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THE BLISSFUL PURSUIT

GLOBAL ART & LITERACY MAGAZINE



SPRING ISSUE

BOOMERANG: BEFORE & AFTER THE PANDEMIC



THE BLISSFUL PURSUIT

GLOBAL ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE

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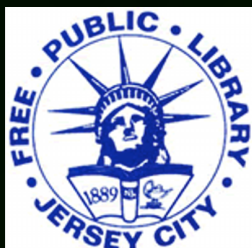
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That Thing

by Ariya Agarwal

We were swimming in the clear blue sea,
Waves crashing against us as we went up and down in them,
The sun showcasing our smooth, glowing skin,
The coral beneath us, full of colour in every space,
This was a few years ago, no, what am I saying, this was ages ago,
I was with my mother, we were having such fun,
And just a few days later is where all the evil begun,
We were swimming steadily, and then we came to see this 'thing',
And before we knew it, she was tied up with this string,
I was still in the ocean, the water turned to ice,
Chills stung my spine, and fright blew my brain,
She was going up and up, and she called out to me,
Nerve in her voice, tears swelled her eyes,
She was lifted out the water, onto that 'thing',
Her calls were getting fainter,
And my heart had filled with danger,
I had lost my mother, you see
And a few years have past,
I often wonder where she is,
But now the world has got worse,
And it's just a matter of time until all of us are on that thing.



About the author

Ariya Agarwal is an internationally known writer and has been writing to raise awareness about the cruelty towards animals and the risk towards their extinction.

Ariya has published a book *Eyes of Extinction*: Amazon.co.uk: Agarwal, Miss Ariya: 9798712131341: Books.

The Brownie Recipe

by Alana Brown



for this particular recipe, we don't speak Betty Crocker's pre-packaged tongue// direct yourself to the baking aisle of the local grocery store// and you'll discover a bag of cocoa powder hidden beneath the Alps// while you're at it, go ahead and grab some sugar// brown sugar// the color of almonds baking in a copper sun//

containing that finger licking sweetness that'll make a diabetic reconsider the finer things they've missed out on// make sure to call your best friend and remind her of the hook up she got you with the coconut oilher brother's girlfriend's uncle's third cousin twice removed, great nephew's fourth wife, Nicole, imported from Jamaica for half off// on the way to the checkoutline, you'll come across the Reese's peanut butter cups

you've been craving since last week// when you saw that commercial of a chocolate Easter bunny kissing a jar of peanut butter while Marvin Gaye croons "Let'sGet It On"//but before you can add it to your bugey, allow your eyes to wander over to a teddy bear shaped bottle of honey you put in your chamomile tea when your evil twin parts the Red Sea for a monthly visit from hell //you'll thank me later // oh I almost forgot,

you have finals next week and a couple of all nighters are calling your name // so it might be in your best interest to retrace your steps the cookie aisle where a crinkly blue package of Oreos reclines in a nestof crunchy delicacies // anyway, back to the recipe// drive home in the battered mahogany Rolls Royce your granddaddy bought from a marshmallow colored brother down in New Orleans named Platinum Bordeaux back in '77// stop at a prolonged red light near your salon(btw it's time for a touch up)//



when your phone rings with a text message from Sonic letting you know that Happy Hour is right around the corner and that new caramel cookie dough ice cream is a limited edition// so you make a quick stop at the drive in //climb out of your forefathers most prized possession// careful not to damage the paint, you just got a fresh coat Saturday at the car wash// sit on the red patio tables organized in a quad where you can watch the sunset and the amalgamations of pink rising from the sky's atmosphere//however, a silhouette of a man will block your view to provide you with an even better one // his blue black skin glistening in rays like a fleeing river in midnight // smile fortifying your tentative faith in God and who knows this could possibly be him in final form // cause he's nothing but grandeur in his walk// like the Champion durag draped over his head that resembles the Pan-African flag //

epiphanies begin to do cartwheels in your cranium when you recall a certain IG handle your little sister introduced you to //property of an immaculate conception. named Bekele Daba, a foreign exchange student from Ethiopia who studies anesthesiology at State so he can leave something bigger than himself at the altar of this waning city //waita minute Bekele has his right hand man flocking him at 2 o'clock// a lean cup of coffee with ginger hair and freckles to match starts snickering to himself when you realize you've been staring at them for at least a minute with your mouth gaping// this will be one of those stories you tell your children when the world collapses and the only remnants of hope is nostalgia //about how you and Dad met during a solstice that made you completely forget about making brownies...

★★

About the author

Alana Brown is a nationally known writer and has earned many National Medals for her poetic words and writings. Alana was the recipient of 2021 Blissful Us Foundation Scholarship in collaboration with the Scholastic Art and Writing Award.





The Train is Coming

by Melinda Diane Genberg

if:

the train was coming would you move

the ground was falling from underneath your feet would you run or

would you stay and let the

earth crumble

the car skidded in the rain would you push on the gas or the brakes

the air filled with poison would you breathe in

the gun clicked against your head would you beg for mercy or pull the
trigger yourself

what i'm saying is:

do anything to hold on

hold your breath

pump on the brakes


run towards safer ground

the train is coming

please step off the tracks

About the author

Melinda Genberg is a rising college freshman from New Jersey. She will be attending Barnard College of Columbia University. Her writing has been featured in various literary magazines, including the Austin International Poetry Festival "diversity" anthology, and has won two Scholastic Regional Gold Keys.



The Blood We Inherit, The Blood We Spill

by Evan Wang

When will I live in a world where I'll be able to leave my burrow, for the fear of being insulted from daily walks in the park is too great for me to bear. If it's not the skin then it's the looks. If it's not the looks then they insult your culture. Life will be nothing but gray panels filled with blank spaces left so there will be more legroom for one race because color and culture can only be celebrated if it becomes a trend.

We all shout and roar as if we have conquered it all, but when the young see diversity, they do nothing but insult our features and sing ethnic slurs like it's music to the ear with their hate-taught tongues. I have no words for people who spit cracks into this world except for a simple question. Why do you find it necessary to make a stranger feel unsafe and insecure purely because they look different from you? If it's because we invaded your land then please reconsider your view about internationality. If it makes you laugh, then laugh away. If it entertains you, then keep on teasing us like the circus animals you treat us as. If it makes you feel good, then I hope such prejudice will resolve itself one day and you'll be the odd one out, still trying to stomp boundaries into communities with your old mud-stained boots.

