

Disinformation and the perils of telling the truth

by Rita Payne

As George Orwell wrote: “If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.” Unfortunately, this maxim that does not appear to resonate with many people today. There is an antipathy towards hearing an opposing point of view. As the world struggles to adjust to the anxiety and confusion unleashed by the climate crisis and Covid-19 pandemic, people are finding it harder to trust sources of news and information. Social media outlets not only reinforce their point of view, but have also been accused of promoting extreme positions. This has led to physical attacks and the deaths of two British members of Parliament.

Impact of social media

Manipulated photos and video clips go viral in an instant on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. It is a sad irony that while we are bombarded with information, we cannot be sure that what we see, hear or read is true.



A Facebook whistle-blower, Frances Haugen, told the Online Safety Bill committee in London that Facebook is ‘unquestionably making hate worse.’ Clearly stung by the accusations about its role in spreading disinformation and hate, Facebook’s founder Mark Zuckerberg laid out his vision to transform Facebook from a social media network into a “metaverse company” in the next five years, though critics have argued that this is an attempt to divert attention from the issues.

The role of the state

According to a BBC study, gendered disinformation attacks online, which have been used by countries such as Russia, Hungary and Brazil to undermine their opponents, are gaining ground in the West. According to researchers, recent elections in Germany - and specifically

Boost for South Asian Diaspora writers As Confluence to be Archived

We are delighted to share with our readers the news that South Asian Diaspora Arts Archive (SADAA) has asked to archive all the past volumes of *Confluence*, particularly those highlighting work by, and contributions from, the first generation of South Asian born artists and practitioners creating work in the UK.

SADAA has received National Heritage Lottery Fund funding for its 'Reunited Project' which includes the conservation and protection of the Confluence archive as a publication unique in its coverage of, and value to, the UK's South Asian Diaspora. This means they will collect, collate, catalogue and digitise the Confluence archive. They will also store in accessible, regulated, museum conditions for perpetuity, all copies of Confluence that we release to them. **(Cont. on p 3)**

attacks against Greens candidate Annalena Baerbock - gave ample evidence of the tactics being employed.

A report by the International Press Institute (IPI) notes that democracies and dictatorships are trying to exploit the situation to implement measures that pose a threat to media freedom. While the global picture is fast moving and complex, and it remains too early to understand large-scale ramifications, the IPI has observed that a number of trends are beginning to emerge. These range from straightforward censorship and suppression being conducted by traditionally authoritarian governments such as China and Iran, to ruthlessly control the public narrative, to broader emergency measures rushed through democratic parliaments without review that go far beyond the powers necessary for the pandemic.

Climate change

The BBC World Service has launched a weekly series looking at climate change disinformation around the globe and the first episode explores some of the tactics employed by groups who have moved from less obvious forms of denial towards delay, division, and deflection.

Several US states are accusing top oil companies of ‘greenwashing’ and BP, Shell, Exxon Mobil and Chevron appeared before US Congress to face allegations that they misled the public for decades about climate change. Twitter has announced plans to introduce a programme that aims to ‘pre-bunk’ climate misinformation by getting ahead of false narratives about climate change and exposing users to more accurate information on its platform. **(Continues on P3)**

Editorially speaking

Dear readers,

Even though it comes later than expected, this is truly a feature packed issue coming with rather greater number of articles, poems, stories and reviews and I am sure our readers will take time to read all of them and give their feedback to us.

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Once again, I would like to mention here about the number of submissions arriving late and our difficulties in screening and editing them and to publish the magazine on time. Since our resources are very limited, we would urge our contributors to send their submissions on time.

Please write us back as we always welcome your valuable feedback. We wish all a happy holiday season and a New Year that brings lasting health and peace of mind.

Vijay Anand

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	Title	Author
1	Disinformation and the perils of telling the truth	Rita Payne
2	Editorially speaking	Vijay Anand
3	<i>Boost for South Asian Diaspora writers</i>	Vijay Anand
4	Meditative Dialogues	Basudhara Roy
5	Two Poems	Deepa Agarwal
6	Travels with Tina	Anjana Sen
7	Holika, Sita, Sati	Anita Nahal
	I Spy Thee, My Lord!	Meenakumari Venkateswaran
	Cliches Collide	Anjana Sen
8	Review of The Rebirth of the Demon	Mary Ann Sestili
9	The Rage of the Sky	Meenakshi Mohan
10	Through the poetic lens	Yogesh Patel
11	Delights of Mauritius	Sonali Appanah
12	Man from Lahore	Cyril Dabyden
13	India's Early History	Prosenjit Dasgupta
14	Review of Basudhara Roy's Stitching a Home	Anita Nahal
15	Review of Forgotten Kaleidoscope	Nabanita Sengupta
16	Review of Mohona Kanjilal's A Taste of Time	Anjana Basu
17	MEMORIES OF A CHILDHOOD - poem	Devi Rajab
18	Review of The Blind Matriarch	Lakshmi Kannan
19	The Flute Player - Short fiction	Subhash Chandra
20	Bashabi Fraser's Patient Dignity – An Appreciation	by Debjani Chatterjee
21	SOUTH AFRICAN NEWSLETTER, Suicide	Devi Rajab
22	Brijraj Singh's A Memoir of Four Years in Shillong	Excerpt
23	Flash fiction- Androids	Sunil Sharma
24	Fiction - A flash of lightening	Anjana Sen

Continues from P1

Covid-19 pandemic

BBC research traces the pattern of disinformation on the Covid-19 pandemic. In the case of Italy, for example, disinformation collides with climate conspiracy theories. Anti-lockdown groups in Italy spreading Covid-19 misinformation are now adopting climate conspiracies - primarily suggesting that the climate crisis will be another tool for imposing control and lockdowns.

This is a matter of great concern because with Covid-19 what has started as a global health crisis could – with the mounting death toll, widespread job losses and the prospect of economic turmoil – become a period of severe social unrest. Independent journalism is essential to finding an end to the pandemic and mitigating the consequences of the spread of Covid-19.

Other issues involve the licensing and testing of extensive surveillance of citizens with huge implications for privacy, personal data and the free conduct of journalism, and the rush to criminalise “disinformation”, setting in place powers to suppress uncomfortable information on the pandemic and silence critical media – powers that could last beyond the immediate crisis.

The BBC has been central in fighting the ‘infodemic’ caused by Covid-19 myths and rumours ranging from 5G mast causation to the protective properties of garlic and drinkable silver. It is also working in partnership with other content publishers and platforms to tackle the problem and promote trusted sources of news and public information as part of The Trusted News Initiative. This established to protect audiences and users from disinformation, particularly around elections. It has now been extended to identify false and potentially harmful Covid-19 disinformation by putting in place a shared alert system for promptly reviewing content by platforms.

The need for trust

It is hard to think of a time when there was not a greater need in the world for trust in the media. Less than twenty years ago there was a relatively limited range of news sources: traditional print media, tv and radio and online news. Gradually, with the proliferation of social media and other digital outlets we are now overwhelmed with information with little time to process it.

Telling the truth comes at a cost. To mark the United Nations International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists on 2 November 2021, the Press Emblem Campaign (PEC) issued a demand to governments to bring those who threaten journalists to justice. According to PEC figures, at least 66 journalists have been killed so far this year, yet nobody has been held to account in 81% of journalist murders during the last 10 years according to CPJ’s 2021 Global Impunity Index.

The pandemic has provided governments with a new excuse to wield laws criminalizing the spread of “fake news,” “misinformation,” or “false information” — and offered a reason to implement new ones. Over the past seven years, the number of journalists imprisoned on charges of “fake news” or “false news” has climbed according to research by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).

If we have learned anything as we face the threats from climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic, it is that we all have a role to play in being vigilant about false information and check that we get our news from trusted sources.



Rita Payne
President Emeritus, Commonwealth Journalists Association

Boost for South Asian Diaspora writers(from P1)

This is what SADAA’s Chair, Sri Lankan born Shyama Perera had to say.

“I remember meeting your fabulous father, Joe Nathan, when he was first publishing Confluence. I had no idea what a massive task he had undertaken, and how difficult it must have been for him to finance and produce so many editions. Not only that, he drew in the finest writers, polemicists, and critics to assess the South Asian experience both on the sub-continent and in our new homes in the UK.

It was only after he died, and the struggle to maintain his legacy became apparent, that I understood his importance within the diaspora communities. It has been my intention ever since, to preserve that legacy - particularly the pages on arts and culture which often featured, or included contributions from, the first generation of artists and practitioners creating work in the UK.

We will digitise all pertinent content as part of the Reunited Project which is solely concentrated on the arts. This will be done in the next few months. Across time we will digitise all Confluence content so it is available worldwide at the press of a button. In the interim those hard copies which we have, will be held in museum conditions at SADAA’s archive at Birmingham Museum and Gallery. They will be physically accessible to researchers and practitioners.

SADAA’s mission is to collect and conserve the work of all professional, practising, artists who form the first wave of the South Asian diaspora - from India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, and from Bangladesh 1971-1977. We only collect work created by first generation specialists who arrived in the UK before 1977. After that the architecture of the artistic landscape started to change and second generation writers, artists, and performers became a genre of/contributors to, the mainstream oeuvre.”

Founding and running a magazine is not an easy task even for an experienced publisher, especially a literary magazine like Confluence, without long term financial backing and a dedicated team of editors. Confluence was founded in September 2002 by my late father Joe Nathan. When it was founded, he did not have any essential editorial tools, so it was published with the help of some hired page designers and at a shoestring budget only. At that time the Editor Joe Nathan did not know many diaspora writers of South Asian origin, living in the UK, who would be willing to contribute to the magazine regularly. The only tools he had were his pure enthusiasm for journalism and ability to communicate and connect to a diverse group of writers from many different countries and regions of the world.

In his maiden editorial he said *“The launch of a new journal is often accompanied with mixed feelings; of some trepidation, indeed of conjecture. And titled Confluence, suggesting a meeting point or flowing together, in the context of increasing world turbulence, must sound pretty naïve and lead to quite a few raised eyebrows. But that is the challenge Confluence is seeking to meet.”*

He added, “Confluence is about all these sorts of issues – the mapping and monitoring of the unfolding social scenario that is today’s multi ethnic Britain. The sorts of issues that need to be looked at objectively, sympathetically and vision; of the need to promote and sustain a healthy integration that recognises a rich cultural diversity – a diversity that adds to a Britishness that is capacious enough for all who wish to live within it peacefully in an atmosphere of mutual, not mere tolerance, but acceptance.”

I remember him visiting the Indian High Commission’s cultural arm Nehru centre in Mayfair and Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in South Kensington and Watermans Art Centre, Westminster Parliament and House of Lords where he met many writers artists, scholars, politicians and others to bring them all under Confluence banner. He tirelessly worked hard to bring this magazine some recognition in the already overcrowded market of publishing. Unfortunately, his journey came to a sudden halt in 2014 May after 12 years of continued publication of Confluence.

The people who contributed articles, poems, stories, interviews and more were all high calibre writers who have been the pillars of this magazine during its growth and this is an important milestone for all of them. Today after about 20 consecutive years of publishing, we have won the recognition of the British Museum and I am delighted to say that we have now secured a small space in the history of Britain through this collaboration with SADAA.

Meditative Dialogues: A Review of Gopal Lahiri's *Alleys are Filled with Future Alphabets: Selected Poems*

by Basudhara Roy

In his lecture 'A Poet's Creed' for *The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures* (1967-68), Jorge Luis Borges states:

I have come to the conclusion (and this conclusion may sound sad) that I no longer believe in expression: I believe only in allusion. After all, what are words? Words are symbols for shared memories. If I use a word, then you should have some experience of what the word stands for. If not, the word means nothing to you. I think we can only allude, we can only try to make the reader imagine. The reader, if he is quick enough, can be satisfied with our merely hinting at something.

At a substantially deep level, Borges' assertion holds true, for memorable poetry seldom leaves us with a graspable meaning that we can hold on to. Poetry's truth is never in the concrete but in what the reader makes of its conscious, orchestrated semantic arrangements. Incantative in spirit, a poem's meaning is incapable of sustaining itself outside its particular linguistic universe. To evoke its meaning each time, the poem as a whole must be conjured and re-conjured. In this repeated calling forth lies, also, the test of good poetry. Hence, Matthew Arnold's *Touchstone Method*, despite its obvious shortcomings, relied on drawing a yardstick for the evaluation of worthy poetry through the constant and conscious recalling of lines from poems that were indisputably classical. The idea dominating this approach was, obviously, the inseparability in enduring poetry, of expression and meaning, or the integrity of what Borges might call expression as allusion.

This quality of expression as allusion looms large over the universe of Gopal Lahiri's latest collection of poems *Alleys are Filled with Future Alphabets: Selected Poems* and is powerfully asserted by its cover-painting 'Uncanny' by poet-academic Jharna Sanyal. The 102 poems in this collection chart diverse and highly idiosyncratic thematic journeys. Divided into seven sections, the telling sub-titles - 'Voyages In', 'Voyages Out', 'Cityscape Silhouettes', 'Macrocosm', 'Haiku Series and Micro Poems', 'Travel Diaries' and 'Pandemic and Resilience' - offer cues for navigating through this densely meditative volume. In his critical essay 'Postface' that concludes the collection, John Thieme remarks:

The poems often deal with transient phenomena – moments in the day; the flight of birds; the minutiae of landscapes and cityscapes – and sharply realized observation lies at their core, but observation is never an end in itself [...] and the imagistic underpinning of Gopal Lahiri's verse consistently questions the possibilities of extracting meaning from both the ephemeral present and the partially remembered past.

However, though these poems deal primarily with the concrete and visible, their method of operation is highly imagist and abstract. Lahiri's strength lies in relentless linguistic exploration and in the frequent clinching of ideas through an incisive turn of phrase. In 'Connection', "The real showstopper is now the drunken breeze", in 'Silvery Lies', "The moonbeams knife through the wall papers" and in 'Right Moment', "An empty night has never/lived up to its expectations".

