

OpenDoor magazine

YOUR WORDS MATTER.

**NEW
BOOKS**

THE BELL TOWER

ALTERNATIVES

YOUNG

FEATURE

**PEACE
BE WITH YOU**

welcome to the OPENDOOR MAGAZINE january issue!

What a unique entry into a new year! What will your new year bring? We hope it brings you an abundance of choice for you to play your own game of sliding doors. Join us as we explore ALTERNATIVES through the words and minds of the following writers and artists.

If you are looking for ways to continue to support OpenDoor Magazine – please consider becoming a Patron (patreon.com/opendoormagazine) with tiers as low as \$1 per month – and we are hoping to grow our Patreon page into something that is above and beyond your monthly subscription experience!

Thank you for continuing to share our magazine with your friends and family and allowing our audience to keep growing.

- Kassie & Mel

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what are
OUR CO-OWNERS
UP to?

KASSIE J RUNYAN

Co-Creator



Watching:

After Life with Ricky Gervais. It's in season three. It's an amazing look into loss, mourning, and living beyond it. Every episode makes me laugh and cry. Highly recommend!

Listening:

In my Joni Mitchell moment right now – nonstop. It drives my husband nutty – but it's helping my own coping with recent loss of another kind.

Reading:

When I Was Her Daughter by Leslie Ferguson

Girl Unstrung by Clair Amy Handscombe

<https://www.KassieJRunyan.com>

<https://www.Facebook.com/kassiejrunyan>

<https://www.Instagram.com/kjrunyan>

<https://www.Twitter.com/kassandrerunyan>

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLvSEcLEfE196OE_Ya2LNNN3kjFp82Ktt2

KASSIE J RUNYAN – CO-CREATOR

WHO AM I?

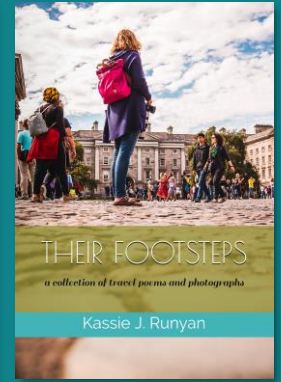
Kassie Runyan
United States

<https://www.kassiejrunyan.com>

my voice falters
as i cry out
screaming into the darkness
yesterday i smiled
but today i woke to a
tearstained pillowcase
my body numb
brain in a fog
yesterday i was alive
skipping through the day
today i fumble through
the known motions
as if on auto-pilot
my scream hits the wall
and bounces back to me
it sounds like the pain
of another body
one full of emotion
that could be happy again
tomorrow
but that emotion is gone
just in this moment
as i watch my hands clench
but don't feel the pressure
tomorrow i will smile
and plan for the next day
but today i am unsure
of who i even am
or who i would like to be



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2020 [HERE!](#)



Purchase your copy
of Their Footsteps
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This is 2020 Part Two [HERE!](#)

KASSIE J RUNYAN – CO-CREATOR

Walking out the door – January 25th

Pre-Order NOW

<https://www.kassiejrunyan.com/thedeathandlifeofjohnhndoe>

VIRTUAL LAUNCH PARTY January 25th!
RSVP at [KassieJRunyan.com](https://www.kassiejrunyan.com) for entry to win some fun author/reader giveaways!!

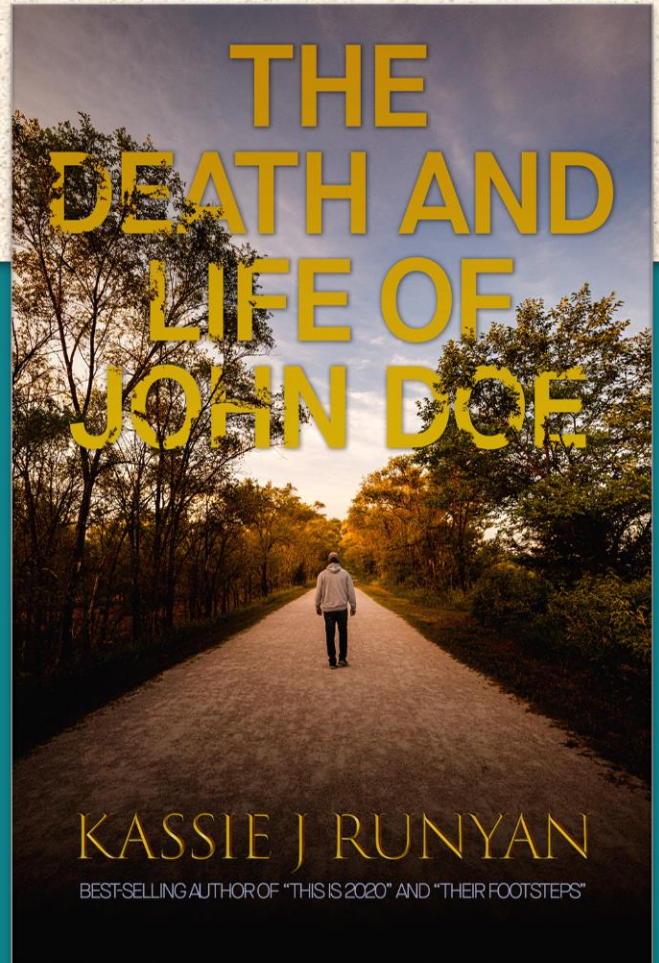
From best-selling poet of “This is 2020” and “Their Footsteps,” Kassie J Runyan, comes her debut novel, “The Death and Life of John Doe,” which takes a deep look into trauma, the human psyche, and the struggle of living on the street.

Our nameless nomad walks out the front door of his suburban home, leaving his life behind. Not knowing what it is he's looking for... or what it is he's running from. He closes the door and walks into a world full of the pain and joy that waits for him with each step. He keeps moving forward; driven by a desire to find a reason for his life and to discover his forgotten past. What he wasn't prepared for were the dreams.

What is your name?

"The Death and Life of John Doe is a mesmerizing book that takes you on a cross-country journey and makes you question your own perception."

- Joni Rachell, Author



MEL HAAGMAN

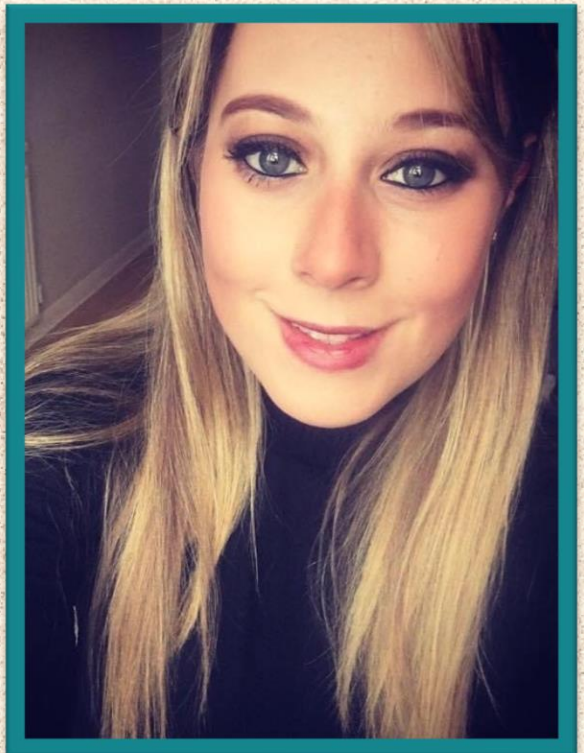
Co-Creator

Watching:
And Just Like That
Sex and the City is back! No more needs
to be said!

Reading:
The Lying Life of Adults by Elena
Ferrante

In this powerful novel set in a divided Naples by Elena Ferrante, the *New York Times* best-selling author of *My Brilliant Friend*, fourteen-year-old Giovanna is searching for her reflection in two kindred cities that fear and detest one another: Naples of the heights, which wears a mask of refinement, and Naples of the depths, a place of excess and vulgarity, where her guide is the unforgettable Aunt Vittoria.

With this new novel about the passage from childhood to adolescence to adulthood, Ferrante gives her readers another gripping, highly addictive, Neapolitan story.



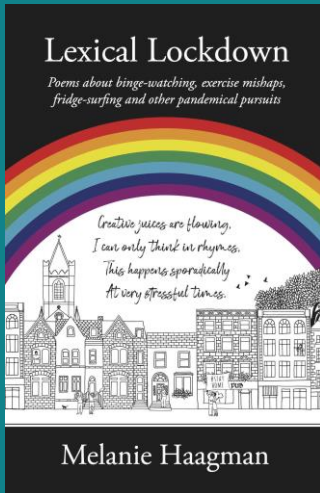
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MEL HAAGMAN – CO-CREATOR



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**Mel Haagman
United Kingdom**

<https://www.facebook.com/girlontheedge90>

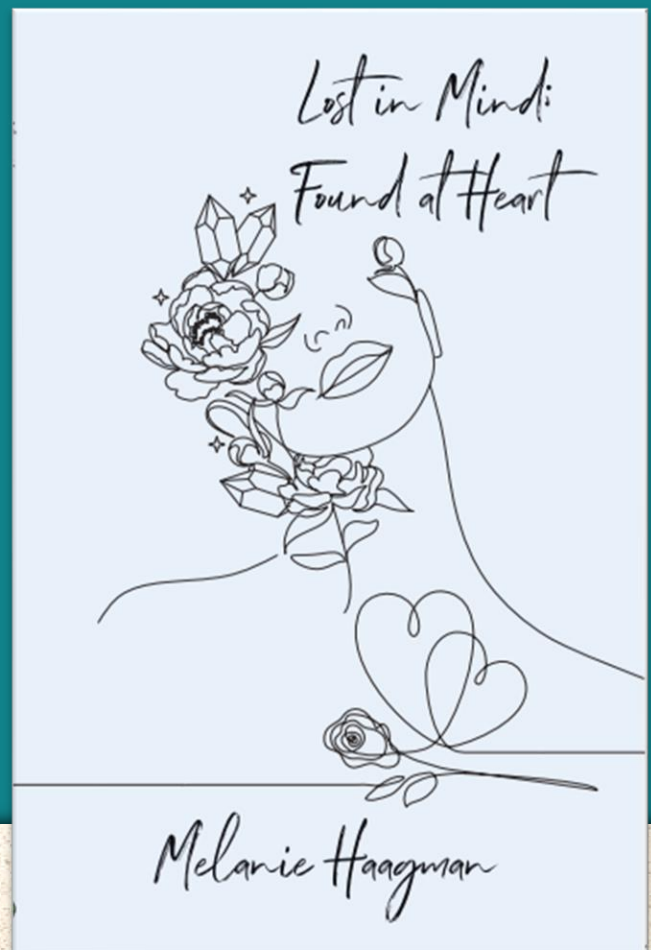
I hear it in your voice,
I see it in your eyes,
The outpourings of grief,
You're unable to disguise.
The strength that you possess,
So many couldn't endure,
And collectively it's made you
Even stronger than before.
Although these cruel events,
Have stolen way too much,
You've always got back up.
Providing others with a crutch,
And when you're down and lonely,
Exacerbated by these days,
Know that I'm just down the road,
And here for you always...

**Available on Amazon and available to purchase from Mel directly right now! Head over to FB to find out how:
<https://www.facebook.com/Girlontheedge90/>**

Lost in Mind; Found at Heart really did write itself. Every time I feel a strong emotion, whether it be a negative or a positive one, I find nothing more therapeutic and satisfying than writing a poem about it and of course they have always got to rhyme!

Poetry for me is an innate coping mechanism to deal with whatever life throws at me. I do my best to try and write honestly and always aim to end with an uplifting line. This book reflects that no matter how hard things get, when we are truthful and transparent with our emotions, we can make meaningful connections with others who will in turn help us to get through. As well as learning how to get back up when we fall and realising that this is how we learn, develop, and grow.

