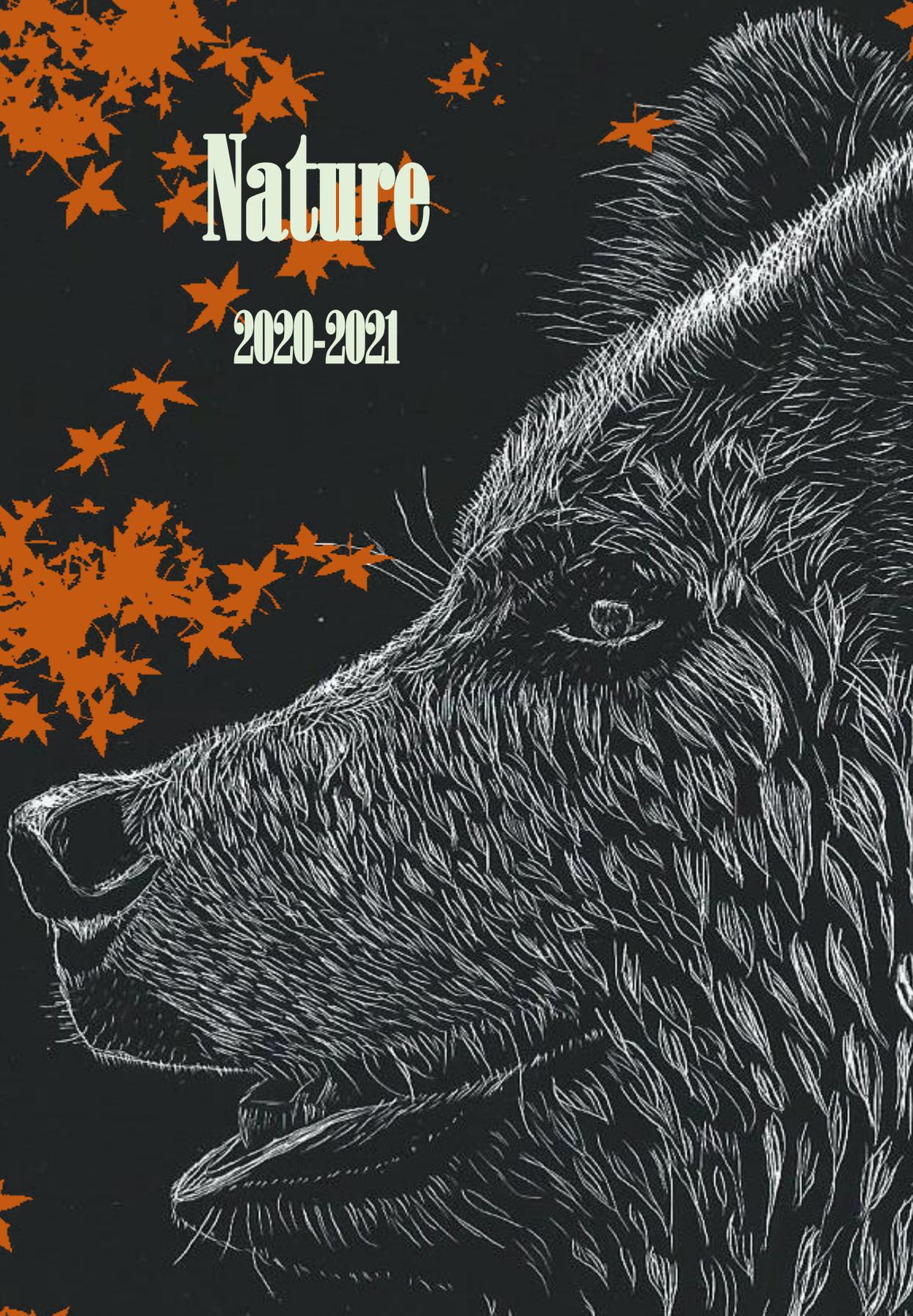


# Nature

2020-2021



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**Partners:** <https://synchchaos.com> (Synchronized Chaos) AND

<https://talesforlove.blogs.sapo.pt> (Tales for Love)

AND <http://www.maximumpotentialeducation.com/> (Maximum Potential Education)

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## Introduction

This Edition of the e-Anthology of the Nature Literature Contest contains a group of literary works of enjoyable and inspiring reading.

Additionally, it is the result of a literary path and reasoning regarding environmental sustainability, which is closely connected to social sustainability. Yes, this literary work is an evolution from the previous ones and this year it introduces in it, for coherence, two important changes to reduce the consumption of energy in the laptops where it is read, i.e., using darker colors and including on the same page the editorial information, the introduction, and the automatic table of contents. Because it is only experimental, very new, aesthetically, any suggestion for future Editions is welcome.

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## POETRY Category

*1<sup>th</sup> place: "A PRIMAL COLLOQUY" by Joseph (USA)*

Resplendent in red,

was he.

More modest,

was she.

Wing to wing

they stood on

the telephone wire,

in seamless synchronization,

against a putty-gray sky,

populated with

hurrying yellow

and orange clouds,

thick and heavy as

wet paint; a gusting wind

heralding the approaching

deluge.

Heads, turning rapidly and

sharply, speaking

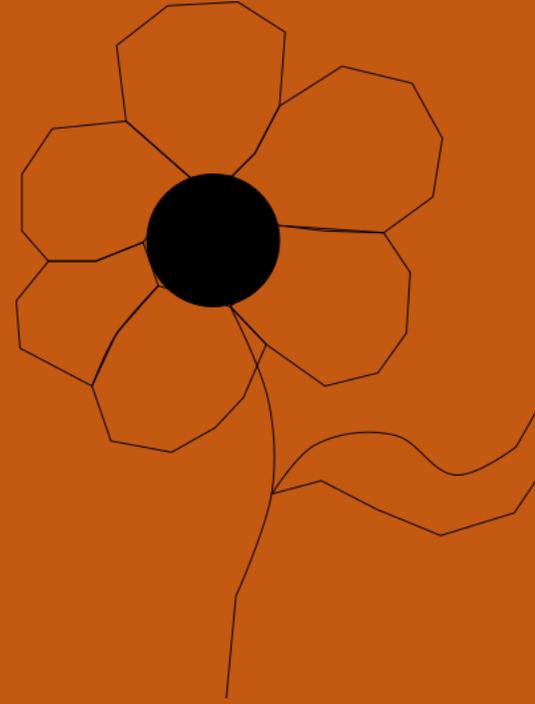
their language of love

and necessity,





in his outstretched hands.  
Terrified I'd cry, run away  
until the day I grit my teeth,  
stood my ground, patted its  
crusty head. After that  
he stopped pestering me.  
At least not with reptiles.  
He often kissed them until  
one bit him on the lower lip  
and like mom would say he  
screamed bloody murder.  
I think he still has a scar.  
I feared those dears had  
become extinct long ago.  
It's interesting what a coronavirus  
can do to shift the balance back.



3<sup>rd</sup> place: (TIE)

"The Lord of the Words and the Gardener" by José Reis (Brazil)

The Lord of the Words determined  
That I speak a word of comfort  
To those who mourn their dead through the empty streets,  
To those who seek a thread of hope,  
To those who wait for the balm of life!

The Lord of the Words determined  
That I announce the arrival of light







I bring a pencil and a scrap of paper,  
paddle slowly out of the cove,  
then listen carefully while I drift  
silent as a fallen branch or curious turtle  
until the dictation begins  
and I am blessed with the job  
of recording secretary  
for the ageless wisdom  
wafted across the water by the breeze.









or bridle the blind pursuit  
of seizing all we find,  
and bring earth home.

If you could soothe the sea and cure the land  
With tills that feed and waves that can,  
form water, clouds and snow  
again,  
and bring earth home.

For there is nothing you could not do  
to heal the pains and to renew  
the seas, the lands, the sky and you  
to what should always be.

*"Healing" by M. Tragicum (Portugal)*



you're the first one  
that comes to mind  
when i see rosy skies.  
even after all the  
pain you caused me,  
you're the first one  
i want to call  
when there's  
a starry night.  
i gave you  
my vulnerability  
and you abused it.  
you took my heart







Recognise that  
The trees are still here  
And your lifespan is forever  
The old spirits died to make way for you

Feel the  
Vibrating energy  
Calling you upwards  
It is your Mother's love  
Channelled into sunshine curtains

Believe in  
Yourself  
You deserve to be loved  
And I'm so sorry  
They convinced you otherwise

## **Honorable Mentions (Best Short Poems):**

"Araguaia River" by Deuzeli Linhares (Brazil)

River,  
My beautiful river  
enchants  
Brings peace and lightness  
He who dances  
With her crystalline robes  
In these currents



## Other Selected Poetry:

"SOMEWHERE ON THE COAST" by REFIKA DEDIĆ (BOSNIA and HERZEGOVINA)

The sea is rustling  
the shadows breathe  
they write destiny

The moon sends a look  
out of the corner of the eye

The sky in the sea  
sea in the sky  
they dream together  
sky and sea  
sea and sky

You and me on the bench  
we listen to the sea waves

Memories are awakened

One boat on the horizon  
writes history

A slight bow  
towards the sea  
towards the sky  
I have to go







"Time" by Priscila Carvalho (Brazil)

I no longer know the time to get up  
You wake me up before  
Come into me and I'm part of you  
Guide me  
Determines  
Perfect  
I still know that I'm sure of you  
Of the milliseconds  
That I can't waste  
Even if you have to wait  
Why to notice you time  
I understand you  
Every detail that brings me  
The life that opens  
And for having you follow my heartbeat  
so even uncertain  
How long will I have you  
I follow without worrying about you  
For understanding you,  
it's already a cure.

"The birds fly" by Priscila Carvalho (Brazil)

I stayed here watching the birds  
They fly  
Follow a destination  
Thought? Planned? Or is it instinct?  
I know they just fly and reach their destination ...



And there is not enough time to fear or to mind

I think about the ones who passed  
As I leave this message to the children I desire  
There is no use, dearest, I do not deny  
Know that one day I must die

I promise not to smoke the last cigarette  
Regardless of it having any effect  
I confess for the last moment without regret

Know that you won't be treated with neglect  
The moments of poetry and the blessings of care  
Are stuck with you, I can't make you forget

Yes I know that one day I must die  
But until then I'll be loving and living my life  
I'm carefully walking every step of the line

Yes I know but today I'm alive  
Life is about love and love is the real light

Despite the fact that I won't make it  
Life is about how much you can love  
and love is about how hard you can try  
Remember that I'm putting up a fight  
And when the day comes remember that I didn't lie

If it ever occurs to you that death has defeated life  
Remember that we live to protect love

Although we all must go by design  
Love is bigger, Love survives  
Remember that I'll meet you in time

Cry what you have to cry  
but be brave  
Now you know the size of your strength  
Life will go back to be a delight  
And I would very much like to see you thrive

**"A minute of reflection" by Thiago Winner (Brazil)**

In this world of so many unfair disputes,  
it is difficult to stand out for what we are,  
instead of what we have.

Many want to leave more material goods,  
but I want to leave my legacy and miss you a lot.

Each of us has a purpose in life,  
but many ignore this fact for the obsession with power, fame and money.  
One day, we will all transcend to a full place.

Look and observe everything around us,  
even a pandemic can be a warning  
for all those who have no social goals and objectives,  
and who are "superior" to other beings.

Be the best person you can be for yourself and others.

Be humble and find out what your human purpose is,  
so you will better understand life in your greatest feeling.

"yellow soul" by Roberta Santiago (Brazil)

could you see my soul behind the image  
of the reliefs, of the age  
the smell and the sound  
of it behind the language?

can you touch the color of my soul  
while the wind is dissipating it  
in the dance of the clouds  
with the rainbow?

some people say my soul it's yellow  
orange  
like the flower that turns  
around the sun,  
and yours?

i ask god to see  
your soul  
behind the image  
even if i can't touch  
the colors of it  
or the smell or the sound  
that are bigger than the flowers  
that are bigger than the sun  
and the eternal endless of the poem

less eternal than your soul

which i ask god to see

behind your teeth

your skin

your eyes with the tunnels

your hands holding

the world

in a raining sunday winter evening

when it is friday

i ask

god to see

your soul behind the image

can you see mine?

