wife instinct’ they put together,
so her home isn’t talked down
for her ability.
Losing her right on her own soul vessel,
made believe that’s her life and
been called divine just to let them
choose what she becomes,
Not a chance of Who she is
in question or thought.
Dreams of a girl from the South,

echoing silently in the kitchen walls
with cuts and burns in her palms
and words buried deep down her throat.
Promising herself to save the
Name of her Mother, here.
The mother who didn't wish her daughter
to Live a Life rather That, she
got passed on to. Here.
"Maybe not all are like me..." She
thought seeing them flying
from different lands. Still wishing
her life would change to what she
dreamt it to be.

Beatrice Ray (Pen Name) is a 22-year-old in India. Although a commerce graduate, she loves to spend time on her dream of becoming a writer. For words being her solace, she writes what she feels. Not until recently, wanting to be heard, she decided to try to publish her works.

October 2, 2022

“The Sacrament of Exile”

Kalahari Marrakesh

We,
each one of us.
lost in the translations that we seek,
exiled from the corners of a dilapidated township
in search of another township.
township looking like a graveyard
graveyard looking like a township.
township leaking something so strong like a civil war
my compass can point out where the toyi-toyi is.
a breathing living toyi-toyi
because it is silent.
guerrilla warfare of poets,
resistance fed with silence
fed with muted voices.
led by tongue-tied comrades
who cannot speak for themselves.
brewing an unspeakable torment because
It tortures your tongue;
it leaves you voiceless yet venomous.

We,
each one of us.
but none of us have walked this path before.
hypnotized by this gravel road,
traumatized by this gruesome pavement.

barefooted in an avenue of the less travelled,
many never made it to their motherland,
jar full of dialectics
mother-tongue smuggled to the diaspora.
exiled & erased
blotted out from the struggle.

We,
each one of us.
diagnosed with an exhaustion for resistance,
an erasure of black literature is ongoing,
in transit to a cemetery of libraries
a burial site of our ancestral anthologies.

We,
each one of us.
sing a eulogy from exile.
unsung songs of the struggle archived in a vinyl,
cd romance and cassettes unearthed from a
township graveyard.
built & bulldozed like sophiatown screaming
we won't move.
scorned off the face of the earth
screams of help ringing like sirens,
dreams get demolished too.

Kalahari Marrakesh (born. ***Mothupi Kgatshe*** 1998) is a creative writer & visual historian working and living in Johannesburg, South Africa. His work tackles complex issues of human experiences ranging from pain, displacement, crime, poverty, violence, blackness, identity, and memory. He utilizes writing and image-making as two vital tools to better understand his world.

As a creative, Marrakesh is fascinated by civilizations, particularly metropolises, big cities and thriving towns, their complexities and anxieties.

October 8, 2022

“Why Wars?”

Maiwand Banayee

As I was writing this article, my eyes flew toward the television’s screen that showed Russia’s indiscriminate bombing of a train station, killing hundreds of civilians, mostly women and children. I stopped writing and watched those horrific images with a painful familiarity. Then my imagination took me to the country of my birth, Afghanistan of 1992, when I was just eleven years old: The Soviet Union had just crashed inside Afghanistan, resulting in the killings of one million Afghans, fifteen thousand Soviet troops and seven million Afghan refugees.

By then Afghanistan was awash with Russian and American supplied weapons, which birthed a fierce civil war. The rival groups took positions atop elevated buildings and shelled each other amid residential neighbourhoods with no regard to the civilian lives. Meanwhile we hunkered inside our houses. The bullets hissed over our house and the rockets swept in the air, making roaring noises and slamming like heavy thunders. Every nearby explosion sent tremors into our hearts and we cowered in fear, expecting the next rocket would fall on our heads.

The next morning, several mortar shells struck the nearby houses, shaking the earth, swinging our doors open, pelting dust and debris into our house. And then a loud rocket banged into the wall of our courtyard, kicking up a huge dust, shattering our window glasses, and smashing our ceiling bulb into tiny pieces. With this, we all broke into loud screams and clung to each other. Mom pulled me and my little sisters into the small back room, but Dad disliked the idea of mass sheltering because only one shell could kill all of us at once. So he screamed at Mom, and told us to disperse into several rooms.

With each passing day the fighting intensified, stretching for weeks and then for months. The only thing we heard were non-stop blasts, thuds, bursts, bangs, vroom, vroom, crack, crack, pop, pop, whiz, whiz and buzz, buzz. Some days rockets fell without interruption, other days at

random. Sometimes the noises were ear-splitting, but sometimes they rumbled like distant thunder.

Then there came a lull in rocketing. We took a sigh of relief, thinking the fighting was over. But the next morning the whooshing and wheezing of artillery resumed, breaking all our hopes. The rockets began falling like hailstones this time. And then another rocket pounded our neighbour's house, rattling our windows. Terrified, my sisters clung to Mom, and I jumped to the end of the room with wobbly legs, seeing flashes before my eyes, and buried my head under the blanket. Seconds later, sounds of cries emanated from our neighbour's house, echoing into our ears as low voices, interspersing with artillery sounds. Mom clutched her heart and said, "The rocket must have hurt someone."

Over the next few hours, artillery fell silent again, so Dad dashed for our back door. Naively, I walked behind Dad and followed him into our neighbour's house that smelled burnt. Kids were crying inside the corridor. The chicken hut was pulverized and the mud patio was pelted with broken glass. My legs shuddered when I saw streaks of blood on the cemented area around their water well. I crossed to the glassless window, peeped into the room and glimpsed Dad and other men shrouding a figure in a white cloth. The figure was bloodied, with a deformed head and white brain appearing in the midst of blood-soaked hairs. I held my breath to keep from vomiting and darted back toward the house. On my way to our door, I heard a hail of bullets thudding against a wall in the short distance, and then I missed a bullet just by inches.

