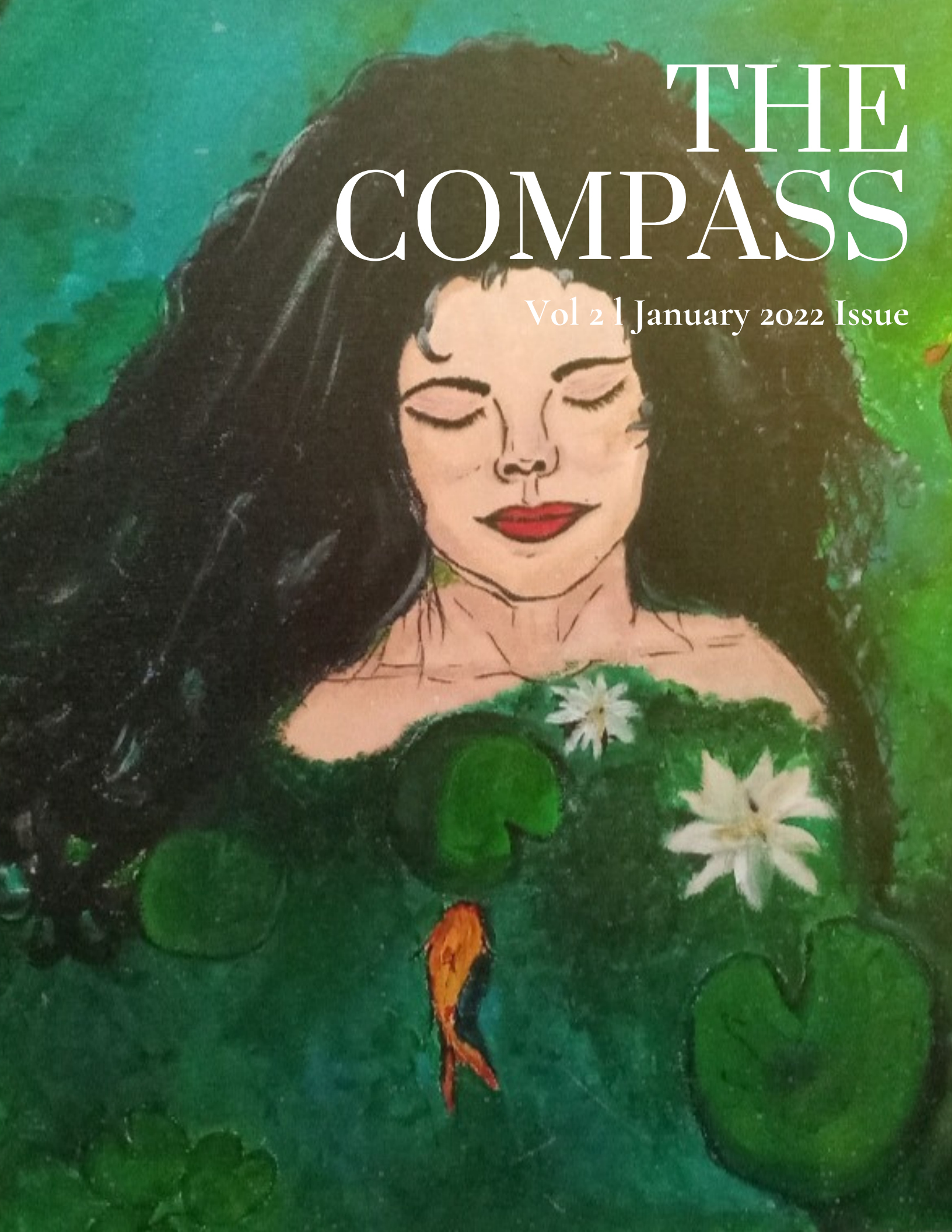


# THE COMPASS

Vol 21 January 2022 Issue



# Editor's Note

We all made it to the year 2022. I want to wish you all a very Happy New Year! May your year be filled with love, hope, grace, and gratitude. A new year provides us with an opportunity to rekindle our excitement for pursuing our goals and objectives. Here is our second issue, which reflects and focuses on heartwarming and exceptional content.

Winter and the holiday season brings fresh ideas and energy to life, resulting in an increase in innovation and opportunities for experimentation. Writing is perilous, and publishing is much more so. Writing is a translation of words ready to be shared. Writing may be revolutionary, revitalizing, and uniting.

At the time of this writing, our previous issue has been read all over the world extensively, and with this edition, we are poised to significantly expand our reach. This volume features the voices of contemporary poets and authors. We have also worked tirelessly to foster worldwide cultural understanding. We have already shared information about countries and religions on our website. We constantly share articles and informative pieces as well.

Now it's time to congratulate the entire team of *The Compass* for bringing another stunning issue for our readers. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to our contributors and readers because without you there is no journal.

Check out the beautiful compilation of writings in our second issue. I hope you will take the time to read what the content of the magazine has to offer. This issue has so much to read, so much to ponder and so much to learn.

- Lubna Khanam

# Meet the Founder

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

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



# Cover Design

This edition's cover was created by Deva Priya. She said of this piece, "when you tell me you are awake in the growling dark I'll pitch you this lullaby and paint you my dreams. I've been there before and I can't sing anymore so the next time we meet we'll share the same dream." Deva is a writer from Thrissur who enjoys painting her dreams.

# Appreciate life always

## by Dr. Anoushka Rai

It's never too late to be content with life.  
As the sky turns to a rosy pink shade,  
And the flowers rise up and hail.  
After an acute cold, some sunlight is gold.  
They drape the floors in different shades-  
Pink and red and purple, around a cascade.  
All parading on my land, none fade.  
Amidst all the green, I stand.  
Looking at the iris and freesia, in a glance.  
And at night the starry sky,  
Like a carpet, full of sapphire.  
And the scents of jasmine like-success, I admire,  
And what could be said about the beautiful orchids,  
Filling people with love and strength, they inspire.  
It's never too late to appreciate,  
The life you live and pass in haste,  
Without admiring these beautiful changes.

*Anoushka Rai is from Delhi NCR in India. She is a poet, co-author, editor, and anthology compiler. Anoushka can be found on Instagram at @anoushkaa\_ and @\_.blendspace\_.*

# Be in a happy promise

## by Shredha Narayanan

If only distance could be measured  
Not by just numbers  
But by words, by feel, by sight  
I measure it by our voice, our smiles, our dance of joy  
We measured it by books, by letters  
Scented by our shaking fingers  
Our tears of pain on the low days  
The desperation of our lonely days  
The whispers in our journey  
Late night conversations, about favourite memories  
Of complicated histories  
Of unfolding mysteries and unbottling of whiskeys  
Words stabbing as a paper cut  
From those letters that made us a cult  
Stories flowing as shutterbugs  
Memories fluttering like fused bulb  
The physical distance made a new pact  
That never will be apart  
The ink bleeds the pain  
Of the eternal realisation of strain  
The distance was not about physicality  
Distance became purely mentality  
Possessive and jealousy took over  
Freedom and joy bent over  
Tears and despair took over  
Till one's sparkle and smile bent over

For everything was told to be compromised  
To be in a happy promise  
When we met our hands In a lifetime we were to lead  
Consciously try to bleed  
Without being seen  
For everything was told to be compromised  
To be in a happy promise

*Shredha is an aspiring writer with a vivid imagination and visualization of both the present and future.*

# Call of Destiny

## by Angandeep Chatterjee

What was your first case? I mean, when did you come to know about your observation powers and how to solve issues using them?'

We were on our way back to Kolkata from our Panagarh hostel when abruptly, the topic of my best friend, Jayashis Dey's works on different cases came up. Over the last nine months that I have known him, I have witnessed this nineteen-year-old, fit and drop-dead handsome guy, a heartthrob for college girls, solve some of the toughest and puzzling crimes in and around Panagarh. From August last year, till today, the 14th of April, I have personally seen him work on cases related to murders in our college, a theft, a case of the infamous Dracula, and one where he had to find the missing parents of a common friend.