**"Loneliness" by Maroel Bispo (Brazil)**

Wolf in crisis

Loneliness is like a vague look through the cracks in the soul.

And also, it is the complete result of the will,

The desire to disappear on the horizon.

Such despair at the wilderness, the silence of the spirit,

The occasional shrinkage that paralyzes life.

To go or not to go?

Live or die?

To exist or not to exist?

The inner self is absorbed by the vacuum,

Yes, because of the emptiness of those sad impressions.

Free yourself! Run away!







Natural, messy, crazy love.

**"This ease" by Liliane Neves (Brazil)**

Health and illness are point of views  
There's something more inside the pills

Faith or science are modes of thoughts  
There's still more light that shines in the pots

Strong and weak are monotypes  
Nature complains with stereotypes

Cure shows that diseases can be killed  
Death shows that life can be healed.

Ever after.

**"A dream dreamed" by Emanuel Madruga (Brazil)**

The birds ate in my hand,  
I could see a star during the day,  
The rivers were crystal clear and alive,  
The current showed me, I want to be your guide.

The beasts of the field heard no gunshots,  
The dry leaves fell in due time,  
The rains were the joy of the lived man,

And I was just joy, living in a captive world.

The sun was shining, but it didn't burn,  
The moon shone and did not complain,  
Even the black cloud contemplated,  
The wealth that was on the land that I loved.

Everyone lived in harmony, man, animal and nature,  
There was morning, afternoon and night, everything was perfect.  
The days were slow to pass, we had a lot to tell,  
Oh what a joy without peer, I didn't want to wake up anymore.

But, everything that begins is over, I turned from side to side,  
I sat in bed asleep, I spoke words out loud,  
No, I don't want to wake up again, let me dream permanently.  
I am happy this way, I want to be bedridden, no one will take away from  
me, the reality of a dreamed dream.

**"Non - reciprocal relationship." by Vanessa Silva (Brazil)**

We are violent  
The Earth's kiss  
Spreads with love  
And we refuse  
Cutting her lips off  
Making her bleed  
Over our feet



"Running out" by Rafael Cocchini (Brazil)

What good is there  
in spreading beautiful lies  
while the truth's ashes  
spread across south american skies?

How does it help to portray  
mythical virgin woods  
while the forest burns away  
to become meat produce?

Why not stop showing  
the history which in theory  
we should preserve

And start showing  
what we're actually doing  
to stop the declining green curve?

Are we actually doing something?

Is it helping to show lies  
instead of focusing on those who try  
everyday with the cost of their lives  
to preserve the Amazon soulful cries?

Haven't they figured it out  
that throwing money on it here and about  
is not going to stop the forest from burning to the ground?

Haven't they figured it out  
that showing images through an exotic lens  
is not going to stop the fire from consuming everything in its way?

Isn't it time  
to take actual political action  
instead of transforming our home into listless lullabies?

Isn't it time?

**"The stones" by Lucas Grosso (Brazil)**

the world is crying  
but you aren't hearing  
'cause are too busy rocking  
the stones of a hollow  
street

the world is crying  
but you aren't hearing  
'cause are too busy mopping  
the stones from a  
wasteland

the world is crying  
but you aren't hearing  
'cause are too busy holding  
the stones of a forlorn  
house

the world is crying  
but you aren't hearing  
'cause are too busy seeking  
for the stones of a kidney  
transplanted

the world is crying  
but you cannot hear because of  
the stones  
the stones  
only  
you  
see

**"When the Sun rises" by Candido Catão (Brazil)**

When the Sun rises, the trivial Earth celebrates warmly.  
His splendid presence makes him shine  
even the most shapeless soil.

The green grass rejoices with its advent.  
Your arrival is the provision of the most beautiful things,  
it is the reason that sustains the beautiful trees.

Your light,  
gives joy to graceful plants,  
makes thin flowers germinate,  
awakens all the remarkable sensations.

Thus making it possible  
the unfolding of the most illustrious reality,  
which is known as Day,  
where the hearts of the creatures are full of hope  
for yet another vigorous journey.

**"To my younger self" by Cătălina Trandafir (Denmark)**

To my younger self,  
I am writing you from 2012.  
it's not high school that  
is killing me,  
it is my mental health.

My heart feels heavy today,  
but not because of sorrow,  
it feels full  
or swollen;  
A new one I could  
borrow.

'Know you struggle now,  
but brace yourself for  
these few years of hell;  
You'll paint a smile  
everyday,  
but every night,  
You'll pray for help.







Lotuses in ponds smaller than my backyard,  
 birds I can never name that flashed past  
 Face a little too close to the air as leaves brushed my heart  
 Summer sweat on my nose freezing as the empty fields start  
 To flush, air such, that diamonds glittered as kilometres dart  
 As fast as my days in those parts, depart

I would never change it even has my body aches with  
 Want, cities never sit right in my bones,  
 Spaces already occupied by pictures of smiles in tiny stones  
 I lost them and now I'm lost in concrete, neck always tilting back and  
 forth with unconscious speed  
 Whether blue sky or fog my eyes and toes  
 trace it, Ancient tree gods on sidewalks as I take in  
 Every little detail that feeds me, little flowers in the making  
 Cousins, childhood, and best friend that I taste in  
 Oranges and the air, it sustains  
 This beauty that isn't for me stays with me

**"WANDERING" by Stefania Vasile (Italy)**

He paints humanity  
 Paths on the road of life  
 To the east of the sun  
 And not to the west!  
 We travel with the mind  
 And we give color to life  
 Even when the Lord  
 He has nothing to say!  
 Lying, enmity

Always a place of honor  
It will be ... because we, the madmen  
I left this place to them  
Let's not turn our cheeks  
Just like the Messiah  
You see, He did it  
What a payment we gave him!  
The forest twisted  
With tangled branches  
And roots on the outside  
That they have no place in the earth.  
Nature is also changing  
With indistinct natures  
And we'll be back again  
To the eternal grave!  
In the wild  
Nothing is as it seems  
And everything seems to be  
A little upside down  
For life seems to be  
A question mark  
What came from the cross  
Beloved Christ!  
To the divine peace  
We hurry on stellar paths  
The only compass we have is space  
Let's not get lost  
Luciferians are beacons,  
Or they are indicators  
The black holes



or roses and fragrant flowers  
 fluttered in celestial music  
 on the slopes of the artificial hill.  
 None of this, my dear.  
 Neither the rain of diamonds nor the liberating wind  
 who tore the city to shreds  
 they had no effect  
 on the sodden hill of smells.  
 For future reference.  
 Here the posterity will carry out  
 their archaeological excavations,  
 to reconstruct our civilization.

**"HAIKU" by Edweine Loureiro (Japan)**

Among the pine trees,  
  
 I look for inspiration...  
  
 Shadows write a haiku.

**"Hi, how are you?" by Segă Vitalie (Republic of Moldova)**

She had no face in that abandon building  
 ants swarmed on the buiding wall and  
 rose blossom on the roof  
 the bees were making honey  
 between windows the basil leaves grew  
 in window glass life-sucking zombies  
 moving in strange way,

but you did not blink at those who passed by it,  
that building we visit every night,  
on nights with purple skies,  
when neither I, nor the ants, nor the bees,  
nor do thoughts slept  
I was looking for you in one of windows  
like glass of water in summer sun ,  
pointless  
I told you before: you are a fairy  
Ana, what are you doing in my fairy-tell?  
I have insomnia again

"Nature Owns Him" by Marta Sousa (Portugal)

The Man looks at the Nature.  
Mountains high, fresh and green,  
birds sang the best song ever seen,  
Animals here and there,  
Beings of all colours and shapes,  
Perfection, they all share.

The Man says this for me!

Then animals, trees and bird sounds,  
Get too frail,  
So, Nature has to prevail.  
Tremors and storms,  
Warn her ire;  
but the Man does not care.

Then, the sickness came,  
The Man is concealed.  
Finally, Nature heals  
Until the Man understands  
He does not own Nature.

Nature owns Him.

**"Sacred" by Sílvia Silva (Portugal)**

I find the strength  
In the nature  
Sacred floors  
Of Mother Gaia  
Holy Father's Will  
and Neptune's water...  
We all carry intentions  
Sacred words...  
(Bring peace...)  
Divine callings...  
(Hush... stand still...)  
We hope... for better days  
(It will come true...)  
Dreamers exist  
They unite...  
In our Sanctuary.

"Mia" by RB Cătălin (Romania)

You me and Cărtărescu held hands last night  
Everything was frozen, still, like a cruel 1st of January  
On the kitchen counter  
A green fern was struggling to breathe.  
Here there isn't plenty of carbon dioxide  
Consequently, its choice wasn't the greatest.  
Stepping like a tired cat with your hair hanging like the ivy on  
Blakesley Close  
You were looking for your bathroom, unsettled.  
Through your mind are usually passing loads of thoughts  
But yesterday, you afforded the luxury to think only of me,  
Of loneliness and me which, in essence, are one and the same.  
New York Piano Nights and a poem whose sadness was satisfying  
our nihilist tendencies.  
You, still puzzled and scared laid docile in bed  
You would have given everything for tomorrow to be a fantasy  
A bad dream from which you would wake up tired.  
On your athletic legs the coldness of the room was settling  
In your gypsy eyes a reflection of the door-less living room  
Behind a boyish t-shirt your bosoms were protecting a heart left  
stationary.  
Outside, streets like a cobweb in the wind would continue to exist  
Would continue to stretch  
Would continue to be silent  
Would continue to hide your sexuality.  
With an eye closed, in a shark-like sleep,  
You hope this would be the last poem.  
Waiting begins to feel like listening to an old song you got bored of.







Meadow, I miss you so much, how much!  
 I love you from my childhood a maze game!  
 With the whistle of winds in arms close to my chest  
 With this humanity, incursion in abys with the rose

This life in the breezes of rhythms  
 With your musicians in the bouquet  
 Of stars with condors wings  
 Over sad this humanity  
 You lifted her to her feet.  
 To the edge of the water bathing a bit loud  
 From the autumn of the years and  
 The communion of the chalice  
 From a world of the tools the musical  
 Great is the miracles

He was healed.

Now is a scented story my flowers  
 Meadow, how much I love you!  
 Indescribable meadow in the distance  
 Illuminated by colored spheres  
 At the foot of the towering mountains and  
 At the water's edge in prayer  
 Every day prayer for humanity.

**"The river" by Gabriela Gârlonța (Romania)**

I went downwards on the river  
 in a moment of spleen

in nets touch the boat  
 and I touched the river  
 with my hand.

**"Fragment of change" by Popica Roxana (Romania)**

Your veins are crossed by sap of beauty  
 You shine with your dull wings, oh, cutie,  
 As if you were unnatural delirium,  
 You rise and fall in useless dreams martyrism.  
 A vivid glow of pure morning gain  
 You kiss her in the night with icy pain.  
 Soft and fragile, with common face,  
 You turned from cold to timeless color space.  
 You won't live magic of your eternal life  
 For rainy mist on you 's long strife  
 And from the dark cocoon you ran from, man  
 You'll return, tired on the earth again.

**"MORNING" by Daniela Marian (Romania)**

A ray landed on my eyelash like a hologram  
 It was yellow as a warm, as a blowing...  
 I watched the proud morning sun blind me!  
 A ray as if free by him gently took me in his arms  
 And he kissed my forehead, carried me through the dew.  
 The dew was like a cloak on the fresh grass  
 From multicolored drops embroidered with spheres of light  
 From the brilliance of diamonds projected up to two genes  
 Caught himself in the suave dance,



"Vibration" by Danya Stefan (Romania)

Hearths on strangers cords  
 Seagulls flight guiding your soul  
 Bridges to unknown.

"Woodland in Wintertime" by Andreea Finichiu (Romania)

There it was, the wood of old.  
 So they say, 'Savageries are ours to break'  
 and strive and bend and never do mend  
 what they claim to be their own.  
 But, ah, I mind, and often do not,  
 lest I trouble the elderly hearth of ours.