In the house, Mom chastised me to no end for going outside. In the next hour or so, the hums, drums, and cracks of artillery resumed, and Dad returned from our neighbour's house, looking frantic, gasping for air, his hands and clothes soaked with blood. "The rocket killed Agha's wife," Dad said, his eyeballs seeming to sag out. "I told them to bury her in their backyard, but Agha won't listen."

A chill passed through my body because Agha's wife often gave me sweets whenever I popped into their house.

Mom clamped a hand over her mouth and gasped in horror. "What did Agha say?"

“He wants a formal funeral and wants to bury her in their ancestral cemetery in Shomali province,” Dad said. “He is just stupid.”

“Stop poking your nose into other people’s businesses,” Mom said. “Let them take her there.”

“The journey to Shomali takes hours.” Dad’s voice rose. “We are besieged. This war is not going to end anytime soon. That woman’s head was crashed and bloodied. Her children are terrified, and the weather is hot. If they keep her for long, she will swell and smell.”

Dear reader, I tell you this story not because I had a melodramatic childhood, but because all wars are horrible. They destroy homes, force people to flee, rob kids of their childhood. And when kids see fear in their parents’ eyes, that trauma lingers with them throughout their lives.

The politician starts the wars, but ordinary people suffer its consequences. All wars are fought for power, wealth, ego, and control. I wonder why they spend too much time inventing devices to kill each other and so little time finding ways to achieve peace. I wonder when man’s moral intelligence will catch up with his technological intelligence. Now, I am reminded of the German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno’s words: “We humans have grown cleverer than our ancestors but not wiser.”

Indeed, the power of modern weaponry shows that Adorno was so right because we have only replaced the swords with guns and the spears with intercontinental ballistic missiles. We still carry a caveman’s mentality, driven by greed and fear and unable to resist fighting. In this bewildering juncture, it is more important than ever to discard the old psyche. War technology has reached its zenith, with the potential to erase humanity from the face of this earth.

Maiwand Banayee was born in Afghanistan. He came to Ireland in 2004 as a refugee, where he learnt English. After receiving permission to stay in Ireland, he attended IT Carlow, graduating with a degree in Physical Therapy. Maiwand speaks four languages. He writes about war in Afghanistan from his direct experiences, and is currently writing a memoir. His work has been published in War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities, The Stinging Fly, Galway Review, and MASI literary journals and several anthologies.

October 14, 2022

“My African Dream”

Joseph C. Ogbonna

I dream of a great African continent where
fighter birds will cease to storm the serene skies.
Where torrential explosives are fully doused,
a continent with no poverty-stricken cries.
Where justice and freedom for all is espoused.
An Africa where bigwigs to rule of law adhere,
an Africa of resources natural,
harnessed effectively for infrastructural
development and economic progress.
I dream of an Africa without borders,
where tyrants do not give draconian orders,
where human rights by her leaders are upheld.
A land of plenty which God Himself did bless
with everything tangible that can be held.

Joseph C. Ogbonna was born on May the 1st, 1975, in the Nigerian commercial capital of Lagos. He is a prolific poet whose works have been widely published. His poetic works cut across different genres, such as religion, history, nature, politics, love, philosophy, his motherland Nigeria, and so on. One of his poems was used by the BBC Radio 3 to mark the bicentenary of the death of Napoleon Bonaparte on May the 5th, 2021. He currently resides in Enugu, Nigeria.

October 20, 2022

“Still Here”

Joanna Cockerline

* 2022 IHRAF Publishes Pushcart Prize Nominee *

I didn’t hold you when you died. No one did.

I’d seen you that morning, at the Shell station. It was just before morning rush hour and you came across the sidewalk in a cami and cutoffs, flip flops smacking the already warming pavement. Your hair was pulled into a messy ponytail and your eyeliner was worn, sparkles from last night’s makeup barely left of your shadow.

You looked tired, not unlike many people that time of day. You could have been one of the summertime tourists, hours into the trip. A mom striding from her minivan to the gas station, beelining for a washroom, a minute’s peace, and a bag of chips to bribe truces in the back seat—you had something of a fatigued battle-weariness to you. You could have been anyone.

I’d brought what you wanted. It was all in a bag in the trunk of my car. What you wanted, and then some.

There was the dress we’d talked about, fitted but a muted blue, not too dowdy but not too flashy, either. Certainly nothing to collect suspicious looks. I’d brought a second one, too, a bit longer in case that sore on your leg was flaring up again. No need for questions. I’d brought two bras, two different sizes because you kept getting smaller these days.

You didn’t have to ask if I’d brought it. You reached for the hanger I held out, along with the weekend bag: a donation, but nice. Our town has some wealthy people and was good for things like that.

When I’d packed the bag last night, I’d tried to think of everything. Shampoo, conditioner, body lotion, deodorant, toothbrush, toothpaste. Two perfumes, those tiny sample sizes, so you could choose which one you liked. Hairbrush and comb, bobby pins held together by a hair elastic. Black eyeliner and then one that would match your eyes. Shadow, which you already had, but

just in case you didn't have any with you at the time. Mascara and two shades of lipstick, both tactfully muted in different ways. Foundation, powder, cover-up—those were essential. There was no way to fully hide the sores, but makeup could make them less noticeable from a distance. Up close, they could be mosquito bites, someone gone camping unprepared.

"I'm so nervous," you said, quiet, glancing towards the highway. Summer tourist traffic had already started to clog.

"You've got this."

"I've got to."

When you peeked inside the bag, I saw your nail polish was fresh, different from the night before. Your hands were almost clean. Sometimes you binned in garbage cans for recycling, and had grime in the swirls of your callouses, but you had clearly scrubbed hard.

"She's been texting me all morning," you told me as you thumbed through the bag. There was the card I hadn't mentioned, but when you saw it, from the way your shoulders changed just slightly, you seemed glad it was there. It was a bright explosion of colours, sparkly stars and CONGRATULATIONS bursting across the front. Inside was blank. I'd brought a pen, too, so you could write her a message while on the bus. Five hours was a long stretch but you were determined to do this.

