

MARCH-JUNE 2025 - ISSUE 20

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Creative Writing

CRISPR History, CRISPR Future

Nonfiction by KM Kramer
Winner, 2025 Micro Nonfiction Contest

The Vanishing Sky

Fiction by Douglas Pereira
Winner, 2025 Place & Home Contest

The Writing Prompt

Nonfiction by George Chandy

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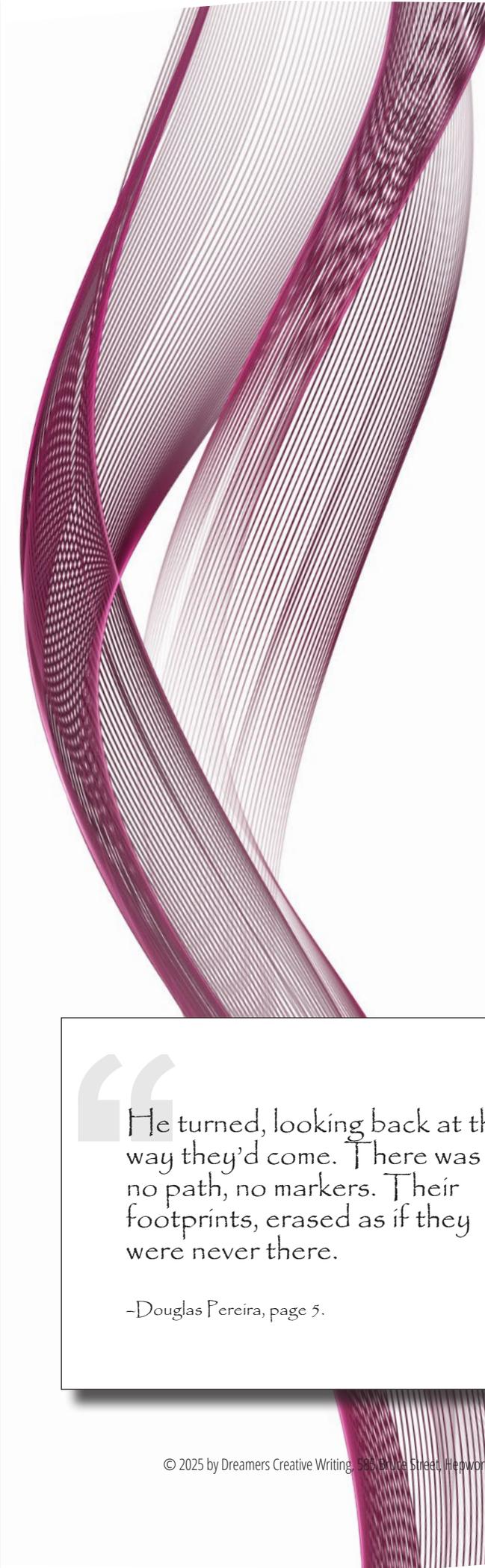
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He turned, looking back at the way they'd come. There was no path, no markers. Their footprints, erased as if they were never there.

-Douglas Pereira, page 5.

EDITOR'S LETTER

Welcome to Issue 20 of Dreamers Magazine. This issue arrives at a turning point. After a long, hard winter—one that felt heavier than most—the sun is finally showing itself again. And with it, the weight we've all been carrying seems a little lighter, if only by degrees.

You'll find sorrow and memory within these pages, but also grounding—stories and poems rooted in place, in moments of return, and in the quiet persistence of the self. Our *Stories of Migration, Sense of Place and Home Contest* winners explore what it means to love and leave, and to long for what was and could be. And, our *Micro Nonfiction Story Contest* winners capture flashes of truth that settle in and stay awhile.

This issue's feature nonfiction story, *The Writing Prompt* by George Chandy, stands as a powerful reminder of how writing can draw the past forward—gently, unrelentingly—and how it can ask us to face what we've kept buried.

It's not a light collection, but perhaps it doesn't need to be. Like spring, it carries something more enduring than cheer: renewal, in small and personal ways.

As always, thank you for reading.

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2025 STORIES OF MIGRATION, SENSE OF PLACE & HOME CONTEST

*Congratulations
to the 2025
Winners!*

FIRST PLACE

The Vanishing Sky

Fiction by Douglas Pereira

The bus stopped in the middle of nowhere. The doors wheezed open, spilling cold air inside. Vani gripped Vinita's shawl tighter. She had been warm, curled against her mother's side, but now the wind nipped at her nose.

The driver said something to the man beside him, but Vani didn't pay attention. People shuffled in the seats around them, hesitant to leave their warm refuge. Then Jayan stood, zipped up his jacket and popped the hood over his head.

"Come, let's go," he said to the two of them. Her father's voice was firm, it made Vani feel safe. When they'd go to the Sunday market back home, Jayan would weave effortlessly through the crowded roads on their rusty old scooter. He always knew the way. She followed him with a gingerly pace.

The snow swallowed their boots with a soft crunch as they stepped off the bus. Vani was bundled in layers and tiny mittens and a colorful trapper hat that she'd picked out at the airport yesterday. Vinita tugged on the little girl's drawstrings and then scooped her up.

The others stepped off behind them - six more people, wrapped thickly, their breaths turning white in the dark. No one spoke. A man at the front gestured. Jayan nodded, adjusting the straps of his rucksack. They started walking.

Vani lifted her head, blinking up at the night sky as she bounced in her mother's arms. The black stretched endlessly above them. And speckled across the darkness, the stars flickered back at her.

"There are so many," she whispered.

Vinita glanced up but said nothing, focusing on her footing. The snow was uneven, groaning under her feet with every step.

Jayan kept his phone in hand. He spoke in low tones to Vinita, but Vani couldn't hear. She didn't care. She was busy counting the stars.

"Seven!" she exclaimed, a puff of white wafting up around her.

"Hush, my love," her mother said.

Vani didn't know how long they'd walked. She wasn't even sure where they were. The thought escaped her as she marveled at the trail of steps behind them, winding off into the trees. The others moved farther ahead of them, their figures shifting like shadows in the dark.

Soon, the snow began to fall harder. The wind sliced at their cheeks. Vani buried her face in her mother's neck.

"Where are we going, mama?"

"Somewhere warm," Vinita said, "Somewhere better."

Jayan walked beside them, his phone gripped tightly, checking something - directions, a message, maybe both.

Vani peeked up at the stars and started tallying them again out of boredom. One by one, she poked at them with her mittens.

"Five," she whispered, "There's only five, mama."

Vinita didn't answer. She quickened her steps to keep up the pace. The others were much farther ahead now.

"Mama, there's only five," Vani said again, twisting her head around, bewildered, searching for the missing lights. She twisted her hood loose and a sudden gust tore the hat off her head.

"Mama!" she cried out as the wind whipped through her hair.

Vinita spun, searching desperately for a speck of color in the sea of white.

"Come on! We're falling behind," Jayan bellowed through the wind.

He stomped back and nudged Vinita back on course. Vani sobbed.

Jayan turned to his daughter and grabbed her trembling hands. "Listen to me, beta," he said, his voice quiet but fierce. "I can get you a new hat. I can get us a new house, but..." he



swallowed, "I can only give you one future. I want to give you the best one."

Vani sniffled. She looked up at him, confused.

Jayan exhaled and took her from his wife. "We go forward. No looking back."

Vinita felt a pang in her chest.

They hurried now, pushing through the deepening snow. The flurry engulfed them, erasing their footprints almost as soon as they left them. And their group had disappeared into the storm.

Vani didn't know how much longer they walked. She only looked up at the stars, there were even fewer than before. Her mittens were wet. She rubbed them together, trying to keep warm, but the cold was inside now, gnawing at her fingers. She remembered her bed back home, a thin foam mattress that made her itch all over. Sometimes the power would go out and she'd be frightened of the night. But her mother would lie down beside her and sing a lullaby until she drifted off into sleep. She wouldn't mind any of it now.

