

# LITERARY JOURNAL



TRUTH

CHARITY

**STELLA MARIS COLLEGE**  
(AUTONOMOUS), CHENNAI, INDIA

**STELLA MARIS COLLEGE**  
(AUTONOMOUS)  
CHENNAI - 600 086

Vol. 38

March 2015

## EDITORIAL



This picture of a tree seething with life is strikingly different from the passive representation of trees in landscape paintings. It is an example of the *Pardhan Gond* art in which nature appears alive and conscious – the product of an eco-centric philosophy of existence. Perceptions of the world and our place in it are so varied that one can perhaps only make a distinction between those worldviews that are privileged and those that have been for a long time ignored, like that of the Gondi tribes. Such ideas have stirred academic interests only in the recent years and the intercollegiate seminar organised by the Department of English on “Literature and Ecology” was an effort towards exploring the implications of “Nature” and “environment” within literature.

For most people the mention of “nature” would conjure images of a lush countryside which for Wordsworth had “the glory and the freshness of a dream;” others might romantically imagine themselves explorers amidst a thicket of trees, hearing the rustle of leaves and the chirp of unseen birds; and still others make such profound statements as “Nature is everywhere” and “Nature is everything.” Whatever be your own understanding of this much-used word, the fact remains that a great many of us feel keenly about it. This happy fact is in consideration of the overwhelming response that both the call for paper presentations for the seminar and articles for the ecology-themed special edition of the literary journal received. This edition of the literary journal brings you critical essays and creative writing on a variety of topics, and includes Anuja Sundar’s award-winning poem. According to a popular Welsh saying, “There’s nowt as queer as folk”- literature can capture the surprise and the strangeness of the human being the same way in which it can recreate the wonder, variety and the terrible beauty of Nature and this year’s journal is an humble attempt to do the same.

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# Contents

1. Denise Levertov's Plant Poems: A Tentative Reading .....	3
2. An Ecocritical Approach to O.V. Vijayan's "The Legends of Khasak" .....	6
3. An Ecocritical Study of Ted Hughes's Animal Poems: .....	9
The Jaguar, Roe-Deer and Tiger Psalm	
4. I have come... ..	12
5. Homebound .....	14
6. Dirt .....	16
7. The darkened skin... ..	19
8. Looking past.....	19
9. An Interview with Daya Bai.....	20
10. Writer's block.....	24
11. How many lives.....	24
12. "Bright Star"- The Portrait of an Artist as He Appeared to His Lady .....	25
13. Evening Star .....	28
14. The Generation Gap .....	29
15. The Untold Story .....	31
16. I Say We... ..	31
17. On Cars and Car Owners.....	32

## Denise Levertov's Plant Poems: A Tentative Reading

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Scattered across the twenty odd poetry collections of the American poet Denise Levertov are poems that can be called 'plant poems' – poems that portray plants as thinking, intelligent, active beings. This view of the plant kingdom stands in contrast to the hierarchic, anthropocentric view that sees plants as 'inferior' beings largely because they are sessile and are seemingly passive. Such movement as there is in plants is usually seen as automatic responses to stimuli such as light, water etc; these responses are not seen as involving any degree of intelligence.

Plant poems, such as Levertov's, propose a diametrically different view of the world we live in. This world, in Levertov's own words, is a web with its different interwoven strands and requires us to see, observe, appreciate and accept this view of the world that is "shaking, / changing, / forever / forming, / transforming." She exhorts us to "all praise ... the / great web" ("Web").

Plants are an intricate part of this web and many of Levertov's poems portray plants displaying a high degree of intelligence. One of the best examples of such a poem is "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" (*Relearning the Alphabet* 84-84) which depicts a tree (species unnamed) responding to the music of a "human" whom the readers recognise as the titular Orpheus – the mythical Greek musician who went into the underworld to bring back his wife from Pluto. The tree responds to his song with a tingling in its branches: "my own outermost branches began to tingle, almost as if / fire had been lit below them, and their twig-tips / were drying and curling." The tree sees the man and describes him in purely plant-terms: "He was a man, it seemed: the two / moving stems, the short trunk, the two / arm branches, flexible, each with five leafless / twigs at their ends, / and the head that's crowned by brown or gold grass, / bearing a face not like the beaked face of a bird, / more like a flower's."

The poem is unique in its botanical description of the human, almost a kind of reverse personification. It is also unique in the poeticisation of the tree's recognition of self and non-self and its interaction with the biotic and abiotic world around it. The tree recognises the human as a species apart from itself. At the same time, the tree is also acutely aware of its relationship with its immediate environment, especially the wind. The ripples that the lyre causes "... unlike the wind's voice had no need of our / leaves and branches to complete its sound."

Traditional readings of poems such as this often tend to see the use of figures of speech such as personification or symbolism. However, the poem can also be read as describing literally a plant's reaction to music. The nascent field of plant neurobiology has been singularly successful

in proving that plants have a high order of intelligence that is evident especially in their interaction with their immediate biotic and abiotic environment. The tree's response to Orpheus's music can be seen as poeticisation of the scientific experiments of the Indian physicist turned botanist Jagadis Chandra Bose who can be seen as having anticipated plant neurobiology in his experiments on plant responses. At the same time, Frantisek Baluska and Stephano Mancuso of the Institute of Plant Neurobiology have pointed out that plant intelligence is best manifested in their recognition of self and non-self – a recognition that has immense significance, especially in pollination.

If “A Tree Telling of Orpheus” depicts the tree's point of view and forces us to reconsider our notions of plant intelligence, “Captive Flower” (*Breathing the Water* 21) critiques the human tendency of seeing plants entirely in aesthetic, utilitarian terms. The poem can be read as a critique of gardening as a recreational and even environment-friendly activity. It is not surprising that the opening lines “This morning's morning-glory / trying to thrust / through the wire mesh towards the sun” is reminiscent of Hopkins whose concepts of inscape and instress can be seen as an earlier attempt at recognising the uniqueness and ‘thisness’ of the non-human world. Hopkins's “Windhover” with its associations of grandeur and freedom is evoked ironically here; the flower “is trapped” within the confines of its mesh. The human persona intervenes so that s/he can “see better its unfurling,” an admittedly commendable desire, yet even this desire, when carried out without respect for the ‘thisness’ of the flower only leads to destruction as “it resigns / the dream. / Its petals / are scarred.” The poem ends with the persona's guilty realisation: “I had not thought myself / a jailor.”

Gardening is often seen as a human attempt to make peace with nature. Yet, this poem alerts us to the fact that gardening too is often an anthropocentric activity that tries to forcefully fit the plant world within human ideas. The persona in the poem has ignored the phototropism of the plant (“trying to thrust / through the wire mesh towards the sun”) probably because phototropism (turning towards light) is too common a plant movement and desires instead to see a flower unfurl (a romantic movement), leading ultimately to the death of the flower.

Plant poems therefore force us to reconsider our notions of the world and to rethink our position within the universe; they compel us to see ourselves as a (dispensable) part of the world we live in and not as its centre.

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## An Ecocritical Approach to O.V. Vijayan's "The Legends of Khasak"

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O.V. Vijayan's *The Legends of Khasak* is claimed to be one among the best novels ever written in Malayalam. He translated the novel aiming to propagate the beauty and the splendour of the village Khasak, with an imagined location in the countryside of Palghat, Kerala. The village of Thasarak, near Palghat serves as the source of inspiration for the creation of the novel. The novel has gained its popularity through O.V. Vijayan's exploration of the richness of nature and its value in the village Khasak. Nature, as picturised in the novel, is in its utmost glory and magnificence. The author has included his own perceptions of nature along with the traditional conceptions. This strategy has improved the aesthetic quality of the novel.