Outstretched limbs laden with a candid cold -  
 sheer whitefall,  
 atop ages of bane and bitter woodbath  
 that you donned -  
 upon my nearing lurch, and lean forth...  
 Treaded past... I long the hold.

There are shoots stiff and wound  
 in search of the heart spot.  
 There are men hurled in depths of fuming quiet  
 at Redwood's Hollows,  
 men whose wear  
 is a vicious wreath.

And there they are,

millennium-deep down the sap...  
the pangs of blaze  
no rain can quell,  
wounded wood, wood aflame  
beneath this bark of snowy robe.

How lone the loaded limbs!  
And so I stop under a stack or two  
for my share of  
stifled warfare.

Yet buried in snow,  
just my hands...  
I hear you say  
my forefathers and I never shared fingerprints.  
And so I sit by your bough and root flare  
in search of the heart spot  
and sylvan care.

Word has it that crackles and creaks  
can be heard to this day,  
now it's not the wood  
but human hearts in disarray.  
So it was, and so it goes on.  
So they bury their young -  
would no one see the branches ajar  
letting sprouts feed on morsels of sunlight? -  
and so they rouse  
what they claim to be their own.  
The wild.

Never to be broken.

And the broken  
never as sparing.

"Spring" by Corina Potcovaru (Romania)

He's greened the coder on his lap.  
And the forest is all cruel,  
On the plains and across the valley,  
He's all alive, as far as you can see.

A carpet of popcorn  
It lays on the plain,  
Birds thousands and thousands,  
In a chorus of joy.

Sing the cuckoo on a ram,  
Swallows at the window,  
Flyers flying up,  
Bunnies jump through the sky.

Down in the valley I sing of longing,  
Shepherd's whistle,  
Deer drinking  
Cold water from the valley.

The springs are flowing down the valley,

In a quiet murmur  
And under the rays of the sun  
New life has dawned.

"Gray" by Mladin Cristian (Romania)

Gray are the trees, the houses and the people.  
Especially people...  
Dark autumn days  
Make my soul crave  
For something.

Something i lost  
And which the red-brown-yellow leaves  
Take it away in their crazy dance,  
Into the november wind.

Feelings tear apart the silence of the night,  
And i shout out ...whispering.  
Strange.

I can hear the buds of solitude slowly breaking.  
I fight my demons,  
But i am not always winning.

Far away from the people, i try to find  
That something they are missing.  
The reason for hapiness, maybe.  
Something that it's not gray at all.

"All around us" by Lilioara Macovei (Romania)

the tree became gloomy, losing its eyes in the sky  
his roots murmured at the questions  
    why is it so quiet  
I hurried past him, greeting him in my mind  
I have limited time and I just realized  
that I forgot my amazement at home  
the tree is still green  
but it is no longer the street  
and a piece of sky makes some roofs heavier  
cars are viewed as soundless movies  
everyone around me has their eyes in their shoes  
through fraud I take what is left of the gentle glances  
I returned with my bag full of trouble  
I climb some stairs full of pungent odors  
I close the door with the key to fear  
and I get my hands dirty  
then  
I pray again

"Maybe" by Daria Pană (Romania)

I'll paint this white paper,  
Or I'll write something down.  
I could also try singing,  
But I might stick with listening..  
Maybe I'll feel alive.





"November" by Cristina Zaha (Romania)

the crumbled ground  
swallowed my light  
just like the kiss  
you stole from me  
in that darkest night.

your hands  
touching mine  
ghostly  
just like the leaves...  
I'm falling apart  
on the crumbled ground.

under the november sky  
the pain won't hide  
or fade  
or die.

under the november sky  
i shall kiss  
the leaves  
breathless  
on the crumbled ground.

"All nature gives my heart accepts" by Adela Silvan (Romania)

I grew weary of human sound  
And followed the bird's song,

Into the woods the forest green  
Welcomes my blue-sky heart  
And all the trees become my knights,  
Fearless - and tall - and free;  
With virgin leaves on branches high -  
Slowly dance in the wind.

I summon all my fairy friends,  
Some pixies and some elves -  
They dance along to nature's tune  
While on the grass I rest  
With violets playing in the shade,  
Sweet fragrance nostrils steal,  
And I watch birds up in their nests  
Protective, yet relaxed,  
But when they flit away I hear  
The whirr of wings that travel high,  
Impressive speed to bring one's dream,  
Oh, so much closer to the sky.

The seed of solitude I seek  
As I embrace hard bark,  
Each trunk can feel my heartbeat race  
Faster than feet of bugs.  
I dream of mushrooms, mint and rain,  
For I think I should move  
In furtive ways, away with faith,  
Escape from urban screech,  
Capsize the noise into the brook,  
'Cause I do understand



He heard it in the night  
From the shrewd owl, the old guide,  
A friend of the dark sky  
Where stars are simply candle light  
To help engrave the Moon,  
Into the poet's memory,  
Never to fade away –  
But never to replace  
Layers of shallow manners,  
Unnecessary wishes  
And unspeakable truths,  
For you may not be aware,  
But there's a slit in every heart  
That one can't sew or cover,  
With profuse protection  
They can't repair the cruel damage  
Caused by the white fang of society –  
That is how I know  
That no garden can save me,  
No home can I build  
On land drenched in sorrow,  
No plant for my tea  
Could ever cure the soul;  
Yes, I acknowledge –  
In a world where we put the gyves upon all Green  
Their windows will be swallowed by gray illusions.

But I'm the lucky one..  
My path is clear  
And with another rabbit jump

I find myself standing in the middle of the glade,  
 With nothing between me and the sky,  
 And all that lingers is the idea  
 That I can fill up that slit  
 With blankets of hoar frost,  
 Or marigolds or bees,  
 Forget-me-nots may do the trick,  
 Or ivy that expands –  
 All nature gives my heart accepts;  
 One thing I know for sure,  
 That in the city I felt cold  
 While Sun's rays strike my skin  
 Yet, now, under the coldest rain,  
 There's warmth inside my heart.

**"Poem in blue" by Oana FRENȚESCU (Romania)**

passion falls from the stars  
 feelings make the spring temperature bloom in pink  
 the wet night is dry with a bright sun

the poplars gather the crows  
 a man like a fir board crosses the street  
 a dog barks diagonally

a poet runs after a round moon  
 no printing house catches up with him  
 on page seven he seeks his love in white verse

a strange weather bathes the truth in the water

a miracle arises from a crooked judgment  
a universal mask sets the tone for fashion with bare ankles

a void comes out of the round words  
the pink letters burn my skin on my fingers  
yellow wings try me under the shade

I temporarily sterilize everything for  
fear of air  
of hugs  
by the world climbed on speeches  
by the skeleton of the voted words  
fear of blind thought  
of syllables pasted between spaces

the purpose of high love needs a few words  
of a pink silence  
and a remnant of yesterday's time

**"SOME DAY" by Ramona Ilade (Romania)**

Some day I will shake the trees  
of all the green  
that won't fit in the leaves.  
And I'll wear it on my waist  
like a living belt  
until from my naked soles  
roots will burst  
near by a river.  
My ankles will smell of dust,











and rain  
pelts down  
torrents drenching  
all the world  
giving life -  
and air.

**"A Family of Mergansers" by William W. Palmer (USA)**

I like to see a family of mergansers  
on the bay, a mother and ducklings  
with spiky red Mohawks

I watch them dive  
one at a time  
and wonder when they will appear

They always rise  
in different places,  
then find each other again

**"Her Northern Sisters" by Robert Keeler (USA)**

The thirteen sit in pomp, a silent line  
strung across a cold arc of urgency.  
Sisters, they hold collective breaths;  
they pray, they sigh for continuity.  
Along that old, red-fired crescent  
they deign to whisper loud, north





## Short Stories' Category:

"March 24th, 2020" by Michaela Brady (UK)

Today I was scheduled to fly to LA for my best friend's wedding. On Saturday, I would assume the position of Weeping Bridesmaid, staining a forest green dress, surrounded by the budding woodland venue in Topanga. All the flights were booked, the bouquets selected and the assortment of mini doughnuts approved. I relished structure and schedules, whether it was a casual night out in London, a boozy afternoon tea for a flat-warming, or the pinnacle of all planning: a wedding. What remained, on my side of the pond, was to pack and confront my fears of long-haul flights.

Kendall and Adam have been together since our first year of college. In the run-up to this week, I began to view the wedding as a culmination of nearly seven years of love, friendship and all those other gushy things we would have swooned at in the maid of honor's speech. Personally, the wedding served as a reunion with five of my closest friends—some of the most inspirational, zany, caring people in my life, and an opportunity for me to introduce them to my partner. Although we all met in New York, our post-graduation paths led us in opposite trajectories: I nestled under England's gray skies and they built their careers in film, music and acting in LA. Reunions were fleeting, and I could not help but feel like The One Who Left any time we said how much we missed each other.

For once, the Atlantic wouldn't feel so vast. For once, our intercontinental estrangement would be paused.

I write in the past participle and past tenses because plans mean nothing now. Today I remained on the ground while planes grumbled, unseen, over my roof. The wedding is postponed to June, but even that date remains tentative. Today I worked in my room, had therapy via Skype, and cleaned here and there as all of civilization was put under lockdown. Boris Johnson's voice drones on repeat from our screens, televisions, car radios and phones. Stay at home. Stop the spread. Other catchy one-liners.

Although we are permitted to go outside once per day for "a form of exercise", which should be limited to an hour, I didn't limit myself today. The skies are clear for the first time in months, and the temperature does not shock my skin with a damp, cold smack when I step outside. In the morning, I briefly zip to the nearby park to wake myself up, to watch all those oblivious birds and trees raise their heads to a spring we're unprepared for. At home, I've positioned myself at my table, while the grand bay window that dominates my studio flat drip-feeds me the passing hours. I'm grateful that my street is normally very quiet; it's easy to pretend nothing had changed.

In the evening I grow restless, so I venture out once again. Pink beams radiate through the stairwell, drawing me to the door, feeling the call of dusk renew my energy. Since my first year of college, I've punctuated my days with sunset viewings, and developed an appreciation for their nuances, the way they change the world for an hour, their passion and tragedy. Unless I'm occupied with something else or the evening is overcast, I almost feel obligated to catch it, remember it, escape through it. Clearly that has not wavered since the lockdown announcement, and I will not allow it to. Even if we can no longer plan for the future, we can adhere to a semblance of routine.

Joggers huff and puff along the paths and dogs trail their owners, savoring their daily walk. Meanwhile, I sink my boots into the thick,

squishy soil until I reach the center of Tooting Common, where I'm rendered a statue before a swollen evening sky. The horizon is coated in a rich turquoise that sharply contrasts the burning, waning sun. Below the turquoise sits a pillow of murky lavender clouds, bisected by a flaming pink beam. A painter could destroy their pallet trying to replicate this view, and cameras only seem to capture the strong, golden streaks cast over black and indigo below. It's nice but not enough. They simplify the view by washing out its beautiful complexity. Every time I get a chance to pay my respects to a dying day, my heart breaks - all we can do is watch it slide away. And I keep coming back for more.

Is it really as simple as the Earth turning away from the sun? Is it really so spectacular that the sky turns into a spectrum every day? And is it worth freezing my appendages and frying my eyeballs to just watch something like this? Sure. It can be just that. Not everything needs to be analyzed and overthought. But I can't stop my thoughts from drifting to the lockdown - how this is so clearly the optimal, if not only, solution to contain this outbreak. Why did the UK act so late? Selfishness, surely, or falsely believing this was not a human issue and that our sympathetic nods for the situation in China would provide us with enough immunity. I guess this quiet desperation really is the English way.

That couldn't be it. Although my eyes are fixed on the sunset and my ears are losing their blood flow, I can still feel them perk up slightly at every conversation that floats past me. People are reciting the government's rules, venting concerns, or making a complacent "well, that's the way things are now" sort of statement, as if any of us know what's going on. Their musings are directed at loved ones both walking by their side and on the other end of the telephone line. And I continue to stare at the sunset, knowing it isn't my place to eavesdrop or even mourn a cancelled trip when there is so much more at stake for others. Just like this sky, what's going on is nowhere near as simple as we would like it to be. We want to see a pretty orange sky and move on but we're stuck gaping at a spectrum of contrasting hues and light. There's always something unseen, unnoticed, unreviewed - a missing data point or a speck you only see before night shrouds the world, our part of the world, again.

