



*A Collection of Creative Non-Fiction*

# ROOTS

*by*

*Immigrant Seniors and Mount Royal University Students*



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# About This Anthology

This anthology is the result of a collaboration between Immigrant Services Calgary (ISC) and Mount Royal University (MRU). Facilitated through the Community Initiatives for Immigrant Seniors Program (CISP), funded by Family & Community Support Services (FCSS), it was over the course of ten weeks that immigrant seniors worked with Prof. Natalie Meisner, PhD and creative writing students to write and craft creative non-fiction pieces about roots as a thematic focus.



## Community Initiatives for Immigrant Seniors Program (CISP)



The Community Initiatives for Immigrant Seniors Program (CISP) is a locally funded social inclusion initiative designed to enhance the integration and inclusion of vulnerable immigrant seniors from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, creating welcoming and supportive environments to help them feel respected and valued.

This program adopts a proactive, holistic, outcome-driven approach to address the physical, emotional, psychological, social and intellectual needs of immigrant seniors and facilitate their integration in the Canadian society. CISP focuses on empowerment and building the capacity of our seniors to be active and contributing members in the community, and it provides them with opportunities to take part in spearheading, implementing and sustaining meaningful community-based projects.

If you are interested in learning more about CISP, or want to join this program, please visit us at Immigrant Services Calgary.

#1200, 910 7th Avenue S.W.  
403-265-1120  
[www.immigrantservicescalgary.ca](http://www.immigrantservicescalgary.ca)

# Contributors

## CISP Immigrant Seniors

### **Zahra Abbasi**

My full name is Zahra Abbasi. My hometown is Hamedan, Iran. I love my hometown, its rich culture and beautiful nature. I am a housewife and have successfully raised three children. I moved to Canada five years ago because of my children. Everything was new, but I embraced these changes and accepted this country and this welcoming city as my second home. I have been developing new roots in this new land and now feel more stable. I have stayed firm, challenging myself to improve each day. In addition, I started learning new skills. I have been improving my English by attending classes and reading books. I now have the chance to participate in a creative writing class, which has dramatically improved my writing skills. I am confident writing now and have gained valuable experience in this class. My hobbies are knitting, reading, and baking; I love nature, too. A fun fact about me is that most of the time, I make gifts for my family and friends.

### **Maryam Haghighi**

My name is Maryam Haghighi. I was born and raised in Tehran, the capital city of Iran. I worked at an oil and gas organization for 34 years and enjoyed every moment. It has been nearly 3.5 years since I moved to Calgary. Here, I have more time to reflect on my interests and experience new things. Painting and writing were two of my life dreams that became into reality. I'm still in the first stages, but everybody has to start from somewhere. Painting and playing with the colours give me positive energy, while writing brings me serenity by pouring my thoughts on white paper. A fun fact about myself is that I developed my writing skills by attending Creative Writing Classes, a joint project between the Immigrant Services Calgary (ISC) and Mount Royal University (MRU).

### **Ludmila Krautsova**

My name is Ludmila. I was born in the capital of the Republic of Belarus, the city of Minsk. At that time, Belarus was one of the republics of the Soviet Union. Like all other children in my country, I went to kindergarten, then to school, and then to university. After university, I started my career at a computer center, where I worked as a computer maintenance engineer. In the same computer center, I met my future husband. On December 26, 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed and all the republics that were part of it became separate states. Belarus was declared as an independent state. Like many of our friends, we applied for immigration to Canada. We lived in Toronto for more than 20 years.

I worked in an engineering consulting company. I have designed heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems for schools, hospitals, residential buildings, theaters, etc. Now, I am retired. I have my grandchildren and hobbies; I always loved music, singing and dancing. I love to travel and do physical activities like yoga. Even though I've lived in Canada for such a long time, I still have so much love for my country. I will always be drawn to Belarus' people, including their culture, their spirit, their traditions, and their open hearts.

### **Lili Zhang**

Lili Zhang is from China. He has been in Calgary for more than four years. He believes that writing is a process of thinking and learning. Organized by Immigrant Services Calgary and Mount Royal University, the Creative Writing course has provided Lili with such a rare opportunity, and he feels that his writings would not be as good as they are without the valuable guidance of Professor Natalie Meisner and the attentive help of Ruby, Benjamin and Pamela, his group partners from MRU. He learned a lot from them.

### **Grace Xing**

Grace Xing is from China. She was a nurse and has lots of experience working in hospitals in China. Since Grace moved to Canada, she enjoys planting some flowers and vegetables in her garden in summer. In her leisure time, Grace also likes to hike with friends in the mountains, watching the beautiful scenery and taking pictures. She really enjoys listening to popular, meaningful songs and singing along with them. Sometimes, Grace likes to walk long distances for exercise.

### **Sukhvir Jatana**

Sukhvir is a devoted mother of three and a proud grandmother to many. Rooted in her Sikh faith, she grew up on a farm in Punjab, later raising her children and managing a farm in Madhya Pradesh. Eventually, she moved to Calgary, Canada, where she continues to dedicate herself to supporting her family and helping others. Sukhvir seeks to continually learn and grow, especially through the opportunities to learn and practice English and exercise classes. She approaches every chapter of life with curiosity and determination.