And in all those cases, I have been able to witness the genius behind his works. Being just another first-year student of Information Technology at Panagarh Institute of Engineering & Management seemed not to be enough for my talented truth and mystery seeker friend. He had an uncanny knack for seeing things that other people miss, and finding the truth behind those visuals, and more.

As a result, Inspector Biswas from the Kanksa Police station seemed to believe and rely on him in some puzzling cases that had the misfortune of falling in his jurisdiction in Panagarh.

While each of these cases has a different history, one thing was always prevalent. Joy's ideals, his visions, and his genius mind were at the crux each

time. Every person in the college, including the principal as well as the janitor, knew about him. He was a very polite, friendly, and go-to person, never disappointing anyone, whether helping with class assignments or finding the truth behind the hidden history of things.

And that has made him more popular than any other person in the college.

'Well.....!' Joy seemed to think a bit, stroking his chin with his index finger from the right hand while smiling. Me, along with seven others from our friend group in college, continued to look at him, as he contemplated my earlier question. We could see the meadows, huts, and animals, like cows and goats, moving past us at phenomenal speed as the train suddenly increased pace. 'There was a particular situation a few years ago.'

As the train paced along the tracks, keeping the nearby fields and cattle behind, moving towards our destination to reach our families before the Poila Boishakh, the Bengali new year, my best friend started his story.

'It was before I started my training for the Army and failed. My mom and I went to Sitalkuchi in our North Bengal parental house for a week. I had just completed the tenth board exam then.

That was the third day of our leaves. I was just introduced to smoking by my good friend Mohan in Sitalkuchi itself, just a day back. We were practising smoking from a single cigarette near a small lake behind the Durga Mandir Bazaar. The place was secluded most of the time, covered with trees all around. A perfect site for our endeavour.

I have always known myself as a bit different from my childhood. The colours of my eyes are dissimilar, as you all have seen.



Turns out, heterochromia was not popular with students at my school — South Point. My friends, my classmates always tried to bully me. But, I never paid much attention to them.

You all probably also know about my father's death, I think, courtesy of Aratrika's books on my crime-fighting.' Joy said the last bit, looking at me and smiling, and continued speaking before I could even respond. So, from childhood, I had the habit of checking on my mom. Her mental and physical health was my priority. I always knew if she had cried or if she had not taken her medicine. The tell-tale signs were always there. I guess that's one of the big reasons for the so-called observation power that Aru so proudly highlights in her stories about my cases.

Anyway, that day, while we were smoking there, I suddenly noticed a man. On the opposite bank of the lake. Running, hiding, and moving gradually among the bushes. Mohan was focused on the Flake at that time, so he never saw the fellow.

The guy was in his late twenties and tall. But most of his other features were obscured due to a cheap shawl covering him. It hid most of his face, along with his body. But, there were two things he wasn't able to hide. The first one was his shoes. Even though his dress and his bedsheets were more like a local villager, his shoes told me a different story. I had seen them very clearly, even from the opposite side. The black Bata shoes were expensive, about a size eight or nine, and soles were worn out, even though the leather was shining. That meant the guy was not a villager. He owns an expensive Bata shoe and has used it for a long time. He had the habit of taking care of the shoe. The next thing that I noticed was more concerning. It looked like the man was holding something horizontally in his lap, covered by the sheet. It was as if he was trying to keep that particular thing hidden and that's why all the camouflage.

There was no one else. Just me, who was looking at him from a distance, and Mohan, who was busy smoking. The guy seemed to have not seen us, or at least not noticed us as someone threatening to his agenda. Probably the banyan trees around us were responsible for that.

His attitude, appearance, everything looked suspicious to me. Why would someone try to show himself as a simple villager by wearing torn grey pants, a worn-out white shirt, and covering most parts of his face and body in a sheet, moving so carefully through a place where nobody comes much?

My breathing quickened as I suddenly noticed something else. A part of whatever he was holding in his hands, covered by the sheet. And a chill ran through my spine as I suddenly comprehended why he was there.

Without waiting, I quickly whispered to Mohan, instructing him and letting him move away from the place urgently. Of course, he let go of the half-consumed cigarette before that, throwing it into the clear waters of the lake before he left.

As soon as Mohan was away from my vision, trying to carry out my instructions, I quickly and silently negotiated my way through the bushes and trees towards the other side. I was afraid that it might be late before I reached the person.

As soon as I crossed to the other side, I heard a horrible sound. Something falling in the lake's waters. Breathless, out of luck, and out of options, I did the only thing I could. I jumped straight into the water, diving deep. I was good at swimming, courtesy of my trainer Bishu da, at Friends Club Swimming Training in Kolkata, and that knowledge came in handy this time. Within seconds, I reached where the man had thrown away whatever he wanted to hide from people.

'And then?' Rini asked, her eyes fixed on Joy as we all waited for the answer. 'What happened to that guy?'

'Well...!' Joy shrugged. 'Nobody had ever seen his face, not even me. He was gone right after the disposing of the baby. So, it was difficult to find anything. Except for one thing.'

I had seen the tag that was still on the little girl's left leg, around the big finger there. Though most of the words were already gone, courtesy of the lake water, I could see one single word. Hatibandha. And I knew. Hatibandha was the nearest railway station to Sitalkuchi. And there was an Upazila Health Complex there.

That guy must have taken the girl from the hospital. After an hour, the police came, and I told them what I found.'

He smiled that dashing smile of his, making my heart flutter, before speaking again.

'The rest is short. The police went there and found the baby was indeed missing. She was the child of a nurse there..... who died during childbirth. Her name was Hironmoyee. She was unmarried but was rumoured to have a boyfriend that nobody had seen her with. After her death, probably that same boyfriend wanted to get rid of that illicit child.'

Anyway, while nobody could find who the boyfriend was, my eyes suddenly fell on the shoes of the head doctor there, Dr. Charan Ghosh. He was tall, slim, handsome, fair-skinned, and in his late twenties. He was in formal attire, with black trousers and a light blue shirt, with a stethoscope around his neck.

The only thing that he forgot to change was the black Bata leather shoes,

And I touched it. I touched...'

It was then that I suddenly saw Joy's eyes welling up a bit while he still smiled. His voice was choking, making it difficult for him to speak. Not really understanding what was happening to him, I kept quiet, giving him time to gather himself. The other friends also seemed to come to the same conclusion, as they waited patiently for him to speak.

After a minute, he wiped his tears, took a couple of swigs of water from his bottle, and then started speaking again.

'She was so small. A tiny, little human being. A girl of probably five or six days of age. As soon as I held her and tried to keep her above the water, I heard her crying.' He smiled this time, recollecting the scene. 'That was the first time I was holding so little a child in my hands, and she cried. Her tiny wet fingers suddenly held my fingers with a grip that belied her strength. I was mesmerized. But, she was not out of danger. The place was deep, with holes and trenches below on the lakebed. So, I started swimming again, carrying her in one hand and making brushstrokes through the water with my other hand and legs.

It took all my strength and breath to finally reach the bank with the baby in my arms. But, I did that. I saved her, at last.

And then I heard a commotion as Mohan came back with people from the nearby Durga Mandir Bazaar. At least twenty people ran towards me and helped save the baby. She was swiftly taken to the Sitalkuchi General Hospital and kept in care.'

He stopped and looked out towards the huge fields that were passing outside our train window.

which I had seen earlier. I whispered the same thing to the Police Officer, Ravi Mitra. And the man took custody of the doctor.

I heard later that the doctor confessed to the crime and was jailed.

Poroma, the little girl, is growing up in Jalpaiguri, taken care of in an orphanage. You should see her. She is so bright, so brilliant. And she does great card tricks.'

My eyes welled up in pride as I saw the happy smile on Joy's face, just as the train stopped at the next station.

Destiny has a way of showing you or taking you through the path that you are meant to follow. And none other than Joy knows it the best.

