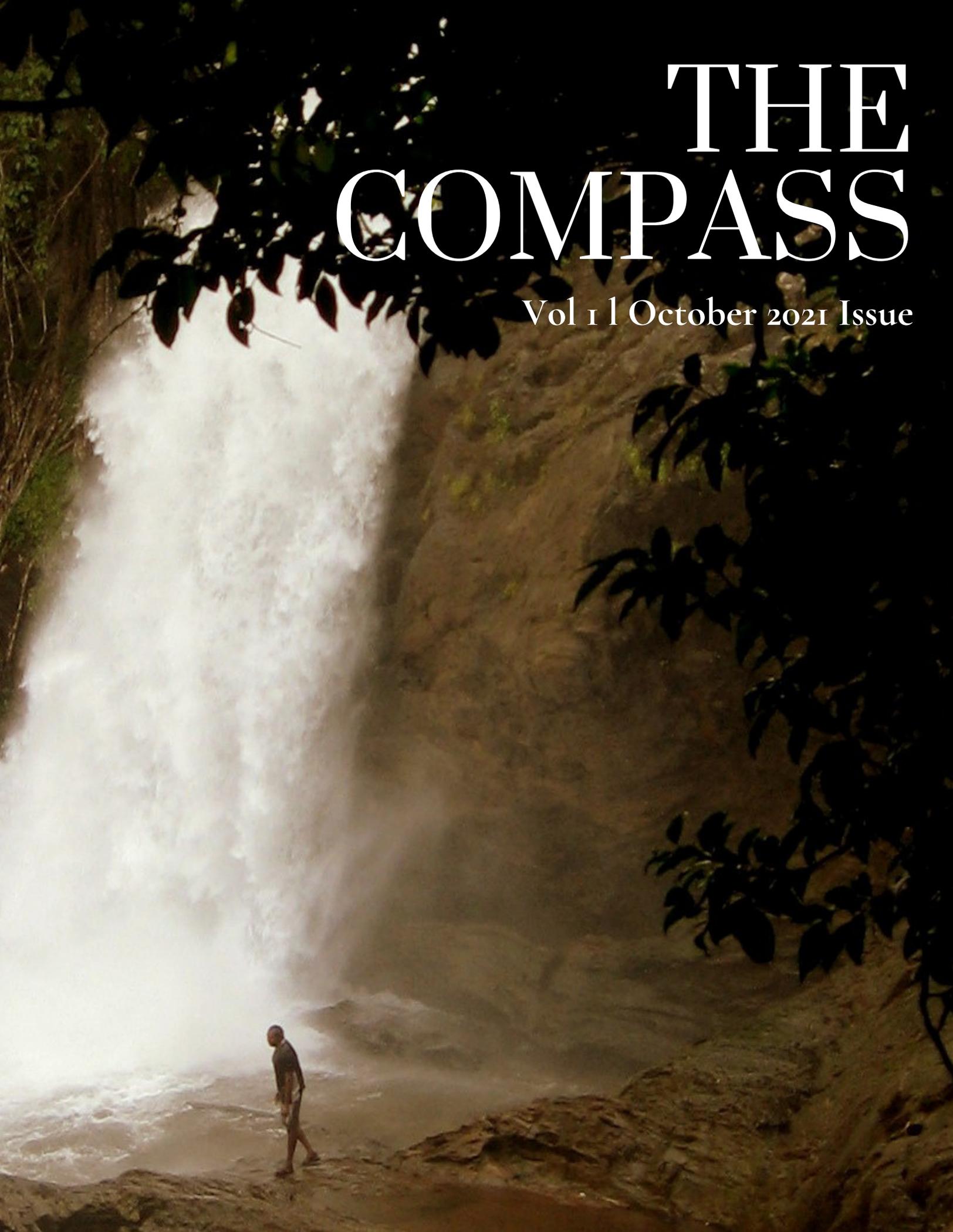


THE COMPASS

Vol 1 | 1 October 2021 Issue



Editor's Note

This fall season, we present to you the first issue of our literary magazine. *The Compass* is more than just a magazine; it is an insight that spans the globe. *The Compass* is a concept that entangles the entire world with a single string. Being a part of *The Compass* has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. I am so grateful to be working with such lovely people to capture life in a magazine.

We have an entirely devoted team of people who are committed to making a positive impact on the world through their work. The love we have for one another helps us to walk through the thorns and collect those lovely roses and embed them into our magazine.

The world's most creative minds have collaborated with our magazine to bring you a collection of the best pieces of art, poems, stories, and articles. A heartfelt thank you to everyone who took the time to submit their work to our magazine. Our magazine would not be possible without your help. You all are the nurturers of *The Compass*.

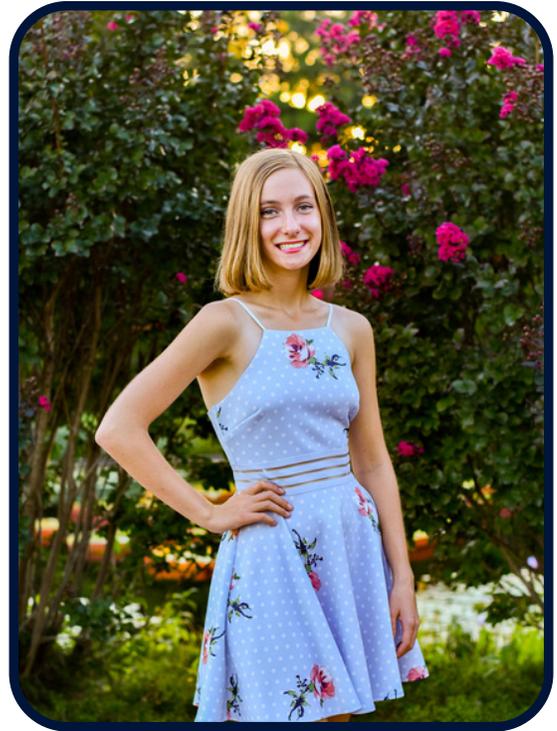
Finally, I dedicate this magazine to all those who strive to be the best versions of themselves and make a difference in the world. I hope you have a good time with this issue. I hope you find ways to stay connected to *The Compass*, a magazine that is dedicated to making the world a better place to live in. And, lastly, I would like to express gratitude to our dear readers for associating with us. We promise to strive hard to bring you the best pieces with every issue of *The Compass*.

- Lubna Khanam

Meet the Founder

Kate Wexell is the Founder and Executive Director of The Compass. She is currently a piano teacher living near St. Louis in the United States and the author of two poetry books. Having grown up experiencing the culture of a small Swedish town where her grandparents live, she has been fascinated with understanding other cultures and lifestyles.

Kate created The Compass as a way to spread awareness about culture, identity, religion, history, and language so that people can experience different perspectives.



Cover Design

This edition's cover was created by Dr. Anupama Sadasivan. The photo, entitled "Inner Strength," depicts the Soochipara Waterfalls in Kerala, India. She believes that the falls represent Mother Nature and the pervading essence of motherhood.