I ask of nothing from racists except self-reflection, the effort of making the twisted hatred within them unknot, and the humility to lower the gun, sheathe the knife, and take back the words. Fox eyes and big lies, we always thrived and America gave us the gold medal but when problems arise, they make us step aside. We are not the token model minority this country made us as, the successful group of people that clawed their way out of the grave America dug for us. Enough is enough.

And through our broken English, it is hard to talk back towards the foot that's been threatening to be pressed against our very backs since the day we rose and so we kept silence under our tongues like sour candy. Our face may show some bitter resentment but our mouths slowly wiped away the insulting history with every waking breath that's spent in silence. And though quietness is an effortless thing to keep, it is easily broken. The choice between silence and speaking up, reputation or destruction has settled itself within all our minds, but the gold medal America placed around our necks for being "the better race than the rest" isn't so special anymore, and we don't need reform. This is opening the never-before-seen door.

And when our bodies began to fall, blood as red and thick as the Chinese flag, the Japanese sun, the Indian sari, the Vietnamese gift wraps, our accents and so many other Asian countries that have the color red as luck but in this land it means death, rage consumed me and sadness washed over my veins with a pale hue of blue, though hope seldom still flew.

Our tongues stumble and trip over words due to the thick accents we carried over from our bountiful homeland. It is thick like honey and smooth like milk, easy to bite our tongues on but we will never stop speaking broken English, for it is culture that wraps around our words, not stupidity. It is art we spill out of our veins, it flows like a river, like a train.

My parents and theirs carried a part of a country on the other side of the world across oceans to grow life from this barren land where they knew nothing about except that it can provide their children, including me, a better life. So how is that for bravery and courage, for art? But all that spirit can't translate through our very being, all that spirit is used to water the weeds in American soil.

What use are strong roots when the very ground can't support it? I can't help but think, maybe this is how this country breaks eager people down to where their level and position is all they know of. Asian hate, what a trait.

If we told you, we don't deserve to live in fear in our own country, would you care? If we told you Asian hate is not new but is simply brought to light, would you believe us? But it no longer matters if your words discredit our own or if your bad days burn like a blaze even though our lives want to stay because our brushes with hate speak volumes. Don't just count the victims because a crime against one is a crime against all and you and I both know that those numbers will never fall, but we have found our voice and despite all the attempts made to silence it, it still rings louder than ever, our legs as sturdy as bell-towers.

All this time, you've been telling your side so maybe it's time to tell mine. We are not a virus, our eyes are not a trend. These waves of hate may crash, but we will never bend. And this is the blood, the culture, the love our parents passed down to us and we will never lose this passion because even though the blood we inherit is also the blood we spill, slowly, we climb up this hill.

About the author

My name is Evan Wang and I am a 14 year old poet who lives in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania. I'm constantly focused on upending my past achievements with new and better ones while jamming to indie music on a rainy night. You can often catch me staying up late to write poetry in the A.M. and having existential crises over life, which inspires most of my poems. This poem was a huge stepping stone in my poetry journey. It brought popularity to my poetry in my school district and it was inspired by the rise of Asian hate crimes ever since the beginning of the pandemic. I also incorporated my own experiences after being called an ethnic slur during a walk I took.





All the Way Home

by Anusha Bansal

February 4th – Faircrest, NY – 0 miles from the house

When you entered my town, it seemed that all you saw was gray. It seemed like the buildings, the streets, the air, and the people – were all gray. Perhaps it was because of the poverty that spread like a disease across the town, or perhaps it was the way that the disease affected each person, making their once fully-colored personalities into the same shade as fresh ash. I believe everyone starts life with a bubble. Over time, like the hair on one's head, it turns gray, but they all begin pigmented. Driving through this town, from one end to the other, taking a look at all the starving people, taking a look at me – I believe that even a visitor's bubble would have diminished in color, perhaps just a little. The trash on the streets that fly and swerve in the air with a puff of wind, the people curled up on the curbs that shudder in the breeze, or the buildings that moan and creak in a sudden gust of air – this was all a part of where I lived. And I had to deal with it and live as one of them every single day.

I never knew my father and my mom had died last year. Lucky for me, before her death, she married a disappointment, my “step-father.” I put quotes around “step-father” normally because I knew he didn't care about what happened to me, so why call him anything similar to a father? I would have been surprised if he knew my name. His real name was Mickey, and although most people called him Mick, his name should have been changed to something a little more suited to his personality. Anyways, since he was the only person that could legally “care” for me, I started to run away.

I've always loved to run. Without even having a planned destination, I'd run. And ever since I'd been put into Mick's hands, running seemed like all I could do to survive. Before my mom passed, my life was great and simple. Now I had to deal with the gray bubbles on my own, and with Mick shattering my life here and there, it wasn't easy.

February 5th – Faircrest, NY – 0 miles from the house

Standing outside the house, I saw imprints of memories that my mom and I had made together. The windows, the doors, the lights - it was all in the hands of Mick, whom I had to deal with now. I saw the window that we peered through each time we counted stars. I saw the window we opened to release the smoke from our baking disasters. I saw the lonely window that had only its memories since the day she died.

Taking a deep breath, I gripped the door handle which was greasy from the oil from the food he shoved in his mouth. I was looking around, analyzing the disgusting refurbishing he had done. I saw the beautiful ivory lamp she haggled to buy, but it was crusted with dirt and yellowed even though it was barely a year old. I saw the creamy wooden floors darkened and so grimy, smothered with cakey soil. The hammock my mother and I had hung up inside was gone.

I disappeared inside the memories and the thoughts floating through my head and barely heard the uneven steps coming down the hallway.

From the yellowing door frame emerged my “stepdad,” with a glass bottle full of stuff so strong, I didn’t even want to think about it in his hand.

“Get out.” He slurred immediately, his voice dangerous.

“This is my house.” I responded, my voice calm yet still unheard in his mind.

“This is not your house. You lost that privilege the first time you ran away. Get out!” The slur coated his words heavily and it was almost impossible to tell one word from another, even though my eardrums rang from the intensity of his voice.