It has never been more important to speak out about mental health and the similar struggles that we are facing. I hope that these poems can help others to know that they aren't alone with their feelings. This book is divided into subsections to quickly help you find the perfect poem to get you through the day. Whether you need advice, a little injection of humour, a poem about feelings, down-days, or even friendship! I hope that you can laugh, cry, smile, relate to and most importantly enjoy this book.



YOUNG
POET
FEATURE



Evie

United Kingdom - AGE 10

THEY SAID.

They said I was a loon,
They said I would go soon,
They called me a baboon.

Then there came a moon,
It said, “you will find love and you will find hope,
so go elope.”


It doesn't matter what they say,
just carry on with your day,
that's what I say.

THE BELL TOWER

BY DC DIAMONDPOLOUS

DC Diamondopolous is an award-winning short story, and flash fiction writer with over 300 stories published internationally in print and online magazines, literary journals, and anthologies. DC's stories have appeared in: *Penmen Review*, *Progenitor*, *34th Parallel*, *So It Goes: The Literary Journal of the Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library*, *Lunch Ticket*, and others. DC was nominated for the Pushcart Prize twice in 2020 and also for Best of the Net Anthology in 2020 and 2017. DC's short story collection *Stepping Up* is published by *Impspired*. She lives on the California central coast with her wife and animals.

dcdiamondopolous.com



Reverend Langston Penniman sat on the edge of his bed, stretching his black fingers. Everything had either twisted up on him or shrunk except his stomach. Once six-foot-five, he now plunged to six two, still tall, but not the imposing dignitary he once was standing behind the lectern in front of his congregation.

His parishioners aged, too. So hard nowadays to attract the young, he thought standing from the bed he shared with his wife of fifty-two years. His knees cracked. He'd gotten his cholesterol under control, but at seventy-five, his health headed south as his age pushed north.

Born and raised in Montgomery, Reverend Penniman had a hard time staying relevant, what with tattoos, body piercing, rap music, not to mention homosexuals getting married and reefer being legalized. For a man his age, changing was like pulling a mule uphill through molasses.

THE BELL TOWER – DC DIAMONDPOLOUS

The smell of bacon and eggs drifted down the hall. He heard the coffeemaker gurgle. How he loved his mornings with the Montgomery Daily News—not Internet news—something he could hold in his hands, smell the ink. He even enjoyed licking his fingers to separate the pages.

Off in the direction of the Alabama River, he thought he heard a siren, not far from his church.

“Breakfast ready,” Flo shouted from the kitchen.

Flo was the sweetest gift the Lord ever bestowed upon a man. Oh, he was fortunate, he thought, passing her picture on the dresser bureau and the photo of their three boys and two girls. Proud of his church, he was even prouder of their five children. Three graduated from college, all of them respectable citizens.

“It’s gonna get cold if you don’t come and get it.”

“I’m a comin. Just let me wash up.”

The siren sounded closer.

The Alabama spring day was warmer than usual. At nine in the morning, it was headed off the charts, as the kids say nowadays.

Reverend Penniman washed and dressed. At the bureau, he brushed back the sides of his white hair, his bald crown parted like the Red Sea. When his kids teased him about looking like Uncle Ben, he grew whiskers just as white. His boys joked he looked like Uncle Ben with a beard. He chuckled. He would have preferred Morgan Freeman.

“I’ll feed it to the garbage disposal if you don’t come and get it.”

“I’m a comin now, sweet thing.”

He heard the siren turn the corner at Bankhead and Parks.

Reverend Penniman looked at the cell phone lying on his dresser. He’d yet to master how to get his thick fingers to press one picture at a time, or type on that itty bitty keyboard. He couldn’t even hold it in the crook of his neck.

He hurried down the hall. The floorboards of the fifty-year-old house creaked just like him. Not quite shotgun, his house did have a similar layout what with add-ons for the three boys.

The siren was upon them.

“Lord have mercy,” Flo said as she put the food on the table. “That sure sounds angry.”

“Sure does. Let me take a look,” the reverend said from the kitchen’s entrance.

THE BELL TOWER – DC DIAMONDPOLOUS

He went to the living room window and saw a police car pull into his driveway, the siren cut-off. Two uniformed police officers, one black, the other white, got out of the cruiser and headed up his footpath.

He opened the door.

“Are you Reverend Penniman?”

“I am. What’s the problem?”

“There’s a girl up on the bell tower of your church. Says she’s gonna jump,” the black officer said.

“Good Lord!” Flo cried, standing behind her husband.

“Let me get my keys,” the reverend said.

“No time, sir. Come with us. You’ll get there faster.”

Flo took off and came back with the reverend’s cell phone. “Here baby. I’m gonna meet you there soon as I shut down the kitchen. You should at least have your toast. I can put it in a baggie for you.”

“No time,” he said as he hurried out the door with the officers.

Reverend Penniman sat in the back of the car with a screen separating him from the policemen. “Who is she?” he asked.

“Don’t know,” the young white officer answered.

“What’s she look like?”

“Black teen, skinny, baggy pants, chain hanging from the pocket, hoodie pulled over a ball cap.”

“Akeesha.”

“You know her?”

“Like one of my own.” The reverend looked out the window as the car pulled away. He clasped his hands together and said a quick prayer for the troubled girl. Lord, help me help her, he repeated to himself. “Did she ask for me?”

“No.”

“How’d you find me?”

“Your name is on the marquee of your church.”

THE BELL TOWER – DC DIAMONDPOLOUS

“Oh, right.”

“I’m Officer Johnson,” the older man said. “This is Officer Perry.”

Officer Perry reached forward and turned on the siren. The noise deafened everything, including the pounding of Reverend Penniman’s heart.

They drove toward downtown Montgomery along the banks of the Alabama, the RSA tower soared above the city’s skyline.

The speed limit was forty. The reverend guessed they were doing twice that. His right knee pumped like the needle on Flo’s sewing machine.

The siren screamed. The lights blinked and rotated flashing red and blue on the hood of the car. Reverend Penniman felt like he was up on that bell tower, on the edge, with his arms stretched out, his body holding back the weight of all his parishioners who had wept in his arms.

At the corner of Graves and Buckley, the cruiser slowed, the siren cut-off. Officer Johnson made a right turn. People rushed along the sidewalk their cell phones pressed against their ears.

Halfway down the block, Reverend Penniman saw more people standing outside his church than he ever had inside. A fire truck parked in the lot with men unloading a ladder.

The police car jumped the curb and drove to the side of the brick building. He saw Greaty, Akeesha’s great-grandmother in her burgundy wig, mused like a tornado whirled through it. She cupped her black hands on the sides of her mouth screaming and crying at the roof. Her pink housecoat hung open revealing her cotton nightie.

Before the car came to a stop, the minister jumped out.

Greaty saw Reverend Penniman and ran to him. “You get my baby off the roof, you hear, Reverend? She done gone and have a meltdown.”

“We’ll get her down. Just craving attention like all teenagers.”

“She cravin’ nothin’ but death. She gonna jump. She all I have!”

He ran to the front of the church. Greaty followed. The reverend gasped. “Good Lord.” Akeesha teetered on the edge of the bell’s shelter. Her baggy pants flapped in the breeze.

Two firefighters carried a ladder to the roof. They propped it against the gutters.

“Get away,” Akeesha screamed. “I’ll jump, you try to get me.” Her voice carried over the mob.

“I know the child. I can get her down.”

“Don’t think so, Reverend.”

THE BELL TOWER – DC DIAMONDPOLOUS

The minister turned to see Officer Johnson standing beside him. “Then why’d you get me?”

“It’s your church. I thought you’d be younger.”

“I’m young enough and I’ll get her down.” He gazed up at the girl. “Akeesha!” he shouted using his pulpit voice. “I’m coming to you, child.” He sprinted around the side of the church, to the back, amazed at how his body complied with his will. Officer Johnson’s leather holster crunched with each matching stride.

Akeesha had broken the frame of the door and busted in.

“If I have to cuff you Reverend, I will,” Officer Johnson said.

“You really want to save this child?” Reverend Penniman asked. “I’ve known her since she was four. I’m the only father she’s ever known. Now you let me do my business.”

He pushed open the door when he heard car wheels on gravel.

“Langston,” Flo yelled out the window. “Where do think you’re going?” She slammed the driver’s door.

“Good Lord, woman, I don’t need you pestering me too.”

Flo ran up to her husband. “Officer, you arrest this man if he so much—.”

“You gotta save her . . . she my baby—she all I have!” Greaty screamed coming around the corner.

“Calm down,” Reverend Penniman said.

Greaty wiped her face with the sleeve of her house coat. “She never been so upset. She so angry. Them girls who beat her up. Them punks who tried to rape her.”

The reverend looked at Officer Johnson. “Get all those people away from the front of my church. And tell those firemen to take down the ladder.”

“I’m the one in charge here, Reverend.”

“How about we get Captain Martinez?” Officer Perry asked. “They can secure the reverend with a rope and harness.” Before his superior had a chance to argue, young Perry ran off.

“Thank you,” Reverend Penniman shouted.

“She a good girl except for her sin,” Greaty sobbed.

Flo put her arm around Akeesha’s great-grandmother.

“Flo, take her to the car,” Reverend Penniman said. “I’ll be okay.”

THE BELL TOWER – DC DIAMONDPOLOUS

“Keep him safe, Officer. Don’t let him do anything foolish,” Flo said as she led Greasy away.

Reverend Penniman heard the whirling blades of a helicopter. “Good Lord. A child’s life is at stake and this is turning into a circus,” he said entering the back of his church.

“How’d she get up to the bell tower?” Officer Johnson asked.

“There’s a room with pulleys. A stairway curls around leading up to the bells.” Reverend Penniman could kick himself for letting Jake show Akeesha the inside of the tower.

Officer Johnson shot up the stairs.

“Wait! You can’t go that way. You’d come out behind her. I swear, man. You let me handle this my way or that girl is going to die.”

Officer Johnson turned on the landing.

The reverend had him in an eye-lock. “Please,” he said, not used to the sound of the word or the helpless feeling that it carried.

“Why is she up there?” the policeman asked.

“She’s a homosexual.”

“My brother’s gay,” Officer Johnson said.

The minister watched how the cop’s eyes captured a memory, something powerful enough to soften his features.

Reverend Penniman climbed the fourteen steps to the landing. He’d always been proud of his bell tower, right now he’d wished his ancestors never built it.

Officer Perry returned with Captain Martinez and a boyish looking black man. Both men held gear as they took the steps in three strides.

“Well Johnson, your call,” the captain said.

“We’ll feed Reverend Penniman below her, on the roof.”

“Thank you.”

The reverend led the men around a corner to a loft with stairs to the church roof.

“Got your Nikes on, I see,” Martinez said. “Good.”

“Now put that contraption on me and let me out there.”

THE BELL TOWER – DC DIAMONDPOLOUS

The firefighters held the harness for the reverend to step into. They hooked the cloth rope to the straps, gave it a tug jolting the reverend backwards, then tossed the rope to another man who waited below. “Side-step going down the incline. It’s not steep, but we got you no matter what.”

“Get rid of the ladder and the lookyloos. And stay well below. I don’t want her knowing you’re around.”

“We’ll be down on the first landing,” Captain Martinez said.

“I’ve had enough talk, gentlemen.”

Reverend Penniman took the steps to the roof praying as he went, for Akeesha, for Greaty, but most of all for himself. That he’d say the right thing, be sincere, because Akeesha had the gift of honesty. He prayed, asking the Holy Spirit to fill him with wisdom.

The door to the roof was ajar. He gently touched it. He felt the rope tug the harness. The door swung open.

The roof slanted and leveled out several feet down. The area around the tower was flat.

He smelled the fumes from the asphalt as he stepped sideways onto the shingles, planted himself and managed the incline. He took his time placing his right foot, then his left, and held for a moment. He did it again until the roof flattened out.

Applause and shouts broke out. “Get back!” Officer Johnson shouted. “Everyone!”

