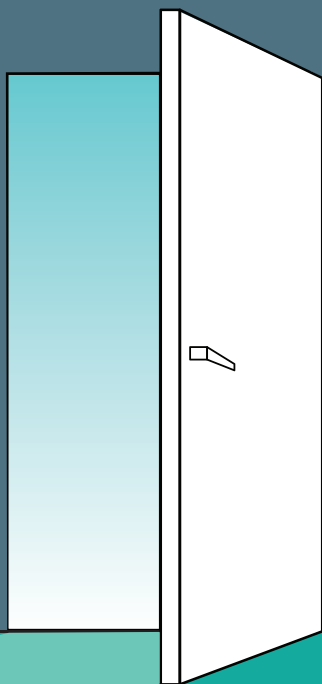


# Opening Doors Through Stories: Discovery

WRITING FROM NEWCOMERS TO REGINA



A project of the Saskatchewan Writers' Guild and the Regina Open  
Door Society

Thank you to all of the staff, volunteers, and participants of the  
2022 Regina Open Door Society Creative Writing Class.



**Top L-R:** Iryn Tushabe, Cat Abenstein, Mohammad Nure Alam

**Middle L-R:** Maricar P. Beredicto, Khaldoun Abou Alshamat, Bhoomka Dongel

**Bottom:** Shama Mahajan, Shuchen Hu

**Missing:** Abdul Salam Abo Alshamat

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The views, thoughts, and opinions expressed in this chapbook belong solely to the author, and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Regina Open Door Society or its funders. Any content provided by our authors are of their opinion and are not intended to malign any religion, ethnic group, club, organization, company, individual, or anyone or anything.

Since 2018, the Regina Open Door Society's (RODS) Welcoming Community for Newcomers (WCN) program has been supporting immigrant and refugee newcomers in Regina (and area) to hone their writing and storytelling skills.

This past year, the WCN program once again proudly worked in partnership with the Saskatchewan Writers' Guild (SWG) and local writer Iryn Tushabe. Tushabe facilitated the Creative Writing Workshop and shares with you the 4<sup>th</sup> edition in the series, *Opening Doors through Stories: Discovery*.

Throughout November and December 2021, over five two-hour sessions every Saturday over Zoom, a dedicated and talented group of newcomers came together to discuss, plan, and write their stories for the 2022 chapbook. We hope these stories will bring you joy during these uncertain times caused by the on-going COVID-19 pandemic.

The WCN team would like to thank all of the contributors in this chapbook for their hard work and commitment to refining their writing and storytelling skills in order to share some of their life experiences with all of us. The positive outcome of the chapbook would not have been possible without all of your efforts, enthusiasm and creativity.

The Regina Open Door Society's  
Welcoming Community for Newcomers Program

The fall of 2021 was once again a time of togetherness and originality, despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through Zoom, participants met with facilitator, Iryn Tushabe, over five weeks gaining language and writing lessons to help them create never-before-seen writing. Writer Henry Miller once said, "Writing, like life itself, is a voyage of discovery." In these pages, we embark on a journey to discover stories and poems that celebrate the uniqueness of being human. From what is unknown to known, for all the ways we surprise ourselves and each other, and for the pathways words carve to different worlds, may the following pages help you to find the courage to open new doors that lead to discoveries, and to celebrate the complexities of human connection and creativity.

Cat Abenstein  
SWG Program Coordinator

# INTRODUCTION

Iryn Tushabe

A friend of mine, a burgeoning writer like myself, once told me, “It’s so hard to be funny in English. It’s a language of clean and precise lines; it flattens everything.” I feel the same frustration sometimes. There are expressions in my mother tongue that when translated into English lose their potency. I’m sure a born-English speaker attempting to write in a learned language would face similar challenges. Therefore, writing is itself an act of translation.



I’m generally drawn to stories that feel genuine, that knock me sideways and leave me convinced of something, no matter how small, that matters. Stories that open a window into the lives of other people, real or imagined. I don’t care much for gimmicks and clever philosophizing for its own sake. I abandon stories that rely too heavily on complicated vocabulary. It has been a joy to work with the writers in this chapbook. Their stories and poems have that everlasting quality all good writing tends to have, a kind of wisdom that teaches us that there are no keys to the mysteries of life, that we don’t have all the answers, and perhaps we don’t need to. Like any good art, they are timeless. And you will enjoy them well into the future.