Sadasivan is a Lecturer of Psychology at the University of Kerala, where she is from. She loves to observe and showcase the world around her through photography, poems, and short stories. She has multiple literary and academic works to her credit.

Kerala

by Dr. Anupama Sadasivan

Tucked away in a corner,
Like two ice cream cones kissing each other,
There is a place famed to be God's very own.
Riddled with sea breeze and mango showers,
Golden sand and sunsets abound,
Rivers and lakes like veins criss-cross,
Ghats frilling the beautiful borders,
The place lay encrusted for a soulful tryst;
A place abundant in diversity,
Geographically and culturally.
Greenery all around, famed for its coconut trees.
There's a marvelous place known as Kerala.
It is said that the land was born
When the warrior sage threw his axe across the sea,
The water parted ways to show the blessed land.
Famed for its hospitality as much as its festivities,
People here speak many tongues and worships many Gods, old and new;
The land of abundance welcomed kings and queens to its folds in history.
The explorer found his way to it from across the seven seas,
Famed for its spices and black gold.
The birthplace of many saints, reformers, poets, and artists,
Not a surprise considering the enriched surroundings.
Lucky indeed are we for a chance to behold its beauty.

Sadasivan is a Lecturer of Psychology at the University of Kerala, where she is from. She loves to observe and showcase the world around her through photography, poems, and short stories. She has multiple literary and academic works to her credit.

Compassion
by Yashika Tiwari



A Travelogue, "Let's Travel India" by Saptarshi Bhowmick

March, *March*,

Starting from my home, the easternmost coordinate of India,
Arunachal Pradesh, and with the militants of Dong village,
I marched on.

Towards the north as the wind carried me by monsoon breeze,
I reached Kashmir, white as the emblem of snow, it rewrites
the history of subaltern dominance, by many dynasties and kings.
With them, I shared a meal.

Then moved on and took a bypass on Western Himalayas,
dry like the pot in the desert, the air leaves dead marks on our
skin,
only to make us realize we reached Kutch in Ghuar Mota.
On distance, we stayed.

Know not what sap took our zeal, we feel empty like sand.
The desert, making it fulfilled, remained blank yellow though grand
in the austere eyes of Gujrat, we regained our ambition.
Now it's time to go down.

So down that, we reach the black waters of Ross Island;
the Indian Ocean in name, it is famous all over the world
but here we measure the water by the lives it once took.
Many millions or more and alas! I lost count.

Still, I exist in this tiresome journey of our venerated country.
One mightn't have noticed me because I flow in Ganga,
in Desert Sand, in Monsoon Current, and I fall upon
your lap and sleep.

Like I share no part in it,
the stage is not for me, there are others well-suited for that.
I rather belong to the readers, in their applause and silence.
With many, I exist in that darkness from where the light of the
stage still shines.

The Countryside in My Heart

Holding a Deep Breath *Sniff! *

Ah!

The aroma of three miles of mustards,
mixed with benomyl,
the mellowing sun with muscular heat,
stayed the same how I left it.
The birds following in vain, my ruptures,
subsiding a notion to return,
Wondering if they remember me or not.
I will commemorate my blessing to thee!
These celestial roads, if I recall correctly,
as vexatious for their gloom and mud;
the patchy sludge holding down
our same monochromatic livelihood_
Hens running back and forth,
my senses are to be so.
When a familiar voice will cry out my name,
emotions also fluctuate, as it goes.

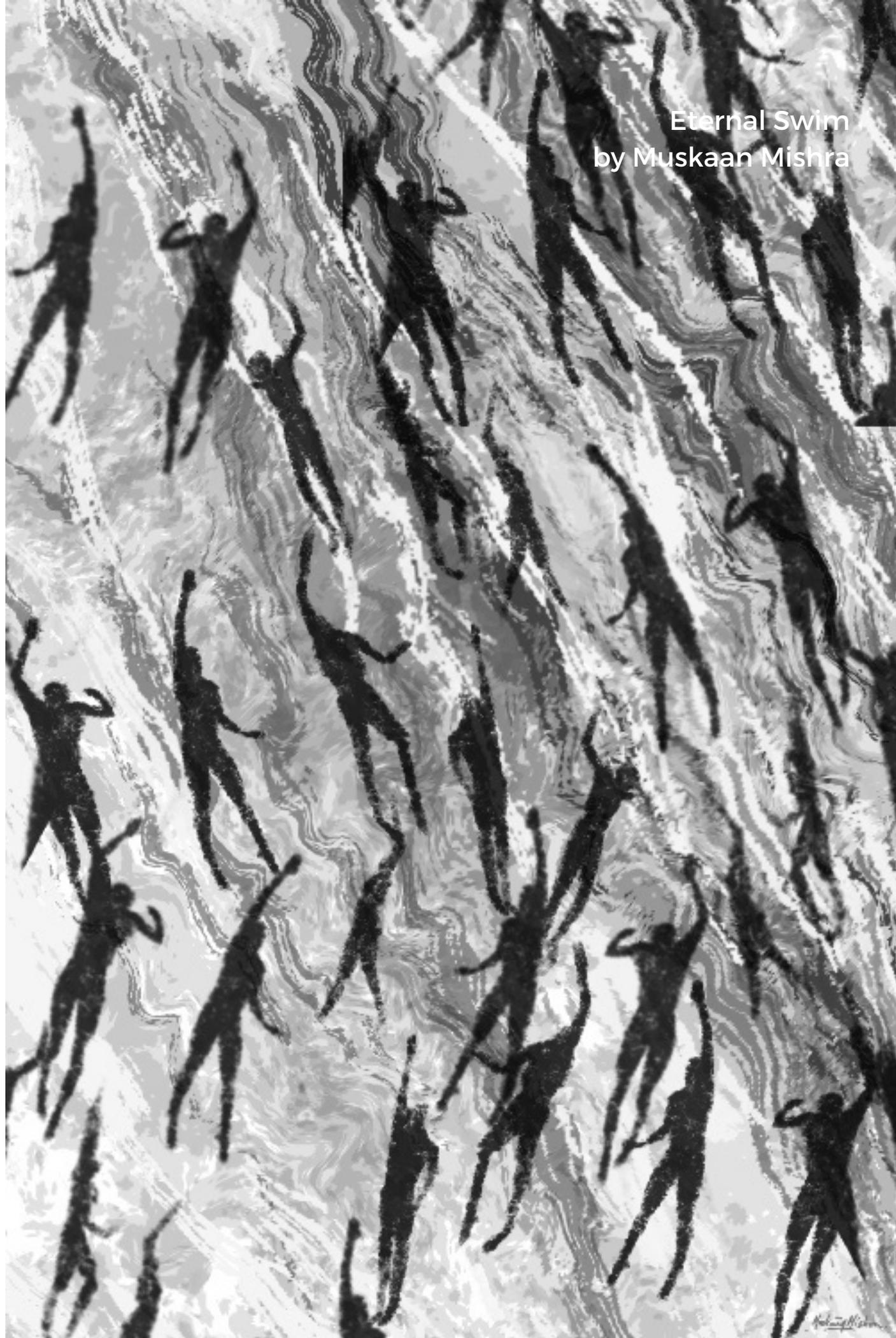
After I take this turn, right from that moor,
no more concrete to interrupt my sight.
The city-cacophony is long gone,
in oblivion, I search for my home;
the walls standing long without any support,
the comfort of yesterday, all lost,
only a skeleton of heart-warming
vestibule for uncanny rupture of life lies.