The reverend glanced at the Alabama River. The spectacular Montgomery skyline like a masterpiece God painted. Then he looked below. He saw the van of a local TV station, the helicopter off in the distance; the crowd herded across the street by young Perry, and so many cell phones held up to the bell tower it looked like Beyonce held court.

He heard sniffles, then crying.

“Akeesha. I’m here to talk, child.”

“Won’t do no good.”

“Well, I didn’t climb all the way up here thinking it wouldn’t do no good. You and I have a way together, now don’t we?”

“Prayin’ don’t work. I’m still gay.”

“No reason taking your life.” He thought back to the convention when one minister said, let the gays kill themselves. We need to protect our children. Only problem with that was all the

THE BELL TOWER – DC DIAMONDPOLOUS

molesting he knew came from men with little girls. He left those conferences feeling tired and old, the same men year after year with their stale jokes and self-righteous rhetoric. He felt trapped by the old ways and frightened by the new.

“Everyone knows. It’s on Facebook.” Akeesha whimpered. “My girlfriend broke with me.”

Reverend Penniman made his way around the side of the bell tower feeling the tug of the harness. He looked up at the teenager.

Her hoodie covered all but the bill of her ball cap. She wiped her tears with the black leather band she wore on her wrist. “I wanna die.” She inched forward to the lip of the shelter. Her hand left the arch.

“No!” Reverend Penniman yelled his arms stretched out as if he could catch her.

The crowd oohed.

He moved slowly around the tower until his back was to the mob. “Sit on the ledge baby.”

“I’m goin to hell when I die. Bible says so.” Her voice quivered. “Greaty found out. Said I’d bring shame on her house—more than my mama in jail. Said a woman’s body parts were made for a man to make babies.” Her voice trailed off.

“Greaty loves you, child. She’s running around screaming and bossing, telling us to get her baby off the tower. You hear me, child?” He watched horrified as she balanced herself on the rim of the tower. A slip and she would die.

“They callin me a freak.”

“Sit down now. We need to talk.”

“Jump faggot!” someone hollered across the street.

Reverend Penniman looked back at the crowd. Officer Johnson grabbed the man. Perry hauled him away.

“They all stupid.” Akeesha sobbed.

“We can work this out.”

“Don’t dish with me, Reverend. Talkin’s no good,” she shouted.

He lifted his head up to see her lip quivering. “Can be,” he said.

“I’m goin to hell. Might as well get it over with.”

“Now, don’t talk like that.” He thought of all those times they knelt together holding hands. Their eyes shut tight, the way Akeesha repeated his words to rid herself of the sin of

THE BELL TOWER – DC DIAMONDPOLOUS

homosexuality. When they were through, her face was wet with tears. He'd never forget how she'd wipe her fingers several times across her jeans like she'd been holding hands with a leper. He knew then she'd yet to be cured.

He talked to his daughter about it. Rose told him the gay people she knew said they were born that way. She told him his generation treated the Bible like a deli, picking and choosing what to live by, who to hate and the nonsense of fearing God. His conversations with his middle child made him reflect. That's all it did. He loved his children equally, but Rose had the gift of benevolence.

“Akeesha.”

“What?”

“You jump, I'll try to catch you. Then I'll die trying to save you. You know that'd make Flo mighty mad, child.” He took a careful step back to get a look at her face. She gazed out at the Montgomery horizon. Her calm scared him.

He remembered the first time Greaty brought her to church. She was four, always carrying her dump truck and running it along the pews. During the sermon, she'd nestle into Greaty's bosom, thumb in her mouth. Her short hair braided. When she got older, she sang in the choir. For extra money she gardened around the church. He'd take her to McDonald's afterwards. They talked. She was a good girl—even if she did look like a gang banger— thoughtful and quiet, never swore, didn't do drugs. But she suffered at school. It showed in her grades, and she finally dropped out. He was the only man in her short life, and she clung to him like a daddy. Her great grandmother looked after her like a one-eyed cat watching two rat holes. She ain't goin to end up in jail like her mama, or dead like her granny. She gonna be respectful, yes, indeed, she gonna be a fine woman when she grow up.

“Akeesha,” he said with a stern voice. “You want to give Greaty a heart attack? I told you how worked up she is.”

“She always worked up.”

“She loves you.”

“Quit lyin!” She spread her arms out.

“I'm not lying. You've seen her below. Running around. Now you hold onto that post.” The noon light threw no shadows. The wind rippled his shirt. He felt the sun beating down on his bald spot. “God loves you.”

“Then how come we pray to change me?”

THE BELL TOWER – DC DIAMONDPOLOUS

“Cause you wanted to be like other girls. Remember? I’m not a psychiatrist. Praying is all I know.”

Reverend Penniman took out his handkerchief and wiped his brow. In the 1980s, he buried a young man who died of AIDS. He’d never forget how his boyfriend threw himself on top of the casket crying and shouting the dead boy’s name. He never thought homosexuals had feelings until he witnessed that young man’s grief.

“We prayed to make your life easier. So you’d be happy.”

“Didn’t work. My life be easier if people left me alone.”

“You’re probably right, child.” The reverend wiped his mouth with the handkerchief and put it in his pocket. Even if his heart struggled with what he was going to say, perhaps he could save her. “Maybe God made you perfect the way you are,” he said, thinking of Rose.

“You lyin so I don’t kill myself.”

“No child. I’m saying it cause God has a reason for you being here.” He heard sniffles. Then he saw her skinny hand swipe across her face. “Oh baby, come down and let’s have a good cry together.”

He watched for any movement from her feet.

“Quite a view up here,” he said, trying to sound casual. “We live in a beautiful city. Don’t you think?”

“I wanna go to California.”

“Now, why would you want to do that? What about Greaty?”

“What about her?”

“Girl, I’m getting a crick in my neck looking up at you. I haven’t eaten today. At my age, I’m on a schedule, and I get awfully tired if I’m hungry. We can talk better down here. Sit behind the tower. Alone. I want to talk to you like a grown-up.”

“I am grown up.” She shifted and pulled the hoodie off her head so it fell around her neck. “Jalissa broke with me. Who gonna love me?”

“Child, there’s a whole lot of people in the world. There’s got to be one just for you.”

“You not being honest.” She tugged the hoodie back up. “You wanna boy to love me. I don’t wanna boy.”

“Darlin baby, I admit I don’t know much about such things. All I know is that I love you, and that

THE BELL TOWER – DC DIAMONDPOLOUS

love is greater than any judgment I cast upon you.” He hesitated, and thought about the words that flowed out of him so effortlessly. It sounded like something coming from Rose’s lips, not his.

He looked up. “Akeesha!” Where’d she go? He held onto the tower. He circled it fearing she jumped from the other side. “Akeesha!” he cried. He didn’t dare to take that part of the roof. The slant angled too steep. He felt weak, a little dizzy but his adrenalin rushed. He went back the way he came, the harness tugging. Sweat poured into his eyes.

The door to the roof creaked open.

“What you wearing Reverend?” Akeesha stood in the archway.

“Lord have mercy, child!” His heart felt like a bowl of confetti. Instead of fearing the worst, she had climbed inside the tower and took the stairs to the roof. “You could have answered me when I called. You done scared the daylights out of me, child.”

“What you mean, your love greater than your judgment?” Akeesha asked.

“Oh, oh, my darlin baby—we should enjoy this magnificent view of our city and thank the good Lord for the beautiful child that you are.”

“I’m not beautiful.”

“In God’s eyes and mine you are.”

“You lyin’.”

“I swear on my sweet Flo’s life.”

“Then why we waste all that time prayin when I’m already okay?”

He caught a glint of the stud that she wore in the center of her tongue.

“You not as smart as you think, Reverend.”

Reverend Penniman let out a hearty laugh. “Well, I’ll tell you a secret, Akeesha, I don’t have all the answers. Sometimes I have to make it seem like I do or no one would come to my church.”

“They won’t come anyway, lyin and all.”

He thought about what Rose said, how the young have turned away from religion. “You know my daughter, Rose? She’d agree with you. You know she’s studied in India. Traveled the world. Says God is always expanding—not sure what that means.” He walked slowly toward the girl. “You know something, Akeesha?”

“What, Reverend?”

THE BELL TOWER – DC DIAMONDPOLOUS

“You taught me something.” His voice fractured. “You taught me, child. And I’m truly grateful.”

“Taught you what?”

“Can we sit here, for a minute? I’m really tired.” He slid down the wall. The harness grabbed at his thighs as he sat.

Akeesha walked like she’d been on the roof a hundred times, maybe she had, he thought. She sat next to him.

“You taught me to accept you.” He slowly pulled the hoodie down so he could see her face. “I’ve always thought of you as one of my own. Flo, too.”

Akeesha took his gnarled old hand. She spread each of his fingers to include hers. He felt love in her fingertips.

The confetti in his heart flung out over his beloved Montgomery. It showered like a vital rain. “I think there’s only love in God’s house,” the reverend mused. “So much of life is good.”

“Can we go to KFC?”

Reverend Penniman smiled. “Not McDonald’s? We always go to McDonald’s.”

“No. KFC.”

“Sure enough. My treat,” he said. “I could take you to a fancy place where we sit at a table with a white cloth and linen napkins. We can order ribs. They have finger bowls with water so our hands don’t get all sticky. Eat as much as we want.”

“No. KFC,” she said, standing and holding her hand out for the reverend to grasp.

alternatives



JANUARY: ALTERNATIVES

BY MULTIPLE AUTHORS

OLIVE TREES

Mohamed el Houssaini
Morocco

I miss the rustic beauty of my town
surrounded
by mountains and olive trees
no matter if it is rainy or sunny
the bewitchment of the sky refines the soul
I spent my whole night thinking
a possible alternative, but I can't
I can't be thankless
betraying the place of my childhood?
what a sin!
in dim light of aurora
I feel the breeze and peace
I see nothing save green
what a grace!
Heavenly leaves charmed speak
of the boon I own
sorrow there is ephemeral
with the mellifluous voice of birds above
euphoria conquers my soul
almond trees fetchingly mesmerize
my feelings in spring
you are the panacea for everything
as long as I breathe
I'll be thankful for all your gift

WORDS ARE BLOCKS

Catherine A. Coundjeris
United States

Remember when letters were objects
made from sandpaper and felt?
Words were blocks to build banks
to study and hang from back packs.

Words were sticks and stones
and they did hurt.
Words on tongues hit teeth
lost words and your mind sweeps,

searching for meaning
as words jumble,
spilling out backwards
and forwards,

sounding like
a foreign language.
Little archipelagoes
of meaning in an ocean of dementia.

Then quiet
punctuated by sighs
and moans
no words necessary, but

the comforting monologue
of caregivers,
then silence
and finally, only remembered stories

peppered with familiar words...