# EVERYTHING CHANGES

ABDUL SALAM ABO ALSHAMAT

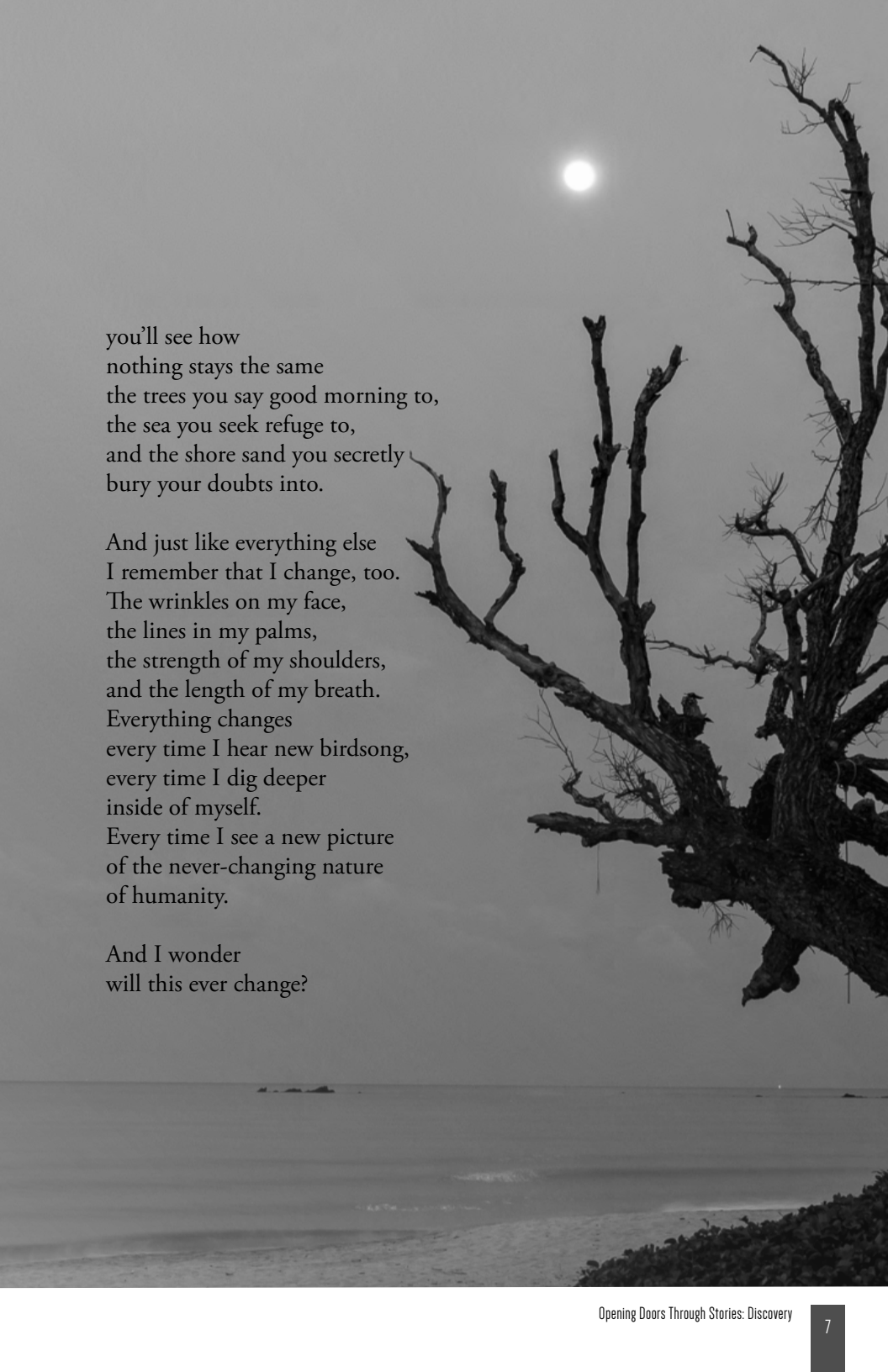
PHOTO CREDIT: ABDUL SALAM ABO ALSHAMAT

Everything changes;  
the taste of the night breeze,  
the shape of the stars  
and their chaotic positions across the sky.  
The pain changes too,  
it moves  
from the top right  
of the heart,  
down  
to the bottom left  
of the stomach.

The sound of despair and worry in the air,  
the unknown you always fear,  
the laughter you never cherished,  
the smell of your favorite place  
the sinking ship of memories  
changes.

Everything changes  
every step you take towards  
your ever-changing dream.  
Every poem you start writing,  
every door you knock or have knocked.  
Every window you ever gazed out of  
through its mirrorless glass, changes.

If you open the same door again and again  
you'll end up somewhere else,  
somewhere foreign.  
If you look outside again and again



you'll see how  
nothing stays the same  
the trees you say good morning to,  
the sea you seek refuge to,  
and the shore sand you secretly  
bury your doubts into.

And just like everything else  
I remember that I change, too.  
The wrinkles on my face,  
the lines in my palms,  
the strength of my shoulders,  
and the length of my breath.  
Everything changes  
every time I hear new birdsong,  
every time I dig deeper  
inside of myself.  
Every time I see a new picture  
of the never-changing nature  
of humanity.

And I wonder  
will this ever change?

# TIME (IN THE VOICE OF A REFUGEE KID)

## ABDUL SALAM ABO ALSHAMAT

PHOTO CREDIT: ABDUL SALAM ABO ALSHAMAT

You are a big boy now,  
my mama always tells me.

I still remember that night,  
it was spring,  
the first time I watched fireworks.  
The sky was flashing, the streets were whistling, and the lights were dark.  
It was like a party, except no one was dancing.

You are a big boy now,  
my mama always tells me.  
But what she really means is  
she no longer needs to read me bedtime stories,  
iron my clothes, or tie my shoelaces.  
She no longer needs to kiss me goodbye before I go to school  
or pick me up from the bus when I reach home.

I'm a big boy now, can't you see?  
I may not know a lot of things  
other big boys know, like work, sex and politics,  
but I know what Time really is.  
My mama tells me that he is a magician  
the greatest of them all.

His tricks are real, impossible to reveal  
She tells me that Now is his favourite trick,  
He plays it all the time, over and over again

Like how he turns morning flowers into giant crows  
How he turns springs into thunderstorms,  
How he changes the colour of the sky  
over and over again





How he turns homes into landmines  
and cities into landscapes of memories  
How he paints my father's face in my head  
over and over again  
How he hides my school, my friends, and even my toys  
in his pocket.  
How he changes the sound of fireworks  
And how he, sometimes, turns them into falling stars!

You're a big boy now, and big boys don't believe in miracles,  
My mama tells me.  
But I know,  
they exist, somewhere  
back in our home when the fireworks came through the ceiling  
and hit the dining table next to us  
Out there in the ocean, when it swallowed us  
and spat us out to the shore,  
Up in the sky when the birds carried us  
to our new home.  
Here.

You are a big boy now, my mama always tells me.  
And I still remember that night,  
it was spring,  
the last time I watched my dad kissing my mother's forehead.

I may not know a lot of things other big boys know,  
Like home, childhood, or family,  
but I know that Time is a magician  
and that he will always be playing his tricks  
over and over again.

# A MEANINGFUL DEFINITION FOR SUSTAINABILITY

MOHAMMAD NURE ALAM

PHOTO CREDIT: MOHAMMAD NURE ALAM

John B. Robinson's definition of Sustainability is one that resonates greatly with me. A Professor at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, Robinson posits that sustainability is a reconciliation of three imperatives: the ecological imperative to stay within biophysical carrying capacity; the economic imperative to provide an adequate material standard of living for all; and the social imperative to provide social structures and systems of governance that propagate the values people wish to live by. He focuses on the intersection of climate change mitigation, adaptation and sustainability, and stresses highly on the power and productivity of collaborative research and practices.

The definition encompasses Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) factors and economic imperatives comprehensively enough to be suitable for adoption by countries, societies, corporates, non-profits, and individuals. It offers a framework for organizations and individuals alike to evaluate their progress in their sustainability and sustainable development endeavours. Rather than addressing only the resilience or balancing of resource



utilization, Professor Robinson offers a system-approach reconciling different aspirations or imperatives with respect to ecology, economy, society, and governance and topping it up with “value”.

I worked in the sustainability and public affairs sector for over four years for multi-national companies, and my experience in those roles makes me gravitate toward this definition. The priorities and interests are diversified for different stakeholders including public, private, civil society and other interested groups. It is my experience that while ESG is important for corporate organizations to boost investor confidence, there are broader and more urgent priorities for countries, societies, and interest groups based on geographical, ecological, economic, climate and social factors. So, a comprehensive definition like the one Professor Robinson offers is more inclusive.

Most of the other definitions I’ve come across cover natural resources and their balanced yields in the long run. However, Professor Robinson’s definition goes beyond “Ecological imperative to stay within biophysical carrying capacity” in its three imperatives. The only thing that is lacking in Robinson’s definition is, perhaps, human capital. In their definitions of sustainability, Hanley, N., Shogren, J. and White, B.<sup>ii</sup> emphasized human capital, putting it alongside natural and man-made capital. Field & Olewiler’s<sup>iii</sup> definition beautifully aligns economy with a sustaining social and ecological systems including human capital.

Many of these definitions point to people and their aspirations or goals for wellbeing. It might be fair to acknowledge that people are not the only inhabitants of the earth, and a sustainable environment needs to be equally conducive, livable, sustaining, and supportive to other living beings in the eco-system.

With growing climate change concerns around the world, one expects sustainability and the way we define it to evolve, to reflect a world that is rapidly changing around us.

<sup>i</sup> Sustainability is “the reconciliation of three imperatives: the ecological imperative to stay within biophysical carrying capacity; the economic imperative to provide an adequate material standard of living for all; and the social imperative to provide social structures and systems of governance that propagate the values people wish to live by” Robinson 2008:76-77  
Robinson, J. 2008. “Being Undisciplined: Transgressions and Intersections in Academia and Beyond.” *Futures* 40: 70-86.