We both prepared for doomsday at the expense of others' health and denied doomsday would come at all. Now that action has been taken, the day breathes a sigh of relief, and rewards us with a finale of color and soundless symphony. Life will restart, Kendall and Adam and many other couples will be wed; for now, we must pause.

We talk of perseverance in this "unprecedented time" and I'm reminded of another Boris, Boris Pasternak, urging us to be "alive and burning, to the end". So, I will do as he says: I will take walks at sunset to

remind myself, and others, what that means. I hope that, no matter what changes and re-forms here in our diminutive shadow, there will always be sunsets to color our days.

"Sparrow Spring Engineers" by Mi West (Sweden)

This is the coldest Scandinavian winter within the memory of man; deep snow, an orgy of darkness, and a supernatural silence that makes me hear the snowflakes fall. An infinite meditation for all creatures, one of inner and outer tranquillity. This year, the snow of the world seems to have fallen on this very street, and the thermometers at human nests are running out of scale.

\* \* \*

I hardly hear the soft, unobtrusive knock on my window. Many neighbors up here are birds, so I open it ajar. My toes immediately feel the ice-cold downdraft.

A sparrow. Surprisingly, he has picked up quite some human twitter. "Good evening," he says in his tiny voice.

I reply while wrapping my feet in a folded blanket. "Sit down, please. Well, I mean up, near where the heat flows out. If you were a human then you might remember icy Moomin-Valley winters from fairy tales."

"I'm a bird, and birds don't. This winter was a surprise; a stress test of survival of the fittest—or the inventive."

"I've seen some of the snow on the roof opposite has slid over the gutter, making a small cave."

"Scandinavia counts as a well-lighted place among two-legged flyers. So does the guttering. I'm staying just opposite your window and your writing lamp," he tweets, "and, a dark morning when my sweetheart and I were exhausted after mating, we watched the beautiful icicles outside

this window, glittering in a narrow ray of lamp light. They matched her glittering eyes. We probably kept on for hours."

"Oh, kept watching them?" I say, assuming sparrows are not that much into Tantra. Their soaring is more literal.

"Yes. Some parts of the cave are warm, and cozy, too, thanks to heat-insulation gaps inside the roof."

I laugh, and reply "We humans tend to believe that technology of the two-legged is perfect."

"The roof is a warm proof to the contrary; it's perfect from a bird's perspective only. No matter literal bugs or figurative, a bird instantly turns a bug into a feature."

"But, rather than from gaps in human tech, our distress comes from too little time spent on the essentials of life."

"Whereas birds are turned on equally by a high-flying vision and a tiny, down-to-earth grain or bug."

"Many humans feel less and less in touch with both kinds of turnons," I reply softly.

"Then imagine a sparrow mind, set soaring by things as simple as a hole in the snow!"

"But, isn't there more to it? You're in an attractive location, too. None of the cats in this district are hungry, and their two-legged owners—or butlers, in the cats' arrogant opinion—afford a plenty on the bird feeders, too."

"Right, and birds of prey find food in the nearby forest, enough to stay away from the human territories where I hang around."



I realize sunrise has an extreme duration at high latitudes; I'm overwhelmed by such a profound sunrise celebration, just like I'm by the daily sunrise song outside...

I say, "Your flock's vocal clarity has improved, too."

"Yes, thanks to the hike in our housing standard. The females are enchanted. Life has become pretty intense: Singing in daytime, mating at night."

I drop all preconceived ideas about sparrows as he goes on.

"Enjoying the magic of flight; literally in daylight, figuratively in twilight. That's the way natural selection works, breeding the brightest, cuddliest, singingest."

Natural selection seems important to birds, unlike the superlative form.

I reply, "You're bright enough to cheat the worst winter ever. I bet the good warm times are back before your cave finally melts near spring, like the heart of a two-legged sweetheart. Last summer, other humans didn't even believe that a bird's song imitated my alarm clock at daybreak; well done, although annoying at 1:00 a.m. near summer solstice."

"Until then, we precultivate the spring. It blooms within. Not only humans know what profuse lovemaking is; just in case you're doubtful, we'll introduce on-the-fly a couple of cute results of this cozy life," he twiddly-bits.

"When do you expect hatching?"

"In a couple of months. They'll be a generation brighter, cuddlier, talented-ier, you name it-ier."

Mating and evolutionary biology are important to birds, unlike the comparative form.

"The Spring song goes on, year after year," I reply. I wasn't totally wrong: although they have sex for progeny, they pick up a sweet Tantric tone now and then.

"You bet! Talk to you later," he concludes while vanishing into thin air, for another magical evening with a tiny being called sweetheart.

\* \* \*

I close the window, switch the kettle on, and put my toes on a warm radiator. A parallel reality? A dream? My ten frozen toes might be unparalleled, but they're all real. Just like the spring to come.

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**3rd Place (TIE):**

**"The Lost Village" by Subi Taba (India)**

During my early childhood days, my grandma once told me about the tale of the lost village. A village nestled in the faraway high mountains of Pakke valley, hundred mountains away from our village, where one day, the entire village, the inhabitants, the houses, the paddy fields, the mithuns, the pigs, the fowls and even their dogs just vanished into thin air!

'But how can an entire village and its inhabitants disappear just like that?' I prodded my grandma sitting up on the bamboo veranda, not satiated with the logic of the story.

'How do I know? All of them are gone. No one is left to tell the tale. Maybe someone might be left out there but the village is too far for us to travel and seek the answers my Papi.' Grandma replied gravely, worry lines appearing above her forehead. I looked at her face and imagined both of us climbing up the treacherous journey of the hundred mountains, holding onto the roots and branches of the wild trees like human monkeys.

'I will travel there someday and find out the truth.' I divulged dreamily.

'I will wait for that day. It will be your turn to tell me stories then.' My grandma grinned in her toothless smile and pulled me down to lie with her on the bamboo veranda seemingly done storytelling for the evening. I cloistered into her feeble arms that smelt like old dried bamboo skins. We both lay, resting our heads on the small wooden planks looking at the old moon shimmering softly above the rustling bamboo leaves.

I was busy imagining what the lost village must have looked like! Was it green, sloppy, windy with rugged rocky hills? I wondered how the people of the village dressed? Did the women plait their hairs around the forehead like us? Did the men keep a bun above their forehead like my grandfather? Did they wear yellow beads like us? Did they swear on tigers and elephants like us? Did the women weave skirts and shawls like my mother? Did men bring mithuns to purchase a bride like ours? How did the children spend time? Did they have a stream or a river that flowed nearby?

Sixteen years had passed since that evening and I had blossomed into a young woman, joined the Rajiv Gandhi University as a botany student but the magic of that tale still spanned somewhere in my old dusted memory reels. In the year 2014 a trans-highway project was sanctioned by the Indian government for the far flung tribal hills of Arunachal Pradesh and finally a road was carved on the impenetrable terrains of the hundred mountains. During my final semester, our Botany professor



monolith on the entrance. I glanced around, walking on the soft earth, mud sticking to my gumboots to find an existing house or signs of agriculture. The valley was overgrown by creeping jennys, smothering the ground with a carpet of yellow delicate flowers. I noticed an unusually large black rock in the corner with carved steps. I climbed over it and stood looking at the adjacent mountains and spotted a quiet river flowing in the east. The whirls of mist had lifted up and had clouded itself into white fluffy pendants of the sky. I sat down on the rock and felt a strange vibration, like the rock was a relic from the past attempting to whisper to me a dreadful forbidden secret.

In the far aerial tree branches, I saw movement. Then gradually the movement came nearer. I turned stiff, clutching my notebook tight. Could it be some wild creature? But to my relief, a man appeared from the rustling bushes, hustling breezily. An ethnic looking village man with a bun over his forehead, just like my grandpa.

'Hey!' I called out at the man, climbing down from the rock.

He suddenly paused and looked at me stupefied.

'Is this the lost village?' I asked hesitantly. A question that had been broiling inside of me for so many years.

The man looked at me intensely and asked from a curious distance observing my pants, t-shirt and gum boots, 'Who are you? You look different.'

'Oh, I am a student, a botany student.' I gave a defaulted reply but realizing the education level of the man I quickly added, 'I came here to study the vegetation of this valley.'

'Nothing grows in this valley, it is a cursed village.' He said and gingerly walked upwards briefly glancing at the village monolith. He looked like my father's age, but only more handsome and sturdy.

'What happened here?' I quickly asked. 'How did the entire village disappear?'

The man walked up the steps of the rock gazing intensely at the black surface and asked me, 'Do you believe in mystical pythons?'

I shrugged following him.

'Sometimes humans end up making strange friendships and falling into unpredictable fate lines!' He chuckled and sat down over the rock, his eyes remembering a story from the past.

He said.

Once upon a time, many years ago, this valley was teeming with life. Everything grew and prospered here. The climate was lovely. The harvest was plenty. The water was fresh. The land was fertile. The people were happy. There was music in the rustling leaves of the paddy fields. Men and women celebrated Nyokum with fervor and praised our Sun-Moon deity manifold.

Those were the good times, but those were the worst of the times as well. Village feuds and wars were rampant. Everyone wanted the best land, water and harvest for themselves. So one day it reached the ears of the neighboring Sede village, ten mountains away from here, about the fertility of the Pakke valley, the valley that gave sweet smelling rice.

Folks from Sede village prepared and waited for a moonless night to attack. They hid like quiet ghosts on the tree tops and gingerly climbed down when the domestic fowls were quiet and dogs tired of barking were snoring under the warmth of their owner's fireplaces. They scurried up like rats to the bamboo houses, in pairs, one man latched the door with timber posts and guarded the door with a machete while the other went down to set the house on fire. The villagers were in deep sleep somersaulting in their fourth stages of dreams, unaware that it was the last few moments of them breathing dreams, then fumes and then nothing. After midnight, the entire village rose up in distraught flames with dying hues and cries. Those who managed to rush out of the locked doors were slain right at the door. That horrific night all

the men, women, children, mithuns, pigs, domestic fowls, and the dogs were burnt alive. Except for one man.

That man, Bida Kino, survived death by slim chance of fate. He was sleeping on this very rock that night, planning for an early hunting trip to the forest. He woke up hearing masculine voices in his head. 'The Pakke valley belongs to us now!' The Sede folks hollered victoriously holding up their bloodied machete, their sweaty body shining under the silhouette of the splintering flames. Bida rose up and rubbed his eyes, to see his entire village being roasted.

'Did you check all the households?' 'Yes, brother. There is no one left. We have wiped out the entire village!' 'No, wait there is one man left.' They noticed the black figure of Bida Kino standing on the rock.

'I will come back one day and avenge you all!' Bida shouted, tears and anger boiling in his blood as he leaped down from the rock into the darkness and fled into the forest. The Sede folks chased him for many days and nights.

Bida ran and climbed through the rough impenetrable rugged and rocky terrains in terror. Once when he had reached one of the steepest mountains, he stopped. When the terror subsided, he realized that he was naked, consumed by hunger and thirst. He felt like the only person left on the earth in the dark company of dense forests. Many nights he cried his sorrows to the mountains that he had decided to make his home. He lived like a ghost in the mountains. Sometimes he slept like monkeys on the trees. Sometimes like a lion inside a cave. He ate fruits and buried the peels. He never left a footprint.

One day, in the mountain while foraging for wild roots, he found an egg. He held the egg tenderly in his palms and asked, 'Who are you?' The egg was silent.

Under a giant tree, he built a cave with dried leaves and placed the egg on it. He waited for weeks. One day, the egg started to crack and a tiny baby python emerged out of it.

After living like an animal for days, the man could not contain the happiness in owning another creature. He celebrated the arrival of the python and nursed and fed the python like his own child. His days became livelier and his fate started to magically transform in the mystical company of the python. He would whistle and the python would emerge and they would explore the terrains of their small hamlet. He grew healthier, taller, and handsomer. He had built himself a house in the mountain. He tended fields that gave surplus yield. He had everything except a woman to start a family.