I will come again after 10 years or more,
down to the memory lane of Origins.
Know that the land may forget,
but the bond is all that will remain;
then to see with the same eyes of today
a Foreign Scenery of perpetual change.
Nature would vow to have me in peace,
a living soul of the motherland;
in heaven, the grace might come

to the Yester-fields of mustards.
It is an honour to answer the shout,
three scores and ten will not be enough,
I need more,
I need hundreds of years or infinity
in the station to relish my remembrance.
If so, then I will be at peace;
in a menace to this penetrated forlorn,
and the day will certainly come for me
to join the eternal solitary Bliss of Nature.

Saptarshi Bhowmick is a thinker from Berhampore, India. He is known for his bilingual poetry and has been internationally published. Some of his publications include The Rainbow Poems, Tofu Ink Arts Press, The Antonym, and MOIDA.

Eternal Swim
by Muskaan Mishra



Muskaan Mishra

Water Tastes Like by Akansha Patil

Water tastes saline

like the pickles
my grandmother made
and left me with
as I bid adieu to
her and my village

I eat/drink it every day
with gratitude

Water tastes earthy

like the mud
I had all over my face
every time I wandered
in the garden alone
as a kid

I gulp down an entire
bottle of water
and still, look for more

Water tastes tangy

like the tomato chutney
my family accompanies
a plate of khichdi with

alone, I dampen my
memories with every
sip of water

Water tastes sour

like yogurt -
an essential member,
a constant
on a table of change

I return home
a glass of water awaits,
always.

Akansha Patil is a 20-year-old culinary student who loves crafting poems and striking conversations with strangers through writing. Her poetry celebrates, mourns, screams, nurtures, breathes, and grows within her.



SHE

by Dr. Anupama Sadasivan

Humanity VS. Nature

by Afreen Shanavas

it's the end as you know it
the prophesied catastrophe
something akin to
Armageddon
you lose every hope because
you already lost
when you ignored every
caveat
this was a battle against the
forces of nature
against the tectonic plates
and swirling eddies,
the thicket of roots and
sprawling grasslands
myriad of life
now it's a wasteland in the
throes of extinction
you're no longer the master
of your destiny
once you were, but you
chose not act
chose not to see
now look what you've done

Not Your Woman

You're the revolution

my words don't gracefully slip through my parted mouth
I drop the 'good girl' facade and shout into the abyss
and for once, I felt myself; truly and completely
all the bottled-up emotions let loose a cathartic deluge
trousers on my back, I protest, stop apologizing, stop accepting
I don't let the suffocating patriarchy inundate me with recuses

You're a warrior

I load my 'loud' opinions into the chamber; pull the trigger
watch as the ammo sear your thick skin; wallow in the music
of your screams; today, we are the vampires; today we conquer
the monsters; today, we suck your blood; today we watch you
burn at the stake.

Afreen Shanavas was born in India, but grew up in the United Arab Emirates where she was inspired by Hollywood movies, books, and authors like J.K. Rowling to start writing. Her writing has been featured in anthologies such as A Melange of Memories, Thrive, The Unheard Voices, Verses of Love, Remember the Roses, among others. When she isn't reading, she can be found cycling, playing badminton, or scrolling through Instagram.

The Moon's Love Song

by Ambirneya Kannan

All those nights on the dreadful sky
For the gravel that shattered every high;
I abode there hopelessly for my sly.

It started with the love for the brown eye;
The orange sky again became creamy blue,
For the gravel that shattered every high.

The creamy blue whirled to the doves that fly;
I thought of you again without any ado
And I abode there hopelessly for my sly.

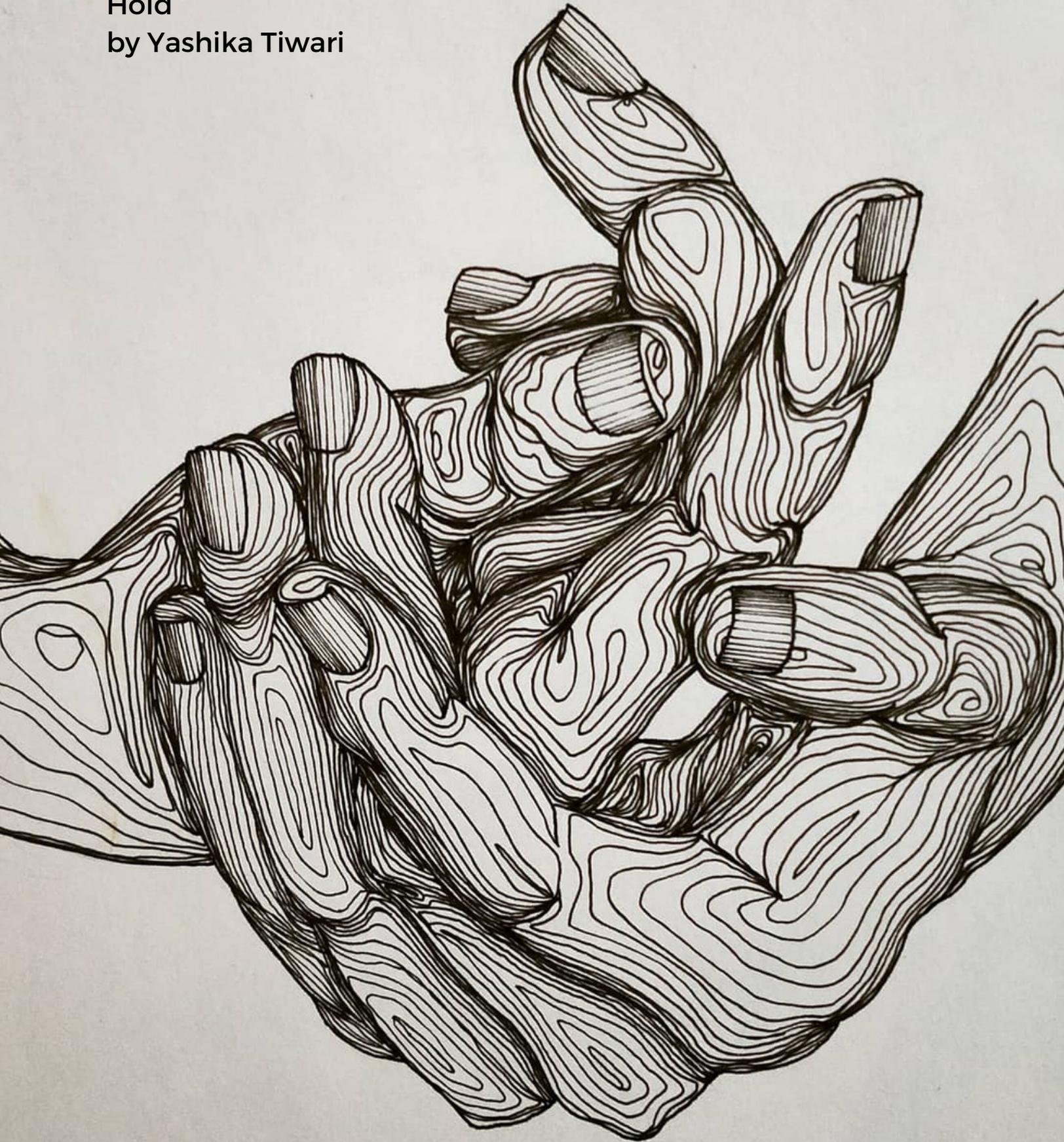
That white dove fell into the ink of intense sky;
That made me feel like a little fresh dew
For the gravel that shattered every high.

