

SUMMER 2018

October Hill

M A G A Z I N E



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Welcome to October Hill Magazine



Summer evokes a broad spectrum of emotions, thoughts and memories. Each one of us maintains a special relationship with nature's warmest season. There are some who long through the long, cold nights of winter for the warmth, gentle breezes and brightness of summer. Others can barely wait for the heat and humidity to end with the onset of autumn's first breath. Who among us has not had special memories of people, events and experiences in summer?

We asked our writers to reflect upon their own experiences, memories, thoughts and emotions in the season of sun. What they produced was a bounty of writing on their childhood memories and experiences of summer; their relationship with the sun, the weather, the sea and the beach. Some chose to write about the changing light of late summer days, while others reflected upon currents of loneliness and the experience of dying and death.

They all dove deeply into the past to retrieve these pearls of insight, observation, emotion and memory, no two of which are alike. What they have created for us is a lovely mosaic of the human experience in summer. We are most grateful to them.

Richard Merli
Editorial Director

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A special thank you to our volunteers:

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Fiction

Summer, Iran, 1978

By Wendy Coyle

This work is an excerpt from Wendy Coyle's historical novel-in-progress, "Siemorq." In the volatile Tehran summer of 1978, six months before the Islamic revolution and the fall of the Shah, Gael Heron, an American woman now divorced from her wealthy Iranian college sweetheart, Cyrus Ravari, has sent their son, 12-year-old Ali John, to the family home in a small provincial town while she remains in the city.

In August of 1978, Tehran temperatures reached 116 degrees Fahrenheit during the day and were still in the 90's at midnight. Businesses and offices closed at noon. Apartments and homes, lacking expensive air-conditioning, became ovens that never cooled. Those who could afford transport and lodging left for the seaside or the mountains, but the other four million, unless residing on the higher slopes of the Alborz where the King and the rich lived, left their abodes early in the morning for work, shopping, and food and returned by noon to remain indoors until night when the burning streets began to cool. At that time, people from crowded tenements and homes slept in the open air on flat rooftops, in parks, and on sidewalks. The city's dogs and cats also disappeared. Even the robins that always came to Gael's balcony to tweet and sing had gone. She wondered if they would ever return.

The heat put everyone on edge and kept Gael alert. Her foreignness and lack of protective connections now invited general hostility and aggression exacerbated by the maddening heat. She was a target for the frustration and anger against Americans who were seen as responsible for keeping the Shah, with his corruption and megalomania, in power and for selling him the weapons he used against his own people to keep that power.

One morning last week Gael had been browsing in a handicraft store when a rude clerk, wilting in the heat, ordered her not to touch the cheap brass artifacts. Compliance had not appeased the clerk and, as Gael was leaving, the woman called a guard to arrest her for shoplifting. To Gael's horror, the man actually grabbed and attempted to handcuff her while she pleaded in Farsi to be let go. Suppressing her anger and outrage, she gave them what they needed; a grovelling flowery apology for her rude ignorance.

Back home, she broke into tears of outrage, impotence and fear. What if she had been taken to the police, to jail? Would anyone have ever found her? Never had she experienced such terror. It shook her to the core. When she'd been rich - with the privilege of chauffeurs and servants and the power of money and important connections - she was shielded, untouchable. She had often observed in Iranian culture a paranoia, a constant on-guard stance and inability to trust, and now it made sense for her, too. Alone, with no protection, she realized she was as vulnerable as any other person on the street.

In addition to the unusual heat, it had been a summer fraught with unrest. Oil-refinery workers and various bazaar guilds went on strike. Decent merchants, targeting scapegoats to shift the blame for the food shortages and 300% inflation, were jailed for hoarding and price fixing.

The military forcibly evacuated and bulldozed the huts, hovels and caves in South Tehran, deeming them a health and safety hazard. But they offered no replacement and provoked the millions of homeless to protest and rebuild at night, which caused endless bulldozing and violence.

To Gael it felt like the city sat on a rumbling volcano. Yet, like Pompeii had become so accustomed to the noise, heat and fumes, it could not see disaster lurking. The unspoken question was how could the nation go on without its Shah who'd been there 37 years. Who could take over and replace him? Over the years, with the West either cooperating or turning a blind eye, he had killed, exiled, imprisoned or co-opted any leader with the ability and charisma to govern.

One night, near the open windows, sleeping fitfully with only a sheet over her, Gael dreamed she was on the schoolyard in Wintun Mills and the bell ending recess was ringing. She had a test next class and, knowing she was not prepared for it, knowing she would fail, she stayed outside. But the bell kept

ringing and ringing. When she opened her eyes, she realized it was the telephone. She was not expecting a call this late. It was probably a wrong number. And Ali John, in Firuzabad for the summer, only called on Fridays. Was it Nima? No, they hadn't spoken in a month. She missed him and his company and often wondered how she would manage the years of loneliness ahead. But she'd made it clear they must say goodbye. He must meet someone who could love him deeply, who could be his wife. The phone rang again.

Cyrus, dispensing with the niceties, was unusually slow and serious on the other end. He asked, "What are you doing?"

Thinking it unusual he would call so late at night, Gael came fully awake. "What is it?"

"Have you heard anything?"

"No. Should I?" She had a sudden sense that something was wrong, very wrong.

"Don't you have a radio, a television?" There was a long pause then he said, "There was a fire. In Firuzabad."

Gael flashed back to a snatch of conversation she'd heard earlier in the evening at the greengrocer. Two women were buzzing about a fire in a movie, deaths. She hadn't paid much attention because there had been movie theater attacks by religious fanatics all year, mostly late-night fires or small pipe bombs to send the message that movies, with representations of humans, icons of corruption, were forbidden in Islam. The women had mentioned a city in the north and left.

Cyrus continued, "I am going there. Leaving in an hour and you will want to come, I think. That is why I called. The planes to Meshhad are taken, the airport filled. Faster to drive."

"Why? Why are we going?" Gael managed, all the while dreading the answer.

The pause was so long Gael's chest ached as she held her breath.

Then Cyrus said, "Ali John went to the movie with Nanny Ezzat. No one can find them."

Nanny Ezzat braided the tendrils of her wispy grey hair and remembered how, in her youth, the tresses had been so thick and black and long that they took a day to dry after the baths. Under her chin

she tied the blue flowered kerchief that matched her shirtwaist and wrapped her best black chador around it all. Then she pinched her cheeks to give them bloom like a girl going to meet her suitor. “And, so what? He is the joy of my heart, no other,” she said aloud to the broken piece of mirror on the wall of her tiny room off the greenhouse. Nanny sometimes worried about her afterlife. She loved her tiny charge so fiercely from the moment he’d been placed in her arms 12 years ago that she’d rather hold him than pray. He’d replaced her Saints as the light of her life; she loved him to the point of worship.

Up on the veranda where the evening air was as hot as dog’s breath, Ali John and Chauffeur waited.

“We’ll be cool in the movie. Air conditioning.” said Ali John. He was wearing his Tehran clothes, grown-up slacks and a green polo shirt.

“Most of the town will be there just for that,” Chauffeur added. “No place else to go when it’s so hot. Only 15 cents.”

“Well, it’s my Nanny’s birthday and she loves movies.” Ali John said as he hugged her shoulders.

Nanny said, “Dear Master, the likes of us don’t have birthdays. That’s for you Lords and Ladies.” But she giggled, remembering that summer when Ali John was seven and had been unbelieving when he learned she didn’t have a birthday. When she told him that poor people, especially with unwanted girls like her, had no thought for such things, he deemed that date, August 19, her birthday. Ever since that time he remembered it with a gift or a card.

At the Throne Room Cinema, the two settled into 20-cent balcony seats which allowed them closer proximity to the air conditioners. Ali John bought paper cones of sunflower and pumpkin seeds, orange sodas and Nanny’s favorite tongue sandwich cut in half to share. While the commercials ran advertisements for soap powder, washing machines, televisions, the new Peykan automobile and the National factory-made shoes, Nanny watched the people who came into the big salon so she could later gossip about them to Madame. The smell of sweat and cheap cigarettes from the packed auditorium rose about them. Ali John said he’d counted about four hundred people, every seat filled, and told Nanny how roads and cars had made the city grow so big. She felt pride that her child knew so much like the great


man he would someday become. When the lights dimmed, they stood for the national anthem and faced the projected image of the Shah on the screen. Each of his royal teeth were as big as a chair. Each medal on his uniform as big as a tombstone. Then the doors closed with a metallic clang, hinges and handles grinding.