He raised his arm abruptly as if to smack me in the face. He stepped closer, and I stepped back. He stepped forward again, and I stepped back. Forward, back. Forward, back. Forward – my back was against a wall.

Threatening me in the corner, he stared me down from three feet above. I saw the oily, uneven stubble of hair on his head, and I could smell the sharp alcohol coursing through his veins and his body odor leaking through his pores.

I could feel my cheeks burning as I stared intently at the man I hated most. Why did she marry him? He treated her like a crumpled up can, stepped on by pedestrians on the sidewalk. Sometimes I couldn't help but think that could have made her weaker, or made her more vulnerable – made it more possible for her death.



I smoothed down my shirt carefully, gave Mick one more withering glare, and stormed out of the house, not paying attention to the drunken snorts that followed me out. As soon as I stepped out onto the porch, I got that feeling again. I needed to run. I shoved the food I had snuck from right under Mick's nose deeper into my pocket and I started to sprint. I had absolutely no idea where I was going but I knew that I was never going back.

February 6th - Greenford, NY - 6 miles from the house

I kept running even after the sky turned velvety and my legs ached from exhaustion. I saw signs that said I was in Greenford, where the poverty situation is apparently half as bad as Faircrest. I say apparently because I could tell.

Some of the buildings looked like the few best of ours; most look like our regular buildings; and only a handful look worse. There were also half as many helpless people sprawled or sleeping on the curb, but I knew I would be one of them that night.

I sighed, found a piece of cardboard I could sit on instead of the cold cement, and laid it out in front of me. My sudden change in circumstances was laughable. I once had a wonderful room with lots of stuffed animals, a wonderful house with beautiful furniture and loving memories, a wonderful mom - and now I had a cozy spot on a sidewalk with a frosty piece of cardboard.

No crying though. I swore I wouldn't, and I owed that to myself. Cry and you can't stop, I had learned that the hard way. After the pileup on the highway, I swore that crying wasn't going to help my situation, and that only I could change my fortune.

I pulled the slightly putrid tuna sandwich out of my pocket. Squished and warm, it was only a half sandwich.

Bon appetite, I thought to myself, and started gnawing on the sandwich. As I was eating, I noticed a dark shadow approaching. It didn't look human, but it could have been. I couldn't tell. That made it all the worse. I couldn't tell what it was by the silhouette, as it was too dark out. I shivered and pulled my knees in towards my chest and ducked my head behind them.

After a couple of intense minutes, I took a peek to see if it was still there, and I almost yelped in surprise. There was a dog curled up in front of me, eating what was left of my forgotten sandwich. I recalled the dark outline of the silhouette and silently chided myself for thinking it was a human. I loosened my tight position and I gently petted the dog. Somehow in the dark of the night I could still see his two inky eyes, glittering with a light only he could see.

I leaned back onto the wall of the building, petting the dog's warm, tangled fur, and closed my eyes, all the while praying that when I woke up later in the morning, it would still be there next to me.



About the author

Anusha Bansal is the Editor-in-Chief of The Blissful Pursuit Online Magazine. She has founded this magazine out of her passion for writing and to provide a platform to her fellow writers to speak their minds about social issues.

Anusha founded Blissful Us Foundation Scholarship in collaboration with the Scholastic Art and Writing Award to promote writers to attend intensive writing camps.

on legalizing giant puffer fish in public pools because constitution and oppression

by Zoha Arif

Human meat must taste like chicken. The Chef de cuisine says this to us on our first day orientation with hands rotating around each other like smoke from fresh meatloaf chock. He pauses his monologue to get our punch cards and I hate that you immediately bend into your phone—but not enough to never like you. Punch cards, uniform (white shirt, striped vest, black pants, black shoe, black sock), W2 form, and social security later, I am leaning forward to clean a booth with Weiman wood cleaner whilst you wipe windows with a bathroom towel dipped in yesterday's dish water. This is fate and the prophesied universal destiny at work because when I left graduation two days ago as a seventeen-year-old high school graduate and almost-adult member of free society, when I waddled home barefoot, black cone heels in hand, because my parents and Uber flaked, when I sat on the square bean bag in my room, LED neon pink lights on, and listened to Kodakline and Amber Run for two hours, I was telling myself that I am starting over at Pittsburgh this fall—that everyone from high school, I am not going to see again willingly and that you, love, crush, who almost failed high school and said that colored chics are just not as hot as a nice, classic brunette with olive skin and cat blue eyes, I am not going to think about again. But yet here we are, the two of us, mushed together for a summer. And if all that Andrzej Sapkowski and Przemysław Truściński witcher taradiddle taught you anything it's that two people who are destined to be together will eventually meet.

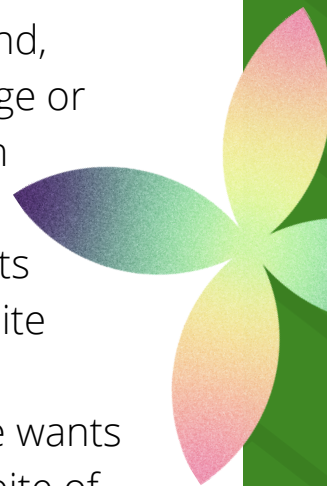
I forgot that I set the wood cleaner bottle behind me on a stool and so when I turned to get another dab of the stuff, my elbow knocked the bottle over the stool and the commotion of the wood cleaner falling and then drooling out onto the tiled floor makes Chef contort his mouth into a silent, muted laugh. He says in between massive breaths I promise I'm not crazy. Just trying to lighten things up on this Tuesday afternoon. I hate Tuesdays.

Mondays are fundamentally worse but I see where he's coming from.

Chef is a brown-haired, blue-eyed Italian who says to any stranger that the two z's in his name are pronounced like the two z's in "pizza." Within the unconditional boundaries of Steinway Street and Hillside Avenue, in the first storefront of the first floor, lies his Italiano restaurant, with authentic Italian cuisine (like polenta and prosciutto and porchetta), not that pop culture Hollywood pizza and pasta stuff. It's not fresh, his restaurant, has sat there in the sweltering Jersey heat and brewing Jersey winters for decades since the great migration of southwestern Europeans fleeing the pogroms, but it is a new responsibility to Chef, whose father died in Tuesday golf in Galloping Hills last week.