The dreary ink got withered to black dye;
I was again left brutally there without any clue,
I abode there hopelessly for my sly.

Which soul is there without any awry?
As I fell deeply into those eyes of ecru
And my nerves don't dare to say goodbye;
(Oh! All those nights on the dreadful sky)

Ambirneya Kannan is a poet, short story writer, and teacher, having received a degree in business administration from Madras University. She is a published author of two poetry books and has been a co-author of many anthologies. She is a lover of traveling, beaches, the woods, drawings, and multitasking.

Hold
by Yashika Tiwari



Beauty, A Lot of Us Mistook

by Aroshee Gandhi

Beauty isn't in how you look,
A lot of us always mistook.
Never let the judgments
Make you feel low,
For they don't know,
How else to justify
the comparison they do,
Other than to let the level stoop.
May you be bold,
With a tender heart and soul.
May you be as lethal as fire,
Yet as calm as the sea.
Because beauty isn't in what we see,
It lies in all our beliefs.
A face might lie,
Hide in disguise,
But there's so much time,
That one might hide,
Behind that fake smile.
Beauty isn't in how you look,
A lot of us always mistook.

Aroshee Gandhi holds a bachelor's degree in journalism and mass communication. She currently works as a teacher and subversive social blogger. Her genre mostly occupies quotes and articles which she displays on various social media platforms. While she aspires to be a journalist, she also loves dancing and painting.

Marienplatz, Munich, Germany



Unity in Diversity

by Saranya S.

The dresses we wear are in vibrant colours,
As our ideas and opinions blooming in mind,
Our nation is the junction
Of diverging foods among
The beautiful cities across,
Our foods are delicious
Mixed with love and spices,
Multiple Deities majestically stand up
Showering their blessings,
Architectures inside the shrines,
Represent how our ancient people lived,
Different languages people speak,
Among that smile and love is
The common language they share,
Distinct forms of music we have,
Which is felt with the heart
Despite the language barrier,
Discrete types of dances are available,
Which is expressed with unique talent and passion,
Even though we see diversity in everything,
We are united by a nation.

Saranya is an IT professional who writes to express their thoughts in their free time.

by Simrandeep Kaur



Unaccustomed Earth

by Amandeep Kaur

On that unaccustomed earth,
I wandered, I wandered alone...
When I was a kid I didn't have any idea,

Regarding my plight,
I was content among all my cousins,
With whom spending time was fun,
Then I realized I was caged,
When I asked for permission,
To visit my friends and have some fun,
It got denied because of being a girl child,
There I wandered, I wandered alone...

On that unaccustomed earth.
A woman is a woman's worst enemy,
I found that true while observing,
My paternal granny,
And her ways to treat my mommy,
A mother's love wasn't a bread's loaf,
Which could be divided equally,
To all the children she bore,
I experienced that to my heart's core,
While noticing the tricks,
My paternal granny played with her lads,
Who were busy in considering her 'The God'.
There I wandered, I wandered alone.....

On that unaccustomed earth.
I wasn't accustomed to that world,
Which the teachers, the books, the people talked about,
It was unaccustomed to me,
And there I wandered, I wandered alone.....

Now after getting married I felt safe,
I was on my own land as it was described by the patriarchs,
A woman's actual place was her in-laws' domain,
I was amused,

I was content,
That was my domain,

That was my continent,
I craved for happiness,
I craved for equality,
I craved for freedom,
I craved for authority,
THUSSS.....

My expectations' balloon got collapsed,
As I was breathing under the other monarch,
I felt suffocation,
As I was on unaccustomed earth,
There I wandered, I wandered alone.....

We talk about Feminism,
We glorify today's woman,
But still the world;
Either external or internal,
Is unaccustomed to her.

But the woman never stops.....
She wanders, she wanders alone.....
To find her real worth,
On this unaccustomed earth.

*(this poem's title is based on the short story collection "Unaccustomed Earth" by
American author Jhumpa Lahiri)*

The Stoical Man

He was standing near the sea-shore,
The sullen wind was awake,
He had his eyes closed,
As his heart was fit to break.
With a deep sigh, he tried to relieve,
With eyes closed, he saw a narrow road,
Gloomy and dark, walking all alone,
Lost in his thoughts, he touched his pocket,
To find his phone.
What was the time? How could he know?
With a whirlwind, suddenly he reminded,
What was the fun? He couldn't run.
He had to fight with that plight,
He couldn't let himself fall,
Although cancer closes all.

Amandeep Kaur has the educational degree of MA Hons. (Eng.), MCA, M.Sc (C. Sc.) and PGDCA. She has worked as a computer lecturer and assistant professor of English. The pandemic has given her time to write her thoughts in the form of poems, short stories, and blogs. Now, she works as an assistant professor and trilingual blogger.



Cathedral Basilica of St. Louis, St. Louis, United States

The Seasons of Us

by Colette Mbariko

I watched the seasons change us,
first came the *spring*,
the incipient of it all, so virtuous.
As the timorous *April* rain fell ever so delicate,
a vivid memory encapsulated my mind, the infatuation.
It was so suffocating, but it was so new.
Like a blooming tulip on a unadorned field of green,
the exchange of passing glances,
the smell of anticipation in the air,
I wonder if you felt it too?

I watched the seasons change us,
the *summer* had arrived,
liberating felicity, bright yellow rays.
I took your hand in mine as the balmy *July* sun laid a kiss upon our blushing faces,
Those were our halcyon days, the sweeter nectar of nothing but pure freedom,
there is no place I would rather be.
In your arms, I felt untouchable,
It was you and me in our own sanctuary of affection,
you wounded me, I fell for you.