Deep introspection is a defining characteristic of Lahiri's oeuvre. His poetic practice bespeaks an intrinsic dissatisfaction with appearance, evidence and geometry. What intrigues him is the ungraspable, self-militating and unnegotiable essence of things. There is a rampant desire in his poems to unpack the familiar patterns of the world through conscious linguistic reconstructions that border, sharply, on the metaphorical. The canvas of his poetry is the world around him but the focus is relentlessly on the reflection of this world in his own subjectivity. Thus, Lahiri's poems, though they engage in sustained dialogues with the world, are not realist in the conventional sense of the word. In 'City of Joy', for instance, "The trees turn into a series of promises/ syncopated words and sentences/ sublimates into the secret diaries,/ the hustle of the avenues/ swaddle in our lengthy playlist." Here, the trees are both as real and unreal and as denotative and connotative as semantics. In "dialogues are now in/ long queues" from 'Exposure', the idea engenders a stirring ambivalence. Are the dialogues long or is it the very act of engagement in dialogue that is queued up or are both meanings employed in conjoinment?

In her 'Preamble' to the collection, Sharmila Ray remarks:

Reality for Lahiri is sacred in itself not a springboard to reportage or an obstacle. The physical is the spiritual in the sense it voices human heart beats, dilation, respiration which are all part of the cosmos. The capacity to expand a fleeting experience into dense and complex, satisfying both instinct and intellect, is an art the poet is very much at home with.

The real and the metaphorical, as Ray rightly observes, constitute the warp and woof of Lahiri's poetic fabric. His meditations are contingent and etched upon a finite moment suspended in time. Temporal consciousness acutely marks these poems, both in the observations of the world and the self. Both despair and hope are temporally framed and hence, a perpetual site of becoming.

Immensely significant to an understanding of the collection is its visual title *Alleys are Filled with Future Alphabets*. Here is a consciousness of marginality and possibility, of darkness and hope. The pointed semantic choice of the graphic word 'alphabets' also speaks for the volume's strong metaliterary faith in poetry as pathway and destination. Whatever the moment might bring, the map of poetry is potent enough to lead the poet and reader beyond prevarication and into wisdom. Meditative, self-reflexive, exploratory and characterized by an intense linguistic searching, these are poems that will lead readers to think anew about their everyday world and the ways in which they inhabit it.



Basudhara Roy is a faculty at the Department of English, Karim City College affiliated to Kolhan University, Chaibasa. She is the author of two books, a monograph, *Migrations of Hope: A Study of the Short Fiction of Three Indian American Writers* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2019) and two collection of poems, *Moon in my Teacup* (Kolkata: Writer's Workshop, 2019) and *Stitching a Home* (New Delhi: Red River, 2021)

Two Poems

by Deepa Agarwal

A Smile for the Road

*She puts her best foot forward
to begin the journey of a thousand miles
arms herself with a smile,
this migrant worker heading home.*

*The sindoor flames in her hair
her bindi is placed just right
her sari blooms like a rainbow
as the avid cameras grab her desperate flight.*

*Will the smile endure the test?
my logical mind asks
will it stay the pitiless course?
What of the road that snakes on endlessly?
Won't weariness cancel it out?
Will that armour slip off her face,
abandon her on the predatory path?*

*What if it does?
It's engraved in my heart,
the smile of this gutsy woman,
embarked on an impossible journey home
her sindoor flaming like a beacon of hope
her sari a rainbow of faith
and her bindi placed just right.*

Deepa Agarwal has over fifty books published in the genres of fiction, poetry and translation. The Begum: A Portrait of Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan, Pakistan's Pioneering First Lady, is one of her latest titles.

That Invisible Space

*The space between silence and a scream
How do you negotiate that with such skill?
The space between the practised mechanical smile
and the well tutored tears that have learned
that their place
is not below your trembling eyelids
but a hidden region in your heart*

*A space so lost
within the maze of compromises and negotiations
that you have forgotten the way to get there
only, the elusive ache remains,
that will o' the wisp of hurt
always fluttering in the night mist*

*Should one name pain?
or let it stay unidentified?
is the invisible torment easier to forget
than the perceptible bruise?
yet it weighs as heavily on the heart.*

*Because two hands clasped in love
two lips pressed close
are both traitors.
The only question that remains is
which is the more heinous crime
The perpetrator's or the victim's?
The victim who remains silent in that invisible space.*



Travelogue

Travels with Tina

By Anjana Sen

'I have a confession, Bapi,' I said softly. 'Remember that scratch on Tina in '86? That was me, and I'm so sorry for having denied it all along.'

The monitors continued to beep rhythmically and there was no visible response from the man attached to them. This was on the 8th of November 2019. I had just flown thousands of miles from Glasgow to Calcutta and come straight to him in the ICU. The doctors and nurses, expecting me, had kindly drawn the curtains around the bed.

He slipped away the next day. I will never know for certain if he heard me that night, or indeed, was aware of me. But selfishly, it lightened my heart to have 'come clean' finally.

Tina was the fourth woman in his life, and the three of us were quite jealous of her from time to time. She was a blue Ambassador, TNS 1921, ergo Tina. Today, we would say teal, but those were simpler times, when blue was just blue.

She came into our lives in 1976, when I was eleven years old. Our first car. Oh, the excitement! The remembered joy which fills my heart even as I type this. My father smiling from earlobe to earlobe, Ma almost skipping with joy. My sister and I fighting for who gets to sit in the front. In the end, all four of us sat in the front, for that first drive around the cantonment. No seat belts were required back then, and the car seats were like sofas. News spread. Colonel Gupta has a car! Folk streamed into the house to congratulate and exclaim, and we had to serve endless glasses of lemon squash.

My parents loved travelling, and we went on mini (and maxi), breaks every chance we got. Fair to say, we covered a lot of kilometres, exploring areas around where we lived.

Looking back, they make up the happiest memories for me, but back then it was not always pleasant. My sister and I suffered greatly from motion sickness, especially on mountain journeys. Most of our childhood was spent in the hills of the Nilgiris in south India or the Himalayan towns of the north or the northeast. By

modern parenting standards my parents would have failed disastrously, they never paid a great deal of attention to our nausea, convinced the adventures were good for us. So, we would loll about miserably at the back, while the two of them would giggle and sing and 'explore'. Every now and then we had to stop, while one of us stumbled out, threw up, got wiped down with a wet hanky and Old Spice, and off we would go again.

On longer journeys, the dogs came along. Normal families had one or two four-legged siblings, we had four! Lhasa Apsos, they were. Mishty always sat in the front, she was Ma's favourite. Bundle and Poochie shared the back seat with us, whilst Chhotu, my father's boy, sat on the ledge behind us.

When we stopped, at random beauty spots, we walked the dogs, while my mother headed for Tina's Dicky. This will make you chuckle. Here in the UK, it is the car boot, in the US, it's the trunk... but in India, it is a Dicky! Tina's dicky was this cavernous Aladdin's treasure trove. It contained everything from rations to a small kerosene stove. Ma would then proceed to cook, fresh water from running streams, fresh fish bought off local fishermen.

Our suitcases were secured firmly overhead, with ropes I had become adept at helping our father with. 'The Navy Knot not as great as Infantry Intelligence,' we would chant together.

There was the time we got lost in a cashew forest in Kerala. Before Google maps and Satnavs or mobile phones. We were told that we would sleep in the car till daybreak. Ma had added (albeit in a small voice) that the dogs would protect us. Thankfully, it had not come to that, we met some local farmers who guided us out onto the main road.

Such was life with Tina.

My highlight in that car was the night our parents returned from a party. It would have been close to midnight, it was a full-moon night, they were in high spirits (neither of them drank alcohol, they were just always annoyingly merry), and decided

they wanted to take the girls for a moon-lit drive. I was then in my final year at school, studying hard for exams, and also had to be at the stables by 6am. So, I was certainly not amused when Ma woke us up and insisted on this drive. Much grumbling, shawls over pyjamas, and off we went. My memory does not provide perfection purer than that. Two grumpy and sleepy teenagers soon turned into mini versions of the accompanying adults and sang along almost as noisily. That was the night, he let me have a go at the steering. Sitting next to him, manoeuvring the car, on empty windy mountain roads, it was magic.

Alas, I wasn't allowed to further my driving lessons with Tina. It was after I had acquired my licence (on one-ton military truck), that I got to drive her. The gears were attached to the steering wheel, which was different from what I had learnt, and I am sure everyone held their breath for the entirety of that journey.

Later of course, every time I went home from university, I acted as though Tina were mine, even stopped asking for permission. Till that day, just before my wedding, when I had a little altercation with a passing cab, in crowded Calcutta.

Everyone knew it had been me, but contrary to my nature, I denied it. I will never know why. And never drove her again. This must have caused such disappointment to my father, not just that I had lied, but the fact that I never 'owned up' to it.

Till the day before he died.

My husband and I have owned a few cars, but I remember no other number than our beloved TNS1921!



Anjana Sen spent her childhood years, all over India, and later travelled the world before 'settling' in Scotland (Glasgow) in 2000. She has been writing in earnest over the last three years. She is a member of the Scottish Association of Writers, and also the Secretary for Eastwood Writers.

Poetry

Holika, Sita, Sati

by Anita Nahal

Holika

Fires here, fires there, fires, fires everywhere. Each day, every year, each moment in our minds and hearts too. Fires titanic high and blaring through the comps sounding more ferocious in the pit. Fires on their own mission. Own timeline. To suit some. Some those who walk the halls of respect yet secretly plunder the Earth with fires that fulminate and gash the rainforests. Or any forests. Or street blocks. Or loaded on missiles. On guns and knives, appropriating inhalations, generating infernos. On outcomes twisted, screwed, coiled like thin plastic pipes to suit some. Some those who call for charring their own kith and kin. So, Holika burned when she listened to the folly of a man. Why is evil always shown burning, not reforming?

Sita

A God-King's mind disintegrates like contaminated floor joints condemned after a home fire. He bides his queen, Sita to walk through fire. Prove her purity, her chastity so his subjects would him respect. False respect like false teeth don't stick for long. And like a glorious dove of honor, Sita emerged from the flames walking straight and poised. No blood shed. No clotting either. No bones powdered into dust. Her sari and face as unruffled as before she entered the fire, willingly, a complacent wife or tending to her own dignity. But her heart was torn to pieces as she feels herself unshielded, exposed. So, marital trust incinerated when a man did not use his sense. Why does a woman only have to walk through fire to prove anything?

Sati

And then the pleading yelps of a woman sacrificed for property or other greed comes from the hollow pit of a blazing wooden mound. Bodies thronged from villages afar to see such a spectacle as if it were a beast effigy shuddering in the flames. They said, a woman must remain unsullied. Let her die with her dead husband. So, an edifice of an immoral shrine came to be. Why does a wife have to sacrifice her life when her husband dies? Fire, fire you test em all. Some you test more, and some small. Women are hoodwinked, coerced, and drugged to sit on you. Why doesn't it rain when you are on you?

**Holika; Sister of the demon king, Hiranyakashipu *Sita: Ram's queen in the Hindu epic Ramayana who is abducted by the demon king Ravana *Sati: A past practice in some parts of Bengal and Rajasthan in India where a wife was supposed to kill herself by self-immolating on her husband's pyre
This poem also appeared in the author's third book of poetry, What's wrong with us Kali women? (Kelsay Books, August 2021)*

Anita Nahal is an Indian American poet, flash fictionist, children's writer, columnist, and professor. She teaches at the university of the District of Columbia, Washington DC. More on her at: <https://anitanahal.wixsite.com/anitanahal>

Poetry

I Spy Thee, My Lord!

by Meenakumari Venkateswaran

The early morning mist,
The smell of damp earth,
Green lawns sun kissed:
I spy Thee, my Lord!

A baby's innocent chuckle
The bird's melodious coo
A loving puppy cuddle:
I spy Thee, my Lord!

The growl of threatening storms,
Vicious lightning missiles
Prickly hedges, sharp thorns
I spy Thee, my Lord!

Disease, Death, Isolation
Weddings, Birth, Celebration
In sorrow and joy, Your Perfection:
I spy Thee, My Lord!!!



Meenakumari Venkateswaran is a Chartered Accountant by profession. An accomplished Bharathanatyam dancer in her youth, she now enjoys reading, reflecting, and writing, in addition to undertaking voluntary work. She currently lives with her husband in Dubai and travels often to the UK to visit her children.

Poetry

Cliches Collide

by Anjana Sen

*To still and calm this mind of mine,
to write a verse on profound matter.
I strain to train this brain to shine,
hush the patter of mindless chatter.
Thought to thought, the monkey-mind jumps,
caged in a prison with finite words.
Where cliches collide, where the congruous died,
and the alphabet floats up like a million birds.
I want to write jolly thoughts again.
witty, pithy, light, and bright.
I want us to forget this doom and pain,
write new verse, without fear or fight.
About the
Sun shining,
Lovers pining,
Puppies whining,
Families dining,
Stars aligning.
But,
The stars, they need to re-align first,
to re-set our world, to discard the mask.
This new normal may work for you,
but bring back old normal, is all I ask!*

Book Review

Meenakshi Mohan's *The Rebirth of the Demon*

Reviewed by Mary Ann Sestili

Dr. Meenakshi Mohan, a recognized author, educator and poet, has graced us with her genius with words, images and similes that are showcased in her new book *The Rebirth of the Demon* (Third Eye Butterfly Press, 2021). This book is an extension of Dr. Mohan's talent as an academician, artist and teller of tales for children. She has authored two children's picture books, *The Rainbow in My Room* and *The Gift*, coedited an *Anthology of Poems for Children* and exhibited her paintings, most of which are in private collections.

Although *The Rebirth of the Demon* can be read in one sitting and the *Foreword* advises that it is a children's book, do not underestimate the value of this gem of a book as it addresses the topic of COVID – which has become a world health crisis. It is noteworthy that Dr. Mohan has dedicated her *Demon* book "To all those people and organizations who dedicate themselves in eradicating the most dreaded of infections in this century."