Soon, the trees were far behind them. Jayan looked at his phone, at a message that had come earlier.

"Near a post up ahead," he muttered.

They kept walking. It seemed like forever. Vani grew heavier in her father's arms, her small body shivering despite the layers. Vinita's hands were rigid in her gloves.

Then, they reached the place.

It was nothing. Just an empty road, a sign caked in ice, and a hollow in the snow where something might have been.

Jayan handed Vani back to his wife. Vinita whispered his name desperately, but he was already dialing. The call rang once, twice - then a voice crackled through, muffled and far away.

"We lost them," Jayan said. "We - where are we?" he looked around, "There's a sign. A road."

The wind knocked against them, trying to push them over. Jayan was listening to the phone, nodding, then shaking his head.



"What is it?" Vinita asked, clutching Vani close.

Jayan's voice sharpened. "No, we're here. We're exactly where you said." He paused. His breath was jagged. "You said -"

Vani felt her mother stiffen.

A long silence. Then, her father said weakly, "They said to go back."

"Back?"

"They said - we missed it," he exhaled sharply. "They said to go back."

Something inside Vinita cracked. "Jayan."

He didn't answer. He turned, looking back at the way they'd come. There was no path, no markers. Their footprints, erased as if they were never there. The road ahead winded into the endless horizon.

Vinita's arms tightened around her girl, and her breath shuddered against her tiny cheek. Vani was tired. She wanted to sleep, just for a little while. She leaned in, but

Vinita shook her gently.

"No, my love. You have to stay awake." Tears frosted around her eyelids. The world blurred around them. There were no more stars in the sky.

And then, Vinita hummed.

It was quiet at first, nearly lost to the winds. A melody, distant but familiar.

Vani knew the song. It was the one her mother sang when the lights stopped, when the night threatened to consume them.

Jayan looked away, past the road, past the horizon, searching for the future that had escaped them. Vinita sank to her knees in the snow, cradling Vani closely.

"The sun is coming," she promised, pressing her lips against the girl's forehead. "And tomorrow, we'll be warm."

Vani smiled, her breath small and soft against her mother's chest.

She believed her.

My Mother's Eyes

Nonfiction by Ruth Patterson



*'Lehed juba kolletasid puul
Kuivi heinakõrsi kandis tuul
Oma pambukese võtsin kaenla alla
Viimast korda tegin kodu ukse valla
Saatus toimus väga karmilt minuga
Pidin maha jätma oma kodumaa*

Autumn leaves glowed yellow on the tree
When fate dealt so harshly with me
Wild winds whipped the haystacks dry
I left my village, no time for goodbye
Now my homeland is behind a closed door
Can it ever be opened? Why this war?

I pick up this morning's newspaper and read another article about displaced Ukrainians, whose lives have been upended by a war instigated by Russia. There is something about the accompanying photos that looks familiar. Those hopeful eyes—for a new life in a peaceful country. Those sad eyes—for everything they have left behind.

I've seen those eyes before.

I remember my mother's blue eyes, behind her brown tortoiseshell glasses, the way she looked my father straight in the eye. Her silent no-fooling-around stare was her stern admonishment for whatever misdeed he had been guilty of that day.

This happened most often at our family cottage in the lower Laurentians north of Montreal. My father would arrive there late Friday night in the summer, drop off groceries and bags in the kitchen, and then drive off to a local farmer's barn to smoke, drink and play bridge—a penny a point—with other Estonian men, all refugees like him. Just before sunrise, my sister and I heard him staggering to his bedroom. He invariably woke up my aunt, who slept in the kitchen. Then we'd hear an indignant screech from our family cat whose tail had been flattened—Puddy always seemed to get in his way.

My mother's eyes flashed a dangerous silver those Saturday mornings, her lips a thin line, as if stretched by invisible elastics. My father pleaded for her understanding of his need

to decompress after a long week of work, but my usually loquacious mother had turned into a woman of no words. She'd likely learned this strategy from her own mother, Juulia, who'd given my grandfather Jaan the same silent treatment when he came home late and lurching after playing the *kannel*, his Estonian zither, in the village band. As the tenth and last child of Juulia and Jaan, my mother had been the only one still living at home to witness those transgressions and the response they had elicited.

My sister and I huddled together under the bed covers until our misbehaving father found refuge in the vegetable garden. He stabbed at the earth with a pitchfork—first angrily, then gradually more contentedly—to unearth a few potatoes for dinner. We breathed again when he deposited the potatoes with my aunt in the kitchen, and they started a conversation about a neutral topic, like what to cook for dinner or whether we should swim in the river before or after lunch.

In another of my memories, my mother was sitting around the bonfire with our cottage neighbours, her dark eyes reflecting the moonlight. She was singing the songs of her childhood, while my father played the accordion. Like many of the adults, my parents had cigarettes wedged between the index and middle fingers of one hand, and a glass of Canadian whiskey or gin in the other. I peeked out from between the legs of my parents, and watched the sparkling embers glow red, as I lay spreadeagled on a blanket and rubbed the smoke from my eyes. As the stars appeared in the night sky and the dampness crept into my body, I hoped no-one remembered that it was hours past my bedtime.

My mother's eyes were always darting, back and forth, at our family parties and holiday dinners. Her right foot was tense, ready to administer a firm kick when my father's conversation got off topic or when discussions with sons-in-law or guests got too heated or political. My father's defence of nuclear energy never sat well with us young environmentalists, but it turned out he was more prescient than we thought. We never did find out what my mother thought, as she was too busy scanning the room for danger, the air electric with the current of her disapproval. The hearty meals of pork and sauerkraut that she served—and the shots of vodka that were downed—

usually eased the tension.

When my sister and I decided to get married within three months of each other, my mother, who by now had lost both parents and all but one of her nine siblings, was faced with the loss of two daughters. Although the word "depression" was not in anyone's vocabulary in those days, I remember her eyes were often dull or full of tears in the months leading up to those two weddings. My father took her silences in his stride, and put himself in charge of most of the preparations. As a mechanical engineer and list maker *par excellence*, he seemed to have no difficulty orchestrating guest, food and drink lists. The Estonian minister that he hired was able to do "two for the price of one" or at least, that's what my sister and I imagined, as my thrifty father was always looking to save money.

A couple of decades later, my mother's eyes sparkled as we regaled each other with stories about our day. The year was 1990, and the two of us were celebrating her 65th birthday with a trip back to Estonia, newly independent after Gorbachev's *perestroika*. We were staying in *Võrumaa*, my mother's birthplace, where we visited with her people, saw her landscapes and I heard her stories.

Relatives she had not seen during the fifty years that Estonia was part of the repressive Soviet Union had invited us to their home. Time and history had not been kind to them. Former farmers, before the collectivization of all farms and the prohibition of private property ownership, they had been reduced to living in an unpainted wooden bungalow, with a small backyard where they kept chickens and beehives. We spent the afternoon listening to fifty years worth of stories, perched on a dusty couch in their tiny living room, while escaped bees crawled in through the uninsulated cracks and floorboards and made their way drowsily across the carpet.

"You were covered with a hundred bees, and the rest were buzzing around on the floor at our feet. I was wondering how long before we were stung to death?" I asked my mother.

"I was so busy trying to understand Maida's thick *Võrumaa* dialect that I barely noticed the bees. I wish we had brought a tape recorder," my mother said wistfully. "Such juicy stories, and I'd almost forgotten how to speak *Võru*".

Her eyes were animated. She spoke clearly and confidently. This mother was different from the one I knew back in Canada. Suddenly I could see her as the beautiful young high school graduate, who'd dreamed of going to medical school. I could see why the young German army officer would have agreed to smuggle her, her sister and her mother onto a munitions train to safety in Germany. I could only admire this lively new woman in front of me.

