

ISSUE 7

MELBOURNE CULTURE CORNER

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ISSUE 7

Mehreen Ahmed

Cenote

Before the telltale stick figures of shinned solid bones, a priest sermoned. Etched on a Mountain cave of russet walls, in the pale shadows of a moonlight tall, a tale came to pass. That a famine had struck hard, a terrible pestilence followed. The rain gods must be appeased. They had to be cleansed. Innocent bodies sacrificed. For there were no rains, certainly no grains. Undeterred in the crucifixion, this was the temple's ruse to boost harvest. The King of the land sat reading from a scroll. It was in the scroll of the dead, where this light was shed. A high price at stake, the Sacred Cenote, where the heads laid. Within its magical orbit.

Children queued up in short loincloths. When they heard the divine decree, they were in awe. That the priest picked up a child and he took him to the gallows. Parents witnessed petrified, sunken souls in hollows. Little bodies lay amok at gods' altar. The severed heads in chaos, but still no crops, nor any flying swallows. The famine persisted for yet another year. A gaping horror of cries; hollering justice to rise. But Nature remained mute. A silence played out. Like this cold marble of unheard, untuned lute.

Preservation of life; that was all the King cared about. His Queen gave birth to a boy, the future King. He was a father; he felt a sense of pride. His conscience gave him a choice, all babies including yours, or none at all to die at the altar of grains. It was his choice, the King's call. He thought. Then he thought again. Preservation of life; that was all he thought he cared about the most. Who's preservation? His baby's or the babies of his subjects.

Mehreen Ahmed is an award-winning author, internationally published and critically acclaimed by Midwest Book Review. One of her short stories won The Waterloo Short Story Competition, 2020. Her works have been nominated three times for The Best of the Net, 2020. Pushcart Prize nomination, 2020. Two times for Ditmar Awards in 2016 and 2019, Aurealis Awards nominee, 2015 and nomination for Christina Stead Prize, 2018. Her book was announced as The Drunken Druid's Editor's Choice, June 2018. Three of her books received Author Shout Reader Ready Awards, 2019. One Received Silver. The other two Bronze medals.

Bernard Pearson

After the Divine Comedy

One day the devil
(Who nowadays is
Only ever seen advertised
On the wall paintings
Of old churches)
Came out into plain sight.
Seeming to taunt the people,
He would stand on one hoof
then the other
And putting his festering talons on
either side of his great scaly red belly
He would roar with laughter and say.
'Fools you thought that I was invented
by man, when the reverse is true.'

The people then looked behind
The devil into the yawning maw
From whence he came
And saw a great stramash
Between men of different
Style and configuration
All screaming at each other
in the silence that is hell.
'You now see for what you were
made.' he said

Then from the crowd before the beast
A child of tender years walked
Towards the swaggering demon
And said 'It is good that I can see
You and take your measure
For now If I take your hand
Which of us will burn?'

Bernard Pearson's work appears in many publications, including; Aesthetica Magazine , The Edinburgh Review, Crossways, The Gentian, Nymphs The Poetry Village, Beneath The Fever, The Beach Hut Little stone. work coming up in Big Easy, and Orange Blush In 2017 a selection of his poetry 'In Free Fall' was published by Leaf by Leaf Press. In 2019 he won second prize in The Aurora Prize for Writing for his poem Manor Farm. He is also a Biographer and Prize winning short story writer

Strider Marcus Jones

HERE I AM THE SAME

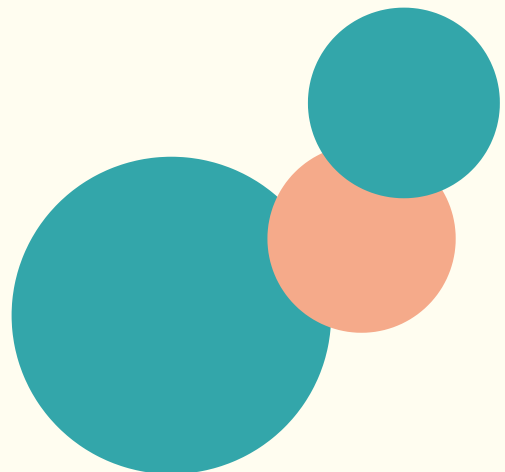
here i am the same
sitting in the dark with you
turning out the stars
that won't do.
from the dimmed grain
light of coffee bars
they look so infinitely plain
against the black backdrop
countless where time can't stop.