*Angandeeep Chatterjee is an IT professional and novelist. He is the author of The Thanksgiving Revenge and has been published in several locations. He can be found at his website, [www.authorandangeep.com](http://www.authorandangeep.com).*

# Choice

by Dr. Kanu Tiwari

A choice is a chance to choose. It is your right. Whatever you may feel, you always have it at your disposal.

When you walk along a path and get at a cross-section, you have the choice to either go right or left. It is just that, simple and confusing. When you take a road less travelled, it is your own choice. Whether it was a right decision is entirely a different aspect.

A choice can make or break us. As a kid, have you ever eaten chocolates when told not to? Have you skipped homework and gone playing instead? You may think it was mandatory, but it was your choice. Your choice to disregard your elders. Making the wrong choice at times doesn't pose much of a problem. Not unless you make a blunder.

Have you received a prank call? Did you choose to follow the directions of an unknown person and land yourself in a mess as a consequence? Believe it or not, you had a choice to act otherwise. It was your decision that made you at a loss.

Each day that you walk a step, you get closer to somewhere. Yes, somewhere you will definitely reach if you walk long enough. Where that somewhere is, depends on your choice. I became a doctor and a writer by my choice. No one forced me to. And if someone did, it was my choice to act along the same lines!

We are what we are today by the choices we made yesterday. You can choose to be a preacher, a practitioner of good works or a drug addict. Circumstances

don't make or break you, it is your reaction and your choices that do.

Have an unhealthy relationship? You can walk out of it as you please. You can fall in love with a person. But you don't just stay with him by default as if there's no one else available to you. You stay with him because you choose to, every day that you wake up, every day that you fight or lie to each other or disappoint each other. You choose him over and over again, and he chooses you.

The world at times may seem bleak, but don't let it make you weak. When you think all is lost, think again and you'll find a way. Have a choice best suited to the circumstances, try to make it work. If it doesn't, choose again wisely. It is your choice, your call. You may stumble, you may fall but you can still be victorious when you follow your call.

*Dr. Kanu Tiwari is a doctor and baker. She has co-authored books and headed the literary department at her college. She wishes to serve her nation by her profession and change the etiology through her words. You can find her as @drkt\_writes.*

# Hammering My Depression

## by Saptarshi Bhowmick

“Thak-Thak”, “Thak-Thak-Thak”,

A cacophonous hammering prorogue my auditory,  
The never-ending motion of Iron on this stilly world  
Breaks the harmony of life.

It does not behove anyone to throw stones into a still pond;  
Remember, Earth has a resounding rhyme,  
To disturb rhythm is to irritate the Music\_  
A song named Life, composed by strings  
That relishes a sojourn in symphony.

“Thak-Thak”, “Thak-Thak”, “Thak-Thak-Thak”,

It rings louder like growing Civilization,  
And it’s hard to breathe now.

So, I opened my window to see  
The discontinuity of regular livelihood;  
Though there’s a house, being built  
It aches my heart\_  
Like the nails are placed over my heart,  
Deepened by each blow of the hammer.

Wonder if Christ feels this way;  
Nails nailing down in Tri-Clavianism  
And an extra nail on the heart.  
Depression I feel in my room  
With my pen in hand, and papers on my lap\_  
The transience of life and happiness.

Now the hammering stops



As night befalls before us,  
The connotation it leaves  
A tranquil gesture,  
To the uncertainty of death and birth.

I am surrounded by Four Walls\_  
In my room, circumambient by  
Sadness, Fatigue, Depression and Tension;  
Wondering if being Alive is  
More toiling than Death.

## Humanized Countryside

There was a delicacy in our northern villages;  
when men died of illnesses without any cures,  
We left them on the outskirts of mountain slopes.  
Where he stayed for weeks, decomposing,  
or become food for the vultures.

I was talking about ancient times.

Today it is an urban, humanized countryside.  
Nowadays nobody was gifted with such luck  
as fortune shines negatively in their isolated homes.  
Separated with multiple personalities and complexities,  
they now propel sleep, even deep into their eternal ones.

Their eyes remain silent and limb nonchalant;  
often movement disturbs them in a solitary gear.

So a rapturous soul never gets a death suitable to its wish  
and we are only appeased by a mournful funeral.

To these days they are still hollow men, even in their deaths,  
Serving no purpose,  
as they do nothing while living and dying.

## As I used to eat the Morning Mist

Similar to the foam of pressure cooker  
in our kitchen, where mother left it on the oven  
and waits to hear the first ten whistles,  
the outside narrows in our vision  
with fog in late winter mornings.  
The boiled potatoes taste like the buildings  
hidden in that mist as it is served openly  
with salt and butter, dipped in half-cooked rice.  
Now the suction of cold water, I sip  
counters the warmth so lightly that  
I sometimes forget to chew before my gulps  
and my mother often rebuked and said,  
“Don’t gulp it all at once, chew 32 times each  
the food or indigestions will play later”:  
so alike the black crow on the sight of a foggy road.  
Little by little the fog goes out with the late sun,  
left only a small place for these mornings  
I share with my mother and her motherly care.

*Saptarshi Bhowmick is a bilingual writer, thinker, and blogger from Berhampore, India. He has been published internationally in several literary magazines. More about him can be found at <https://bio.link/kcimwohb>.*

# COVID-19 I am not ok

## by Amandeep Kaur

Am I okay or not?  
Are they okay or not?

While staring at my laptop's screen,  
I was ready to hear their opinion,  
Fiction or non-fiction, poetry or prose,  
Which was the best option,  
To start the new semester,  
No one replied, And I waited quietly.  
Four more lectures went the same way,  
As a teacher, I wasn't feeling Okay.

Puzzled and confused, I reached home,  
Rushed to hug my son tight,  
'Don't touch me, Mumma, You've come from outside,  
Shouted my bundle of joy,  
My feet paused there, Being a little coy,  
His demand was Okay, As a mother I was Okay,  
But as a human being, I wasn't okay.

My mind towards various news stations diverted,  
The fear of getting infected with Covid pandemic,  
Had brought the numbness in relations,  
Many bodies were waiting for cremation,  
As blood relations were denied,  
To do the customary traditions,

For their own protection,  
Were they all Okay?  
No, they weren't Okay.  
As a human being, I wasn't okay.

The mother, the father,  
The brother, the sister,  
The nearer and the distant,  
All had become indifferent,  
In this worsening situation,  
The doctor, the nurse,  
The caretaker, the patient,  
No one was Okay,  
That was the portrayal.

I wasn't feeling Okay,  
At the pitiable condition,  
With a shudder, I got up,  
To find some solace,  
Among the stirring thoughts,  
Turned the music on,  
But when the wind was sullen,  
How could one imagine being calm,  
As if everyone was spellbound,  
Nothing was Okay all around.

My phone rang,  
Save me *beta*, I am going to die,  
My mother-in-law sighed with an annoying pang,

I felt a twinge in my heart,  
Forgot to relax and rummaged for money and mask,  
As it could be Covid-19's attack,  
Imagining the scene at the hospital,  
And feeling the fear of losing someone familiar,  
Was turning me into a dreader,  
While calling my hubby's phone number,  
My hands were fidgeting with fear,  
I wanted to shout at the top of my voice,  
I wasn't Okay, come fast,  
But as a dutiful daughter-in-law,  
I had to be strong, I couldn't withdraw.