### **Shahrbano Ghafarri**

My name is Shahrbano Ghafarri. Originally, I am from Iran. It's where I was raised, where I graduated from school and married. I was a teacher back home and I taught chemistry at a high school. Now I am retired. I married when I was a student at university. I have four kids: one son and three daughters. All of them are highly educated. Two of my daughters are medical doctors and my son has a PhD and PEng in civil

engineering. My youngest daughter has a PhD in chemical engineering. All of them have married and I have three granddaughters. I moved to Canada in 2014 and I'm a Canadian citizen. I made a lot of kind friends, and I like it here. I am a volunteer for sewing and knitting. I also enjoy creative writing. Professor Natalie taught me how to write a poem and the lovely students help me write better. Now I love creative writing and I'm happy I can write poetry, as well as improve my writing and speaking skills in English.

### **Liubov Truzhnikova**

Her native country is Kyrgyzstan. She has lived in Calgary for over 10 years. Her native language is Russian. The name Liubov translates into English as Love and reflects the essence of her nature. She loves her country, people, nature, travel, music, dance, theater, books, cinema. Her main goal is to become a worthy citizen of Canada. She successfully studies English in ESL courses at Maple Live Academy, Bow Valley College, CCIS, and CIWA. The joint CCIS and MRU Creative Writing program helps her improve her English, teaches her to write poems, verses and stories about life, love, and the roots of her people.

### **Juan de Jesús Rodríguez Valero**

Juan is a Venezuelan "creole of purebred," born in Cabudare, Lara State on December 26, 1951, being the third son of Marina and Gustavo. He grew up in Caracas, the capital of Venezuela, and ended up living in Valencia, capital of Carabobo State. He joined the National School of Administration and Public Finance, graduating from it as a Senior Technician in Customs. He began to work at the Air Customs Office in Maiquetía, but after the birth of his first daughter he moved to Valencia and was transferred to the Maritime Customs Office in Puerto Cabello. A year after the arrival of his second daughter, he moved to Aquarius Street, where the longest and most wonderful period of his life began, full of friendships and experiences that left indelible memories.

### **Svetlana Danilova**

Svetlana Danilova came to Canada from Russia eight years ago, under sponsorship from her son. After graduating from a technical university in Russia, she received a degree in Bridge Design and Construction Engineering. When designing bridges, it is important to integrate the structure into the surrounding natural environment.

### **Tania Alibekov**

My name is Tania. I was born in Uzbekistan. My parents are not native Uzbeks. They were forced migrants from Russia with the advent of the communist revolution, as they belonged to the wealthy class. In Uzbekistan, I graduated from university and received a medical degree.



In 1994 my family and I left for Israel, where I confirmed my diploma and worked in my specialty. First, in a children's hospital, in a hematology-oncology department and then I moved to the emergency service of Magen David Adom. I have a daughter and a son, and five grandchildren. I have a hobby - dolls with special emotions on their faces. I am very happy to have such an interest.

### **Yoleinys Rodríguez**

Yoleinys Rodríguez was born on May 23, 1957 in Anaco, Venezuela. She is the third daughter of six siblings. Her childhood was spent playing games, studying and a lot of family union, sharing much love with her parents and siblings. She married and had three beautiful children, also full of love and projects that together with her husband would lead her to the raising of her children. She graduated as a psychologist, a personal dream and an important achievement for her, along with seeing her children become architects, engineers and doctors. As time went by and seeing what was happening in her country, she looked for a way for her children and her husband to emigrate to other countries to have a better quality of life, thus leading to the physical separation of her family. Seeing her children leave for other destinations and start their families far away from her was not easy, but she is learning to live and to move forward for herself, for her children and grandchildren. She has not lost hope of returning to that land where she grew up and where accumulated all the beautiful memories that remain alive in her heart. She's very proud of what she's achieved and is continuing to accomplish.

### **Ana Melendez**

Ana was born in Caracas, Venezuela, located in the north of South America, a country where the most beautiful beaches, mountains, plains, jungle and desert are found. She studied to be an elementary school teacher, and after graduation she applied and began working at a government school. While working, she started studying at the Central University of Venezuela and got her degree of Bachelor of Education, specializing in Educational Technology. She worked for 27 years and now is retired. Ana married and she had two daughters and one son. She currently lives in Canada, since October 2023, with her husband and oldest daughter. Her youngest daughter lives in Germany with her husband and two kids.

### **Alireza Hajihashemi**

I was born on June 15, 1967, in the historic city of Isfahan, Iran, which is known as the capital of culture and art in the country and is one of the most famous artistic and tourist centers in the world. I completed my education and earned a master's degree in management in Isfahan,

where I worked in large industrial factories in the city. Ultimately, on June 18, 2023, I immigrated to Calgary. I am passionate about cultural topics and the various influences of cultures in shaping Canada's multicultural society.