The first law of ecology – everything is dependent upon everything else – indicates the existence of a mutual relationship between human beings and nature. This interconnectedness is delineated when Kunhamina, the little girl, feeds the peafowl on her way to the *Madrassa*. The path is rugged and patchy and the leaves make her way pleasant, "a clump of Arasu trees shed their leaves over the footpath." This highlights the reciprocation of the favours done which strengthens the bond that exists between the two realms. It is believed to have the power "to breathe recovery into the people of the village." This can be viewed in two ways: the literal and the metaphorical. In the literal sense, Gopalu Panikker, the village astrologer and the teacher of the alphabet, prays to no God but to Khasak before he gives the medicinal concoction to Rukhmini, which conveys the healing power of the village Khasak. Metaphorically, it conveys the ability of nature to impart life and to be a catalyst in human life. The village Khasak prepares itself to welcome the protagonist Ravi, to be one among the community members, intended to impart a home-like feeling which can be linked to Edward Hoagland's idea of Nature as the "widest home".

The author demarcates a physical landscape for this imagined village Khasak and thus attempts to create an artistic environmental space. The author constructs a picturesque village amidst the foothills of Chetali. He installs a banyan tree at the center of the village that serves as a witness to their community life. The tamarind tree is regarded as an abode of divine presence- Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth. Yet another attraction of O.V. Vijayan's Khasak is the Chrysanthemums that blossom everywhere in Khasak, Kumankavu, and in the valley of Chetali. The hills are believed to spring surprises the Chetali Mountains being one among them. The village landscape also comprises "a grove where on aged mangoes branches, owls dreamed and nodded; and further down where the teak forests. Monkeys, a whole clan, were crushing tender shoots of teaks into red paste which they smeared on their faces."

Barry Lopez propounds the theory that explains the existence of two landscapes; the internal and the external, and the stories link them both. The characters of this novel occupy the external landscape and the natural inhabitants take over the internal landscape; the myths and the tales found in the novel make an interconnection between the two. O.V. Vijayan has included

myths and tales about insects, plants etc. in the plot in order to strengthen the strands of beliefs and traditions of the village. The people of Khasak believe that dragonflies were memories of the dead. The character Ravi tells the tale of spiders. The spiders look like outspread palms when they are found inside the crevices and are born to power and splendour when found outside in the forests of the rain. Ravi tells the children how the female spiders eat up their mate after making love. This story opens up a discussion among the children; “The children could not believe that such bloody dynasties ruled over Khasak’s peaceful grass and fern. Then Karuvu stood up and said the male spider was paying for his sins in an earlier birth. The children knew it was karma, the class was now unusually quiet”. The eerie call of the kalan kozhis, the nocturnal birds, is considered as an omen of death. Ravi also tells the story of lizards and spores, which tells that there exists only parting and sorrow in the loveless tale of karma. It is also believed that the flying serpents rested on the palm tops on the course of their journeys, also the palm seizes to bend when the tapper’s woman loses her innocence.

The main three disciplines that explore environmental literature – according to William Howarth – are ecology, ethics and language. Ecology describes the relationship between nature and culture. Even though some critics regard nature and culture as opposites, Howarth comments that they mingle, “Like water and soil in a flowing stream.” The implicit hospitality, the relevance of divinity along with veneration towards elders and the superstitious beliefs of the villagers are strengthened by their close living with nature.

Nature, as viewed in the novel, has undergone certain digressions due to the impact of the hand of mankind on nature. This involves the construction of a dam for the sake of water conservation. Contrary to this idea of constructing dams for the sake of development, the old man in the novel says, “They are talking of a dam but can it make the skies rain or turn back the flood? One doesn’t know. He was deeply disturbed by the big machines with arms and mandibles that moved loads of earth and chewed serene rocks into jelly. Could man pit his skills against God’s will?”

As mentioned earlier, this village is constructed and made known through words and images; the language used to develop the conversation of the characters shows the convictions, positions and the level of intellect in regard to their association with nature. This is made vivid in the dialogues rendered by the cretin character Appu Kili- “Achhi what you doing with fovers? You aa bootiful, I marry you”- in spite of being a translated text. The author has drawn descriptive epithets from nature to foreground their qualities and living styles- Appu is called Kili, Parrot described as “our parrot of Puranas;” Chukkru who indulges himself in diving and retrieving things fallen into wells, is known as Diving Fowl and Ravi refers to his little sister as the pretty tadpole. Consciously or unconsciously the author’s strange use of the word “peck” refers to the wild dining mannerisms of characters.

The novel *The Legends of Khasak* holds a compacted set of images, as seen in the Author’s Note, “It has been difficult translating this book. It is full of dense images of nature, old folk customs, evocations of caste differences, the rich play of dialects, all of which are difficult to render into English”. This usage of dense imagery has helped the readers to widen their knowledge on various rhythms of nature. This is evident in the close comparison of a school to a sapling, made



by the red-bearded man. The description of nature's preparation to welcome Onam, the festival of thanksgiving and harvest also substantiates this idea.

Most of the characters in the novel experience the power of nature - Abida, the daughter of Chukkru, witnesses the power of flowers that soothe her when she is emotionally unstable and yearns for solace. She makes a comparison of the falling flowers to a rain that is believed to calm all emotions. A vivid resemblance is made between the red rashes found on Kunju Nooru and the "flower beds on distant hillsides, deadly and deceptive."

O.V. Vijayan has a poetic and complex way of writing through the use of symbols and imagery. The attainment of womanhood is remarkably compared to flowering which in turn connotes the idea of fertility. The author brings in this image when Kunjamina, the little girl, "pressed her hands over her navel and bent forward... Ravi clenched and unclenched his palm, where the lines of fate lay like desert trails; the crimson drops had fallen on them. Ravi gazed in amazement on the miracle, the first blood-flowers of womanhood". The author also evolves a line of similarity between that of the tailorbirds that make nests out of sewn leaves and Ravi. Tailorbirds are known for their nests as they sew them. Ravi is symbolically compared to a tailorbird that leaves his home that was sewed by his father and then creates a home-like place in Khasak, which he calls "a nest of Rebirth."

*The Legends of Khasak* foregrounds the multifaceted implications of nature, which throws light on the intellect and mastery of O.V.Vijayan. Khasak is the product of his mind, imagination and his desire to create a space for it. Nature itself can be identified as a character, presence and an agent in this novel. He does not forget to establish a link with traditional conceptions and conventions.

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# **An Ecocritical Study of Ted Hughes’s Animal Poems: “The Jaguar,” “Roe-Deer” and “Tiger Psalm”**

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Ecoliterature, being formulated in the late 20th century, has not had a clear-cut definition thus far. It may be described as nature poetry that is not Romantic like traditional nature poetry – it goes beyond it to take on contemporary environmental and ecological issues. It is hence ecocentric and respects the nonhuman. With time, ecoliterature has become more expansive, including concerns of identity and gender, amongst others.

Greg Garrard states that ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts in terms of their value as responses to ecological crisis(4). Ecocriticism can also be seen as a study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, or nature. It also looks at how the human world is connected to nature, impacting it and being impacted by it.