In later years, when her mind was often full of the bad memories, my mother's eyes were tired. Once again, she and my father did not want to talk about depression, even though there were many days when she avoided getting dressed. Refugees of their generation had no time to be depressed. They were too busy building new lives wherever they'd had the good fortune to be accepted. But over 60 years later, my mother's many losses and disappointments were still sinking in.

"*Ma ei ole kibe*" ("I'm not bitter"). Her eyes flashed angrily again. "*Ma olen kibestunud*" ("I'm embittered!"). She emphasized the difference between those two Estonian words.

She then listed all the unfair things that had happened in her life because of the war.

"I never finished medical school. I never said goodbye to my father when we left Estonia. I didn't even hug him. How could I have been such an awful daughter?"

I didn't know how to answer this question. I'd never met my grandfather Jaan. He was a shadow figure to me. He had not joined his wife and two daughters in the line of refugees making their way to the German border.

"Stuck behind the Iron Curtain, because of his stubbornness," my aunt had said.

I tried to understand how this happened. Perhaps he could not have imagined a life anywhere else but in his village? Maybe he had been afraid of moving?

As a child, I imagined the Iron Curtain as a real curtain made of some kind of metallic substance that was preventing my grandfather from getting out of his house. I thought that was why he would never come to visit us. I didn't yet understand why he never wrote or called my mother and why she never called or wrote to him. Only years later, after his death, did I understand that any contact with family members who had escaped to the west would have resulted in imprisonment or exile to the dreaded Gulag in Siberia. This had happened to my father's family.

Another couple of decades pass, and I am at the hospital with my mother. She no longer speaks, but her open eyes tell me she's still alive. I hold her hand as the ventilator helps her breathe and the hydromorphone takes effect. I think she can still hear and understand me, but I don't know for sure. I alternate between whispering "*Ma armastan Sind*" ("I love you") and "*Oled hea ema*" ("You've been a good mother"). I repeat these words over and over again, like a mantra, not knowing what else to say. I know she is in the last hours of her life.

When my sister arrives from Vancouver to take her place in this last vigil, my mother's body seems to relax. Her eyes finally close, the room is silent. I keep repeating the mantra in my head as I let go of that familiar hand, give that familiar body one last hug. I'm sure my mother's gaze still follows me, even though her eyes are no longer open.

A year later, my sister and I take my mother's ashes for burial in a hilltop graveyard above a peaceful lake in *Urvaste*, near her birthplace in southern Estonia. Her name is etched on our family gravestone, joining those of my father, my aunt, two of my uncles and both my grandparents. Despite all the challenges and disappointments in her life, I know my mother is in a place where she is still remembered. Where the wind rustles through birch trees and a chorus of nightingales sings in the evening. Where we, our sons and maybe our grandchildren will visit from time to time.

**Väike majakene põllu sees
Soo ja männimets ta õue ees
Seal ma mööda saatsin noorus a'a
Seal mu kuldne mälestuste maa*

A tiny house, in a boggy field
Fragrant pine trees were my shield
Mine was a childhood with no fear
In that golden land, forever dear

I still read the newspaper every day, and continue to be moved by stories of war and displacement. I contribute to organizations that help refugees, especially those in Canada and Estonia. I have befriended a young Ukrainian family in our town who hope to settle here permanently.

These are small gestures in today's complex world of migration and immigration, but if my mother's eyes are watching me, I hope she would be proud.

**NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR: The Estonian poems at the beginning and end of this memoir were in my mother's collection and likely written by her. I have done my best to translate them into English.*

2025 MICRO NONFICTION CONTEST

Congratulations to the winners of our third annual micro nonfiction contest!

FIRST PLACE

CRISPR History, CRISPR Future

Nonfiction by KM Kramer

CRISPR technology lets us edit genes—targeting stretches of the genetic code to edit DNA at precise locations to replace harmful genes or limit their expression.

It's a relief, frankly, to know we have new tools to prevent us from turning into a feared genetic destiny. My entire life I have wanted a tool like this: to prevent becoming my mother. To stop me, if I start to replicate her nature or her nurture.

I suspect I will need to get down to the very threads of our shared DNA. To shake the broken filaments—listening to them rattle, like the insides of a broken lightbulb—before gently rearranging them.

Perhaps there is a gene that causes my mother, when caught after she litters cellophane candy wrapper or a plastic ice cream dish, to justify, "Well, it is clear."

My mother's narcissism is the genetic legacy I fear. Studies have tried to answer the question whether narcissism is genetic. The short answer is: possibly. Several studies from

across the world have demonstrated that narcissism is, at least partly, genetic—over 50% in some cases.

Most likely, I must go even further, to explore the spaces of our epigenetics, the cellular area where behaviours and environment can influence genetic expression without changing the DNA sequence itself. What life experiences replicate from there?

Amidst a pogrom in Lithuania, my great, great, great grandmother, Zloti, hides family silver in the folds of blankets. That way, ghetto checkpoint guards cannot see it. Zloti passes this instinct down to Holocaust survivors in our family, including my mother.

How have conditions changed so that my genes can react differently and still keep me safe?

These are the crisper tools I need. The examinations to conduct. The replications to truncate. To pass something better down to my son.



HONOURABLE MENTION

Brotherly Love

Nonfiction by Stephanie Lafleur

Hiding in the closet, as far back as possible, I wrap myself up in my grandmother's beaver fur coat. The warmth envelops me, swaddling, calming me. The silky lining – a tender touch on my skin.

He won't find me here if I'm quiet. He won't mock me or call me names. He won't punch me when he passes by, or glance at me in disgust. I put a hand up to my lips and remember the

tinted lip gloss I tried on. A fruitless attempt at being pretty and feminine. I rub it off furiously with the back of my hand.

Some say home is a sanctuary. Some say brothers are heroes.

As I close my eyes in the darkness, I shrink myself down to invisibility, slowly developing a superpower that will serve me poorly for years to come.

HONOURABLE MENTION

Twenty-One

Nonfiction by Niko Alexandratos

You would be twenty-one now, the age I was when I made the choice.

I wonder what life would have been, a mirror universe where a different me made you possible. Not regret, but second guessing.

But it was a non-choice, these other paths only visible now, looking back. I wonder if you see it the same way, or, on seeing my life now, if you feel cheated.

In the liminal space between waking and sleeping, I feel you with me, within me. You are not lost, I carry you under my skin, an ember of radiant heat and light.



The Writing Prompt

Nonfiction by George Chandy

"I never told anybody this, but..."

These were the last words I remember writing at the Third Street Writers' workshop. It was midmorning in February, two days before Valentine's day. Nine hours later I woke up in a bed at Kaiser Permanente Hospital, Irvine, wondering how I got there. The better part of a day had vanished from my memory. I was petrified.

"How did I get here?" I asked Susan, my wife.

"Patty brought you home from the creative writing workshop. After the workshop, while walking with her to the post office on Forest Avenue, you told her that you were having a stroke and could not remember anything. You sat down outside while she collected her mail. She alerted me and brought you home. You wanted to lie down. As you walked down the stairs to the bedroom, you fished out an orange from your pocket and wondered how it had got there. Patty told you that oranges had been bought to the workshop by someone. You did not comprehend what she was saying. You seemed very confused and incoherent. Very worried, I brought you immediately to the Emergency Department."

"When was this?" I asked her.

"Around one in the afternoon", she replied. You walked in to the hospital holding my hand. The ER physician and the neurologist were both former students of yours. They found you very confused. You could not remember the day, year, and repeatedly asked where you were. Your blood pressure, normally low, was sky rocketing when they admitted you. The doctors were worried that you were having a stroke. They ordered a CT angiogram and an MRI as part of a stroke workup. The doctors have excluded stroke and are considering a diagnosis of transient global amnesia."

"What is that?"