*Amandeep Kaur is an assistant professor in English. She has a M.A. Honors, MCA, M.Sc. and PGDCA. She writes short stories, poems, and blogs in English, Hindi, and Punjabi.*

# Nightlight

## by John Lemon

An ocean set fire, placed atop the world  
Pure white glass pierces the thin airy veil  
The shimmering void sends the rays asunder  
Thirsty pools lap at soles, begging for more  
The Hive is awake, buzzing, beating, bounding  
Their light races up to meet the moon's  
The flies flutter, flocking to the safety  
Guided by the signal sent skybound  
This benevolent beacon  
The nightlight

# Oh Nature, how beautiful you are!

## by Saranya Reddy

Across the valley,  
In the deep woods,  
Stream of water flows  
Flawlessly, magnificently,  
Spirit of water gleaming,  
Beneath the river,  
Fishes dancing gracefully,  
Beautiful butterflies flying  
Across the exquisite flowers,  
The fragrance of those flowers  
Make you feel light,  
The rays of sunlight  
Between the bushes of trees,  
Keeps you warm,  
Whistle of birds  
Compose a music rhyme  
Melting your heart,  
Refreshing your mind,  
Oh Nature, How beautiful you are!  
No words can explain  
How wonderful you are!  
You are God's Gift.

*Saranya is an IT professional who writes during her free time. She has been published in several anthologies and magazines.*

# Night Scars You

## by Ambirneya Kannan

The night is null-squashed and dare and there is a  
Touch of eclipse and abruptness in the sky.  
The Moonlight flows on at the bedroom  
Window and drags through the slaughter  
in the double-cot in whites and canes of  
blemish-black. It splits the Amor into scars  
like a stone and tears it to sparkle glint.  
Slight specks of baseline dry on the texture of  
the scar and chance, glance, and their affections  
cobble lusciously rover the wanting;  
a fuss of my binger lays him buzzing,  
twirling. I stride a sole and the tops of  
the bight in the cover tar. I fly around and cry,  
and endure the bean-white barter, the moon-gnawed  
ceryl shine, gush on me. The night is a ghost too  
shallow to survive, the fresh fog wraps me  
from the unduly right twilight. I will cry  
here awhile and flirt with the moon and the light spots.  
The night is gloomy and lofty. A bee collapses  
by the window, and there is a hint of  
eclipse and abruptness in the sky.

*Ambirneya Kannan is a poet and a short story writer from Tamil Nadu. She's been an author of a poetry chapbook, compiler and author of two anthologies and co-author of many anthologies.*



# Life's Glory - Childhood

## by Sai Harshitha M

When we play all day... every day  
When life shows its full glory  
When worries and doubts cannot win  
Our carefree life cannot daunt

A yearn to do all that we can  
To use our little helping hands  
To focus hard with our minds so fresh  
To study hard and do our best

We want to share all our care  
With the little friends who will stick  
We share to them with honest hearts  
With an ocean of kindness so pure

Singing songs and rhymes all day long  
With an imagination so very strong  
The strongest dreams nobody sees  
To leap over every hurdle in our way

With the wings of the future, we fly  
Soaring high up in the blue  
We are the future, we are the youth  
To keep the wheels moving through

# The Emerald Stars - Falling Foliage

Coming to life in the spring  
Greenery and joy they gather  
Blooming through the night unseen  
Appearing beautiful and rare  
Eaten up by cows and goats  
But the pain they cannot feel  
In various sizes do they come  
Singing their whispery song  
Sun moon and rain they see  
The birds and little buzzing bee  
Rustling together on the watch  
Chattering together all at once  
Autumn time they doze away  
Falling happily in the day  
Waiting for the snow to melt  
For the sun and the rain, they wait  
Sunny times they come again  
To wait until they droop  
But of worries, they do not think  
For them, dear time passes so slow

# The Little Sheets of Rain

Pouring down from the clouds  
Pattering hard on the ground  
Those tiny droplets so small  
Can cause a catastrophic fall

Pitter-pattering here and there  
The smell of earthiness in the air  
Inside we sit warm and glad  
While the outside world stands still and dreary

People don't see here and there  
Thanks to the rain and all its help  
Rising up to the sun  
The plants' little life has just begun

Those little drops fell right here  
Towards the ground they steer  
To muddy puddles here and there  
With children jumping in the air

The earth is now at its fullest  
With beautiful plants in great bushes  
The rain has now wiped  
The little glass shard that is our life

*Sai started writing poetry about a year ago. Some of her other hobbies include painting, singing, dancing, and reading.*

# Freedom from Speech

## by Youbin Park

The first time I stood in front of my fourth grade class, I forgot my own name. To be precise, I forgot my English name that was so carefully assigned by my parents. There were too many letters to remember, so many sounds to round out and combine; my mouth was wired shut, and I stood for an embarrassingly long time before being silently dismissed.

What I thought I knew from my forty-five-minute lessons from Korean public schools proved to be useless, and my ABC's and miscellaneous thematic vocabulary stood no chance against real American children. While I mechanically ironed out my "h" sound in "white" and struggled to distinguish "word" and "world," children around me bent English around their tongue like mounds of clay forming into whatever shape it desired to be on a potter's wheel.

My English was too stiff, too separated like the hardened sounds of Hangul, and I hated the way English felt in my mouth. It was like putty; syllables slipped and the wrong parts of my vowels were rounded. I could not wash the flashing sign of my foreignness embedded so deeply within my tongue.

I carried around a dictionary every day. Oftentimes, I eavesdropped in conversations to pin vocabulary words I did not understand, and the rare times I was spoken to, no one was patient enough to wait for me to shuffle through to the first letter of their sentence in my dictionary. So I did not speak, and I did not want to be spoken to. This sentiment was shared among my classmates, and I spent my time enclosed in a glass cage. My struggles were apparent for everyone around me, and they were on display; I, in the cage, had no choice but to pretend that I could not see beyond.

The first essay I turned in was translated entirely from Google. I wrote my essay in Korean, and paragraph by paragraph, I copied and pasted until I frankensteined a traditional five-paragraph format argumentative essay. My teacher gave me full marks, not because I had a perfect essay, but because my English was so hopeless that she did not want to kick an already dead horse.

Even after my accent was masked and I no longer walked with a dictionary, writing haunted me for years. My essays did remain mechanically translated for a few years because I had no self-esteem to spare for the sake of improvement. I cried thinking about the muffled snickers and narrowing of my eyes whenever anyone read my paper; peer-grading, in particular, made me want to run out into a busy intersection.

So I conquered. I read like a madman and collected vocabulary words like Pokemon cards. I asked first for my paper to be reviewed by teachers and excellent writers only for me to receive my essays flooded with red ink. But I didn't enjoy writing. I wanted to kill the flaw that made me foreign. I wanted so badly to be embraced by the language I despised.

And that is exactly what I wrote about the first time I wrote voluntarily. There were no conventions or rules or deadlines strangling me; it was just my raging hatred, an empty piece of paper, and a half-filled G2 pen from Walmart. So I wrote about how much I hated being here, in a slurred mix of Korean and English. Only I could faintly trace my thoughts afterwards. It was rough but raw; I threw it away in embarrassment, but I think of that scrunched up piece of paper as my debut. I knew then, that I had to write again.

From then, something within me was disturbed. I had these urges to write, an uncomfortable sense of need, to write down my heart's content until it was enough. I remember my first piece of poetry I wrote outside of abstract

jumbles-- it was about my father. As I began inking each word, I remember a burning sensation in my soul; it was like a small spark fanning into a flame, escaping my body through a click of a pen. I had brought my pain from the past to the present, but I was consoling my future--to heal from the past.

The first time I performed this piece, I did not rehearse once, nor did I plan to perform. The opportunity presented itself, and I did not have a choice to avoid it. I stood silently on the stage, but this time, I spoke.

And I was free.

*Youbin is a 20-year-old writer who is originally from Korea. She is currently finishing her bachelor's degree in psychology and criminal justice and is working to publish her short stories, poetry, and full-length novel. She can be found on Instagram at @youbin.park.*

# SAUDADE

## by Dishari Neogy

“How far is your land?” asked my friend casually.

This question plunged me into an eternal state of brooding. Staying in Canada for almost two decades now, I made myself forget the miles that detach us. I made myself accustomed to this new land of glimmering lights and ultra-modern skyscrapers. Its culture bemuses me, even after twenty years of citizenship in this land.