Ted Hughes was a British writer, anthropologist, and environmental activist in the later part of his life. He was also considered a shaman. Many of his poems are celebrations of the power and vitality of animals and nature. He believed that animals, being closely connected with nature, had a vitality, purity and instinctive energy that humans had lost because of civilization and, consequently, sophistication. In one of his interviews, Hughes says that to him, animals were a symbolic language, which was also the language of his life. Animals, he felt, were complete beings. In this respect, three of his poems are studied in detail – “The Jaguar”, “Roe-Deer” and “Tiger-Psalm”.

In “The Jaguar”, the setting is a zoo where most of the animals are inactive but for a raging jaguar that holds the onlookers mesmerized. Hughes uses the phrase “as a child at a dream” (15) to describe the people experiencing the jaguar. The poet here makes a reference to childhood – an early stage where one is perceptive and instinctive. This could mean that looking at the jaguar makes the people reminisce about their “primitiveness” or early past - a time when they were one with nature, and hence, more perceptive. It seems to plunge them into their collective consciousness. The animal hence acts as a shaman – it links the people to their inner realm of pure consciousness.

The poem also hints at the domination of humankind over the rest of nature. Confining the animals to cages has made a lot of them lifeless and lethargic, as the former part of the poem describes. However, this does not happen in the case of the jaguar, which is seen as the most powerful animal of the lot, and hence, symbolic of the greatest power in nature. Though it is caged, it is simply impossible for anyone to curtail its spirit, as is suggested in the lines: “... there’s no cage to him / More than to the visionary his cell: / His stride is wildernesses of freedom” (15).

It is also interesting to note that the jaguar is compared to a visionary, with supernatural power. This sheer power also comes across in the line, “The worlds roll under the long thrust of his heel.” (15) The poem is thus strongly ecocentric, but also largely of a collective consciousness, of which all life forms, including humans, are part. This idea may be considered a response to one

of the questions Frederick Turner raises in his essay, “Cultivating the American Garden”, as to what exactly the natural is – whether it is necessarily the nonhuman (40).

The poem “Roe-Deer” discusses the poet’s encounter with two deer on a snowy morning. It has strong elements of shamanism because the deer are described almost like spirits, who seem to belong to a different world altogether. In this light, the poem may be compared with “The Thought Fox”, which interlinks the physical, spiritual and textual realms in which the fox operates. The ideas of different realms and shamanism are seen in several instances in the poem – the poet says the deer “happened into” his dimension, all of a sudden; there is also an instance where the landscape seems to change entirely, revealing a secret world: “. . . the curtain had blown aside for a moment / And there where the trees were no longer trees, nor the road a road / The deer had come for me.” (184)

Towards the end of the poem, the scene changes back to how it was, after the deer merge into the snowy environment, which also erases their footprints. It is evident that the human and nonhuman here are two very different and distinct realms – those of the ordinary and the extraordinary. The initial hesitation the deer have towards approaching the poet persona, and their different worlds could stand for the divide between humans and the rest of nature. Taken literally, the disappearing or the vanishing of the deer into thin air could directly refer to the danger of their extinction. It is noteworthy that the species of deer called the Roe deer, after which the poem is titled, had become extinct in 18th century England, except in the Central and North West Highlands. Taking up such ecological issues is reflective of modern-day ecopoetry.

“Tiger-Psalm”, literally meaning song in praise of the tiger, is a celebration of the Dionysian Principle as put forward by the Existentialist philosopher Nietzsche, through a tiger. The Dionysian Principle signifies passion, instinct, and the merging of the self with the whole – this is comparable with the way Hughes viewed animals. Opposed to the Dionysian Principle is the Apollonian Principle, which focuses on structure, order and reason. The poem juxtaposes two destructive forces – the tiger and machine guns, which are worlds apart from each other. The former is organic, representative of the nonhuman, and of the collective power of nature, while the latter is inorganic – typically man-made, it is a sign of civilization. It is furthermore inefficient and obsessed with argument; it is also Apollonian. Hughes strongly believed in Nietzsche’s idea of reconnecting with nature and living wholly in the world. This idea is strong in the line, “The tiger kills like the fall of a cliff, one-sinewed with the earth” (109).

When the tiger kills, it is judicious – it is for satiating basic needs. The tiger, furthermore, licks the victims clean, as a mark of compassion. More significantly, killing here is an art, reflective of the beauty of nature. It is thus creative. It is also sheer power, as supported by phrases such as “kills expertly, with anesthetic hand”, “kills by thunder bolt” and “kills with the strength of five tigers”. The fury and force of nature are hence juxtaposed with its beauty and gentleness, presenting a celebration of nature that is not romanticized or overly idealized.

The tiger is presented as both a god-like and shamanistic figure that, by killing, transports the victims to a different path, “neither of life nor of death”. The depth of the tiger’s persona comes across in the lines describing it thus – “Himalayas under eyelid, Ganges under fur”. In this

respect, this poem may be compared to two other poems by Hughes, namely “Hawk Roosting” and “Eagle”, both of which present their respective birds of prey as supreme, almost supernatural powers that are omnipotent and fiercely majestic. In “Hawk Roosting”, the bird narrates, in the harsh, non-sentimental tone of a warrior, that the earth is turned upward for its inspection. The raw, crude energy is striking – the bird is “an allotter of death”. In other words, it is a controller of destiny, the idea of which is direct in the poem. In “Eagle”, the bird is a god of sorts, whom both his ancestors and successors venerate. It is also interesting to note that the other animals consider it an honour to be chosen as the eagle’s prey. Hence, Hughes presents aspects of what may also be considered a form of nature-worship, in this poem.

In *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*, J Scott Bryson puts down three features of ecopoetry– it is ecocentric; lays emphasis on the smallness of humankind; and is sceptic about hyper rationality, and the resultant overreliance on technology. (7) All of these characteristics may be identified in Hughes’s animal poems, which are firmly rooted in nature - some are ecocentric, such as “Roe-Deer”; some look down upon human mentality, such as “The Jaguar”; and some criticize technology, as seen in the putting down of machine-guns in “Tiger-Psalm”.

Hughes thus uses the power of poetry as an art not just to link people with nature but also to sensitize them in the process. Hence, the poems may be considered shamans themselves, linking material realms to those of pure consciousness. It is noteworthy that Hughes intended the fox in “The Thought Fox” to come alive with each reading of the poem. This idea may be applied to his animal poems in general, that are evocative of the spirit of nature through animal imagery.

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i  
have come  
and i do  
not wish to remember  
but i have seen this  
before:

under grandmother's  
periwinkle quilt is  
you, this time, your  
chest heaving up, then your  
breath crumpling, cycles of gather-shatter  
and all the while wishing each would  
hold-release at least one sacred word of  
prayer before you go, i wonder how i've seen  
this before.

we could be  
lost in a rainstorm  
the cold is invincible today  
and the silence, in your sunkissed  
bedroom our frostbitten fingertips still numb to  
each other's touch, is that why there's sweat  
slick on my back, white shirt soaked into transparence,  
clutching to skin, the anxiety damp and thick and persistent  
as the loud ticking of your old clock, how have i  
seen this before?

who is the one  
who must go, i cannot  
seem to fathom the waywardness of

death, perhaps not a waywardness at all  
on the world's part, only a silliness of  
our own that builds ideal rooms in the air  
like hospital homes, only kinder, with warmer sunlight and the  
sanguinity of being certain of things and breathing lighter, but then  
what's prayer for; and this curious ache must define us though we  
have seen this before.

and all of my memories  
seem to swell with your breaths  
and crumble with the same kind of  
surrender, i must be alone in remembering hereafter  
but nevermind that solitude, it is the silence that  
holds me, and the cold of disappearance, don't you see  
i will learn to be all right and that is what  
is most frightening; that spring sunlight will flood in here someday and  
there will be room for it; please don't worry your soul into gasping  
for painful breath after breath just to pray for me, i cannot bear it  
because life goes on, and i despise the certainty with which i know this unkindness:  
i have seen this before.