I watched the seasons change us,
the autumn appeared,
The once verdant leaves embodied now the wilting brown,
But yet the kisses you lay upon my body are foreign to me.
As the October air grows cold, you grow colder, my worries flood my mind,
But when I look into your eyes, I still feel nothing but love
The nagging whispers that torture me disappear with the passing wind,
Because your heart belongs to me and I know we are going to be alright.

I watched the seasons change us,
the *winter* is here,
the esoteric white, the bitter end.
The *December* chill is unforgiving, and sadly for me, you are too.
The snow fell soundlessly as you left through the door that morning,
taking all the burning tenderness in me with you,
I thought to myself this was it, the denouement.
Underneath my heart of fire, only ice, nothing more.
The gaze that once rendered me weak, fills me with cold, cold hatred.
I watched you leave, and I let you.

I watched the seasons change us,
Nothing else remains.

Colette grew up in the city of Brooklyn and from the time she was able to start reading, books have always been an important part of her life. When Colette, her mother, and sister settled in Ontario, Colette realized she had a new found love for poetry. Her main inspirations come from Maya Angelou and Oscar Wilde and she is deeply interested in the Toronto poetry scene. She one day hopes to become a published poet as well as a licensed therapist. Her Instagram handle is @colettembariko

Three Poems

by Ivan de Monbrison

1)

I write backward so they don't read me.

I have to write.

Night Day.

But I'm afraid to be read.

Wolves with human heads roam the street, killing.

I see corpses from my window.

Silence is made up of words that have never been spoken.

2)

The sky, wounded with a knife, is bleeding.

You cry behind the wall.

Silence is a glass full of blood.

I drink slowly.

You sing a song that I don't know

But it reminds me of my childhood.

3)

Oblivion, exile, night, everything

The violence of the world.

You are dying without knowing who you were.

It's a drama.

Tomorrow I'll go sing among the wolves, I'll go dance with them.

And then they eat me up without saying a word.

Ivan de Monbrison is a writer from Paris.



Hundertwasserhaus, Vienna, Austria

Two Poems

by Sneha Das

1)

We didn't order curd rice at fancy restaurants.

Curd rice stroked with pink pomegranate seeds, black mustard seeds, cream cashews or green grapes.

No, we didn't order curd rice at those fancy restaurants.

But curd rice was a staple meal prepared in Amma's kitchen.

It was always there on my plate, the cold white cream mixed with white fluffy rice, at lunch and dinner.

You should have two spoons of curd rice at the end of every meal. It has good bacteria to aid your digestion. Papa always said, and sneaked in three pieces of banana chips to make my eating easier.

Some days

Amma would pack curd rice in that hot box. She knew I wouldn't have it with lemon or mango pickle. Although she never understood why. I also don't understand why. So, she would keep 4 concentric circles of fried brown murukku to help me eat it.

It tastes nice.

I don't order curd rice at fancy restaurants.

I have it at home. I mix the thick white sour cream with warm fluffy white rice. I always have it with four or maybe five concentric circles of fried murukku in my most huggable pajamas.

The sour curd spreads sweetness into my heart when melting on my pink tongue.

2)

When I was a
5 year old,
I remember my
grandmother
sprinkling the
white talc from
the cylindrical
orange tin of
Cuticura on to
her wrinkled
palms. It
always spilled
in excess, as
though a triangular
pile had been
deposited on
her wrinkled palms,
she would apply it
on her face and neck,
filling the whole room
at the brink of sunset
with a soothing scent.
She would lovingly
call me, to pat my
soft skin with the
remaining powder
but I would just
scoop them into

a pinch and make
them into a white
dough in my
small world of
plastic kitchen set.
Today, I have a
little more love
for my dodda's
white talc in
that orange tin.

When I was a
9 year old, I
gave a Bharatanatyam
recital on stage
wearing a silk parrot
green saree with the
maroon border, painted
intricately in the beautiful
golden threads of Zari.
My feet tied with the
bronze beads of salangai
would tap on the large
stage and my ankles
would twist to create the
perfect adavu and my
whole body would
work towards the
proper aramandi with

my Alta colored
hands on hips.
Today, I have a
little more love
for the golden
beads on my
salangai.

When I was a
10 year old, I
drew a hemispherical
diya with the flame
and filled them with
earthen brown and
bright orange colors
with its wick sketched
slightly in yellow. It
was hung on the green
board outside my art
classroom.

Today, I have a
little more love
for the forgotten
paints and palette
knives in the unopened
drawer of my desk.

When I was a
19 year old, my

mother decided
to make Paneer
Butter Masala
in her South Indian
kitchen for her beloved
daughter. She had
cut the white block
of paneer into
perfect cubes of
equal dimensions
to dip into the
buttery, chilly red curry
of tomatoes and onions
only to see them dissolve
as scatters in the curry.
Today, I have a
little more love for
that white block
of Paneer and
as always an
infinity more
love for my
dear mother.

Sneha writes poems to translate the chaos of her mind into something beautiful. She has been writing for five years, and enjoys reading.



Alpsee, Germany

The Morning Walk

by Dr. Dipima Buragohain

I walk past the same alleys, trees, houses, and stretches every single morning for a quiet rendezvous, and I discover a new version of myself every time. Birds nest or rest for a while. They come out to see me at times or just stare. We exchange glances, shorter ones, and part our ways.

Through the greens and yellows and rusted browns, tall trees, some arrogant yet accommodating, grab my sight to remind me of a golden past. Some bend across the other side of the path. The greens fail to touch the field, but I hope my vision will let it happen anyway. When the breeze sneezes to my delight and whispers His name on repetition, I feel a telepathic urge to call it and hum, turning it into an old melody.

It was familiar to my soul long before we knew each other. The sun comes, releasing mysteries.

To rest and repeat another day, I return safe and sound to my monotony with a “Ciao, ciao,” to my morning vibes until we meet and greet again.

Dr. Dipima Buragohain is an academician from India and works in China. Motivated to explore new domains of learning, she is constantly engaged in pursuing and publishing academic research work as well as creative writing. Her curious mind has constantly led her through creativity in the form of poems, short stories and novellas, both published and unpublished.



Bishop Hill Colony Hotel, Bishop Hill, United States

Beauties of the North-East

by Hritika Bhattacharya

The North-Eastern part of India is the most beautiful and made with utmost scenic beauty and creativity by the Almighty. It is a treat to the eyes of the tourists who visit this beautifully crafted place. The place is not only beautiful but the people residing there have a rich and diverse culture.

The traditions and cultures followed in this part of the country are a thing to behold just like the beautiful tapestries by the almighty in the country. The various tribes residing in the north-eastern states add to making the culture rich and diverse in its way.

Now, when we talk about the culture of a place, the most vibrant way to celebrate the culture is the wedding rituals of that place. The various rituals followed in the wedding ceremonies reflect omnipotently the cultures and traditions of that particular tribe or community of people.

North-East, because of its diverse tribes and communities, displays an array of beautiful wedding traditions which are very less known and unique in their beautiful way. Each tribe follows its tradition and each tradition is unique and beautiful.