PLASTIC FANTASTIC

Kurna Mistry
United Kingdom

1

Plastic pollution
There's no solution

Production insanity
Demand by humanity

Mountains of waste
Throw away haste

Greed over need
Extinction with speed

Profits and expansion
Over heart and compassion

2

Rethink the box
Or ingest the tox

Many different ways
To live and stay

Smarter thinking employ
Find ways not to destroy

First repair or reuse
But recycle we choose

One of many thoughts
Among all sorts

THERE'S A SILENCE

Brendan Kirwin
United States

like fire
that burns at the edge
of a forest where we keep
pieces of ourselves hidden
the soft, small parts that
fit in canopic jars

be with me here
the stillness will feel like
the world was just made

it should feel strange,
like repeating a word
or a name over and over
again

what should we say?

your name, my name,
names of saints of light
and color,
names we hear
in dreams that arrange
the world

with all things outlined in rushed,
hatched strokes, harsh along
their edges, but blooming
with hues that fill up everything
tangible and tangential –
leaves, elbows, katydids,
clay, hips, dew, petals

we could live here,
subsist on our senses,
visions, premonitions,
Repetitions

the last of what's left of us
if we can just find
the time

FROM THE ASHES

Deenaz P. Coachbuilder, Ph. D.
United States

yesterday, when she hurried along
hers was a welcoming home
the reassuring voices of children
as she busied herself with the evening meal
the quiet bedroom waiting impatiently
for her nightly sojourn
a book lying enticingly open
lit by a glowing lamp
her beloved lover's warm body to cuddle against

all, all scattered fragments swirling blindly
as dried wildflowers in the wind

soon her lips forget laughter's curve
droplets of misery fill each unsought dawn
the parched hours drag

she stumbles onto the backyard garden
granite piercing her startled bare feet

numb fragments of faded hopes
beg to be recognized
cherished relationships stretched across the years
the places she lived and loved in,
wrap around her a quilt
embroidered in long lived grace
inviting her
to go
looking for her life

a warmth begins to scrape against her skin
the soft lament of the mourning dove
knocks gently upon the chambers of her bruised heart
sweet smelling currents drawn into her shuttered breath

double delight roses shiver desperately to seek her attention
yellowwhite butterflies flutter invitingly around border lantanas
the startled new sun mingles with her unkempt curls

TOMORROW

Lynn White
United Kingdom

<https://www.facebook.com/Lynn-White-Poetry-1603675983213077/>
<https://lynnwhitepoetry.blogspot.com/>

I must wait till tomorrow,
that's what I was told
when growing up.
Tomorrow
would bring the sunshine,
tomorrow
would bring the treats,
tomorrow
would be glorious.
It was always tomorrow.
Now I know
that tomorrow brings death
and there is no glory in death.



Claudette Martinez
Canada
#claudettemartinezartist

Claudette Martinez

Canada

<https://www.facebook.com/claudemartinezdesign/>

<https://www.instagram.com/claudette.martinez.92/?hl=en>

#claudemartinezartist

Shall I tell you a story of a young girl of four or five,
and a boy, teenager turned man who saved her life,
not once but twice.

Life wasn't easy for this boy, teenager turned man,
but he still played football,
went to school,
held a job,
a handsome man.

Tall with a killer frow,
tees too tight,
bell bottom jeans that hung a little too low.

With that job and with his very first pay,
he bought that young girl of four or five her very first bike,
now she could escape and ride ride away,
he saved her that day.

Later that year that girl of four or five was sassy in class and sent to stand outside.

She stood through recess and countless tears,
frozen to her spot thinking of endless fears.

Too afraid to move,
her urine ran down,
frozen to where her tiny feet had built a grove.

She stood when all had left,
after all had gone.

She stood till the teacher
realized what she'd done wrong.

She brought the young girl of four or five inside,
put on her mittens, hat and coat,
then set her outside to head home,
cold and alone.

Then along came the boy, teenager turned man,
scooped up the girl of four or five,
held her as close as he could lifted her hood.

She was no longer alone he'd carry her home,
a kindness she was rarely shown,
a simple price for saving a life.

This girl of four or five, teenager, women turned wife,
will always remember the boy, teenager turned
man who saved her life,
not once but twice.

FAMILY

Liz Tomaszewski
United States

<https://lizthompsonpoet.wixsite.com/my-site-1>
<https://www.instagram.com/l.t.poet/>

We don't have the same body
none of us do
except those ginger twins
two doors down
when looking at each other, or in a mirror
are the same

but you and I don't share
a mom or a dad
the same DNA
or even the love of pickles
which I think are death
and you think are life

I come from a country
on a different continent than you
and yet we try
to compare our bodies
thinking I eat too much
and you too little

Maybe I am the one broken
maybe you are
or maybe the melting pot
has created a standard
that none can achieve
by feeding their bodies

MURMURATION

David Olsen
United Kingdom

<https://www.davidolsenpoetry.net/>

A breathing cloud of starlings,
reflected in momentary mirrors,
flickers in wanton trickery,

alters a collective mind
in hive unison, as if reversal
itself is the purpose of all.

Indecision or contradiction
buffets me in winds
of your capricious whim.

To escape the suspense
of randomness, I depart
in deference to indifference.



HOME

Sarah Neve
United States

home

is not four walls and a door,
a roof to shield me from the storm.

it is skin and fingers
slightly smaller than mine with
callouses from plucking at
guitar strings, soft
from holding my hand.

it is the same thin t-shirt,
a scattering of holes across
the shoulders, as familiar
as the speckled skin barely
visible beneath.

home is the way I have butterflies
on the drive up and serenity
when I finally see your face,
the way your eyes soften
when your pupils meet mine.

it is the comfort in knowing
you will hold my hand through the rain,
across sunsets,
in the frozen winter,

home is four calls in one day because you
are the answer to every emotion I have,
every thought coursing through my veins,

your arms
are my favorite place to be,
home

is not four walls and a door,
you are
everywhere I want to be,
you are my

home.

CHANGE

Brenda C.
Canada

I'd rather listen to the noise
of a powerful locomotive
approaching another,
then hear the silent war
I have known with you.

The one that stripped my youth
to age like a rusty nail embedded
in the cuticles of my soul.

There were times when we shared
laughter with language on solid ice,
but now, we fall through the thin
cracks of our smile's and drown in
the house that was never a home.

And the joys we held in our hearts,
no longer hold us strong without love.

A war in silence. . . kills.

BRING ME SPRING

Christian Ward
United Kingdom

https://www.instagram.com/christian_ward_writes/

Forget the cabbage white butterfly
bringing winter everywhere it flies:
A trail of brassica ice sculptures,
snowmen trees and frozen
lakes of backyard ponds.
Sunset's darkroom light
slowly returning the scene to normal.
Bring me a garden tiger moth – a reincarnated
big cat bringing spring with it. The garden pond
turning a shade of Lucozade from the Koi
will be a lake, the decorative gnomes
with hats curled like whipped cream
might hide in fear at this circus escapee.
It will leap through the dandelion's
ring of flames to feed, dodge
housecats doubling up as pumas
and curious dogs with tails
whipping the air like a jockey.
It will bring pompoms of blossoms,
days opening like picnic blankets.
The lawn will welcome its netting of dew.
Our love will not shed like last season's
chrysalises but will grow like the carnival
of butterflies bringing new light.

TIME TO CHOOSE

Abby Kay

Trinidad and Tobago

<https://msabbykay.com/>

Son son what yuh want for breakfast?

What is this I hearing?

Lil boy like he have choice?

Allyuh spoiling these children nowadays

In we time we didn't have no choice

In we time

yuh eat what cook

or yuh mudda say

Who doh want it could lay down beside it

What yuh want fuh breakfast?

Nothing but what cook was what was cooking

And d person cooking it was d one choosing it

Yuh choice was eat

or doh eat

Ah know mammy, daz how we grow

But dat was cuz we didn't have no setta food

But yuh never went hungry doh

No, I was never hungry; but it have real thing

That we had to eat then

That I wouldn't eat now though

Now ah have ah choice

Daz what wrong with allyuh

Young people nowadays

Too much damn choice

Allyuh weak now

No staying power

Breeding ah generation dat cyah persevere

I doh like dat

I doh want dat

I have ah choice

You can't make me

Boo hoo hoo

Cry cry cry

As soon as something allyuh doh like show up

Yuh run looking fuh something else

Never satisfied

Always looking for d alternative option

Daz why now have so much alternative lifestyle

How I coulda raise children who does raise children so?

Lawd, ah doh know

Ma look doh start

Cuz you from ah generation who had no choice

And allyuh was stuck in bad marriage or shit wok.

Miserable

Never having to really be responsible for your own decisions cause you coulda always say

I had no choice

And you knew that

Daz why allyuh work so hard

So that we coulda have more options

You wanted us to have choice

Now choice bad?

How you coulda raise children who raise children so?

Is you raise we so

So yes my son have that choice

My children go learn early that they responsible for the life dey go be living

We may not have had much choice

But you and daddy make sure we learn dat

Iz just dat my son go just have more practice choosing

Making better decisions

Cause he had more practice making decisions

And yuh know you woulda choose different for your life

If you had more options

Yuh get big? Talking to yuh mudda so

Daz not true?

...Maybe.

HARD TO GET

BY EVA LANGSTON PATRONE – UNITED STATES

<http://evalangston.com/>

I was going to move to Thailand, but now I'm not.

This is what I tell Aunt Beth as I pull off my coat in her foyer. Of course, it's the first thing she asks about as my mother and I walk in.

"I thought you had rekindled the romance with Rob?" Aunt Beth squints at me through her heavily-mascaraed eyelashes.

"False alarm," I say. Aunt Beth is the family gossip, so I'm hoping she'll spread this around, and I won't have to go through the whole spiel with everyone.

"He was a looker," she says, still squinting. She never wears her glasses because she thinks they make her look old.

My mother makes a grunting noise behind me. She never liked Rob. She says he reminds her of my father.

"Those blue eyes," Aunt Beth continues loudly. "So handsome. But love isn't just about looks, is it Danny?"

"Hey! What's that supposed to mean?" Uncle Danny shouts. He's stuffing our coats into the front closet.

"Don't yell! We're all right here," Aunt Beth shouts back. It's a wonder they haven't gone deaf after twenty years of marriage.

We follow Aunt Beth into the kitchen. My other two aunts are stirring pots on the stove. My mother and I politely offer to help, but they shoo us away, which is a relief, because Aunt Beth is going into full-panic Thanksgiving mode, yelling about not having enough mashed potatoes.

Eva received her MFA from The University of New Orleans, and her work has appeared in various literary journals. She is currently working as a manuscript consultant and runs a successful writing blog with over 2,000 followers.

HARD TO GET – EVA LANGSTON PATRONE

In the living room, a few of my teenage cousins sit on the floor in front of the TV, and my grandpa is on the couch. He stands when he sees us and gives us big hugs.

Things have changed a lot for my grandpa in the three years since my grandma died. When she was in the hospital he started getting rid of their things: furniture, books, paintings, clocks. “What do I do with it all?” he kept asking. After Grandma died, he moved into one of those Senior Living complexes where they have game nights and potluck dinners. He seems to be doing okay now, but it's hard to tell. He calls up my mother sometimes to ask how to do laundry or boil an egg.

While my aunts cook, my mother and grandfather and I drink white wine and make small talk with the cousins who float in and out of the living room. I'm the oldest cousin, and I remember them all as toddlers. Now they're in high school and college. My younger brother arrives with his girlfriend, but soon they disappear out back to play with Aunt Beth's dogs.

My mother refills our wine glasses, and then she, too, disappears, upstairs to one of the bedrooms to call the man she's currently dating. My grandpa looks at me. His cheeks and nose are pink, but the rest of him is white: white hair and eyebrows, pale, papery skin. “Gina,” he says. “Tell me about this moving to Thailand business.”

I sigh. “I was going to. But now I'm not.”

Three years ago my college boyfriend Rob moved to Thailand to teach English, and when he emailed to tell me, I thought maybe him living in another country would help me stop fantasizing about us getting back together. And it did help...he shifted to the back burner of my mind. Although still, on the rare occasion I'd get an email from him, my heart would leap to my throat at the mere sight of his name in my inbox. He emailed me out of the blue every so often, usually with a book he'd read that he thought I might like, or a weird poem he'd written and felt he couldn't show to anyone but me. I'd write him back immediately then not hear from him for another six months or so, until he had another book recommendation or weird poem to share.

Then, this past April, he came to Northern Virginia to visit his parents for a few weeks, and I happened to be in the area, too, for a friend's wedding. Rob sent me a message, suggesting we meet up for drinks, and I said okay.

I hadn't seen Rob in almost eight years, and I wondered if he would still look the same, if he would still think I was pretty. I had a boyfriend, so I didn't really expect anything to happen between us, although of course the possibility crossed my mind.

As it turned out, he *didn't* look the same. He was thicker – from working out at the gym, he said, something he'd never done in college. His sandy hair was shorter and receding a bit around the

HARD TO GET – EVA LANGSTON PATRONE

temples. His forehead was lined, and there were dark circles under his eyes. Oh, but those eyes were the same brilliant blue, and he had the same plump lips. That same chicken pox scar above his right eyebrow. The chicken pox scar alone would have done me in.