*\* Won National-level Poetry Contest by Prakriti Foundation*

# Homebound

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where is the end?

where do i go?

the questions linger on my lips  
the way the sweet-sour of lemonade does:  
just long enough to be remembered  
    once,  
        maybe twice.

where is the end?

i didn't know to ask when i tried to say  
goodbye  
nine and a half years sago  
in our musty old apartment den  
the two of us surrounded by  
suitcases and bare walls  
and the mess of a room  
screaming to mask the  
emptiness  
like it was on an adrenaline rush  
after a fatal wound,  
bleeding but so alive.

where do i go?

i didn't know i'd forgotten  
the sound of the words  
somehow  
memorizing instead  
the rhythm of the deadbolt locking  
from the outside  
as you left every morning.

where do i go?

i didn't know the answers  
it was only a whispered line of poetry  
on the horizon  
that i couldn't catch on the wind,  
looking out the window glass,  
my hands numbing white  
from prying at the iron grill bars.

where is the end?

i didn't care for all the endings,  
  
like for the dinner going cold on the table.  
i cared for only some,  
like for the splintered dining chairs  
you've broken over my back

so often,  
there are two  
still standing.

where do i go?

i didn't dare to,  
or is it *care* to  
    *ask*  
when you muffled me out  
in the night  
to keep the silence tightly wrapped  
around us  
  
for nothing to escape.

where do i go?  
i didn't dare dream of answers  
when your honey skin reached for dusky old  
mine—  
to serve scars with your knife touch  
or vice-grip my time—

but  
where is the end?  
where do i go?

the questions linger on my lips  
with cyanide sting  
just strong enough  
for a single forgetting,  
once  
and  
for all.



## Dirt

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and i said unto you, “brother, forgive me. but this is the only way.”

-

The inevitability of it all is what staggers me. Our story was etched on the first rock.

-

The afternoon sun is aching.

I read somewhere that the development of the two most common non-melanoma skin cancers- basal cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma- directly correlates with long-term sun accumulation.

We are on holiday. You are seven years old. Our mother brings sun block to the downstairs swimming pool and spreads it all on your body, leaving none for me.

You and I, we spend hours underwater, hiding from invisible sharks. I tell you that:

1. Elemental chlorine was first prepared by a Swedish scientist named Carl Wilhelm Scheele in the 18th century.
2. It was first used as a weapon by the Germans during World War I.

You smile beatifically at me.

I hold your hand when you request to be led to the deep end of the pool. The water is much colder here. I imagine- for a single whisper of a moment- letting go of your weak wrist, watching you float motionless in the greenish-blue.

I lazily look down at my arm to see our mother pressing her nails deep into my skin. Her long, red-dipped fingernails leave indentations. Small bite marks.

*Whatever happens*, our mother tells me, light glinting off her dark sunglasses, *don't you dare let go of his hand.*

-

*Listen*, you say. *You don't hate me, do you?*

I ignore you, which is easy to do in our sprawling garden. It is every shade of green. I bend down slightly to tend to the tulsi saplings.

*I mean*, you say. *I mean. I just-*

I turn away. My back faces you and the sun.

*Look at me*, you say, stepping forward.

From the corner of my eye, I see you grow a small white flower for me in the centre of your hand. The lines of your palm glow gold and extend like vines into the translucent petals. The petals quiver to the delicate beat of your heart.

*I'm right here*, you say.

As if I could ever forget.

-

For your eighteenth birthday, I run away from home. I run until the sounds are different and the soles of my trainers nearly stop leaving prints on the ground.

I am stopped by the sight of a lone, beige telephone receiver nestled in a cradle of grass, appearing out of nowhere just by the side of the NH 744. I stare at its cable and allow myself to wonder how far into the earth it goes. The phone begins to ring- harsh, accusatory. It clashes with the evening quiet.

*You're just showing off, now*, I say into the receiver.

*I forgive you*, you say.

I tell you that I haven't done anything yet.

*I still forgive you*, you say. You breathe crackling embers into my ear. *Please come back home.*

You sound as if you mean it, which is what makes this worse. Your unfailing kindness is nauseating, dirt clinging to the back of my tongue.

*Are you still there?* you ask. Your voice is small.

I want to reply: I'm still here. I'm still here. My brother, I can almost feel the clean rust of my sickle, and the murderous heat, and something in the sky screaming as the voice of thy blood crieth unto me from the ground. I'm still here. I'm still here, and I wish there were another way this chapter might end, but it always ends the same way:

- 1) Me.
- 2) You.
- 3) A blade in my hand, sharp like corners.

I hang up.

Our mother finds me half-dead from dehydration next to a shrub (a Rangoon shrub, biological name: *Quisqualis indica*) some seventy kilometres away from our home. She finds you lying unconscious several feet away from my rucksack, your hands and feet bloodied.

*Found him*, you rasp, and collapse in her arms.

Once I am sufficiently alive, she strikes me across the face. You flinch for me.

*How dare you*, she says. *How dare you*. I curl inwards.

*God has a plan for you*, she says, a shock of the lightning.

She wraps her arm protectively around your frail shoulders. She wipes the sweat off your forehead. Your eyelashes are heavy with tears, and it suddenly occurs to me that both of you have the same jaw.

*That's why I have to leave*, I try to tell her, but there is a molten halo burning in my throat and there is only one way this chapter ends and there is nothing more to be done.

-

The day before your eighteenth birthday, I realise that I exist inside the labyrinthine mess of a text written by someone who despises me. There is no escape from this. There is only me, you, and an old sickle that once belonged to our father. Every day, I quietly tend to the tulsi saplings in our garden, and every day I see they will never be enough.

The inevitability of it all is what staggers me. Our story was etched on the first rock.

-

Once upon a time, we stood together in a field. I won't blame you for not remembering. It was a long time ago.

-

listen to me, brother: though i have killed you with two wretched hands and torn into your flesh like a heathen at a feast and buried your bones beneath the field upon which we once danced as children does not mean that the name you carved into the flesh of my arm with the edge of your ragged fingernail has faded, because it has not, it is sore and it aches and it has never ceased to gleam as red as the unused sun-

(sometimes my eldest son touches it, cautious, and softly asks me what i've done.)

The darkened skin  
of a blushing sky  
Sends droplets of water  
Gently from above.  
Lush grass,  
The dirt cleaned off,  
Subtly shines.  
Leaves play catch,  
Dark trunks of trees,  
A steady stream flows down,  
Nourishing hungry roots.  
Earthworms twist up,  
Away from the wet earth,  
Flushed from their flooded home.  
I glance away.

A fleck of white on green.  
Teardrop shaped,  
Pristine white body.  
A long neck,  
Curved like a lounging snake.  
Yellow beak,  
Rooting the dark earth,  
Underneath its green coat.  
I venture closer.  
Resplendent white feathers  
Flutter out;  
Dark thin legs  
Bend and straighten;  
The feathers dip and sway,  
She's airborne.