The film was older but a favorite in the Provinces, “*Gav, the Cow.*” It was a tale of a poor man whose only asset was a cow that supported his family. When it was killed and his quest for justice or compensation failed, the family lost everything. Nanny loved the movie and always cried. She had seen it so many times that she could now whisper warnings and instructions to the characters: “Don’t trust that man” or “He’s coming to get you,” or “Run! Run!” She didn’t notice the smoldering acrid smell, perhaps because her attention was on the film, or because it smelled like oil and kerosene burning in the samovar at home. The flames rose quickly along the back wall, the sucking whoof and roar were obscured by the soundtrack but she still didn’t see them as they licked at the sidewalls. Then people in the dark room started screaming, “Fire. Fire!” Everyone rose and ran toward the front doors.

“Nanny, come on!” Ali John stood up, grabbed her hand and pulled her down the steps behind him. They only got as far as the ground floor main aisle when they were enveloped in a panicked mass of pushing and shoving. People shouted and pounded on the metal, “*Qof!* Locked! The doors are locked. *Basteh.* We can’t get out. Oh Allah, help us.”

The flames swirled around them and engulfed the ceiling, flaming chunks of plaster rained down on their heads. The flames leapt from seat to seat like writhing devils with flaming torches. Smoke filled the air and sucked the oxygen away until every breath ignited their lungs from within. Those who could still breathe cried out, “Help, Oh God. Let us out!”

The crush of bodies pressed them forward. Nanny managed with the greatest difficulty to wrap her arms around Ali John’s back. The air smelled of burning hair and flesh. The frenzied and panicked mob pitched them forward and they fell, their bodies becoming steps, a ramp, for those who clawed and climbed to get out amidst the crunch and crackle of breaking bones. All Nanny Ezzat could do was shield Ali John in the airless black, the fading screams of “Allah save us. *Hazrat-e* Ali save us.” Beneath her

own broken body, she felt Ali John go limp like a rag and, with her last breath, her face to his ear, she managed the words of his favorite nursery rhyme, the one she sang to him at bedtime every night of his childhood: “*Atal matel too too lay, gav-e hassan che jur-e.*” As her mind went dark and her body weakened, she mustered a last, “Sleep my baby boy, my soul, my life. Sleep.” 

Wendy Coyle lived in Iran for many years serving as as an Persian language interpreter for the State Department. She was also the director of bi-national language and cultural centers in Tehran and Meshhad. She has a doctorate in multi-cultural education from UC Berkeley and currently lives in New York City.

Poplar, London. February, 1941. 11:33 P.M.

By Christina McDermott

Citrus.

Nell is remembering the way her dog Poppy looks when she sniffs flowers in the family garden back home – ears perked, tail between hind legs. Then, she smells it. Citrus. She puts her hand to her nose to keep from sneezing and feels the dirt rub her nostrils. Even the ashy London wartime muck cannot mask the smell.

The bomb shelter near East India Square is an old church basement equipped with one lantern. Nightly now, the east enders file into dim dugouts at the siren sound, and pass nights by embers. They are dock workers, air raid officers, nurses and immigrants (so many immigrants!) and they are all poor, made poorer by wartime rations. They sit in the dark with their eyes half open, pressed uniform to jacket to moth-eaten jumper, leaning against the damp earth, smoking cigarettes and listening to whistles and crashes above them.

The lantern light is almost out, leaving everyone shadowed and non-descript. But Nell swears she can see the bright orange color in Doug Flynn’s hands when she turns to him.

“Shh,” says Doug. Ember light catches glossy bits on his dockman jacket. He smells like mackerel.

Nell is in her nurse’s uniform and her baby-blue dress is covered in ash. Her red cross badge is fading. “Where did you...?” She reaches out for the fruit and he bats her hand away. “Just a piece, Doug.”

Doug shakes his head. He’s a funny young Irishman – quiet and a good listener, not at all like those rowdy Fenians in the magazine stories her mother used to read. He sat next to her in the bunker on the first night Poplar was bombed, and asked her how her day had gone, as normal as you please. Now, each night they converse quietly, departing in silence at the sound of the all clear.

Nell leans back and listens to a pipe drip water. There's a mum humming to her little ones across the room and the song's minor notes harmonize with a bomb whistle. Again, she thinks about Poppy in the garden, let out for the fresh air during breakfast time. There were always oranges on Sunday, and Poppy liked the taste. Sometimes, Nell would slip her a piece and Poppy would smack her lips, even though oranges weren't sticky.

"Keep it then. When I go home I'll eat oranges every morning." Nell says.

"Wales. That's home?" Doug says.

"Chepstow."

"D'you think it will still be there?" he asks.

"Well!"

"Listen," says Doug. And they are silent.

"This is all temporary," says Nell. Temporary, she tells herself every morning when she starts her work at the clinic, treating men with syphilis and swaddling babies in damp cotton clothes. She writes temporary when she writes letters home to her mother (who hasn't read a magazine since paper rationing started) and when she thinks of Poppy.

Nell cannot see him, but she knows Doug is looking at her. "So was before," he says. They buzz in her ears – the words – and she tries not to register them but of course she does. Like London, her insides are crumbling.


Doug hums along with the mummy across the room, singing a lullaby to placate her little ones. The Irish – they all know the same songs. She sneaks her hand across to Doug's, hoping to pry the fruit from his fingers. Dimly, she wonders if they will ever meet outside the bunker. More likely, their friendship is based only in the underground, where traditional social conventions are laid to rest.

Just before Nell can grab it, Doug tightens his grip on the orange. It smells so sweet and fresh.

"I found it in a corner along with empty cargo crates. Fallen off the Dorchester's shipment it was," Doug says. "I'm thinking that it'll be a long while before another orange for me." He stops. "A long while before oranges, Nell."

The shelter shakes. Waves of explosion can travel through London's earth, even when a bomb lands several blocks away. But this blast is closer. It goes on endlessly, rubble falling and quaking. In an instant, Doug drops the orange and it rolls away into the darkness. Nell wants to cry. Temporary. Temporary. She thinks of the orange, sunny and tasting like those slow Sunday breakfasts before Hitler and the Red Cross Corps and the bombs. What was harmless is now decadent – feeding fruit to a dog! The orange is probably lost now. It will rot here in the damp earth.

“When it's over, what will be left?” she asks. It is a melodramatic question. It is how she feels when she imagines the flames in buildings – the ones that will still be burning the next morning. Whispering deflates her, but in this exhale, she feels something settle within.

Doug had not heard her. He returns, having scooted after the orange. He puts his head on Nell's shoulder and reaches across her, grabbing her dirty palm. In it, he places a small piece of the fruit, leaking a bit of juice. The old world is gone. Nell can hear Doug breathing and promises herself she will bid him good morning above ground. 

Christina McDermott, an English and linguistics student at UC Berkeley, is fascinated by the relationship between phonetics, metaphor and poetry. She enjoys learning how to apply her linguistic knowledge to her creative work. Currently, she is working on a series of snapshot poems and a children's novel.

A Bird's Song

By Amit Shekhar

“So, Akash, tell me about your problem.”

“Well, Dr. Verma, as far as I can think it began quite early in my childhood. I would feel a strange sensation shooting up from the base of my spine and travelling up to half the distance towards the crown of my head. I would feel uncomfortable but did not know what it was. I did not even ask anyone. Whenever the sensation would happen I would press my back against something and then it would vanish. I was a very good student before all this started but then I started slipping academically.”

“How old were you then?”

“I think it started when I was seven.”

“Well, then?” Dr. Suneet Verma asked, making a note on his pad.

“It was then that I also started getting alienated from my family. Previously, I was the darling of the entire family.”

“Who is in your family?”

“My mother, father and two elder sisters. They all used to dote on me. I was a leader among my friends. It all vanished one fine day and this thing, this sensation, and the loss of my magic touch happened at the same time. My grades at my school in Allahabad deteriorated. Everything I did was wrong. Things carried on like this, and after school I moved to Delhi to do my degree in Physics. Then when I did my MSc, I read Swami Vivekanand. And he spoke about the kundalini, the serpent-power. He said it lies dormant at the base of the spine and yogis awaken it so that it can travel up to the crown of the head, where enlightenment takes place. I realized in a flash that my childhood sensation, which had stopped a few years after it began without my realizing it, was the kundalini indeed. I was living alone in a rented room and I started awakening this power and it started rising. When it rose, I would feel intense, unbearable pleasure and it would rise up to my throat and I would cry out ‘Ma, Ma’ in

ecstasy. The feeling of bliss would be too much that I couldn't stand the power rising further. It would travel down from my throat. And I would try again. Then one day, it shot right up to the crown of my head and everything became dark, and I came to realize that the world does not exist, that there is only love.”