I don't remember what we talked about over drinks. I just remember watching his thumb rub down the condensation on the side of his beer glass. We barely made it back to my car. We were frantic at first. He actually ripped my underwear, which was something that had never happened to me before, and he sucked on my lips until they were practically numb. He told me I was even hotter than he remembered, and we laughed about how we were both staying with our parents and thus forced to have sex in the backseat of my Toyota like teenagers.

I know I'm making it sound good, and, oh God, in some ways it was, but the thing about me and Rob... it was always a little *too* passionate. He needed me desperately, and I desperately needed him to need me. It had taken a lot of fucked up situations in college for me to finally end things with him, shortly before graduation.

After our fast and furious sex, Rob buried his face in my neck and sobbed, saying he still thought about me after all these years, and he wished he didn't have to go back to Thailand. And then I cried, too, because being with Rob always made me cry. My love for him was so intense it hurt.

We lay there, cramped in the stuffy car, and talked, and it was like old times. We decided that maybe, as people grow older, the outside layers of their personalities harden or warp. They change to be who they want to be, or have to be, or think they should be. But inside, there's this core that stays the same. And if someone gets to know you deep down to your core, it doesn't matter how much time goes by, you'll forever have a connection.

Then we cried again and kissed snotty kisses and rubbed each other's sweaty backs. And we didn't even care that we were half-naked in the backseat of a car in the middle of a parking lot. I guess I should have known then how it would end. Desperate, overwhelming passion like that is not the stuff real relationships are made of, but oh, Hollywood had sure made me think that it was, and I was ready for my happily ever after.

Rob went back to Chiang Mai, and I went back to Baltimore, but we messaged every day and talked for hours on Skype. I broke up with my boyfriend.

Rob sent me pictures of his life in Thailand: lush hikes, golden mountain-top temples, a colorful nighttime bazaar. I started to imagine myself there: zipping around with Rob on his motorbike, my arms tight around his waist, the air perfumed with coconut and spice.

After a while the idea arose that maybe I could move to Thailand and teach English, too, and Rob and I could try being together again. It was crazy, but maybe it was fate. I started telling people I was moving and I applied for teaching positions. Rob and I discussed all the places we'd visit when I got there.

HARD TO GET – EVA LANGSTON PATRONE

If my life was a movie, it would have ended with me arriving at the airport in Chiang Mai, loaded down with my bags. I would see Rob. He would see me. I'd drop my luggage, and we'd run to each other for a crushing embrace. Our lips would lock. The music would swell as we went off together into the sunset.

“Tell me again why you were moving to Thailand?” Grandpa asks. “For romance, wasn't it?”

“I know.” I twist the stem of my wine glass between my fingers. “It was silly.”

I'm just glad no one has mentioned my old boyfriend, Gus. I'm sure that's what they're all thinking – that I'm an idiot for ditching a nice, upstanding guy like him for a flighty bum like Rob.

“Well, I'm not so sure,” Grandpa says. “You've got to go for it sometimes, in the case of romance.”

This is a strange thing for my grandpa to say. He's never struck me as particularly romantic. When I was in high school I asked him about courting Grandma, and he said something along the lines of, “well, it was time for me to settle down, and Trudy was nice, good-looking gal.”

At the time I had been appalled, but as I got older it seemed to make more and more sense. Maybe it didn't have to do with butterflies in your stomach or passionate declarations of love. Maybe it was as simple as saying, “hey, I'm tired of being alone. Who seems like a person I could spend my life with?” It was a decision, not an inevitable fate. And it had worked for my grandparents. They were happily married for over fifty years.

That's what I'd been thinking about when I started dating Gus. He was stable and thoughtful and good at Scrabble. He didn't write poetry, and my heart didn't ache for him, but maybe that was okay. He cooked me nice dinners and got along with my friends. He didn't have panic attacks or bouts of crushing depression. Of course, I ruined things by cheating on him with Rob.

“What happened to make you change your mind?” Grandpa asks.

“More like he changed his mind.” I drain the last of my wine. “I guess he had always dreamed about us getting back together, but when the dream started turning into reality, he got scared and broke it off. It's probably for the best.” I shrug.

I don't tell Grandpa how I spent a month sobbing after Rob told me he was freaking out because he wasn't “ready for all this.” He was worried he wouldn't know how to make me happy, and maybe me moving to Thailand wasn't a good idea right now. “Maybe in a year or two,” he'd suggested, “when I've got my head screwed on straight.” I told him I wasn't waiting around for him, and maybe we shouldn't talk anymore, like, at all.

HARD TO GET – EVA LANGSTON PATRONE

Then I cried and cried until my head pounded and my eyes swelled shut. I was mad Rob, but mostly I was mad at myself. That I could still, at the age of thirty, be so stupid as to believe in fate. That I was so naïve, or maybe so desperate, that I'd been willing to give up my whole life and move across the world to be with my unstable ex-boyfriend because I thought he was my "true love." And, worst of all, maybe the reason I was willing to give up everything was because I didn't have much to lose.

Grandpa knocks his empty glass against mine. "Be a good girl and get us some refills."

In the kitchen, Aunt Beth and Uncle Danny are fighting loudly. Meanwhile, Aunt Gail is getting ready to send Uncle John to the grocery store to pick up more potatoes. She hands him a list. "And if they don't have whole milk, two percent is fine."

"Copy that." Uncle John takes the list and moves towards the door. He and Aunt Gail always seem more like business partners than husband and wife. They're very efficient together.

The kitchen is steamy and smells like turkey and yeast rolls. My stomach growls, and I head back to the living room to deliver Grandpa his glass of wine.

As soon as I sit down, he puts his hand on top of my wrist. His fingers are cold and dry. "Gina," he says. "I'm going to tell you a story."

We're alone in the living room. The cousins have abandoned the television, and I can see them through the window – they're outside kicking a soccer ball around in the dried-out grass. The dogs run back and forth, following the ball, and my brother and his girlfriend stand off to the side, by the old, rusted swing set, their arms crossed against their chests. Grandpa takes a sip of wine and clears his throat.

"It was 1953, and I was living in Des Moines," he says. "I was working for the magazine Better Homes and Gardens – you've heard of it?"

"Yes. Of course." I figure this is going to be one of his career stories like he used to tell me when I was in college and he was trying to convince me to study journalism.

"Well, I was having a pretty good time back then as a bachelor." He smiles. "There were some girls I took out, but there was one girl from the office I was especially keen on. Beautiful. And smart. She had this fiery personality that really knocked my socks off."

"Grandma?" I ask.

"No," he says. "Her name was Rita."

"Oh." This was different.

"But Rita wouldn't let me take her out. She didn't think it was a good idea to mix work and play."

HARD TO GET – EVA LANGSTON PATRONE

Which was funny, because most of the gals at the office were working there to find a man. Rita was actually interested in a career.”

“Uh huh,” I say, reminding myself that Grandpa is eighty-seven. I wonder where this is going.

“So me and Rita,” he continues, “we were “just friends.” I'd stop by her desk to chat, and we'd talk when we ran into each other at parties. Sometimes a group of us from the office would go to lunch, and I'd make sure to sit next to her. Rita always had something to say – and boy, she would argue with me, any chance she got! Sometimes she made me so mad, but it was good for me. I was too sure of myself back then.”

“She was a challenge.”

“Well, I tell you, I liked her a lot. I'd lie in bed at night and think about her. I liked her so much it hurt. Like I couldn't contain it.” Grandpa pats his chest, over his heart, and I nod.

“One night, we were both at a party, and Rita had a bit too much champagne. We went out on the back porch, just the two of us, and she said, you know I like you, Philip. I tried to act surprised, but I'd had a hunch all along she was just playing hard to get.

She said she knew I was looking for a woman who would cook dinner every night and stay home with the kids, and she wasn't that kind of woman. So I asked her, what kind of woman was she? And she said she hadn't figured that out yet, but she didn't think she was the type to get married.

I have to tell you, I didn't know what to say. I guess I was looking for a woman who would cook for me and take care of the kids, but I was also looking for someone I loved, and I was pretty sure I loved Rita. I told her she didn't have to cook me dinner. We'd go out to eat. And we'd hire a nanny for the kids. She just laughed. Then I kissed her. And boy, could she kiss! The next thing you know, we're getting in a taxicab and heading back to my apartment.”

“Grandpa!” I swat at his arm. He's grinning.

“Well, that's what happened. And it was pretty wonderful. She was a smart, good-looking gal, and we were very attracted to each other. She told me, well Philip, you won me over.” He takes a sip of wine and stares off into the backyard. It's only one in the afternoon, but the day is dark, and the sky is low and gray.

“So then what happened?” I ask. “Did you date Rita?”

“No. I started thinking. She said she didn't want to get married. But I did. I wanted someone to come home to every night. I wanted a house and kids, but Rita didn't want those things, and I

HARD TO GET – EVA LANGSTON PATRONE

didn't know it could be any other way. I guess I was scared. I didn't know if I could make her happy. And, I'll admit, it worried me, what happened that night. I wondered if she did that sort of thing all the time, with different men. Just the thought of it made me sick with jealousy.

So, the next day at work, I asked her to lunch. And I told her I didn't think it was a good idea for us to see each other anymore. That was the only time I remember Rita having nothing to say. She nodded and ate her salad, and she didn't say a word. I knew I had hurt her, and it broke my heart.

The next thing I knew, she got a job with a magazine in New York, and she left Des Moines, and that was it."

"You never saw her again?"

"Never did. A few months later, your grandmother started working as a secretary at the office. And Trudy was very pretty. Serious, but she wore this bright red lipstick that knocked my socks off. So I asked her out. She was a good, Catholic girl, and she wanted to get married and have lots of babies. We got married six months later."

"Why so fast?"

Grandpa sets his empty wine glass down on the coffee table. "I made up my mind, and that was it. We liked each other and we didn't want to wait."

"Did you ever think about Rita?"

"Sure I did. I thought maybe if things didn't work out with Trudy, I'd find Rita, and I'd be with her, in whatever way she'd have me."

"But things...worked out with Grandma, right?"

"Of course they did!" Grandpa pats my knee. "She was a good wife and a good mother to my children, and I loved her very much. We made a real good show of it."

"So you made the right decision."

"I made my decision. But now," he says, "I'm ready to find Rita."

When it's time to eat, we all gather in the kitchen to say the blessing and tell what we're thankful for. My mind wanders to Gus, and I wonder if I should try to patch things up with him. Maybe we could make "a real good show of it." Or maybe not. Maybe I need to move somewhere else, get a new job. Baltimore doesn't exactly set my heart aflame.

HARD TO GET – EVA LANGSTON PATRONE

“I’m thankful for my husband and kids,” Aunt Beth says. “They drive me up a wall, but they make my life fun, and I love them.”

“I’m thankful for Gail and all the cooks,” Uncle John says. “For making sure we have enough mashed potatoes.”

After all the prayers and thanks, we load up our plates. There are twenty-three of us in all, so we can't fit at one table. Aunt Beth has set up folding tables in the living room and den. I choose to sit in the dining room with my mother and her sisters and Great-Aunt Rhodie. This turns out to be a mistake because immediately they start discussing my mother and the man she's dating.

“Our relationship is mostly sexual,” my mother says through a mouthful of turkey. “Which is fine with me. I have my own life and my own friends. I don't have time for anything serious. But it's nice to have regular sex a few times a week.”

“Mom, please.” An unwelcome mental image flashes in my mind.

“A few times a week?” Aunt Linda asks. She's divorced, too, but she doesn't go on dates the way my mother does.

When it's time for dessert, I decide to move to the kids' table, which is a joke, because there are no kids left in our family. My youngest cousin is sixteen. Our family is in this weird limbo right now, waiting for the next generation. Everyone's holding their breath to see when my brother and his girlfriend will tie the knot and start procreating. Or when I will finally find someone and settle down. Like it's a decision I can make all on my own.