"She keeps asking when my bus will arrive."

"Four thirty. And they'll meet you there?"

"That's what she said." When you wiped your hands on your cut-offs they left damp smears. You sucked in sharply.

"She'll be so happy to see you."

"I just can't mess this up. She's the first from our family to graduate, you know."

"That's awesome."

"She's getting an award. Two, actually. One for math and one for music." You laughed, not happily. "If it weren't for the stretch marks to prove it, I wouldn't believe we were related."

Your hair was catching in the wind, gold where the sun shone through it. It was warm already, sunny, ready to be a lovely day.

"Mmkay, I better go. D's gonna give me a ride to the bus station."

I glanced towards my car.

"It's okay. Just gotta do a couple things before I go."

"Everything you need's in there," I said, wanting you to look through it, to see that everything was there to make this special, to make this possible. I wanted you to look through it so you knew you could do this. Along with the bras and makeup there was a fashion magazine, a crossword book, and a Sudoku, a hopeful attempt at distracting you, keeping you occupied if all you wanted to do was go back to that bathroom at the end of the bus and do the thing you vowed you would not do, not on this day. There was a bottle of water and a can of cola, some fruit chew candy—the cravings would be fierce and you were going to have to do something—and a granola bar, Bandaids and wipes. Two kinds of wipes, just like there were two kinds of underwear. I wasn't naïve enough to think you wouldn't work if you had to.

But on the way back. Not before grad. You'd get there, you'd be there for her, you'd stay quiet enough around the rest of the family and not let them get to you. We both knew you'd use, but later. You'd be there for her and even if you weren't with her for now you'd be in the photographs, a mother and daughter in dresses, each with a corsage. You'd smile together. Make a new memory together. That photograph would be a promise of what was to come, that repairs can happen and forgiveness is possible. That everything can be made up, in time.

You turned then, walked from the Shell station. It was near the corner where you worked and I'd seen you there countless times, usually at dark. In the day you really did look like you were just someone a bit dishevelled from being on a car trip too long. I'd long since abandoned the notion that women working down here were young and pretty and sparkly. Sure, there were miniskirted teens in their stiletto boots, boots they still wore because they were new enough they didn't yet know sometimes this work meant you had to run. These sparkly girls looked the part, but that clean sparkliness didn't usually last, or they didn't, and most of the women down here looked like you. Just an ordinary person, a bit frayed.

I watched you walk away and I hoped.

I hoped through the day, in between emails at work and in line at the food store, while waiting at traffic lights and getting distracted by a bus that was the same type as the one you would be on. Four thirty came and I pictured you straightening your dress, stepping off the bus and wiping your hands, nervous but determined. The dress would be a bit wrinkled from the long ride but not too wrinkly: weeks ago we'd agreed that I'd hang on to it until the morning you left. It wasn't that you weren't capable of keeping it nice; it's just that in the shelter things got stolen and on the street things went missing, and this mattered too much to risk.

The next night, when you still hadn't texted, I didn't get a call. I'm not family. Not kin. Am I even a friend, exactly? What are we? What—

This isn't how the story should end. If it were a proper story there would be redemption. Struggle, adversity, conflict, tears, yes—but redemption. Or at least an attempt at reconciliation. A mother and daughter in a photograph if nothing else, flowers pinned on chests and a bouquet in the girl's hands, that girl thankfully seventeen without needing braces and years ago taller than you, though you didn't know when, exactly, that happened. A photograph of difficult smiles, of struggle, of simmering anger and a legacy of disappointment, but also of hope. A memory made, nonetheless.

But there wasn't that. And there wasn't a text and there wasn't a call that next night.

There was just Lacy, spinning on the heel of her little plum getaway boots, her worn leather jacket stained red and yellow from the glow of the Shell sign behind her, her fingers rubbing the hem of her jean skirt in that way she did when she'd been waiting too long or when something was up.

And when Lacy looked at me her eyes told me before her mouth did. Her eyes were shiny in the fragments of light, hard and soft all at once, her gaze right there and yet so impossibly far away. And I didn't yet know about the man, the night-shift man who'd been sweeping, who found you.

You curled against the lockers in the bus station just blocks from here, curled against a wall in that way I'd seen you many times before, sleeping, hair across your face to keep the world out.

I'll never know what the phone found beside your hand said, if there was any message at all, sent or received. I don't even know who has your phone now. Things like that happen all the time out here—your phone has probably already been resold, or gone somehow, living its next life. And you, you're still here, in this city, maybe even wearing that dress, with maybe your makeup still vibrant, still here.

But that is not how this story should end.

Joanna Cockerline, B.A., M.A., is a writer and street-level outreach activist based in unceded Syilx Territory in the Okanagan valley, also known as Kelowna, BC, Canada. A CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) Literary Awards prizewinner, her fiction and poetry have been published in national and international publications such as Room, The Fiddlehead, and En Route. She teaches in the Faculty of Creative and Critical Studies at the University of British Columbia Okanagan, and is at a work on a novel focused on street-level sex work.

October 26, 2022

“To All Those Who Taught Us Hate”

Yiyang Zhao

I wonder who taught those children in primary school
To fake sick looking at my lunch box.
It only contained fried rice
Which now the whole world seems to eat.

I wonder who taught those children in primary school
to praise me ‘a nice Chinese person’
when I didn’t get their racist joke.
It was something about Chinese and Japanese eyes, and
I didn’t understand the stereotypes, because they weren’t true.

I wonder who taught the adolescent boy
to lean out the bus stop and say ‘konnichiwa’.
It made me think, I’m not Japanese.
But for all they cared—no, they didn’t.

I wonder who taught the girl to say, when asked to tell a funny story,
how her teacher was mocked by students
about her eyes.
One mention of the ‘R’ word from my lips and she and her friends were silent.
Where did all that confidence go? From when you were laughing a minute ago?
Their eyes looking down told me
they knew it wasn’t right. (So why do you do it?)