There was silence in the room for a while. Dr. Verma, head of the department of psychiatry at King George's Medical College, Lucknow, had been taking notes all the while Akash was speaking. He put the pen down, ran his right hand over his balding pate and smiled. The psychiatrist who had examined Akash in Allahabad had, after a year of medication, asked Akash's father Brahmdudd Tiwari, an Allahabad university professor six years away from his retirement, to take Dr. Verma's opinion on Akash's illness. Brahmdudd was waiting in an adjoining room.

Dr Verma examined Akash's features once again. The 22-year-old patient had become thin due to too much thinking. His eyes burned with a strange light. His moustache hung on his lips and his wheat complexion would have been clearer if one year of psychiatric medication had not blemished its natural glow. When he spoke, his entire body, his face, his eyes and his voice would fire up. Dr. Verma used 28 years of experience as a psychiatrist to wipe the smile from his face like a socialite wipes off a lipstick smear with tissue paper.

He ran a mental health clinic in Lucknow and, while the government position earned him his social standing as a renowned psychiatrist, the clinic was his bread and butter. He needed to nurture patients and their disorders, if ever there were any, to keep both his reputation and earning alive and kicking.

And then his voice - like that of a person lost in an unknown city who refuses to ask for directions for fear of being misled – cut through the silence.

“What happened after that?”

“I was 21 when the full awakening of the kundalini happened. I quit college, came back to Allahabad and decided to take the Civil Services exam. But my course books didn't hold my interest, so I read spiritual books instead. All the while I meditated on my own. There was no time for studies. And

then I heard the flute of Krishna. The ecstasy was unbearable, and I danced with joy in my room. I had visions of Ram, Shiva, even Arjun, and Jesus Christ.”

“Where would these visions occur? Did you see them in front of your eyes?”

“No, not as physical realities, but in the mind’s eyes, akin to dreams.”

“What did Ram look like?”

“Well, blue in colour. But I can’t describe the beauty of his face. Nothing in the world can compare. It is beyond anything. Beyond words.”

“And Jesus Christ?”

“Oh, Jesus? All the paintings of Jesus have got him wrong. They show him with tender, soft eyes alright, but where is eternal life on his face? Can you paint the picture of Christ, tell me? Can you imagine how alive that man would be? The man whose mere touch brought the dead back to life? And you attempt to paint such a man on canvas? Can you ever communicate such life on canvas? It is futile. Just like I said for Ram, he is beyond anything in the world, beyond words, beyond brush strokes. My mother would hide away books written by Vivekanand that I had. They thought I was going crazy. I am not crazy, Dr. Verma, am I?” Akash’s quivering voice became silent and doubt and agony flooded his eyes.

When Dr. Verma spoke, he was not a lost man seeking directions in an unknown city, but a street-smart kid who knows not the way but still tells a lost man where to go. The street-smart kid might do it for fun - he had been doing it for 28 years because it was a good, respectable way to earn a living.

“Akash,” his voice was coated with love and sympathy, “it happens sometimes that the brain discharges a lot of bioelectricity, more than the nerves can handle. Medical science does not know what triggers these discharges. A lot of factors are involved, such as the impressions since birth, the genetic predisposition of the person and the stimuli in the environment. In your case, it was such discharges that were triggered in your childhood and later too. These visions are creations of the mind - just imagination. I think the diagnosis of Dr. Mohit Sharan in Allahabad is correct. I will change the medication only slightly for the time being. Now, if you could just wait outside so that I can speak to your father?”

The seer of eternal life could not salvage himself. The crucifixion was rather swift and smart. Sagging shoulders and a lost spirit trooped out of the room. Brahmdutt, a man whose medium frame showed that it was carrying the burden of not one but two lives and whose eyes spoke of a story gone haywire, walked into the room.

“Mr. Tiwari, the diagnosis is correct. Your son is suffering from schizophrenia...”

“Why don’t you take Akash to him? He is amazing. I told him how I had lived in havelis and now I had to live in a slum. How I was worried that my daughter won’t get married. And he replied, ‘Stop worrying about your daughter’s marriage. There are many people who are not able to marry off their daughters. As for your bygone splendour, even the Taj Mahal will become dust one day.’ That was enough to soothe me. You know, Dr. Sinha makes sense. He can cure Akash with yoga or perhaps, as he did with me, just by his counselling.”

Afroz Ali, Brahmdutt’s childhood friend and fellow professor in Allahabad University, was advising him about what could be done to save Akash from ruin. A year had passed since Akash met Dr. Verma — a year in which Akash had fought in vain with his family members and Dr. Sharan to convince them that there was nothing wrong with him and his visions and that he did not need psychiatric medication. Dr. Sharan’s treatment had continued, slowly trying to rid Akash of his “hallucinations,” dulling the wiring of his brain, trying to kill his belief that his perceptions were true.

Afroz had to vacate the haveli of his forefathers after losing it to his brothers in a lawsuit at a time when he had been diagnosed as suffering from manic-depressive psychosis. He was financially weak and did not know how he would be able to marry off his daughter. Dr. Amit Sinha, middle-aged, tall and slim, whose face had a youthfulness and playfulness that made him appear 15 years younger than he was, was a doctor at the university dispensary. He was a yoga teacher too, and had learnt the ancient art at the world-acclaimed Bihar School of Yoga. The school was founded in 1964 in the city of Munger of the state Bihar of India by the renowned yoga master Swami Satyanand Saraswati. He set up a yoga centre at the dispensary for students and teachers of the university.

It was his advice that Afroz attend the yoga classes in order to address some of the problems he was facing in life. Afroz attended one of the yoga courses run by Dr. Sinha. A liberal Muslim if ever there was one, he was amazed to learn from Dr.Sinha that yoga is not just about staying healthy by routinely practising body postures or asanas and breathing techniques or pranayam.

When Afroz sought Dr. Sinha's counsel to deal with his life, it did not begin with the usual expected sympathetic and soothing phrases. Instead, he received a supreme, unruffled, counterintuitive enquiry that simply asked, "So what?" It was something like "I will die and my daughters will still be unmarried." and then you tell yourself, "So what?" and then the mind says, "Oh, it will be terrible. My girls will face a tough time." and again you tell yourself, "So what?" Ultimately, a time comes when the mind does not generate an anxious reply to the question "So what?" Even the worst eventuality then loses its bite and the problem vanishes like there never was any. It is in that revelatory moment of catharsis that it becomes clear that the cumbersome problem was nothing but a huge, silly knot, an imagined monster that has now melted away. It is to such a dispenser of wisdom that Afroz was asking Brahmdudd to send his son to.

"All your experiences are genuine. You are not suffering from any psychiatric disorder. The flute of Lord Krishna that you heard was real, the visions of Christ and Ram that you had were real. You see, our ears can hear sounds only in a particular frequency. But that does not mean that sounds don't exist above and below that range. Certain animals can hear sounds that the human ear can't hear. Schizophrenics are highly evolved people who can see and hear things that the so-called normal person can't perceive. The only problem with them is that they can't control their mental faculties completely. But their visions and their perceptions are true. You know, if any seer or saint of olden times, including Christ or Nanak or Meera or Mohammad, was taken to today's psychiatrists, they would call them all schizophrenics. After all, they also had visions that the average person can't understand. After all, what is the normal world? Deepak Chopra, an allopathic doctor and spiritual master, very aptly calls it the psychopathology of the average." Dr. Sinha's words sunk like pearls in Akash's heart. His words were

the first drops of rain on a land ravaged by decades of drought. The doctor's face exuded a reassurance that was an elixir for Akash. The flute of Krishna was playing and something inside Akash was swaying to the serene music. He was listening not just with his physical ears, but his soul's ears too.

Dr. Sinha continued, "I will teach you some asanas and breathing techniques. But I don't think it might be needed. You have taken the highest leap of faith on your own and you came clear. But then the constrictions of society, lineage, upbringing, norms, the modes of worship practised by you and your family, the entire realm of mortality and its greed and fear surfaced to throttle your flight into immortality. In brief, that explains the entire gamut of causes of mental illnesses covered by genes and environment, nature and nurture. This gang war against you is as ageless as it is new. Asanas and breathing techniques are for those who want it safe, not for those who can take leaps on their own into the unknown, who live dangerously. Now that you have lived and died multiple times like that, you are ready for eternity. Just be sure, all your experiences are genuine, there's nothing wrong with you. Have you seen the movie *A Beautiful Mind*?"