once,
everyone has a once-
they lit the canopy
on that journey
now only
tickets of buses and trains
and notes that grew out of numbers and names.

around midnight,
i mull them with moonlight
and stand out in their youth
from this heavy slated roof
i've settled under
and wonder
will i ever find
another time to penetrate
and fascinate
your body with my mind.

Strider Marcus Jones – is a poet, law graduate and former civil servant from Salford, England with proud Celtic roots in Ireland and Wales. He is the editor and publisher of Lothlorien Poetry Journal

<https://lothlorienpoetryjournal.blogspot.com/>. A member of The Poetry Society, his five published books of poetry <https://stridermarcusjonespoetry.wordpress.com/reveal-a-maverick-moving-between-cities-playing-his-saxophone-in-smoky-rooms>



REJECTING OVID

the fabulous beauty of your face-
so esoteric,
not always in this place-
beguiles me.

it's late, mesmeric
smile is but a base,
a film to interface
with the movements of the mind behind it.

my smile, me-
like Thomas O'Malley
the alley
cat reclining on a tin bin lid
with fishy whiskers-

turns the ink in the valley
of your quills
into script,
while i sit
and sip

your syllables
with fresh red sepals of habiscus,
rejecting Ovid
and his Amores
for your stories.

His poetry has been published in numerous publications including: Dreich Magazine; The Racket Journal; Trouvaille Review; dyst Literary Journal; Impspired Magazine; Literary Yard Journal; Poppy Road Review; Cajun Mutt Press; Rusty Truck Magazine; Rye Whiskey Review; Deep Water Literary Journal; The Huffington Post USA; The Stray Branch Literary Magazine; Crack The Spine Literary Magazine; The Lampeter Review; Panoplyzine Poetry Magazine and Dissident Voice.

OLADEJI Mayowa Oluwasegun

Seabird at Sunset

-Inspired by a Biyi Bandele photography

It is still coming and we are waiting for it, the intermittent crookkkk sound of a fatigued bird. At the outline of a sleeping city, a gaze at the sight of Almighty. Learning the language of peace through open wings, a sign of loneliness hug my cloth as I hang across the ledge. The politics on television threaten to open my thoughts

through doors that cover my heart. The one made of honey so that you taste sweetness every time my words kiss you. It is here I come to watch the world die and be reborn again. The first place I learnt to paint with blood, to know how life can draw a map across a body. Legs dangling, rooted in darkness that wants to crawl over me. I look to the horizon

to see light. Glittering sharp luminescence, struggling through to success. To know that newspaper reports are dramas of life. Hover around, hover around, you are the owner of the sky. I remember the curves of the horizon follow your wings, your beak point to brightness; you wish to carry us away. To ferry us through

memories we seek to reimage. I want to walk across this water, I hear I must get a certain power. The type a boy sees his mother search for through doors of many churches. To leave bones starved of flesh, a call for prayer at the altar on the hill. There is something about the music that ripple through my soul, bird chirpings rent the air in the forest that is my body. I am sitting, but it is through your flight

that I walk into redemption. This exorcism come from the light of God, a painting made on the canvass of existence. It glides down the heavens, a picture of serenity and power. My feet still tell stories as they dangle away fear from the tip of my toes, to know what drives a man to success is a maxim that is alive. These memories must not die, I encase them in words that mark forever. This one is a tale of happiness, carved into the system of a musing naturalist.