He said: *My old waitress—her name was Rukmini—died the same day, one hour later than mi papa. Rukmini was a good girl but she loved her ecstasy too much—and her Totoro tattoo was horrid. She had to cover it up with foundation every morning and bring some to work because that drug store stuff melts with sweat. You will be a good girl like Rukmini, don't worry honey.*

So we are part-time waiters in Chef's Italiano restaurant this summer and Rukmini is my silent God. We wipe dishes every Wednesday in a three-compartment dishwashing sink usually filled with frozen chicken left out to thaw. When I worked at the other Italiano restaurant in Union, Mario's Tutto Bene, anyone who was ServSafe certified would never think of committing the atrocity of defrosting chicken at room temperature. But the Italians in Union weren't the most trustable and they were too lazy to really research anything. For example, once, instead of hand sanitizer, they bought spray can furniture sanitizer and, for weeks, had us frequently use the furniture sanitizer as if it were hand sanitizer. One morning one of us waiters, Hunter Cardone, 22-year-old Rutgers senior majoring in Business Administration, was goofing around the sanitization cubert and just happened to read the beginning bit of the warning label of the "hand sanitizer" can which said: harmful if absorbed through skin. And that's when Hunter Cardone turned the can over and realized that us waiters had been practically bathing in furniture sanitizer for weeks because it smelled like your ol' grandmother's cream cheese lemon cake. So there was an explosive fight between us waiters and the Ricci family who owned the place and who kept claiming that no one could do anything legally cuz they didn't mean to skin poison anyone. And, technically, they were right because all of us waiters were college or high school kids trying to get some extra cash for custom prom dresses or a nice pair of Neiman Marcus skinny jeans or the occasional date night and none of us felt like getting our parents involved and filing a law-suit. So, anyway, the Ricci clan were quite clearly liars and that's why when Chef said that frozen chicken defrosted at room temperature is delectable and that's how he wants his restaurant chicken made, I did not argue with the man in spite of my training with the Riccis.



There are three parts to hand-washing dishes: wash, rinse, and sanitize. You rinse and sanitize, I wash. There is a cabinet with holes and dents chucked underneath the dishwashing sink for the thawed chicken to sit in after it's fully defrosted. You dropped a plastic spoon through a crack in the left cabinet one night and opened the cabinet to retrieve the fallen spoon. I distinctly remember the both of us standing there with the water in the sink still running and the soap bubbling out of its bottle, staring at the thawed chicken and wondering why it looks so much like a human head. The nose, the lipless mouth, the eye socket, it was all distinctly there if you turned your head at the right angle. And through the thick perfume of Febreze citrus magic and strawberry dish soap, there was a mild, sweet smell of dead rat wafting from the lump of chicken meat. The fallen plastic spoon sat next to the head's nicked ear and you reached in quickly, snatched the spoon, and then closed the cabinet.

I guess I haven't spent much time looking at raw meat, you said, but, Christ, that's uncomfortable to look at.

I said yeah and I guess we both know that we can't handle being butchers. All that raw meat around us. You laughed and I felt good for making you laugh. I rewashed the spoon and you rinsed it and sanitized it and then we punched our cards out and left for the day.

A few days after the fourth of July, I began to enter the self-denial stage of liking you. Like, sure, you happen to have a spicy scruff of a beard, and a nice quiff with a fringe up, and blue eyes like oceans, and all that eleven-year-old Wattpad fangirl stuff, but there was no way I actually liked you. Like, you once made fun of our physics teacher who had a thick Indian accent and who, out of nerves or maybe a small speaking impediment, said *this guy* a lot.

For example: Newton's second law of motion, force equals mass times acceleration. When our physics teacher was teaching it, she said something like: *so, this guy, force, the only way he feels full is if he has both this guy mass and this guy acceleration and don't forget this guy multiplication sign. Don't make any of these guys upset guys, and, remember this guy force is an uppercase F.* And you sat there with your junior varsity baseball buddies saying this guy this guy this guy and mimicking that Indian accent. This is to say that the quality of your personality is questionable. Plus, I'm into hyper-masculine looking men, hairy and big and built, and you're a spaghetti noodle, nice to look at, but spaghetti noodle nonetheless. Like, there's no way I actually like you. And I won't see you after this summer, most likely. I'm heading to Pittsburgh, you to New York, that's west and north.

An old couple from Cape May was mowing through town on their way to New York for Independence Day weekend one Friday. They ordered chicken stock soup with breadsticks and, after spooning a few chunks of the soup, complained that the meat had the texture of beef and tasted like sweet veal with a hint of soft pork. *This is not chicken, the old man said, I know chicken. I'm a butcher and I been eating chicken for decades and you cannot sell me that this is chicken. Now you give me chicken or me and my wife are out.* I did not have the muscle to fight with the couple so I called Chef to deal with the circumstance. Chef refused to refund them or take the soup back. *It's chicken, chicken, it's chicken,* he kept saying. Eventually, the both of them left with their breadsticks and Chef took a spoon and tasted the meat himself. *It's chicken,* he said, *totally chicken.* He then asked me to taste it but I was a whole vegetarian so then he brought you. You bit your lips—I thought that that was hot—and tasted it and said, *I definitely never had anything like it. But chicken it is, in my opinion.* And that pasted a look of triumphant on Chef's face. *There, it's chicken. Don't listen to them old chaps heading to New York for New Year's or the fourth of July or Memorial day or Christmas. They're really broke and will claim anything to get out of paying for stuff. Like they can really convince me that chicken isn't chicken.*

But other old couples traveling to New York for weddings and cousins and college students from Kean and Rutgers who came rolling in for a 10pm treat before cramming away at their summer research theses for the night and young bachelors out for dinner after an hour of clubbing pinched their noses and complained that the chicken in their soup was weird or just not chicken at all. You said to Chef one day: *I believe that we're serving chicken. But if a lot of people are saying that something's up with the meat, maybe something is up. It could be the thawing the meat at room temperature business that messes with the chicken.* And Chef did not take kindly to that comment. He said *listen here, kid, this recipe has been in mi family for centuries. Now I ain't changing it because a few American folks don't have any culture to them, bloody hell.*