I wonder who taught the woman, walking into a Japanese stationary shop,
to act offended because ‘everything’s in Chinese’.
I can’t decide what was funnier:

her obvious racism,
or the fact that her husband pointed out
that the writing she had looked at was English
in a unique font.

I wonder who taught the closest friend
to be shocked into saying,
‘Is that the widest your eyes can go?’ (are we still not over this)
Remember, you can be friends with me and still be racist.
Stop trying to find excuses. (Try to change instead.)

Lies are still told about us,
Minds affected by them subconsciously or not.
I’ve heard we can only be taught to hate.
So who is doing the teaching?

We have to stop being students of this hate;
it blurs reason.

You can be proud, and so can we.

You’d be surprised at the power of unity.

So
teach yourself to love.

Yiyang is from a small city in the North-East of China and currently resides in the United Kingdom. She grew up in the North of England amongst a diverse group of peers, and has always been interested in writing and culture. She won both categories in the Mother Tongue Other Tongue poetry competition in 2021, and is now studying a BA in Comparative Literature. In her spare time, she loves researching Chinese Hanfu, reading, learning languages, watching Cdramas, and making boba.

November 1, 2022

“Wilting Metaphors”

Zakir Aatish Khan

My father drives bus to faraway places.
Hums off key, in the wrong tempo —
        Mozart: Serenade in G major
        his croon
            his projection of life.
Grease stains on sleeves,
blackened cuticles,
and a waft of diesel are deeply entwined
to the fantasy he lives in.
Often disturbed by the moonlight
        seeping in through jute curtains.
My father on his prayer mat,
        projects supreme submission
        to fate,
        to the world running in discord
        alongside his wilting metaphors.
Nervous fidgeting the dark hallway,
my father, coughed to kill time
and shame when
my school almost

turned us away.

He couldn’t pay for my studies

for three straight months.

Tails for a packet of Lays.

Heads for another bland day.

It’s always tails.

Since my father loved Lays

as much as I did.

We’d shoot trifles and play games while

my teacher tirelessly petitioned the

required sum to secure me a space in the

green register.

We’d pretend to be great musicians

but deaf.

We’d silence the world and my school

and would walk home

while he crooned all along.

My father doesn't have a name

As I do.

A wilting metaphor.

But isn’t every name a metaphor?

A projection?

But no metaphor could set

any of my emotions in motion

when I saw my father selling his goat

to the butcher.

It's treat to my dormant taste buds,

the dead animal further died in

my stomach.

And he managed to set aside

a nominal sum too to pay

to my school.

The dogs cried too much that night—

sounds of fractals of thesis

the night proposed.

The goat

and the dog

and my father

and I

created a symphony.

They lulled me

into the depth of sleep.

I closed against my father in terror.

He is crooning still,

mothering my apprehensions,

tending to my withering brevity,

nurturing my wilting metaphors.

It was a beautiful setting to

trap the world with questions.

What does your croon mean, papa?

Zakir is a multidisciplinary artist–primarily a writer – residing in India. His writings have appeared in Kitaab, Muse India, The Bombay Review among many others.

Author Foreword:

The heart of my art languishes at the fringes of the working class and the passive discrimination they go through. I have watched a community grow sick in absence of art and believe life for an artist without art is equal to death. That's what always has been the case. The piece "Wilting Metaphors" was inspired by a bus driver who happens to be a fine guitarist, unknown to the world — wide or immediate — except to his son. The very act of the bus driver, his rebellious tendency to live this duality intrigued me to warm my thumbs up and let them go tap-tap-tap across the keyboard.

November 7, 2022

“Little”

Lucy Gathoni Njenga

Nov 7

See, I am just a little village girl

Who grew up with little and

was taught to be content with little.

To give thanks and smile irrespective;

It is the way to happiness

And to hand out happiness

And to forge a little heaven down here.

So, I have smiled despite;

I have always given thanks

And have made many people happy...

Not all, but I try; I really try.

See, I barely dreamed -

The nights were so dark and cold;

So, whenever I dreamt, I would see Cain!

His big black foot would come

So close to my window

And I'd curl, cry and shshshiver in silence.

Come morning, I would give thanks,

Smile and dare not to dream again!

See, once in a while

I would wish I had a slice of bread,

A pair of shoes for school,

and to see my dad again...

Then I would stop

in the middle of my wish,

and remember my lesson — to be content –

And to give thanks.

By and by went the days

– and on some,

I saw my Dad,

I got some slices of bread

And wore church shoes to school.

As I left my studies behind,

I remained a student – graded and critiqued.

It's been difficult, the exams especially.

But I have attained a pass by grace

Somewhat satisfactory,

Approaching expectation, maybe...

I'm happy my daughter exceeds

My every expectation;

And the way she looks at life

With big bold eyes,

And demands for her slices of bread,

Has given rise to a fire...

I feel some warmth,

And I can now dream again!

Lucy Njenga is a Kenyan Poet, writer, and editor. She has a degree in Language and Literary Studies and has contributed to the field with many written, edited, and published works. Her main areas of interest include humanitarian issues, especially women and children in distress. She is a Pro-lifer and advocates for life from conception to natural death.

Author Foreword:

Little is a poem that expresses the manipulative, internal fear that prevents people from reaching for their dreams. Poverty has forced them to tame their aspirations and instead settle for the little gifts in their lives. Contentment and gratitude are key aspects in advancing this mentality, since yearning for more is perceived as being unappreciative. This realization is, therefore, aimed at freeing people from mediocrity and ensuring the coming generations have the courage to fight for their dreams no matter what it takes. The village girl, despite being raised under repressive conditions knows there is more to her dreams; she gives her daughter a leeway to a world of possibilities as she overcomes her own deep-seated fears.

November 13, 2022

“The Harp”

Anna Banasiak

There is a yearning in your voice;

Rashi’s commentaries are hidden

in the rustle of trees.