One might be tempted to stop reading this review and put it aside because COVID has become part of our vernacular and our everyday lives. We have all been guilty of comments, "Because of COVID, we frequently hear comments such as: I am depressed. I haven't been able to attend my house of worship, work, grocery store; kids can't go to school; I can't visit my parents, grandparents, grands; we can't go to a restaurant, the movies, etc. It has significantly impacted my life." We have read too much about COVID; talked about it too much; thought about it too much; have had our lives turned upside down. It is to be expected when we say, "I'm done with it!" Agreed.

A family member asked me, "Why doesn't someone write about this disease in a straightforward way so that everyone can understand it? Why can't it be presented in a way that the reader can be drawn in so they can engage?"

Someone has. Dr. Mohan, has written an incredibly clever, and creative book where she, using techniques of *anthropomorphism* and imaginative *story-telling* takes us on a journey where we are not only introduced to the little gremlin, COVID, who "From the time he was born wanted to be all-powerful and rule the world," but also to the Indian mythological demon *Raktabeej* and the *Goddess Kali* who play major roles in COVID's story from the time he was ridiculed by his other *demon friends* – cholera, malaria, and tuberculosis – to when he transforms to become the strongest demon the world has ever seen. The inclusion of imaginative illustrations by award-winning artist, Diane Simmons, contribute to the book's ingenious story.

I cannot divulge the path that the gremlin COVID follows to achieve his goal as it would be a spoiler to the story, but what I can say is that Dr. Mohan introduces her readers to villains and scoundrels and their imaginative tactics especially of the *Old Demon* who serves as COVID's mentor, guide, and supporter and who as the main villain encourages and fosters the little gremlin's idea to THINK BIG. What I can say is that the book introduces the reader to the *Old Demon's* imaginative rituals required of COVID when he is

told "you have to put a lot of effort into keeping these rituals" and introduces him to *Raktabeej* "...one of the most terrorizing demons that world has seen." We watch as the gremlin continues to create himself through his fierce Avatars and while following the *Old Demon's* admonitions and rites and *Raktabeej's* interventions, COVID does achieve his goal and becomes COVID-19 where, as of this writing, more than 5 million people worldwide and more than 700,000 in the United States have died because of this virus.



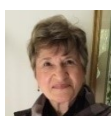
As with any great fable, good and evil dual in their pursuit of power. Which one will prevail? Knowing this, the reader looks forward to the struggle. Considering that we now know how in the real world COVID-19 is managed and being controlled, we wonder how the author will continue to lead us on our myth-journey.

Goddess Kali is watching! Without much fanfare, she and the other *Devatas* are planning, strategizing, designing ways - especially eliciting the help of earth Avatars - to control and contain COVID-19's devastation. She assembles a diverse and worldwide army of bespectacled World Leaders, white-coated Research Scientists, bow-tied Company executives, face-covered and gowned Medical Professionals, suited Manufactures, hard-hat Delivery Company Managers, uniformed Airline pilots, astute Truck Drivers, strong Delivery Carriers, and astute Politicians who designated mitigations to keep COVID-19 from spreading, attacking and leading mortals to sickness and death.

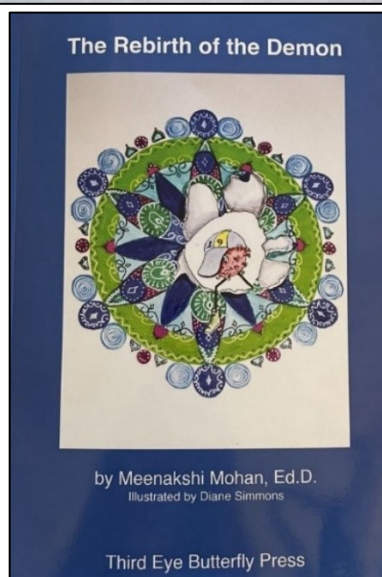
COVID-19 complained to the *Old Demon*. "Sire, I am now almost dead. The whole world is fighting against me. I will be eradicated from the face of the earth forever." The *Old Demon* cautions the gremlin – "Don't be sad, son. You have my genes. Even if they kill some of you, you have the power to be reborn in your mutating

variants." We too must exercise caution as these mutants are not Avatars, but real as we have already experienced. We should be consoled - goodness will continue to prevail in this battle with evil. Kali, her *Devatas* and Avatars are in place, at attention, on call, more are being summoned, more are joining the group, all ready to fulfill their protective role.

I so enjoyed this book because of its unique take on a topic we all dread talking about. You will want to own this gem for your personal library, to read to your children and grandchildren, or to just sit quietly yourself and enjoy this imaginative world that Dr. Mohan has created to address a topic that we have endured for close to two years – COVID – one that we will not forget.



Dr. Mary Ann Sestili, trained as a biologist, now a published author of memoirs and current reflections.



Picture & Poem

The Rage of the Sky

by Meenakshi Mohan



Suddenly the blue sky was enveloped in smoky dark clouds.
The sun shied away, and the sky seethed with fiery flames.
Bloody streaks of red and purple bled
through the rough rankles of the shadows.

The wrinkled waves of the ocean
calmly tried to soothe its shore.
The tall trees touching the horizon stood numb.
It was an onset of a storm.

Inside she laid on her bed --
tired, helpless, and alone,
she weathered many such storms in her life.
Now, her kith and kin stayed apathetic and muted.

Like the wrinkled waves of the ocean,
she had calmed and soothed
many disturbed shores.
Today, with shattered wings, she stared at the ceiling.

Finally, she took her last deep breath.
The calmness of the earth enveloped her.
With Sita's patience,
she took shelter there for eternal peace.

Meenakshi is an educator, writer and an artist. She has published widely in UK and USA. Currently she is serving in the editorial committee of Inquiry in Education, a peer reviewed journal for National Louis University in Chicago.





Yogesh Patel

Through the Poetic Lens

Exhausted on the Cross Najwan Darwish hears sitar



Najwan Darwish

A portrait by Véronique Vercheval

Najwan Darwish's modern and iconic Arabic poetry has occupied a unique seat in world literature. Born in 1978 and surging on the poetry scene with his first collection in 2000, he has also become an unequivocal voice for the Palestinian struggle. However, with his latest collection, *Exhausted on the Cross*, he has revealed his resignation and weariness of the world. Persecution, if it remains unabating as an agonising endurance on a 'Cross', eventually surrenders to world-weariness and reflections, and prayers, because we are not Jesus. I have decided to comment on this poem—mostly ignored by the critics—as it is a tangential prayer. For Indian readers, it will resonate because it represents universality. This universality reflects in the lines in his poem, Visiting Hafez:

I'd give Mecca, and Jerusalem too,
to the God of the Hindus.

I wish I could give/ all Persians,
and all Arabs too,
to the God of Hindus.

This universality is not about any literal take on it or about religions, but about the point he is making. Love is music. This is brave. However, make no mistake: it all converges to being perpetually on a cross of persecution as a Palestinian. Just that poet's vision is panoramic about tolerance humanity must learn. He makes this clear in his poem, In Defeat:

Who's the bravest in defeat?

I advance and fall back.
I advance in defeat.

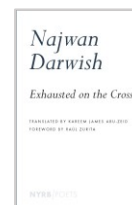
The Instrument

What's the name of that instrument Ravi Shankar plays?
What's the name of that winged bull in the sky
of a scattered resurrection?
What's the name of the Buraq from whose back a prophet
alighted in our yard?
What's the name of that instrument?
What's its name?
It's more dangerous, Lord, than atom bombs,
and there are more sins on Shankar's shoulders
than on the shoulders of a state.
What's the name of that instrument?
What's its name?
Such rapture
takes us beyond justice,
and this joy is greater
than the hearts crammed together
on the steps to your home.
Lord,
what's the name of that instrument?
What's the name of that instrument with which Ravi
Shankar
rises to meet you?

Beethoven's words: "Music is the language of God". Not that poet doesn't know the name of the instrument. Remove the name of an instrument, then all that remains is a language of love, God Himself. Poet plays with this idea as a prayer and takes it to the question of humanity's crimes, more precisely to the sins of the states. The phrase 'sins of the state' has more bearing on morality than on the crass wars. This morality is twisted: but is there a higher transgression when one is made to bear pains and tortures incessantly, as if riveted to a cross, from where one can only observe and find the prayers cruelly unanswered? Where is the burden of sins in this? So the poet declares that this prayer is 'more dangerous' as it looks like apathetic contempt. However, prayers, meditations and reflections, much like the music—a language of love—are a respite from the suffering far better than the religious anchors of 'the hearts crammed together' on the steps of temples, churches or mosques. In the Abrahamic religions, it is said, sins are stacked on your shoulder when you pray. So, focusing on a prayer requires more concentration and a meditative state. Borrowing from the Islamic tradition, one can also discover in this work an oblique question regarding what takes precedence: hadith or Salah? Instrument or the music? Ibn Umar quotes the Prophet: "When a slave stands in prayer, all of his sins are brought and placed on his head and shoulders. So, every time he bows down (in Ruku') or prostrates himself (in Sujud), the sins start falling down."

The idea of how we don't care for a name comes from the mention of Buraq, a creature that transported the Prophet in one night. Transport for the Prophet is the only focus. Music, the prayer, is such transport. Again, the type of the instrument is irrelevant. So is the name of Buraq.

Mention at the beginning of the poem, the 'winged bull' (the lamassu) is also significant. It brings to mind The Winged Bull of Nineveh. It is an Assyrian symbol of force and domination. When pairs of winged human-headed bulls guard the portals of palaces, the presence implies an authoritarian regime. Looking from the level of humanity, does the name of such a cruel regime matter anymore? It is the cruelty that should have a name but often lacks it. Also, the bulls are something that keeps you out! How can a Palestinian participate in progress if he is 'walled' out? This perpetually exiled status obviously indicates the Palestinian struggle. However, "resurrection" also brings the image of Egyptian god Isis to mind. She spread her wings to become a bird, and with invoking words, resurrected Osiris. (Brier 1994: 21). But this bull-like sitar has a name, though it is not to be named. It is the resurrection or a rescue or a respite or freedom that has more significance. A poet wonders if it will ever come!



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By asking the same question, the poem takes the form of chanting. The effect and impact of the melody are so profound that the action in this poem is not about finding the name of the instrument but finding the name of God and challenging Him. It is also about not feeding the ego of any god, as there are questions to be asked. Yet, it is about faith and belief as in this last line, 'rises to meet you?'. He expands this question in his poem, A question:

This is a question for the midday sun,
for the celebrated traitor,
for the haughty abject queen.

If you are not
then who is?

This is a question for my people.

Najwan Darwish brings us the voice we have not heard in a long time. His anguish feels the words have "cast him out". So the language of music offers an alternative in this poem. Will god listen?

Yogesh Patel received an MBE for literature in 2020. His new collection of poems, *The Rapids*, is just published by *The London Magazine*. He runs *Skylark Publications UK* and a non-profit *Word Masala* project to promote SA diaspora literature. Extensively published, an award-winning poet, he has also received the *Freedom of the City of London*.

Travelogue

Epicurean Delights of Mauritius!

By Sonali Kalia Appanah

Food has a long history with civilization and mankind. Starting with the hunter-gatherer, surviving largely on a meat-based diet. Societies then evolved into agrarian ones, with farming as the main route to sustenance. The ones who controlled food, had unimaginable power over everyone and everything. Food was a necessity, often simple bland and home-grown. As society progressed, man's definition of food changed as well. Flavors took precedence with the advent of the famous spice route. Food took on a more cultural role, taking a front seat at all social and cultural gatherings.

Speaking of culture, Mauritius is a melting pot of



Dutch, French, Chinese, Indian and African influences. Something that has translated into its food, seeping through generations, but keeping with its origins. Food in Mauritius is still considered hereditary and passed on as a craft from generation to generation. Mauritians take great pride in their multicultural palates and are truly a people united through their gastronomy. The island boasts of something for everyone, vegetarian or otherwise.

The Dutch introduced deer on the island and fresh venison is a delightful treat during the hunting season. They also brought sugarcane, which is the matriarch of the famous Mauritian rums. While Mauritius is considered an offspring of Asia, the French influence adds a unique twist. Tomato based "rougailles" laced with fresh thyme, stews or "daubes", "French baguettes", light flavored broths or "bouillon", flaky tuna salads are all beautifully matched with local wild game such as deer and wild boar or the more ordinary chicken and beef. Washed down with wine, these make for true French "savoir vivre"! Likewise, the British introduced the love of a good "afternoon tea". So much so that today, Mauritius grows its on tea and Mauritian like to gather around a good "cuppa" to catch up with friends, life, and daily news. "Puddine mais" – is a pudding made from maize flour, an answer to British pudding perhaps? "Napolitane" – made from two sable biscuits with jam and coated with sugar, are a local pastry, albeit the French name. Mauritius also has coffee plantations, a little known fact.

The Chinese have left an indelible culinary stamp on this tiny Indian Ocean island through Chinatown in the Capital, Port Louis. A Mauritian's love of "mine frite" or fried noodles, a good "hakien" batter fried spring rolls, dim sums or "boulettes" cannot be discounted. Every year the Chinese New Year is ushered in with "gato lacire" – the traditional wax like rice flour cake and "gato zinzi" – sweet fried balls coated with sesame seeds. Salty flour based Chinese snacks such as "gato cravattes" and "sipek" – made from crushed prawns mixed with tapioca and then fried as thin light wafers and "moon cakes" make for great companions for in between meals hunger pangs. One cannot ignore the "dizet roti" or roasted eggs and "bol renverse" or inverted Chinese bowl, a full meal of rice, meat and vegetables all in one.