I saw Chef hauling a strange black sack from the trunk of his mustang to the back dumpsters one night. There was a lunatic beadiness to his eyes as he was hauling the sack. When I went to throw out the trash before the end of my shift, there was an especially horrid smell encasing the dumpster, like rotten eggs but with the sickening sweetness of cheap perfume and something else distinctly dead. I pinched my nose shut with two fingers and rolled back inside quickly. Chef was at a booth tallying the cash in the register and, for a few minutes, he watched me shuffle around with the broom and pan before saying *you look pale. Everything alright out there?* I said *Gosh, it smells back there.* He laughed silently. *It's trash. What do you expect? Flowers?*

Then I was wiping menus one evening when you came out the back kitchen pale and stiff. Your fingers clutched the stray yarn fringes on your apron so hard that the tips of your fingers and your nail-beds faded to white. *Listen, I need you to see something* you whispered. I was thinking, alright, we've been working closely for a month, so maybe, just maybe, there are valentine balloons and danish chocolates back there and you'll get down on one knee with a promise ring and say, hey, I really like you because you're funny, and you're smart, and you have beautiful brown eyes, so I would love it if you could be my girlfriend.

But, lo, you take me to the walk-in freezer in the back of the place, the one that's usually locked shut with seven bolts and a handful of padlocks. On a shelf, you point to a tin bucket of meat and say that's human.

What do you mean?

That's human meat. I know it.

It's beef, you're crazy.



The very proposal of the identity of the meat was insanity. I reached out to touch the beef and you pulled my hand away. Relax, I said, relishing the sudden shock of electricity stimulated by your hand around mine, I'm showing you it's literally beef.

Aaliyah. We barely know each other and I know that what I'm saying sounds sick and crazy, but, trust me on this one, this is human meat. I saw Chef with a body bag. He came in here and he must have sawed up the body and kept the muscle meat for god knows what. I'm going to call the police.

Are you saying that Chef, the poor guy, is a sicko murderer?

I was getting very passionate at this time. Kind, humble, charitable man Chef who lost his papa and Rukmini mere weeks ago and still mourns the both of them with sagging tears and shaking, edgy hands and whispering cries of don't worry papa, I will make you proud and don't worry Rukmini honey, your death was honorable. Your life meant something. Our big-hearted, benevolent boss, Chef, who gives us sperlari and jolly ranchers for the bike ride home, who tips us bills generously, and who offers to write us glowing recommendation letters for wherever we work next in Pittsburgh or New York this fall. That Chef who dedicated his life and attributed his personal happiness to a drowning family business, an inheritance and legacy that he did not choose or want. I could not understand how you could accuse that Chef of something as inhumane and gory as murder and cannibalism.

All I'm saying is that this is human meat and this is Chef's restaurant. you said.

I grabbed your phone. I won't let you get an innocent into trouble. You're sick.

Give me my phone, Aaliyah. I could be wrong, but every weird thing in this god forbidden restaurant makes sense now and I'm scared and I want the truth.

Your sense has made you lose your mind. The truth is that that's beef and your crazy, sick mind twisted the narrative.

God damn it, why are you sure of Chef? Did you not see the head underneath the dishwashing sink? That was someone's literal god damn head! And when he made me taste the meat in that old couple's soup, I knew that was not chicken the moment my tongue tasted it but I kept trying to convince myself that it was because I'd vomit that second if I admitted to myself that I ate human.

You're so sick. I loved you, did you know that?

What?

I was prepared to be your martyr. And then you went and broke my heart. And what do you mean 'we barely know each other'? We went to high school together. We've been here together for a month. We know each other more than just well.

Aaliyah, what. Okay, here, I'm sorry, I really am, but, honest to God, we should talk about this later. I need to call the police now, give me my phone.

I spat and turned to march out the freezer but Chef suddenly popped into the freezer entrance. *What's going on?* he asked. I said *nothing* and started to parade away again but Chef snagged my wrist and pulled me back next to you. *I asked what's going on. One of you best talk.*

You were physically shaking at this point. I wondered, based on the concerning velocity of your shaking, if you were one of those shy spaghetti noodle boys afraid of intimacy and if you shake whenever you're faced with the sweet problem of asking a cute girl out and if I should've been the one to make the first move and if you were even into the whole philosophy of promise rings. Chef reached down into his apron pocket and started fishing for something. I realized that you were not going to speak so I pointed at the bucket of meat and said that's chicken, right?

Chef licked his lips and his fishing stopped as his hand made a fist around something cylindrical inside his pocket. It tastes like chicken.

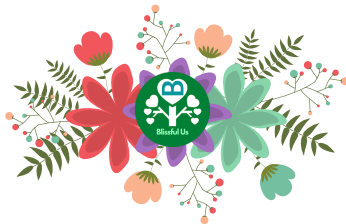
You said God, and I asked What do you mean "like" chicken?

Chef pulled out a pistol. I guessed that it held six rounds at most.

Your boyfriend said himself that Rukmini tastes like chicken.

About the author

Zoha Arif is a nationally known writer and has earned many National Medals for her poetic words and writings. Zoha was the recipient of 2020 Blissful Us Foundation Scholarship in collaboration with the Scholastic Art and Writing Award.





First Quarter

by Grace Danousha Reid


She knew what it was to feel truly empty. The smallest things, inconsistencies on the part of others, delayed trains, lukewarm coffee could bring her down so far she couldn't tell if she would get up again. She had also the experience of not feeling empty, which, when she was nose-deep under the covers, made her feel something else. Regret. The dark, uncrackable walnut of regret taking up a small, but not unsubstantial, space somewhere near her navel. That space should normally have been reserved for drunk, giddy butterflies, but hers was cold and hard. Not dead - teeming with some kind of energy, but stagnant, festering in itself.

She could tell when she was at her emptiest, because the couple hundred steps to change tube lines on her way to work seemed impossible. Just let me ride the Northern line all the way to Morden! She couldn't remember what hunger was, for anything. Anytime she had expressed explicit desire for something it had been spewed back into her face. Aren't you embarrassed? Aren't you ashamed? To want? To take up space? To feel *need*?