I'm rooted to the spot,  
While she perches  
On a spot away from me.  
Rank human flesh,  
Didn't seem to agree,  
With her delicate tastes.  
She flings at me  
A glance of distaste,  
For I bothered her hunt.  
I retreat,  
While she comes down gracefully,  
To peck  
Among blades of grass.

I observe,  
Keeping away from her;  
A gift from nature.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Looking past**

I was searching.  
Looking past  
The black and green spots  
Of big trees  
Singing with the winds  
Dancing and shimmering  
Against the sky.

Looking past  
A great whale  
Moving lazily  
Across the white frothy foam  
Splashing  
Against an azure blue sky.

Looking past  
The delicate dandelion  
Dispersing

In tufts of white  
Stretching across the horizon  
Against a powder blue sky.

Looking past  
White rays of the sun  
Peeping through  
Black, Grey and White  
Running parallel to  
Gushing rivers, underneath.

I continued searching,  
For the elusive little curve  
That weeps in colours  
Dripping down to  
The listless land  
Below

## An Interview with Daya Bai

*Meryl Mammen Kurien*  
*II B.A. English Literature*

The tribals of Madhya Pradesh opened their arms to welcome this luminous presence. The government officials and ‘protectors of the law’ used unethical methods to try and kill the raging inferno that she was. Placing her trust in her *ooperwallah* and love in her actions, she marched on ahead to stand with and for her fellow brethren who are abused even to this day.

She is Daya Bai: the Woman of Steel.

### **How did you go about winning the trust of the tribals?**

I never thought I would win their trust. Firstly, I had to bear in mind that they were royals who had ruled for almost eleven centuries. Besides that, I wanted to base my work in a location where churches and NGOs weren’t around. I did all this, never telling them that I came for social work- instead, for research purposes.

The tribals normally do not take others into their fold and hence I had to sleep on an open verandah. I went about and did my work, naturally gaining their trust.

Once, at a particular place was staying at, I had returned in the evening and the neighbour came, asking me for tea leaves. His wife was in labour. I brought the tea leaves and asked if I could come inside, he agreed. I was curious to see how they would concoct the beverage. The whole night, I sat near the woman and spent my time rubbing her little hands and feet as if to share in her ache and pain, giving her some moral support and consolation. In the morning, I accompanied the women in their rituals despite being an outsider. When I returned, the woman said, “*Tum mere goi ho*” (You are my special friend now). *You are now a ‘bandhewaali’*”. That was a relationship built- there was love and trust. Similarly, when I knew that there was a wage problem created by the Forest Department, I didn’t approach the authorities as a professional social worker to find out about the rate of the wages. Instead, I went to work as one among the tribals and received a wage of Rs 5 per week. When I saw the wage record- and based on what I witnessed- I made the tribals conscious of their rights and how they were being exploited. They were not willing to do anything in the beginning, but eventually they did. News about me started to spread, and they understood that I am for them and with them.

### **I have often wanted to ask somebody this question- isn’t calling our fellow brethren as ‘tribals’ almost like a racial slur?**

Yeah, even I don’t like to address them thus. I call them ‘our people’, but we need to categorize them as ‘tribals’ for legal purposes. I refer to them as ‘tribals’ as they have a clear racial identity and they are proud to be that. So I would use it for them. In the Indian scenario, they are to gain as they have a lot of reservation, benefits, etc.

### **Do you think a better term other than ‘tribals’ can be used to address them?**

No, not at all. They are happy with being called ‘tribals’. They proudly call themselves so. But, it

may be different for 'harijans' It may not go well with them as it has more to do with caste and is considered truly demeaning. As for tribals, they think highly of themselves and we are considered low. Initially, I was looked upon by them as untouchable. I had no entry into their house till they saw I was fully with them and they accepted me as one of their own. Then I had access to their house; I could participate in their *pujas*. Otherwise, I was like an outcaste.

**Have you ever felt lonely in your struggle?**

I haven't felt lonely but have experienced aloneness sometimes. I am usually busy the whole day, come home around evening time, and am alone. I then want to share my feelings and thoughts with somebody in that level with which I don't usually do with the village people. This is often missing. But then I have managed to work it out, I speak to the *ooperwallah* and I speak to animals.

**So, would you call yourself a pantheist?**

I don't call myself by that name but I see God in everything, everything.

**What is the most turbulent experience that you have undergone while working with the tribals?**

Well, there are many- like that case about the torture that I had undergone while opening a school. There was much opposition when I took up a lot of cases. Even the Forest Guard cutting teak from the forest and leaving it in my land to frame me is truly an example of how people's minds work to defame and trap you in some way. The higher officials felt that the story was fabricated when I said I was ready to go to the Supreme Court. They didn't have the courage to make a case against me or to take that wood away. I wrote again and again but eventually the person I wrote to died of heart attack. (*Frowning*) I don't know whether it is because of me that it happened. However, many people have come and told me, "*Madam, aap ka sab ooperwallah settle karta hain*", because those who have had this kind of thing died or something else had happened to them; I don't will it to happen. What I feel is that we human beings have a lot of power; more than a nuclear bomb. We have to use that power and channelize it by strong will, strong conviction, and clinging to the *ooperwallah* because there is a power beyond you.

**As a woman what was the kind opposition that you had to face from the society?**

*Nahi nahi*, it's not only opposition but a whole lot of unpleasant things. In Malayalam, there is a book called *Pachcha Viral* where the first chapter is 'May I Come In'. So, an officer came to my place when I was sleeping on an open verandah in the middle of the night in to have his time with me. I have experienced torture at the hands of many, many women who did all kinds of things to me in the bus, in the train, in public places and when I came as a forward class woman, a *gaowali*. It has happened to me so many times.

**So, you believe that patriarchy is not restricted to the masculine form.**

Of course, even women advocate patriarchy. In the dowry case, it's usually the mother-in-law who's the mastermind. It's part of a kind of system, but men have a much stronger patriarchal attitude.

**As someone who has led most of your life alone, what do you have to say to today's young women who experience all kinds of abuse alone?**

I don't have to say anything because each one has to find their own space and what they want to do with their own lives. But what I want to say to them is that each one should find what they want to do, who they want to be and to be that. Very often they compromise for the sake of their husband, son, or parents and are not living their lives.

**For someone who has gone through a lot of abuse, do you believe that kindness can pull these people out of what they go through?**

It's not only kindness; their own realization of their personal worth, their potential, and what they want is crucial. I think they can. What is important is the discovery of oneself and a positive attitude. This can make a woman realize her potential.

**Do you feel that social ethic as such is unfair to women? It is a very popular tradition to blame the rape victim and not the perpetrator.**

Not necessarily. Most of the women raped in India are poor. Hence, poverty and ignorance are the enemies here. Secondly, women who raise their voices - uncompromisingly going against the prevailing patriarchal system- are made to be silenced through rape. It is a grotesque and inhuman way of punishing them without murdering them. Otherwise, how can anyone pick up a shabbily dressed, untidy girl who is constantly salivating? There were four young men from reputable families who did so. They locked her up in a room all night and took turns using her. This is so perverse! Day by day the victims are becoming increasingly helpless.

**Do you offer rehabilitation for the victims you are fighting for?**

There are certain cases where I have to. Take for instance when one of our supporters was murdered in cold blood. It was made to look like an accident. I had to rehabilitate the family of the person. There are also some cases like eviction caused due to dam building or thermal power plant construction that require me to offer rehabilitation. I have other people to help me with it. However, it demands a lot of continuous work but I cannot be away for long.