Another Asian gem, India, has largely influenced the local cuisine, a reason why the island is popular with Indians looking for a food home away from home. Indian immigrants clung to their food as much as their culture and immigrants migrated from Indian states such as Bihar, Tamil Nadu. Andhra Pradesh, Bombay etc. As such, Mauritian Indian Cuisine offers the best of all these states. "Briani" or "Brie" is Mauritius's version of the internationally famous Biryani. Indian breads such as "farata" "dhol puri" and "roti" compliments an array of Mauritian curries. "Satini" originating from the word chutney curiously offers South Indian (satini coco – coconut chutney) and North Indian (satini pomme d'amour – a traditional tomato chutney from Bihar) versions. The Indian Vadai is replaced by the Mauritian "gato piment" – lentil based fried spicy bites. Pakodas – are replaced by "bajja" or bhajiya, stuffed with brinjals or chayote. A smaller, flatter version of samosas – more akin to cocktail samosas are a quick street food treat. Popular Indian sweets such as gulab jamun, kheer, jalebis, laddoos and tamarind compote or "takkar" are favorite desserts. South Indian delights such as poutou – steamed rice flour and coconut logs, "panacon" – a refreshing tamarind and lemon drink and "raason" – the Mauritian version of the spicy Indian lentil soup Rasam. Mauritian-Indian cuisine is largely enjoyed in marriages and as a feast after prayers. "Achar" – local varieties of the Indian Achar or pickles tickle the palate. Mauritians love their chillies accompanying the food, not in it. Hence it is very common in Mauritius to have crushed red or green chilli paste as an accompaniment to almost every known type of Mauritian food! Another favorite is the "piment confit" – small birds eye chillies, fermented in vinegar, salt and lemon juice. "Alouda" is the Mauritian flavoured milkshake with lotus seeds or "La Mousse" – a drink made with agar agar jelly; both a great end to a spicy meal.

The African influence is largely in the "rougailles" and the vindaye or mustard based gravies. Seafood and octopus soaked in these gravies are a delight. Mauritians love their beer as much as wine, with two local beers which are an integral party of any Mauritian toast – Phoenix Beer and Blue Marlin Beer.

While much can be said about the culinary landscape of Mauritius, one is bound to miss

something. Such a vast array of food and beverage can overwhelm even the seasoned "food trotter"! Although I would suggest while in Mauritius, do as the Mauritians do, the island has every other possible International cuisine on offer. More to satisfy the Mauritian traveler than anyone else. Hence, the occasional Thai food or Italian food cravings while in Mauritius will not constitute a gastronomical crisis! The average Mauritian today travels almost once every year and to several destinations. As such, cuisines outside of Mauritius are also now local favorites.

The influence of many cultures brought several dishes to Mauritius, the island population has embraced it and made them its own. So while it is an amalgam of the food from these countries, every dish has been "Mauritianized" based on local ingredients and island life adaptation. The modern Mauritius is a foodie's delight. This tiny nation of 1.2 Million people offers its giant cuisine, served with the pride and warmth of its people. This makes it a unique experience in itself. Mauritian food is a quintessential part of family gatherings and social



visits and a Mauritian will welcome you into their home and family by calling you for a traditional, home-made Mauritian meal. Falling in love with Mauritius is easy, but its cuisine is what will truly get you hooked! In Mauritius, food is what bridges all cultures and communities and this can only be experienced in person. I always tell everyone who visits this island, the food and tastes slowly grow on to you. With every meal, every drink and every visit, you will grow to adore this treasure trove of flavors and tastes.



Sonali Kalia-Appanah, was born and raised in India, to Indian parents. She is a hotelier by profession and describes herself as a typical "Army Kid"! She lives in Mauritius, with her Mauritian husband and two boys. Her passion is to share her childhood experiences,

lessons from her profession and her life in Mauritius, by sending them out into the world through her writing.

Micro-fiction

MAN FROM LAHORE* By Cyril Dabydeen

He looks at me with familiarity--my countenance, or allure it seems. Ethnic, too? More than propinquity, you see, with my stance here at the shop's counter, the Quickie's corner-store. "Where d'you come from?" he asks forthrightly, but feigns affable ease.

An immigrant's instinctual game we're playing with geography as our guide here in the Great White North (so-called). He forces a grin, making a face--not a stranger's face--this middle-aged man living here in Ottawa, the nation's capital city. A newcomer, as perhaps we all are, what I want him to know; and yes, for me to accept him at his word. Our existential beingness, you see.

Now who's really an immigrant? Indeed he's from Lahore. What the Quickie's corner-store confirms, in a manner of speaking: here he works at the cash register; and what he figures I will now purchase with my unaffected ease.

He keeps acknowledging me, because of our common identity-cum-familiarity.

And our longing for one place all the while, without aloneness--let it be known.

"In Canada you always buy a lottery ticket," he tells me, entreating me--an overture mixed in with his prescience.

"Oh?"

"To make life good," he assures me with his verbal inflection.

"Really?"

"You will win." His game of chance--I know, but don't really know.

"But...?"

He laughs, because of abiding hope somewhere. And a special spirit he might have cultivated. His charm, no less. He with his new-immigrant's dream of living a full life in Canada. A South-Asian's quest, if only Pakistani-style.

But I would rarely ever buy a lottery ticket, I'm about to tell this man. Yet a vision of sudden wealth flits into my mind. Fantasy with a sense of escape, yes. From what?

He laughs, sort of, with more prescience. I also laugh.

"You must keep trying," he persists, handing me a lottery ticket--my purchase because of his prompt. A rescue point, and freedom with a vague sense of materiality, somewhere.

"But my chances are...?"

"Don't worry about your chances." He sounds definitive.

"Don't?"

"You will win."

An immigrant's cause to celebrate, yes.

"Because--?"

"You are in Canada!" He breathes in hard.

I also breathe in hard. Mimesis, see.

He shakes his head in an oversized jacket, like what's just thrown over his shoulders. He twirls his whiskers and looks at me with his lathe-grey eyes. It's what we keep making of each other--our talking, more than made-up conversation, with my presuppositions.

A new identity taking shape with real or just imaginary places with our own immediacy, if only our immigrant space. I unconsciously dredge up more than what's intuitive with my sense of oceans crossed. Will I really win?

I entertain more dreams, but not a far country, do you know? And riches, like being a maharajah in a time of yore, if a castle somewhere in Jaipur, Rajasthan, but not one that's gothic. Yet one far unlike a Wall Street millionaire's, you see. Dream on!

This man wants to know my name, because of what's authentic in me, and now forming between us. More than verisimilitude, you see. And where do I really come from with my own bonhomie, or contrived style?

Familiarity yet oozes. I tell him where--more than a made-up place in my mind's eye. Details I give to him in a casual manner. And he's undoubtedly from Lahore, and has been living in Canada not very long. But how long is long?

I unconsciously pretend being a wanderer--not a wayfarer--in my new style without pretence. He asks another question to establish a marker between us with his outsider's sensibility at work. A subtext somewhere. He wanting to

know much more than what stems from sheer curiosity. And yes, about my lottery-ticket winning chances in Canada aligned to my bona fide immigrant's hope.

Something new to behold in our self-awareness, or self-realization. Indeed our actually being in one place and in one time--here at the Quickie Corner store.

Other customers cast quick glances at us: our ethnic experience acted out, more than in a trumped-up familiar manner, sure. And my indeed having bought a lottery ticket and dreaming of winning, like a regular pastime.

I keep making up more than sub-continental boundary lines, see. The Far East, and the famed Silk Road, with a genuine cartographer's sense in me. Lottery winner, eh? I look at the ticket in my hand. Breathing it, smelling it. My castle up in the air. Immigrant reality aligned to fantasy ongoing.

But this man's not without his own guile. He pats his whiskers, muttering about real possibilities here in Canada--unlike the life he might have lived in Lahore. The lottery ticket in my hand wavers. I unconsciously rehearse the numbers in my mind.

A prized possession only. And tomorrow the draw will be. A sense of ecstasy grows because of my winning ways. Got you! I hear him say.

The other customers' eyes light up, taking us in. Casually I say my goodbye. Wishful-dreaming, nothing less. Canada--here I come.

***A prize-winner in the recent Stands international flash fiction contest/Sept. 2021.**



Cyril Dabydeen's latest books include My Undiscovered Country/Stories, God's Spider (Peepal Tree Press, UK), My Multi-

Ethnic Friends/ Stories, Imaginary Origins: New and Selected Poems, and the novel Drums of My Flesh (Mawenzie House, Toronto). His work has been nominated for the IMPAC/Dublin Prize, the Pushcart Prize, and he twice won the Okanagan Fiction Prize. He also won the Canute A. Brodhurst Prize via the Caribbean Writer/(U of Virgin Islands).

History

A Glimpse at India's Early History by Prosenjit Dasgupta

"What is history?" is the question that the renowned historian and diplomat, E.H. Carr, threw to those who were around to listen. He then attempted to answer by observing "History is preoccupied by the fundamental processes of change. If you are allergic to these processes, you abandon history.....the function of the historian is neither to love the past nor to emancipate himself from the past, but to understand it as the key to understanding the present."

One of the pillars of the great edifice of Indian history is the Indus Valley Civilization (later in short, IVC) that has been found to date back to about 3500 BCE, that is, around five thousand years before the present. As has been mentioned in numerous articles, reports and books, people across the world were startled to learn at the beginning of the 20th century that such a civilization, contemporary with the Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations, had existed for such a length of time in the north-west of India in the valleys of the Indus and the Saraswati-Ghagra Rivers.

To give in brief the major features of the IVC, one must note that it represented one of the earliest manifestations of a semi-urban society in an area spanning nearly five hundred thousand square kms. that typically housed a population of about five hundred to around five thousand at each of the sites; Harappa is said to have had a population of about ten thousand. These dwellings were not the typical mud-and-wattle huts one sees in the Indian rural country-side, but were built of sun-dried or fired bricks of definite dimensions. These settlements had streets and drainage channels set in a fairly orderly fashion, and it seems that there were citadels at many of the sites set apart from the rest of the dwelling houses, which probably denoted the residence of a chieftain or noble. Judging from the archaeological findings, it seems that the people of the IVC were part-pastoralists and part-agriculturists at that point of time around 3000 BCE and apparently had wheat and barley as the main cereals and ate the flesh of deer, sheep, etc. Their level of civilization may well be judged from the fact that necklaces and jewelry of lapis lazuli and faience were common-place as well as gold ornaments in many places; "factories" producing such jewelry have been found at many sites. They obviously used cotton textiles, as spindles to spin cotton thread have been found many sites. Pottery of various types such as jars, bowls, etc. were commonly used and remnants of copper implements such as sickles, digging tools, swords and knives and so on have also been found. As to

the ethnic types, it seems that the population of the IVC was fairly mixed, comprising Australoid types, as also Mediterranean and Armenoid types, the latter, as some scholars have it, were possibly Indo-Iranian or Indo-European migrants



An overview of Dholavira showing water channels



A step-well at Dholavira



Some IVC seals

from parts of Central Asia. Some of the sandstone images found suggest some peoples with relatively thick lips and nose and a stout body.

Another significant aspect of the IVC was the widespread use of terracotta or steatite seals with interesting inscriptions and images. These seals typically depict animals such as long-horned bulls, tigers, elephants, and a unicorn-like creature. A number of them also depict human beings apparently making offerings and one famous seal shows a person or god with a horned headdress sitting in a cross-legged posture with deer, tiger and other animals around him, likened by some to the god Pashupati. Unfortunately the script in the IVC seals has not been deciphered as yet; but some computer simulations seem to suggest a way out; hopefully this will see the light of day before long.

Although a good number of the IVC sites have now fallen in the territory of Pakistan, assiduous efforts by the Archaeological Survey of India have led to the discovery of an equally large number of such sites within India. A number of them are in Rajasthan and Gujarat, but some important sites have been found at Rakhigarhi and Ropar in Haryana. One of the major IVC sites in India is Dholavira that is located some two hundred kms. north of the town of Bhuj in the Kutch area of Gujarat. This is situated on a low hillock and is spread over an area of nearly half a square kilometre. Apparently this site was used by successive generations since about 2500 BCE and is notable for the extensive use of stone in the structures. One of the most interesting aspects of Dholavira are the "step-wells" resembling large "baolis" that were apparently used for "rainwater harvesting"; for, channels run through the buildings from the top of the hillock down to the tanks below. There are also shallow wells on the top of the low hillock and circles of stone with fire-places and grinding stones indicating where the people lived. Here also the town is divided into segments, with a citadel on one side, a number of dwelling places next to this and a further number of dwellings somewhat outside and below the main site that is taken to be a settlement of artisans and lesser officials.

A visit to a well-preserved IVC site such as Dholavira (another is Lothal near Ahmedabad) brings one face-to-face with the history of early India. One is transported in minutes from the 21st century to an era that was a reality some five thousand years ago, with its own culture and civilizational characteristics. One can then better appreciate E.H. Carr's observation as to how understanding the past makes one better appreciate how we have moved over the millennia into this present.



Prosenjit Dasgupta, was born in Kolkata in 1944. After education at St. Xavier's School and Presidency College, Kolkata, he joined a leading chamber of commerce in 1966 and retired in 2008. In addition to his professional commitments, he also developed a personal interest in places of historical interest as well as folk and tribal culture and wildlife. He has written occasional articles on wildlife and folk culture in The Statesman, The Telegraph, and Indian Express and in Sanctuary magazine. Blog-site: tollykol.blogspot.com

Book review

Basudhara Roy's *Stitching a Home*

By Anita Nahal

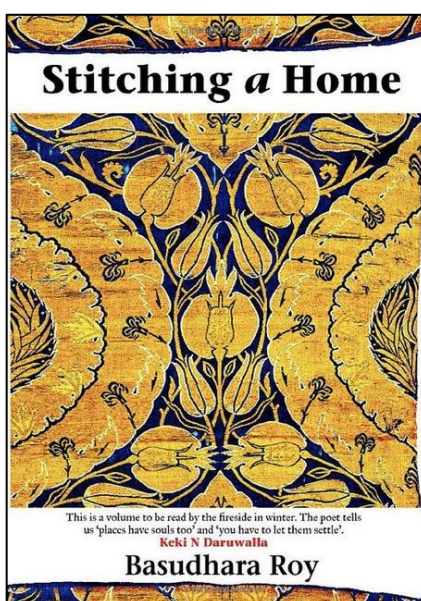
Poems that warm the soul, reminding we all have the capacity to build a safe home

The title is exactly what this precious second collection by poet and professor, Basudhara Roy promises...*Stitching a Home*, bit by bit, layer by layer...emotions upon thoughts, movement over quiet, gestures over nothingness, promises that are meant to be kept and broken. I walked with Basudhara through her home/s and felt deeply her contemplations and feelings. She seemed to be holding my hand, guiding me through the rooms, doors, windows, taking me the engrossed reader from locale to locale, through time periods to stationery moments, structures to none, letting me have a glimpse into her endearing poetic corridors, her carefully crafted writer's world. It seemed I was there with her. As if I was watching a movie woven like a jasmine flower necklace in a linen string...tenacious yet not unbreakable. The fragrance though is unforgettable and lingers.