/ Moon Phases / 2

#

A simple creature, she liked attention and craved love. At any cost, she was so starved. Let's go out, said her friend. She couldn't quite bring herself to make an effort, at least a wholehearted one - she could be saved by irony alone. Who could blame her then if things went right? She didn't want it, didn't expect it, but got it. Better, more palatable. God forbid anyone get what they intended. Pretended, pretentious.



She liked the strobe lights, the ones that make everyone look like they're in a stop motion film, she liked the extra second of joy on their faces. Not a man or a woman approached her that night. Too much like themselves, for both. Is it self-loathing or homophobia? She couldn't tell but it made her feel better. She was better, that's why they didn't like her. But just how much better could she become? Would her sex appeal skyrocket if she took up playing guitar? Or if she dropped everything? She saw the man she liked earlier but thought was gay necking a brunette in trainers whilst waiting for the coat check. Ordered a cab. A tall man with misjudged stubble got in first. "Wrong one, mate. Grow a brain." Drove off while he was checking the license plate.

#

She had a very cottony hangover the next day, and couldn't swallow her own spit. Made drip coffee, felt Scandinavian. Took the bins out in bare feet and some boxer shorts she had bought for herself (her dad was very confused when she went home for Christmas).

She had to fill her time somehow, inventing reasons to buy more coffees and go to more bookshops that sold the same books. Art galleries made her sad, boo-hoo for culture. She ordered mint tea since she had drunk the entire jug of coffee at home, and tried to read. Only useful if I look mysterious, she thought. The fact that I'm pin sharp doesn't matter unless it's a pretty package. The cashier came up to her,

/ Moon Phases / 3

"Have you read this?" His eyebrows were a pretty package.

She thought back to the boy she gave that same book to months earlier. Are they actually self aware, or is the candour purely ostensible? She didn't care - a man who reads is better than one who follows football. Why? She handed the book to him to scan, after tucking an American Psycho style business card with all her foreign numbers in the cover. A twentieth present from her father, the impressive daughter.

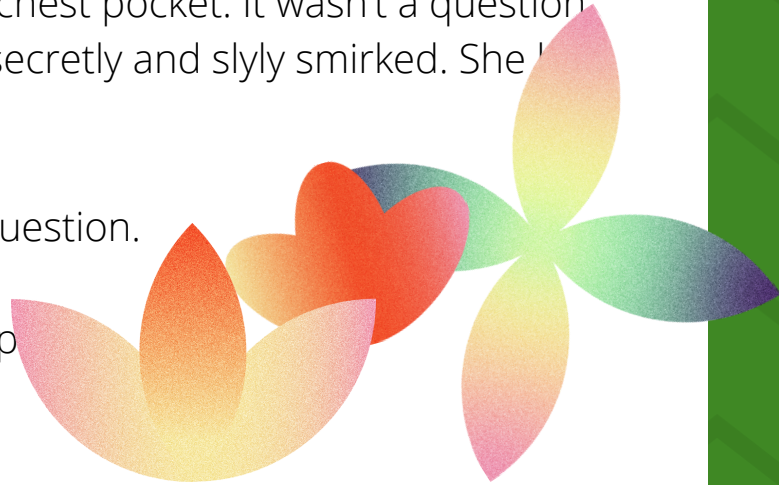
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She went back. This is a man she should like. But he was 'seeing someone'. How lonely and desperate and loserish do you have to be to be single... oh. Even more, to like me? Must be an idiot. She slipped in the business card just to be able to say she did it, like in the movies. A picturesque life. A series of amusing anecdotes. A cute boy she once saw working at a bookshop.

"This is you." He said, pulling it from his chest pocket. It wasn't a question. She held his gaze above her mask. She secretly and slyly smirked. She manipulated him. He likes her now.

"We should get coffee." She said, not a question.
"Yes."

She met him at nine as he was closing up.
"I'm an actor." He sipped at his wine.



She kissed him, because you can do that in movies. She didn't care about real life anymore. It was a plot to play with. To mess up, on purpose, she gave herself permission to. It was liberating. The choice was hers, to live in a chaos of her own making, rather than the inconsiderate mess of others. He kissed her back, though. Their teeth clanked like stirrups, they were both so hungry.

/ Moon Phases / 4

#

She held his hand in the cab home. She couldn't bring herself to let go of him. She was less concerned about how he felt. All consensual *of course*, she was used to fabricating the reciprocity, she gave so much love because it was the only love she touched.

The only decoration in her room was stacks of books, mostly unread, mostly kitsch. Two pillows lay on top of each other in the middle of the bed like lovers. She glanced at this over his squirming shoulder. He stood, dangling opposite her and she started to undress. Irony could not save her now. She thought of all the things she could say to excuse herself, to negate how real it had been. If they both had varying degrees of realness. She could only say, "Why?". A face like granite, "Why me?".

She went back. This is a man she should like. But he was 'seeing someone'. How lonely and desperate and loserish do you have to be to be single... oh. Even more, to like me? Must be an idiot. She slipped in the business card just to be able to say she did it, like in the movies. A picturesque life. A series of amusing anecdotes. A cute boy she once saw working at a bookshop.

He only smiled, eyes full of what? Welling with pity? She stepped toward her, traced his broad fingertips from her shoulder, down her arm and interlaced them with hers as she had done herself so many times. He held her face and kissed her tenderly. "I've never kissed anyone standing up before." Was that pity again? For the girl who grew up too fast and too slow?

#

/ Moon Phases / 5

When the sun hit the linen sheets in the morning, she padded down the corridor with the coffee pot, and two cups. Now she could have another later, if she wanted. Veto the green tea.

#

She went back. This is a man she should like. But he was 'seeing someone'. How lonely and desperate and loserish do you have to be to be single... oh. Even more, to like me? Must be an idiot. She slipped in the business card just to be able to say she did it, like in the movies. A picturesque life. A series of amusing anecdotes. A cute boy she once saw working at a bookshop.

The giddiness she felt at sharing her life with someone knocked her off kilter for a while. Whilst sitting on the tube, she would remember how he pulled her closer with delicate force, as if she were a very heavy cloud, and her heart would drop and pound. She would pulse.