<sup>ii</sup> Sustainability is achieved so long as the total stock of natural, man-made, and human capital does not decline, however all sources of capital are interchangeable, allowing natural capital to be run down so long as human and man-made capital are increased sufficiently. Hanley et al, 2001:135-136

<sup>iii</sup> A sustainable economy is one in which investment in social capital allows the economy to grow so that people are at least as well off in the future as they are in the present, while sustaining the health of ecological systems. Field & Olewiler, 2002:11

Content Warning: This piece contains depictions of sexual assault.



# DEAR ME IN A PARALLEL UNIVERSE

BHOOMIKA DONGEL

PHOTO CREDIT: BHOOMIKA DONGEL

The cusp of winter has brought with it a stark nakedness. The poplar trees around me are bare. Their amber leaves have fallen to the ground, they are being trampled on, and crushed by careless feet. Empty branches dangle mid-air, awaiting spring. If I am lucky, I might be able to spot a lonesome leaf still holding on to a frozen branch. On days like these, I feel naked, too, like someone has stripped me of my protective layers.

The winter also brings painful memories. I try to combat my despair and look for answers to why Ava suddenly disappeared. Right up until Fall, she had been next to me, clinging like that last autumn leaf. But then come winter, poof. She was gone.

Was I not enough for her? Her own twin sister! Ava and I emerged from the same zygote. We are identical. Only Ma can tell us apart. Something in our eyes, she says. She saw the difference the day we were born. “Fire,” she would say, looking at me. “People born with fire will consume everything around them.”

But Ava's eyes have the depth of water. "Torrential rain," Ma would tell her. "One day you'll drown yourself in it." Two teardrops would slide down Ava's cheeks. It never occurred to me that those two droplets would one day coalesce to form a colossal river gravitating towards the sea.

I used to make fun of her. "Crybaby!"

"Wildfire!" She would reply.

The fire is not only in my eyes though. It also lives within me. Fire coexists with my murky old friend, guilt. They reside at the very base of my gut, cultured and preserved in agar. I do not ruminate over how happy or sad I feel. I measure my days with an intrinsic yardstick of how irreparably guilty I feel.

I wonder if Ava ran away because of me. Although I've been told by others that I am not to blame, Ma claims otherwise. "How could you just let her slip away? You were supposed to watch out for your sister. That fire in you will engulf everything one day."

"Yes, I'm burning inside, Ma, and one day I'll burn everything—burn, burn!" I used to tell myself. If only thoughts could scream!

Ava's departure was sudden, abrupt. Or maybe it was meticulously and deliberately planned? I can't tell which. Sometimes I think Ava left because she was tired, exhausted even, to live with someone like Ma. Ma had witnessed her own mother grieve all her life. Aji, our grandmother, isolated herself to mourn when her husband passed away abruptly. Our mother never received the love and attention she desired. Ma learnt to be stoic in grief, indifferent to the rest of the world, to move on. Moving on, she believes, is the only selfless act of kindness for those who survive, for those who keep on existing. But this moving-on might have been her way of numbing herself.

So, for Ava and me, there has always been a sense of guilt around grieving. We didn't grieve when our parents separated or when Ba left us. Not even when our beloved pet, Goofy died.

I have tried to find my way around loss through writing. Yet writing, much like grieving, is a selfish act. There is an isolation from reality, a separation from the rest of the world. Writing makes me an invisible character in my own unfinished story. But right now, I don't feel invisible. I am looking for answers and I want to know why Ava ran away.

“If you run away now, you’ll always find yourself running away from it,” I can hear Ma’s voice reverberating in the stillness. But I ignore her.

On most days, this is how I get by. Ignoring things until I become submissive enough to darkness. You might wonder how do I know about darkness so much. It’s because I’ve seen and felt him closely.

Darkness. When I think about him, all I see is his Seiko watch.

Darkness. I don’t want to wax lyrical about him nor do I want to waste words on his physical attributes. Besides, what adjectives are there to describe someone like him?

Darkness. He wears a Seiko watch which might have been a replica, a second copy or maybe even a third. It is a big wristwatch, almost the size of his three knuckles pressed together. You can tell a lot about a person by his shoes. For Dipak, a man is defined by the size and grandiosity of the watch he wears.

“Dipak sir” used to teach us English when he came to volunteer at our school at the height of the Civil War in Nepal. It was the onset of winter in 2001. The mornings were misty and the afternoons were crisp. Sometimes, I can still hear the ticking of the second hand of his Seiko against the thumping of my heart.

That day when he asked me to recite my poem in class, I had never felt capable of expressing myself so publicly. I was eleven. The most familiar emotion to me was shame. Ashamed and awed at the speed of growth of my prepubescent body. Ava and I had started wearing bras, another set of shackles, a reminder that we were becoming women and women needed to be restrained. Moored to men who think they can be our safe harbour, men who think they can protect us. From what, I wonder. Darkness?

Darkness. He had planned a school picnic that year. I remember how I had been wanting to thank him for letting me read my poem. I had anxiously waited for the day. He came to sit next to me on the school bus, but Ava was already beside me, clinging to me the way she always did.

Someday I will tell Ma about how Ava always tried to find a mother in me, how I tried to be maternal with her until I couldn’t be her caretaker anymore. We were kids who tried to find an adult in each other. We kept trying, but failed. I failed.

Darkness. How he comes blatantly uninvited. Did I seduce him? All I remember now is that at the picnic spot, there was a narrow

stream meandering between tall trees and thorny bushes. Our crowd of fifty people had thinned. Suddenly we were alone, just me and him. He slipped his pinky into the palm of my hand. I felt the tickle of his fingers.

“Thank you,” I wanted to say, but before I could even conjure up the words, he leaned closer to me, his fingers hovering between my breasts, squeezing my nipples. I found myself in his suffocating embrace, unable to free myself. Twenty years later, I still struggle to free myself from that grasp.

“Isn’t this what you wanted?” He said it like a statement, not a question. What’s been spoken can’t be unspoken, what’s been heard can’t be unheard; the damage done by some words is irreparable.

Did I blink then? Did I keep my eyes shut or open them wide? All I can recall is that I submitted to him. He pushed his hand farther below, his index finger reaching past my belly button. Suddenly there was a sound of someone trampling on dry fallen leaves and then a silence. When he moved off to the side, I saw my little sister Ava staring at me. If only the agility of the river gushing through her eyes could extinguish the fire in me.

As soon as we’d locked eyes, she turned and ran. Dipak Sir turned around to the sound. He hastily tucked his shirt back into his pants, sliding his big hands through his black leather belt. The Seiko watch shone in the mid-day sun. The second hand’s ticking grew louder than the voice inside my head.

There he is, him and his Seiko. And there is my sister, she and her cavernous eyes that searched mine. How can I ever outrun the image?

I read somewhere that memories don’t expire. But what if they did? What if I could squeeze these memories, shrink, and seal them into a tin can and put an expiration date on it? Would I find absolution then?

I hope that wherever she is, Ava has moved on. That she has finally found a way through her own grief. That she met someone who tells her it is okay to grieve.

If I forgive myself, will she forgive me too?

Lately, I have been convincing myself that I am not to blame for what happened that day between Dipak and me. Lately, I have been thinking of guilt as an amicable friend.