"Transient global amnesia is a temporary inability to form new memories as well as a loss of recent memory. A deeply disturbing psychological event can trigger it. Did something horrible happen at the workshop? Patty says that you took the writing prompt *I never told anybody this, but...* and wrote a wonderful short story and read it to the group."

"I don't remember writing a story or reading it. Where is the notebook where I write stories and poems?"

"Your notebook must be in your backpack at home," Susan said.

I returned home on Valentine's day after discharge from hospital. At home, I read the story I had shared with Third Street Writers. I transcribe the story below.

...

I never told anybody this, but I escaped being sold into servitude when I was eight. We were in Calcutta. It was February 1962, sixty-two years ago. I was being sent to a boarding school in the Nilgiri mountains of South India. From the blazing sauna of the city, deafened by cacophony, past beggars, some my age, the clink of metal coins dropping into their tin begging bowls, my parents and I weaved through the chaotic bustle at Howrah station. Ahead of us, a coolie-porter in a red shirt carried my yellow metal suitcase, my name printed on it in black. The platform was teeming with people waiting beside a train with red carriages pulled by a powerful steam engine. I held tight to my parents' hands. At a carriage, two men were waiting. Many children and their parents milled around. My parents told me that this was the party of students I would be joining. The two men were my teachers. We would journey for three days to reach the school. I was terrified. We entered the train. It was an old wooden sleeping compartment, oozing odors of strangers, hints of betel nut, sandal-wood, mustard oil, fish and spices. I sat with other students. Most students knew each other. They chattered among themselves. In the dim light, their eyebrows, lips and cheekbones were shaded, leaving shadowy patches on faces that appeared rat gnawed in my frightened imagination. I knew no one. Nobody spoke to me. I felt abandoned. The whistle blew and the train steamed out of the station. My parents receded into the distance.

A little while later, a man came by and said there was room elsewhere on the train if anyone cared to go with him. In grey trousers and short-sleeved bush shirt, he sized us up through heavilylidded reptilian eyes. His English was spoken with the lilt of central India. He appeared to be a teacher. The other students ignored him. Not knowing any better and being naturally trusting, I agreed to go with the man. I followed him through a few carriages and reached an empty sleeping berth. He asked me to sit there. He told me that we would alight from the train in a few hours and change trains to travel to the school. This was different from what my parents had told me, but I was confused and tired, so I said nothing. I sat by the metal-barred window looking at the passing countryside, listening to the rumble of metal wheels on iron tracks below, tears streaming down my face as I ached for my family.

What saved me was geography. The train's first stop was Kharagpur. My oldest brother Thomas, an engineering student at the Indian Institute of Technology, had come to Kharagpur station to see me set out for boarding school. When he did not find me with the school party, he asked friends to alert the station master that a child was missing. They recruited others to prevent the train from leaving. My brother went carriage by carriage looking for me. He found me sitting by myself. The adult who had brought me to the seat had disappeared. My beloved brother, wearing the same mustache he wears today, embraced me. I sobbed in his arms, comforted by his familiar scent. I never talked about it again. There was no counseling in those days, no

therapist I could talk to. From that day I have been gripped by the fear of being abandoned.

...

That was the entry in my notebook. Patty visited the next day. "Patty, what exactly happened at Third Street Writers?"

She replied, "You read your story. Everyone loved it and said they couldn't wait to read your book. You and I then walked to the post office. We talked about India. You then began talking with great animation about the beggar children in the movie *Slum Dog Millionaire*. By the time we reached the post office you said you could not remember anything."

My son, a psychiatrist-in-training, put the pieces of the puzzle together. "Dad, your creative writing exercise ripped into the open a scary event that you had kept hidden in the depths of your unconscious brain for sixty-two years. That painful memory welled up into your conscious mind. Your vivid imagination, overlaid with mind-images of beggar-children on the streets of India, caused your conscious mind to suggest the horror of the *what ifs*. What if I had been kidnapped? What if I had been maimed, blinded, limbs broken and set in odd positions, forced to beg on streets,

beaten if I did not bring back enough money, sexually molested? By the time you reached the post office, your brain was experiencing profound psychological stress from the terrifying repressed memory blaring into your conscious mind. Your memory circuit shut down. You experienced total amnesia starting from the first line of your story, lasting nine hours. It was a fugue, a dissociated mental state. Your blood pressure soared because of your immense stress. You exhibited a typical PTSD reaction to a terrifying past event."

He went on to say, "Be grateful Dad. You were not kidnapped. You were saved. You had loving parents. You have been happily married for 47 years. You are loved. You live in a gem of a town on the shores of the Pacific. You have had a fulfilling career. You are blessed."

Our minds are like the ocean. Painful memories, long suppressed, can bubble to the surface from unfathomable depths and terrify. Actions and intentions imprint our minds. Some are wisps, quickly whisked away. Others take longer to fade. Deeply etched imprints can impact our journey. This painful memory is one such imprint. "No imprint is permanent." I remind myself, "I will erase this imprint, I will find peace in daily tasks and mindfully breathe, smile and be grateful as I tread lightly step after step."



POEMS

by Debra Bennett

On the Shore

Once again, to the shore
pebbles and plastic wrappers
in-drawing, withdrawing breath of wind,
that slow moaning of foghorns:
our common humanity washed up,
yet again.

*(Yesterday, or last week,
or last year
in some other place, another war erupted,
children shaking inside
makeshift shelters, bodies bagged,
Blame flies like blood: whose fault?)*

Here, fog lifts and on the sand:
a few stubbed out cigarette butts,
sand scraped, scoured
by two stumps
laboriously pushed together.

someone's half-eaten sandwich
unclaimed yet
by screaming seagulls or those crows watching,
shiny eyes, scavengers
darting down for a bite of bread, a bite of meat,
or juice, blood, bones.

On my way home,
in the grocery store,
the news on someone's phone chatters:
atrocities, rage and revenge
on both sides.

*And I'm thinking about how, somewhere or
over there, on both sides,
today or yesterday, or last month
someone's child died.*



Refugees: A Testament on New Year's Day

I sit on a park bench alone
beneath a drift of leaves;
a scuffle of rubbish rushes up with the wind:
scraps of red plastic,
crumpled paper hats, masks:
a smell in the air,
singed and bitter.

I sit on this park bench,
New Year's Day.

And have I sat here forever alone listening
to the cacophony of branches scratching
the bare cold sky?—
—shreds of broken glass, tramped earth,
scorched paper rising with gusts of wind,
those raucous midnight voices
finally stilled into sleep
the clown faces melted now:
waxen colours running down
the ruined faces, red and blue then
purple bruises:
our human facades sliding away
exposing raw skin, bald bare eyes.

New Year's Day, a park bench
the swings emptied now
the children gone away.
And I wonder: will we sit here forever,
on benches and mountains,
on beaches and deserts,
always,
a million Marys mourning
the terrible waste,
the bruised flesh,
the broken bodies of loved ones.

And, again and again will we watch
as the heavy boots
march and stamp. Again.
Now.
And, again,
that trail of tired refugees
crawling over the inevitable mountains or
deserts,
sliding into oceans,
those young faces grown old, those
old hands poking among make-shift fires:

what wreckage, what loss, the blackened
scavenged homes, the dead flung like rubbish
into heaps—and will some god not
rise up, weeping and raging
will the blood of generations not
erupt from the earth,
will the sky itself not
thunder out against the sight of
the emptied eyes of the quiet children,
the bent young women mourning along mountains,
the old ones stumbling again and again upon those
lurches of cracks and rocks:
another trail, more dust and hunger
even the fear repeating itself like the bursts
of distant shells—
—even the fear has gone on so long, it's almost stale.

Yes, we sit on benches, stumps, rocks, mountain sides,
bent over our broken ones, young and old,
fear and greed.