The first wedding tradition which is unique for the other parts of the country is said to be similar to the neighboring country Burma, modern-day Myanmar, and Tibet. It is also observed that weddings in this state, which is Arunachal Pradesh, differ from the 20 and more tribes which exist in the state of Arunachal Pradesh.

So the similar trait which is said to be common among these 20 tribes of Arunachal Pradesh is a concept called *Bride Price*. Now, people may confuse this with the ill tradition called *Dowry* which being illegal is still practiced in many parts of the country, but here the idea of Bride Price is that in these wedding traditions the daughter of the family is considered as an economic asset, therefore the groom's family provide are the bride's family with *mithu* (A type of cattle), fabric, and cookware. All these are given for accepting her into their family.

This is a beautiful practice to make the family of the bride feel how precious their daughter is. It is different from the dowry tradition because the dowry tradition is actually practiced to make the bride's family feel that their daughter is a burden on the groom's family which is being compensated by giving enormous gifts to the groom's family.

Now the argument here also arises that the bride price is also more or less the same, only the parties are changed. But it is not so. The primary difference here being that dowry is an imposed ill tradition that is practiced and it is not a part of modern tradition. It should be made clear that giving gifts and fulfilling the demand for the gifts are two different things and the latter here is the ill practice of dowry.

Now coming back to the tradition of bride price, here, the ritual says that the groom's family wants to make the bride's family feel special and privileged that they are the parents of a girl child. Therefore, there are no demands for the gifts, but rather it is a self-initiated tradition which is practiced for lasting happiness.

Now another beautiful and indigenous custom that is followed in the Nagamese Weddings is that tradition that is followed in the AO Tribe. So the

tradition here is that from the boy's side of the village, one of the family has to adopt the Bride-to-be. This gesture is incorporated to make the bride-to-be feel safe in the distant land, also this allows the bride to know and love a new family as well.

Now the AO Tribe weddings also have this beautiful tradition where the bride is given a companion or best friend called *tembar*, who is supposed to be her companion in the bride's good and bad times. The beautiful part here is that these 2 practices of providing a *tembar* and adoption of the bride are done by the groom before the wedding takes place.

Here, an argument may arise: why does the bride need a family adoption or a companion as the new age brides are self-sufficient and can take care of themselves? Well, that is justified, but the idea behind these two concepts practiced in Nagaland is not to make or look at the bride as the weak or the vulnerable, but to look like something which is super precious and therefore needs special care and attention.

Now, if we look at it from the historical point of view, princesses were accompanied by their maids after marriage. Their few essential things like the cow whose milk she prefers and many more things like that were sent along as well, not because she cannot manage alone, but to make her feel and look more self-sufficient. It shows that if her husband's family or native place has some essentials that are unavailable, she still has this resource. Similarly, in this tradition of Nagamese wedding, the bride-to-be is adopted by a family from the groom's side, and is provided a companion just to make her feel comfortable and at ease.

The various wedding traditions of the north-east are unique and beautiful with a very strong message to the world that weddings are not to make the

bride's family pressurize but as a ritual to celebrate, to expand their families, and to add more people to their circle of love and affection. These wedding traditions clearly reflect the rich culture of the North-East.

Hritika is currently pursuing a B.A.B.Ed 4-year integrated course from the Regional Institute of Educational, NCERT. She views herself as an amateur writer who wishes to write and embed her thoughts forever.

Everything to Survival

by Rhea Bagchi

He came in looking flushed and breathless, mostly owing to his mad dash through the work rush hour of New York. His arms, laden with steaming coffee orders and bursting files, throbbed and did not help his predicament. Identical buildings rose before him and he felt a sudden rush of satisfaction as he pushed through familiar revolving doors, knowing that not many made it to the prestigious Twin Towers fresh out of university. Not even on an internship.

He hastened about depositing coffee cups left and right: Chloe's pure caffeine with no cream and no sugar. She smiled at him in helpless gratitude, chugging the scalding java with one hand and answering a call with the other. She waved him away.

A strange gut feeling made him halt and turned his gaze out of the window at the other tower.

Foreboding made him peer closer- the windows were not reflecting the blue of the sky but

rather a dark mass growing by the second. For a short bizarre moment, he was reminded of a vehicle's side-view mirror and the message it imparts- "Objects in the mirror are closer than they appear." No sooner had this thought entered his head that a strong rumble reverberated through the two buildings. Cracks ran up to the top.

A beat of silence.

Everything came crashing down.

Both his life and the opposite tower. Screams echoed. Alarms blared. And he felt ice trickling down his spine and rooting him to the spot. Then the running. But he didn't move. Chloe had gotten in front of him and was yelling at him to move, to run. The caffeine had really helped her, it seemed. There was another resounding crack. It broke through the frost rooting him in place. Heat flooded him and he ran down numerous flights of stairs, uncountable to him as he surrendered himself to the crowd's momentum downwards. Biting winds stung as the doors were thrown open.

Horror.

A grand icon of power turned to rubble, stained with too many of the dead. What monster could do this?!

Survival became second nature. They wove through the debris that was still falling. Running. Out of vicinity. Cleared the zone. And then a weight hit him, perhaps exhaustion and he fell. Darkness spirited him away.

The narrator inched into the spotlight in a wheelchair. "Nearly nineteen years ago, I lost both legs fleeing from Ground Zero. I'm lucky to be alive." He smiled a little. "My mother spoiled me rotten for years after," the smile turned into a grin. "I gained a family though. In survivors. Because we know that beyond the fear, there is just the exhilaration of living. Just gratitude."

Face to Face

A blank word document stared back at me. Almost mocking me for its lack of words. I simply drummed my fingers against the joint's table and bit down a scream. No use attracting needless attention. I flagged down the nearest worker and ordered our usual: a caramel and chocolate milkshake and a double cheeseburger, hoping it would help me arrange my thoughts. Not that this waiter would know our usual, considering it was from nearly ten years ago.

I looked back at the page and sighed. I shut my eyes tight and tried to parse out one sentence. Just one and maybe the rest would come tumbling out. Or the page would just look less empty. I sighed for what seemed like the hundredth time, recognizing a hopeless case from my previous tries to write this particular draft. I had to write. Something from the heart this time around, my editor had suggested. Just ten in the morning, and already exhaustion was egging on my blooming headache. I ended up adding a coffee to my plate.

Today wasn't looking up for me. This book wasn't coming together at all. That much was obvious. I had come here to this cafe hoping to be reminded of our chaotic shenanigans that inevitably landed us in trouble. A combination of great ideas and poker faces. Terrible ones whether it was blue eyes wearing them or brown.

But they just weren't enough to ignite the spark. No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't muster the words to express myself. I tamped down a groan and loosened my ponytail instead of smashing my expensive laptop.

"Excuse me?" A tiny voice came from my right. I blinked, automatically looking up, expecting a waiter with my order. It took me a moment for

a realization to hit that a small voice like that could not possibly belong to a decidedly adult waiter. I looked down and caught sight of chocolate curls first and then crystal blue eyes peeking out from beneath shyly.