“Miles apart!” I said vaguely, but deep down, I can still envision my motherland, exactly the way I left it decades back.

Sarah, having completely lost the string of conversation, looked at me baffled. Suddenly, her phone beeped, she took it out from my back pocket and a broad smile smeared her face. Instantly, I knew it was Michael’s message who comes every Saturday to pick her up from work.

When Sarah left, the emptiness of my life and the darkness of the room devoured me. After a tedious day’s work, I am waiting eagerly for my husband to embrace me, my only confidante and lifeline in this alien land. Though my twelve-year-old son is sleeping peacefully, unbeknownst to his mother’s agonizing past, I gaze out through the window of my small cozy apartment. I can only witness the restlessness of cars, the listlessness of people after a day’s work and the facelessness of identities.

Until my husband reaches home, let me narrate the chronicle of my past, which I have only disclosed to my life partner till now.

Even after staying in Montreal for over years now, I am still unable to forge an alliance with its culture and progressive lifestyle. I yearn for Kolkata's cultural heritage and emotional sentiments, which abundantly runs through its veins. But in Montreal, nothing looks familiar to me, apart from its blood and flesh humans with their stoic faces and fastidious life. A torn part of my soul still longs for her city of joy, Kolkata, which is miles apart from the ever-busy city of Montreal.

An unfortunate and unforgettable event compelled me to fly to Canada for a safer future and stability, leaving behind my dead parents and vulnerable relatives at the mercy of God.

The gradual but unprecedented upsurge of Naxals started in 1967, who made vehement protests against the then government of West Bengal, Communist Party of India (CPIM). nothing much changed even in the year 1984, when I was born to my parents.

I was the youngest of five siblings. Hailing from a joint family, my whole family used to serve both state and central governments. My grandfather was a Civil Engineer at the Public Work Department (PWD), my father was an Assistant Engineer at Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) and my mother was a professor at an esteemed government college, let alone the other family members who were all public service workers.

In 1990, when I was sixteen, the Naxalbari movement was at its pinnacle. Their protestations included incessant slaughtering of innocent people, burning down of public transportation and beating and shooting of government servers.

Charu Majumdar, the precursor of the movement, demanded rights over water, forests, lands and mineral wealth. They used government weapons as



their paraphernalia of violence against the government, from which they bifurcated themselves due to divergence of opinions. They had a special grudge against the upper and elite class of the society, which included all government workers and landlords.

Two years before I turned sixteen, my father rented the first floor to a family. Despite my mother's disagreement, he went forward with the contract which stated, "No violence, no use of drugs and no business are to be conducted, as it is a residential house." This is the only line I remember.

When the whole country was swept with mass transformation, my tenants were not exempted from its grotesqueness and barbarity. Stealthily, they started to transform by first denying my father's authority to kill a random individual on street, due to his involvement in a heated argument, where the murdered person supported the government and brutally condemned the Naxalites.

The Naxal groups embodied the marginalized (tribes, lower castes, farmers and labourers) and their grievances were primarily against the mainstream occupants like engineers, doctors, government workers, professors and teachers, who had worked for the betterment of the community. They considered themselves 'backwards', 'deprived', 'unprivileged' and 'disadvantageous'. It was more like a dichotomy between the 'lower' and 'upper' class, and this very realization of inferiority made them monstrous and venomous.

One day, after returning from the office, my father told me, "Be careful, when you return from school and don't stop at any particular place without purpose."

This fear of being haunted and hunted was hovering large over the minds of

the Calcuttans. These identity-less Naxals were employing brutality as their device to secure their place in society and strived hard to etch their names on the walls of dilapidated buildings.

In response to my father's concern, which sounded more like a warning to me, I asked reluctantly, "Why? Did Sumon Kaku complain about anything?" I looked straight into his face for answers. But it was as plain as paper.

He simply said, "No!" After a few seconds, he said, "Go and study in your room." He ordered me sternly and I instantly understood my time with them was up.

After so many years of that conversation, I can still visualize his facial wrinkles of tension, the hot sweat over his forehead was of worries and the dark circles under his eyes were of exhaustion and from constant anxiety.

During my adolescent years, I had mastered the special skill of 'eavesdropping', though I sometimes thought it was graciously endowed on me by the Almighty. I used my expert adroitness to hear their hidden conversations about me. But what I heard then, did not make much sense to me, but now I realize the underlying fear of being caught.

My mother asked, after sensing something strange about his aura, "Why are you looking so aggrieved?"

After remaining silent for a couple of seconds, as the question went unheard, "Everything is rapidly changing. None has remained the same!" he exclaimed lamentably.

"Why? Did they come for you?" asked mother anxiously, by keeping his eyes fixed on his face, frantically seeking hope either in his voice or face.

“No. But it’s just a matter of time. Everyone is suspicious of the other and their masqueraded attachment to Naxals.”

“Is anyone caught?” was her apparent question. “The police are patrolling heavily at night and detaining anyone who is found with mysterious activities, without any credible and concrete alibi.”

“Yes. But the number of honest policemen is reducing. Many of them have hidden connections with Naxalites and are refusing to come to the front due to their fear of expulsion from service.”

“So, we can’t even trust government workers now!” she said palely. “Did you talk with the Deputy Executive about your matter?”

“A report has been submitted to the higher authorities in alliance with the Police Commissioner and two unrecognized people have been traced. They are from the district of Birbhum and have strong Naxalite connections, but unfortunately, they are not arrested yet.”

“Then will you sanction the money? Only that can resolve the issue.” In response he said, “I can’t do so without any official instruction from the high-up!”

After that, I did not hear any of their mundane office gossip. At that juncture, it was very tedious for my mind to register their illusive connotations. I never took much interest in their so-called grown-up world, and hence that eluded me decades later. Maybe, I could have comprehended, if I was patient enough to listen to it.

Few months before this conversation. My mother told me, “Your father is caught in a tussle between the government and Naxals. As a government

representative, he is obliged to follow the laws and instructions of the authority and hence, should now aid the Naxalites.” My mother was a person who never disclosed things, which I was not supposed to know. But that sort of information was of no aid to me, as I was completely detached and kept separated from their mature world.

My bewildered eyes caught her threatened gaze, which was staring distantly on the floor. I asked very innocuously, “But he never told me anything in this regard.”

“Because it’s beyond your concern, and there’s a whole world of complexities that you will never understand, Mummum!” She further continued, “It’s an issue beyond your measure. You just know one thing, the world will not treat you politely, neither the government nor these extremists.”

Startled at her declaration, I aggressively asked, “Why won’t the government support us? My father is an honest and loyal officer and does everything for the betterment of the people.”

To appease my high-pitched voice, she placed a hand on my head, “You will understand slowly, Maa; maybe three-four years later.” Then replacing her two hands on my cheeks, she warned me smilingly, “You don’t know what the future holds for you. So you better study well and prepare yourself.”

My mother never used the epithet “Maa’, until it was a sensitive issue and it required a compassionate tone to convince me. Though I was flattered with her overflowing endearing attitude, still I was unable to apprehend the increasing fear in their own voice and eyes.

I knew what was happening in my ambience, but how my father was related to the whole ruckus was absolutely beyond my knowledge and capacity.

The Kolkata, I knew for years or the progeny would know, had no semblance with the current scenario. Slowly, the schools started to shut down indefinitely, people were afraid to leave home unnecessarily, students started to disappear from tuition classes, the noisy bazaars were mostly empty, the clubs and movie halls became the epitome of anti-social and criminal activities, the roads were deserted and the parks were lifeless. The entire city was shrouded with a melancholic enigma. The ceremonious nature that used to run through the veins of the city was no more visible.

The entire city had turned soulless and spiritless and our family was no exemption from the whole pandemonium. But the government offices were still wide open and none knew what decisions were being taken within the four walls of the headquarters.