"Yes," Akash replied.

"What happened to the hero of the movie?"

"His mind exploded."

"Why?"

"Because a finite thing was trying to understand infinity. Yes, Dr. Sinha, I too feel like that. I feel as if I have exploded into infinite pieces and am scattered in the entire cosmos. I don't know what to do."

"You don't need to do anything. It can be a very beautiful thing to be scattered like that. Remain like that. Celebrate that state. It is the state beyond the union of opposites, the state yoga promises to present because, ultimately, yoga is a way of life that takes the aspirant beyond the opposites."

"Dr. Sinha, I don't know why people can see everything, every finite thing in the universe, see all the finite names and forms but can't see infinity. You know, whenever I look up at the sky, my problems just vanish. The night sky, Dr. Sinha, the stars, how many are there? It is infinite. I look at the

scale of creation and look at myself, but I am not there, I have already vanished. Finiteness has vanished, only infinity remains. I remember reading the discourses of Swami Vivekanand's master Ramakrishna Paramhans. He talked about a statue of salt entering an ocean to discover its depths. As it enters the salty waters of the ocean, it dissolves, the elements merging with each other. Now who can tell how deep the ocean is? I get dissolved like that when I see the scale of creation. Both in terms of the infinitely big compared to the human state, as the stars and galaxies and the infinitely small, as in the case of the ever-revelatory atoms. And then you can't even name it, it is beyond everything, beyond words, because words are sounds and sounds are finite. They have a beginning, followed by a middle of a lifetime and then an end. And just as the ancient Vedas fall silent after describing the supreme reality as not being any finite thing, silence reigns in my being too. I am not talking about some esoteric thing, Dr. Sinha, I am talking of something that becomes as real for me as the physical world is for other people. People bent on being half-born, half-dead, not living totally, not dying fully. Is it a crazy thing I am talking about Dr. Sinha?"


"No, you are not. But everybody does not have this vision. It is the vision of the third eye - the mind's eye - the eye with which we see the astral world of dreams. It is the vision of Meera, of Rumi, of Christ. You are blessed, Akash. This blessing became your curse, just like Meera's love for Krishna became a curse for her and Christ's enlightenment became his cross. You see Akash, the kundalini is the sum total of all the forces of all the universes that lies dormant at the base of the spine. The kundalini is nothing but pure, unconditional love. Seekers of the spiritual path like yogis awaken this force very gradually in a spiritually sanitized environment under the guidance of a master. It is like scientists conducting a nuclear explosion or doctors performing a very delicate operation. They control and sanitise the environment and take all kinds of precautions. A kundalini awakening is like billions and billions of nuclear bombs exploding at the same time. In your case it happened without any regulation. The result was confusion, self-doubt and all kinds of negative emotions that you were not able to control. In a way, western psychology is correct in interpreting experiences such as these as sudden discharges of huge amounts of bioelectricity, more than the nerves can handle, resulting in a biochemical or hormonal

breakdown of sorts with some biochemical entities plunging way below the norm and some swinging way above. But western allopathic psychology has not gone to the root of the problem. Ancient wisdom traditions, all originally oriental, have. The same spark that was triggered in Buddha when he saw the ways of nature and the world was triggered in you, too, in childhood and later on. The causative trigger itself is just an excuse to bring on the experience. It took Buddha years of spiritual practices to gain complete control over the forces unleashed in him. It will take time for you, too, but you must realise that a beautiful thing has happened to you. Allopathic medicines will be needed to help you tide over the chemical churning. It is just a matter of time before the wounds inside you become flowers. Just a matter of time.” Dr. Sinha put his right hand on Akash’s shoulder and a glow of understanding filled the room. The seeds of flowers had fallen on the wounds.

Who can explain why Akash gathered faith from Dr. Sinha’s touch and words? Especially from the grace and compassion that poured forth from his eyes? It was a blind, dumb and mute faith—too deep for words, too intimate to be seen, just like love. Lightning strikes a banyan tree in its full bloom of youth and chars it to its roots, but a tiny offshoot deep below the surface escapes the wrath of its mother, and from there shoots a fresh sapling when its season of life arrives. It was such a season of spring that Dr. Sinha had gently ushered in Akash’s life. It was truly a miracle of faith.

Tears welled up in Akash’s eyes. Years of suffering trickled down his cheeks and fell on the ground to be lost forever. When Akash spoke, it was the voice of a person who has just been introduced to his destiny.

“Just as Christ asked God to forgive those who crucified him, I also ask God to forgive those who thought I was mad. In a way, I was and am mad. I am mad about the essence that lurks within existence, the essence called the spirit or God, the Supreme, Infinite Being. The world is crazy about finite phantoms that are like lines drawn on water with a finger, or even like lines drawn on sand, on rocks, the sky itself ... lines that vanish even as they are created. What is this world after all? Science tells us that stars die, that our sun will die, so what of our little earth, our homes, our hearths, our short and long tales, our silly worries, our names, wealth and fame? They will all become nought, cipher. You

know, Dr. Sinha, someday I will write a story about myself. I will draw a line on water. But will I write? Or will it be like the wind that goes from place to place on its own, the river that flows on its own and the bird's song that rises and falls on its own?" 

Amit Shekhar wanted to be a poet but fiction caught up with him because of an illness that unites the two hemispheres of the mind into a whole. Now he is okay but a longing for words remains.

Sidney Cherry

By Tara East

Mark slid another one of his coasters across the bar. He'd flipped it over so the McGee's Irish Pub logo, a furry leprechaun holding a pot of gold, was smashed into the damp bar runner. It was one o'clock on a Thursday and the food bell in the kitchen had only rung three times in the last hour. How was the bar mat wet already?

I punched table seventy's drink order into the computer and when the printer on the other side of the bar spat it out, I picked up the coaster. I must have had about twenty of these things in a drawer at home. I don't know what I'd say if Ben ever found them. Then again, I wasn't the one who was married.

This time, Mark had written a poem.

Can you feel the

Heat in my

Ever,

Ready,

Rising,

Yearning desire to walk out mid-shift and never come back?

As far as acrostic poems went, it wasn't his best or his worst. His downfall was the use of my surname, Cherry. It was a curse really, that name, especially for a woman. When I was in high school, there was a girl two grades above me with the last name *Blows* as in *Danielle Blows*. A name so fucking tragic, so obviously embarrassing, there was no point in drawing attention to it. The only person who'd gotten away with changing my name into a pun was Ben. He's come up behind me one Friday night after work and asked, "Can I see your cherry?" It wasn't a very good pun, but for whatever reason it'd worked and we'd continued to meet a couple of times a week.

“Sidney!” Toni chimed from the front counter. I held up my index finger, indicating that I’d be just a minute. Mark plonked seventy’s order onto a tray and gave me a wink. “How ‘bout it, Sid? Wanna slip off that apron and walk into the sunset with me?”

I slid the tray onto my steadier hand and stabbed the order docket. “Don’t tempt me.”

I set the drinks down and took their food order. Tucking the tray under my arm, I scooted over to Toni at the main counter.

“What’s up?” I asked, typing seventy’s food order into the front desk’s computer.

“You mind if I send you early today?”

It wasn’t Toni’s fault it was quiet or that I was already down five hours that week, she was just doing what she was told, yet logic did little to curb my anger. I didn’t like Toni, but that wasn’t her fault either. Ben and Toni rarely worked the same shifts. Ben was Sous-Chef and no way was the manager wasting those kinds of wages on a weekday lunch shift. Toni mostly worked lunch and Ben mostly worked dinner, little wonder their marriage was suffering.

There was a plus to finishing early, however. “Alright,” I said, trying not to sound too pleased. “You want me to clock off now?”

Toni hesitated, probably felt guilty about the abrupt notice. “If you wouldn’t mind...”

I nodded and immediately started to undo my apron while walking back to the staff room.

“You’re going early,” Mark said as I walked past the bar. “My offer wasn’t serious; I can’t afford to quit.”

I laughed but continued on my way.

“Hey...We’re going to The Ridge tonight for a couple of drinks, maybe some pool. Want to come?”