The stones are full of mystical light;

Music seeps in the garden of sounds;

The Psalms of David echo eternity.

In the shadows of the past,

I find the promise

of peace.

The harp drowns out

the cry of war.

Anna Banasiak is a poet, writer, and occuaptional therapist. She loves helping people through art therapy. She is the winner of poetry competitions in London, Unesco, Berlin, and Bratislava; gold and silver medalist in Kamena; gold, silver, and bronze medalist at All Poetry; is featured on Poem Hunter and Poetbay; and more...

Author Foreword:

I wrote my poem to pay tribute to A.J.Heschel-profound, a Jewish teacher, theologian and social activist who wrote "Jerusalem is a witness. An echo of eternity. Stand still and listen." (Israel: An Echo of Eternity). Rashi (Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac), reference in line 2, is one of the most influential commentators of the Talmud and Hebrew Bible in history. The Harp is a poetic

response to the search for world peace through art. Although the harp is symbolic of hope and divine worship in many cultures, the instrument is a personal symbol of peace, harmony, and beauty. As a Pole, I was raised and surrounded by Jewish culture and an appreciation for spirituality. I have yet to visit Israel, and channeled my longing to visit the city — a garden of peace for so many — as inspiration for The Harp.

November 19, 2022

“Rouzan”

Shereen Leanne

for rouzan al-najjar 1997-2018

when we heard you were shot,

wrapping bandages around generations shattered into spirits of bone,

we said your name, rouzan,

and the fricative cut echoes in the wall.

heal, sister, in the frayed history of a flag’s broken spine climbing out of the sand. the wounds on our hands opened out like ghosts caught in prayer.

we washed along the bank where

salt etches states, shrubs inch out

of a limestone occupation,

seaweed curves in qur’anic verses.

then, just before sunfall,

our grandmothers placed their palms in yours, rouzan, rouzan

and as our singing, aching blood

left patterns on the streets,

our hands released your memory

like birds with sewn-up wings.

Shereen Leanne was born and raised with the rhymes and concrete chimes of Birmingham. She is currently an unsettled guest on xwməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam) territory where she is a PhD student in English at the University of British Columbia. Both her creative and academic writing

engages with citizenship inequalities, border-crossing, and colonialism. Her poetry has been published by Wasafari

Author Foreword:

This poem is dedicated to the Palestinian paramedic Rouzan Al-Najjar. In 2018, aged 21, Rouzan was killed by IDF soldiers as she evacuated and treated wounded Palestinians attempting the Great March of Return. The poem began as my personal prayer for Rouzan as an Arab sister, but the singular voice gradually took the shape of the plural pronoun as I reflected on collective mourning and the gendered violence of settler colonialism. As detached news reports on her murder swiftly became the primary accounts of Rouzan, I saw it as a poetic duty to address her directly and to memorialise her as a healer and life-saver.

November 25, 2022

“Falling Fetters”

Geraldine Sinyuy

Nov 25

I was a child when my brother was born and an injunction was put at the crossroads leading to my family compound forbidding any of my maternal family members from visiting the baby. The injunction was placed by my father – a nobleman – in concertion with his kinsmen and people of his rank in the tribe. It was forbidden for my mother to stop on her journey, to greet any of her relatives should she meet them on the way; in the market, at the stream, at any social gathering such as a funeral, death celebration, or at the church. The injunction physically consisted of shreds of an inner raffia frond which was carefully pinned into the ground at the border of our compound. That particular injunction was called “Mbang Wan," translated to “the baby’s staff.” It was respected, obeyed, and remained there as long as declared by my father.

“A tuuiyni mbang wan. They have pinned the baby’s staff”, I heard a woman lamenting with my mother. At that moment, my mother burst into bouts of tears and screams. She fell down on the earth floor and sobbed, comforted by the messenger.

“Please don’t do this to yourself. I know how it hurts. Gather yourself and find peace,” she urged my mother who wouldn’t listen, but went on rolling from one end of the floor to another, beating her breast in deep pain and anguish.

My mother clenched her teeth in a fierce way and shook her head, brandishing one finger at an invisible person. Suddenly, she nodded her head over and over as if to say she had cracked a riddle. Some new knowledge had suddenly dawned on her. Her eyes were glistening with tear drops that could not find enough companions with whom to run down her cheeks. The sparkling tears in her eyes made me think that stars had suddenly come down from the sky and settled in them.

That was a mesmerizing moment for me, innocence mixed with childish intrigue. I never had a chance to look so close into my mother's eyes. She gazed longingly into the horizon, possibly asking her guardian angels or her ancestors to intervene. She maintained that posture for a while. I tried to follow the direction her glacier eyes were gazing into but my eyes only fell on the far away, winding, endless hills which at some point seemed to be touching the lower eves of the sky. The hills appeared very smooth with low carpet-like grass. It was a beautiful part of the world altogether and when the sun set, I loved to watch it light the tips of those beautiful hills with its spectacular golden hue. I longed to reach those hills someday; I did not know the end-of-the-world-like horizon only pointed to further horizons as one moved closer to them.

"Perhaps there live some very happy people beyond those hills," I thought.

I was pulled out of my thoughts by my mother's voice. "Why have they done this to me? Why?" my mother asked, without expecting an answer. She turned to face the woman who had broken the bad news to her. The woman clapped her hands in lamentation:

"My sister please, do not hurt yourself. You know how this tradition is. Once the men have decided on something, no woman can change it. We just have to obey. Remember how I suffered when I had my first baby and my husband's people put an injunction against my people's visit to see and greet the child. I tried to protest, but they told me that I had no say in it. I just had to accept it the way it was even though deep inside me I was in great pain. Women have no say here at all."

"How long will this last?" my mother asked the woman, hoping for an answer that would suit her wounds.

"It all depends, but the child must be at least one-year-old. Mine was one year and six months before the injunction was uplifted," the woman answered.