The ones in their high desks, faces, fingers folded
into a comfortable complacency, smiling
while the children die.

Yet, witnesses, so many of us,
always and forever, together and alone, age after age,
watching and listening as the leaves scuttle and scratch
bare cold earth, or sands smoulder another
bare bright sky,

until the sky is finally falling, the
winds blowing away deserts,
listening to those Ones.
Forever here, forever gone away.

New
Little one, small sun wrapped
in pink blankets
features surfacing slowly, rising up
from unknown waters, the eyes still dark
with an old knowing,

your tiny fists clutching
the drawstrings of life: they will pull you in
tighter and tighter into a necessary forgetting
as they do all of us.

(Hopefully, you are one
welcomed with wide open arms into
landscapes only
imagined by too many others),

Still, for a while you will be lost
in the hubbub of life, the noise of traffic
signs directing, warning, suggesting,
sometimes the finger-tapping
gum-chewing boredom,
lines steaming, stuttering, stopping.
And all of that.

Still—I wish for you a few
handfuls of pure love
the sunlight glinting through bits of
soft ripe gold in your palm:
remembrance of where it all began
before the forgetting.



fullstop.

Fiction by Vaani Sai

Day One

A sharp squeeze below my gut wakes me up. *Oh no*. I feel the ooze between my thighs. I push myself up, avoiding twisting my torso. I try not to shake the straw mat, so I don't wake up the boys on the other side of the bedroom. I pick up a section of my nightie and fold it between my legs, then waddle to the adjoining room. My bare feet on the concrete are like a cat's before it pounces, though I need not worry, because Rajesh's snores will mask even the rooster's crow in a few hours.

Maa and Nana are asleep in their room. I rub the sand that has built in my eyes. "Maa," I whisper, getting close, but making sure not to touch her. "Maa," I hiss, urgently now, as I become increasingly aware of my wetting chaddi. Maa wakes up with a gasp. "Enti?"

"Maa, periods *wuchindi*."

"Enti?" she exclaims, more out of shock than for clarification. Nana, who is sleeping in corpse pose, makes a slight grunt.

"*Adhi - adhi wuchindi*," I whisper again. She glances at my nightie bundled between my legs. She pushes herself up, all of a sudden wholly conscious, and then gestures for me to follow her.

I know where we are going. I feel like a schoolgirl who's broken a rule, being led to her punishment. Maybe I did. Maybe I am. I follow her up the narrow concrete stairs to the empty room on the roof. She unlocks the door and holds it open for me.

A single incandescent light bulb hangs from the concrete ceiling. There is a door that leads to the veranda, where we hang wet clothes or lay fruits and spices to dry. It's easier to walk to the veranda from the stairs outside, so the room remains abandoned save for a few nights a month when I am its only occupant. On humid nights, I'm greeted with the troubling companionship of a wall lizard. Thankfully, tonight is cool, and I'm spared two types of discomfort.

There is a straw mat rolled up in one corner of the room. I pick up the coconut broomstick next to it and sweep the floor, banishing all the dust and dirt that has accumulated since last month. Once the room is sufficiently clean, I lay out the mat.

At this point, Maa has returned. Careful to not step inside the room on the roof, she places a bucket of water, a jug, a clean pair of *chaddis*, and another nightie at the doorstep, as well as some rags. Then, she disappears down the stairs. Only after she has completely descended, do I lean beyond the door

and bring them into my quarters.

There is a tiny room attached to the room on the roof, with nothing but a drain. I undress, bring the bucket of water and jug here, and wash my blood-stained thighs. I'm careful to use only half the water. I fold one rag and sandwich it between my legs, pull up a fresh *chaddi*, and throw the new nightie over me. I take the sullied clothes and rinse them out with the remaining water, then drape them over the bucket to dry.

I waddle to the window. There is no mesh, only metal bars that are wide enough for me to stick my head through. Even so, looking out is futile. The room on the roof is the only place with a light bulb on at this hour. Even the moon is shy today, revealing only a sliver of silver. I bid it a good night and go to my straw mat. It's difficult to find a comfortable position with my back arched atop the cement floor. *Maybe my side*. No, the ache deepens with my hips squished against the floor. I use my arm as a cushion, angling backward...

Day Two

I can't tell if my eyes are open or not. I can only see black. I am only certain I am awake because I can feel my heart pounding against my chest as hard as my uterus is contracting against my abdominal walls.

I become vaguely aware that my abdomen is being bombarded with two different types of cramps. *Oh no*. I pray everyone is asleep. I grab a cloth and open the door as quietly as possible. I scurry downstairs, past the boys' and Maa and Nana's rooms.

I un hinge the front gate, cringing at the sound of metal against metal, jumping side to side on my toes. I glance back inching to sense if I've woken anyone. I slip on my *chappals* and run out to the side of the house. I trace the cement wall that separates our house from the neighbour's, using it to guide me to the outhouse. At the wall's end, I feel for the fence that barricades the cows out back and then inch toward the outhouse. I know where the tap is. I fill up a bucket of water, and then squat. My cramps subside.

Walking back feels easier now that my eyes have adjusted to the faint moonlight. Once I am back in the house, my walk to the staircase is interrupted by a silhouette in the kitchen. I'm only frightened because I can't help Rajesh back to bed from his sleepwalk. Nor am I allowed to talk to Mohan to ask for help. So I stand, watching from a distance. Rajesh stands by the stove for a few minutes and then begins shuffling back to his room. I wonder if his curse is luckier than mine. My thoughts pause when I hear a thump, which I take as





I pray to her for forgiveness for having touched other parts of the house and ask that she cleanse them of my sullied marks.”

assurance he has fallen back onto his and Mohan's mat.

I continue back upstairs to the room on the roof. After closing the door, I turn to the moon. She's two slivers big today. I pray to her for forgiveness for having touched other parts of the house and ask that she cleanse them of my sullied marks.

Day Three

Pain strikes through my abdomen, waking me. I squeeze into fetal position. The quick movement eases my cramps, but only for a second. I re-adjust, pressing my eyes shut, but there is a knock at the door. Maa is sliding a fresh nightie through the slit under the door. This time, a bar of soap appears too. I sit up — ooze — and wait for her footsteps to trail off, and then open the door. There is another bucket of water, which I pull inside. I wash myself and replace the reddened rag inside my *chaddi*. Then, I place yesterday's bucket and dried clothes outside the door.

Maa must've heard the door open and shut because a few minutes later, a plate of food shuffles into the room. Two fluffy white *idlis* slathered with fresh *sambar*. I inch the door open to find a glass of water, steel to match the plate.

I sit by the window, eating at an unbearable pace. Chewing this way fails to trick me into forgetting the pain. I lick the plate clean, and then place it outside for Maa to pick up.

The boys are probably leaving for school now. I peer out through the barred window, and see Mohan and Rajesh in their checkered red and white shirts, maroon pants, and black loafers, running to the end of the street. They don't seem to notice that our trio is missing a sibling. I couldn't imagine walking to the train station in this state. Right now, I'm grateful for my curse.

Soon, I can't see them, or maybe I closed my eyes. Colors of pain curtain my vision and I lie down on the straw mat once more. The concrete is more forgiving in the sun's light. The hot wind through the window massages my back as I toss and turn.

A knock wakes me. The sky is purple now. I open the door and find dinner. Rice and *rasam* on the same steel plate. I slurp it all up and set it outside. The cramps come in gentle waves now. I'm lucky to have slept through the worst of the pain and bleeding this month.

Peering out at the silver crescent of light, I'm reminded of last month's horrific spill, when I had to use my only clean rag for that day to scrub blood out of the mat. This month, I spare the moon the sound of a broom's whip against my back. I gaze upon her observing me, triumphantly listening as she whispers compliments through the wind.

Day Four

I wake to the rooster's crow. *Did he crow yesterday? I can't remember.* Warm *idlis* and *sambar* welcome me after my cold bath.