Meanwhile, the Sede clans had taken over his village and were in constant curious lookout for the last surviving man of the village. They scanned all the nearby mountains except for one mountain. It was the mountain where the python and the man lived. Whoever crossed the giant tree never came alive. With the help of their shamans, they were certain that it was some mystical power that was saving that man. Knowing the marriageable stage of the young man, they sent their most beautiful maiden to the rocky mountains.

Bida saw the maiden in the mountains and fell for her at first sight. Deep in love, he had forgotten about his python, which waited in the cave to hear one of his whistling calls. The maiden, surprised to see such a fine built house in the middle of the forest stocked with rice and vegetables, started living in his house. The Pakke valley did not give sweet smelling rice after that fire holocaust. She tended him dearly and took care of all his manly needs. One morning, she woke up to find him gone. She followed him secretly and saw him walk towards the tall tree holding a bowl of food. After reaching the tree, he whistled and slowly a python emerged out of the cave. 'Ajin ho, I am sorry I have had some work so I could not visit you for some days.' Bida said as he fed the python and scuttled up to the pathways to tend the fields. The maiden was now certain about the truth of a mystical power. The next morning, after Bida had gone to the fields. She walked towards the tree and in eagerness attempted a whistle.

In the evening when Bida came back from the fields, the maiden was not there in the house. Worried he searched the entire mountain. Later in the evening he hobbled up to his python. There he saw the python had curled up the maiden and she was screaming. He wrestled and rescued the maiden. Enraged, he took out his machete and chopped off the giant tree and kicked away the rocks of the python's cave. He taunted the python spitefully, 'This is the woman I love. My kind, I belong to them, not you! You, you are... just a snake! We can't be ajins anymore!' The







the ground and colour it grey. The granite grass forms a fairy-ring around the corpse, as if in warning. As if it is contagious.

I wonder when they will find my body.

It has been six hundred hours since I died, and I watch as spiders settle in the eye-sockets. They build their homes, weighed down with morning dew, and raise their children amongst the cartilage, feeding them with slices of grey matter. They come and go as they please, tapping over the exposed skull with spindly, hairy legs. Pity rises in my throat and I reach for the corpse. My hand passes through the cavern where its stomach should be and my fingertips drift over the frayed vertebrae.

I wonder if they will find my body.

It has been one thousand two hundred hours since I died, and the weather is beautiful. It is a rainy day at the turn of autumn and the world pulses in yellows dampened by the cloudburst. Trees curl their branches to the sky in thanks, stretching to the heavens in an attempt to collect every last drop. What manages to evade the trees falls to the earth in glittering silver shards or gets lost in the thick fur of creatures who scurry past, looking for shelter. Their beady eyes do not even glance my way. Even the forest has forgotten me. I am little more than an outline now. A whispering memory, overtaken by the vitality that vibrates in every corner of this grove. I am a forgotten goddess, with budding flowers for eyes and butterflies in my stomach. I close my eyes and try to remember what rainy days smell like.

No one will ever find my body.

## Honorable Mentions:

"Like a Bird" by David Ehrlich (Brazil)

Peter spotted a small, dark dot flying across that completely cloudless sky, and immediately grabbed his binoculars to check it out. Just as he thought: large wings, rather pointed tail tip,

extensively grey flanks, black head. "Got you, my pesky little darling!" he thought, and ordered his camel to keep moving across the desert, following the bird.

It flew towards a large, dark mountain massive starkly standing out amidst the sandy lowlands of the Sahara Desert. From that distance, it seemed largely bare of vegetation, but there certainly was some sort of oasis there. That was where Peter would find the bird.

- We got company! - Suddenly said Igider, pointing towards a group of four figures slowly getting closer. Amastan and Izemrasen grabbed their rifles, though without taking them out: those were times of unrest, and depending on whom those people were, things could get nasty. They could be Tuareg, French or even Hausa, all of them would bring trouble with them.

Peter sighed: wherever there were humans, there was conflict. Back in Europe there was conflict, boys fighting each other in muddy trenches. For two years it had been like that. There was no more nature there, only No Man's Land. But even in that vast, silent and lonely desert, where sometimes Peter could hear his own heartbeat and it seemed there was no time at all, or rather all the time in the world, there was conflict.

It took a few minutes until the strangers could be identified as Tuareg. Igider, Amastan and Izemrasen released their guns, being Tuareg themselves, but didn't completely lower their guard. After all, they could still be rebels. Not exactly dangerous, but could drag them into dangerous situations. None of them wanted that, especially Peter. One last time he looked at the dark dot flying towards the mountains. "Let's hope you'll wait until we're there".

Finally the group got close enough to talk. It consisted of three men and a young boy. All of them stared unfriendly towards Peter, then proceeded to talk to his companions.

- We are thirsty. - One of them said in the Tuareg language Peter was slowly learning.

- And we are hungry. - Said Amastan. He turned, as if asking Peter for permission. Peter nodded, and Izemrasen gave the strangers the group's water to drink. They, on their hand, gave Peter and his companions some flat bread to eat.

The boy, who seemed to be about nine years-old, was the first one to drink the water, and while his own companions drank, he stared at Peter, with very angry eyes.

- French or Italian? - The boy asked in French, possibly the only European language he knew how to speak.



Through his guides, Peter knew what was going on: for years the Tuareg had been fighting against the French, who forced them to pay high taxes and seized many of their camels to aid in conquests. And after the most recent drought, which lasted three years, the Tuareg were more willing to revolt than ever. Then three months earlier, Kaocen, a local Tuareg clan leader, rallied a force of over a thousand warriors and defeated the area's French garrison, seizing all major towns around the mountains and putting that whole place under Tuareg control.

Issouf's companions - who Peter now knew were called Omara, Brigi and Mahamadou - proudly retold the story. Only then did they tell something Peter wasn't aware of: in 1907, before Kaocen started to engage in battles against French forces, he had a son with a young Tuareg woman. But then he chose to partake in the fight against the French, leaving to Chad in order to participate in several raids. Now that he was back to his homeland as a rebel leader, he found out his son's mother had recently been killed by the French, as a way of reprisal, and that they had captured his son. Kaocen sent two hundred of his men to release Issouf, and the boy was now on his way to finally meet the father he hadn't seen since he was a toddler.

The young Issouf didn't say much while his father's story was told. That whole time, he just stared silently at Peter, but the man couldn't say if it was just due to curiosity.

- How many people have you photographed? - The boy finally asked.

- I don't photograph people. - Answered Peter.

- Then why are you here?

- To document the migration of the Sardinian warbler.

- The what?!

- I don't know how you Tuareg call it. It's a bird. It lives in Italy, and during winter it migrates to the Sahel. I've been travelling and taking pictures of every place the bird has been, and seeing how far it goes. That is what brought me here.

- Why do you do that?

- You want me to be honest? - Peter brought his camel closer to Issouf's, in order to talk almost next to the boy's ear - No reason. I just take pictures of birds. I've already travelled to hidden corners across all seven continents, photographing the migratory patterns of birds. That's what I've been doing for the last 21 years.

- And what did you do before that?

- I was a teacher. I would teach young boys like you how to write and read, how to speak properly and become gentlemen. But then I came across this picture... I can't remember now the name of the photographers, but it was a picture of a bird's nest with eggs. It was the purest thing I'd ever seen. Even years after those eggs hatched and the chicks flew away from the nest, that picture will always show that exact moment, without human interference. Even a painting still has a human touch; two painters will always paint the nest differently, even if they paint it from the same angle. And that was when I realized it. That all those years I'd been teaching kids the art of words, when actually words mean nothing. I've been trying to describe you what I felt seeing that picture, but if you saw it, no words at all would have been needed. And that is why I quit my job and became a photographer. Nature needs no words, and I gave up on the world of words. I haven't written a single letter in three years. Meanwhile, many of my former students have died on a trench, shot on the head, bleeding to death on barb wire or blown up to bits, just because of words they heard or read telling them to kill and die.

- I don't understand it...

- I don't think I can understand it myself. - Peter laughed.

- But why birds?!

- I don't know! Maybe I'm doing it for nothing. - Peter smiled - Or rather for myself.

- What do you mean?

- It's an old motto from Yorkshire, where I come from. It sounds better in our dialect, but it says the same: "Hear everything, see everything, say nothing. Eat everything, drink everything, pay nothing. And if you ever do anything for nothing, always do it for yourself".

- I don't understand anything of what you are saying...

- Somehow, I hope you never have to understand it.

Peter couldn't tell for how long they rode through the desert. On that bare landscape, there were no watches to imprison time in hours and minutes: rather, it flew freely like a bird, and it was everywhere, to the point of meaning nothing. Peter could have blinked once or a million times, but in the blink of an eye they were right next to the mountains, getting close to a small town near an oasis. But before the army entered the town, everyone stopped. Peter would have asked why, but soon realized it: towns and oasis always meant noise, unlike the brutally silent desert. One would hear people

talking, camels grunting, donkeys braying, dogs barking. None of that could be heard. It was as silent as any other place for miles and miles.

"The people could have fled", Peter thought. After all, there was a revolt going on, and on such conflicts people tend to flee from small towns, where they are less safe.

Then the wind changed direction, blowing straight to their faces. And the smell was unmistakable: a stench of rot, a stench of death.

The first gunshot was heard before any of the Tuareg could take any action, and one of them suddenly fell from his camel. Only then did the French soldiers get out of their hidings. There were hundreds of them, standing on rooftops, hiding behind barrels, pointing their rifles through windows. All of them started to shoot at the same time.

The Tuareg were taken by surprise, but did not panic: many of them were experienced in battling against the French and quickly dispersed themselves, making it more difficult for the enemies to shoot them. With rifles in their hands, they charged, shooting back while riding.

Peter stayed still where he was, bedazzled by the Tuareg's braveness. He looked for his guides. Peter soon found Igider, lying dead on the ground with a bullet wound piercing his throat. Amastan, who happened to be Igider's brother, was lying right next to him, alive, but crying in the most heartbreaking of fraternal despairs. No sign of Izemrasen could be seen.

Issouf. What about Issouf, where was he?! The Tuareg wouldn't let him fight the French, they rode through the desert just to bring him to his father. But where was he?!

Peter soon saw him, being dragged by Omara, who was running away by foot, his camel probably shot down. At first he thought that Omara, being part of Issouf's escort, was just taking him to safety. But then Peter saw the way Issouf was being dragged. And a bell rang on his head, remembering those long-past days as a teacher, under that cruel school system where the authority was the law, and not the opposite. He remembered seeing school boys being dragged like that by their teachers or seniors. And soon realized Issouf was in danger.

Peter ignored the hellish battle around him. And somehow, it ignored him back, as no bullets hit him while he rode his camel as fast as the animal could. Though the poor creature, not used to gunshots, was quite scared, and though it looked thirstly at the lake which formed the heart of the oasis, it obeyed its master, and safely reached the entrance of a narrow valley where, after weeks of

travelling, Peter finally saw trees, small acacias and balsams growing up between the rocky mountains. There he reached Omara, trying to walk his way up the valley.

- Stop! - Said Peter, passing over Omara. Peter was unarmed, so all he could do was use his huge camel to block the Tuareg's way.

- What are you doing, mellan? - Asked Omara.

- That's exactly what I was going to ask you.

- I am bringing Issouf to his father, away from this lost battle.

- And what else?

- What do you mean, what else?!

- You knew those French were waiting for us, didn't you?

- Don't you dare say "us", mellan! You are not one of us!

- You didn't answer me, Omara. What about you? Are you one of "you"? Do you think you are one of "you"? Or do you think you are better? That you are you and they are them?

- Don't try to confuse me with your words!

- Didn't you hear me before? Words mean nothing to me. I just saw the way you are dragging this boy. You don't care about his safety. You just want to get close to Kaocen, right? That's what the French told you to do.

Omara suddenly pulled a pistol he was hiding under his clothes, pointing it not towards Peter, but towards Issouf.

- That's right! Kaocen knows his revolt won't last long! We all knew a large force was being dispatched from Zinder to suppress us! That's why he went on hiding! He won't even let other Tuareg get near him! But if I bring him his son, he'll have to let me get close enough.