Ava, I’m writing this note for you that some day you might relish it:

The dawn of the winter bears the seed of the sun.  
In circles we dance with shadows of life—  
*We've been born today, this is our birth*  
we dance for the sun, we dance for the sea  
we dance for the womb that shelters our wound

We dance for the loss of a long-lost love,  
our bones once heinously hewed in sunder  
all is forgiven but not forgotten,  
and when the cicadas sing again  
our bones will weave a tapestry of tales  
of irrepressible dancers coming to life  
feasting on freedom, feasting on life  
*We've been born again, this is our birth...*

We're gathered for a feast today  
gnawing on the depths of our shame,  
with feral claws and untamed hearts  
we shamelessly surrender  
to the beats of a drummer divine  
When does the healing begin?  
asks the last autumn leaf  
with her parting soliloquy  
*We have been born, this is our birth.*

Yours truly, from another universe,  
Mikha





# H-O-M-E

BY BHOOMIKA DONGEL

PHOTO CREDIT: BHOOMIKA DONGEL

The red and yellow lights on the carousel blinked intermittently. Ria, Renu's four-year old daughter, insisted on riding one of those yellow ponies that took them round and round until their head felt sick and their bodies became sore.

Dot, dot, dot, dash, dot, dash – the LED lights around the blue horse blinked, like a Morse Code that probably deciphered h-o-m-e.

Renu fumbled through her Mheecha for a loonie to feed the engine, to get it going. What used to hold petty cash and coins when she was home in Nepal, her Mheecha now held an ID, a Credit Card and some crumpled up bills.

Clink. Her one-dollar coin tumbled through the slot. Three, two, one... but nothing happened. The carousel remained stationary.

Leaning closer to the central pole of the carousel, Renu tried to make out the writing etched at the base of the centrifuge –

“Two dollars to start the engine,” it read.

Renu looked at her daughter, dismayed. The shiny carousel had swallowed her hard-earned loonie, the only one they had left.

That was the day it hit them that they were so far from home. That no matter where they went, they would never be home. That a part of them would always be someplace else.

The carousel lights blinded them. Dot, dot, dot, dash, dot, dash. H-o-m-e.



# ALL THE PLACES I'VE CALLED HOME

BY KHALDOUN ABOU ALSHAMAT

PHOTO CREDIT: KHALDOUN ABOU ALSHAMAT

I come from a beautiful country that has deep roots in history and civilization, famous for poetry, delicious food, and hospitality. Unfortunately, it's going through a terrible and dangerous present. It's called Syria.

I was twenty-seven years old when I left Syria for Malaysia in 2012. I never felt old before leaving, never imagined that one day I would leave this place where my family, friends, and memories lived. But to escape the brutality and oppression of the ruling regime – and fearing for the life of my family members – I left.

In Syria I had been studying information technologies and working as a freelance IT specialist while I slowly completed my bachelor's degree at the Syrian Virtual University. I was taking life slowly and I thought I was doing well in life. For years before the uprising started, I never thought I'd ever leave Syria, and our home in Damascus.

I thought of myself as a successful person who was financially independent at a very young age. I was forward in life at a fast pace until I was forced to leave in a hurry to Malaysia. I didn't have the

chance to complete my last semester in the university. And once in Malaysia I couldn't afford to continue my studies. I applied for over forty jobs in the IT sector, but was never hired for one, even though I had extensive experience in the field. At first, I didn't know that as a refugee, it was illegal for me to work in Malaysia. I ended up working under the table in restaurants for two years, then as an accountant for three years before transitioning to photography – my passion.

In 2017, with the help and support of my brother and partner Abdulsalam, and with simple startup equipment, our company, Media Lab, was born.

We started providing professional photography services in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. We shot events, portraits, interiors, food, and products. The competition was steep, but the market in Kuala Lumpur was generous, too.

We were resettled to Regina, Canada, in June 2021. Regina – compared to Kuala Lumpur and my hometown of Damascus in Syria – is a small and quiet city. I don't mind quietness; I am a quiet person. And I love nature, being surrounded by it.

I'm thankful to be here in my new home in Canada. Still, I can't stop thinking about returning to Malaysia where my friends are, where nature is abundant, and where I had some of my best experiences and memories in life.



# MY NAME

BY KHALDOUN ABOU ALSHAMAT

**M**y name, Khaldoun Abou Alshamat, predates me. Before I was born, before even my mother and father met, my name waited for me. My father, in his youth, went by Abou Khaldoun. Abou, in Arabic, means “father of.” So, Abou Khaldoun means “Father of Khaldoun.”

I find it strange, this naming practice. But especially in the Middle East, it’s popular for men and women to be named in this way. It is considered a sign of respect to call someone by their oldest child’s name, even if that child is not born yet, as happened in my case.

Where I grew up in Syria, I had no issues with my name. I neither liked nor hated it. But then the war started, and I had to leave Syria for Malaysia. During my first days there, I realized how problematic my name was going to be. I soon discovered that it was very hard for non-Arabic speakers to pronounce the first letter of my name – خ. It has no match in the English alphabet, but I’ve been told it can be represented by combining the “K” and the “H” letters together. It makes pronouncing and remembering my name extremely hard for every non-Arabic speaker. Now whenever I’m asked, “What’s your name?” my mind freezes for a second. I think, “Oh, here we go again!”



# MY LITTLE P.A.

BY MARICAR BENEDICTO

They called her my little personal assistant. Makayla visited the Philippines when she was four years old. That's when I first met her, in February 2008. I was bound for Canada. She was with her grandpa and grandma, my eldest sibling, and my sister-in-law. She was going to be a flower girl at her grandma's cousin's wedding.

She loved Lolo, her great grandpa. Great grandpa, after living in Canada for two years, had opted to come home. He could not bear the winter chill. Makayla would sit on his lap and touch his face. Lolo loved her too and was very protective of her. She was so small everyone liked to carry her around. They would tease her, "You have forgotten how to walk!" and she would smile. She loved being carried around.

It was time for us to go back to Regina. Makayla cried. She wanted Lolo to come back to Regina. In the airplane, I was seated by the window, two seats away from the others. She was crying because she couldn't see me. My sister-in-law had her husband switch seats with me. She was happy she could see me. But she resumed crying when the airplane was about to take off. She was pointing to the map. She wanted Lolo to be with us in going back to Regina. Soon, she wore herself out and fell asleep.

A charming and loveable child, Makayla was born in Regina, Saskatchewan. She calls me Nanay. When I picked her up from school, she would say, "Nanay, can we go to the dollar store?"

"But I don't have a car," I would reply.

"We could take the bus," she always insisted.

There was no excuse for Nanay to not take her to the dollar store.

We would take the bus every weekend going to the Southland Mall, where Walmart used to be. First, we would go first to the library, and she would play a bit. Then, shopping time at Walmart. She knew her budget, not more than 20 dollars. But sometimes we went over the

budget, especially if there was a new princess DVD to buy.

When I got my first car in 2010, it became easier for us to get around. Same routine on weekends, except now she was riding in my car. We could go anywhere. We went to the Royal Saskatchewan Museum, RCMP Museum, Government House, Chapters, and the central branch of the Regina Public Library to borrow books. A bit of trivia: Makayla signed her first library card when she was four years old! She signed name in big letters: MAKAYLA.