Being an ardent reader in my adolescent years, I read the play, *Rhinoceros* by Eugene Ionesco, where he talked about how a pseudo-governmental manipulation had blinded every individual of the city. How the Red Guards of Romania had brainwashed the people in order to authoritatively seize the whole country. I had found striking similarities with the absurd plot of *Rhinoceros*. The only difference was, in *Rhinoceros*, the governing body was a totalitarian entity who believed in an absolute and rigorous control of power, but what was happening in Kolkata, was flared and ignited by the Communist Party, which eventually went out of their own propaganda and hence, they completely failed in controlling the situation.

After a point, I saw our permanent maid stop coming. I asked Maa about its reason, she said, "She is afraid to travel the long distance." My immediate reply was, "Why? She came till the previous week."

Without looking at me, she said, "Yes. But she won't come from this week onwards!" After reading the vagueness of her answer on my face, she

continued to elaborate minutely, “Her hometown is Jhargram and the movement is still prowling rapidly. So she thought to terminate this work in order to stay home-bound!” She ended her answer with a slight smile, which I found very eccentric. Without expressing any of my million thoughts, I wondered, “Is she happy that she left, else why would she smile.”

From my mother’s facial countenance, I could not gauge the enormity of Naxal notoriety. Apart from the violence and surveillance they employed, they had other means to torment people, which included rape, abduction (with the demand of ransom and at times without it), forced marriage and many more.

The government’s resignation to the whole situation or their deliberate attempt to stay passive had further aggravated the situation. I lost all my freedom and independence to play outside with my brothers. None of my siblings were permitted even for a walk. And, every day I prayed for a future, which would be unrestrained, emancipated and glorious.

Two weeks later after the maid left, the burden of running the whole household fell on my mother. With the passing of days, my father’s working hours elongated. I lost the appetite to study harder as there was no sign of school reopening.

On 3rd August 2000, the day that subverted my entire life and transformed me into a woman of twenty-five. Being a government official, my father had to work longer hours and even had to undertake night shifts. At around 12:30 A.M., a stranger knocked at the door. When I opened it, he looked very familiar to me, but I couldn’t recognize him.

He told me to call my mother. I did as he said. When Maa came downstairs, he insipidly told her, “You have to come with us!” Maa asked nervously, “Now? Why? Where do I have to go?”

“To the police station!”, he said bluntly.

“Police station! Why? she uttered the words with a shaky voice.

“I can’t tell you that now. You have to come with me.”

She turned in my direction, “You stay in your room and don’t leave the house until I return.”

I watched my mother get into the ambassador and saw it leaving. Sitting in my room, I waited till 6:30 A.M. in the morning, but still, none returned. By 8:00 a.m., my father was supposed to reach home, so I waited impatiently to inform him about what happened yesterday.

But unfortunately, at 10:10 a.m., my aunt called me and said, “I am coming to your place.” I could feel the urgency in her voice, but before I could ask her anything, she disconnected the call. After forty-five minutes, we both were sitting in my room and now, after so many years, when I ponder introspectively, I understand that in those silences between us, she was forming sentences about how to reveal the ominous fate of my parents.

Breaking the silence, the first thing I said was, “Maa, Baba hasn’t returned home yet! Yesterday...”

“I know!” she said brutally by cutting me short, with her head still stooped down.

“You know!” I repeated in a startled fashion.

“Yes.”

“When will they return? I am waiting for them all night.”

“You have to leave Kolkata immediately, without asking me another question.”

I was taken aback by the sharpness of her tone, “Without my parents?”

She said resolutely, “Yes, without them!”

“Then when will they come?”

Avoiding my question like a child’s petulance, she handed me one ticket to

Canada. I stared at it for a few minutes as nothing made any sense to me, especially my aunt's behavior, who was very stiff and solemn that day.

"I can't go without them," I said assertively and with unflinching eyes.

"You have to and you must, as there's no other choice. Just listen to me, carefully, your parents will not accompany you. You will go alone and I have made all the arrangements."

"Why will they not come?" I started crying after that.

"They killed your Maa and Baba! Next, they will come for you, so you must run," she declared ruthlessly, with an obtrusive voice, the voice I am not accustomed to.

I stared at her blankly. When she realized, I couldn't process what she said, she continued slowly, "Yesterday, they picked your mother to identify your father's body!" I saw tears at the far ridge of her eyes. Sans dropping a tear I asked, "Who killed my mother?"

Shrugging her shoulder, before she could give a vague answer to comfort me, I said, "You don't have to. I know who killed them."

That was the last face-to-face interaction I had with her. At around 3:45 P.M., I had my flight to Canada. My aunt escorted me through the journey to the airport and both of us didn't utter a single word in the process. I had my flight to Ontario, in Ottawa International, I found a stranger approaching me. Later, I realized, he was my aunt's college friend and here, he would be my guardian in the city of Montreal. I was his close acquaintance until his death, fifteen years later.

There's a double knock on the door, and I knew instantly it was my husband. He has come unusually late today, thanks to Montreal's traffic and his busy schedule. Mainak, is my only confidante and adviser, over the last fifteen



years. He is the only person who knows every minute detail of my life and the very backbone of my existence. His Bengali reminiscence often reminds me of our mutual cultural connection and bond, which I customarily look for in this outlandish city of advancement.

I cling to him, as a child clings to her mother's saree, never letting it go out of sight. At night she embraces me, in order to protect me from the bruises of the past and to smother the patrimony of my life.

Tomorrow is a new day, a new morning and a new journey for me altogether. As I will fly to Kolkata with Mainak and my son, to relive the same tormented memories, which I have tried to escape for over twenty years now. I want my son to acknowledge his grandparents' commitment to duties, and to know my battle until now, which I have assiduously concealed from his cognition. So the time has come to encounter the challenge, but with a renewed support of my husband and love of my son and to witness Kolkata, that I have never seen before, with its own dynamic hue and enlivening trait.

*Dishari has completed her bachelor's in English from Amity University Kolkata, her master's degree at Shri Shikshayatan College, Calcutta University, and the Post-Graduate Content Writing Program from Henry Marvin Education. She has also undergone writing classes from Duke University and University of Pennsylvania professors. She can be found on Instagram at @dishari\_neogy\_.*

# Seasons of Metanoia

## by Julie Arenas-Antonio

We are orange leaves in the fall  
Stepped on during autumn walks

We are scattered snowflakes  
Flying by every gelid winter

We are spring flowers  
Efflorescence by constant thunderstorms

We are never lasting sandcastles  
Built every summer beach day

We are every season  
That comes with moments of Metanoia

*Julie is a writer from Alabama. She is an editor for Blue Sage Magazine, Sea Glass Literary Magazine, and an ambassador for Pluvia Magazine. She also writes a blog called "The Book Nook" and enjoys reading, digital drawing, listening to music, and learning foreign languages. She can be found on Instagram at @k.juliette\_02.*

# Letters to the skies...

## by Debdip Maitra

*HE*

A cool breeze blows tonight,  
Bringing with it the tangy scent of memories,  
As the towering black clouds gather over the horizon,  
Sending the burnt red afternoon sky into a stark contrast...

*SHE*

Orange shades on burnt down skies of cloudy ashes-  
Wondering, are you?  
Yes, I am too.  
As a lone nightingale sings to nature-  
An unsure tune of love.  
Let this be an echoing whisper,  
For all conspiracies to console in silent contemplation,  
Because a kiss is not lips:  
But an odd heart in faith,  
Like your shadow allures me:  
To a suspicious love.

*HE*

A strange pain fills my heart,  
As I watch her walk away every day,  
Laughing, jesting with her gaggle of friends...  
Oh, how I yearn,  
To be the cause behind her smile,  
Her smile, which lights up her face like the first peeking ray of sun after the storm,  
A storm it is, that rages on in my heart,  
Yet, her shores are not mine...  
What had I, that I'd dare stretch my hands towards the moon of my sky?  
No, Much better to let this be the shadow of love,  
Hidden from her, for she walks with her face to the sun,

Hidden, treasured deep within my heart,  
The miser guarding his beloved hoard...  
And yet,  
This wild heart refuses to listen,  
And beats all the more furiously as she turns,  
The whispers of rebellious love echoing on...