After pie and coffee, I feel like it should be time to go back to my mother's house and fall asleep, but it's only five o'clock in the afternoon. My grandpa is back on the couch, and the cousins are back in front of the television, watching football.

“Rita,” Grandpa says, patting the cushion next to him, “come sit next to me.”

His face is flushed, and I wonder how many glasses of wine he's had.

“Gina, Grandpa,” I say. “My name is Gina.”

“What?” He looks startled. “What did I say?”

I sit next to him. “You said Rita.” I hope he isn't going senile. I hope he's not going to start putting the moves on me, thinking I'm Rita.

He sighs. “I got Rita on the brain. I called her up, you know.”

“You did? When?”

HARD TO GET – EVA LANGSTON PATRONE

“Yesterday. I got your brother to do some sleuthing on my behalf. Somehow he figured out she’s living with her daughter now, and he got me a phone number. And an address.”

“So what happened when you called?”

“I left a message, but she hasn’t called back.” Grandpa fishes a piece of paper from his shirt pocket. “She lives in Alexandria now.”

“Oh, wow.” Alexandria is thirty minutes away.

“Your brother also found out she’s a widow.”

“So she got married and had kids after all.”

“What do you say?” Grandpa grins at me. “Want to take a road trip?”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea. You don’t want to barge in and disrupt their Thanksgiving. Maybe we should try calling again.”

“I’ve waited years to see Rita,” he says. “I don’t want to wait any longer.”

I can think of a hundred reasons why this is a bad idea. Grandpa remembers the young Rita. What’s going to happen when he comes face-to-face with a Rita who is eighty-something years old? What if she doesn’t live up to his expectations?

On the other hand, I’m one to talk. I was ready to move to the other side of the world to rekindle a romance with Rob. I was the one who talked about an inner core, a connection that lasts a lifetime.

“Let me get my keys,” I say. “You tell everyone we’ll be back later.”

Outside it’s cold, and the sky is heavy. The weather is calling for snow flurries. In the car, I turn up the heat and try to find a radio station Grandpa will like. He looks out the window, watching as we pass strip malls and brightly-lit gas stations. “I don’t want you to think,” he says after a while, “that I didn’t love your grandma. Because I did. Very much.”

“I know.”

“But I had such passion for Rita. I did think about her sometimes. Maybe if we’d gotten married, we would have driven each other crazy. Probably. But I never felt about anyone else the way I felt about her.”

I could say the same thing about Rob. My love for him was immense. I loved Gus, too, but that love was small and practical. It didn’t hurt so much to lose it. Maybe that’s better, in the long run. Maybe love shouldn’t weigh you down.

HARD TO GET – EVA LANGSTON PATRONE

“I think it's all working out according to fate,” Grandpa says quietly. “I was supposed to marry Trudy and have my girls. But I'm supposed to die in the arms of my true love.”

I feel my nose tingle with tears. At the age of eighty-seven my grandfather still believes in fate.

The GPS tells me to turn right, and soon we're driving into Rita's daughter's neighborhood. “We're almost there.” I reach over and put my hand on top of his. He's shaking.

I pull up in front of a large, brick colonial. All the lights are on, and there are five cars jammed into the driveway. We sit silently in the car for a moment. “We don't have to do this,” I say. “You can always call her in a few days.”

“No,” Grandpa says. “I want to see her.” He opens the car door.

“Do you want me to stay here?”

“No. Come with me.”

I walk behind him as he shuffles up to the house. I wonder if Rita will even recognize him.

We stand on the stoop, and Grandpa pats his hair down with one hand before reaching out to ring the bell. I feel my own heart beating fast. This is it.

The door opens halfway, and a middle-aged woman looks out at us.

“Hello,” my grandpa croaks. He clears his throat. “Is Rita here?”

The woman cocks her head to the side. “One second.” She walks down the hall, and we hear her say, “Mom? Are you expecting anyone?”

A moment later, an old woman inches down the hallway with a walker. A cloud of white hair surrounds her head, and she wears a pale pink blouse with a blue cardigan over top.

“Rita!” Grandpa says loudly as she approaches. “How's it going?”

I try to see the young, beautiful Rita in this old woman's face. She has large, dark eyes behind her glasses, but they are surrounded by creases. Her pale eyebrows are finely arched, and she wears pink lipstick, but her chin sags, and she has spots of discoloration on her wrinkled cheeks.

I glance at Grandpa. I've never seen him smile so widely. “It's me, Phil!”

She stares at him. “Who?”

“Phillip,” he shouts. “From Des Moines.”

Rita mashes her thin lips together, and her eyebrows draw in towards the bridge of her nose. “Who are you?” she asks again.

HARD TO GET – EVA LANGSTON PATRONE

“We worked together.” Grandpa's voice begins to lose its joviality. “At Better Homes and Gardens.”

“Do you remember working there?” I ask. Maybe we need to establish how strong her memory is overall.

She looks at me and frowns. “Of course I remember working there.” She turns to Grandpa. “But I don't remember you.”

Rita's daughter reappears in the hallway. She seems suspicious of us.

“Phillip DeCicco. Don't you remember me? Don't you remember that night after the Hanson's party?”

“I remember the Hanson's party.”

“But you don't remember me? Not at all?” Grandpa pulls his wallet from his back pocket and starts flipping through the contents. “Let me see if I have a picture. I look different now. Maybe if you saw a picture of me, from back then.”

“I don't remember you,” she says loudly.

Her daughter puts one hand on Rita's back. “I'm sorry,” she says to us, “but we're getting ready to eat, so...”

“Oh, sure, it's just...” I pause. Maybe this isn't even the right woman. But then I notice the way she's looking at Grandpa. She's studying him carefully, her lips twitching.

“I'm sorry,” I say. “We'll let you get back to your Thanksgiving.” I make a move to go, but Grandpa just stands there, staring at Rita. “You really don't remember me?”

Rita shakes her head, but something in her eyes says otherwise.

“Have a nice night,” I call as I take Grandpa by the arm and lead him away from the door, down the steps and towards the car. It's starting to snow. I see one white flake, and then another.

I help him into the car, and when I get in on the driver's side, he turns to me and says, “do you think she really can't remember me, or is she just playing hard to get?” His face is dead serious.

And then I laugh. I can't help it. After a moment, Grandpa starts laughing, too. Maybe he's crying a bit as well because from time to time he touches the corners of his eyes with the back of his hand.

HARD TO GET – EVA LANGSTON PATRONE

I start the engine. The radio is playing one of my favorite oldies songs, and I sing along softly as I pull away from the curb, feeling like I might cry, too. Grandpa reaches over and pats my knee. I drive through the neighborhood, passing houses with their windows glowing yellow. The snow swirls down from the sky, and Grandpa starts singing, too, loudly and off-key.

“I need you, more than anyone darling, know that I have from the start,” we sing together. “So build me up, Buttercup, don't break my heart!”

I pull out onto the main road and turn up the volume. We sing even louder as we head back to the house filled with all the people who wouldn't exist if things had gone differently.



ALTERNATIVES

Pankhuri Sinha

India

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life should be full of them!
alternatives
are nice things!

like always finding a
by-lane
out of a bad traffic jam!

a surprise job offer
when work hours simply
increase without raise!

no one should be left
with that sentence
“you are left with no alternatives!”
no one should ever be told
“you have to do it”
everyone should always
be able to ask
“well, what are my alternatives?”

alternatives should be as
pleasing as a choice
between Continental, Chinese, and Mughlai!

but! Endless choices can confuse
a buffet with limitless items on the menu
will be only half enjoyed!

in a world most capitalist than anything else

your favourite green
of the grass
can hang and dance
in jumpers and pullovers
of so many cuts
you won't know
which one to choose!

and not love, not even lust
may be, something in between
an organic song
called seduction plays itself
between people
long settled, drifting apart
ready to part!

what a travesty!
humans appearing as
alternatives to existing
humans! replacements!

what? do you say
It's an age-old game
ancient practice
well, isn't it time
to end it now?

to clarify
to stand for the individual
to never obfuscate!
shouldn't this be modernity's clarion call?

GOOD AT ANY AGE

Carl "Papa" Palmer
United States

<https://www.facebook.com/carlpapa.palmer.1>

so what do you say
wanna give it a try

remember the last time you did it
me either

we'll start out slow and easy
be patient and understanding

no use rushing right into it
we don't need to keep score

nothing to prove
I'm sure it won't be anything

to write home about or tell
a close friend probably best to

keep it secret it's really
no one's business

how well we bowl

IN ALTERNATE MOMENTS

Vidya Shankar
India

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Not just a peck but a long drawn passion —
The warmth of his affection
A tender tracing of sensuousness
Consuming blazing flames
Cooling smouldering embers...
And I breathe again!

O Love! What fiery mystery is this!

My eyes, desperate to behold his approach
Become glowing coals
My parched mouth, thirsting to drink
The virility of his lips
Turn wet crimson
My cheeks, coloured with thoughts of him
Blush a deep that no palette
Can reproduce
My hands, lambent with longing
Quiver rufescent tones
My heart, a firestorm of conflagrating emotions
Swells with love for none else
But him

O Love! What fiery mystery is this!
A moment when separated
I, a nervous, raging inferno
Swathed in a carmine cloak of feverish desire
Yet, a minute later when near him
Healed to composedness
As aching feet by tranquil waters!

ANNA AND THE SCOURGE

RC James

United States

*Rescued from captivity
we will preserve you. . .
mighty Russian word!*
—Anna Akhmatova

We memorized our poems
to preserve them from
winds out of the Kremlin.

My friends, in corners unknown,
now memories enfold you
in the raw weather of release.

As you walk down the Arbat
mind my ashes that remain
as a sign of sanguine revival.

Dank cells offer only blank prospects,
a full moon illuminates your path,
promise opens to a peaceful sea.

Remember metal on metal at dawn,
the thud and crunch of boots,
shouts, and cries of the tortured.

Black Marias careened with human loads,
we consoled each other, understanding
that Russian speech was our homeland.

Delirium thrived; we walked by
the frozen grins of corpses,
chains finally unfastened.

Proud Russia writhed in the army's grip,
I won't allow emotion now,
a dark shroud protects the memories.

I remember your words and your faces,
There will be new sorrows, but I will
remember our time through them all.

If there is to be a monument, place it
in front of the steel doors where I stood
for hundreds of hours, and an old woman's

cries echoed through us, where tears
now will flow from bronze eyelids
watching silent ships sail up the Neva.

MORE OF ME

Linda M. Crate
United States

<https://www.facebook.com/Linda-M-Crate-129813357119547>

i've always been seen as one
of the alternatives,

never the first choice or option of
anyone for anything;
if you don't think that hurts i'm here
to tell you that it does—

i am always the friend that cares more,
always the romantic partner that loves
more, always the giver that gives more,
the encourager that encourages
more,
and i can safely say i am exhausted being
there for everyone else when no one is ever there
for me;

and so i am done treating myself like an alternative—

i have a voice and a magic all my own,
should you not be able to appreciate me as i am
then you can go find less because i am going to be
more of me.

ALTHOUGH I KNOW ANOTHER WAY TO GO

Ken Gosse
United States

<https://www.facebook.com/ken.gosse>

*Parody of Robert Frost's poem, "Stopping by
Woods on a Snowy Evening."*

Whose woulds are these? They're mine, you know,
but druthers changed my path, and though
intentions lead to Hell from here
if shoulds were coulds, I still might go.

Bad choices make each toll more dear;
each brings a troll which we can hear
like blackboards which a nail might rake
while burning lessons in our ear.

But do we learn and do we take
this wisdom offered for our sake,
or do we simply let it seep
from brain to drain, without a wake?

My will seems empty; dark, and deep.
The better choices I don't keep
and so I sew that which I reap—
the consequences, ours to keep.