OLADEJI Mayowa Oluwasegun writes plays and poems from Zaria in Northern Nigeria, where he is engaged in his graduate work studying Theatre and Performing Arts. He has been published on the Kalahari Review, Praxis Magazine, Nantygreens, and other literary platforms

John Homan

Escape

Running through darkened halls,
Twisting, turning.
Now left then right,

Trying to lose the foe,
No time to breathe,
Legs begin to ache.

In the distance is a double door,
Bright light streaming through,
They are closer now,

Shrieks in the air,
Scraping on the floor
One more big breath,
One more sprint.

Approaching the door,
A length of chain wrapped between the crash bars,
No time to stop.
No options left.
Nowhere to go.

Lowering the shoulder,
Leaping into the air,
Landing on the weakest part.

Snapping the chain in two.
Bursting the door with a crash.
Tumbling into the sunshine...

Where the darkness can't follow.

Hope in the Dark

The man in front of me at the convenience store
bought generic cigarettes and scratch-off lottery,
dressed in a batman t-shirt and pyjama bottoms,

As I got in my car I saw him,
sitting on the curb at the side of the building
smoking in the morning darkness
as he scratched the card.

John Homan is a poet and percussionist from Bend, Oregon. He is a graduate of Indiana University. His work has appeared in Chiron Review, Former Cactus, and Misfit Magazine among others. He is an ESL tutor in a middle school, happy to have given up years of corporate customer service. He lives with his wife and many cats in Elkhart, Indiana.

Twitter handle @john_homan

Ximena Escobar

From the Zeppelin

Your aqua irises jitter, suffering the nascent outburst desperate to gush out of our throats.

I see it snake in your neck-veins, twitching, flapping—I don't want you to ever eject your love for us.

But a barrel resonates, the same white muteness and colour of my mind, of this white surgical space, this purgatory.

I scream with you, gag the wings you are retching. Your skeletal jaw wide open, bearing the powder cloud that ejaculates, the dove that flies away.

There is water. A murmur, distant, of ocean and cars. Except it comes from the 'flies', large as fat aeroplanes, zeppelins carrying our million pastless eyes. I sometimes see one in the far—white oval ships crossing the blue sky of day. My hands-on the curved glass surface, sterile dermis I inhabit. I dream the window open, darling, should you care to find me.

Do you still judge me? I fear your physical pain is already too intense, too much to feel our love anymore; but your apathy is worse than your resentment. It seems we are in a similar situation after all—the past is only numbers here. Here, where there are no roots... Do you look upon me like that? Do you look upon me like a number, from a similar distance? Am I the night sun, sunken, forgotten behind the mountain of your body? Am I only a name, information?

I'm not sure your index would even slow as it would scroll past me, down the whitest plasma such as I conceive of here, beating instead for a gap of blue between the lines, the smell of grass you cannot grasp, not even brush with your calloused fingertips. They've forgotten the steel guitar strings, the wine inside my mouth. They are not the shapes keeping you alive now—not our song, anymore—but the tweeting of birds, the threads of sunshine through the leaves, crystalline rivulets we only ever dreamed of. We only borrowed them from storybooks, yet, you miss them, like you lost them. I guess like an orphan who never knew his mother. But I—I do. I feel them run through me now—their cold translucence flowing through plastic hollows inside me—I shiver—curl, bend, suffer them with you—we are together still. Here, in this white-canvas universe, I am free to suffer what I will—your face. What you suffer is only survival, loyalty to an Earth that never was. I don't care for it your forgetfulness, my dissolution.

I stretch my fingers tensely on the glass. As colourless and odourless as the liquid flowing through the pipes inside me. I feel them with an uncomfortable numbness —as though my body was waking, attached to some kind of machine. But that is a movie I once saw—yes—slipping in through the air conditioning or whatever those vents are in the halls, just above the white tile floors—I don't think I really have a body anymore—where nothing but the stillness of my exact same temperature and breath doesn't flow, just exists, stagnantly. I see the shattered glass, the metal, the concrete. I see you—the wire and your hands like I'm right there above you. Your veins bulging, not full of me but full of your strength, as you push yourself up and gaze—for a moment—at the powder white sky, gliding away with me. Because immediately, instantly, you turn, searching for a heart beat, a hug in the darkness to freeze to death with. As long as the ache of you weighs I don't care, like a sinking stone, filling up my nostrils of the only reality I care for—you—elevated—our swelled-to-perfection story.