I didn’t need to ask who *we* was. Mark had moved into Ben and Toni’s spare room. Ben said they needed the extra money. Sometimes I thought he just wanted to get caught.

“Don’t you spend enough time in bars?” I asked.

Mark whipped the air with a tea towel and pulled open the glass cleaner door, releasing a plume of steam. "I've never found that to be a problem." He picked up a pint glass and started polishing it. "So, how about it?"

I sighed. It hadn't bothered me in the beginning, but lately it felt weird to see Ben and Toni together.

"Come on, Sid. You haven't come out in ages. I'll even let you win a round." That was one of our jokes too. I was good at pool; I could win effortlessly. Mark wasn't good at pool. It had become one of those self-critical bits which pretty much described my life.

"What time?" I asked with instant regret.

"Seven, we'll pick you up."

We. Great.

A few hours later, Ben broke, sending the billiard balls across the table.

"Sorry about today," Toni said, looking genuinely remorseful.

"It's alright. Work's slow, I get it," I replied. The taste of her husband's skin still in my mouth.

"Things will pick up again soon."

"So, Sid, are you seeing anyone?" Mark asked tactlessly.

Ben stiffened, ran a hand over his closely shaved scalp. Jesus. Did he always have to look so fucking guilty?

"None of your damn business," I said, sinking number three into a side pocket.

"That's a yes." Toni nudged my shoulder like we're friends.

I shrugged.

Ben sweated.

Before the second game started, I went to the bar to get myself another drink. If I kept up this pace, maybe Mark would win.

Ben appeared beside me. "Do you have to be so obvious?"

There was smoke on his breath, when had he started smoking?

“What are you talking about?”

He rubbed his head, again. “You keep looking at me. She’s gonna figure it out.”

I rolled my eyes. “If Toni figures it out, it wouldn’t be because of me.”

“I think we should stop.” He took a swig of his drink because he’d stammered and he knows that I know he only stammers when he’s nervous.

“Really?” I pick up my own drink, took my change from the bartender. “You didn’t seem like you wanted to call it quits today. So, what’s happened between then and now?”

This time, he didn’t look away, he found my eyes and held them. “Toni’s pregnant.”

My chest tightened. I plucked at my sleeve. *This bar is so damn hot.* “Well, I guess that means Mark’s out.” I swallow a mouthful of my vodka, then a second. Desperate to wash away the rest of him.

A muscle pulsed in his jaw. “That’s all you have to say?”

“Yup,” I made the ‘p’ really pop.

“Jesus, Cherry.”

My breath hitched, knowing I’d never let anyone call me that again. I grabbed my drink, “Alright, it’s over then.”

When we walked back into the pool room, Mark was trying to sink ball number four into the right back pocket, but the angle of his cue was off and I knew he wasn’t going to make the shot.

Toni stood on the other side of the table and when Ben drew his arm around her – around her waist, around the cluster of cells in her womb – he kissed the top of her head. One day, that cluster would become a shitting, screaming, fleshy bond that bound Ben to Toni forever, linked to each other through the flesh of another. She took a sip of her G & T and I smiled, flashing my eyes from her drink to Ben’s face. He looked away, but he got the message. *You just bought a drink for your pregnant wife. Asshole.*

Like she could read my mind, Toni slid her mostly full glass onto the high-top table behind her. “That’s my last one for the night. I’m opening tomorrow morning.”

“Well, I don’t have to start until eleven.” Mark emphasised the comment with a slurp of his beer.

“Me too.” I said. Though, I hadn’t meant for it to come out the way it did, linking us together and separating the group, but I did like the shadow that fell over Ben’s face. We played pool for another ten minutes which was enough time for Ben and Toni to finish their drinks and for Mark to buy himself and me another round.

Toni hugged me goodbye. Ben did too, though his hug was awkward and stiff. After they left, Mark and I started another game. A few minutes later, I finished it.

“You want another?” Mark eyed my empty glass.

“If you’re buying.”

Without discussion, we relocated to the bar. Pulling out a stool, he indicated that I should take a seat. He signalled to the bartender who had served us all night.

“Toni told me something today.” Mark began.

“Oh, yeah?” Even when she wasn’t around, Toni was still present.

“Yeah, she said I’ll probably have to move out soon.” The bartender slid our drinks in front of us and Mark handed her a twenty. “She told me she’s pregnant.”

“Well, if you’re hitting me up for a room, forget it. My apartment is barely big enough for me and it’s a personal rule of mine not to live with co-workers.”

Mark huffed. “Don’t flatter yourself, Sid. I wasn’t hitting you up for a room.” He exhaled, hesitating for a moment.

“Alright...” I left the door open for him, waited.

“I think Ben might be cheating on Toni.”

“Why do you think that?” I asked. A perfectly natural follow up question.

“Sometimes there’s a fry pan left soaking in the sink. Two dirty plates and two sets of cutlery on the bench. Before Toni gets home though, Ben always cleans them up *and* puts them away.”

“Alright,” I consented. “That does sound suspicious.”

“The point is,” Mark continued. “I don’t know if I should say something to Toni. Would you want to know, if you were her?”

I would never be her, *that was the point*. I took another sip of my drink, at least my hand was steady even though my insides were shaking. Getting caught used to be exciting, but now it seemed kind of pointless; I didn't want to be with Ben.

"Chances are Mark, if you've noticed these signs, then you can bet Toni has too." This statement was less true. Everybody lies, especially to themselves.

"Like women's intuition?" Mark asked.

"Sure," I took another sip of my drink. "I've heard horror stories. A chick sees her best friend's husband kissing another woman in the street. She calls her best friend and tells her. The wife and husband fight, but they work it out and stay together. The best friend, though, she gets kicked to the curb. What's the point of sweeping the dust under the rug if everyone sees you do it?"

"Christ! You're like a psychologist, Buddha and Tracey Chapman all rolled into one."

"I think the correct term is *barfly*."

Mark snorted, but lightly, so it wasn't too embarrassing. "A barfly maybe, but a pretty one."

There were a handful of coasters in a table talker beside him, he pulled one out and grabbed a pencil out of the Keno box. Flipping the coaster over to its blank side, he scribbled on the back, a small smile creeping over his face. Then he put the pencil back and handed me his latest offering.

Her name was sweet, dark as fruit,

Her mind clear and sharp.

She cast a spell upon me

Weakened my knees, pierced my heart.

"Well, it's better than the one you wrote at work today." I tucked it into my jacket pocket, feeling his eyes on me.

"You keep them?"

"Yup."

"Where?"

"My underwear drawer." I timed it perfectly. He choked on his drink.

“Seriously?”


“No.” I smiled my jackal grin so he couldn’t tell whether or not I was joking.

“Do you...want to get out of here?”

Flirting was fun, but it was the pause that made me commit, made me say yes.

“Sure, but I don’t want to go to your place. We’ll go to mine.”

“More privacy,” he added. “I get it.”

But he didn’t. This wasn’t about privacy. I just figured it was time for a change, it was time for a new, better secret - one kept for new and better reasons. 

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Prisoner of Memory

By Maren Altman

The elevator rattles as it slams the floor. *They really should fix that before it gives someone a heart attack or blows my knees out.* I begrudgingly drag my laundry out of the elevator, only for it to spill all over the floor, a towel getting trapped in the closing doors. It rips in half as the metal slams shut. The leftover scrap drops apologetically at my feet.

“Shit.”

I pick up the pink terry cloth next to my Batman slippers and sigh as I gaze at the rest of my dirty laundry. A shadow forms over the clothes. I peer up. It’s the guy who I just found out buys all the peanut butter pretzel bites I steal from our dorm kitchen. Jett. His lips are moving, but I don’t hear much due to my headphones. Humiliation and surprise distort my vision through their opaque veil and I can’t read his lips either. Feeling powerless and turning red, I rip out my headphones and try to catch up to what he’s been saying.

“-any help?”

I blink twice. “Oh. No, I’m alright. Thanks.” I’m still hunched over in a squat and my headphones are now tangled with the rest of the mess. Obviously, he’s aware I could use help but he knows it would be more embarrassing for both of us if he didn’t pretend he wasn’t aware of this. The opposite elevator shaft opens and Jett leaves the laundry room, still looking at me and my mess.

“Cool slippers, by the way.” The sound of the doors closing causes me to shudder. At least I’m getting a thigh workout in this squat, but my white robe is probably picking up dust mites that will just further irritate my shitty sinuses. Goddamn. It’s not even nine in the morning and I could already really use a joint to distract me right now. If my friend Di weren’t the furthest thing from a morning person, I’d probably text and harass her right here, on this basement linoleum floor surrounded by food-stained t-shirts and half of my favorite childhood washcloth.