"Do you mean that my mother, father, siblings, and all my relatives will not see my baby until the child is at least one-year-old?"

“That’s the way it is my dear friend. As I told you, if you go against this law and anything happens to your son, you’ll have yourself to blame.” At that, my mother did not ask any further questions.

The woman changed the subject, speaking curtly, “Okay, I’ll be on my way. I have to go and harvest huckleberry from my farm near the stream. I need to cook some corn fufu and huckleberry for my husband before he returns from the men’s social group meeting... I don’t even have firewood. I will need to go and search under the eucalyptus trees for fallen branches. My husband doesn’t split firewood for me and I don’t have an ax, so the tinder will have to suffice,” The woman said, unraveling her loin cloth in order to tie it more firmly around her waist. She stepped out of my mother’s room and walked briskly away.

My mother sat on the edge of the bamboo bed supporting her head with her left hand as she often did in times of sorrow. I watched streams of silent tears running down from her eyes through her cheeks and soaking the collar of her dress. She didn’t make any efforts to wipe the tears, rather she let them flow freely until her eyes were exhausted. It was the cry of the baby, who had slept throughout this scene, that took my mother out of her trance.

As from that time, anything that came from my maternal relatives was taken and secretly kept away by my father. On one occasion, I followed him secretly and watched him hide a large bag of baby gifts which I could not make out from where I stood behind the bush and watched him dump the gifts into a large sac and hid it in a thick cluster of banana plants. I was about six then, but some innate sense told me to hide from my father’s view. These were gifts from one of my mother’s relatives attempting to break this tradition, but even with her courage, she stole her way to the compound, out of sight of the tribe people.

Many years later, my mother’s younger sister married a man in the neighboring village and this tradition repeated when she had her first son. When my mother’s first cousin, who was a Christian clergy and did not understand our customs, witnessed my aunt on the street, my aunt ran away with her baby. This first cousin hastened behind my aunt, confused why she was running away

My aunt explained in tears, “None of my family is supposed to see the baby until the baby is one-year-old. If any of you do, evil will befall me and the baby. Please go away – if my in-laws see us standing together they will punish me or send me back to my family.” Her cousin was taken aback by this revelation. She pitied my aunt and tried to make her understand that it was just a way of making her keep away from her family, but it was hard for my aunt to understand.

Little did I know, this terrible tradition would eventually land on me. When I had my first baby, my husband and I left the urban area where I work for his village. We come from the same tribe but our villages differ. Just a few days after I had the baby, my parents-in-law paid me a visit in the hospital where they named the baby. On leaving the hospital maternity room, my father-in-law ordered me to bring the baby to his home in the village, which is at least 63 kilometers away from where I live.

When we were eventually discharged from the hospital, my foster mother made arrangements for her driver to take us to the village despite my baby’s poor health and need for special medical attention. When we arrived at the village, my husband spent only two nights and then left for another African country for work. He instructed me to spend at least three weeks with his parents.

“The baby is not sucking well,” my mother-in-law complained. “You don’t eat enough. You have to eat well for the baby to have enough milk to suck.” She said and left the room. It was my first baby and I did not know what to do. Truly, my baby would not latch and cried constantly. However, I would later learn, it wasn’t because I couldn’t produce enough milk — my baby was ill and had no energy to pull the milk. My breasts became too heavy and engorged, causing my neck to ache and the nerves on my shoulders to strain. I sought the help of my mother-in-law but no help came.

“Mama, do you know what I can do for my breast milk to flow?’ I asked her hoping to get a solution but my question met a rebuff.

“I long finished breastfeeding so I don’t know anything about it,” she retorted austerely.

I didn’t say anything further. I spent sleepless nights as my sick baby cried throughout the night. My baby’s weight dropped drastically within these three weeks before we finally had to leave.

On the eve of our departure, my parents-in-law summoned me for a meeting late in the night and my father-in-law commanded me not to go back to my parents, allowing me only to go to the home where I grew up in the case of a family event. He warned my husband not to visit my home unless somebody dies;should this happen we were not supposed to share a room, talk less of a bed. I listened patiently and struggled to suppress the tears which welled up in my eyes. I never imagined marriage, which traditionally in Africa is supposed to unite two families, would bring such untold trauma to women. I never imagined sitting silently through the same humiliating, dehumanizing custom which my mum, aunt, and thousands of other women endured without a word.

I had to break the cycle.

I have not cut links with my people. My husband and I spend time with my family on our terms and I visit my foster parents during the holidays. It was there, in my loving foster parents' home, that I stayed until I had my second baby. I hope that other women will stand up against some of these psychologically traumatizing cultural practices that are impediments to human progress and wellbeing.

Geraldine Sinyuy is a budding Cameroon Anglophone writer, residing in the North West Region of Cameroon. She has a Ph.D. in Commonwealth Literature and is a scholar, teacher by profession, and an editor for WordCity Journal. She has published Music in the Woods and Other Folktales and Coedited Poetry in Times of Conflict anthology where her poems depicting the plight of the internally displaced people in her country also feature. Her work has appeared in FemAsia, Asian Women's Journal, WordCity Journal, Time of the Poet Republic, Africa Writers Caravan, Creative Girls Magazine, Fired Up Magazine, and many scholarly journals. She is currently working on her first collection of poems entitled, The Spear Grass, and on her first novel. Sinyuy is also an advocate for a safe and clean environment and she has a passion for organic gardening which she does in her spare time.

Author Forward:

My short story titled “Falling Fetters” is a personal memoir about sociocultural practices in my clan. Some of these cultural traditions neglect the well-being of the people, especially women, like those portrayed in the story. Falling Fetters is inspired by my childhood experiences in my village, where some customs and traditions strip women of their human rights. The key characters are very close relations of mine and the voice telling the story is my own. I’m inspired by human rights and possess an urge to speak out for women, advocating for an end to gender-based violence so that there can be equal rights and opportunities for all. Every cultural practice which is an impediment to human progress must be dismantled as portrayed and suggested by the title and content of my story.