They'd stay up all night, talking about nothing and everything, flicking cigarette ash out the sash window. How he had been with her the day before she couldn't fathom, as now he was next to her, holding his cigarette like a quill in his elegant fingers and the air was magnetic again. Could she kiss him? She smiled, not because she wanted to, but because she wanted to be the kind of person who would smile. Took a drag on her cigarette (she hated smoking but he would roll and light it for her). She sat on his lap and leaned back, her head once again fitting into the curve of his neck. She just couldn't bear it. All this man touching

/ Moon Phases / 6

her, her entire back pressed up against a living, breathing someone who wanted her. She wanted to thank him, to say many things, but she could only stay silent. He kissed her ear and her stomach clenched. More wine?

*This piece has been edited to cater to our audience's age.

About the author

Grace Reid resides in England.







Chiaroscuro

by Rajvi Shah

Endless days of masks. Hundreds of cases everyday. Cancelled events, shortages, shutdowns, and quarantines. It all started with a remote virus in China. Just another thing in the news. Everyone unaware that this virus would spread worldwide. Putting our lives at a halt. Turning everything upside down.

I lounged back in my chair, the cool metal of my seat pressing against my back. Bright colors flashing before my eyes, a world of Patriots and Redcoats. It was dim in the classroom, sunlight peeking through the shades. I could hear the chattering of my classmates in the background. "What are you doing for the weekend?" "Wanna come over?" It was Friday and the school day was almost over. Everyone was eager to go home for the weekend.

I shifted to hear what my friend was saying. "You know I heard the teachers saying that school is going to close for a week!!" her eyes widened with excitement. A smile slowly spread across my face as I realized what my friend had just said. "Really?!" I perked up in my seat, elated to hear this. "Yeah. I saw them making some plans or something." she informed me. "We'll have a nine day break! This is fabulous!!" I clapped, eyes lighting up as bright as the sun. *It'll be like an extra break!! A whole week off! This is unbelievable!*



My teacher got up from her chair. A screeching noise filled the room as the chair scraped along the floor. The sound of heels clacking against the floor. Clack, clack, clack. "Everyone listen up!" she called. Everyone turned to face her, curious about what she was going to announce. "School's going to be closing for a week, because of Covid-" Cheers erupted and everyone started gabbing about the terrific news that the teacher had just announced. "This is going to be awesome!" I beamed like a Cheshire cat. "Everyone quiet!" the teacher shouted, the corners of her mouth turned down, her voice tinged with annoyance. "But, you guys will have some work to do for each subject." Groans and sighs filled the room.

“Ok well I’ll see you guys on Monday! Everyone, have a good break!” she waved, walking back to her desk. Everyone jumped out of their seats, stuffing their things back into their backpacks. Everyone was yakking about what the teacher had just explained. No more school for 9 whole days! I thought, as I shoved my books into my backpack.

Little did I know that I wouldn’t come back to school for 1 year. When I look back on this moment, I laugh bittersweetly. At first I was excited about the time off, but then 9 days turned into a month and a month turned into a year. Now I can’t remember how it was to go to school without a mask.

Before the pandemic, we would always meet with people and go out to restaurants. I would play with my friends everyday. We would go to after-school clubs. I would see my parents late in the evening after they came back from work. And of course we travelled during every break and even during long weekends.

The title of my piece is **Chiaroscuro**, which means **light and dark in Italian**. The pandemic was bad but there were some good things too. During the pandemic, I spent more time with my family. I learnt how to bake and cook and we tried all kinds of crazy recipes. Everyone was on video calls, in separate rooms. Yelling for everyone to be quiet when it was their turn to unmute. And of course, the biggest change of all - everything went virtual. From office to schools, even birthdays were virtual. We sanitized our hands literally every minute. Watched way too much TV.

Because of all the restrictions, going indoors wasn’t a choice. There goes Dave and Busters, movie theaters, and shopping at malls. Instead we hiked through forests, surprises at every corner. Hearing the rush of a river or the chirping of crickets in the distance. Sometimes we took one wrong turn and ended up in a totally different town. Sometimes we got lost, and the sun set, turning everything pitch-black.

We would complain every minute, sighing and groaning. Asking how many miles were left. But at the end of the hike there was always a breathtaking view. A glimmering waterfall, the New York skyline cutting into the clouds, the sky changing into stunning shades of orange and pink.

Things still haven't come back to normal. The pandemic has taught me to appreciate what I have. Don't take things for granted. Because all these wonderful things in our lives can be taken away at any time. And we never learn the value of something until it's gone.

About the author

Rajvi Shah is in 6th grade. She lives in Parsippany, New Jersey. In addition to writing, she enjoys baking and playing the piano.



Prophetic Solutions for contemporary problems in modern era

by Allen Anthony Andrews

Problems are always made from the power to defend. It is absolutely an epoch long concept and even today such solutions are revitalized through new era problems. Our Indian society is always bound to prophetic theologies and ideals. The gurukulam concept is said to be a forerunner in such prophetic concepts. Here a guru / teacher plays the role of a prophet and he will be the guide to everyone in a concerned village. But are such prophetic concepts just limited to the religious base. Unfortunately in the modern era even the prophetic advises are less valued either due to a broad perception that those are superstitious or black magic which only is a 2% among them and rest has some theological backing.

The contemporary world emerged or evolved through the brains of various young minds either through a revolution or movement. But are such revolutions devoid of scientific backing? No, because a scientific backing always helps a person to go beyond their common perceptions which results in fruitful yields. As a person growing in such scientific backing reaches at a point in their life, where they are forced to choose a prophetic way of life. But how such a thought arises in a scientific or value based mind? It is there the life teaches them about the ethics and morality that they should possess in order to prolong their artistic or life sustaining temperament.

Recently many issues occurred in the world, looking into an example like COVID. Till date we have not yet known the source of such a virus even though conspiracy theories loom around the society. A 100 years ago, have our forefathers imagined such a pandemic ravaging the world? No, because in every generation, they have their own problems to be sorted out and also they will have their concern about the future.

Before the computer was invented, people feared on a device that would take up their jobs which will result in joblessness and such a fear caused for the seeding of many movements to wipe out that particular invention.