Spray parks fascinated her. We visited a spray park every day throughout the summer. Swimming was another activity she loved, as well as acrobatics on the monkey bars at the school playground. But she wasn't only about physical activities. Makayla was into arts and crafts, a very creative girl. She made abstract paintings on canvas. Whenever we go to the dollar store, we picked up more canvases and paints. I couldn't bear saying no to her. As an early childhood educator, I wanted my little P.A. to develop all her skills including her love and passion for arts and crafts. I appreciated and recognized her time spent in creating masterpieces of her own.

I'm glad I cherished and treasured the time we spent together while she is little because my little P.A. is not so little anymore. She has grown into be a fine young lady.



# MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN A CHILD'S LIFE

MARICAR BENEDICTO

“Where do you work?” It’s a typical question I hear from people from the same country. Being a newcomer that they know, they tend to be curious about what I am up to.

“I work in a daycare,” I tell them.

However, it doesn’t end there. There is always a follow-up question. “So, you babysit children? That’s what they do in daycares, isn’t it?”

Sometimes these remarks from people who have little knowledge about what it means to work in a daycare centre – to work with early learners – make me feel bad. I take pride in telling everyone that I am a certified level 3 early childhood educator. “We don’t sit on children,” I say. “We help them discover their innate talents and help them hone their skills.”

As an educator by heart, I know that a teacher can make or unmake a child. Early learning is vital in the development of a child. Children in daycare centres learn social skills and other essential life skills that stay with them forever. This is the most critical stage of development.

Love and compassion are important for an early childhood educator. I was hired at a downtown daycare. My first assignment was with the young toddlers, four girls and a boy. I was informed by the group leader that the boy could not speak. She further informed me

that he might be deaf and mute. We had to use simple sign language for words like “please” and “more.” I also had, under my care, a twin and two firstborn girls. The group was a challenge, especially with the boy.

I had to challenge myself. I gave myself a month for that boy to be able to talk. I would use every technique I had acquired in my training, techniques I used with my clients back home in the Philippines. I constantly made sounds with him. I hummed. He started copying me and making his own sounds. While at play, I would sing, “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine...” My group loved that song.

Call it a miracle, but my boy started singing “You are my sunshine.” That he was speaking was an achievement for me. Furthermore, he learnt my name. His mom and his sister would ask him, “Who is your teacher?” and he would reply, “Maricar!” One day, his mom showed me a video. He was singing “You Are My Sunshine” while his dad played the piano. My heart melted seeing how much he had achieved. His mum told me that he was becoming very talkative at home.

My twins were struggling, too. They both wanted to be the leader of the group. Whenever we went outside, one of the twins would stay in front and the other would not want to go outside unless they were the leader. They would both become sad, their faces growing long. They competed for attention. The younger twin sometimes went to sit in the corner while her sister ran around the room. As an early childhood educator, I needed to do something to help her get out of her shell like her twin. Appreciation and recognition of their individual projects and letting them make stories about their work helped her to verbalize her emotions. It was clear that they loved each other.

The two first born kids, now they were dominant figures. You could always hear them screaming over the same toy. “Mine!”

“No! Mine!” The other one would say. I was lucky they were no biters in my group. Being first borns, they were used to getting their way. However, they needed to learn how to share; in daycare we share.

In daycare we also play, explore, and learn!

Love builds brains!





# THE SEED

BY MARICAR BENEDICTO

**T**hey wanted their third child to be a girl, having had two boys in a row. Mamang was in Bantay, Ilocos Sur, a province in the northern part of the Philippines. She was staying with her parents, finishing her college degree in education. Papang was a presidential guard of then Philippine president Elipidio Quirino in Manila. He had to travel for eight hours by bus to visit her and their sons. The third pregnancy was very difficult for her. Since they really wanted a baby girl, they made a nine-day novena to Apo Caridad—Our Lady of Charity, the Miraculous Patroness of St. Augustine Church in Bantay. My Mamang and Papang told me that they walked on their knees from the church’s entrance to the altar for nine days, praying for a baby girl.

“If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” – John 15:7

“Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you received it, and it will be yours.” – Mark 11:24

The first trimester was difficult for her. She had morning sickness and felt so tired during the day. She would throw up all the food she ate. She wanted to give up. In her mind, she could still get rid of it because it was just blood. She wanted an abortion. But her husband disagreed with the idea. In the Philippines, abortion was, and remains, a crime punishable by law. It is believed that life begins at the union of sperm and egg, the process of fertilization. It wasn’t

just blood.

You may wonder: what is the first trimester all about? What about it might lead an expectant mother to want to terminate her pregnancy? An obstetric gynaecologist will tell you that the first trimester is a time of great anticipation with rapid changes happening both for the expectant mother and the baby. It is considered the most difficult stage of pregnancy. The mother's body is working extra hard to create life and to keep up with the surge of hormones.

It is no wonder that Mamang wanted to abort her pregnancy. However, she later agreed with Papang. Afterall, wasn't the pregnancy their answered prayer?

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I was born on the first Sunday of September 1958 in Canlubang, Laguna, a province in the Southern part of Luzon. It was the feast day of Apo Caridad, known also as Nuestra Senora de Caridad – Our Lady of Charity – in Bantay.

I was named after Apo Caridad.

At my baptism, which took place at St. Augustine Church on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May 1959, I was given the name Maria Caridad Benedicto.

My parents fondly called me “Caring.” But when I was being naughty, they called me by my full name, Maria Caridad.

My first teachers were Papang and Mamang. They taught me how to write my full name in preparation for my starting kindergarten. Papang was so excited to enrol me in school. However, registration for kindergarten was already closed. Disheartened, Mamang enrolled me in grade one at the public school where she taught. I was five years old, the youngest in grade one. One day, I went home from school complaining to Papang about my name. I said, “Why is my name too long?” Papang told me how I got my name. Still, I wanted it shortened. It took forever for me to write down my full name. For a grade one pupil, my name felt heavy, and it was too long. I was happy when Papang and Mamang agreed to shorten it to Maricar – a combination of Maria and Caridad. From then on, my name became Maricar.

I love my name. It says exactly the kind of person I am. And my namesake, Our Lady of Charity or Apo Caridad, has greatly influenced the way I see the world.

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The northern province was golden with fields of rice, green vegetables, and tobacco plantations. Travelling north from Manila, you could see the mountain ranges to the right and the deep blue waters of the China Sea to the left. Historical landmarks during the Spanish time and the second world war lined the highway.

The nights were cold. There was no electricity back then. Grandma lit gas lamps to brighten the house. Supper was usually early. The sun would still be up when Grandma called everyone to supper. Afterwards, Grandpa would lead the evening prayer.

We lived with Grandma and Grandpa in a two-story house with four bedrooms, an altar on the second level. The evening prayers was a daily devotion for the whole family. I'm grateful to have grown up with my grandparents.

After the devotions, Grandma would gather us grandchildren in the living room. She told us stories about princes and princesses. My favourite princess story was the one about Prinsesa Naranja and Ibong Adarna. Grandma also told us stories about living through World War II. She had so many stories she never ran out.

I played in the yard with my cousins. We liked climbing up the guava tree, picking macopa and Indian mangoes. We would have picnics. One time, we picked Grandpa's papaya fruit without asking. He was very fond of papaya. Every morning he would check if his papaya fruits were ripe so that he could have one for breakfast. He noticed that one papaya fruit was missing, but he didn't say anything. He just looked at us and we started giggling.