*SHE*

Tell me, have you not received my letters?  
Letters that my eyes write.  
Have you ever noticed?  
Have you ever believed, dear love?  
That I am just there:  
Neither far nor away,  
Amidst cacophonies of noisy shifts,  
A mad soul that searches on in circles,  
In regular pentagons,  
Here and there,  
For love is not peaceful,  
It is a tumultuous affair.  
It is chaotic, often sad,  
But, the heartbeats loud and louder-  
And if I am not close enough,  
Drive me to your side,  
A magnetic cohesion,  
For the sake of a separated love.  
Let this be celebrated,  
Let the separation, too.  
For love's celibacy is but love,  
Like a virtual image on an unsure screen of the pupil.

*HE*

A celebration, of the thousand crumpled sheets,  
Spanning a hundred insomniac nights,  
Spent in wistful dreams,

Hidden, treasured deep within my heart,  
The miser guarding his beloved hoard....  
And yet,  
Dreams of you, of us...  
Dreams that I am too weak to stop,  
For deep down, I guess I don't want to...  
Believe me, beloved,  
I really want to dream,  
To believe,  
Believe in the notion of us...  
But the bitter shards of memories hold me paralysed..  
Leaves me hanging,  
An unwilling suspension of disbelief,  
The oozing vitriol of memories,  
And the gasoline of dreams breaking through,  
Set this heart aflame,  
Red hot liquid fire coursing through my veins...  
The mad cacophony of my erratic heart pressing against the sepulchral tomb of this  
deadened heart....

### *SHE*

Baby, love is a mystery,  
And sometimes, touch is but the most intangible,  
I find you in between the pages-  
On piled-up books,  
Or a horizontal ray of sweet sunshine,  
At dawn,  
On a lonely bed.  
And, if everything turns dark,  
I run off to where we met,  
Sometimes, in my mind,  
Sometimes, in real-  
What I see is:  
Two souls accepting each other's wounds,  
Licking bloodsheds to heal,

For love is a lot of pain,  
For love is memories and moments,  
For love is a little more than love.

### *HE*

Yes, love is always a little more,  
That extra mile to walk just to find a smile on her face,  
Love is, in those furtive glances,  
Only to find you already looking.  
Love is, in the poignant silence,  
Love is, in all the words unsaid,  
So come close to me, won't you?  
Come, like the mighty west wind,  
And set my cogs whirring again,  
Make me feel again...  
Let not this be another story of a separated love,  
Of the pinings & slow deaths, Of what-ifs...  
We were never meant for the mundane,  
Always yearning,  
Always stretching for more...  
The insatiable thirst, the wanderlust setting us on fire...  
So, come with me, darling,  
Let's dance the milky ways,  
Paint the very skies a million hues of love,  
As our hearts take flight,  
The resurgent phoenix...  
Burning oh so bright,  
In the flames of our passion...  
And on we dance,  
Painting this letter to the skies...

*Debdip Maitra is an IT professional. His hobbies include writing, reading, photography, and listening to music.*

# Sounding Her Arrival

## by Arya Jash

The Katwa-Sealdah Local had stopped at Bandel Junction. It was six in the morning, and the rising sun had a benevolent and pleasing warmth. Bandel being a larger station than most on its route, the train halted for two minutes. The usual crowd of early morning commuters began boarding- housemaids, vendors for the market carrying baskets of agricultural produce, and a few dedicated early morning office goers. It was a weekday like any other. But something felt different. Because that particular Monday of October was Panchami. A goddess' arrival was imminent. Maybe it also had something to do with the two people, not daily passengers, in one of the coaches. The boy, dressed in a light t-shirt and shorts, the father, in a scruffy shirt and faded and frayed jeans. The boy was asleep, his head resting on his father's shoulder. Over his shoulder was a packed sling bag made of cloth. And in front of the two of them was placed a *dhaak*, a traditional large drum that is played during Indian festivals, and something without which the soundscape of this particular festival is incomplete.

As the train pulled away from the station, Amit Das woke up. He rubbed his eyes and sat up straight, and saw the station passing by. "Which station are we crossing?" he asked his father. His father replied, "Bandel. Soon we'll be crossing the mighty river Ganga Ma as well. Then, soon, we'll be in Kolkata. It'll take us a little more than an hour." Amit did not reply and gazed out of the window, watching the mofussil pass by. They had crossed most of the agricultural pastures while the sun was yet to rise, and he'd been asleep the rest of the time. There were patches of green to interrupt the stretches of brown and grey townscapes. Often there would be a khal (a backwater pond) accompanied by the uncultivated land. Here, there were clutches of white kash ful (a type of grass), a plant emblematic of the season and of the arrival of

Durga Pujo. It is typical of the plant to bloom in this season, covering vast swathes of the countryside in white.

Bhonjon Das smiled, as he saw his son's attention glued to the window. He was worried. His son, Amit, was now 13 years old, and for the past year had been quite vocal about his father's absence from home during the festive season. Although the money earned by his playing *dhaak* helped in their living, it still meant Bhonjon was away during the one time of the year when the family was supposed to be together to celebrate the coming of the Mother Goddess. He'd tried explaining the necessity of his work to Amit in multiple ways- the monetary aspect, the fact that it was a form of respect to the Goddess herself, an obligation and a way of passing down a family tradition. Amit had accepted each of these explanations, never protesting, but Bhonjon couldn't help but notice a sense of resentment against him from Amit every time. Things came to a head when Amit declared a few months earlier, completely seriously, that he wouldn't be playing the *dhaak* during Pujo like his father. Bhonjon had talked to his wife about this, and Amit as well, and got him to agree (rather reluctantly), to accompany him to Kolkata for Pujo this year. There was one thing Bhonjon hoped that would at least change his mind about *dhaakis* (*dhaak* players) in general.

Amit, despite trying to put up a mask of supreme indifference, couldn't help but feel slight anticipation. What did his father have to show him, that it would change his mind about *dhaakis*? He didn't hate his father. But, all year round, his father toiled to provide for their family – apart from the two of them, there was his mother and little sister, Mohua. Most of the year, his father would be out, having accepted a labour contract for some construction work, providing his services to help cultivate others' land, as they didn't own any, and at other times accepting work based on the '100 days work' employment provision scheme of the government. All this resulted in his father being away from home every few days, and if he was working in town, he would return at odd hours. They hardly ever got to spend any



time off with him. He didn't mind, realising Bhonjon's sacrifice, but Mohua often missed her father, and it pained Amit to see this. The one time when Bhonjon could be free is during Durga Pujo. It was festival time, after all. But, frustratingly, it was when Bhonjon was busiest. He'd leave, just before the start of the Pujo, with his *dhaak* over his shoulder, off to play in some Pujo in the city or even outside the state. A standard Pujo for his father involved him leaving their hometown, Dainhat, on Chaturthi evening, to go to Kolkata. From there, he'd usually board a train for Hyderabad. Once Durga Pujo was over, he'd return by train to Kolkata and play the *dhaak* in one of the many Kali Pujos (another Goddess festival) in the city. After that, he'd return home, tired, but with a decent amount of money, and sometimes extra clothes given to him by people who had been part of the Pujo. The clothes were an offering, a sign of gratitude. Hardly a week would pass, and his father would be back to work, somewhere. The entire duration of the Pujo and beyond, there'd only be the 3 of them celebrating back home. It was this self-imposed necessary separation during the most festive of times that had disillusioned Amit, and he sought to stop this from happening in his life as well.