I spend the day watching the roofs of the other houses. Sometimes I see Vidya across the street hanging clothes on a line. If I turn left I can see Jyothi's mom spreading *chinthapandu* on their veranda. I'll have to help Maa spread a new batch for us next week.

A knock marks lunch. It is rice, *rasam*, and bean *thalimpu* today, which fail to satiate me now that my cramps have dulled. Dinner couldn't come sooner, so I'm excited when I

hear a knock what couldn't be more than an hour later.

When food doesn't slide through the door, I peak outside. Sitting on the floor are my textbooks and a pencil pouch. As I lean to pick them up, I make eye contact with Mohan who accidentally turned back to look at me. He freezes for a moment. Looking at me is a crime. I purse my lips, wrap my belongings in my arms, and close the door. There is a piece of torn paper sticking out of one of the pages. It is a note from Soumya who has scribbled the schoolwork I missed yesterday and today. Fractions. The task doesn't even seem daunting today. Any distraction is welcome. Fortunately for me, my maths headache soon cancels out my menstrual pain.

After dinner, I can't keep working. The single light bulb and waxing crescent in the sky aren't enough to illuminate my textbooks. I decide to wash up and rinse my used clothes.

I lay down on my straw mat. My scattered breaths slowly relent as I give into the quiet oblivion of dreams.

Day Five

I wake to Maa's knock on the door. I wash before eating breakfast. My flow is lighter today. I'll be able to go to school again soon — maybe I'll make it to the Holi festival. Sonia's mom always makes the best sweets, and everyone loves Maa's *laddus*. Sometimes Mohan would gamble them off for Varun's mom's *jalebis*. I hope I can accompany everyone to town for the function in a few days.

After lunch, there is another knock. Soumya brought my homework again. As I walk back to my room on the roof, I can hear Rajesh, Mohan, and some other boys running outside. It must be Friday if they're allowed to play on a school day. *Has it been a week already?* I suddenly ache. I'm overcome with a desire to see the outside. I look through the bars, but this doesn't quench my thirst. I look at the door that leads to the veranda. *There's no way anyone would see me. It'd only be for a few minutes.* I step outside, knowing Maa would be furious I'm poisoning the batch of *chinthapandu* laid out here for next week's *rasam*.

I watch the boys toss the cricket ball around on the street. Sometimes, Varun manages to hit it far enough that the others have to run and retrieve it. Once, he accidentally sends it inside our house's gates. Mohan runs to our house. I don't know why he looks up, but he does, and he sees me. He waves, and I almost wave back, before we both remember we're not allowed to be interacting. He turns around and continues off. When I hear Maa call for them, I head inside as well. Dinner.

The moon seems higher in the sky tonight, certainly fuller. I can see the rows of houses beyond Jyothi's for the first time all week. In the distance, I see a light flicker on in another room on a roof. I lie down opposite the thought of not sleeping alone tonight.

Day Six

With the morning light today arrives something strange and foreign. *"Aipoyindhaa?"* A voice. *Is it finished?* The first words I'd heard in six moons.

"Aa." Yes.

Maa opens the door and I wipe the sand out of my eyes.

POEMS

by Ken Cathers

the promise

*the last surviving member
of Heaven's Gate
reflects on failure*

I thought you were
coming back

had wrapped up
everything

was ready
to be taken away

become one
with the pure light
as promised.

I had completed
the purification
recited the prayers

left no trace
to follow.

but I was deemed
unfit, flawed

an empty carcass
left behind

let others decode
that cold calculus
of stars

reveal the secret face
that lies
beyond

I ache for what
you have discovered

pretend to listen in
hear a voice
behind the silence

am a spurned widow
in a shadow world

burn with a cold fire
watch the sky
for your return

malice

violence is a language
learned from birth

that casual slap
on the head
an arm bent back

it is the first phrase
remembered

a rock thrown
in the dark

a complex syllable
a curse hissed

how easy the rhythms
come to us, the
smug cadence of lies

how helpless we are
against it

hand slammed
in a car door

the pain naked
beyond words

catch that quick glint
of malice
in your eyes

lazarus returns

four days is not
a long time
to be dead

but the man
you bring back
is lost, confused

a poor act
for the big stage.

he refuses to mingle
stumbles into dance
has started to smell.

he wanders off
and keeps going.
becomes an imperfect miracle

a minstrel
a voice in the desert

is seen in the distance
a tatter of rags
befriended by dogs.

there are no new lines
to the story, no roads
left to follow

only the shadow world
the stray Angel of sleep
that beckons

he is empty inside
returns to the cave
rolls back the stone

remembers again
what it is to die



At the Airport Bubble

Nonfiction by Kateryna Mashtakova

This is me—a newcomer who emerged at your Kelowna airport today.

Someone could complain, What brought her to my city?! We already struggle with lowpaid jobs, high rental charges, and pricey tags at grocery stores. Her arrival will simultaneously elevate the cost of goods in all sectors. And what if her skin colour is not as white as our mountain snow? And what if she does not hold our beliefs? An invader of our little paradise. And yes, she is not from Canada, but from somewhere between Austria and Australia, so her English will sound funny; maybe she doesn't speak The Language at all?!

Precisely at this moment, I nestle in a cozy chair near the window, tired of dragging my suitcase through the airports of several countries. Ukraine, Turkey, Poland, Germany, and finally, Canada. It's funny to imagine my tiny steps like a serpentine, red, dotted line on the world map.

Now, what are my thoughts? I am a modern Don Quixote, ready to fight the windmills of separateness, unemployment, and the impossibility of getting a lease agreement on a tiny basement only because I have no credit history in Canada. But clearly, I am delusional, and these creepy monsters exist only in the realms of my feverish imagination. A cloud of dandelion chutes floats in the air outside the window.

I will step out of the airport bubble. I will instantly get sunburned under the ice-cold sun. *Ice-cold!* you will exclaim. It is the Okanagan; the sun here works in baking mode. But don't forget about stereotypes; I was convinced I would arrive in this wonderful arctic country to meet polar bears, see the landscape of igloos, and be greeted by the friendliest and most polite people.

But, no joke, I believe in Canadians. Window glass mutes their words, but, for sure, they will not judge my traditional



costume of a sky-blue sundress, embroidered shirt, and a wreath of wildflowers decorating my head; they will appreciate my choice of Horilka (I don't drink alcoholic beverages, but Horilka works miraculously for massaging my granny's back); they will genuinely try to comprehend my English (well, 10% English; the rest Ukrainian and Polish words, evenly).

“It's funny to imagine my tiny steps like a serpentine, red, dotted line on the world map.”

I will find a tiny vacant spot in the field of education; daycares are not bad: I won't become rich, but who knows, maybe my loneliness will be cauterized by the dozens of children's hugs gifted to me daily. The housing issue will also somehow be resolved. Thousands of British Columbians will eventually find an exit from the labyrinth of the housing crisis, and I will, too. If, of course, anything will be left after the raging wildfires that destroy nature and cities on their way. I know this heartbreaking feeling when your land is racked. But we will rebuild the places and bring rebirth to the natural environment. Your home, and now my home, will be okay. And while working together, our friendship will grow because—though we all have individual tastes and habits—we, humans, are so alike. We cherish our loved ones; we are proud of our neighborhoods; we believe that the land that sustains our existence will always be great. And these are not pathetic words; this is the essence of the phenomenon called *The Nation*.

In the end (or perhaps it will be just the beginning), will I grow roots in the Okanagan soil? It will depend on your welcoming attitude and my stoical strength in fighting endless paperwork. I expect that a glass of Horilka for you and a shot of maple syrup for me will help maintain the most productive dialogue. Welcome to Canada!