December 1, 2022

“We Remember”

Debbie Cutler

This piece was written in reflection of the experiences and words of Mr. Bruce Lemmie and in acknowledgment of the souls of the Sugar Land 95.

I can only imagine
the Sugar Land 95
linked as one
in wake and sleep.
Five in a row, shackled
in the summer heat
boiling and blistering their skin;
and through the winter cold
thickening their blood.
Forced to toil
hard, incessant hours
for work, nobody else would dare.
Plantations, railways, and mines
where precious lives were cheap and disposable;
where the average lifespan…
about two years?
“More where they came from.”

I can only imagine

the sweat,

the threats,

the preset value of human life.

Prisoners day and night

some starved,

some beaten,

some shot even

for menial crimes.

I can only imagine

the helpless feeling

seeing fellow souls, one by one

bodies weakened;

fearing they would be among those

buried hastily

in wooden caskets, unmarked graves

near the soil they toiled on.

Forgotten.

We remember.

Debbie Cutler has been a writer for more than 30 years and has been published in dozens of magazines. She resides in Columbia, Missouri.

Author Foreword:

Recently I wrote a Q&A on University of Missouri History Alumni Bruce Lemmie*. While interviewing him on the events of his life, his ancestral history, and his involvement with the Buffalo Soldiers National Museum's exhibit on Black USA Soldiers through the country's history, I asked "anything else?" It was then, he told me about a project called Sugar Land 95, a memorial for Black lives lost in Sugar Land, Texas, just outside of Houston. His reflection on the latter project struck me like a punch to the gut. After the Civil War ended, the Texas correctional system allowed convict leasing of Black men and women for menial, undesirable, and often dangerous jobs. Recently, a site was discovered where 95 of those Black individuals died at the hands of the landowners as punishment for various crimes — some as menial as spitting on the sidewalk. Lemmie, now retired, is working with several groups to help build a memorial site in honor of the Sugar Land 95.

December 7, 2022

“All Out Stories Come Ashore”

Nancy Meyer

The day Zebulon crowed
from the steeple, the Gazette
reported him as Elizabeth Phelps’
African man. Not Mende or
Igbo. Not son of Arthur Prutt
of nearby Amherst.

Which African ancestors of his
survived the 80 days, their
18-inch berth?

Archives digitized, I might
trace the very ship, bill of lading,
auction tag. Who am I
to dig through these drawers?
Expose a birth name, village
raider, or telltale bead.
Do I want to know the first
price, first port, if mine
were ship-builders, bookkeepers

clerks who kept the ledgers?

Dormant in each molasses keg

and bit of crockery, iron ballast,

broken mast, or gold doubloon:

the waters brine us all.

Response to Text Fragment: Ad in Connecticut Courant, Sep. 8, 1766

Run away from the Widow Elizabeth Porter of Hadley,* a Negro Man named Zebulon Prut, about 30 years old, about five Feet high, a whitish Complexion, suppos'd to have a Squaw in Company…

I never imagined Zebulon as "whitish." Or so small. How many of us white readers made him into some movie image? A Sydney or Denzel.

I remember how my ex-husband Mel struggled being light-skinned. Shoved aside by both Black and white.

Carried away with him, a light brown Camblet Coat, lin'd and trimm'd with the same Colour—a plain Cloth Coat, with Metal Buttons, without Lining—a new redish brown plain Cloth Coat, with Plate Buttons, no Lining—a light brown Waistcoat, and a dark brown ditto, both without Sleves—a Pair of Check'd and a Pair of Tow Trowsers—a Pair of blue Yarn Stockings, and a Pair of Thread ditto—two Pair of Shoes—two Hats—an old red Duffel Great Coat—whoever will take up said Negro, and bring him to Mrs. Porter, or to Oliver Warner, of said Hadley shall have Ten Dollars Reward, and all necessary Charges paid by Oliver Warner…..

Elizabeth, you practically grew up with him. Yet, you say nothing in your Diary about him running away. Only his capture a year later: "slave owned by my father."

Like my saying nothing. When the garage attendant called Mel “boy.” Saying nothing. When he was depressed, overlooked by his white boss. Saying nothing. When, after the divorce, our 16-year-old son’s white therapist told him it was “okay to pass for white.”

*my 9th great grandmother

Nancy L. Meyer (she/her) is a 2020 Pushcart nominee, avid cyclist, and grandmother of five from San Francisco. Meyer is published in many journals including Gyroscope, Laurel Review, Colorado Review, Tupelo Quarterly, and Sugar House Review; soon to be published in Outcast, Kind of a Hurricane Press; and additionally in 8 anthologies, including by Tupelo Press, Ageless Authors and Wising Up Press.

Author Foreword:
All Our Stories Come Ashore is an excerpt from a manuscript I’ve been writing for almost four years after discovering that my colonial New England ancestors were enslavers. This information not only reframed my sense of responsibility in the present, but also surfaced reflections on my marriage 40 years ago to a man of African-Jamaican origin. I imagined the Atlantic ocean disgorging our inter-connected stories from West Africa, to Jamaica, to Boston.

December 13, 2022

“In Exile”

Toby Ameson

I could go home.

I could return;

to the place where I was made,

to the place where I was made pleasing,

crushed into the shape of someone else’s design;

wings clipped, then bones hammered

so that I could keep my feet on the ground.

I could go home and be in exile from my truth,

from my spirit,

from myself,

from who I am meant to be in this life.

But I would be “home.”

Sometimes, I think about the life I could have there.

A half-life of cushion and buffer,

of rules and restrictions,

of safety from the cavernous jaws of capitalism.

A half-life of secrets and lies,

of rejection and ridicule and never being enough,

of bare survival and calculated betrayal.

A half-life

without meaning or connection.

No.

I can never go home.