After lunch, Grandma would tell us to have a nap. If we napped, there was a treat waiting for us when we woke up. What was the treat? An ice cream cone and a bottle of Coke. Children have such simple needs and likes. Sometimes, if the ice cream man came early, Grandma would buy us ice cream even if we didn't nap.

Our aunts were also there to take care of us. When they got their paychecks at the end of the month, they took us to Kapitolyo and bought us new shoes and clothes. Then we would go to our favorite restaurant to eat pancit and halo-halo. Sometimes, my oldest aunt rented a kalesa and we went around the city of Vigan in the horse-drawn carriage.

There was one rule that could not be broken. We had to be back home by exactly five in the afternoon. Then, Grandma would give

us a shower and we'd change out of our dirty clothes. We always had to be clean for supper. Then, we would say the Angelus together with Grandpa as we did every night. We went to bed early on Saturdays. We woke up at four in the morning to attend the first mass every Sunday.

Grandpa always went to church ahead of us. He worked in the parish as a secretary after his retirement from government service. He was a retired provincial auditor. A piece of trivia: he participated in the first marathon in Luzon. He loved to walk. He said, "It's a good exercise!"

We always walked to church because we didn't have car. We enjoyed walking along the streets of Bagatan. People brought out their benches and sat in front of their houses to watch passersby. Everybody knew each other.

Grandma was a Chinese mestiza and a merchandizer. We tagged along and helped her sell merchandize. She sold gold jewelry and dry goods. Every week, we went to different towns for market days. Grandma would buy us lots of food when she went with us. She would give us our allowance. We loved to tag along. She was the best merchandizer. She would sell at low prices, saying, "a small profit is good, as long as we sell them all." She was a typical Chinese merchant.

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Ours was a small family community consisting of three to five generations of immediate relatives. Grandpa was the oldest. Everybody respected him. They sought his advice. Grandpa was full of wisdom. When gathered to say the Angelus, he reminded us to always love one another. "You are brothers and sisters," he said.

In that small family community of ours, children built their dreams. We all dreamed of becoming someone someday. A doctor, a teacher, an engineer. But what I remember most are the plays we put on.



# DID YOU EAT YOUR EGGS TODAY?

BY SHAMA MAHAJAN

“**D**id you eat eggs today?” Imlī’s grandfather asked.

“Yes, we ate boiled eggs today, all four of us ate one egg each,” she replied. Imlī was just seven years old when her father incurred a huge loss in business. He had to sell his factory, assets, his wife’s jewellery and even their big house to offset the debt. The family moved into a much smaller house in the suburbs. The house had just two bedrooms and a very small kitchen. Life wasn’t the same as before. Raghu and Bimla, Imlī’s parents, took the smaller bedroom while Imlī shared the bigger bedroom with her three siblings: her elder sister Bela, her younger sister Poorna and their youngest brother Bhola. Bhola was only three years old. None of them liked the new house. It had no open space and ended before they could walk a couple of steps.

The family came to terms with this new life of scarcity and deprivation. The kids were removed from elite private schools and admitted to public schools. Bimla cut down on household expenses. She cooked simple meals instead of delicacies, and the kids had to eat what they were given. Raghu had offset the debt, but he soon realized that he had to start from the scratch. So, one day he told Bimla, “I am going to Patna next week to find some work. I am

going alone, I will make some arrangements for you. Once I've found a house, I will come to take you all with me. Till then you all have to stay here."

Bimla, a tough woman, nodded in agreement. She had to run the house on whatever meagre income her husband could send home.

One day the kids' grandpa visited. He brought a tray of eggs for them. Bhola was excited.

"Hurray," she said, "We will eat eggs today."

Grandpa was aghast. "Is Bimla not giving you eggs to eat?" He asked his grandkids. "Why?"

"She has no money," responded Imli.

Grandpa's face went pale as their financial crisis became clear to him. "I will give you ten rupees daily to buy four eggs," he said. "I will come check on you every day."

The kids were overjoyed.

A few days later, Bela gave a handful of coins to her mother.

"Where did you get this money from?" Bimla asked, surprised.

"Grandpa has been giving us money to buy eggs," Bela said, "But we buy eggs only for Bhola. He doesn't know how to lie to Grandpa. When Grandpa asks us, we all say that we have eaten eggs for breakfast."

Tears trickled down Bimla's cheeks. Her girls were all grown up.

# MY NEPHEW'S UNFORGETTABLE WEDDING

BY SHAMA MAHAJAN

IMAGE CREDIT: SHAMA MAHAJAN



We were all dancing to the tunes of the Bollywood songs, “Balle Balle ji Soneya de rang dekh lo.” We were dressed in our best silk sarees and loads of matching jewelry. The venue for the wedding was a community hall beautifully decorated with tissue sarees, fragrant roses, and marigolds. After hours of dancing, we reached the venue drenched in sweat, exhausted to the core. In India, it is the part of a marriage ceremony where friends and family members accompany the groom in a procession with lots of fun and frolic. There is loud music played by a band while the groom rides a horse. Lights, camera, and lots of action. The venue wasn't very far from our residence, but we deliberately took a longer route to enjoy the procession. We took turns dancing, singing, and laughing with loved ones.

At the community hall, about two hundred people had gathered. They were waiting for us. Our guests were all having fun, enjoying the variety of cuisines and tasty foods. The groom and bride sat for the ceremony. The priest lit Hawan Kunda, the holy fire, and chanted Hindu wedding hymns. He called Aksh, the groom, and Iccha the bride, and asked them to stand up for the phere, the Hindu wedding rituals. During phere, the bride and the groom walk hand in hand around the sacred fire as they exchange their marital vows, promising to live and die for each other, to keep no secrets, to protect, love and

share everything selflessly, and to remain faithful to each other all their lives. Usually, the tradition is for the couple to complete four phere and some communities even do seven.

The couple had hardly completed their second phera when all hell broke loose. Aksh fell to the ground with a loud thud. He seized, writhing on the floor. Everyone was stunned. No one knew what was happening. The guests looked on in despair. Iccha's parents wanted to call the wedding off right there and then. Her father shouted, "This wedding cannot happen. You hid the boy's health condition from us." All their relatives were pointing fingers at us. Aksh laid unconscious on the sofa, unaware of everything that was happening around him. Iccha, his bride, sat at the other end of the hall, surrounded by her family.

We knew for sure that the marriage was off, that any time now they'd give us this bad news. But to our surprise, the unexpected happened. The bride's father, Mr. Gupta, came to us and grumbled as if irritated. "My daughter is crazy and blinded by love," he said. "She loves your boy and thinks he loves her truly. I just can't understand this blind love."

We all breathed deep sighs of relief. Soon the groom regained his consciousness. He married his bride, and everyone showered them with blessings. Later, we learnt that the boy had taken a mixture of different liquors, which caused this adverse reaction. That's why he fainted.

It has been fifteen years since my nephew's wedding, but I still get goose bumps every time I think about it. What a day!



# THE TEMPTATIONS

BY SHUCHEN HU

PHOTO CREDIT: SHUCHEN HU



Eileen has never dreamed about ghosts or monsters. Not even once. But last night, she had a dream about a human skeleton dripping in blood. The two black eye sockets hinted at a vengeful smile. The flowing blood carved into the white bones, painting the whole skeleton red. Eileen woke up, her heart pounding. She knew something bad was coming. But she told herself, “It’s just a dream.”