Look at this. Look at you tread on the dead birds. It's the lack of time here, the inability to experience anything that memories break their ties altogether with reality—If we concur that reality is that which can be shared almost entirely. They become something else, true creations.

I won't suffer your bones, I will only suffer the man you were with me, gripping the air separating us, our eyes locking as the same boat cracks but it wasn't the same boat, you and I afraid of the darkness; I was only afraid of solitude.

Here, now, is when I feel the distance. Here is when I close my eyes to this foreign sun, following the infinite amoeba shape escaping—you—time and time again, diagonally away and taking off again, forever. Light was not a mere purple stain; it was scarred, tattooed in our darkness that we never could perceive darkness absolutely.

I am one out of countless eyes in this carcass, bouncing stored in one of countless drawers. I don't know if they will ever use me, the us of me, if I will ever transcend this vacant universe. It's like death too, ironically, and if they are flying is because they are going to die too. I cling to you, darling, hang from you by the nails. Dig into you that you will never heal—I—will never heal. Here, in the certainty of, if nothing else, light, I'll cling to you. I'll cling to your imprint lest your eyes fade. Cling to the scar where, like a watermark, we remain.

Ximena is writing short stories and poetry. Originally from Chile, she lives in Sydney with her family. Facebook:
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Elizabeth M Castillo

I don't write about my brick house because it is there

I don't write about its sturdy walls, its cosy nooks. It's thick thatching. I write about the dangers that lurk outside in the night, and the daylight that comes to call, every morning without fail. About the banquets prepared in each one of its rooms. And the salt that still calls me out to sea, and the mountains that stand guard to either side.

I don't write about my brick house, but I write inside of it. Its solid foundations have steadied my ankles, and its wood floors are soft beneath my feet. At my request, it turned its face towards the sun, and showers me with all the laughter and light the season can provide. Though my daily walks might take me away from it, I have learned that behind its doors is everything I could ever need.

I don't write about my brick house, because you have filled it. I write about those that have gone, stepping outside, clutching at words as they swirl on the breeze, to fill the spaces they once occupied. Bottle them up for pickling once back inside. All that remains are these words, each one a benediction. A sigh of laughter. A dying breath. My brick house is lined with shelves and cupboards so I can store away what little is left.

I don't write about my brick house, but I always carry it with me. An amulet in my pocket. A comforting weight at my back. Moulded am I, by the shape of it, I wear the hue of our pleasure for days. Even as I wander the forests in the deepest black of night I hear whispers of treachery and deceit but know they cannot harm me, for the mark of my name, and might of bricks, are at my fingertips.

I don't write about my brick house, but I run to it. Run, like the devil's after me, which he usually is. My brick house is my constant. I wear its walls like armour against the cold, against the ravenous wolves that would have my heart, my head. They cannot touch me within its borders. I fly its colours. I am safe. My brick house will surrender me to no adversary. And I will suffer no fool that would dare take its place.

Elizabeth M Castillo is a British-Mauritian poet, writer and language teacher. She lives in Paris with her family and two cats. When not writing poetry, she can be found working on her podcast or webcomic, pottering about her garden, or writing a variety of different things under a variety of pen names.

Music

I close my eyes and listen
To the very first note
And it was in that moment,
I felt like I could float.

Then came tears that burn my cheeks
From how hard the lyrics touch.
I cried and then I sobbed,
How a simple sound can do so much.

I find I have to remind myself,
Though my heart is deep in poise.
This ethereal noise that heals me,
Is another human's voice.

Rani is a sixteen-year-old and from NY and loved poetry since 4th grade but only recently started writing it as a hobby. Rani wrote this poem about music which, like poetry, is an emotional release and a way to express themselves.