The collection is divided into three parts, titled, 'Sift the City', 'I'd Still Keep It', and 'It Takes Time'. In almost all the sections, home is a central theme. And home is not necessarily the walls of a house, or the ones we nourish...cook and clean, birth our children in, smearing with our sweat, energy, and care...home could also be behavior, memories, artifacts, daily living objects from necessities to luxuries such as love and belonging. Yes, the latter are gifts and blessings for some. Basudhara's moving poems leave the readers wanting, craving for that fulfillment that comes to only a few. Her poems scratch at one's inner most desires and dreams and leave one hungry for some balm of a plausible cheerful ending which happens mostly in Bollywood movies. Therefore, Basudhara's immaculate poems full of tremendous imagery are inherently hyper realist, yet these audaciously lay foundational hints of optimism, and hope...should we wish so.

'Banaras', 'Overlooking cities from a railway coach', 'Home truths', 'To home a home', 'A

place for peace', 'Un/Dolling your home', to name a few, fabulously lay and stitch homes for us, brick by brick, thread by thread, for our hidden recesses to ponder upon, to visualize and paint grand murals, which could lay at rest, alone, or go to sleep with us, or maybe mock us, or call us to join them, or urge us to create new domiciles.



The jacket of the book which also finds itself in b/w within the covers of the book, is a mellow yet rich mustard tapestry that reminded me of haldi (turmeric) which is smeared in Indian weddings on bridegrooms-brides' hands and face as blessings, or like unpretentious yet meaningful designs found outside homes in villages... priceless motifs constructed with handmade dyes as good luck charms. Haldi is also a spice we sometimes drop a pinch of in milk/tea to repair aching joints/bruises. Thus, Basudhara's book/home, right from the start, makes one feel soothed and welcomed. Some of the inner pages have animals, flowers and people drawn into the matrix. Again, urging one to consider notions of home, humans, other species, fauna, and flora...elements that

make this planet our only home within the squabbling and contentiousness that permeates it, screaming at us to let it be. Each page also has the number written within a pencil line drawing of a mosque from Banaras, the place that became Basudhara's home for five years as she studied in the educational institutions of this remarkable holy city. Very meticulous, deliberate attention has been poured into the production of the book...almost like each poem had to be hugged, pampered, made to feel secure within the pages of this treasured book which became their home before these were shared ever so graciously with the world, the latter to which Basudhara alludes to in the preface.

I strongly recommend this book to all poetry connoisseurs. Lay back on a charpoy (woven bed) in the winter sun or summer tree shade and warm/cool your heart with Basudhara's pure creativity. In the last poem, which is also the title of the book, *Stitching a Home*, she says delightfully, *Summon a mud-house, leaking roof/second-hand bicycle, worn charpoy, the neem's shade/Marry it all to the moment, call it home*. You'll be glad you decided to be part of Basudhara's travels, travails, aspirations, and yearnings. It was not amiss that in the title only the "a" is italicized. Keep that tucked in your memory and by the time you close the book, you would have enriched yourself with the gift of an exquisite home stitched just for you by Basudhara with her tender and poignant poems.



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Poetry

A Kaleidoscope of Images – Poetry of Deepa Agarwal

A Review of *Forgotten Kaleidoscope*

by Nabanita Sengupta

Pages – 132

Publisher – Authorspress, New Delhi (2021)

On a soothing off-white background, colourful patterns greet the eyes. This is the readers' gateway to the *Forgotten Kaleidoscope*, a collection of poems that speak in multiple levels, poems that are dedicated to 'All Poets Struggling to be Heard'. Each time you peep into the kaleidoscope different patterns greet you. Each time you read these poems; a different layer of meaning emerges.

Deepa Agarwal is not just a poet but also an eminent writer of prose, particularly fiction. Her storytelling skills are displayed even in her poems, like 'A Forgotten Kaleidoscope', 'A Tale of Two Princess', 'The Ghost of Christmases Past', or 'Robben Island'. The poems in this anthology are a philosophical exploration into life, characterized by a lilting vocabulary. The poet accepts life as it is yet she also registers her protest at the institutionalized machinery of injustice, such as patriarchy. Deepa Agarwal's latest anthology is a collection of seventy-seven poems, divided into seven sections – Womanspeak, Childhood, Loving and Hoping, The Cage of Memory, Cityscapes, Words, and lastly, Random Utterances.

The first section, 'Womanspeak' is the longest one with about twenty-two poems under it. The poems here are deep and incisive. The title poem, which is also the first poem in the anthology, talks about the presence and absence of colours in a woman's life, which is quite often determined by social customs and traditions. The deep sense of loss that is masked in an apparently practical question of 'What shall I do with these bangles' by the newly widowed mother, is undercut by the response from her friend – 'Break them, says her matter-of-fact friend'. In the poem 'This is Not a Country with Smooth Roads'; the poet is sarcastic. The 'jolt' that we receive along the road, 'grateful to arrive at our destination whole, intact' points at the helplessness of women who step out of their homes. Like the vehicles moving along bumpy roads, the readers too are jolted out of stupor – 'This is no country for women/ because so many claimed /it was not violence or a violation.... but mere roadside entertainment'. Each poem in this section requires a serious reading. They are a critique of the society where women still do not hold a rightful place, where women are 'wordless', have no choices, or have to 'remain strangers behind yak skin (face masks)'. There is a universality in these poems that tie the women in a bond of sisterhood of both oppression and combat.

The feminist persona in Deepa Agarwal is critical of Savitri the 'constant wife', 'woman of power' for her 'womb was too narrow/ It could only hold/ A hundred sons/ Not a single daughter'. In this section, the poet criticizes, questions, and exposes the patriarchal mindsets through both mythical and urban imageries.

The section 'Childhood' consists of poems that paint the innocent pleasures of children's lives as well as the dangers that lurk in their growing-up stage. 'The Road to Wonderland' is not just an escape into fantasies of a child, but a patient wait for the 'white rabbit' which can only show the right way. In this section too the poet's concern for the girl child comes across. The poem 'Cloistered Girl' is the poet's song of experience, aware of the proscriptions of a girl child right from the days of her innocence.

The transience of love, its illusory nature, death of the beloved, and unfulfillment – 'Loving and Hoping' includes poems that traverse through all these issues and more. Yet love is not just these, it is also the seed that 'held promise/ of life/ of blossom'. Deepa Agarwal does not speak of the doe-eyed love that looks at the world with tinted glass, instead, she articulates the wait, the silence, and speaks of the heart that is a 'writhing fish. Love here is what lives on as hope in spite of everything and memory is a cage. In the section 'Cage of Memory', the past brings both 'rotted corpse' and 'a pearl within an oyster'. Memories are painful. They bring back images of violence, as in 'A Gathering of Bones' where 'wayward thoughts loop to another time' and the poet speaks about 'My own father negotiating a surge of bodies'. Memories are also filled with images of loss, where the girl remembers the gradually growing 'stillness' of her mother's world who was gradually receding from the world of sounds.

Interestingly, the 'Cityscape' poems are marked by their inwardness. The city exists, but as an effect on the poetic consciousness. Images of death and darkness dominate. The city is not the glittering cosmopolitan space in a globalized world. The poet captures the murkiness of the modern city life, the anxiety of surviving in such places in an Eliotesque critique of contemporary urbanity.

The mood swiftly changes in the next section titled as 'Words'. For the poet, the words have a life of their own. The storyteller in her emerges as the poems in this section narrate stories of words, of

those that 'congeal in your throat' or the ones that 'spout from sewed-up mouths'. In the 'Unexpected Poem' the poet is taken by surprise by a sudden arrival of a poem at her doorstep. She talks of the creative process, the birth pangs and the joys of creation. Words are her Xanadu but not as exotic as Coleridge. She finds them in the grime of the city life, in her everyday existence.

But it is in the last section, 'Random Utterances' that the Kaleidoscopic element is at its best. The poems, as the title suggests are a medley of images. 'The Train to Nowhere, The Train to Somewhere' underlines the inevitability and unpredictability of life. The poem projects a stoic's journey through life, accepting the changes as they arrive. This poem is in many ways a continuation of the poems in the 'Words' series. Just as the journey of life is inevitable, the place that a person once occupied would be filled in by another, so are the words and music – 'because they will not be orphaned as you once feared.' The anthology ends with the poem 'On the Top of a Mountain', an awareness of the fragility of life. One who is standing tall can at the very next moment be pushed 'off the top' and 'hurl (you) into oblivion'. The poem aptly ends the anthology which contains poems of deep and philosophical understanding of the world.

The anthology *Forgotten Kaleidoscope* adds to the repertoire of rich poetic voices in English that has emerged from India. A variety of images, postmodernist communication with the self, and a voice that can be deceptively simplistic or scathingly sarcastic make this anthology an enriching read. It makes the readers sit up and pay attention to the words to catch them in their right nuance and not get misled by its apparent charm. This anthology is definitely an important addition to the corpus of Indian poetry in English and makes for a delightful poetic experience.



Nabanita Sengupta A creative writer, translator and academic, Nabanita Sengupta works as an Assistant Professor of English in Sarsuna College (affiliated to the University of Calcutta). She has been variously published in anthologies and e-journals. She has recently authored an e-book of fiction, *Ghumi Days* and translated a Bengali nineteenth century travel writing *A Bengali Lady in England*.

Mohona Kanjilal's A Taste of Time A Food History of Calcutta A review by Anjana Basu

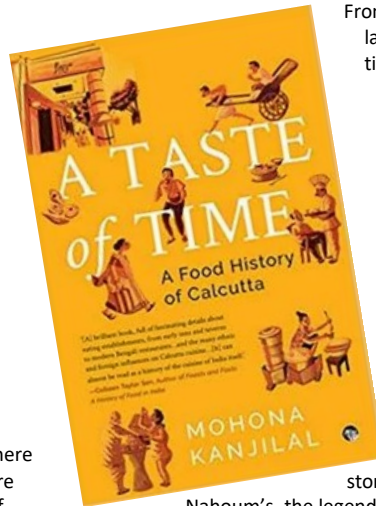
Melting pot is the term that everyone uses to describe Calcutta – whether it is the mix of people, the crowd of interests, its different intellectual pursuits and yes, its food. Calcutta or Kolkata is a city that lives to eat which is why Aqua Ptychotis and other similar remedies have been known to pop up on dining tables, just in case. It is a city that bakes, fries, grills in many different ways and most often for those watching their waistlines, it fries.

Bhetki fry with mustard – kasundhi not Colman's, the melt in the mouth texture of notun gurer sandesh – Bengal food is at one level complex and at another very simple. It has its roots deep in the simplicity of life in rural Bengal, an existence comprising fresh water fish, and whatever grows on the land, mustard, karela and a wealth of vegetables. To these ingredients were added those from Huien Tsang and the Chinese traders who swept up and down in their searches for religion and gold. There was the added weight of the Muslim influence with the Mughuls who brought Persian and Afghan flavours to the melting pot and popularised variations on the good old porota since Jehangir was fed up of it. And then the British, Dutch and Portuguese who added new world vegetables like potatoes, tomatoes and certain chillies to the Bengali menu not to mention beverages like tea and coffee. Of course, whether the Bengali 'cutlet' came from a mispronunciation of 'schnitzel' is debatable – though yes, English cutlets and Bengali cutlets are very different kettles of fish.

Kanjilal has taken on the task of collating all the various food influences that have accumulated in the city and allocating them a local habitation and a name. She traces them back in time, beginning with the British and tracks down the origins of hoary old favourites like Allen Cabin,

Dilkusha Cabin and more, not to mention recording the specialities that are served at each. The Favourite Cabin was a haunt of freedom fighters pre 1947 and the manager was on lookout for British police in the front room with coded signals ready to warn in case of incursions.

From a later time



there are

stories of Nahoum's, the legendary Firpo's which left a waft of unparalleled excellence down the decades and the iconic Chinese eateries, some of which are spreading their wings into new cuisine flights. She also highlights the divide between East and West Bengal – epar and opar bangla – in their

tastes which has become more pronounced over the ages and throws in all the stars and their favourite haunts.

Sadly few these days are aware of the Arakan origins of the Mog cooks who were prized by memsahibs for their light hand with pastry and crepes. At last count someone wondered whether they were descended from Portuguese

pirates while someone else insisted that Bengalis couldn't cook continental to save their lives.

Those who remember the heyday of many of the places mentioned will love revisiting their memories and remembering the secret spices that made every moment so delicious. However, tastes have changed and restaurants have had to up the ante to keep pace with the new globalism while many new eateries have emerged to challenge the status quo. What remains, Kanjilal says, is the spirit of adventure that characterised the original foodies now seen in experiments with fusion fare like baked rossogollas and sprinkling of panchphoron in chocolate puddings – though if there is chocolate with chillies, what's the harm? One might quibble on occasion with her choice of restaurants but then, a volume like this can't lay claim to completeness. She also, while she mentions 'char-ter cha', or four o'clock tea, leaves out 'cha-er shonger ta' the nibbles that go with tea, a phrase that has books of recipes in its honour.