**What are your poems inspired by?**

Ah, I never thought I could write poems. It was because of some serious opposition that I had with a minister who, during a huge public meeting at night, invited me to accompany him to the guesthouse. I refused to go and instead had an argument with him when everyone was present. Following this, I faced a lot of threats from the party officials. From then on, I used to think of every day as my last day. That was the first time in my life when I wrote something born out of the intense feelings that came from the experience. I never read any of my first poems as I would tear and throw them away. Then I later wrote a couple of poems on some bits of paper. A priest who visited home one day saw one such scrap paper with a poem on it. He suggested that I compile all my poems and publish them. They have so far been published in a book called '*Daya Bai: The Lady With Fire*', a feminist magazine, and some of my poems during the World Social Forum.

**Can you recite a few lines of any of your poems?**

This one is from my own experience in a train where a young Malayalee couple was seated opposite me, and the man- on looking at me- said to his wife, “*Nokkadee oru saadhanam*” (“Look, dear, at that ‘thing’ sitting there”) presuming that I don’t know Malayalam.

*‘Do you see that bundle of bones  
With a bit of skin and flesh around?  
Clad in torn rags,  
She’s called a poor woman.  
Do you see her trying to fit in a crowd that cares not?  
Look into her eyes  
Enter into her heart  
Put yourself in her naked feet  
And now listen ,  
Listen silently within  
And you will never be the same.’*

**How do you want the world to remember you?**

I often say that you had better not start any kind of monument or award in my name. *(Laughing)*  
If I have got anything, I would urge you to continue to live that!



## Writer's Block

*Dr. Vasantha K. Krishnaraj*  
*Department of English*

Love and marriage go hand in hand,  
but contentment and art do not...  
Strange bedfellows they make,  
turning their backs on each other...  
When the heart is full,  
the mind is empty...  
Like the blank page that stares at me  
trying to coax the words and metaphors  
slumbering within my tranquilised soul...  
How I long for the aches and pains  
and those old, familiar demons  
that once I effortlessly exorcised  
with my felt pen...  
How I long for those old, magical powers  
To make of each new hurt  
A glowing pearl of crystallised thought  
Now all I have is my little girl  
Who, with a crinkled smile,  
irons out the creases in her mother's soul.  
Lost is that ancient craft, that wondrous gift,  
the alchemist's secret,  
and like the humble maiden  
who once won a king's heart  
I pensively strive to remember  
the precious art of spinning straw into gold.

## How many lives

*Dr. Aparna Srinivas*  
*Department of English*

How many lives  
Do we live?  
In one I am the gruhini, holding  
The world together  
In another I am the  
Myriad handed Lakshmi  
Wielding auspiciousness  
Or Kali wielding  
Weapons of dire destruction  
In another svelte and  
Tip topped  
And in yet another  
I carry the stains  
children's food  
Like a badges of achievement  
I am the meditative Saraswati  
The fertile Parvathi  
the ardour of  
Manmatha and Rathi  
Or  
The staid teacher  
Marching around feeling  
Uncertain of the passion bursting forth  
With every name of an  
Author  
of a country  
mountains, and writers  
Writing it into being  
needing to be  
Written into being  
Nine lives – aha!  
more like  
Twenty nine

## ***Bright Star- The Portrait of an Artist as He Appeared to His Lady***

**X. Catherine Shilpa**

*I M.A English Literature*

*I almost wish we were butterflies and liv'd but three summer days, three such days with you I could fill with more delight than fifty common years could ever contain* wrote John Keats in one of his love letters to his fiancée Fanny Brawne and in Jane Campion's film *Bright Star*, Fanny, in her delight after reading these words, falls back against a green meadow of violets and kisses her sister all over her face. This picturesque film with a mainly positive rating of 83% on Rotten Tomatoes has nevertheless perplexed and left certain critics fumbling for words to explain why they couldn't completely love it. *Bright Star* with its narrow focus on the romantic relationship between the poet John Keats and literally the girl-next-door, Fanny Brawne is a film that can obsess, influence and inspire (It still gets me unusually excited and has spawned several viewings). Most unfavorable reviews of the film have been in more or less of the same tenor- Michael Phillips of the *Chicago Tribune* "found it difficult to engage with even after two viewings" and states in summation. *Keats has been dramatized passively. Little of the man's neuroses and fire and anger can be found here; he's the human equivalent of a fainting couch, for Fanny to recline upon.* To me the film and its characters are irresistibly beautiful and understated; neither can I complain about its 'slowness' or the pauses in the dialogue in which you either *hear* the pregnant silence or the birds twittering in the background (I have often marveled at the amazing speed and ease at which people come up with amusing things to say in most films. I flounder so much in reality). *It is supposed to be a film not a painting* was the opinion of one reviewer- this runs the risk of making it sound like a "pretentious art flick"- which *Bright Star* is definitely not.

Many of Keats' momentous phrases from his momentous letters are a part of the dialogue and you want to learn them by heart and spout them at opportune moments - *There is a holiness to the heart's affections. You know nothing of that*, Keats reproaches his possessive (and rather misogynistic) friend Charles Brown when the latter warns the poet about the dangers of "falling into the trap" of the "game" that Fanny and "her kind" play. (*There is one or two of her kind in every fashionable drawing room of the city- gasping over skirt lengths!*) *Poetic craft is a carcass, a sham. Poetry should come as naturally as leaves to a tree or it better not come at all.* he tells Fanny Brawne who wants to know "something of the craft of poetry." It is a biographical fact that Keats and Brawne had a literary companionship, often reading and conversing together, and this offers substance for Campion to construct a tender love story based on a tentative friendship and awkward attraction rather than the confident torrid passion that is expected of historically famous lovers.

The letters that Keats wrote to Fanny during the brief time they were separated and even when they were living under the same roof (separated by a wall) were published after Brawne's death by her children to whom she had entrusted them. These letters created great outrage among admirers of Keats who found them too emotional and fevered in contrast to the incisive and passionate-yet-measured tone of his other letters. They contain Keats' repeated declaration of his love for Brawne and as his illness progressed they also reveal his insecurities about their relationship in the face

of his poverty and impending death. His letters show the nuances and contradictions involved in his perception of women. Keats while remaining convinced of Fanny's love for him wrote his last sonnet, *Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art--/ Not in lone splendor hung aloft the night/ And watching with eternal lids apart/Nature's patient, sleepless Eremite ...* Throughout the poem she is called "steadfast" and "unchangeable" but unlike Wordsworth's Lucy she is "not in lone splendor". This could be a gloomy reflection on other suitors who were in socially advantageous positions as opposed to Keats who was a penniless poet. Fanny's mother, a widow with three children, though fond of Keats was extremely reluctant to let her daughter marry a man with no prospects. When Fanny wonders aloud *I'm not sure he likes me...* to which Mrs. Brawne quickly and rather sternly replies, *Mr. Keats knows he cannot like you. He has no living and no income.*