We do end up smoking, later that afternoon, out of Di's window. My mouth switches between chewing bites of a baked sweet potato and swirling molasses-thick hits.

"I've never seen someone eat a potato like that. But it is efficient, I'll give you that."

"I already told you, it's a *sweet* potato, Di. A Japanese one, that's why it's purple and white." Di grabs the foil-wrapped potato out of my hand and chomps down on the corner.

Her small mouth leaves a perfect tooth-lined crescent. My mind races. Maybe that means I can take a few grams out of my weight calculation of exactly 225 and be able to use those leftover calories in my dinner. Except I had an almond when Di offered one earlier. So that probably evens it out. Yes. The caloric density translates. Perfect. It's all in order. My order.

"Damn. Good stuff." She hands it back to me. I nibble next to her bite to bring the surface back to an even line then go back in for another when it isn't perfectly straight. Di lingers in her savoring too much to pay attention. She doesn't really ever comment on my rituals just like I don't comment on the dozens of peanut butter jars in her trash, lazily covered up by a blank piece of paper. Except, her lack of commentary is due to ignorance while mine is due to knowing it all too well to bear acknowledging her shit too.

"The most embarrassing thing happened when I was trying to do laundry. That guy I told you about who buys the fucking pretzels? He saw my towel get caught in the elevator, rip, and all my laundry spill over the goddamn floor. And, *and*, I was in my robe and slippers."

"The Batman ones?"

"Yes, the fucking Batman ones."

She coughs out a feeble laugh. "Jesus. I still need to meet this guy. Thank him and all, for aiding me in my recent weight gain."

I snort. My heart races uncomfortably. Despite the inevitable feeling of panic and alien out-of-body dissociation that weed always brings me, I smoke anyway, as a painful distraction. I can feel my nerves rejecting the incoming substance in each inhale. I experience the depth, the mellow, and the lowness it brings, but my veins begin pumping at hyper speed to try and clear it out before I can settle -

an airplane never able to find a cruising altitude among every layer of turbulence. I am unable to enjoy any relaxation as my body jolts me into an unwelcoming limbo between states.

Di's eyes are closed as her mouth opens to allow for a pristine exhale. I look down at my half-eaten sweet potato and rub my foot across it viciously, trying to coat it with as much filth and toe jam as I can. Guess I can't eat the rest now.

I wrap the loose foil over the now-dirty potato and stuff it into my backpack not wanting to leave any sign of it in Di's traumatic trash can. At least this anxiety always prevents my appetite from being able to skyrocket. I jump off her bed and nimbly head out.

Walking out into the hallway, my heart races erratically. It is a jagged musical score of staccato and crescendo that leaves a ringing in my ears and a clenching in my jaw. I lean against the wall near the elevators and grind my stone teeth as my gelatinous brain melts into a thick, boiling vapor. The musical score of ringing elevator bells from floors above and below reverberates the vapor between the wooden sides of my skull until it cracks down the middle in a perfect dichotomy. The vapor dissipates. A melodramatic auto lobotomy.

I sink down to my knees. My memory jolts to experiences in high school parties where some well-meaning guy, two-or-so grades above me with awkward, base intentions, would tell me I was "just greening out" and to "try and take some deep breaths." The past embarrassment rises in me and brings about the neural muscle memory to attempt those breaths anyway. I end up getting very lightheaded and make myself stand up to pace around, slamming the elevator button to my right. Perhaps a walk will slow my mind.

The cold, humid air causes my nose to run upon impact. My upper lip is painted with makeup-erasing snot as if it were tear streams beneath my eyes. I reach for a cigarette to distract myself but cannot light it in the whirling wind, so I throw it down, aborting it with a heel grind.

My younger brother, Greg, stands across the street from me, staring at his toes-together heels-apart feet, just like he always does. My mind suddenly becomes much clearer as the chaos softens within

me. I breathe in, breathe out, and close my eyes. The wind rips my eyelids back open and tornadoes my hair to cloud my vision, but Greg, long gone from existence, is still right there. His gaze lifts forward up to meet mine as his posture remains hunched and timid. Without allowing my mind to grant permission, my hand raises itself and waves violently in hopes of catching his attention.

“Greg!” I croak from my dry throat, “Greg!” The wind thrusts his shaggy brown hair across his scalp, but his expression remains stagnant and unwavering. I’m jumping up and down erratically, my heart about to jump out of my chest, my voice trying to slip through my heavy breaths.

“Val? What the hell?” Di stands barefoot next to me, hands on her hips. “Who are you yelling at?”

Di doesn’t know, and Di won’t believe me.

“Val, come back inside. You’re too high. I’ve been watching you scream at an empty sidewalk from my window. I don’t want the security guards inside to hear you and make you leave for being a crazy homeless person or something.”

“I can’t, there’s someone-”

She grabs my arm, and I trip over my own feet without breaking my gaze. Greg’s still standing there, a perfect porcelain statue, as Di drags me away.

The night before Really Bad, my boyfriend, Vic, and I had gone to the movies for the premier of “Haunted Skullrider.” It ended up being a shit horror movie. I fell asleep.

“Val,” he whispered, shaking me and laughing, “Val, wake up, come on.” I slowly rose up from the old, red velvet theater seat and stretched up my arms. We exited the building and made our way into his twenty-year-old Mercedes station wagon, his arm around my shoulder to shield me from the wind, and I nestled perfectly as a puzzle piece into his prominent shoulder.

“Agh, sorry.” Vic muttered as he dropped his keys and bent down to pick them up next to the driver’s side wheel. I sniffled and waited for my door to unlock as he climbed in and reached over to let me in.

“Your nose is awfully pink.” He gave a pitying purse of the lips and grabbed my hand. I could tell he was surprised by how cold it was and he gave it a firm grip as he turned the wheel in reverse with his left hand.

“Your nose is awfully small.” I replied. He’d told me pretty early on in our relationship that someone had compared his face to Dwight Schrute, in particular the small proportion of their noses to the rest of their faces. He exhaled a soft, slightly insecure laugh and looked at me while slowing the car down to a stop. I could tell something serious was about to escape from his mouth, something whose weight would surpass its length. It would be exactly what I wanted to hear, what would save me, what would barely lift me from the flatline I was constantly at risk of fading into. My eyes granted Vic the permission to speak and he pre-emptively swallowed. A car honked behind us and broke our locked gazes. Our eyes immediately retreated and locked onto the road, not daring to veer away at all. I recall it reminding me of getting my hopes up as a child about my parents’ eventually-empty promises. I bitterly bit my lip. I was expecting to hear what would actually squeeze some serotonin out of these defective neural pathways. Could’ve been some dopamine in there as well, a pure delicacy.

As we drove up into my driveway, the disappointment buried me, and I couldn’t bear to meet Vic’s dark gaze.

“I’ll text you tomorrow.” God dammit. I guess I had been obvious enough to lock him away too, even if he hadn’t been the same level of pissed-off about our aborted moment. I slammed the car door and felt overwhelmingly guilty for causing him such discomfort. *Why do I always do this to people?* Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. You piece of shit. That could’ve been salvaged. Vic would’ve told you he loved you. Vic doesn’t fucking love you now. He’s rethinking the whole thing, thinking about how that honk was a goddamn sign that he shouldn’t even be near you or interpret your co-dependency as “commitment.” He’s glad he didn’t mutter those words.

He’s thanking the impatient driver of that falling-apart P.T. Cruiser nearly hitting his bumper for completely obliterating that delusion he had. If you hadn’t been so awkward after, he definitely would have retrieved his courage and given it a second go. But you closed up, as always, and caused both of

you to suffer. In a utilitarian sense, the whole equation would end up more positive than negative if you weren't at all an aspect. It's that way with every single equation you're a variable in. Omission makes the most sense.

As I entered my house, my dad was sitting down at our kitchen table doing some work on his computer when he looked up and blinked. He didn't say anything. He was always fairly decent at reading me. But he was also always too afraid to ask any further. I could tell he always hoped my darkness was simply surface but knew deep down that it wasn't. Denial is a hard cycle to break once it starts, because it roots itself at the base of the spine and coils around each vertebrae in knots of titanium.

Tomorrow will be different. Tomorrow will be different. Tomorrow will be different.