- Then what? What did the French promise you, to make you a sultan? - Omara didn't answer, but his eyes told everything Peter needed to know - They'll just give you a title and then offer themselves to protect you. You won't have any real power, you'll be just a puppet, and if you do anything they dislike they'll destroy you and put another better-behaved puppet in your place. The French have done it dozens of times before. The British, too, have done it dozens of times before. To those people, every living being in this continent is expendable.

- Now it's you who's seeing yourself as better than "them". Who are you but some crazy mellaan who comes to our land thinking he can do whatever he likes? You can't! This is our nature, not yours! And if you ever find yourself alone here, I bet you won't last a single...

Omara didn't get to finish his sentence. A gunshot was heard, and Omara fell dead on the ground. Peter was shocked to see the shot came from a pistol the young Issouf was holding. He, too, probably had it hidden all this time.

- Issouf... - Peter whispered.

- He is right, you know? - The boy said, seeming unmoved by having just killed a man - You think you can be like a bird flying from one place to another, and that that's what nature is like. It isn't. Nature also has lions. Maybe there are no deserts in your Yorkshire, but here we don't value what you say, we value what you do. You say a lot about words meaning nothing, but you don't do anything either. You call it freedom, but here we just call it cowardice.

- By God... - Peter was stunned, even if a part of him couldn't quite grab the meaning of what Issouf was saying.

- Arrêter! - They suddenly heard someone saying. When Peter and Issouf turned to look, at least a dozen French soldiers were entering the valley, pointing their guns at them.

- Don't shoot, I'm English! - Peter said, but the soldiers ignored him and grabbed Issouf, taking his gun out of his hand - Don't touch him!

- Arrêter! - A soldier shouted at Peter's face, grabbing the reed of the photographer's camel. Peter tried to resist, but the soldier hit him with the butt of his gun. He was knocked out, falling right over the box where his camera was.

When Peter woke up, he was all alone. No sign of Issouf, or the French, or even the camel. His camera was completely smashed under his back.

He ran back to the oasis. No one there to see. At least no one alive. Peter recognized Amastan and Izemrasen, along with those of Brigi and Mahamadou. All of them gunned down and lying next to a wall. But wherever he looked, he couldn't find a single sign of Issouf.

Then he heard a fast and rattling song, coming from the lake. And there it was, a Sardinian warbler, staring back at Peter with its black head and red eyes. Peter instinctively tried to reach his camera, only to realize he had none. He had no camera to take a picture of the bird. He had no camel to reach civilization. How long until a caravan reached that place? Could he find a nearby town by foot?

At that moment, Peter wished Issouf didn't shoot Omara before he said how long he betted the photographer would last alone in that vast, silent, lonely and beautiful desert.

**"The Badger" by Daniela Albu (Romania)**

The car door was locked. Without realizing this, she hastily tried to open it. The helpless expression on her face and the idea of indifferently leaving a woman alone in that rain made me pull on the right and accept to take her for what I thought it would be a short lift. Still, I resented her presence. She was obviously trying to flirt with me and in spite of her beauty, I felt annoyed. I was thinking so intensely of Patricia that I could only find her boring. She obviously has class, I thought. But why on earth did I take her into my car, especially when anything might happen in this crazy world? She can as well be either a thief, a psychopath, or a murderer. Why did I let myself moved by the fact that she was looking so desperate with her small suitcase, by the road, in the middle of nowhere? I had still a long distance to drive and the sky was turning almost black. I could feel from inside the car the pressure of the strong wind. Maybe she was not trying to flirt with me after all and it was only my impression. I could not help looking at her thin delicate arms. She had gorgeous natural red hair and an extremely white skin. I could guess the elegant shape of her body under the long, vaporous summer dress.

The wind became stronger and stronger. Now we could hear the pebbles hitting the car. The green pupils of her eyes were widening almost like those of a cat. It was not fear, but we both felt a sort of tension growing with the gathering of the dark clouds above us. We seemed to be leaving the light behind us and to be heading straight into the heart of the coming storm. Clouds of dust were now whirling on the road and rising up into the sky. I had to get to Patricia.

She had been so insistent at the time that I finally agreed to buy that cottage so far away from the city, with no neighbors, and too near the woods. We were both charmed by the gorgeous view of the lake nearby from the bedroom windows and from the porch. Of course she made wonders and with time, the cottage became extremely comfortable. I still resented having to drive for so many hours to get there. I presume I am a lazy bourgeois and I would rather watch TV, glass of good wine in my hand, than enjoy the strong fresh windy air of the lake and woods and all the other countryside pleasures. But who could resist to

Patricia's charm? One could never neglect her presence when she would enter a room. All of us were so sad when she could not continue her ballerina career because of that stupid knee surgery. She could walk perfectly now, but she could dance no more.

"Stop it, for Christ's sake! Haven't you seen the poor badger? It's a real wonder that he got away. Look! Look! He safely reached the other side".

The woman's shout has been loud but pleasant, like a cold shower to my nerves.

"What are you, one of those ecologists? I haven't seen the darn badger.

Can't you see the storm looming ahead of us? Do you think I care about a stupid animal jumping under the wheels?"

Of course I did not really mean it. I was actually glad that the badger was all right. The woman was tense, but so was I. I could clearly see by the black sky ahead that we were heading directly into the storm. The poor badger must have thought it was night when he tried to cross the road.

"I'm sorry!" I said.

She nodded but I felt her tension combined with a sort of sadness. After all, we are all God's creatures. I could have been that badger myself, I thought, but I did not say anything more. I just continued to drive scarcely seeing the road in front of me. A heavy rain soon started splashing its drops at random in the wild wind. The sound of the rain always relaxes me but this time it was as if someone was whipping the car with fury. The wind grew wilder and wilder. I would not stop the car for anything in the world. I desperately wanted to see Patty. I missed her the entire week and it felt like a year to me.

"Don't you think it would be wiser to pull on the right for a while"? She candidly asked me.

"And do what; just wait for it to get worse?"

That very moment I realized that she might take me for a very rude person. I did not care. I was thinking of Patty's embrace, of her soft arms, her curly black hair, so black that in the light it seemed almost dark blue, her warm walnut eyes, so strange, so innocent and different from any other woman's eyes.

Her stupid idea of spending so much time at the cottage, made me endlessly drive almost every Friday to see her. How thrilled I was to surprise her like that and just show up on a Wednesday evening. I even bought two bottles of her favorite Merlot. We will dine gazing at the lake, not caring about the storm from our cozy living room, and then would make love all night like a crazy young roguish couple. My sweet Patty! I know that life has not been fair to you but from now on, I will try to make it up for all your misfortunes. I had not been right to put my career before anything. I will treasure you, as you deserve.

"Excuse me for not being too talkative". I suddenly said to the woman.

"It's OK. My name is Sandra".

"I'm Michael. I just want to get to my wife and I am only annoyed with this storm".

"It seems to be right ahead of us. It is as if we are going into it. I'm not afraid, I'm from Kansas"

"That's good to hear. It almost looks like a tornado to me."

"Don't worry. Are you sure you don't want to stop and calm down for a moment?"

"No. I've already told you. I have to get to my wife."

"You must love her a lot".

I did not feel like answering her. I continued to drive. My eyes were almost in tears because of my effort to focus on the road. She looked at me with a sort of compassion and then she asked for my permission to smoke. I nodded. I did not wish to enter into any more conversation with her. She lit a cigarette and for a moment the flame of her lighter brought a strange powerful light in all that darkness. The car headlights were piercing the dense dust and fog. The gusts of rain were stopping and coming again in sequences. The woman's green eyes were extremely sparkling, like those of some rare wild creature taken by surprise.

"I must admit I saw few men driving into a storm like this for someone else's sake" said she.

I drove for almost another two hours and the center of the storm seemed to be always ahead of us. Whenever we were reaching a place, the storm was one pace further. We saw fallen trees and wires and had to wait for almost half an hour while a huge trunk was removed from the road. We passed some houses with broken windows, smashed roofs, and were terrified of what more was to come while advancing in the footsteps of that disaster. All this time I felt an inexplicable secret bound between Sandra and me. I did not know who she was and I did not care. We were two closed people in the middle of perils and this was the only thing that mattered.

"We are now getting closer to my place. I will speak to my wife and you can spend the night with us."

She nodded in that special way of hers, without thanking me, as if she didn't care.

I was so happy when I saw my house from distance. Getting closer, I realized that, with the exception of some bended trees in the front garden, it seemed not to have suffered major damage. I told Sandra to wait in the car until I clarify the situation with Patty. When I got out, I could barely slam back the car door. Finally, I managed to reach the porch and to enter the house fighting to push the front door.

It struck me to see from the living room, the broken window of the kitchen with the fluttering curtains and the wind howling everywhere.

I knew how careful Patty was with these things and I could not realize why this carelessness. I rushed into the kitchen and I pulled down the shutters to block the hole. I started anxiously to call Patty. Obviously, the roar of the wind outside covered my voice.

I went upstairs and I opened the bedroom door. And there they were; her sweet face resting on the shoulder of my friend Jack, her half covered body in his arms, under the blue quilt, both plunged into a deep sleep, looking like the perfect pair. I slowly closed the door, went downstairs and managed to go back to the car. I accelerated with incredible fastness to get out of that nightmare and with an amazing accuracy which at that time, I did not realize it was triggered by my disappointment and despair. Despite the strong gusts, strangely, the storm was no longer ahead of us, but it looked like it would get there soon and a sixth sense warned me that this was just the beginning of what was to come. I left the storm behind without any remorse of what might follow or happen.

Sandra did not ask me anything. Only late in the night, when I was still aimlessly driving, staring at the headlights she whispered:

"You look exactly like that badger that managed to get away".

## Other Selected Short Stories:

"COVID's Combat" by Amy Pacini (USA)

Masked mercenaries under covert cover on a mutiny's mission

Harrowingly hunkered within hermetically hiding homes on looming lockdown

In constraining containment of invisible isolation against the infectiously insurgent invasion.

Bravely battling on the formidable front lines of COVID's combat

To infiltrate the contracted camps from spreading sickness and deadly destruction

Prepped and primed with an airtight arsenal of exterminating equipment and disinfectant droids

Vengefully vanquishing the viral viper's pervasive poison with vaccinating victory.

Dreaming of the dramatically diseaseless day

When shadowed skies clear the coughing clouds with rosy radiance

Unveiling a visionary view of welcomingly wakening wonder and breathtakingly blissful beauty

Refreshing breezes carefreely sway with purifying purpose and calm contentment.

The cresting coronavirus crisis plummetingly plateaus

Taming the tempest's cyclonic current and turning the tumultuous tides of plaguing peril

Suppressing the exhaustively ending storm surge prevailingly passing by serenity's shore.

Determinedly dashing through our urgently unlatched doors

Giddily greeting our families, friends, and neighbors

With happy hellos, felicitous faces, and glowing grins

Joining in jubilant jigs and singing sunshine songs

Emotional embraces of tearful tenderness liberate love after yesterday's yearning year

Cheerfully conversing in communal connection of freedom's friendship

As we safely socialize with healthy hopefulness and progressive promise.

Ready to resound the commerce chime

Businesses booming with robust resilience and soaring success

Revitalized retailers and restaurants officially opening with full service and complete capacity

With record breaking customer crowds and profitable purchases.

Launching locomotion, livelihood, and leisure

Galvanizingly geared up for grand gatherings and elaborate events

Finally, time for fun festivities and enjoying exciting excursions once again.

Restoring rhythmic regularity in routines and rituals

Exhilarating energy and emerging earthly equilibrium

Recreating humankind's reality and universally uniting us

With a revolutionary COVID cure for regenerating civilizations in centuries to come.