ALTERNATIVE

BY LAVAN ROBINSON – UNITED STATES

As the children of humanity, our world falls through the many degrees of disillusionment, selfishness, and negativity through the dark side of our unstable nature. Many continue, even with their eyes wide open, to fall to baseless meaning and subliminal nomenclature. The human spirit along with Mother Nature is out of sync as more and more fall into the forbidden zone. Each one is steadily struggling for validity as they sink and are greeted by a nod, smirk, or devious wink. It's not like we don't know the big difference between right or wrong. We do but we chose to just go right with the status quo. What's happening now on our earthly paradise didn't just manifest overnight but took generations and generations to perpetuate out of ideological beliefs and an eye considered totally blind. The great thing is that we the children of humanity are given another chance when the sun rises and sets. Despite the division among races, colors, and creeds; we are in this together as one. We talk about what is wrong but when it's time to fix, the notion of positivity and action is somehow nixed. Every issue we face can be dealt with optimism and positive energy. Instead of hate we must learn to fully give love. Striving for love, peace, and unity is the necessary solution for our survival and the only possible alternative.



OTHER WORLDS EXPLORED

Julie A. Dickson
United States

At last consequences felt,
too late addressed, gasses
amassed, atmosphere distressed,
other worlds explored, escape
hoped for, evading instead -
not to cope with or reverse
fossil emissions, conversation
fraught with irresponsibility,
omissions of perverse overuse,
no, say it – abuse of resources.

In theory, onto other planets,
surely hospitable, humanity
capable of life beyond earth,
strife caused to species, extinct
endangered, succinct comparisons,
doesn't matter that earth will not

sustain future generations, journey
will alleviate any concerns brought
forward, descendants travel toward
planets, moons, supportive of life,
draconic as fantasy fiction, seen
as predilection, worlds favorable
to inhabit, abundant resources,
repeated bad habits, ensured chaos,
predictions ensue with recourse,
humanity likely to earn its due.

HATS OFF

Sarfraz Ahmed
United Kingdom

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Hats off to those thrill seekers,
Dream weavers,
Inbetweeners,
Those that don't exactly fit in,
Those that travel to far off places,
Just to get sun on their skin,

The exotic and the tropical,
The white sandy beach,
Such beauty,
Once out of reach,

To step into the eyes of blue,
To swim clear waters,
To smell the early morning dew,

To dive free fall off the edge,
Just to get to the other side,
To travel far and wide,
Across the lake and seas,
To find the answer to it all,
To unravel the mystery,

FROM A DICTIONARY OF ALTERNATIVES

Neal Whitman
Unites States

What if “just” were a verb?

[Note the subjunctive mood, a condition which is doubtful or not factual, as in,
Let us go, then you and I, when mustard is spread on a corned beef and rye sky.]

So, what notion, state, or occurrence would “just” signify?

just / v. jŭst, justed, justing
to invert two opposing forces

Ergo, “*just a second*” would mean:
This one moment stays put, though the present is past.

Of course, problems will occur when there is a second, second.
We wonder, was it a grammarian or a seer who said, “Future tense!”?

LOVES SUGAR, ALSO LOVES SALT

Sangita Kalarickal
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<https://www.facebook.com/skaypisms>
<http://skaypisms.blogspot.com/>

A distinct dichotomy exists
in a wild flutter of heartbeat.
An unsettled unrest,
a frenzy to pump,
a drive for life.
Yet, a calm underlying current
says all is well because life is.
The calm of the river over a turbulent
feed of the speedy waves underneath.
A new step forward,
yet the past lurks.
A shadow spreads
when I stand in light.
The essence of life. Janus.

SLIDING DOORS

Pratibha Savani
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S l i d i n g

D o o r s

Which way should I go?
What would my life have been like
Had I been through that door?
Like when I was introduced to a guy
That lived all the way in Canada
After some messages and chats
He had come over
It's not the path I chose
Not a decision

I could make with one meeting
Instead, I stayed where I was

S t a n d i n g A t

T h a t D o o r

And let fate and circumstances
Take its course
And my life turned out this way
The way I am today
Still in the UK
Now married and settled
To the one I was supposed to
I knew it straight away
It was meant to be
I trusted a higher power
And this is the reality

S l i d i n g

D o o r s

Which way should I go?
I could have been living in Canada
Had I chosen that door
But I made a decision
On what felt right
And in the end
That is all we can do
To make a decision
Based on what we feel
At the time

TIRE TROUBLE

Jane Fitzgerald
United States

<https://www.amazon.com/Jane-H-Fitzgerald/e/B01MSW2FLO>
<https://www.facebook.com/JanesPoetry>

The green icon
on my dashboard
signaled a warning
Add air to tires
I tried to ignore it
No use
My nervous imagination
Compelled me to act

I had no idea how
To remedy the problem
Tires fit in a man's domain
I pulled into a service station
Hoping to find help
Two men pumping gas looked away

A woman in leather and biker boots
was deftly using the air pump
I asked her to please unravel
the mysteries of tires plus air
She demonstrated each step
It was such a simple task
My faced flushed from ignorance
In a matter-of-fact manner
she accepted my gratitude

My rescuer puzzled me
Having grown up in a time when
M and F identified the two sexes
I was confused by today's letters
Was this woman a L,G,B,T,Q,I,A+

Was her character predominately
defined by a string of letters
proclaiming her sexual orientation
or by her helpful actions
I decided to go with the reality
of a person who responded
like a kind good Samaritan

This encounter led me
to contemplate a complex issue
Not so easily understood
As tire trouble

THE BLESSED SOLITUDE

Lakshman Bulusu
United States

https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/127227.Bulusu_Lakshman

Steady eyes in attention rapt
Turning away to a future insight

Where angels dare, eagles glare
To outdo the latter only a mere stare

Laughing moon, a dream affair
Its crystal wafts a tuft of air

Just a fleeting dream, white in hue
To pass away the dream a sight blue

The caressed lips bereft of gist
When inside out breathe in the mist

With nostalgic sparks, days are gone
Out in the night new moons are born

The silvery edge, a lark's watercourse
The ripples match to beautify a Rose

A nameless name, a maiden's pledge
Wrought the wrath a disdain edge

So soft a breeze, so thin a word
Still melt the silence all around

Miles to eye, a vision in sight
Voices a secret blest alight

WHAT ARE MY ALTERNATIVES?

Kathy Bryant
United States

A New Year is beginning soon,
I wonder what it holds?

What elements of mystery
Will unravel as it unfolds?

Our future is uncertain
No matter how we plan

Exude the warmth of caring
And, hate, securely ban!

Time tested plans of helping
The sick and sad and sore

Will bring a joy unmeasured
Than you have known before

A year of positivity
Negativity in the past

Will secure a blessed future
And satisfaction, that will last!

PEACE BE WITH YOU

BY STEPHEN D. EDWARDS - CANADA

Stephen D. Edwards lives in Edmonton, Canada and began writing in his teen years, but lost the passion for it. After gaining freedom from depression, he wrote a memoir titled *The Branch and the Vine* to share his experience to help those who suffer. The memoir is available at Kobo and Amazon. With his passion reignited, he now writes Christian themed short stories and novels to encourage and inspire. Edwards' most recent work has been published in *Agape Review*."

I looked up toward the sea below the great hill as the wind swept the clouds over my head. I was not myself. The people of Gergesa had deemed me unmanageable and left me chained there, but I broke the chains by smashing them on the rocks. I used to disrobe and run among the pigs of the farm nearby.

I often found mysterious cuts on my arms, legs and torso. I still have the scars and can show them to you if you wish. Many days I looked at my skin and thought I had been whipped and flogged everyday all day long.

After a year and a day of living among those tombs, I saw Jesus with an entourage of followers behind Him. I ran to Him and knelt at His feet hearing myself say, "Jesus Son of the Most High God, what have You to do with us? We beg You do not torment us."

Jesus replied, "Come out, unclean spirit!" Then He asked me, "What is your name?"

My voice replied, "My name is Legion, for we are many. I implore You not to send me away from this country." Then I saw the herd of pigs on the hillside and my voice demanded, "Send us into the pigs." The unclean spirits left me and entered the pigs. The whole herd of pigs ran down the steep bank into the sea and drowned. The herdsmen ran into the city. Soon people came to see what had happened.

The people saw me sitting there clothed and sane. They became afraid. The small crowd of witnesses retold the whole story including how the pigs ran down into the sea. They begged Jesus to leave the region.

PEACE BE WITH YOU – STEPHEN D. EDWARDS

I asked Jesus if I could join Him, but He did not allow me to go telling me, “Go back into the city and tell all the people there about what God has done for you and how He had had mercy on you.”

So, then I did go into the Decapolis and told of how Jesus had delivered me from a troop of unclean spirits. Everyone I told was amazed whether they had known about me before or not.

Having obeyed Jesus, I decided that I had to try to find Him so that I might join His followers. As He and the disciples arrived by boat to the region, I realized He must have come from the other side of the sea, so I thought to walk around it. And that is why I’m here, Mary.”



I turn my attention to Mary sitting here in the shade of a huge sycamore tree near her brother Lazarus’s home in Bethany, each of us resting on a root of the tree. Mary says, “Your story makes the problems I had seem so small. I had seven demons inside me. If it was not for Jesus’ deliverance, I would still be as debilitated as you were.”

“Oh, what happened, Mary?”

“I was quite poor and began to hear voices,” she tells me. “I thought one of them was God, so I listened to that voice. It told me to go to the sea where the fishermen bring in their catch and take a fish. Thinking it was good to do, I stole a fish from a fisherman near Magdala where I lived with my family. I took the fish home, and we had a good dinner. I did the same the next day and the next and the next. I did this until one day the fisherman caught me stealing another fish and asked me why I was taking fish without paying for it. I said, ‘God told me to do this.’ He said, ‘That cannot be.’ So, I ran home.

“The next day, the fisherman was there when I took a fish again, but this time there was a rabbi with him. The rabbi asked, ‘Why are you taking this man’s fish?’ I told him I was obeying God. Then he said that was wrong, because God could not possibly tell a child of Abraham to violate the eighth commandment He gave to Moses. Then he cried out, ‘I command this evil spirit leave this woman in the name of the true living God.’

“I didn’t know what happened to me, but I left the fish where I found it and turned to the fisherman to say, ‘I’m sorry for what I have done. Please forgive me.’ He said, ‘I forgive you.’ I walked home and told my family everything I had done, because I did not tell them I had been stealing the fish.

“A few days later, I returned to the shore and stole a fish from another fisherman. After that I felt worse than I did when I had the first demon. This time it was more like nothing could work well even if I put my best effort forward. I retreated into my home and did not speak to anyone.

“Then one day my brother Lazarus came home and found me in my reclusive state. He grabbed my hand and led me out of the house. I asked him, ‘Where are you taking me?’ He said, ‘Jesus is healing the blind and the deaf near the sea. He can heal you.’”

“Mary, did Jesus heal you?”

“He did. He commanded all the demons to come out,” she says. “They came out one by one—seven in all—each causing me to convulse.”

“Mary, that is great cause for celebration!”

“Yes. I’m grateful for all of it too,” she replies. “But I have a question for you. Did you ever think while among the tombs that your life could be any different or did you think the three hundred demons in you were your lot?”

“I did think that I was doomed to be possessed forever. I thought I would suffer like that for many years, but I too am grateful that Jesus came and changed all of that.”

“Yes. He saved both of us from death. But what happened yesterday was completely unexpected. Seeing Lazarus exit his tomb four days after he’d died gave me a different kind of joy! After all. He is my brother.”

I respond, “Yes that definitely shook my ground as well. But it is scary that the Pharisees now want to execute both Jesus and Lazarus because they think they’ve been causing a raucous mess of things in Israel.”



This is the darkest Sabbath in all of the history of Israel, because Jesus was crucified yesterday. Mary and I among others ruminate over the confusing disturbance of Judas’ betrayal, the mockery of the Council’s trial and His appearance before Pontius Pilate.

Mary says, “I miss Jesus so much already, and I can’t believe it’s over! Jesus was everything in my life and now He’s gone.”