Evenings in October aren’t cold at all. When the temperature hits 15 degrees in the daytime, it is warm in the car. Eileen opens all the windows as she drives home from work. Today’s office work was nothing unusual. When she does her job well, her joyfulness is her reward. Eileen is a task-oriented person.

She turns the volume up on her favourite radio station. It is so loud that she is sure other drivers can hear it. At the traffic lights, she keeps her eyes on the road to avoid making any possible eye contact with the drivers in the cars parallel to hers. She laughs and sways her head to Ed Sheeran’s new hit. Eileen acts like a teenager when she feels fulfilled.

But as she turns left onto the main street in her neighbourhood, she closes all the windows and turns down the volume. She returns to her mediocre life. She is a middle-aged woman.

When she gets home, her daughter, Sasha, is talking to her Lego playset. She jumps up. She wants Eileen to play with her.

“Did you eat?” Eileen says.

“Yes. Daddy made noodles.”

“Where is he anyway?”

“Playing computer games,” Sasha says. “Daddy doesn’t like playing with me.”

Eileen walks into the kitchen. Several dirty bowls sit in the sink, the greasy water almost flowing over the edge of the cracked rim. A big pot full of tangled sticky noodles also soaks. Eileen frowns. “How was school?”

“Good,” her daughter replies. “Mom, come play with me.”

“Mommy needs to take a shower first,” she says. “You are sure you don’t want a costume this year? Tomorrow is Halloween.”

“It is Career Day at school. I want to be a chef.”

“A chef? You’ll need a costume for that, right?”

“Daddy said I could use his apron.”

Eileen looks for the apron but can’t find it. Maybe she doesn’t really want to find it. “We should go get you a costume,” she says. “Put on your jacket. Hope we can still make it.”

“Daddy,” Sasha shouts. “We are leaving!”

The city roads are quiet. Eileen weaves around to find a parking spot in front of The Spirits. For years, it was a shopping mall. But every year now, during the Halloween season, it is a pop-up store. They must earn a lot of money to keep running like this, to employ so many sales associates. Eileen and her friends had talked about this store. They all thought it was a miracle that it kept coming back to the city.

Eileen hates The Spirits. The first time she went into the store, she was scared to death when a balloon monster near the entrance suddenly jumped over her head, laughing with horror. But she convinced herself that as an immigrant, if she really wanted to fit in, this place was a good learning opportunity to get to know all the culture about ghosts and monsters. In her motherland, talking about death was taboo. And playing dead. Unless you wanted to become a dead person, too. Yet here in Canada, it is a nationwide holiday. Gradually, Eileen got used to pressing all those buttons to make demons talk and dance for her. She stood in front of a girl ghost who sat on a tombstone. Eileen listened carefully to what this child ghost was saying, deciding which part of the story was

creepier. A giant black monster wearing a cape tried to suck a boy's soul. The withered body, a plastic model, reminded her of images from Harry Potter. She convinced herself that it was okay coming to this store; at least she could learn some new English words. And Sasha liked the store. The little coward kept begging Eileen to press all the buttons. She hid behind Eileen when the monsters jumped. Still, Eileen felt weary, as if her own spirit would get contaminated each time when she pressed a button in *The Spirits*. She had been studying the Bible for a while. Even now, she's not sure if a true Christian should celebrate Halloween. She worries that these ghosts and monsters will distance her from God.

Eileen has never bought anything from *The Spirits*. She doesn't decorate her place for Halloween. A thought runs in the back of her mind, "Don't hang a ghost, so you won't get a ghost." A pumpkin lantern is a good compromise. This year, she has a reasonable excuse to come to *The Spirits*. Let children be children.

Sasha finds a vampire costume. The child model looks confident in high heels with red lipstick and black mascara. It is a decent dress, covering much of her body. Eileen is relieved even before Sasha starts begging. She maintains a neutral face, but a smile plays on her lips as she pictures Sasha in the costume, going trick-or-treating. Her daughter will be warm in this costume.

"Please, Mom."

Eileen looks at the price tag. "Are you kidding me? Fifty dollars!" She has the money, but still. Fifty dollars for a Halloween costume!

Sasha gets angry. "You never buy me anything I want. Sharon's mom gets her whatever she wants. I wish Sharon's mom was my mom."

"You want to have your friend's mom?" Eileen says, her feelings hurt. "Who knows if your friend can get everything she wants? It might be a brag. I have tried my best, Sasha. If you are not happy, go and become someone else's daughter!"

Eileen walks to the exit. There, two clowns stand. The one on the left, wearing a nicely tailored suit, holds a poker card. He has oversized shoes on his oversized feet. Eileen stands in front of the clown. She presses the button. The clown's head stretches away from his body and another head grows in its place. The clown laughs a hollow sound. Eileen sees her reflection in the glass behind the clown. She would never want to be a clown. She doesn't care to be

disguised as anyone else at this age.

“Sorry, Mom.” Sasha says, coming to Eileen.

“It is OK.”

“So, I guess we should go home now?”

“Go get your size of that vampire costume,” she says. “We still need to find a chef one. We will probably have to ask one salesperson for that.”

Sasha is delighted. She runs back in to get the costume. Eileen watches her daughter with amusement. Her awkward body coordination makes her movements entertaining. Sasha is a lovely eight-year-old Canadian child. Eileen does not want her daughter to be a chef. She wants her to become a doctor or a scientist. When Sasha was in kindergarten, she wanted to be a teacher. Eileen vividly remembers that. Oh, who knows? Maybe Sasha will make a wonderful chef.

It is completely dark outside when they leave The Spirits. The wind has a chill, bringing a smell heavy with moisture. It starts to rain. Eileen turns on the wiper blades, then turns the volume up on the radio. A popular gameshow is being broadcast live. Eileen realizes that she has never heard a person with an accent playing this popular game where players win cash. Not even once. In the back, Sasha is sleeping like a baby.

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Patrick hardly opens his eyes. He is pale like a piece of paper. His sparse gray hair clings to his forehead. Tiny drops of sweat cover his wrinkled face. His lips are swollen. A bag of IV fluids hangs from a pole near his bed. He is hooked up to a nasal cannula for oxygen. A machine displays his vital signs on the screen, his essential parameters. The numbers tell if a person is alive or dead. Patrick knows Jen is beside him. He wants to tell her that his butt is uncomfortable. It feels like two pieces of spoiled pork, rancid and sticky.

The smell of blood, salty and disgusting, hangs in the air. They didn’t celebrate their 39<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, what with Patrick being here in the hospital. Jen can sense his anxiety.

“How are you feeling, Patrick?”

“I’m so thirsty.”

“You cannot drink any water.”

“Why?” Patrick’s voice is low and weak.

“The doctor said you can’t have any.”

Patrick is too tired to argue. He tries his best to search for saliva. His throat is burning. The pain is shooting and lacerating. He wonders if his throat is damaged. His mouth is dry. He swallows, but nothing goes down. He uses up his last strength, and his head feels heavy. His eyesight goes blurry, but his discomfort keeps him awake. He sees Jen wipe tears from her face.