**"Metamorphosis and other Arts" by Elizabeth Eve King (USA)**

The intersection of Adams and 28th Street is surrounded by the smell of rancid spicy foods cooking. An old women selling roasted corn and tamales relentlessly roams the streets crying "TaMALes" in sonorous tones that battle with the the ice-cream cart's relentless, high, too cheerful jiggles. Ruined once been majestic Victorian homes, now house teeming masses, families of five and more encamped in one room apartments. Some yards have crazy, uncontrolled gardens, but most are dirty lots where trash is kicked. Cholos (gangsters) stride down the streets. Colorful tattoos of the Virgin and long family names decorate their arms. Their pants too big, too baggy. In the streets children construct wooden ramps and skateboard off, levitating into the traffic. Babies scream .Fat women roast tortillas over open fires. Streets are trashed. The only color is the indecipherable clamor of graffiti.

It is here that I work for a non-profit organization. We began fifteen years ago by building housing. Now we build healthy neighborhoods.. or that's what we say. I love the children, gardens and art, but I hate the oh so earnest meetings. If I never hear the words "social justice" again, it will be too soon. I run a year round arts studio. Two years

ago I began a sidewalk garden in South Central Los Angeles. A place noted for wildlife, although usually not the invertebrate kind.

I have simple, impossible plan. To plant every stretch of unused dirt, parkways, medians with milkweed; thus making South Central famous for monarch butterflies not gangs. Milkweed is in my mind a lovely flower, delicate and deadly. It's completely drought tolerant and spreads like rabbits. Monarch's migratory patterns are at risk due to habitat loss. However, if you plant milkweed they will come. Like building a ball park...I don't expect shoeless Joe, but I do expect shoeless monarchs. I hope they are jacketless too, jacketless and lacking all clothing or gang insignia. Chrysalis not Cripps, butterflies not Bloods.

Gardening in South Central is digging in hard ground, literally as well as metaphorically. In 1999 about ten (white) volunteers came into the community and planted 20 young saplings. The next day, all were broken. In my garden, however, residents often add plants; tropical oregano, sago palms, prickly pear cactus, and pumpkins. The trick is working with the community. I have for the past fifteen years. The bird houses, built by our kids are mysteriously filled with old bread and corn. Some of our sparrows are so full of tamales they can barely fly. When the cholos see the children planting, or get asked to smell the chocolate mint, they let it grow... Butterflies and happy, dirty children make excellent ambassadors. Also the child might be theirs.

#### "Garden Before

#### Garden After" by Elizabeth King (USA)

One night at about 7:00pm I heard a commotion outside, looking out the classroom window I discovered about 20 people, young and old.

I inspected the street, but noticed nothing unusual (except conceivably me, dirtier than normal if possible, encrusted not only with clay glaze and paint as usual, but with soil as well.)

I leaned out the window. "Is there a problem?"

"Just looking," one young man answered.

"At the class?" Or at the incredibly grubby woman before you?

"No, at the garden. We are admiring the garden."

"We love the garden."

I could have cried, adding trails of salt to my overall filth. Luckily I'm not a crier.

"Lost" by Yasmin Chueiri (Brazil)

Milena, Luna and Luka met at school in 3rd grade and after that they became just like one person: they lived in different houses, but in the same street, they didn't have many friends, what made them get closer and inseparable. They had very different personalities but they completed each other.

They went to the forest because Milena and Luka wanted to explore and Luna didn't want to be alone, so she went with them. The forest wasn't a total unknown place for them. They had gone there a few times, but not too deep. They had to walk less than 20 minutes to get to the forest. They entered the forest and walked for one hour before stopping to rest, eat and drink water in a very calm and quiet place - with a lot of big trees and a lot of bugs. The sunlight passed through the leaves and made the whole place very beautiful. They were planning to stay there for less than 5 hours. They had to go home because they were going to have dinner (the 3 families together). They used to do that at least one time in a month.

Luna suddenly screamed. Luka and Milena looked at her but she wasn't there. They were in panic and started running trying to find her. Both fell in a hole in the middle of the ground. Luna was there too.

- Where are we? - Milena asked.

- I have no idea - said Luka.

- We will die! - cried Luna.

The hole was deep for them to get out by the top, so they tried to find another exit.

- Milly - that's how they called Milena - what will we do? We don't have a lot of food and water, and no one will find us here - said Luka.

- I don't know... look! There is light over there - she pointed to the right.

The girls went there to see the light while Luka tried to find another way to escape.

- Luka, come here! - Milena and Luna screamed.

When he got there he saw a lake and a stone tunnel, which the water accompanied.

- Can we go out by this tunnel? - asked Luna hopefully







- This week? The whole week?
- Yes!

The 3 friends were home now.

### "Nature is important!" by Giovana Maia (Brazil)

In a little town, Mystic Falls, there was a group with 3 friends Caroline, Elena and Stefan. They have lived in this city since they were babies. Caroline and Stefan are 15 years old and Elena 16. They loved to explore the forest that is in front of Caroline's house. There are many types of animals like, birds, sloths, bugs, etc. In this forest there is a mini wooden house, there are a lot of toys, some cushions, pictures, a big mattress that the group of friends, which is known by C.E.S, used to lie down, so they could see the stars. They liked to talk about their future.

One day, when Damon was still alive, the 4 teenagers got together and started saying about what they would like to be in the future. Damon once said: "I think I would like to be a doctor because I like saving people's lives. And you Stefan?", "I would like to be an astronaut, I have many doubts about space and it would be very nice to see the planets, stars. And you Elena?", "I just want to have a big family, care about my children and teach them about nature, be respectful, many things. Caroline what would you like to be when you grow up?" "Maybe a PopStar, I want to meet Rhianna". Stefan said: "You know that this is probably impossible, right?". Then Damon answered "Nothing is impossible for those who dream".

After his death, they never went to the club again. In the end of the year a company, Forever Make-up, that makes some makeup products, like lipstick, foundation and blush, wanted to deforest the area where the club was, because they wanted to construct another unit of the company there. They are the most famous company of makeup products, there are all the things that people want to buy available in their stores. Once they got the girls from Stanger Things to make some advertising, and these products were the most popular.

The group got to know about that when they went to Stefan's house and they decided to do something quickly. Caroline said "Guys, let's think of something fast that will stop the mayor and this bad company". Stefan said "This is not going to work, it is already done". "Really, Stefan, are you giving up?! What would Damon do?", Elena thought. "What if we try to talk to the mayor, it is never too late". C.E.S went to the mayor's office and they said that they didn't want to deforest that place where there were many animals living and because the club was the only thing that they had from Damon, with many memories. It didn't work, the mayor screamed and said:

"But the important thing is the money and the jobs the city will receive".

Before the company started the construction, the group had an idea. They made many leaflets talking about the importance of the forest and that they couldn't destroy it. It was the first time that any of them were making leaflets. They asked Elena's mother, Mary, for help because she was good at editing things. Mary helped them choose which type of writing they would use, with the images and the organization of the texts. There was a sentence saying: "Don't kill our forest!". At 11 a.m. all the people who lived in the town got together and stayed in front of the forest with many charts with information about animals and about the forest's importance.

Everyone started to scream saying;

"Nature is important! Nature is important! Nature is important".

The mayor couldn't stop it. He needed to accept that they wouldn't deforest the place. So he said to everyone that the company wasn't going to destroy the forest: "Everyone, pay attention to what I am going to say. I saw what this forest means to all you folks and I thought it would be better not to destroy it. Thanks for being so strong and having this amazing idea. LET'S CELEBRATE NATURE!!".

The company tried to talk to the people to convince them otherwise. They said "we are not going to kill the animals, we have a big group that is going to help to get the animals and put them in other places to live", but no one cared about the products. After this the C.E.S,



– You can see those land spots there. The brownish parts are mostly desert, but the purple ones are dense with vegetation. The purple color is due to the substance retinal. Purple is actually the most common vegetation color in the universe and we are going to see much more planets like this.

There was a pause and everyone took the chance to look closer to the wall. Many of them instinctively touched the glass, as if trying to touch the planet itself. After a while, the guide said:

– Now, let's take a closer look at the planet and see the lifeforms with our own eyes. Now we are going to point our telescopes at the planet and display the images on that same wall. Just hold on a second.

The guide pressed a button close to the wall and it immediately became opaque. Then, images of the planet's surface were shown, exhibiting the variety of life, both on land and sea, with unimagined creatures that were, at the same time, similar, but alien to what they were used to. There were many purple plants, with large leaves, and colored quadruped animals running through the dense, but spaced, vegetation. In the water, there were fish-like creatures, swimming quickly, chasing each other, and colored corals. The people watched the images with delight. It was the first time they were seeing life outside of their planets and appreciating the beauties of the nature of the universe. After a long time, the guide pressed the button again and the glass became transparent again. Then, he said:

– I can see that you are impressed by what you see. I have been making this same tour for a while and I'm always impressed by those images,

even if I know what is there. But if you think this is impressive, now you are going to see something even greater. we are going to travel to

another planer rich in water, but with a species that constructs impressive structures. Well, I better stop talking and let you see it for yourselves. Now, stay still, because we are going to travel again.

The guide picked a device that was hanging in the wall and pointed to their mouth, saying:

– We are done with this planet. You can travel to the next!

The glass turned opaque again but this time, displaying safety rules telling everybody to press their bodies to the ground, stay still and avoid doing movements during the trip. A soothing music was played, to

avoid the people from panicking. in instants, the spaceship became turbulent and, after several minutes, became still again. The glass wall became transparent one more time and a starry darkness could be seen. The guide said:

– We are going to maneuver the ship, to put the next planet in range of view. Please, be patient.

The spaceship maneuvered and, in instants, another blue planet turned into view. it had less water than the previous, and was smaller. The portions of land varied in color, from brown to green and many white clouds could be seen. The people stared at the glass wall, admiring the planet, until the guide said:

– You are looking at the HJ-887. This is another inhabited exoplanet.

One of the smallest out there. It also has a lot of water and is home of a myriad of species of carbon based life. You can see that the land spots vary in color from brown to green. This is caused by the presence of chlorophyll in the plants. you can also notice that there are two opposing poles, full of ice. I'm going to let you admire the planet for a while, before showing you the natural beauties it holds.

The people looked through the glass, staring at the small blue planet. They weren't as impressed as they were with the previous planets, but there was something about the place that caught everybody's attention. After a while, the guide continued:

– Just by looking like this, there's not much to see. At least not much difference from the other planets we've seen, but the real beauty of this planet is within its lifeforms. Let's take a look at them.

The guide pressed the button one more time and the glass turned opaque, showing many images of the variety of life on the planet, from dense green forests to rocky deserts, from small ponds to deep oceans. One more time, the people were impressed with the natural beauties of the planet and, after some time, the guide said:

– Now, we are going to see one of the most impressive species from this planet.

The images started to show large cities, with many buildings and metallic vehicles running to and from all directions. the species was a biped being, with two arms and a head. They weren't impressive by themselves, but the things they constructed amazed all the spectators. There were many colonies spread through the planet. All of them

densely populated. The species removed the vegetation from the surface, in order to construct its colonies. After a while, the guide exclaimed:

– Can you believe that all this is natural? It looks like something we could construct ourselves, but it was made by one of the species from this planet. All of those images you can see are the result of years of work.

One of the spectators raised a tentacle and asked:

– Does this species destroy the vegetation in order to build its colonies?

The guide answered, eagerly:

– Nice observation! We can see that this species modifies the environment they live in, removing the vegetation cover from the planet. They don't do it in a sustainable way and it means that they experience huge drops in population in regular intervals.

The images showed many explosions and the individuals aggressively attacking each other. Another one of the spectators said:

– Look! They are fighting each other! Should we do something?

The guide answered, calmly:

– Unfortunately, no. We should not intervene with the natural way of the species or it could have severe impacts on the planet's ecosystem.

With those words, the guide ended the presentation and they moved to another planet, continuing the tour of alien life.

**"BEEF IS WEAK" by Rogério Vasconcellos (Brazil)**

"Patiente?"

"YleñaMikovaYrotchmvlsk."

"Gravity?"

"Terminal."

" Prognosis."

"Terminal."

" Don't tell me what I already know. Say something I don't know."

"There is not much to say. Only that her illness is degenerative. The inflamed meninges. But it is stabilized. Lucid. Most of the time, physiologically apt. Currently inert, as requested. The medication only makes albuminalin inactivated. Of course, it has already been reported that this picture is inversely proportional to time. Every time she is medicated, the time is shortened. At some point it will no longer have an effect..."