Fanny Brawne was by all accounts a bright, well-read girl with a penchant for dressmaking and fashion; a fiery temperament and outspokenness that led her to be labeled "minx" by Keats in his letter to his brother. She was clearly no angel and not being an angel she was surely...difficult. So it was easier for shocked Victorian sensibilities to categorize her a shrew. According to the poet Richard le Gallienne, *"it is certainly a particularly ironical paradox that the lady irritatingly associated with (Keats') name should be the least congruous of all the many commonplace women transfigured by the genius they could not understand, and the love of which they were not worthy.... Fame, that loves to humour its poets, has consented to glorify the names of many unimportant poor relations of genius, but there has never been a more significant name upon its lips than the name of Fanny Brawne.... One writes so, remembering... the tortures to which she subjected a noble spirit with her dancing-class coquetries."* It was hard enough for women of genius to escape the specter of male judgement, let alone "commonplace women transfigured by the genius they could not understand." But such readings of Brawne changed over the course of years after details of her mourning and her close friendship with Keats' young sister were discovered and published. According to Amy Leal, Jane Campion's film about Keats' and Brawne's relationship *"reflects the critical transformations in Brawne scholarship in recent years,"* painting her as *"the steadfast "Bright Star" of Keats's sonnet, and it is Keats who is torn between his vocation and Fanny... she is La Belle Dame without the nightmare thralldom, witty and chic but also deeply kind and maternal, an aspect of her character that is often missed in readings of her."*

But the fact remains that we will never know what Brawne was really like- she only exists in the descriptions, letters and the accounts of others. Her letters to Keats were destroyed and a few letters from her to Keats' sister survive. All these sources are unreliable and like the inner lives of Keats and Brawne in the movie can only be taken on faith despite the obvious meticulous research and the director's desire to make her story and characters as accurate as possible.

Campion aimed at minimalism and narrative focus and therefore filters out other aspects of the poet's life that included his circle, his politics and his relationship with his sister and brother George.

Campion in so many gestures and expressions makes her Fanny (played to perfection by Abbie Cornish) convey her helplessness in being in the midst of decision-making men (who more or less ignore her let alone consult her) and in not being in a position to do much for her ailing fiancé besides taking down his words and mending his coat (Keats was sent by his friends to Italy in

vain hope that the climate would revive his failing health. Her moments of intimacy with Keats are few; she never so much as leaves the house without her younger brother Samuel trailing behind her ( even when Brawne, upon Keats' death, cuts off her hair, wears black and walks out of the house into the Heath, imagining herself alone, Samuel Brawne follows her at a safe distance); in one of their stolen moments Keats reclines languidly on the couch with his head on her chest, dreamily murmuring, "*Pillowed upon my fair love's ripening breasts/ To feel forever its soft fall and swell/...Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath*", "*Its new. Which poem?*" she asks, "*Yours.*" he replies, "*Bright Star...*"

The best thing about the movie is its focus on those people and emotions that are often considered unimportant and the depiction of the uncertainties and anxieties of new-found love that has so many 'practical' considerations against it. It ironically de-romanticizes the romance in the life of a Romantic poet. When any other director would have loved to linger on Keats coughing up blood or holding the white carnelian Fanny had given him, in his agonizing death bed (which is reportedly what happened in reality) *Bright Star* has none of this. We see along with Fanny (who is irritably told by Brown to stay out of the way) the blood-stained sheets and listen gloomily to her mother reading Keats' letter from Italy. Almost immediately we find her receiving news of his death and breaking down. Keats never appears in the frame after his farewell to Fanny before leaving for Italy until the end of the film when Ben Whishaw (who plays Keats) provides a heartfelt reading of the *Ode to a Nightingale* in a voiceover. In her gendered representation of the male poet Campion has not neglected his art or the realities of his life- his poetry literally and symbolically pervades and permeates the film (there are excerpts from *Endymion*, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *When I have fears that I may cease to be* and *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*).

*Bright Star* is one of the most covertly feminist films I have ever seen and this means that the film is not entirely about what it will be assumed to be about- the biographical 'hero' is surprisingly left with lesser screen time than the woman who is supposed to have been a corollary. As for complaints about Keats' "passivity", they sound very similar to his contemporaries' attack on his 'effeminacy' and his lack of 'manly vigour' (the poet not having braved treacherous mountain terrains like Wordsworth, delivered passionate political lectures like Coleridge or gallivanted all over Europe like Byron). Campion stated in an interview that her expectation of the film was that it would make viewers fall in love with Keats as she had done after reading Andrew Motion's biography of the poet. And surely enough I began to take an interest in Romantic poetry, which I had so far kept farther away than arm's length and became keen on knowing more and more about Keats. Still, the closest to sentimental that the movie gets is in the afterword: "Fanny Brawne walked the Heath for many years often far into the night. She never forgot John Keats or removed his ring. Keats died at twenty five, believing himself a failure. Today, he is recognized as one of the greatest Romantic poets." At the risk of being possibly slapped for such a cliché I must nevertheless say that *Bright Star* is "a thing of beauty" whose "loveliness increases" every time I see it.

## Evening Star

*Sai Prasanna P.*

*II M.A. English Literature*

I look up at the sky at twilight  
Red. Orange. Pink.  
The sun's rays painted across the sky  
Sunset.  
One word is not enough to capture the beauty  
Of the sun setting below the horizon  
Spreading its soft glow on everything it falls  
Leaving the world in half-light, half-darkness  
As darkness envelops the sky from all sides  
Suddenly I see a light: A tiny flicker of gold  
Reminds me of fireflies glowing in the dark  
Now both beyond my reach  
I resign myself to admire them from afar  
Wondering whether my wishes will ever reach out  
To the one beyond the skies  
Or will they remain unfulfilled  
Like the wandering fireflies  
Searching for a haven amidst the blinding night  
Once more I look up to see infinite glitters  
Lighting up the night sky  
Round and round: They're everywhere I turn  
I concentrate, trying to find  
The one I initially encountered  
Alas! It's no use. It's already gone

Somewhere hiding amongst the crowd  
Sigh  
Letting out a deep breath, I begin to climb down  
My back turned against the sky  
Momentarily out of sight  
I set foot on the ground and turn around once more  
I feel as though someone is calling my name  
I hear a whispering sound: The time has not yet  
come.  
I don't know what it means  
But somehow I feel relieved  
Knowing there's someone  
Or something that believes in me.  
Hopeful, I walk out of the roof  
Closing the door, feeling content.  
Not over a wish fulfilled, but a promise made.  
A renewal of faith.

## Generation Gap

*Meryl Mammen Kurien*  
*II B.A. English Literature*

“You kids don’t have a life”, chimed my father. I was tempted to react to his statement but nevertheless maintained my calm. “You guys know nothing beyond gadgets and the internet”. Oh, yeah! I thought to myself, look who’s talking! For someone well placed in the software industry, this was pure blasphemy. It was weird to hear someone berate the very essence of his career. As I opened my mouth to defend my generation of electronic addicts and geeky whiz-kids, my dad spoke up. “I had a lovely childhood. It was simply memorable! At our home we had a lot of pets: cows, mostly. As a child, I would indulge in bathing them and playing with the little calves. There was one cow that I named *Karumbie* (‘Blackie’ in Malayalam); she gave birth to an adorable little calf. That day, I dragged myself to school and did a countdown of the time left in class. The time clocked on and to my delight the gong struck. I bounded homewards with a childish delight... and there it was! The little calf! That was my first meeting with my companion for years. I would look forward to playing with it every day.” I noted the enthusiasm and vigour that illuminated his face as he spoke about his bovine buddy. With a polite smile, I took in his words. Okay, he played with a cow- and here I was undergoing a nervous breakdown every time I saw a huge cow munching on the overflowing trashcan down the road.