Kanjilal runs the gamut of the food streets, each of which has its origin with a culture attached and she does it in great depth, which is the result of meticulous research. There are several densely packed pages of bibliography to testify to the work that went into this compendium.

Anjana Basu has to date published 7 novels and 2 books of poetry. She has BBC broadcast one of her short stories. Her byline has appeared in Vogue India, Conde Nast Traveller, Outlook and Hindu Blink.



MEMORIES OF A CHILDHOOD

By Devi Rajab

As you so bravely faded away from this Earth with dignity and hope, with concern for those you left behind, my mind journeyed through our lives together as middle children of a fine and caring family. Traversing through three continents Sundru Moodley left his mark in South Africa, England and finally in Denver Colorado.....

*We came from the same womb
Sharing the same blood of our ancestors
Madras, Hyderabad, Velour, Lot14 in Stanger,
Clairwood, Crystal Court, Mitchell Rd, Heswall Rd
We came from that same womb of a mother whose mother she never knew
Separated at birth by death
From her strong groins we emerged all four of us
3 girls and an only son adored and cherished
We were joined at birth to share a common world
Family, home love and the warmth of a hearth made lovingly for us by a noble father
Who rubbed our feet at night, bathed and fed us and took us to the beach on walks,
Made us feel the fresh air in our lungs, brought us Barley sugar sweets and Dutch cheeses
And never scowled or put us down
Who fed us with confidence and loving praise and spoiled us with unconditional love
We were clothed with style and lovingly nourished with Scots Emulsion, Milo and Malt
Educated with books and music and friends
We were encouraged to be free and let loose to the influences of the wide world
They gave us everything that they never had
We were given ballet, elocution, photography and for the only son an overseas education
We could ill afford.
Sent to Kimberley on a plane kitted out with tailored made suits.
Harley street shoes cushioned our feet
While our parents ran shoeless in their youth
As the only son
At every turn you were protected, defended at school, our father fought for your rights
With teachers and relatives if and when the need arose
Our mother fought the battle with rickets by rubbing your body with oil and
Setting you out in the sunshine to absorb that vitamin D you needed
You were their little brown 'blue eyed' boy
Today at a Memorial Ceremony (24th Oct 2021) organised lovingly by your only son the cycle of life continued.
You continued to do for him what Papa did for you.
My thought went back to our youth when we played together on bicycles, climbed trees,
Ate mangoes, held concerts for our grandfather and listened to his stories from the Ramayana.
My thoughts went back to our teenage age years when you lovingly covered up my faulty nail to allow me to wear open sandals
My thoughts went back
To the games we played together and the toys we shared as children
My thoughts went back to our teenage years when we secretly crept into the house past midnight after our wild parties in Mansfield Rd
My thoughts went back to our stay in Kansas and how we shared what little we had to open up new opportunities for you
My thoughts went back to how united we were then as a siblings
How a single phone call of distress could bring relief to her struggling brother
How a big sister played her role with no expectation of a repayment
The trips she took us on and the worlds she opened for us her younger siblings
How she extended herself to complete the work that her parents had started
In giving us all a better life
My thoughts went back to how proud you made us feel as your siblings at your achievements and your generosity and warmth
May your soul rest in peace*

Book Review

The Great Indian Joint Family A Review of Namita Gokhale's novel *The Blind Matriarch* by Lakshmi Kannan

Penguin Random House, India 2021. ISBN 9780670093564]

Namita Gokhale, an acclaimed writer, co-founder and co-director of the Jaipur Literary Festival, has been curating literary dialogues across cultures and nationalities with a passionate involvement. *Betrayed by Hope*, a play on the life of Michael Madhusudan Dutt that she wrote with Maalashri Lal, won the best fiction award from the Kalinga Literary Festival 2021. After her debut novel *Paro: The Dreams of Passion*, her *oeuvre* has fanned out with an astounding range. *Things to Leave Behind*, the third in her trilogy on the Himalayas, won the Sushila Devi Literature Award and the Best Fiction Jury award at the Valley of Words.

The Blind Matriarch brings us to the plains in Delhi during the pandemic that swept through the nation and households, bringing women and men out of their houses with brooms to sweep and clean the pile of brown dead leaves that settled on stalled cars, courtyards, walkways and streets. People learnt to cope without house help, and went through a punishing routine of cleaning, cooking and fiercely protecting their family from Covid – all of it done with a mixture of stoic acceptance and a sense of helplessness. There was shock, but there was also resilience in the way people slowly adjusted to the 'new normal'. The nation staggered under it for a while, and then made ingenious efforts to hold it all together, like a family. More specifically, *The Blind Matriarch* reflects this *weltanschauung* with its inclusive spirit, its embrace of people cutting across religious, cultural and class divide in its steely resolve to survive, come what may.

C 100, a four-storeyed structure, houses a joint family that includes the eponymous blind matriarch Matangi-Ma, her three children, two grandchildren, two live-in maids, a small boy who is given a temporary shelter, a cat, a dog and an injured barbet. While the matriarch lives on the top floor, each of her children has a flat with a floor to him/herself. Territorially, they are independent, yet connected as a family. Matangi-Ma holds them all together as only some women of her generation could, weathering many storms with fortitude, courage, equanimity and a wellspring of love. Life goes on, as it must, notwithstanding the pandemic. Meals have to be cooked, grocery to be stocked, the sagging economy has to be redressed, the fatigue of three generations wearily watching news on TV, reports of death by Covid, doing work online, watching movies, all

with that occasional distraction from a mood lifting food for a jaded palate.

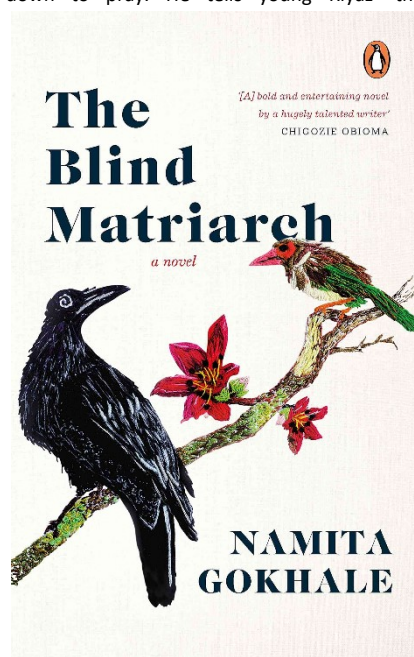
Matangi Ma is coping with an early diagnosis of a 'wet macular degeneration' with retinal complications. Her impaired vision is further compounded by an accidental fall on a damp floor when the burning liquid of phenyl gets into her eyes, after which she loses her eyesight completely. Has *that* made her blind or is it caused by an emotional trauma, is a nagging doubt voiced by her doctor. 'But she still could not see. Or she would not see,' says a vastly disturbing line. Several pages later, we can connect it with Pandu, the man who sucks out the snake poison from Nazneen's ankle, spits it out vigorously, applies a poultice, and then sits down to pray. He tells young Riyaz 'the

When her grandson asks how she got to hear the injured barbet moaning in pain on the ground, four floors down, she says there are so many orifices in the body that tell you. It has the startling profundity of W.B. Yeats's 'Crazy Jane' poems. She tells Ritika definitively that she'll get some good news from her company, and it happens. Interestingly, Matangi Ma is herself unaware of her hidden powers. Her blindness spreads out like an enigmatic, ruling metaphor for the ability to see what escapes others who have 'good' eyes. Outgrowing an abusive marriage, she morphs into this matriarch with a steely resolve to nurture the family with her love covers all of them like a warm blanket.

The Epilogue has members of the family recounting the devastating second wave of Covid when even in death a person can at best receive a mass funeral. It claims Surya, the beloved son of Matangi Ma and many others including their neighbours. She lives through it, and dies peacefully in the hills of Ranikhet.

The book flutters open with the sounds of birds, of poems being read to the matriarch, the fragrance of flowers in the changing seasons, the sighs and sounds of trees in the environment commiserating with us.

It's a book to be treasured and shared with children and young adults who were bewildered and scared by the surreal climate of Covid that numbed the mind, but who snuggled with their family for the comfort of a home and hearth. They may narrate the story to *their* children some decades from now. Shanta calls it the year of the demon, Rakshasa, the end of an epoch. And yet, there is a life affirming quickening in the timeless call of another young barbet, perched on the branch of a semal tree in the eye-catching cover.



important thing about snakebites. Most of the people who die of it, die from terror, not poison.'

The novel makes for a riveting read as we see how Matangi Ma's blindness is replaced by an uncanny vision, an eerie comprehension that is aided by sensory, tactile experiences, a sharpened hearing that travels well beyond the three floors to listen to the birds on the ground, to floating bits of conversation and songs with an amazing clarity. Her 'sensory experience had acquired an echo remembrance,' says the novel. She is prescient, almost oracular in her observations that fascinate her grandchildren.



Lakshmi Kannan is a bilingual writer, also known by her Tamil pen-name 'Kaaveri'. Her recent publications include *Wooden Cow* (2021), her translation

of the iconic Tamil writer T Janakiraman's novel *Marappasu*, for his Centenary Celebrations, *Sipping the Jasmine Moon*, *Poems* (2019) and *The Glass Bead Curtain*, a novel (2020, c2016)

Short fiction

The Flute Player

Subhash Chandra

(Sequel to “The Detective’s Son,” published in the May 2021 issue of CONFLUENCE. The earlier story in a nutshell:

I seduced my friend’s sister, Darshee, who conceived. When I suggested abortion, she hanged herself. The shattered brother’s severed body was found on the railway tracks. Later a mysterious man planted himself in our neighbourhood. My excruciating curiosity to find out his antecedents entrapped me with two ghosts. The brother wanted to avenge his sister’s death.)

The mellifluous notes of the flute serenading classical music were wafting into our bedroom. He was playing Raaga Sama and Raaga Nilambari – the former calms anxiety and the latter induces sleep. But my inquisitive genes robbed me of sleep.

Several questions spiked my mind.

Who was he? A Good Samaritan helping people with the gift he possessed? Corona V had smothered life and cast a pall of gloom. Many were afflicted by anxiety, insomnia, even depression because of constantly looming death.

Was he not afraid of contracting Corona, when he played the flute? And how did he get past the police who were strictly enforcing lockdown 24x7?

The urge to meet him became overpowering.

I was getting ready to go out when Bhavna woke up with a start, though I had got off the bed softly.

“How many times would you throw yourself into the jaws of death?” she asked me in a rueful voice. Have you no concern for Akansha and me?

I kept quiet.

“Last time you were saved because the girl truly loved you and persuaded her brother to spare your life. Or else, you’d have joined the ghosts. Every time, you may not be as lucky.”

Bhavna was right.

“And please stop bragging about your investigative genes. Remember, your father was murdered for his detective work.”

She got excited and started panting. This was a recent development.

She had suffered a nervous breakdown after my narrow escape from the two ghosts. Sometimes, she’d get panic attacks, imagining an impending disaster.

“The brother can come back again to punish you,” she’d say with frightened eyes!

I assured her that was unlikely.

“He could easily have brushed aside his sister’s suggestion, but didn’t. So don’t worry; they are gone for ever ... to where they belonged!”

Her life had shrunk into a bare routine: teaching at school, picking up Akansha from her school bus on way back home, cooking, and helping Akansha with her homework. She no longer scanned the newspaper first thing in the morning to check out prices of the shares and Mutual Funds we had.

She held my hand and said with beseeching eyes, “Tejas, swear you wouldn’t go out.”

“Okay ... I promise.” I said and took off my sneakers.

She looked at me gratefully, sighed deeply and went back to sleep, assured.

I wished the flute man would not visit our neighbourhood again.

Providentially, he did not. Bhavna was getting better slowly, the doctor was satisfied with her progress and I was happy.

But, after a couple of months, I again heard the melodic Raagas.

No, I could not break my promise to Bhavna, I told myself. And if she woke up this time too, it would cause a huge setback in her recovery. Bhavna’s and Akansha’s lives were intertwined with mine; if something untoward happened to me, they would be left vulnerable in the big, bad world.

I steeled myself and resolved to not give in to my irrepressible urge.

But soon, I lost control over myself. Anything with a hint of mystery or enigma triggered the prying genes scripted into my DNA.

I felt guilty for breaking my word.

Fortunately, she did not wake up this time and I slipped out quietly, closing the door behind me.

It was a moonless, chilly night. The air was still, sullen and an ominous silence swirled. With deserted streets it looked like midnight, though it was 11 PM. A couple of streets lights were dysfunctional. From a little distance, I espied a silhouette sitting on the culvert of the rain-drain, skirting the small park.

An involuntary shiver traversed my spine. Was I letting myself into yet another dangerous encounter with a ghost? He could well be Darshee’s brother who had come alone this time, as Bhavna had said. Yet I continued walking towards him. As I got near, he stopped playing the flute. I could roughly make out that his hair were tousled, beard shaggy and clothes soiled and torn.

I sat on the opposite culvert and said, “Sir, you’re a wizard of the flute?”

No answer.

“Your grasp of the classical Raagas is nonpareil.

My conversational gambit didn’t work. He maintained an eerie silence.

“So many must be grateful to you for putting them to sleep during these troubled times.”

The compliment, too, didn’t stir him into speech.

Then he abruptly got up and started walking away. I was trailing him, but he didn’t look back. I sidled up to him and both of us stood under the arc of a street light, looking at each other.

“Who are you?”

After a long silence, he said, “I ... I don’t know.” My curiosity was further whetted.

“Why’re you exposing yourself to the Virus?”

He kept staring at me with blank eyes.

“Can I help you in any way?”

He seemed to be making an effort to say something. Meanwhile, I was trying to visualise him without his beard.

It came to me. In a flash!

“Oh yes! It is him!”

I held his hand and led him home.

He did not resist and walked beside me like an obedient child.

I woke Bhavna up who remained disoriented and dazed for a while. Then suddenly she leapt off the bed and hugged him.