" I received the metadata as soon as the medical record scanned it. What is the prognosis for her to remain stable?"

"For the next two days. The medication is already decaying. Then, controlled, it should last up to one year."

" Is there any discomfort for her? I mean, can I count on it as a positive factor?"

"Wow, of course not! Only at the peak of pain, before and after the medication is inactivated and injected again.

"How much more can it take, if it is powered up?"

"How? By subjecting her to more stress she ...

"What is yours? Do you want to leave the payroll? The commission you earn is big enough to guarantee someone more perceptive."

In the clinic parking lot, in a reserved place, the nurse inhaled the air hard, facing the tie. His lips thinned. He felt his own short nails sunk in his palms, before accepting the fact that he was just another shitty bribe.

I was certainly not at all comfortable with the situation. That kind of approach directly confronted the Code of Conduct. It would break down the career and take it to the High Vegan Council. Heading the indigent shift might not be the dream job, but it paid the bills. And your addictions. In fact, only a small part of them.

"By repeating the dose, it can remain operational for another 18, maybe 20 days. Each of the other five overdoses will bring you closer to death. A maximum of four to five months of life. And more prolonged and intense peak of pain. Then the medication won't even work anymore. You will go through a process of muscle atrophy, organ failure and death."

"Good."

"How can anyone find this satisfactory?"

"In addition to being contrary to the principles, the patient will be subject to early termination. Humanistically speaking, it is a tragedy that can be mitigated and not sublimated."

"He decorated the right booklet, Nurse Oscar deRios. It must be a bonus that I am not aware of, because his indiscretion does not predict crises of conscience. Since when should the quality of life improve, in the time that you have left, should you testify against - sorry for the word - in this stump, vegetating with the other patients, even in twice the period of time?"

"This choice is not ours. The patient must judge."

"And he will judge - the lawyer in a green suit let the discussion ended."

While the nurse searched the pockets for a joint, the lawyer sent a message through the neurocellular on his back:

"Did you hear everything?"

"Everything."

"It's her?"

"Best impossible."

"Then send me the dossier."

"It's already in your file. Just print it out."

"You always knew, didn't you?"

"Yes."

In less than half an hour, each one driving in different ways so as not to arrive together, the nurse and the lawyer were soon in front of the Clinic. While the first went to the clinic, the second went to a private room. And waited.

An attendant came in, driving the wheelchair. Only her head was mobile. Straps held her. The patient, confused by being in a new place, with comforts to which she did not have access, was even more disconcerted when she found herself parked in front of a stranger. He wore a suit that was not in keeping with medical practice.

"Hello, Yleña."

"Who are you?! What am I doing here?"

"Your mouth has never been opened. I'm your ticket. A unique opportunity.'

"I doubt it."

"You have every freedom to speak out like that. You still don't know what's coming. But, I guarantee you will think differently in a short time."

Screaming, the patient called the attendant, but strangely no one came through that door. Tied to the chair, fulfilling the protocol outside the restricted area, the most she managed to do was get tired.

The lawyer did not imagine that an indigent had so much personality. At least that seemed less monotonous than the last time, when approaching other terminal patients and selecting the informants.

"I will be succinct."

"Fuck it!!"

"This is no way to speak..."

"Fuck it."

The lawyer stopped smiling. He could tolerate insolence, but he was very opposed to foul talk and bad words. In fact, only when he did not employ them. He decided to be even more succinct.

"We can do nothing for you."

"Novelty."

"You know it won't be long."

"Again, if you haven't heard it before. Fuck it. I don't need you to remember that."

"Right. But you may need to know that we can do something... for your daughter."

"?"

"That's what you heard."

The wall-TV lit up and showed the young woman in detention. He was in the courtyard, looking scared. Walking, the image of the girl - who could have been beautiful, were it not for some bruises on her face, a part of her ear and face missing, the gray patterned garment - came out of the wall. The hologram walked in front of the wheelchair, which the lawyer turned to the wall.

"Did you see the bite on the face? Human bite. It shouldn't last for real food."

Instinctively stepping back, Yleña wanted to say another bad word, but something about the girl aroused a strangeness in her. The same features, the red hair, the freckles on her face. The birthmark on the forearm...

"His daughter."

"Impossible. I'm sterile!"

The lawyer - and everyone - knew about the law of infertility. Everyone, compulsorily, indistinctly, between rich and poor, when they entered adulthood, before life choices became a burden or blessing, before the genetic code ended up being compromised by the countless drugs (licit and illicit), it should supply eggs and sperm to the bank donor. The collection also served to offer reports - free - on the condition of the material collected. If able, they would be transferred to freezing.

"You were not twenty years ago."

"But..."

"Twenty years ago, before screwing everything up and turning into a meat picker, and surrendering to the shadows, your egg had potential. As you did not claim the genetic material, within the period that the government filed, it was transferred from the public institute to a private egg bank."

"But..."

"And Mr. Raul and Mrs. Lira França, who wanted a child so badly, had permission from the Federal Government to carry this out. And the way found, discarded adoption, was to fertilize a compatible egg. Your."

"But..."

"I know that your eloquence is justified. But think about this: the fortunate couple had characteristics and genetic loads close to their own, the same European descent and their egg led to happiness. That while it lasted."

"They died."

"Exact. It was a carflex accident. But the daughter was suspected of involvement. The police do not rule out latrocínia. If you don't know, it's theft followed by carnage. Article nº 6,265/2032, B4, very serious imputation, of penalty for sulfurous dissolution in Venus III. They want to resolve it as soon as possible. There are many lawsuits in progress and they are not concerned that any young person will spend the rest of his days serving as a punching bag, a cold board and a deposit of venereal diseases of real criminals. Personally - and we have an easy case, claiming minority persecution and justified sin of the flesh - I don't imagine that this young woman..."

The hologram retreated from where it was stationary, returning to the wall-TV and the courtyard full of prisoners. A man and two women were staring at the young woman, who looked out of place among the tattooed criminals and licking her lips, not used to meat so... white.

"...your daughter should be penalized. And I repeat, we may not be able to help you, but Sarete will have the life she deserves. Furthermore, we will safeguard your right of succession; the couple's inheritance will leave her in good financial shape. What else could a mother bequeath to a child, besides the future and comfort, Yleña?"

"Putting it like that..."

"I knew I would get your collaboration. Now "he rummaged through the holster he wore on his shoulder, all made of human leather, behind the sedative the nurse had given him, an M-1, very old, inscrutable, the original bottle used in South Africa, sixteen thousand times more potent than the morphine, used in the death of the last rhino. There was another ampoule, with amber liquid, attached to a small injection gun."

"If what they are going to do to me is none of my business, can I add something?", the last seal that held her to the chair broke.

"Certainly..."

Conspiring with the silence and the help that the lawyer would not help (as Yleña did not do before), she left the chair driven by the will that ignored the motor weakness. The lawyer's jugular torn, a small cleaver taking care of it, silencing his interface.

Still with the cleaver, he extracted the mesoencephalic master key, which gave him access to the exit.



crown of white lilies on your head to shine in the sky, like the Morning Star to light the way of the lost on earth. White the lilies, a symbol of love for children, of the hungry, naked and weeping, for which you also cried that you had nothing to help them to get them out of poverty. You were not afraid that you would die of hunger as it was written . . . , you were afraid for the children that they would starve to death! You were chosen from among the geniuses to remain the Bridegroom forever!

**"The love for beauty" by Roxana Turcu (Romania)**

My grandfather was a kind and generous man. I remember his meaningful stories and the happiness/the joy that read on his face out of love for us. My grandmother had an infinite patience with me. I used to play with the children on the streets of the village every holiday I spent at my grandparents.

At lunch, my grandmother would call us all and make us sit at the wooden table, in the yard, made by my grandfather. There was so much joy, happiness and smiles that the innocence of childhood will no longer keep in another stage of life.

My grandmother always told how happy and fulfilled she felt whenever we were close to her.

"My dear granddaughter, I am so glad that you are here. Your childish games are my source of existence or life. You are all dear to me."

Sometimes the mother of a child would come to the grandmother to ask if she was tired, bored by our presence. She managed to reassure her when she told her not to worry.

"They don't bother me at all. They are like my grandchildren to me."

"You are a special person."

"Please, don't say these big words/talk big. The love for children and for people in general should be present in each and every heart, in every soul."

"Thank you!"

"There is no need. I am thankful to the children that today, for example, they wanted to find out more about traditional peasant shoes. My granddaughter told me that she would like to find out more things about folk/ popular traditions. She has been practising folk dances since she was five years old."

"It's a beautiful thing to find resources by which to talk to children about art"

"Traditional art..."

"Art made with passion is a gentle man/ person, like you."

"Good bye"

"Good bye"

After Mrs. Nicola left, I stayed with my grandmother. Each child went towards their homes. I plucked up the courage to ask what folk art means and why it should be of any interest to me.

"You know, my dear, folk art is the authentic art, traditional costumes and folk crafts."

"Grandfather is a folk craftsman if he designs traditional peasant shoes, isn't he?"

"Yes. He is a traditional craftsman and one of the best."

"I have traditional peasant shoes made by grandfather, too. At the dance classes I am the most envied girl for my little traditional peasant shoes."

"Long before you were born, dear granddaughter, my grandfather continued talking, people used to wear traditional peasant shoes. It is a craft that I also learned after being a tailor for a long time. I learned this craft or trade from my father."

"I consider that traditional peasant shoes are true or real art."

He works for several hours (I have watched him stealthily) in order to create a durable or lasting traditional peasant shoe.

He is an old man with an appearance that you can never forget. Having a big, white beard, dressed in a traditional suit and with his traditional peasant shoes, grandfather seems to have come from the books that the children keep as a holy memory.

"I would like to know what authentic art is and how to distinguish it/make the difference between it from fake art. But how do I know if the art is authentic or not?"

"It is about things made by hand, by people who are in love with the folk art."

"But what about the others?"

"I don't know what others are doing. I know what I'm doing. I'm trying to do everything very well and authentically. In life it is important to find your own way, the path to go and which should represent you. It is the only chance for you to be happy."

"After retirement, I have found a new passion: making the traditional peasant shoes that take my steps all around the country. An example would be at the traditional craftsmen fairs in the country to which I participate when I am invited."

I have always appreciated my grandfather for his tenacious nature and strong character.

He was and still remains a fighter. After his retirement, he did not complain that he no longer has a job, but he found it in making traditional peasant shoes. He is the man with infinite love and patience. This is my Grandfather.

I would like to propose to him to come to school and to tell us about the folk traditions and his wonderful traditional peasant shoes. I hope he accepts. He is a rather discreet man, but maybe with the help of the teacher I will succeed in persuading him.

My grandfather came to school (which made me very happy, I must admit) in the last week before the summer holidays. My classmates seemed interested in learning. He did not think that he would be welcomed with such warmth and interest. He brought with him a few pairs of traditional peasant shoes that he wanted to show to the pupils. When he started unveiling the secrets of his craftsmanship, all eyes were fixed on him.

"I have been making traditional peasant shoes for thirty years. They may not be worn anymore, but I want to promote the tradition."

"Do you think I could learn that too?", asked one of the classmates.

"Of course. You need to like what you're doing and, above all, there should also be passion."

"The traditional peasant shoes are no longer worn nowadays. Who still wears traditional peasant shoes these days?"

"Traditional peasant shoe making talks about tradition, about the authentic. Traditional peasant shoes, together with folk costumes show us what people worn in a certain geographic area and tell us the story of our forerunners."

"When can we come to the workshop?"

"You are welcome anytime. It is a great joy for me when a child wants to know or learn more about this craft."

My classmates told my grandfather that they would stay in the village together with their siblings and parents. And his craftsmanship would not be lost, but they will be there to take it further. Along with the letters, these children also learned the secrets of popular traditions, too.

"I am going to stay in the village. I am not going to town", a small, blonde-haired girl uttered, my deskmate.

"You don't have to stay in the village, if you want to go to town in order to learn a trade/craft."

Even if your steps will lead you far away from here and maybe you will live elsewhere, all I ask is one thing:

Do not forget our Romanian traditions!