“Do you want to talk to Eileen now?” She asks. “She won’t stop crying.”

“Sure.”

Jen makes the video call.

“Dad,” Eileen says, hysterical. “I thought we’d lost you when Mom told me you were in the ER.” Eileen’s nose, mouth, eyebrow blur together. Her eyes are red and swollen.

“Don’t cry, Eileen.” It hurts Patrick to see his daughter cry.

“Don’t cry, Eileen,” Jen repeats. “Your father will cry, too.” She adjusts the phone’s angle so that Eileen can see her father’s face fully.

“Live well, Eileen,” Patrick says slowly but firmly. “Remember to live well.”

Patrick knows his time is not long. There is so much he wants to tell Eileen, but he can’t focus. His thoughts are floating. But he forces himself to speak. He even philosophizes about the shifting economy, the politics of immigration.

“We don’t blame you for not coming back,” Eileen’s mom says before hanging up. “We understand. Always remember that.”

Has Patrick ever regretted encouraging their only child to move to a foreign country, a fourteen-hour time difference between them? Jen regrets it. She is not young anymore, and taking care of Patrick is not easy. She worries that this time, God will take her husband away from her forever. She can’t stand the thought of becoming a widow.

Drifting into sleep, Jen dreams that someone is calling her. She realizes it is Patrick.

“What is wrong with you?” Patrick is irritable, impatient. “You are here sleeping?”

“Sorry,” she says, feeling aggrieved. “I’m tired.”

“I want water.” Patrick tries to lift his body, but he cannot.

“The doctor said no water, remember?”

“Yeah, so I should die of thirst? And I’m soaking in blood. I cannot leave this world with a clean gown?”

The nurse comes into the room. “You have internal bleeding in your colon,” she explains. “We are monitoring the bleeding. I am going to change your gown now. Your wife can use a damp Q-tip on your lips to help with the dryness.”

Patrick accepts everything grudgingly. Since he came into the hospital, he has not been himself. There are different orders to obey from the doctors and nurses. Everyone acts like his boss, including his wife.

He is also confused. He’s an honest, decent man... why would he get cancer? Why must he die at such a young age?

Patrick opens his mouth to let Jen dampen it with a Q-tip. When the moisture touches his lips, it is the best feeling in the world. But the joy it brings disappears all too quickly. His hope diminishes when Jen throws that Q-tip into the garbage bin. Seeing this, Patrick wants to lift his hand to point at it, but he is too weak.

An old memory comes to him as his consciousness fades. He is playing a game of chess with ten-year-old Eileen. His daughter is winning. At first, he was happy for her. But then he became furious that he was losing to a kid. “I want a rematch,” he shouted. The second time, Eileen was still ahead. He pushed the chessboard over and kicked Eileen behind her knees until she fell over kneeling on the ground. He can’t remember seeing the expression on Eileen’s face now, but he does remember all the scattered pieces on the ground. If memory serves him right, Jen was away on a business trip. Did she notice, when she got back home, the large bruises on Eileen’s legs? She never said anything. There was no fight, no quarrel. No consequences for Patrick. Why did Jen always give him such an easy pass?

Patrick can feel another round of colic coming on. Blood oozes from his body. One second is all it takes for the pad to soak right through. Jen screams, pressing the call button. He sees her run to fetch the nurses and he thinks, “I didn’t even buy a gift for her at our 39<sup>th</sup> anniversary.”

# CONTRIBUTORS

*Abdulsalam Abo Al Shamat* is a Syrian poet and a freelance photographer. In 2019, he won the Second Prize in The Migrant & Refugees Poetry Competition in Kuala Lumpur, where he lived from 2013 to 2021. In Malaysia, he performed at Literary and Refugee Festivals. His poetry has been published in the *Archipelago Online Magazine*. Abdulsalam currently lives in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada.

*Bhoomika Dongol* is a strong advocate for resilient communities and has been working in the non-profit sector for over ten years. At heart, she enjoys storytelling led by a childlike curiosity. With her work in the post-disaster scenario in Nepal and South Asia, Bhoomika's stories are inspired by stories of resilient people living during some of the most extreme and evolving circumstances.

*Khalidoun Abou Alshamat* is a passionate photographer from Syria, who also loves storytelling and writing. He currently lives in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada.

An administrator, educator and a clinician in her country of origin, the Philippines, *Maricar P. Benedicto*, Ph.D, came to Canada in 2008. She is a certified and licensed Early Childhood Educator in the provinces of Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Alberta. She is a graduate of Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology from the Manuel L. Quezon University, Manila, Philippines. Furthermore, she has a Master's in Psychology and in Special Education from the same university. Her academic credentials had been assessed and recognized by IQAS( International Qualifications Assessment Service). Maricar loves doing arts and crafts with her early learners. She loves to introduce them to simple science experiments that fascinate them and make them want to discover more. Honing the early learners skills and creative minds is her goal. With her extensive experience in assessment and evaluation, it has been a great advantage in her work as an Early Childhood Educator for thirteen years in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada.

*Mohammad Nure Alam* is an aspiring environmental sustainability professional currently pursuing a master's in sustainability. He comes with over two decades of international experience in diversified fields including sustainability at development and for-profit organizations. He would like to continue his interest and experience in cross-cutting water resource management and packaging waste management working for corporates to deliver their commitments.

*Shama Mahajan* was born in the beautiful city of Amritsar in India. Later Shama moved to Delhi, where she studied and earned her Bachelor of Arts in Education and a Master's of Education. Shama is a teacher by profession. She has grown up listening and reading Hindu Mythology and books by Indian authors like R.K. Narayan, Munshi Prem Chand, Amrita Pritam and Khushwant Singh. Shama sees people and draws inspiration from real life incidents for writing her stories.

*Shuchen Hu* comes from China and she now lives in Regina with her family. After five years living in Canada, Shuchen started to become fascinated by an ambiguous angle to watch the world, as this world is not white or black. This philosophy of nothing-is-absolute is a challenge to the eastern philosophy of Karma-is-a-bitch; meanwhile, nihilism, at some level, reflects the dissipation of humanity, yet another way to explore the intrinsic divinity in humans themselves. Shuchen believes that being true to oneself and self-discipline are the keys to survive in the current chaos.

## EDITOR

*Iryn Tushabe* is a Ugandan-Canadian writer and journalist. Her creative nonfiction has appeared in *Briarpatch Magazine*, *Adda*, and *Prairies North* and on CBC Saskatchewan. Her short fiction has been published in *Grain Magazine*, the *Carter V. Cooper Short Fiction Anthology*, the *Journey Prize Stories*, and has been shortlisted for the Caine Prize for African Writing. The winner of the 2020 City of Regina Writing Award, she's currently finishing her debut novel, *Everything is Fine Here*.





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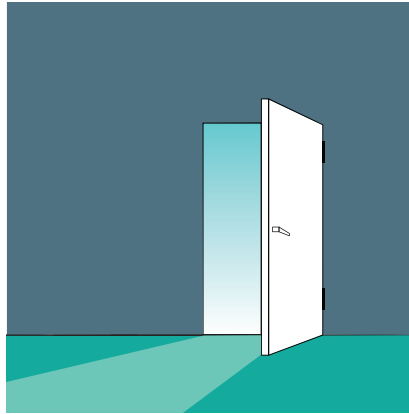


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