“Papa ... where had you gone?” she kept repeating, her tear-stained face buried in his chest.

After my mother-in-law’s death, we had tried to persuade him to live with us, but he refused. The trauma of his wife’s death, coupled with a lonely life triggered his dementia. He started wandering and playing the flute.

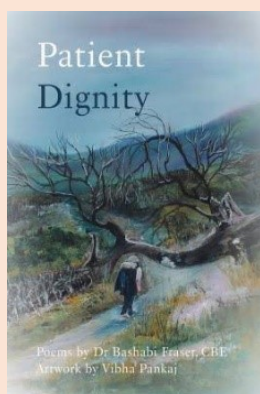
“It happens in dementia,” said the psychiatrist.

“Much of the memory gets wiped off, but by a freak chance something remains intact. That’s why he can play the flute flawlessly. Good you found him. He needs constant care and company.”

Every night, Papa plays the flute in his room and we slide into pleasant sleep!



Dr Subhash Chandra, former Professor of English, Delhi University, has published two short stories collections, Not Just Another Story, and Beyond the Canopy of Icicles, about sixty short stories in journals, 4 books of criticism and several research articles.



I miss you

To my lovely little Louie

I miss you my lovely little one
I miss the soft pressure of your plump dimpled arms
Encircling and hugging my neck

I miss you my joyous little one
I miss your gurgling conversations with pigeons
On your balcony as they peek and peck.

I miss you my curious little one
I miss your napped bottom disappearing
Under sofas in an exploring spree

I miss you my intrepid little one
I miss my anxiety of watching you climbing the sofa
With mountaineering glee

I miss you my loving little one
I miss your slobbery kisses on my willing cheeks
Welcoming my young man's attention

I miss you my clever little one
I miss your beguiling smile as you whisk round in seconds
And capture my mobile with determination.

I miss you my strong little one
I miss your ambition as you stand on your toes
And unsettle paintings on display

I miss you my rhythmic little one
I miss your timely clapping and swaying to music
Which you can repeatedly replay

I miss you my hungry little one
I miss your tiny mouth willingly opened
Savouring mummy's dishes with joy

I miss you my messy little one
I miss you overturning your basket with abandon
And your delight with each little toy.

I miss you my joyous little one
I miss your chuckling wonder watching birds flying
In the limitless sky.

I miss you my tired little one
I miss you when you fall asleep on my shoulder
Rocking to my Bengali lullaby.

Bashabi Fraser's Patient Dignity An Appreciation by Debjani Chatterjee

This lovely piece is one of the poems in Bashabi Fraser's latest collection, *Patient Dignity*, published by Scotland Street Press, written during the Pandemic of 2020 and 2021, and illustrated by Vibha Pankaj's evocative landscape paintings. Like all the poems in the book, this too focuses on an important aspect of the pandemic: the self-isolation that meant very many older people had to miss seeing, hugging, and otherwise interacting with family members; in this instance, it is about Bashabi Fraser missing her grandson Louis.

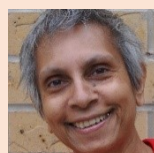
Dedicated to Louie, 'I miss you' is also a list poem tribute to the toddler. The entire poem is a monologue by Bashabi. Each stanza describes one or more of his endearing qualities, including any mischievousness such as climbing the sofa, upsetting paintings on display, capturing his grandma's mobile, and overturning his basket of toys. A list of adjectives to describe Louis brings him vividly to life; he is lovely, clever, intrepid, messy, strong, hungry, tired, rhythmic and, above all, joyous.

A poem, entitled 'I miss you', might be expected to be a plaintive piece, expressing as it does a grandparent's longing for the company of her beloved grandchild, and sense of loss because the pandemic has deprived her of the joy of receiving his 'slobbery kisses', his napping on her shoulder when tired, and feeling 'the soft pressure of ... plump dimpled arms/ Encircling and hugging my neck', and. But, instead, the overall mood of the poem is a happy one. One senses that it is no coincidence that Bashabi twice addresses Louis as 'my joyous little one'. Words like 'joy', 'delight', 'smile' and 'chuckling' all tell of happy memories.

'I miss you' has a formal structure that reminds me of a long nursery rhyme or even a lullaby. The dozen three-line stanzas have a good amount of repetition. The first line of each stanza begins with 'I miss you' and ends with 'lovely little one'. Each second line begins with either 'I miss you' or 'I miss your'. The third line and the sixth line rhyme, then the ninth line and the twelfth, and so on.

Poets sometimes enjoy the luxury of creating new words, but only a confident poet can successfully create a word that sounds comfortable and natural in the poem. Bashabi's lines: 'I miss your napped bottom disappearing/ Under sofas in an exploring spree', not only offers a novel perspective in describing an everyday event in a very young child's life, but also satisfies the requirement in a comfortable and natural way. As such, it is among my favourite encounters in the poem.

In the hands of a lesser poet, the subject matter alone of 'I miss you' would push it into maudlin sentimentality. But Bashabi manages to strike a balance between the sentimental and the memorable everyday reality of missing a beloved family member. This is a poem with which many readers will easily identify.



Debjani Chatterjee MBE FRSL has been called 'Britain's best-known Asian poet' (Elisabetta Marino). She is also a children's writer, translator, Olympic torchbearer, arts psychotherapist and storyteller. Born in India, she attended universities in Cairo, Kent, Lancaster, Sheffield and Leeds.

SOUTH AFRICAN NEWSLETTER

Suicide

by Devi Rajab

I recall reading an incident where a young mountaineer was forced to amputate his own arm when a falling rock pinned him down. His need for survival spurred him to perform such a daringly painful act that under normal circumstances he may never have imagined possible. In nature the will to survive is often stronger than the will to die. It is a natural phenomenon that we observe in the way plants creep through crevices in a bid to survive against all odds. Human beings however have a capacity to actively decide to terminate their life in search of existential peace or a de novo existence or simply to put an end to their suffering.

There has been a spate of suicides following the death of Professor Bongani Mayosi, renowned cardiologist and Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Cape Town in July 2018. He committed suicide on account of his depression exacerbated by insurmountable student protests and cruel slurs against his integrity as an individual. Following closely behind, was the news of the suicide of Mark Minnie co-author of the Lost Boys of Bird Island which came as a shock to all wanting to learn more about the atrocities of a Paedophile ring of apartheid apparatchiks.

The 2018 headlines scream : A Central University of Technology student dies after jumping from mall building". "Bullying drives girl (12) to suicide"; "Shock, anger and condolences in wake of Rhodes student Khensani Maseko's death "Anthony Bourdain bought a painting with a chilling title days before his death, and the artist is devastated. Weeks before, Bourdain purchased a piece of artwork by John Lurie entitled, "The sky is falling, I am learning to live with it."

More recently In her touching beautifully written book Waterboy an award-winning health journalist, Glynis Horning tries to make sense of her sons suicide. Spencer suffered from major depression and general anxiety disorder. With a 90% matric aggregate and an engineering degree with honours along the way, he had been teaching part-time and had weaned himself off his medication before his first full-time employment in the engineering field. He had also been diagnosed as having a blood disorder, thalassemia minor, which resulted in low iron levels, sapping energy, ability and mood. Spencer, with his gentle temperament and "wicked sense of humour", had shown no signs of what he was going to do.

It is reported that South Africa has a suicide rate of 10,7 per 100 000 people, which is higher than the comparable rate for Botswana (9,7), Egypt (2,6), Malawi (5,5) and Nigeria (9,9). The Institute of Race Relations has called for better suicide prevention and intervention measures that need to be implemented in schools and communities in light of research detailing the high rate of suicides in South Africa compared to selected African countries.

Depression which often leads to suicide is an elusive condition that is on the increase in post-modern society

but has always been there as a part of the human condition afflicting highly creative people more than any other group. It is claimed that they experience depression because they are caught up in a struggle to make life seem meaningful to them. People for whom meaning is no problem are less likely to experience depression. For creators however the root cause of their depression stems from a loss of meaning and doubts about life's meaningfulness. In his book The Price for Greatness, psychiatrist Arnold Ludwig studied a thousand eminent 20th century figures and found 77% poets, 54% fiction writers, 50% visual artists and 46% composers had suffered from at least one significant depressive episode. By contrast the rate was 16% for sports figures, 5% for military figures and zero % for explorers. It is contested that the figures for creative persons is significantly higher since creative persons are born to interrogate life. In the process they are more prone to suffer meaning crises and consequent depression on the account of the fact that they find meaning a problem and not a given. The depression they feel may be entirely existential or it may be a combination of some already existing biological or psychological depression. In the case of eminent personalities who have struggled with depression in one way or another, Vincent Van Gogh the icon of the tortured artist is an example. He revealed his depressive moods through colour in his paintings. An analysis of his landscape paintings in dominant blues are interpreted as his cries for help. His Para suicidal attempts have been well documented when he cut off his ear in a fit of madness.

Then there are those who struggle through depression without harming themselves like Churchill and Anthony Quinn. The former complained of the "slough of despond" as he was hit by deep depression, that near suicidal affliction which he used to call "Black Dog". Anthony Quinn throughout his most productive years fought his internal demons as though they were real live creatures. In his autobiography he comes to grips with them after tracing their origins in his troubled childhood.

Depression is a condition that is as elusive as mercury and as hard to grasp. Each case has a different origin though the symptoms may be the same. In the case of Winston Churchill it seemed to have been triggered by his father's death. There is a high incidence of cases of acute depression following the traumatic death of a parent around the time of puberty and if left unresolved it can fester into a lifelong affliction.

The vast bulk of suicidal efforts spring from despair and helplessness but detecting and predicting suicidal behaviour is often very difficult. As Robin Williams prepared the equipment for his asphyxiation his new wife walked under the same roof.

Professionals will agree that no emotive clues one way or the other are given for the determination of suicidal

risk. There is the usual depression, flatness of emotion, feelings of inner emptiness but since these feelings are felt secretly they tend to be embedded below the surface. Then there is the danger of pseudo cheerfulness that often leads friends and relatives astray. Each one of us has had some experience of people who never complain and we tend to admire them for their stoicism. "How well she took her husband's death," one says or, "Nothing ever gets him down" When such a person takes his or her own life everyone is shocked and cannot get to understand what the problems could have been. In fact one of the dominant characteristics is the very secrecy. Sometimes the independence, the brave front arises from fear and pride. The person is trapped inside his cheerful, courageous mask behind which accumulates unspoken convictions of not being understood.

Suicides are often followed by intense blame of self and others, such that those who are left behind feel they or others should have been able to see the signs. Research in the area of hindsight bias support the view that what may seem clear in hindsight is often unclear in foresight. The issue with suicide is its unpredictability. It is difficult even for seasoned practitioners to predict suicidal risk even though there are identifiable factors, such as planning the suicide, a desire to die, hopelessness, anhedonia, and perceived burdensomeness that distinguish individuals of lower versus higher suicide risk. In fact positive prediction rates are low, and false positive rates are high. Moreover, false negative rates are also high: In one study, nearly half of people who went on to die by suicide had been rated as low risk for suicide by both their general practitioner and mental health specialist within the 12 months prior to the suicide. It appears the signals that suicide survivors attend to in hindsight are unlikely to have allowed for prediction of the suicide in foresight, and this may account for the blame the survivor feels.

Sadly though the act of suicide is usually a personal and private one the impact of the loss is felt widespread. It is strange that despite our technological and scientific advancements we are still in the dark ages in terms of human relations. Perhaps it is this very issue of the insurmountable gap between material progress and the human condition that is the problem of the 21st century.



Dr Devi Rajab is an award-winning journalist and the author of several books. Now she is the Chairperson of Democracy Development Program. She is also the former

Dean of Student Development at UKZN.

Bara Bazar

Excerpt from Brijraj Singh's, *In Arden: A Memoir of Four Years in Shillong, 1974 to 1978* (with an Introduction by Anjum Hasan, a Foreword by Easterine Kire, and an Afterword by Paul Pimomo). Published by Confluence with permission from the publisher, Pippa Rann Books & Media, U.K. 2021.

No account of Shillong will be complete without a description of one of its most famous institutions, Bara Bazar.

Bara Bazar is situated on a small rise at one end of the city. It is big, dirty and colorful, and you can buy just about anything there, from pins to live turtles. The whole area is arranged commodity-wise: you pass along a row of shops selling tin pots, turn into the next alley which has nothing but *paan* and *koi*, a mildly intoxicating betelnut, then into a third which sells only mutton before entering yet another where all the vegetables available in Shillong are on display, and so on. It is very easy to lose your way in the labyrinthine alleys of Bara Bazar, but so long as you are not looking for any specific shop this is the best way to get a feel of the place. Huge mounds of oranges comfort your sight, to be replaced by wicker baskets of intricate and fantastic design, and these, in turn, yield to great white slabs of lime which the Khasis eat with their *paan*. And then suddenly there are strange looking men exhibiting even stranger wares on a little carpet spread out on the pavement. You can buy tiger's fat, powdered rhino horn, newts' tails, crocodile teeth, and various other objects which, as the local people well know, are indispensable if you wish to cure your rheumatism or improve your sexual prowess. The vendors are always surrounded by knots of curious bystanders, though whether much business is done I never found out. Underfoot it can be quite slippery and squelchy, and you rub shoulders with a quite uncommon variety of people, Khasis, Nagas, Garos, Mizos, Nepalis, Tibetans, Sikhs, Tamils, English, German tourists, Bengalis, Bhutanese, Assamese, Sikkimese, Punjabis. You step aside to allow a man to pass, pipe in his mouth and back bending under the weight of a pig he is carrying, and in the process bump accidentally into a slim Chinese girl hurrying back to work at the

hairdresser's after her late morning *chow*. As you stand bargaining for a basket full of oranges, down comes a sharp shower and you walk into a Marwari cloth shop for

the north-east are resistant to Hindi? Hindi is the second language of Bara Bazar.