POEMS

by Kerry Rawlinson

pre/mo/cognition

there's something happening that I can't quite
catch. something hiding, birthing,
like the egg of a maggot, itching
to hatch, quite slight—
barely there—

boring corridors of foreboding through
bones & brain, pimpling skin
& stripping clumps of grungy hair for its nest
while I sit, oblivious to it.
—what time is it?

the future's like that maggot egg too:
so tiny smallfrail that if you could find it
you might squish it pinch-flat between
finger & nail—not realizing its un-
changeable irony;

supine in a somnolent time-delay, not blinding
white or magnificent black, but grey-
skinned like cold gravy; not lost but somehow
mislaid, never ending anywhere but halfway.
—what's the cost of not listening?

we never guess the present won't last, sipping
tea in our thrift-shop chairs, but while
I search for the lost ginger cat in half-unpacked
rooms, with endless rain outside
and no moon

I hear you sing: *you have to accept the facts!*
the cat might well be hiding— but I
am dead. are premonitions self-fulfilling?
does Time deny free-will? the future
curls in on itself

like old linoleum, yellowing in every room
of life, its snide claptrap pattering
on the roof & rafters just like monsoon rain.
I can't catch it— so it drips right
through, going moldy behind

the mind's flaking plaster. look! here's the
proof: I bloom stigmata. omens augur
portals through my wits, & our futurespace
slips from normalcy's warm uterus
into the fog of doom.

optimism is a mutated mule

that as- inine,
runaway beast won't
be called back once
it begins, not reigning
in when ordered &
taking only yes between its
teeth. it's a pup's welcome home
tail, beating time; a hundred pink,
wet tongues mapping our tired
faces. it's fulfilled by very little,
by day-old rubbish & flat, shiny
pledges. fleainipped & punished,
it'll curl up on the tiniest blanket
& praise its fine weave. burdens
of a brutal world are carried on
its head as easily as a single,
yellow pineapple, & it'll
juggle machetes with a
cheesy grin. if sharp
journeys rip into my
soles, it leads me to
swim instead, leaping
into frightful depths
right alongside me,
pretending to know
the strokes. and though
I flail in disastrous storms
& my boat truly looks to be
going down, this obstinate
thing, beloved thing, stays fast,
still fiddling sweet music; &
I lash it to a sturdy mast
to keep myself from
drowning.

Tracing the Shape of Love in *Drinking the Ocean* by Saad Omar Khan

Book Review by Sheri Doyle

Drinking the Ocean explores the rewards and complexities of various kinds of love—romantic, familial, spiritual, and self. The individual and shared journeys of Murad and Sofi are narrated in alternating perspectives and unfold to reveal how two paths can cross and entangle with lasting effects no matter how many times those paths diverge or cross again. Set in Toronto, Lahore, and London; in family homes, on university campuses, in restaurants, cafes, and workplaces; the story's sense of place is overlain with an emotional landscape of push and pull, grief and the pursuit of connection, the desire to escape and a need to return.

Murad sees a face that he recognizes in a crowd on a city street. He knows immediately that it's her. Married now and established in his career, Murad reminds himself of the story his mother told him as a child and its moral to not look back. And yet, he is unable to forget Sofi, even now, seven years after he last saw her. At just the sight of her, Murad is flooded with memories, taking the reader back in time to London where he is pursuing graduate studies. Despite his freedom at university and away from home, Murad's spirit is burdened by parental expectations. He is overcome with loneliness and a sense of disconnection from his peers. But when he meets a classmate named Sofi, who is an immediate source of comfort, Murad is pulled from his inner darkness and into her light like an awakening. Murad quickly sees himself changing as he shares part of himself like he never has before. With Sofi, he can open up about his mental health struggles, his sadness, his sense of displacement having moved around

frequently as a child. Sofi offers a fresh perspective to Murad's sense of dislocation as she has the ability to feel at home anywhere. They discuss angst, the human condition, family, and spirituality. A magnetic connection develops but as circumstances and fates impose on their directions in life, Murad and Sofi are separated and pulled together again and again.

Through flashbacks and flashforwards, the story deepens over time and across continents. Although for different reasons and at separate times, Murad and Sofi share in common many of their sensibilities— isolation, loneliness, loss, love, fulfilment—and both persist to understand how duty and responsibility must be balanced with the pursuit of inner peace and a greater purpose.

The novel is divided into four parts of shifting perspectives, each beginning with a luminous quote from a mystic, such as Rumi and Baba Kuhi of Shiraz, whose words are also found in a fictional book titled *Aphorisms of the Mohammedan Saints*. In London, Murad receives the book as a gift of profound importance, both grounding and elevating, throughout the meandering story of two lives twisting together and apart perpetually.

Through elegant and layered prose, Saad Omar Khan offers an introspective, heartfelt story about the intricacies of life for Muslims in the West and the everlasting quality of love.

fledgling

Fiction by Ruth Kennedy

Sprung early from school in mid-May, Rose Wilson started her 'wild rose summer,' by boarding a VIA Rail train in Kingston, Ontario. This was the summer she turned 12, so this four-month adventure to Alberta included her parents and her three younger siblings.

After two days landlocked in the northern Ontario woodlands, it was a startling change to arrive on the prairies. Rose watched attentively as the grassy ocean whizzed by on its horizontal plane under an enormous sky. The train picked up considerable speed on the flat land so the now familiar motion of the car rocking on the rails, and the sound of metal sheering against metal had become rhythmically more complex.

It took three days to arrive in Edmonton. From there, they were transported out to a house on the prairie, south of Vegreville. The first thing Rose noticed from the window of the car during the ride from Edmonton is that wild roses were everywhere.

It was 1977 and Rose's father had just finished his first year of studies in theology. This family venture was to fulfill his first assignment as a student minister. Rose had been a little mystified by her father's decision to quit a good paying job to go back to school. He had explained to them, briefly, that he had had a calling that could not be ignored. His calling required the whole family to follow.

The house they moved into that summer was painted white and surrounded by coniferous trees and tall bushes. On the lot next door was a little white church. Beyond the church and the house were open fields, endless sky, and no other humans beings or buildings in sight.

Rose was enamoured of everything that was new, soaking it in like a sponge. She adored the sunny warm days of late May, but was especially partial to the evenings when the air cooled down and the dusk stretched out longer than she had ever experienced. She liked to stay outside as late as she could, watching the sun set and the evening settle.

Puttering outside one evening, she heard a different kind of noise in the long grass by the hedge near the house. It was not the sound of a kitten but of some other small creature. She waded carefully through the tall grass until she found, nestled down close to the earth, a perfectly round ball of light grey fluff. It had two black eyes and a tiny orange beak. Rose was delighted. She had never seen anything quite this cute before.

"Hi," she managed to half speak, half whisper, "who are you?"

They stared at each other for awhile, then suddenly, the little ball of grey fluff squeaked out a sound and stood up. Beneath it appeared two spindly orange legs, the same colour as the beak.

There came a distinctively adult squawk from high up in the treeline at the edge of the property. The fluff ball turned suddenly away from Rose and started to navigate through the tall grass towards the trees, using small wings not seen

until now, to push past the grass.

Rose called to her siblings and waved them over, excited to share this finding with them, but then she had to hold them back as in their enthusiasm they wanted to touch, even to pick up, this little creature.

"Don't touch it! The parents might abandon it!" Rose was recalling her own parents' admonition when she had found a robin's nest back home. "Don't touch the eggs or the nest, you might scare away the mother."

Her siblings, dissatisfied with just standing around, soon tired of it and headed indoors for the evening. Rose settled in alone to witness the long journey ahead. She didn't mind. She was accustomed to spending time on her own.

Squeak?

Squawk!

Clearly, these two creatures belonged together, but what kind of bird was up in the tree? Rose dashed into the house to grab her father's binoculars. Back outside, she focused on the direction of the squawk and could see the distinctive outline of an owl, but what kind of owl, Rose did not know. The owl was perched on a tree branch high up in the eighth tree of the row.