Rose Knapp

Techno Dreams on Planes

Quests to save the increasingly
Distorted Dystopian decadent
Planet from plutocratic passivity

Gamma Rays

Gamma rays raze planets into wastelands
Reaping the iridium molten cores
Devouring the gravitational pull of matter

Rose Knapp (she/they) is a poet and electronic producer. She has publications in Lotus-Eater, Bombay Gin, BlazeVOX, Hotel Amerika, Fence Books, Obsidian, Gargoyle, and others. She has poetry collections published with Hesterglock Press and Dostoyevsky Wannabe. She lives in Minneapolis. Find her at roseknapp.net and on Twitter @Rose_Siyaniye

Christopher Tracey

I walk China Town

Stray dogs follow me, hungry

Poodle want noodle

Christopher Tracey hails from the Northern Suburbs of Victoria. Growing up in a small shack and raised by wild dogs, he ventured into the city and was inspired by the lights and architecture. Christopher Tracey has been featured before. This is his second submission

Patrick Burr

Joy

Jeremiah was a bullfrog. He was also a drunk. These two labels he did not recognize as being mutually exclusive. Though in his current state — wrinkles where there theretofore had been none; warts out the wazoo, in places only God and he (if he'd have bothered looking) knew; a fat old toad, four weeks from his third/fifty-first birthday — he cultivated doubts.

His wife was similarly-warted. The warts, plus Jeremiah's perennial alcoholism, were the glue. The secret to a strong marriage, Jeremiah had twice said to himself (once on the toilet, once in a particularly lurid dream), was reciprocal weakness. The weakness could be innate or precipitated by external factors — hardly did it matter. Jeremiah despised the suspense of a potential ungluing, and was magnetized by secrets; ever did he maintain a diverse collection of mighty fine wines. This variety of choice placed the onus of creating or dispelling such suspense squarely on Jeremiah, which (even when he denied himself said power of choice, which on occasion he did) he enjoyed.

There was also the job: Jeremiah sang bass in the Pondhoppers, a barbershop quintet he'd founded with two college roommates, Percy and Parnell, and their brothers. They rehearsed at the bog's centre, for the acoustics. On the back of the members' mutual hatred for statements spoken with the inflection of a question, and their unshakeable adherence to a practice schedule as strict as it was comprehensive, the band persisted, was each of the members' (aside from Percy's, who ran a peat moss dispensary empire) main source of income.

Jeremiah and his wife lived in the bog's reedy exurbs. Their home was an agglomeration of sand and muck nooked among the cattails. Snakes sometimes whispered past in the night; Jeremiah of habit slept with his eyes open.

They had not had tadpoles; now it was too late. Jeremiah did not resent his wife for this, though she perhaps resented him. Jeremiah resented nothing, for whenever the conditions for resentment emerged he turned to the glue. He left for rehearsal early and returned late.

The hop home was the lone frame within which emotion could be drawn. Often he utilized this time — or found himself utilizing this time, as it was not always a conscious utilization — for complaining aloud of things and people and ideas — all objects, really, the three.

One night on the hop home Jeremiah was moping hard, hard, hard about a collective of mopeable objects — his wife and her insistence on rubbing his face in how much more intelligent she was than he, playing Mozart on the harpsichord whilst reading a Goethe novel (as was her won't); his bandmates' persistent anger at him for singing "Joy to the World" with what they deemed a false certitude, an anger which had come hot during that day's session with Parnell's tonguing of Jeremiah's left eye; the wait for alcohol necessitated by the studio-to-home commute.

Halfway Jeremiah broke into a sweat — because the session had ended early owing to the anger, the sun was still out, visible above the distant hillcrest. He did not feel like hurrying home; the session had depressed him sufficiently. Jeremiah paused, dunked himself in the water, sat on a nearby lily pad to wait out the heat.

Anon did Jeremiah begin to court sleep. He lay on his back, eyes half-open, embracing the sensation of semi-consciousness. He could stay here, would stay here, forever.... "Sit up, Jeremiah."