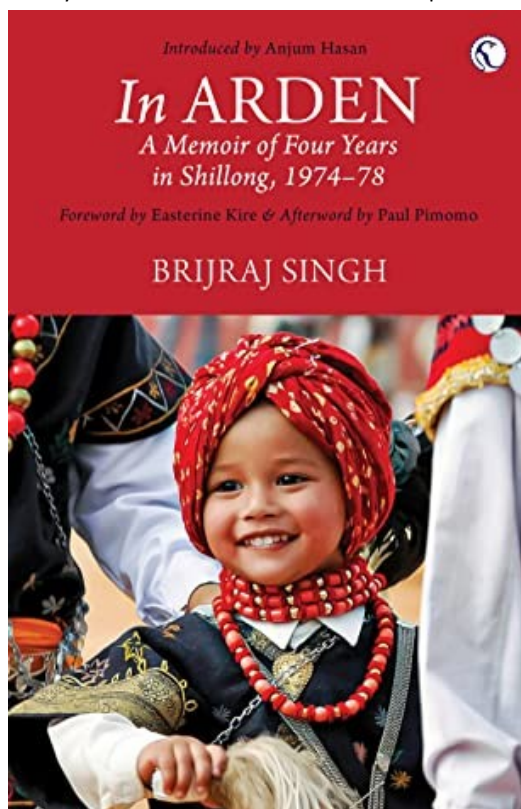
Democracy flourishes in Bara Bazar as in few other places in India. There is no high or low, rich or poor. A respected government official with whom you may have been closeted earlier in the day on State business may be seen poking and prodding a fish to test its plumpness. And surely the woman from whom he is buying it was seen sitting primly behind a typewriter in his office earlier in the day? But Bara Bazar has a way of leveling all the hierarchies that societies may create.

On the occasional "Bara Bazar Day", people come to buy, sell, see and be seen from villages as many as fifty miles away. There is much merry making then, and eating and drinking and news swapping, and children scream, matrons scold, and young men and women giggle and smile and feel rather self-conscious in their new clothes, and look everywhere with sparkling eyes. The government runs special buses on Bara Bazar Days, and they run fully laden with people and produce and pigs.

In the rest of the country the big market day comes round regularly once a week. Not so in Shillong. The day of the Bazar is calculated from the time the annual Nongkhrim Dance will be held by a method of computation that I was never able to understand. The result is that sometimes you can have two Bara Bazar Days in a week, but more often they are eight or nine days apart. You can never look at your calendar and say, "The next Bazar day will fall on Tuesday the 20th." The only way to find out is to ask any Khasi. He or she will always know, though if you ask them how they know, they will say that someone else told them so, and if you ask that somebody else, they will say that they heard about it from yet somebody else.

shelter. No one minds; and it is this sense of the total acceptance of everybody and everything that constitutes the peculiar ambience of Bara Bazar.

Another remarkable feature of the place is that except for the Marwari stores and meat stalls, all other shops are "manned" by women. Men may visit Bara Bazar for business or pleasure, but it is the women who dominate life here. Some are barely in their teens; some others, especially the fruit vendors, are stunning beauties. But most are old, deeply wrinkled, shrewd, with a merry glint in their eyes and a ready, if toothless smile. Their linguistic versatility is fantastic. Khasi speakers all, they are, nevertheless, fully capable of not only bargaining but also joking in Hindi, English, Bengali and Assamese. Whoever said that the tribals of



Flash Fiction

Androids

Sunil Sharma

Back from another dimension!

Remained groggy.

Silence--- scary!

He felt the visitors from the other side still hovering there, curtain-like.

Rubbed eyes.

It returned, the encounter, in the dream-state: the dead! The old man smiled and offered his hand. Romesh Sen held that bony hand and the two walked down---the way they did, when Romesh was a child. Then he vanished into the misty gulf.

"That was not the end." He told his brother over the phone.

"What happened next?"

"I saw Grandpa and Uncle Roy."

"Did they speak?"

"No."

"Good. Tell me more."

Romesh recalled: "Gloomy. Big hall. Winding staircase. They stood in the hall, exchanging tomatoes. Uncle Roy beckoned. In the corner, he showed a pile of red tomatoes. He motioned me to eat, while a grim grandpa watched."

"Then?"

"I woke up."

"Hmm."

Silence.

"Did you eat?"

"No."

"Good."

"I wanted to ask them the reason for this unusual tryst."

"Did they talk?"

"No."

The retired brother yawned and concluded, "You are safe. If they had spoken to you or made you eat, you were doomed."

"Yes, bro. But why these dreams of the dead?"

The brother chuckled, "These dead love you, son. Stop thinking..."

"But I never do. Never remember the father or the other dead..."

"They are trying to send a message, Romesh."

"Why to me?"

"Because, deep down, we are all afraid of mortality."

He was not convinced.

Were they trying to convey something from the beyond or his guilt trying to resurrect them?

Later, Romesh remembered the dead photography. In the West, it was a tradition, in the 19th century, a grim one--- the surviving family posing with the deceased, the photo, a memento, heirloom.

He searched the post-mortem photography. The Victorian England practiced it. The pictures appear morbid now: dead babies; parents and grandparents; siblings; wives and husbands and even pets---everything of some value or interest,

photographed. In one picture, siblings were lined up for the shoot, along with a dead kid, neatly propped up at the end of the line, looking bit sleepy! Sometimes mothers held dead babies in laps. Sometimes, the dead children were put in cribs and circled with wreaths of flowers. Sometimes, the dead looked more alive than the living! The memorial pictures---part of the Victorian tradition that celebrated both life and death and called memento mori---evoked a shudder.

It is a culture's uneasy or easy relationship with the fact of death and the remembrance of this finality within a grieving heart or home that partially explains this social trend then.

That was his philosophy teacher, way back.

Death hardly scared Romesh.

When my turn comes, I will go. He would say but such bar talk got dismissed by colleagues. They laughed and said, do not discuss the Silent Reaper, while enjoying a drink or two, after a long day's hard work in a small and crowded office of an insuring agency.

Death.

For the insuring team, it was a marketing tool.

"We sell death." The team head said.

Romesh agreed. It was good business.

The deaths in the family unnerved Romesh Sen, the cynical insurance agent working on the fears of the urban lot.

Series of sudden deaths!

Uncle Roy died in siesta; dog Bruno, hit by car; grandmother, dying in the afternoon, sans any signs or prior warning.

A cousin murdered.

Odd!

The death of Bruno, painful.

"You get affected by a pet but not by the death of the family members!" wife had exclaimed over dinner.

"What the hell!" He was angry.

"Not a normal thing."

"I am normal being."

"No, you are not. Sufferings of the fellow humans don't affect you." She argued.

"OK. I am a Zombie. Anything else?"

She smiled: "Right. You are a walking corpse, devoid of basic feelings and responses. Becoming a non-human, frightening one."

He forgot the jibe but days later, the boss confirmed the evaluation: "Romesh, you are aloof, uncommunicative and desensitised."

"How, sir?" He asked.

"You act in strange manner, of late. Remote. Cold. Loner."

"Typical nerd?"

"Worse. You have become an android."

"Android?"

"Yes. An evolving tribe. High-tech. New-millennium sub-species. Does not feel any

emotion inside a cold heart. A bipedal machine programmed to do tasks but hollow inside! It can have consequences. Turning into a fully-functional android."

"Who says this nonsense?"

"Latest research by Phaedrus, professor of robotics, Cyber Institute of Advanced Artificial Intelligence, Silicon Valley."

That frightened him, "Is it so? How can it be reversed? Me, an unthinking android?"

"Congrats! You are the future!"

"How can I overcome this state?"

"Find out ways of redemption and recovery, boy. Quick!"

He soon realized he had turned into anti-human. Become an android.

He was attending a funeral of a neighbour who had died in sleep. A young death that had left the family of six almost without a bread winner. The heart-rending cries left everybody in tears.

Romesh felt NOTHING inside. No feeling. A numbness widening!

I am a mere spectator. Unaffected.

The dream kept on recurring.

The visitors from the underground trying to talk to him in a dream.

He was frightened.

But summer homes sans families become the haunts of the dead.

Even androids fear termination!

Next night, overstuffed, he slipped into a drunken stupor...

...and saw the same hall with the same winding staircase. The hall was empty. He saw the beggar kid seen on the street outside office, yes, same thin kid asking for a meal and being kicked off by him...then, Romesh eating meal, watched by hungry eyes, in that dark hall, slurping, choking on the excess food, gasping, unattended, in a pile of consumed brands; another discarded item added to that stock of used-up containers, bottles and the hungry kid trying to snatch meal from Romesh, lying helpless...

"Carrying two lunch boxes, Romesh?"

"Second box for a new friend."

"Ms. Prem?"

"A top secret."

"I know all your friends, buddy."

"This treat for a pal, very special!"



Sunil Sharma abridged: a college principal who loves dabbling in words---lyrical and prosaic. Managed to publish 23 books so far--- joint and solo; edits Setu online journal published monthly from the USA.

Fiction

A Flash of Lightning

By Anjana Sen

Lightning ripped the night sky, followed by an explosive clap of thunder, as they drove in through the gates.

'Come on honey, let's run for it before the rain comes,' he said, helping her out of the car.

Laughing happily, hands clasped tightly together, father and daughter made a dash towards the club house.

Suddenly she stopped in her tracks and turned her face up to the monsoon sky.

'What is it, Pia?' he asked, as fat drops of warm rain began to drum down upon them. 'Come on, let's go in, or we will both get drenched, and mummy will be cross.'

'Look up and smile daddy,' she said, ignoring him. Pouting and dimpling just as another streak of lightning flashed, she added, 'See? God is taking our photographs.'

Overcome by a stab of fierce love for his curly-haired moppet, he scooped her up, squeezed the little girl to his chest and ran into the club veranda. Where, as he had expected, his wife was waiting, with an expression darker than the thunder outside. Crossly berating him for getting their little girl soaked to the skin.

Two weeks later, he sat, hunched under cover in the snow bunker with the rest of Charlie Company. On standby to fire the first shot, pending orders from the Head Quarter tent a mere five hundred yards behind them.

Major Vicky Mehta had resumed duty as the Company Commander at 63 Infantry Brigade, Nathula, Sikkim, after a month's Annual leave with his family in Delhi.

Nathula Pass was a strategic border point between China and India in the north-eastern sector of the Himalayan range at over 5000 meters above sea level. It was a good posting, despite the high-altitude conditions, and the brigade was commanded by the very strict but genial Brigadier Gupta.

Every now and again, minor skirmishes broke out between the soldiers of the two opposing armies. It was imminent, given their proximity. Specially during the sundown revile, rifles were held that much more firmly, and the officers command on their men a touch keener.

All was well on his return, and Vicky's unit was preparing to move to lower grounds soon.

However, tensions had sparked last week when a Chinese patrol lost their way in a snowstorm and blundered into Indian lines.

The debriefings began as per protocol, and an extra company was deployed along the LOC (Line of Control). The Brigade Commander conducted these briefings personally along with his Unit Colonels. Army Headquarters in Delhi had been notified, but they had faith in the commander, and let him deal with the matter himself.

Indeed, just last night, at the mess over pre-dinner drinks, Vicky had been cornered by the Brigadier, who enquired after his wife and Pia. He had been quite amused by the story about God taking photographs and proceeded to recount a few anecdotes of his own children when they were little. This was SOP, standard operating procedure, the Old Dog believed in the personal touch.

On a serious note, he had said to the small cluster of officers, that the Chinese soldiers were happy in isolated barracks, being entertained by Bollywood movies, and would be escorted back to the LOC at 0900hrs the next day.

However, events took a dangerous turn when the three Chinese soldiers overthrew the orderly who brought them breakfast and managed to run out before being apprehended, pinned to the ground, and returned to the barracks. This time, with a lot less courtesy. But not before they had screamed out in their language, loud enough for their own army men to hear. Afterall, the Chinese ranks were lined along their side of the LOC too.

This soon escalated to an angry volley of abuse from both sides, neither understanding the others' language. Officers charged in with more troops, to calm the situation, while the wireless scrambled to notify Command Headquarters.

The General was choppered into the brigade, and similar frenetic activity was visible on the other side. It had now become a matter of political diplomacy, as shots had been fired, and neither was willing to retreat first.

Vicky, looking through the binoculars, could see Major Xian on the other side, placating his men, the same as Vicky was. Xian was a good guy, Vicky thought. Some months ago, they had exchanged cigarettes and smiles, and made small talk in pidgin

English. That was back in the spring when they were both on flag checkpoint duty.

A plan exploded in his mind.

Thinking quickly, he motioned his signals man over and called the HQ tent on the wireless.

'Request permission to see you, sir,' he said to Brigadier Gupta.

Captain Verma scuttled over to take his place, as Vicky tried to explain his plan to the senior officers in the tent.

'Dammit Major, it's too risky,' the General said.

'I know this man, sir,' Brigadier Gupta spoke up quietly. 'If he thinks he can do it, I'm prepared to back him.'

'Two minutes, that's all we give you boy,' he said. 'Get your best sniper to give you cover, and good luck.'

'Jai Hind, sir,' Vicky said, saluting smartly before leaving.

Taking the three Chinese soldiers with him, he marched the short distance to the LOC with small deliberate steps. All four men had their hands in the air.

With every rifle from both armies pointed at them, Vicky made eye contact with Major Xian, indicating he should come forward too.

The two men conversed then. They needed to shout, but the wind which had picked up a tempo of its own was louder than their words, and no one heard what transpired.

Through their high vis binoculars, the senior officers could see the two majors meet halfway into No Man's Land, shake hands, and... were they exchanging wallets? Surely not!

Major Batra, returned to his bunker, and gradually the armies retreated to normal positions.

Later that night, the Brigadier asked what everyone wanted to know,

'What DID you say to the Chinese officer?'

'Sir, I asked him how his little girl was. You see, his daughter is five, just like my Pia, and we had compared photos before.'

Outside the mess, lightning flashed again, before the thunder exploded.

All the officers looked out and smiled.