About four or five, the boy's small voice matched his stature and its overall effect was

completely adorable. "Excuse me?" He reiterated and I noticed that he was trying very hard to enunciate every syllable of the words correctly. I melted, instantly endeared.

I angled myself towards him. "Yes?" The boy met my brown with his clear, soulful blue. Memories assaulted me. I could see the same blue eyes, twinkling soulfully at me in my recollections. I just couldn't place it for the life of me.

"My mummy wanted to talk to you, if you don't mind." The penny dropped, loud enough that I heard its clinking. His voice had lost its clear pronunciation, but I managed to decipher enough of it.

I understood and I smiled at him, hopeful and apprehensive. I stood to greet the approaching woman with a familiar hug that we both stepped into with instant ease. She looked older but her blue mirror eyes were timeless. Memories wove warp and weft. The spark, one I had been desperately tailing, ignited. With just one look, everything seemed to twist into place. One conversation could work more wonders.

"I have a tale to share."

"Can I share it too?"

"How much time do you have?"

"For you? All the time in the world."

"I paid last time. So, lunch on you?"

It all made sense. One can set the surroundings, eat the same food, hear the same white noise of chatter around. But all that does is ease the physical senses. Eyes. Ears. Tongue. Skin.

What about the mind and heart? One cannot fool them. Maybe I couldn't write about our friendship is because I know that the ties that joined us had been left too slack. Maybe it was time to close the distance between two drifted friends.

Rhea is a 17-year-old writer from Bangalore, India. She has been recognized in the Katha Utsav competition at both a state and national level. Several of her poems have been featured in the anthology A Postbox: A Collection of Open Letters and her poetry book Thoughts Diverge; To Wear My Heart On My Sleeve. She can be found using her Instagram handle @kaleidoscopic_view.



Colonial Sod House, Worthington, United States

Forget Me Not

by Heather Drolet

It is her eyes that never cease to make Vano's heart catch in his throat. Not the tiny fingers that grip his thumb while he rocks her, or the soft coos she rewards him with after a lullaby, or the way her mouth eases into a grin when she first sees him approach in the night, although these things do make his heart swell. It is his sister's eyes that capture him wholly. They are the eyes of a warrior, yet also a peacekeeper. A cunning snow leopard, and a wise, omniscient owl.

Tonight, as he has every night for the past four months, Vano plants a kiss on Rosella's dark crown of curls and whispers, "*nu mă uita.*" *Forget me not.* Glistening like two tiny moons in the night, her eyes follow him intently as he crosses the moonlit room with stealth, weaving in and out among the rows of cribs between her and the window. As he moves, his shadow is cast on the nursery walls, rising and falling to the rhythm of his nervous heartbeat, each chip in the pale mint green paint a staccato of emotion.

The others watch Vano, too, from their backs. Their eyes are not moons but black holes, staring without knowing, looking without seeing. Some are older than Rosella, having arrived months before her, and some younger. But none can sit or smile or coo the way she can. They lay in silence on urine-stained sheets and wait. For what, Vano is not sure. He is there only for Rosella.

He reaches the small window at the far end of the nursery and glances at the moon, crescent-shaped and high in the sky. It is late. Daylight will soon arrive and with it, the nurses.

Vano glances back at Rosella one last time to see her gaze fixed on his wiry form. He pushes the window up and a gentle breeze of fresh air punctuates the odor of sour milk and unwashed linens. Propping the window with the stick he has brought for this purpose, he scrambles onto the nearby tree branch with ease. Grateful that the few faint creaks from the closing window behind him can easily be mistaken for bats in the night, he turns to watch Rosella curl her tiny body onto the mattress, clean sheets beneath her, content to wait another day for his return. Her eyelids flutter once. Twice. And then they close.

Vano silently descends from the tree. Keeping company with the shadows of squat houses and storefronts, he cuts through the city to the alley where a makeshift bed awaits him. Living on the streets of Sighișoara for the past four months has taught him many things, the importance of both stealth and shelter high among them. He knows that before he can rescue Rosella, he must find a safer place to call home. But for now, the cardboard box with its damp, musty newspaper bedding will have to do.

Small for his eleven years, Vano fits himself into the box, closes the outer flap, and drapes his father's old, quilted jacket over his body. The jacket, still smelling of alcohol, comforts Vano. Not because it reminds him of Tata, who spent his days in a drunken stupor and his nights alternating between bouts of violence and fitful sleep, but because it feels like the embrace of his mother – warm, and soft. With enough effort he can detect the faint scent of the lavender she would dry for her tea, and this gives him peace.

His mother had been his protector and confidant until the night Rosella was born. He remembers the Romani village *moașă* who wrapped his newborn sister too tightly in his old blanket. The pink marks on her tender cheeks from the rough wool. The metallic scent of stale blood. The piercing shriek of Rosella's first cry. His father, emotionless in the corner of their one-room shanty. The *moașă* whispering something about evil spirits and weakness and

the baby coming too soon. Vano had gone to his mother then, seeking to comfort her but also, selfishly, seeking comfort in return. As always, she had not disappointed. Her arms, weakened but still able to wrap around his shoulders, gave him strength. Her last words burned upon his soul: “nu mă uita.”

In the weeks following his mother’s death, Vano had cared for Rosella to the best of his ability, shielding her from his father’s spells of rage the way his mother had done for him. Now, as he lay listening to a rat skitter across the top of the cardboard home he ran away to, his anger at his father’s decision to put Rosella in the orphanage is renewed. A single tear parts the dirt on his cheek before it hits the newspaper below, blurring the ink of words he cannot read. He vows as night disappears into dawn, that Rosella will be safe in his arms again soon. But first, he must rest.

Vano awakens to the sound of the taxi horns blaring on the Strada Libertății. The train station has come alive with tourists arriving for a day of adventure in the city’s castles and pubs. His best chance at making money is the lunch hour, so Vano rubs the sleep from his eyes, grabs a knife and roll of twine from the pocket of Tata’s jacket, and hurries from his alley hideaway toward the mayor’s stately riverside manor. The primar is known for his flower obsession; his luscious, fragrant gardens span acres.

Vano ducks under the pristine white fence and seeks out the tender, blue blooms of forget-me-nots. Working swiftly to avoid catching the attention of the gardener, Vano cuts and then fastens bundles of the blossoms together until he has a few dozen ready to sell to the lunch crowd.

It is not stealing, Vano thinks, if you are saving a life.

The best targets are the men with beautiful ladies in their arms. “For your pretty lady,” Vano would say, in passable English, holding out a bouquet of flowers and bowing his head. One quick lookup with a sparkle in his eye would seal the deal.

The ladies would respond with an exclamation: “Oh, he is so sweet!”

The men would respond with their wallets.