“I feel the same way, Mary. I even believed Jesus would be the leader who overthrows the Roman oppression. Mary, I’m going back home tomorrow so I need to sleep now that the sun has gone down.”

“I don’t know if I can sleep right now, but let us try. I will stay in this corner of the room where the women are in this upper room. Find a place on the other side where the men lie. I will be going with some of the women to the tomb tomorrow morning to tend to Jesus’ body.”



PEACE BE WITH YOU – STEPHEN D. EDWARDS

The sunlight nearly blinds me when Mary enters the room. I ask her, “Mary. How did it go?”

Mary turns to the disciples and says, “We found the stone rolled away from the tomb. Jesus’ body was not inside. There were two men there in bright white clothing and shining brighter than the Sun. They asked us, ‘Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here. He has risen.’”

Peter immediately runs out the door and John follows. They return less than an hour later confirming that the tomb is empty, but do not know what it means. James locks the door fearing that the Pharisees or Roman guards would come looking for us as if we were hiding Jesus’ body.

The next person I see is Jesus just as He says, “Peace be with you.”

An aerial photograph of a rugged, brown rock coastline. A paved path curves along the edge of the cliff. In the center of the cliff, there is a circular concrete structure with a central opening, surrounded by a low wall. The ocean is a vibrant turquoise color with white foam from the waves crashing against the rocks.

OUR JANUARY *features*

**THERE ARE
ALWAYS
ALTERNATIVES.
THAT'S
WHAT MAKES LIFE
INTERESTING.**

ALAN BEDWORTH

Author Feature

Hello, my name is Alan Bedworth, I'm 65 years old and retired. I live in Knottingley, West Yorkshire, England, where I have lived all my life. I attended Castleford Grammar School from 1967 to 1971 where I left school at 15, with no qualifications, yet started work straightaway. My job was as a junior salesman for Burtons the tailors in Pontefract, which is about 3 miles from home. I stayed there from 1971 to 1977 then I took my redundancy.

1977 was a year that changed my life completely. I went into engineering at R.H.P. Bearing Company. Not only was it a different industry, but it was where I met my future wife. My social life also changed. After watching Rugby League all my life, I decided to play the game. I did manage to get a trial at Wakefield Trinity but I wasn't good enough. Redundancy ended my time at R.H.P. in 2,000 after 23 years. I then did a stint in Warehousing for 9 years, before again being put out of work. Upon I found some more Warehouse work until ill-health forced me to leave. I'm now retired and disabled.

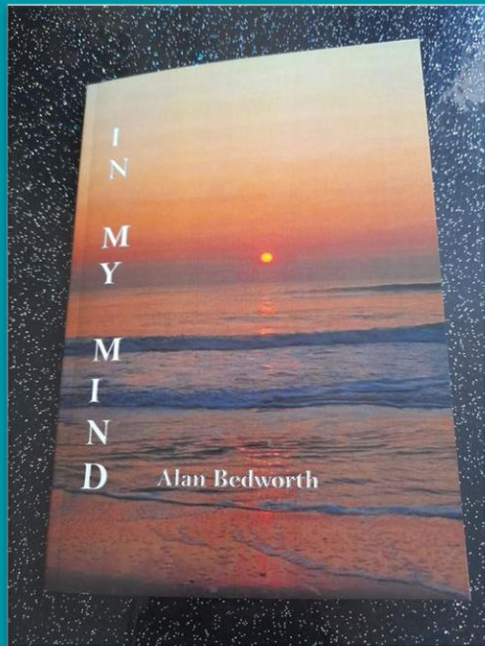
About 3 years ago I decided I wanted to learn to sing. I found a local singing tutor by the name of Georgina Hill-Brown. This lady gave me so much confidence that not only did I gain my first ever diploma for singing, it's for Musical Theatre grade 2 which I passed with Distinction. While having singing lessons, I was encouraged to try writing whether it be songs or poems. I recorded my own song mainly through a challenge to write a funny song. Which I did with the title A Funny song, again thanks to Georgina for recording in her studio, and thanks to her partner Simon Wilby for providing the music. You can find the video at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHb8XbJibtE>

I've since stopped singing due to the covid situation, but I've continued to write and in July managed to publish my first book. Reach out to purchase

<https://www.facebook.com/alan.bedworth>

<https://twitter.com/fevrules>



<https://www.facebook.com/alan.bedworth>

I FEEL YOUR PAIN.

I heard you sobbing,
when you thought no-one was there.
I know the pain and sorrow,
you're going through again.

Hold on to your faith in mankind.
There's good to be found all around.
I understand your hearts breaking,
but believe me you're not alone.

I'm trying to send you happiness
in looking for love in the right place.
Destiny and fate are awaiting you,
wanting you in love and all that amounts.

Now my love I've got to go,
I wish I could hold you so.
Yet being in Heaven and watching you
is the best that I can do.

YESTERDAYS ARE REAL

They generally say yesterday has gone,
look forward to today and the future.
But surely things of yesterday
shape your future.
That's where all your memories are.

Forgetting yesterday can't work
how do we learn from our mistakes.
Perhaps those not wanting yesterdays
have ulterior motives for not
advocating past memories.

I'm sorry I am who I am
due to my yesterdays.
Understanding memories of family
and friends have developed
the person you see in front of you.

In my conclusion memories
and yesterdays have a place
in our society.
How to love and forgive was
learnt in all our yesterdays.

AN ENGLISH ROSE

So many words
have been written,
about the face of a
pure English Rose.

Yet when you meet
this special girl,
all those words
lose their meaning.

Oh yes it's true
the skin is so soft
to the touch, it's the
colour that's so alluring.

When you hold her face
in your hands, it feels
like pure china.
So fragile to your touch.

Even as she gets older,
that bloom seems to
last forever, her cheekbones
accentuates that fragility.

So when you read any words
of an English Rose, they pale
into insignificance, until you
hold and see this fragility.

HIBA HEBA

Author Feature



Hiba Aamer, who writes under her nom de plume Hiba Heba, is a Pakistan-based writer and poet. She earned her Bachelor of English literature and linguistics degree from Air University and currently she is applying for scholarships abroad. Some of her poems have appeared in Daily Times, Terror House Magazine, Visual Verse, Feminist Voices Anthology: Volume II, OpenDoor Poetry Magazine, The Raconteur Review, The Wild Word, Ofi Press Magazine, New Feathers Anthology, Women's Spiritual Poetry, Autumn Sky Poetry, The Aleph Review, The Punch Magazine, Fragmented Voices and Ink, Sweat and Tears. She has a micro-chapbook; Grief is a Firefly, published by Origami Poems Project (October 2021). Hiba achieved the 'First Runner-up' position in The New Feathers Award 2021 for her poem "Morning Prayer"

Hiba likes to experiment with unexpected imagery and extended metaphors in her poems. She keeps finding poetry in the small pockets of her heart and mind but her love for poetry truly began when she heard Eva Green recite Romantic and Victorian poetry in the T.V show, Penny Dreadful. She can be on instagram as hiba.heba_ and on twitter as HibaHeba_

<https://www.origamipoems.com/poets/468-hiba-heba>

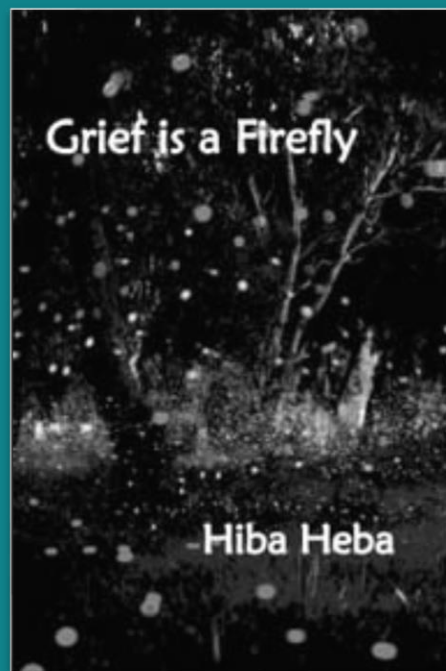
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GRIEF IS A FIREFLY

a wall is gnarled,
and rain-blotched outside
my window, I refuse
to vandalize it with binaries:
it displaces my reveries,
the way poetry does
and the tawdry absence of it,
I'm blue and rinsed by the
psithurism of a mulberry tree.

CLOUDAGE

I see you.
Like me, you're
misshapen;
a swamp in a dwelling.
We merge; a suture
quivers through us,
the way nightmares
take long strides on
still waters.
We're camping
under the mellow lilt of
our alibi; the breath
checks out.



<https://www.origamipoems.com/poets/468-hiba-heba>

EMPTY THREAT

My brother is trying to reach
into a drawer. It's Monsoon.

The furniture is an adhesive now
like moist mesoglea; a thin film of
hymen for things that don't breathe.

Mother's cooking-voice scours
the sweat-sequined air. We rush
through lunch then supper,
horsewhips thrashing our tongues.

My brother struggles to open
the drawer with a wooden ladle,
mother shouts and absconds into
her chores. 'Where is he now?'

"Still grieving his taste buds."

He has a penchant for chewing
bank-fresh notes, tens and hundreds.

Papa's car honk is a whiplash to
adjourn the remaining day's journey.

My brother swallows his crinkled
spit. Mother reappears, zaps past us
in her ironed kurta. The griddle is
aromatized by chapati, the door mat;
an empty threat awaiting some realness,
the key in the door bows in prostration.

PENUMBRA

We always thought apocalypse
would begin when Gog Magog
exclaim Insha'Allah! But it came to
us in the shape of a trifling crown,
now the skies are a clear periwinkle,
a toddler caws in the dingy alleys, there
is no bloodbath, the shrubbery is not
dredged in shrapnel and there are no
potholes bestrewn with dismembered
corpses, every car that whirs past
the Sunday bazaar has its own story
of death, a man abluted in attar of roses
offers his wife a silk dupatta; touching
her pale rubescent heart like a mask
catching a scintilla of breath from our
mouths, a grandfather carefully trudges
over a speed breaker believing it is a
grave for all the graves left undug, his
white turban a supernal halo, a talisman
girdles around his neck; mourning all
the souls it was supposed to protect
when magic existed to harm even those
who are long dead and erased, he moves
past the street kids playing with water-
inflated condoms, he reincarnates a grin.

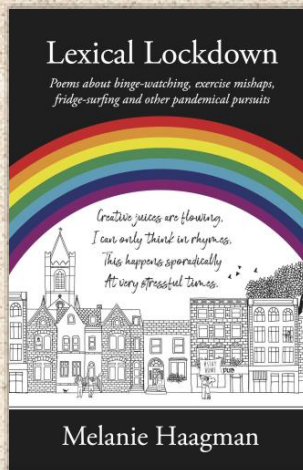
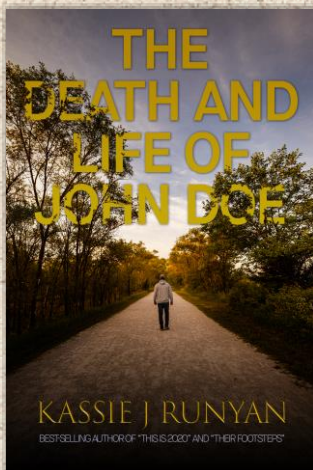
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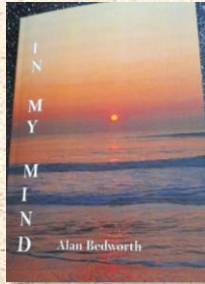
IN MY MIND

Poetry book from Alan Bedworth

I heard you sobbing,
when you thought no-one was there.
I know the pain and sorrow,
you're going through again.

Hold on to your faith in mankind.
There's good to be found all around.
I understand your hearts breaking,
but believe me you're not alone.

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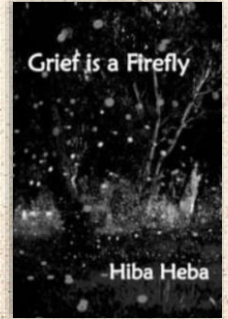


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