The voice Jeremiah did not recognize. He ignored it.

"Sit up Now."

Jeremiah flipped onto his stomach. Jeremiah was not scared. He was a strong soul, had heard voices on many occasions.

"Can you hear me, Jeremiah?"

"No shit. But I can't see you."

"Yes, Jeremiah. Not a snake, but a bog spectre I am. I know your mind, your need." Jeremiah shuddered.

"Look, see what beauty I have left for you."

Jeremiah looked. At the lily's edge was a pill, white, shapely in a made-for-suppository manner.

"Take; eat. This is the gift I shed for thee. Joy to the world."

Jeremiah inched sideways toward the pill. He would take it, on principle — but on principle, too, he was wary. "Will it serve me well?"

"To this pill, Jeremiah, you are master. It knows nothing but servitude."

Jeremiah nodded. It was hot, and he craved relief. The pill he swallowed in the traditional (rather than the now-fashionable) fashion.

"It will cure your symptoms, Jeremiah," the voice intoned. "Enlighten you; turn you toward the sun."

Jeremiah flipped onto his back and sunk into the pill's cool fire. Life whispered softly; this was not like alcohol and owned time in a way his job had never proven it could. In twenty croaks he was out.

And Jeremiah dreamed: The sky was blue. Still on his back, but capable of rising. And conscious he was of this capability, conscious in a way that redefined the word itself. He now not only knew how; he knew. He did rise — into a situp, onto his two feet. He craned his neck at the heavens, extended his hands in both laudation and disbelief at his newfound mental capacity. Five fingers, unwebbed; five fingernails. Now into the water, he looked. In the water, he beheld his face. Clear: the path free from this bullfroggy bullshit which bogged him into an animal less than himself. Then did the peace of knowledge turn to horror, for through his face he saw his past, the anxieties which had indeed driven him to so readily accept the bog spectre's offer: Preschool innocence stripped by playground bullying; first love lost in the cattails; joy pocked by isolations; isolation pocked by joys; aimless hopping pad to pad, catching his face in the water; hating himself for catching flies, loving himself for eating them; peaceful silence alone with his wife, and the void cleaved by her voice or his; the music that once flowed from him's broken decline into eclecticism; the conforming of his face to the predeterminate filth of his condition, lines and crevasses defining the surface which had once been the window to his essence, and which he had never taught himself to cast. This and his eyes, his golden-yellow eyes, eyes which shone of their own accord, dimming into the water's dark death.

He spun away, closed his eyes, but the image remained, burned as it was within, a memory rooted to his finite essence. He curled fetal on the lily (which could yet support his weight), sang himself into docility. "Joy to the world," he whispered. Then he shut up, shut himself off. Fetal, he awaited the end.

"Look straight at the sun," spoke a voice that must have belonged to the bog spectre, though it no longer mattered. "Look straight at the sun." Jeremiah closed his eyes, blinded himself by burying his head into his elbows, which he dug hard into the lily's wet, papery strength. "Look straight at the sun."

Jeremiah shuddered. He was on his back, supine, like a true toad. It was not yet night. He shaded his eyes with a foreleg, rolled onto his flank. Next to him on the lily bobbed a bottle, amber. Jeremiah surveyed it. Empty. He kicked it over into the water. He rolled onto his underbelly, pushed himself up, turned toward the West. And home he hopped, home for more, the sun beating at his back.

Patrick Burr is a writer based variably in the Washington, D.C. area and Latvia. Recent fiction and essays have been or will be published in White House History Quarterly, Merion West, Futbolista, and the Dewdrop. After graduating from Vanderbilt University he edited a weekly paper in Montana and lived in Montana before earning an MFA from the University of Washington, during which time his writing won the program's Nelson Bentley Prize. Please see wpburr.com for more.

Thanks to all our lovely contributors for their support and submissions, and to everyone taking the time to read all the amazing poems and stories we receive!

As always we would like to acknowledge the original custodians of the land we live and work upon, and pay our respect to all indigenous peoples past and present.