Instead, I have chosen:

a life of poverty and pain,

a life of terror and struggle,

a life of freedom and truth,

a life of creative self-expression,

a life of passion and purpose and meaning,

a chosen family of people

who live in exile — together.

They too can't go back

to the home where they were made

and crushed,

and left to die.

It is worth it,

to live in poverty and pain,

the terror and the struggle

of living alone and unsupported.

Because we live.

We are a people in exile;
a nomadic clan roaming the digital wastelands
who have come together
as survivors,
as healers,
as people who know ourselves,
who fight
to protect the wings of the next generation.
Our community was born of trauma,
of broken wings and severed ties,
of judgment, punishment, and exile.
But it ends here, with us.

Together.

Toby Ameson (they/them) is a disabled, non-binary transgender American poet and fiction writer. They have a degree in English from the University of California at Irvine. They're very passionate about discussing marginalization in ways that bridge gaps with respect, compassion, and understanding. Their work has appeared on the back covers of graphic novels and in the Young Poets of America anthology.

Author Foreword:

"In Exile" is a piece about my experiences as a transgender person. I've chosen "exile" from the relative safety and protection of societal support in order to reclaim my truth, protect my life, and heal my spirit from the harm of being crushed into the dishonest and damaging role society would force me to play. But, I'm not alone in this exile. I found LGBTQ+ and disabled people online and in-person who have become my chosen family, and I have in turn become a mentor and teacher. Our community faces life-threatening oppression from being denied housing, jobs, and medical care, as well as from threats, abuse, violence, and murder, simply for existing out loud. But, we are a beautiful, natural, and valuable part of human diversity. As a community, we protect and support one another, we help each other heal, and we teach others how to stop perpetuating harm. We shed light on the underlying societal problems that create fear-based prejudices (like institutionalized racism, sexism, ableism, wealth inequality, etc.), and help shift our culture toward becoming something that values and protects all of its people.

December 19, 2022

“She Ran”

Susan K. Wenzel

About Rosalie Fish (With Permission)

She ran like the wind;

the breath of her ancestors.

She ran for her ancestors;

the map of her life.

She ran for her life;

almost ended from pain.

She ran through the pain;

of scorn for her heritage.

She ran for her heritage;

the source of her passion.

She ran for her passion;

the color of red.

She ran blazing red;

the blood of her sisters

She ran.

Career Navy veteran, mother of two daughters, and wife – has a diverse writing career that spans more than three decades. She knows, however, that not every living, breathing organism has the privilege of having their words heard. Her goal, as a writer, is to amplify the stories of the unheard and unknown – people, flora, fauna, food systems – above the noise of mass media. She is currently enrolled in the Creative and Professional Writing MA program at Central Washington University with an anticipated graduation date of Spring, 2023.

Author Foreword:

In 2018, I watched an unbelievably impressive distance runner named Rosalie Fish compete at the Washington Interscholastic Activities Association (WIAA) State Track meet and felt compelled to see how she fared at the 2019 meet. She not only won her races triumphantly, but competed with a red handprint on her face. I was devastated to learn the blood red handprint is a representation of the thousands of North American Indigenous women and girls who have been silenced by violence, most of which is unreported, undocumented, and even unnoticed. Enlightenment from Rosalie – collegiate runner, Cowlitz and Mukleshoot tribal member, and accidental human rights activist – led me to Annita Lucchesi – founder and current executive director of Sovereign Bodies Institute, the first all-inclusive national database to document Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). There I began my education about this egregious human rights crisis and knew I couldn't stay silent about what I learned.

December 25, 2022

“Rose”

Gezani Abel Maluleke

When I cast my eyes along the horizon
I see the sun peaking from the East,
as an eye envying the beautiful flower.
It sings of freedom and beauty,
drawing countries from abroad.
It is the beautiful flower
rooted in diamond and gold.
Shining like an evening star.
It falls rain of pearls from heaven;
gems scattered around its floor,
as heirlooms from our ancestors.
We are the pioneers of profound diversity;
beautiful lass among the many.

South Africa is our land;
she has wooed and seduced us
long before the white domination.
As a gorgeous girl;
whose tongue knows a dozen languages.
She mesmerizes foreigners;

her allure flows in blood of Black bodies.

She exhales the salty ocean breeze.

She instigates freedom from Robin Island.

Freedom managed to sneak in

through the back door

to destroy apartheid fever.

Maluleke Gezani Abel is from Mavambe village around Limpopo province of South Africa with his wife and two children. He is a teacher by profession, working in the Mavambe Secure Care Centre juvenile prison. He has earned a Degree in Electrical Engineering, Postgraduate Certificate in Mathematics Education.

Author Foreword:

The Rose showcases the unique beauty of South Africa, loved by its people. South Africa is privileged for its mineral resources which draw many to its shores. It is a peaceful country that embraced foreigners wholeheartedly. All foreigners are tended in loving care like locals. South Africa is a beautiful country; I encourage all to visit and experience it within their lifetime.

December 31, 2022

“Glass Ceilings”

Goodwell Kaipa

Sometimes I find her sitting outside at night

Gazing at the stars or otherwise still sky.

When she is in this stupor

She never winks, blinks, never looks at you.

Doctors say there is nothing to do

That the blankness on her physiognomy

Will always be there

Neither their words or her gaze, faze me

Sometimes she talks in her sleep.

Sometimes her face lights up with eerie glee.

Often people come just to look at her —

Not to give us a word of hope

But to amuse themselves —

Likening her to an imbecile.

Their words don’t daze me

My sister as the sanest person I know.

She loves talking to me

When sometimes the wind changes course,

She says she wants to get married,

To have a family and lead a normal life.

I wonder which man will truly love my sister

Who will view her differences as a lovely quirk?

She lives in a society that pretends to be flawless

When barricades are built against those different.

Goodwell Kaipa is a 27 year old nurse midwife graduate. He was diagnosed with schizophrenia in his first year of college in 2015. He wrote this poem after noticing the stigma surrounding mental illnesses.