Vano sells out of flowers just before the dinner hour. His last bouquet goes to a woman with kind green eyes and amber hair accompanied by a tall, well-dressed man. She is different from the rest. She does not look through Vano as they do but instead sees him. Reaching in her satchel, she finds a bag of nuts and offers it to Vano. His mother had taught him politeness and humility so at first, he declines, but the woman insists, the warmth of her eyes telling him that it will be okay. Vano accepts the offering and hands her the flowers. The man kisses her cheek gently and says, “For the new mother.”

Vano is slightly confused. He sees no child and her belly is not swollen. This thought dissipates, though, as the man pays him and the couple walks toward the hotel across the street. The money goes in his pocket, the nuts into his mouth. He chews slowly, savoring their saltiness, and walks briskly toward the outskirts of the city where the orphanage, an unremarkable two-story building with a dull white exterior and flat rooftop, sits surrounded by small patches of grass and several commanding oak trees.

The linens on the clotheslines conceal Vano’s movement. As he passes rows of sheets and towels and stiff diaper cloths, he pulls down one of each, rolls them tightly, and tucks them into his waistband. When he reaches the tree nearest the building, he hoists his small but strong frame-up, branch by branch, until he is level with the window. It is propped open to the early summer air with a metal pipe; he may not need the stick tonight. Obscured by large oak leaves, Vano observes.

A nurse, her hair pulled into a messy bun, rolls a small cloth and places it next to the head of the child nearest the window. She moves to the next crib and repeats with a second cloth. A third, then fourth. The second nurse follows behind, carrying a tray of green Coca-Cola bottles topped with rubber nipples. She props a bottle on the first rolled cloth, inches from the child's mouth. He squirms to reach the nipple but is unsuccessful, his mind incapable of telling his arms what to do.

The nurses place more bottles, miss more mouths. They are near Rosella. Vano shifts so he can see his sister more clearly. Yesterday she had been able to drink half the milk, her hands grasping the bottle and bringing it to her lips. He has worked with her on this skill for many nights in a row and watching her today, as she repeats this marvel, his pride is immeasurable.

Returning to the first crib, the nurses collect the bottles and cloths. The bottles are left in the small refrigerator by the sink; the babies are left hungry. The women retreat downstairs to watch futbol. Soon, sounds of announcers and cheering crowds and commercials for Juicy Fruit gum waft up to Vano's hiding place.

He waits until the sun sinks behind the city's skyline before clamoring carefully through the window and crossing the room to his sister. In the dimming light, Rosella's eyes brighten at his presence, and she coos a pleasant greeting. He shushes her – the nurses may return if they realize they left the window open – and begins the process of changing her linens. He takes a clean cloth from his waistband and wets it at the sink, careful to let only a slow, noiseless stream of water out of the faucet, and quickly washes her.

He tiptoes to the refrigerator for a bottle and returns to lift her from the crib. Together they slink into the lone rocking chair. He places his cheek on her head, willing the scent of his mother's lavender soap into her curls. They sit

until the bottle is empty and stay for another hour or two. Eventually, Rosella falls asleep in his arms. In the darkness, he hears voices in the stairwell. He swiftly stands and places his sister back in her crib, careful not to wake her. “Tomorrow?” says the first voice.

“Da. And there is a newly orphaned brother mentioned in her file. A runaway. But he eludes them,” replies the second.

“Why don't we get more notice of these things?” The question was hypothetical, the response a grunt.

Vano has just enough time to scramble to the window and lift himself onto the tree branch before the door to the nursery cracks open, letting in a golden beam of light from the stairwell. His heart pounds.

“Tsk, tsk, Daniela,” the first nurse says, adjusting her bun and gesturing toward the window. Vano conceals himself further among the leaves. “The window.”

“Sorry,” Daniela sighs. She moves toward Rosella’s crib and looks down at her sleeping form. “She is clean enough. They will be happy.”

The first nurse closes the window and Vano can no longer hear them. Not because the window blocks their voices, but because the blood rushing to his ears sounds like the cargo train that rumbles into town on Sunday mornings. Why do they concern themselves over Rosella? Who will be happy because she is clean?

Vano spends the night resting in a nook of the oak tree, his back pressed against the rough bark. He does not dare leave his sister. His instincts tell him she is not safe. When the sun rises, he watches the nurses prepare the morning

bottles and perform the once-daily diaper change. Their shift ends soon, and they move slowly.

The nurse, Daniela, is fitting Rosella into a bright blue dress when a dark town car arrives in the driveway. A cloud of dust billows in its wake. Daniela picks up his sister, and at that moment everything clicks.

The car is here to take Rosella.

Vano is frozen to his branch, unable to act as the nurses leave the room with his sister. As soon as she is out of sight, Vano snaps. He lifts the window, no longer caring about any creaking sounds, and pounds through the room. A few infants turn to watch. He swings open the door to the stairwell, bounds down the stairs and around a corner, and runs squarely into a nurse. She shrieks as her limbs and Vano's are tangled together in a knot of surprise. It takes precious seconds to unwind himself.

"My sister!" he screams, pushing the nurse.

Her eyes are wide with shock as she rights herself and yells for Daniela. Vano searches for the exit, opening door after door until he finds the main office, a large metal door just beyond it. Bursting onto the front step he sees the town car driving away and Daniela returning to the building, envelope in hand.

He ignores her shouts and breaks into a run. He moves faster than he has ever moved before, scaling fences and careening through alleyways. Taking all the shortcuts he knows, he rushes headlong for the train station. He catches sight of the car rolling along the Strada Libertății toward the station. The primar's garden is to his left, the station to his right.

Vano scampers under the fence and grabs a fistful of forget-me-nots, the gardener yelling after him and shaking a dirt-covered fist. He ducks back under the fence and darts to intercept the car as it pulls into the train station. The driver, a tall man with a kind, familiar face exits the car. Vano approaches.

“Please sir,” he pleads, breathless, hoping to buy time. “Flowers for your pretty lady?”

The man smiles and looks to the passenger seat, where a woman sits cradling a tentative, tearful Rosella to her chest. He circles the car and opens the passenger door.

“They are beautiful, but I already have some,” the woman says warmly, looking to Vano. He recognizes her green eyes from earlier. “Forget-me-nots. Am I right?”

“Da. Nu mă uita.”

Rosella sits upright at the sound of his voice. Of this phrase. Her eyes, wide and uncertain, find Vano. She squeals in delight.

“Does she...know you?” the woman says, looking between Vano and Rosella.

Vano chokes back tears. The compassion in the woman’s eyes compels him to tell her the truth. “Rosella is my sister,” he says proudly, his small chest puffing out. “I take care of her.”

She looks at Vano. Her eyes glitter. “What a good brother you must be, Vano. We have been looking for you for a while.”

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The man has removed his wallet and three train tickets from his back pocket.

“Darling,” she says to her husband. She holds out her free hand to Vano. It is warm. And soft. “We need another ticket.”

Heather holds a master's degree in education and is currently pursuing a second master's degree in English and creative writing while she lives in New Hampshire. She has worked as a teacher for over twenty years. She is most fulfilled when helping her students find their spark and hopes to write stories that broaden people's perspectives.

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