So, this creature on the ground was a baby owl, an owlet. Still painstakingly working its way through the grass to the treeline, the owlet continued to squeak to get a squawk. It took an hour for the little one to reach the row of trees with Rose watching patiently. Then it started to climb the first tree.

Squeak?

Squawk!

It floundered its way up the trunk one branch at a time. About ten feet off the ground, the owlet realized this was not the right tree, so it came awkwardly back down the trunk, shuffled over to the next tree in line, and started to climb again. Rose watched, fascinated by the determination with which the owlet struggled up the second tree trunk. And back down again.

Rose counted the trees to the one where the parent presided. If the owlet intended to climb each tree to get to the parent's tree, there were six more trees to go. There was no way to communicate to the owlet to jump ahead a few trees. And why did the parent owl not come down to rescue the owlet? Rose remained far back to make sure she wasn't the cause of this.

It didn't occur to her that an owlet would leave the nest even before it could fly. That strengthening its legs was important for its development. That the parent had not abandoned the owlet, but rather, was calling it home. And the owlet's job was to find its way there. That only the owlet could insist on living.



Squeak?

Squawk!

The dusk crept further into grey, but Rose was undeterred, her eyes adapting to the low light. She heard her mother call out, "Rose, it's too dark to be out, you need to come in now."

"I can't," Rose called back, "not yet, the owlet isn't safe yet."

"Then come and get your jacket."

It was cooling down, and now that she wasn't moving around, Rose was starting to feel the chill in the spring air. Her jacket was welcome.

Rose felt compelled to witness the reunion. She was in fact a little terrified that she might not. That the owlet could fail from exhaustion or succumb to the coyotes as prey. Or just give up. The call and response continued, with the squawk growing louder the closer the owlet got.

Squeak?

Squawk!

In this way, the owlet's journey continued through another long hour. It did not skip ahead. Rose remained anxiously present, focused on the owlet as it climbed each tree and scabbled back down to ground. Still two trees away from the parent.

Squeak?

Squawk!

When there was barely enough light left to make out the outline of the tall trees, the owlet at last reached the tree where the parent waited for it at the top. The owl climbed all the way up this time until it reached the top. The reunion was a silent one. Rose never saw the owl or owlet again, but she slept well that night knowing she had seen the owlet to safety.

The following Sunday morning Rose sat in the little church. She half-listened to her father's sermon, mesmerized by the dance of suspended dust caught in a sunbeam. She heard his words but had no idea what he was talking about. Sometimes she pretended she understood hoping this would close the growing gap between them. Whether he was standing in the pulpit or sitting in his study, immersed in books and thoughts and words, he seemed as remote and abstract to her as God.

When a mouse ran across the sanctuary the following Sunday morning, squeezed out of the old pump organ during the opening hymn, Rose was delighted and horrified in equal measure. The old organist didn't notice, her father didn't notice, but everyone else did, and a tittering kind of commotion erupted. If this was truly God's world, Rose was glad it included the owlet and the mouse, and such serendipitous humour.

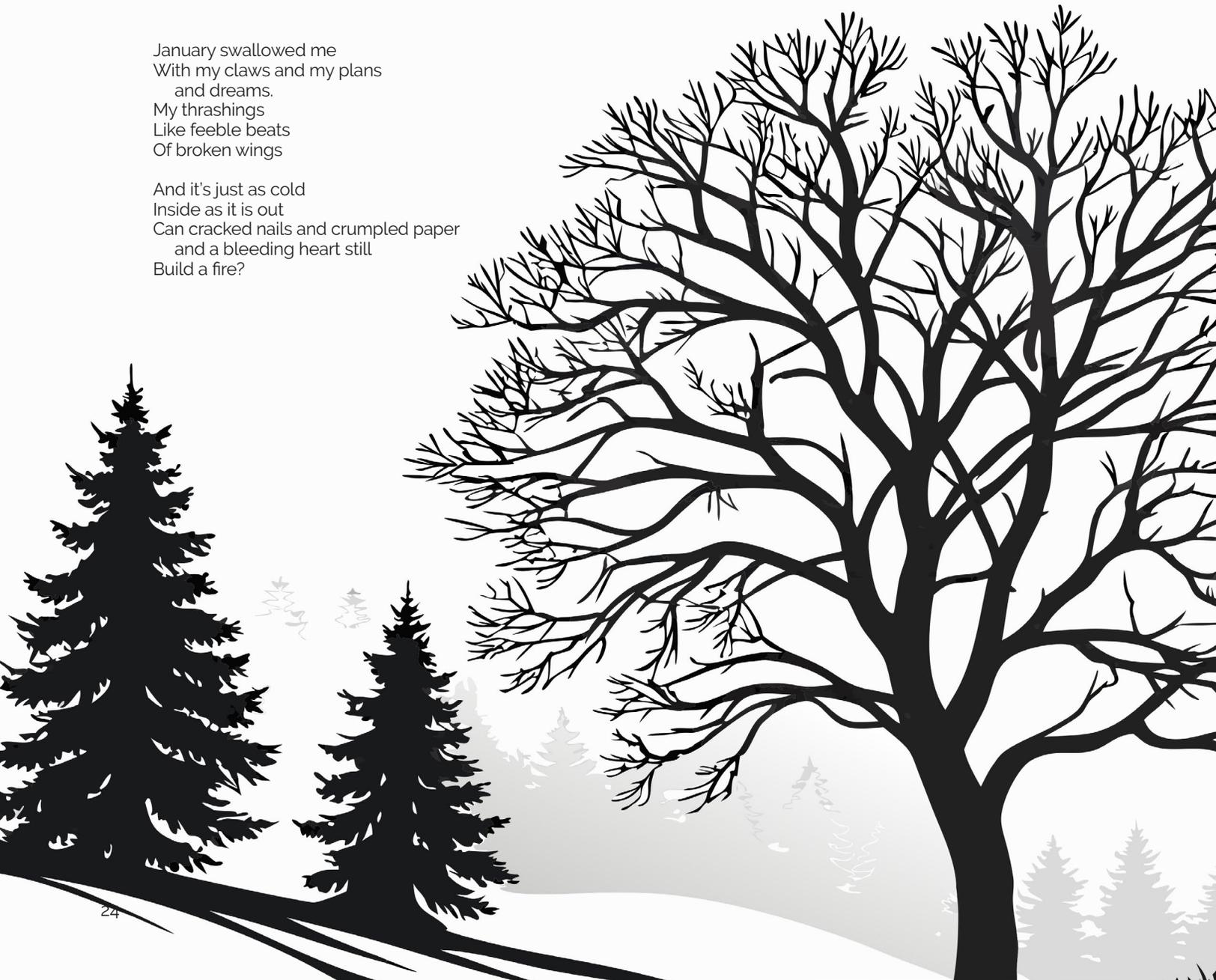
POEM

by Hannah Holbert

the second half of winter

January swallowed me
With my claws and my plans
and dreams.
My thrashings
Like feeble beats
Of broken wings

And it's just as cold
Inside as it is out
Can cracked nails and crumpled paper
and a bleeding heart still
Build a fire?

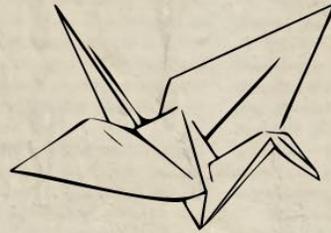


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Dreamers Magazine

\$10/YEAR

DIGITAL SUBSCRIPTION



A watercolor illustration in shades of blue and green. At the top, a sailboat with a tall mast is on a small platform or hill. Below it, a large, dark, shadowed area represents a body of water. In the middle ground, several birds are shown in flight, their forms rendered with dark, expressive brushstrokes. The background consists of soft, layered washes of color, creating a dreamy, atmospheric effect.

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