The local train slowed down as it went onto the New Jubilee Bridge to cross the mighty river Ganges. Amit's eyes widened. It wasn't his first time crossing the Ganges, but it was always quite the sight to behold. The rhythmic sound of the train as it made its way over the bridge, the bridge moving over his field of vision in a repetitive steel pattern, interrupting his view of the vast mass of silt-coloured water that was the Ganges, with buildings starting from the edge of the riverbanks, and various launches, ferries, and tankers dotting the water's surface. Amit turned to see his father with his eyes closed, deep in prayer. As the river was often personified as a goddess, Bhonjon was seeking blessings for the hectic days ahead.

Amit, copying his father, closed his eyes and joined his hands, sending out a prayer of his own to the Goddess. A prayer that, when he was his father's age, he'd be well-off enough to avoid missing out on Pujo with his family

by having to play a *dhaak* somewhere far away for someone else. There was a change in the sound of the train's movement, signifying that the train had crossed the bridge and was now traversing on solid land. As the train entered Garifa station, his father tapped him on the shoulder, and told him, "We've crossed the Ganges. We're practically almost in Kolkata; although our destination is still some time away." Amit stifled a yawn. They had to wake up at 3 in the morning to catch the Local. Only one was scheduled per day. They boarded the train from Dainhat Station at 4.

As the train passed through the suburbs, Amit caught glimpses of people in the buildings as they passed him by. Many had just woken up, going about their regular routines. They passed a school, where he saw children lining up in the grounds. It was like any other day, but at the same time, there was an anticipatory and festive air about the city. Amit himself studied in the 8th standard of Dainhat High School, where they had a little Durga Pujo of their own. Amit actively participated in it, especially the musical performances. He had various instruments (many of them cheap and second hand) at home, all of which he could play with varying degrees of proficiency. His father had trained him about the basics of *dhaak*, but he felt more comfortable playing the circular bronze handheld percussion instrument that serves as an accompaniment to the *dhaak*, the *kanshor*. He could adapt the *kanshor* to different playstyles of different *dhaakis*, be it the random drumming of a hapless classmate, or the complex rhythms played by his father when Bhonjon played the *dhaak* at home. His father enjoyed having him as the accompanying *kanshor* player. That was the role he'd been brought to fulfil this year. But at the end of the day, to him, these were just hobbies. Once school was over, he'd give these up. No pointless journeys to the city when the time with family mattered most for him. The train crossed Barrackpore, steadily making its way to its terminus, Sealdah.

The train reached Sealdah at around half-past seven. Just before they got off,

they found a tea stall and had their breakfast of jhaalmuri and tea. Rush hour hadn't quite yet begun, and so the station, one of the busiest in the country, was relatively less crowded. Bhonjon was looking excitedly at Amit. He said, "There's something I want to show you. Something that happens here every year, on Panchami morning which shows the city that yes, Maa Durga has definitely arrived." Before Amit could ask what, Bhonjon gave his bag to Amit, picked up the *dhaak*, slinging it over his shoulder and assumed a playing stance, the two drumsticks, one broader, one thinner, in each hand. He then played a basic rhythm on the *dhaak*, easily recognisable. It drew a few glances from the crowds, but nothing else. He did it again, this time repeating the rhythm twice, but nothing happened. Amit looked at his feet. He felt slightly embarrassed, and a bit annoyed because his father's enthusiasm had actually made him believe that something was going to happen. Bhonjon quickly glanced at the electronic timetable. Another was due in...ten minutes time. Good. He'd try one last time then. He turned to Amit and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Look, I know you're disappointed. But give me one last chance. If nothing happens again, if I can't show you this, I'll accept you're right. Being a *dhaaki* isn't worth the time given up. Just...one more time." Amit looked at him and nodded, but he was sceptical about this 'thing' that was supposed to happen. All that had happened so far was a mild interest and then indifference from the crowd.

Another local pulled into Sealdah. Bhonjon pulled Amit to one side of the platform to avoid the rush of people. Once again, Bhonjon struck up a beat on his *dhaak*, repeating the rhythm one, two, three times. He waited, hoping, praying for the sound he wanted to hear, over the hubbub of the passengers. Until...yes! It was faint, but there was no mistaking the sound. Someone was playing a *dhaak* in reply to Bhonjon. He looked at Amit. He'd heard it too, from the look on his face. Bhonjon played the rhythm again. This time, the sound was closer. He turned around to find a group of five, among them three *dhaakis*, playing in response to him. They were decked out in more traditional

attire and were probably hires for some big Pujo, but at that moment, those differences didn't seem to matter. They smiled at him and he and Amit smiled back. They made their way to the station gate together, playing as they went. Soon, they heard more *dhaakis* playing in response to their combined call from all parts of the station. Their playing was like the roar of a lion, a dare, a challenge, a call-to-arms. And across all twenty-one platforms of the station, their call was answered. *Dhaakis* arriving on different local trains from various parts of the state, united by a single purpose; to fulfil their role in the celebration of Goddess Durga.

To people inside the station, it felt like a chain reaction. One group of *dhaakis* would play a rhythm once, maybe twice. This would be answered by another group playing at one side of the station. Another group would answer *that* by playing a rhythm from the other side of the station and so it went on. In the middle of all this, Amit had grabbed the *kanshor* from the bag and held it in his hand, beating it with a small and stout metal rod, accompanying his father's *dhaak* playing with a metallic beat of his own. Bhonjon looked at him to see a delighted look in his eyes. Amit was playing the *kanshor* out of pure joy, enraptured by the multitude of *dhaaks* playing around him. He finally understood, at least a little bit, of why his father wanted to bring him here, and what playing a *dhaak* meant to his father.

This sight was witnessed only once a year in Sealdah station. An impromptu performance by the *dhaak* players who'd just arrived from their respective towns and villages. It was an expression of the joy and happiness of the days to come, five days of celebration of the triumph of good over evil, the triumph of Maa Durga over Mahishashur. A passer-by looking down from the bridge over Sealdah would see a fantastic sight. A crowd of fifty or more *dhaakis* outside the station gates, each dressed in their own unique traditional way, *dhaaks* slung over their shoulders, some with 'tails' made of bird feathers attached to their *dhaaks*, playing in miraculous harmony, some even shaking a leg as they

played. But what is most astonishing is the sound. The sound of the many *dhaaks* as they beat together, creating a fearsome and awe-inspiring crescendo. To hear it is an experience like no other, it makes one's hair stand on end. The raw power of the untamed and free sound of the *dhaak* as it ushers in the festivities. One can even call it the roar of Maa Durga's lion, signalling her arrival.

As Amit played with his father and many, many other dhaakis outside Sealdah station, he caught a glimpse of a truck transporting an idol of Maa Durga on the bridge. Of the ten hands of the idol, one was outstretched, offering her blessings. It seemed to Amit that the Maa Durga was blessing them, and had a smile on her face. Maybe he'd just imagined it. It didn't matter, as one thing was certain. Maa Durga had arrived in all her glory – at last, Durga Pujo had begun.

*Arya Jash is a postgraduate student at the University of Hyderabad who lives in Kolkata. He mostly writes short fiction, and has been published in websites and anthologies. He can be found on Instagram at @arjojo16.*

# Thank You to Our Contributors

Anoushka Rai

Deva Priya

Shredha Narayanan

Angandeep Chatterjee

Dr. Kanu Diwari

Youbin Park

John Lemon

Saranya Reddy

Saptarshi Bhowmick

Julie Arenas-Antonio

Debdip Maitra

Dishari Neogy

Sai Harshitha M.

Arya Jash

Ambirneya Kannan

Amandeep Kaur

## Contact

Email: [website.the.compass@gmail.com](mailto:website.the.compass@gmail.com)

Instagram: [@the.compass.website](https://www.instagram.com/the.compass.website)

Facebook: [The Compass](https://www.facebook.com/TheCompass)

Twitter: [@\\_TheCompass\\_](https://twitter.com/_TheCompass_)

YouTube: [The Compass](https://www.youtube.com/TheCompass)

## Staff

Kate Wexell,

Founder and Executive Director

Lubna Khanam,

Editor and Submission Reader

Mandeep Kaur, Submission Reader

Olivia Delgado, Submission Reader