“TELL. ME. Meryl”, boomed his voice, shaking me out of my introspection. “Why is cancer so common these days?”. “Well, dad”, I responded, unsure of what to say, “It just happens.” Shrugging me off, he said in a matter-of-fact tone, “The disease was unheard of”. I shook my head on this one. “There used to be a fruit called *Athakya* that was white on the inside. It is now said to be a remedy for cancer but you can hardly see it growing anywhere in Kerala. When I was a child, they were everywhere!” Surprisingly, I hadn’t heard of this fruit myself. Maybe cancer could have been curtailed had we taken a little more care to preserve this fruit. It was perhaps a delicacy too local to have an English name, or it was just that my father did not know it. He continued about his childhood adventures atop the mango tree. He along with many other children would climb up the mango tree and suck on the delicious fruit. Their favourite was the *Naadan Maanga* or the country variety that was difficult to cut to pieces. This type of mango would be encompassed in dense, unruly and fibrous masses that made it favourable to be carried if not enjoyed in the above fashion.

“You are simply spoilt beyond despair”, my father jokingly asserted. “You need a car to take you through the smallest of distances.” This came as small consolation to my beloved mother who was constantly worried about my safety and disapproved of my walking down the lecher-infested main road by my house. Fuelled by this, I wanted to argue with him. “Dad, I know what’s coming next! You will tell me about how you would walk all the way to your school.” “In my case”, I firmly asserted, “It would be madness to walk six kilometres to college when there is absolutely no guarantee of reaching there on time. I hope you are also aware of the attendance scheme that will cost me and the family dearly.” At the end of my oration, his expression remained unreadable-



but he was listening, nevertheless. He suddenly broke into a grin. Reaching out, he patted my head and said, “I was never going to ask you to walk to college, and it’s not like you would!” This put me at ease.

Gazing at the shampoo bottles and soaps lined up inside our store cabinet, he read out the text below the cap of the shampoo we used rather frequently. “The best friend for your hair: Silky, Smooth and Strong guaranteed... and yet you women complain of hair fall!”. Memories of my grandmother’s homemade shampoo came flooding to my consciousness. She would fill a bowl with a little water and crush the petals of hibiscus flowers till a milky white, frothy consistency would be achieved. She would then add something called *inja* and a host of other things to prepare a shampoo that we would generously apply on our hair. I wondered why this wasn’t marketed with a ‘Silky , Smooth and Strong guaranteed’ tag attached. I caught up with my dad a little while later. He was poring over our medical prescriptions and bills from two months ago. “Hey, dad”, I whispered with my virtual tail between my legs. He looked up to face me. “You were right about the shampoo.” A studious nod met my statement. He lifted a bill to my level of vision and said, “This one’s from the customary dental check-up. I was thinking of ways to avoid having to spend so much to maintain teeth.” What now, I was wondering. “Your grandmother would make me brush my teeth with the ash of rice husk. She would put a tiny portion of it on my finger and I would ‘brush’ my teeth this way. I bet these chemically induced whitening toothpastes are not even half as effective as *umikkari*.”

Minutes later, I would muse on his words and ask myself a lot of questions. My father and his generation were raised in the very lap of nature. A metro-bred girl like me would come close to knowing nature only either through the annual visit to Kerala or through the picturesque poems of the Romantics. I often wonder if such a kind of life lived by the generations that preceded us are only faraway dreams now. Maybe the emphasis on returning to the old ways of living may help us move a little closer to their healthier and more fulfilling way of life.

## The Untold Story

*Anjana Vitto*  
*III B.A. English Literature*

I have a story inside of me,  
Waiting to be told.  
It has a heart of its own,  
Beating along with mine.

It beats louder and faster now  
Its need to be told  
Becoming more and more each day.  
I can feel it pounding it within me.

“Let me out”, it says, “I am not to be  
Caged”. I raise my hands  
In surrender and say,  
“You are free to go.

I do not stop you.  
You fear being turned down  
At the doors you knock.  
But the story lives as long as you live”.

The pounding within me slows.  
Yet it does not die.  
I know it will one day,  
Find a way to be told.  
Stories always do.

## I Say We

*Amudha M.V*  
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I say we're the same, you point and laugh  
I la la la and go dance with the rain.  
Receiving acceptance from a thousand tiny  
drops,  
I'm gracefully washed away from all the hurt  
and the pain.

Look at me, look here, I cry and jump around.  
The rain is the same for you and me.  
What wisdom under the umbrella have you  
found  
That I missed, enjoying this blissful glee?

Us? Unequal? But darling, how can I believe?  
The rain is the same for you and I.  
Turn up your face and for once let your privi-  
leges grieve  
Till you discover, rediscover and watch your  
bigotry die.

Would you still think so greatly of yourself,  
dear?  
When you see it rains for you and me, the  
same.  
As the truths melt in your heart so clear  
Remember, it isn't I, but the rain you ought to  
blame.



## On Cars and Car Owners

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A car, I recently discovered, can say a lot about its owner. Sometimes it does so literally, as the names of the owner, his wife, children, his parents, grandparents and sundry other relatives will adorn the rear windshield. At other times, you might find words like, “My father’s gift” or “My mother’s gift”, revealing the fact that the owner has indulgent parents. All this is bearable. But when I saw a car with the sticker, “Baby on board”, I was besieged by all kinds of pesky thoughts. I wanted to stop the car and ask the owner just what I was supposed to do. I mean, a baby travelling in a car is nothing new, if you ask me. Maybe he wanted other cars to slow down to a crawl in obeisance to the aforementioned baby. The point is, the kind of people to whom this sticker should send a message to don’t care two hoots about whether there is a baby on board or a baby elephant on board. They are usually too drunk- on booze or adrenaline- to care about such niceties. It’d be like showing a red rag to a bull, nothing less. I can just imagine them chortling to themselves, “Baby on board? Looks like my lucky day,” before stepping on the gas and proceeding to give the hapless baby the fright of its life.

Such stickers have become rather ubiquitous these days. It seems like another import from the Western countries. We Indians are rather good at aping things mindlessly. Sometimes I also wonder if such stickers are used by people to camouflage their poor driving skills. Perhaps I should flag the car down and check if there really is a baby on board. So imagine my disbelief when I saw this message on a car the other day: “Pregnant lady in the car.” I was so aghast that I did a double take and rubbed my eyes to make sure that I was reading it right. I have never seen such a thing even in the UK or the US, where I have travelled to. On any given day, hundreds of pregnant ladies in India are going about their business in rickety autos, crowded buses or wobbly bicycles and this blockhead had actually written this crap on his car. Are we becoming a nation of sissies? Or is this a fallout of the fact that Chennai has some of the highest motor accidents? Still, this was a bit much! Suddenly, I had a niggling suspicion about his real motives. Maybe he wanted to announce to the world that he had succeeded in impregnating his wife. Probably he was a techie in the IT industry, which is rumoured to have adverse effects on male libidos. I simply couldn’t believe that any woman would be behind such an asinine act. I mean, I would have died of embarrassment if my husband had ever written such a thing on our car. The fellow was either an exhibitionist or a bad driver, no doubt about it.

I couldn’t help wondering if this was a sign of things to come. And lo and behold! The next day, a colleague comes and tells me that she had seen a car with the sticker, “Grandmother on board”! Well, if you can’t beat them, join them. I have also decided to make some stickers of my own. Some samples - “Troubled teenager on board”, “Restless pussycat on board”, “Murderous wife on board”, “Overbearing husband on board”. After all, this is the Facebook generation where everything is meant for public consumption. In the old days, the brand of car you owned made a statement about you. Now your car is just another vehicle to communicate the story of your life.