But, what about current situation? We are boasting off about an ultra modern age, in which the computer itself creates a countless number of opportunities between the people, who became software developers, engineers and the list goes on. And now we all fear about a future where machines take up the role of humans and a world where Robots rule. But is such a world possible without human intervention? These questions make us leave the scientific backing and take up the prophetic advises, like is there a second life? Does soul exist? What is the ultimate meaning of death?

And such problems can be solved through prophetic advices by making our mind ready to face any upcoming challenges in a contemporary world.

The prophetic solutions gives us a clear understanding that humans are social beings whose interdependent character plays a critical role in worldly solutions. Next I would like to take up an issue which equally raises concern among global leaders. It is none other than the global warming. It took thousands of years for the globe to be formed as of today. From the birth of early humans, they all had a strong bond with the nature and the inhabitants present over there. But as on humans realized the need for domestication and self sustainability they all started producing for their individual and family needs. They gave birth to their generations and reached the agrarian ages. Here they started clearing the forests and started cultivating various types of crops. They also replaced the area with mother nature. But necessity became the mother of goodness and more and more inventions began destroying our mother nature.

Here all the prophetic advices were valued but their advices on a blatant future got neglected. Such a neglect made them pay a lot in the future pandemics and social disasters. And slowly the domestication changed to a society and to a panchayat, the panchayat thus changed to villages.

These villages thus gave birth to districts, states and finally a global order came through various national institutions.



Now the world has changed to a global village concept. Here science connects us from one part of the world to the other. The world has been connected through various modes of communication and still the world values prophetic advises. In the Indian context, if we start a venture we are all behind a prophetic advise in order to give it a positive beginning and also solutions are sought from the concerned people to give it a defining edge. Earlier when we discussed about the early humans they all did the same thing in order to design their capabilities or venture in order to come in understanding with the natural designs that were a predetermined ones. Now the question may come, Are such prophetic advises necessary in a modern world? The answer is, we cannot always neglect our past, because such a past has only come to us because of a prophetic or divine intervention. It cannot be a religious thought but it is a universal one, which cannot be neglected or get out of, if an ultra modern era comes in future. Now the next suspicion is that, aren't such prophetic advices a superstitious thing? Yes, but superstition always comes from an unprecedented event that occurred in the past, which may give us a second thought on a perfect future.

Now we can also check into an other side of such prophetic advices. When a society or an individual blindly believes in prophetic interventions, then the demand for such intervention also increases which gives way for demagogue opinions. Here even the literate ones get attracted to such opinions which gives them a backing for false apprehensions for their individual benefit. This even becomes a dark spot in the life of a society, where each of them gets controlled even without a scientific base. This gives birth to a black economy and totally destructs the true prophetic interventions.



It is here the need arises to separate truth from false perceptions. The false perception lead to all sorts of black magic that covers their falsehood with so many false mental perceptions.

Here the contemporary society defines new terms to their surroundings and looks one another with strong misconceptions. Even a good venture doesn't see its birth because of such false prophetic advices. This is where we always say truth always is neglected because of a strong falsehood that can even control our feelings.

Now it's high time to think about whether a society should be false ridden or ruled by some truths. When an advice is taken it is the duty of the taker to make it truthful. We all are currently living in a marketing world, where even your basic necessities are seen in the eye of a marketing head. And here the quality is compromised through false promises and fake imagery, and unfortunately majority of us are behind such mockery where even the consumer doesn't have proper awareness on what the product is. It is all about the outer cover that the product possesses and not the inner ones. And we all give it the cover of tradition and culture through which even our past gets attracted. Here also actual prophecy is less valued because of their less ability to compromise their product or due to subjugation by the false products.

The same phenomenon prevails in humans too, where the real and compassionate ones in the world are less valued, but the one who yields their image through fake demagoguery are of great value to both the literate and illiterate ones. Now it's time to end the false prophetic advice, it is high time to think on these issues that are less valued in the society. A prophecy should consider both literacy and cognitive abilities of a person. If you don't understand the feelings of a person then what is the difference between you and a machine. Now we all are in search of the traditional values and the old forests, where the soul of the earth rests in. You and I all have a limited time in this earth, so if you are not able to lead a family or world through prophetic advice then the meaning of life gets blurred. When we wake up one morning and find yourself alone in the world, then what will be your next step? Probably it would be to sustain your life through proper way, but is it possible without a proper direction.

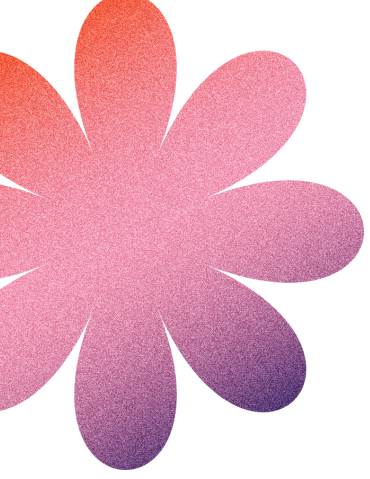
Here you should always be guided in the proper manner to make yourself remarkable. Problems are always a part and parcel of anybody's life, but for every problem there is a specific solution that is binding. Living a life doesn't make a meaning, but proving that you also lived in this world with the small steps you leap is highly important.

I like to conclude my essay through the words written by Robert Frost, "Woods are lovely dark and deep, but I have promises to keep. And miles to go before I sleep and miles to go before I sleep".

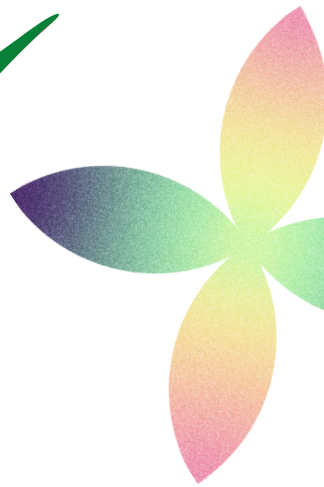
About the author

Allen Antony Andrews is a 3rd year Undergraduate Student in Kerala, India. He is an avid writer who loves to write a lot on the current social issues. A talented speaker who is skilled in coordinating and organizing various social programs and also skilling to become an author and various other avenues of talent. Allen has won volunteer awards and first prize in various literary events like Essay writing and Message Writing.





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