I kept telling myself that as I tried to fall asleep in my fluffy pink sheets. I think it was a mantra I'd heard on *The Secret* documentary as an example of a positive affirmation that claimed to change your reality if you used it enough. I think the secret is really that you know how everything's going to end up. And for a good amount of people, it does end up fairly well, like they're sure it will, because so many people's dreams are based on what they see right there in front of them. When those surroundings happen to not *actually* amuse you, there is no fucking secret because you understand the truth, you see the nuances in 20/20, and you're the only one wearing the 3D glasses out of the whole audience. Winston Smith in 1984. Joan of Arc. Jesus Goddamn Christ.

I woke up sweaty in the same pink taffeta duvet despite the fan whirling all night. There wasn't the usual morning delirium which allows for fleeting relief. There was just overwhelming recognition of my failure. Usually I'd have woken up to a "good morning" text of some sort from Vic at this point, because I knew he had work in an hour. He needed a promotion and wouldn't be late even if his boss wasn't a hardass and he wasn't almost broke from spending all his money on his guitar. I knew his OCD and his always-being-on-time despite also always being stoned. He was my always.

I knew I had to do it now or I wouldn't have the guts again. I was pretty sure most people did this kind of thing at night or at least midday, when they'd had the chance to savour their final moments of choice.

It was a shame that the ten grand that went towards trying to make me happier with myself would end up used as a ticket out. I knew that post-rhinoplasty Vicodin would come in handy sometime, I just assumed it would be for extra income.

So, there I was, not even ten on a Sunday morning, preparing my own release, holding the white circular pills in my hand while snot-crying naked on the bathroom floor. Little did Di know how much we did have in common.

Except I didn't actually have the guts to swallow like her when it came down to it. I looked at the little white circles like I expected my vision to suddenly vanish, tears dripping down onto my bare thighs. The beast rose and took hold of me, angry at myself, angry at the world, angry at Vic, angry at the fact that I was angry all the damn time. I leaned forward onto my wrists and began punching the black tile with my frail hands until it began to take shape of what I imagined the core of my mind looked like. I was howling, chugging back mucus like I hadn't eaten in years and blood was spattering onto the off-white walls. I was Jackson Pollock in a passionately creative episode.

The door suddenly burst open despite my making sure it was locked before. It was my dad standing there, staring as if nothing was wrong. A beat boomed between us.

"AHHHHHHH!" I punched the shiny black even harder, imagining it was his face. "DO SOMETHING FOR FUCKING ONCE! I SAID FUCKING DO SOMETHING!" His jaw dropped ever so slightly and his eyes darted to the pills on the counter. He grabbed my arms and dragged me into the hallway. Then he got two towels, wrapping me in one and wiping my cuts with the other.

I don't remember anything until we arrived at the hospital and started talking to some doctor. I also recall suddenly regretting ever leaving that pink bed. I wanted to cry but I was too tired.

"What prompted you to do this?" The doctor asked me as she sat down at my eye level.

"I fucked things up with my boyfriend." It seemed to be such a pathetic, meaningless statement in that moment, freaking out over a high school heartbreak, but it really was what sent me over after piling it on top of all the other shit.

"Who is your boyfriend?"

“Vic Graham.”

“Is there a number we can reach him at?”


I nodded but then realized I didn't have my phone on me and didn't know it by heart. “He works at Revival Guitars, you can reach him there.” Some part of me wanted to fight the system, but I was too tired and, at this point, I didn't even know what “the system” really was. The woman returned after a few minutes with a concerned look on her face. “No one at the store knows someone by that name. Are you sure he doesn't go by a different name or work somewhere else?”

Heat rose in my chest. “No, I'm sure. What time is it? He gets off at four-” Her sudden swallow shut me up in anticipation of whatever she had to say.

“Valerie, that's not the main reason I'm here. We're going to run some tests for some mental health issues we suspect may be causing this.”

“Wh-what kind of mental health issues?” A pause. “Possibly some schizotypal, or-” “You think I have schizophrenia?”

“There is a range, it's not-”

I shut off at that point. I was diagnosed that day. And the meds did help for a little, but I no longer saw the truth. I wasn't seeing in 20/20 anymore. I was watching the 3D movie in 2D with everyone else after having experienced the full version before. I wanted to go back to how I was, but I was too tired. 

Maren Altman is a current undergraduate at New York University. She is studying philosophy and creative writing. She is also a western astrologer, certified yoga instructor, and lifestyle blogger of the website www.lunalogue.com. In all of her work, she aims to bring others back to the present moment in their personal power.

Poetry

Summer Intuitions

By Mahnaz Mohafez

Can you believe?

There is a trace of fire on my hands.

I have learned to treat the summer sun

like a loyal friend.

She never beguiles me

and I always let her compose

the most enchanting poems ever written

in the firmament.

Can you remember that summer

when I was in search of light

in the forest of lost dreams?

I was drowned in my thoughts


for a bright and victorious future

that she the radiant sun touched me on my shoulder

and we two hand in hand went into eternity

to bring only a piece of news

that was so soothing like the tear of an angel

whom I saw just a few days ago. 

Apart from being an enthusiastic learner of literary ideas, Mahnaz Mohafez followed this interest academically and holds a MA in English literature. She is very keen on writing in different genres. Her first poem was published in New Poetry 2018 Issue. She is currently working on her debut novel.

Sunlight

By Allison Bohn

Did your mother ever tell you not to look

Directly into the sun?

It shall burn and blind

That perfect yellow sphere

Held in suspension above us

Sustaining life

It can disfigure with unconcerned malice

I lay in the grass

Twenty-three years later

My eyes wrapped in gauze

Draping like spider webs

The smell of lush dew inflates my lungs

With the desire for the clouds

To stretch across the blue

All fibrous and spindly

Return to their place in the heavens

My skin prickles and teeth chatter

From the sun's rays

Feeling of fingernails raked across my flesh

The old projector flickers on

Replaying that fateful day

In my head

No clouds, no sunglasses

Just me and the lemon drop in a blue dish

I yearned for a taste, a peek

The brightness crash thought my head

Like stones though glass

My eyes shrunk to raisins

I could hear my mother's shrieks of horror

Unable to see her face twisting like a rung rag

Dripping wet,

All the excess water streaming from her own eyes


The bright yellow turned into forever darkness

I am that same little girl

Now hiding under a maple tree

for protection, shelter

Wishing it had taken all of me

For I am just a moth to flame 

Allison Bohn, 29, is a writing instructor at Oakland University where she earned a Master's Degree in English. Her writing is laced with feminist coos and speculation. She lives north of Detroit with her husband and dogs.

Late Summer


By Patricia Blake

Motley sunflowers
relax their soldier's stance,
foxtails are at apogee, on point,
their ends their snouts as well.

Pink ladies are undressed,
patient for winter coats.

The light, once white,
is now mellow
while another wind
slants across summer
before the birds leave
in a great extinction.

The dog and I examine leaves,
a little fire, some ash in each.
I see the folly of unknotted lace,
ink that dries and dissipates,
a polaroid that goes backwards—
nature unsquared,
the power of nothing.

She sees what it is—
closer to the ground,
a part of it herself—
all things are here and present,
all alive in her senses. 

Pat Blake has been writing poetry and short stories for years. At the same time, she teaches English as a Second Language (ESL) overseas - first in Istanbul, Turkey, and later in Kuwait. She likes to garden and volunteers at the library bookstore in Wichita, Kansas.

War Museum

By Faleeha Hassan

Whenever the dictators get bored of their long daytime hours

Which they spend sitting on their stinking chairs

They open the door to their War Museum

And force us to enter

We pay with our lives as a ticket for this entry

To see:

The remains of soldiers we played with in our childhood

A picture of my grandmother

Who, when she saw the oppressor's face

Predicted our orphans would come soon

A Picture of my father's military boot

Which he lost on the border of a city

We thought belonged to us

Maps of cities where...

There is nothing left but their names

Melted onto the tongues of kids

Women's abayas chewed up by the treads of tanks

Medals who could not find a deserving chest to hang on

Large jars filled with the tears and sorrows of mothers

And

Helmets

Helmets, helmets

Helmets, helmets, helmets

Of unknown soldiers

But...

On the door of this museum

They put a big red sign

"No Exit" 

Faleeha Hassan is a poet, teacher, editor, writer, playwright born in Iraq, who now lives in New Jersey. She is the first woman to write poetry for children in Iraq. She received her Master's degree in Arabic literature and has published 21 books. Her poems have been translated into 14 languages.

Memories on the Beach

By Pamela Hope

Memories in reach

Of my days on the beach

As young blonde curls blow with trade winds

Sleeping on matted sand

Gas lights glowing

How did I end up here?

What were my sins?

Hear the jetty talk at night

As the waves whistled between hollowed rocks.

Keeping me awake and aware

Water rats scurrying through muscle flats

Winds blowing to the tune of nature's lair

The gray sky beckons white wings

Dropping to the cracks through which the wind sings

Sharing in the bounty laid bare on rocky crags

Smell the richness of salted air

Drifting to sleep I try in a dare,

But for a child this beach is a scary place

Just the hint of light in the glowing lantern

Now darkness besets the shore

Only glistening foam separates my bed from
Sea monsters under pounding waves
Gulls chatter in darkness and sweep overhead
Lonely horns of old vessels offshore, forlorned
I close my eyes tightly,
Sand blows causing painful rest.
Sleeping on this beach is such a test,
For one so little.
Beneath me the beach moves to honor my curves
But it's hard, cold and damp...
Adding to this I've a tickle in my nose,
Sand crab being such a scamp.

I turn over quickly and see the black sky above
I feel the sea winds gently tossing golden tresses upon my face
It seems like forever that this cold, damp night progresses
More boats bellowing, fighting the symphony of lapping shores
Incoming tides making known their power
Now encroaching upon my space.
I find myself praying
Asking God's Mercy, hoping for Grace.

Softly I hear the bell toll
A buoy set adrift amid the seashore cacophony
There's a ribbon of golden dawn upon the horizon
Ahhhh, now I can rest.

Surely, this was just a test

A dream of a wet, sandy world

With creatures scurrying in the night

I had such a fright...

I'm glad the Sun is here! 

"Poetry reflects the journey leading from our psyche to the heart. No need to understand the whys and wherefores...allow the mystery. Enjoy the discovery of the puzzle pieces that are you!" -Pamela Hope

Trumpet Soliloquy: Drunk on Blue

By Douglas Clark

Am I drunk on you, Blue?

Could I never move

From this place

Listening to your

Quiet motifs

That flush love from loss


And conjure smoky rooms

That no longer exist?

The ballads you adore

Yet consciously avoid

Are all I want now

In the twilight of my tipsy melancholy 

Music was the language of Douglas Glenn Clark's formative years. He found his song in words. His plays have been performed in New York City and regional theaters, such as the Old Globe Theatre in San Diego. He is the author of *The Memory Songbook* and *The Lake That Stole Children*, as well as the recipient of multiple writing grants and fellowships from arts councils in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Michigan.


Neptune's Coquette

By Joan McNerney

My toes throb over
hard pebbles. Waters slip
over slim ankles. Should I stand
shivering or go swim?
Lose my footprint?

Off I run, falling over myself
a mug of salty cider. This
wave an insecure bed.
Seaweed pillow. Carried by
moon to an abyss.

The floor of my mansion is
not tidy. I shall have sponges
for lunch. Ride with seahorses
perhaps.

On the far shore, my gigantic lover
smiles, kisses of surf. We thread
soft waters while sunshine
dresses us in golden sequins. 

Joan McNerney's poetry has been included in numerous literary zines such as *Moonlight Dreamers of Yellow Haze*, *Seven Circle Press*, *Dinner with the Muse*, *Blueline*, *Halcyon Days* and included in *Bright Hills Press*, *Kind of A Hurricane Press* and *Poppy Road Review* anthologies. She has been nominated four times for Best of the Net.

July Joy

By Amy Pacini

Tingling toes

Dangling in dawn's


Lilting lake

Balmy breezes

Chastely caressing

Sun-kissed skin

And sweet strawberry strands

On a July Sunday afternoon. 

Amy S. Pacini is a freelance writer and poet in Land O Lakes, Florida. Her work has been widely published in online e-zines, literary journals, and anthologies. Amy writes poetry, short stories, personal essays, and motivational quotes. She is the owner and operator of A.S.P. INK. Visit her website www.amypacini.com.

The Visitation

By Jack Maze

The surgery was successful.

She lay in a hospital room,

A bit sore, a bit groggy, a bit apprehensive.

As she lay there, she sensed a sound.

It was a quiet chorus of voices

Feminine, soft.

Soon words were detected.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

The 23rd Psalm, she'd grown up with it.

The words washed over her,

She luxuriated in the voices

As they carried away the soreness, grogginess, apprehension.

The voices gradually faded away

And she lay in a peaceful silence.

Then another voice was heard.


A single feminine voice

Softly speaking Arabic.

Reciting the Quran on her behalf.

She smiled and slipped into sleep.

A peaceful one with the anticipation of tomorrow,

Watched over by the voices now quieted. 

Jack Maze was born in San Jose and raised in Hollister, CA. He is a Professor Emeritus of Botany at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, B. C., Canada He has self published two books of poetry and three books of poems with photos of Dan Brooks.

Ithaca 1980

By Mindy Ohringer

Courts briefly rule Carter's draft registration unconstitutional.

I thought the revolution was coming soon.

I thought the people would rise.

I thought the sixties would never end.

We met at the Apple Blossom Café and I had never seen a man so stunning.

You, bearded psychology major who knew what my problem was...

"Underneath it all, you really don't like yourself."

You, Lost Adonis of Teaneck, provider of diagnosis and remedy

That glorious summer

You were one of three men


Who made me a woman, who let me stay a child,

Who knew a fifteen-year-old girl needed more time – even if she was going to college.

Glistening bare-chested strangers haunt a decade's precipice.

Dan, John. Jim, Dan, Scott...

You'll always be beautiful.

You're the America of my wildest dreams. 

Mindy Ohringer received a BA in Political Science from Barnard College and a MA in Politics from NYU Her writing has appeared in *The Great Neck News*, *The Great Neck Record*, *The Columbia Spectator*, *New Choices*, *October Hill Magazine*, *The Thieving Magpie*, and *The Greenwich Village Literary Review*. Mindy writes about love, history, politics, feminism, and mortality. She blogs at thewifeinwinter.wordpress.com.

Who Can I Count on Now?

By Milton Ehrlich

Death Valley Days
are coming to town.
Our century-old oak trees
are destined for execution.

A sad-looking white circle
on the middle of a once-
hefty trunk—a dire warning.
The end is near.


The underside of oak leaves
blows in the breeze—ominous
dark clouds, lightning bolt
and thunder rumbles.

My brothers are gone—friends
nowhere to be seen—busy dying
or demented.

ADT doesn't always work,
and triple A doesn't come when I call.
I'm tired of sleeping with one eye open.

I better reach for an umbrella

or learn Brazilian Jiu Jitsu

before the devil bites me in the ass. 

Milton P. Ehrlich, Ph.D. is an 87-year-old psychologist and a veteran of the Korean War who has published numerous poems in periodicals such as "Descant," "Ottawa Arts Review," "Wisconsin Review," "Allegro Poetry Magazine," "Toronto Quarterly Review," "Christian Science Monitor," "October Hill Magazine," "Huffington Post," and the "New York Times."

Daily Mail

By Allan Johnston

The letters arrive like tourists
with tiny Hawaiian shirt postage stamps.

I open them; they open me.

One in a bundle, guided by the light bill,

yells, "This is the person who could
win \$10,000,000.00!"

Another, somber, wears thick ties
of print line and a well starched address.

"We are sorry you are not the one
under consideration," it states.

The letters ask for money, acknowledge
refusals, promise better tomorrows.

They give readings on the gas
and seek donations to save the panda.

One inquires about my teeth.

Another advises tummy tucks.

They fill my house like thirsty children


at McDonalds, screaming for cola.

I bring them in, and when they've relaxed

I take them hostage.

I make no demands, phone no one;

just knife them, gut them, put them in recycling.

Occasionally I hear from friends. 

Originally from southern California, Allan Johnston earned his MA in Creative Writing and his Ph.D. in English from the University of California, Davis. His poems have appeared in over sixty journals, including *Poetry*, *Poetry East*, *Rattle*, and *Rhino*. He has published two full-length poetry collections (*Tasks of Survival*, 1996; *In a Window*, 2018) and three chapbooks (*Northport*, 2010; *Departures*, 2013; *Contingencies*, 2015), and received an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship, Pushcart Prize nominations and First Prize in Poetry in the Outrider Press Literary Anthology competition (2010). He now teaches writing and literature at Columbia College and DePaul University in Chicago.