### **Liudmyla Zinchenko**

My name is Liudmyla, I was born in Kharkov in the Ukraine. After completing my education, I went to work at Science Research Institute and worked there for 25 years. I occupied many different professions such as engineer, general accountant, insurance agent, and manager at an international company. I have one son, he has a PHD in math and works at the University of Calgary. I also have two grandchildren, a boy and a girl, both of them are students at school. Since I came to Canada, I've studied at different colleges such as Bowvalley College. I like to use my knowledge and create stories, and to be included in programs with MRU, to activate my brain and my memory, and to express myself.

### **Yan Jia**

I'm Yan Jia from Kaifeng, China. I have never thought that I would have had the chance to have my writing published in Calgary, Canada. Writing, for me, was once a mountain too high to reach. However, by chance, I signed up for a course on creative writing, which not only opened a window to a new world for me, but also stimulated my innermost creative passion. In the class, Professor Natalie Meisner and student teacher Arroy (AJ) Jacob used their charming voices and lively teaching styles to make my writing skills lively and interesting. Natalie told us that writing is not a pile of words, but an expression of emotions and thoughts. I began to realize that writing is not only a task, but also a pleasure, a way to express myself. More importantly, creative writing has made me realize my potential - my hidden power.

### **Hongfeng Yin**

My name is Hongfeng Yin, nickname Old Lazy Cat. I was born in Wuhan, China and lived there for 66 years. I am a retired teacher, but I have lots of knowledge on the production technology of cement. It is really difficult for me to write creative pieces. I don't like writing anything at all, even in our workshops. I wanted to learn how to write, and I tried my best to write creatively according to the teacher's guidance in the workshops. My student partner, Spenny, gave me a lot of support. It was interesting to learn how to write creatively, but I am happy to have finished my writing study.

### **Raisa Arodz**

My name is Raisa Arodz, and I am from Russia. I came to Calgary 9 years ago. I am a teacher by training, but most of my work experience

is in Human Resources. I have adult children, and grandchildren too. As a person, I am active, open-minded, inquisitive, and creative. I love playing sports, especially volleyball and swimming. I love nature with its majestic mountains and hikes. I love art, music, and literature. I love seeing the positive in people, and talking to others about their stories. I will always help people if they need help. Now that I am retired, I spend my days enjoying the warm sun and cold rain. My collection of creative writing represents me and my pursuit of happiness.

## **Contributors**

### **MRU Students**

#### **Arroy (AJ) Jacob**

Arroy (AJ) Jacob is a student majoring in Cellular & Molecular Biology, and minoring in Creative Writing at Mount Royal University in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. He was the president of a student non-profit aimed to improve science education to the general public. He is also the Web-Design Editor for The Reflector, the independent newspaper for the voice of Mount Royal University students. He loves bridging science and creative writing together, and he also loves storytelling, so he hopes to work one day as a published science journalist, and as an author.

#### **Spencer Catherine**

My name is Spencer Catherine, and I am a fourth year English Major with a Minor in Creative Writing. When I first applied to Mount Royal University, I genuinely had no idea what I was passionate about, so applying for an English Degree was just a shot in the dark. I was always told that I had such a creative outlook on life; I was also told that creativity won't make for a stable job- unless you're lucky. Such advice lit a flame of desire within me to prove that narrative wrong. However, most of my early classes focused on literature through an analytical lens. By my second year of university, I was convinced my purpose in life was to have no purpose. Then I started attending creative writing classes. Poetry was the first genre of creative writing I tried, and it felt so natural, as if all this time I had been sitting on the puzzle piece I've been searching for.

#### **Ruby O'Donnell**

Ruby O'Donnell is in her final year as a student at Mount Royal University, majoring in Psychology. A life-long lover of reading and writing, she had dabbled in many different types of storytelling—from poems to creative non-fiction to fanfiction—and finds creative writing

to be a welcome reprieve from the restrictions of scientific writing. Ruby greatly enjoyed getting to meet and work with the seniors from Immigrant Services Calgary and hopes this program, a rare chance for undergraduate students to engage in rich inter-generational and multi-cultural exchanges, will continue well into the future.

### **Jasmeet Khaira**

My name is Jasmeet Kaur Khaira. I was born in Surrey, British Columbia and moved to Calgary, Alberta at the age of thirteen. Having spent equal halves of my life in B.C. and Alberta, I am influenced by my roots in each province whether that includes my family, nature, or stories. B.C. is the place where I learned to love and crave books, and Alberta is the place where my that love matured into a full-out passion. Now, I am an English major at Mount Royal University with minors in marketing and creative writing. My goal is to become a part of the story making process by helping people get their stories out in the world. My other passions include travelling, learning new languages, and spoiling my ferocious little French bulldog, Maya.

### **Felix Da Costa Gomez**

Felix is a Canadian writer originally from Venezuela who is currently in his final year of an English Honours degree and is the Vice President of Publications at Write Club. His dream is to become an author, which he plans to pursue more vigorously once he completes academic studies. Felix's focus is on fiction pieces, with his latest work in progress being a Western trilogy set in both the American Northwest and Southwestern Canada spanning from the 1880s to the late 1910s. In addition to writing fiction, Felix has also recently discovered a newfound respect for poetry as an art form to express emotions, drawing on personal life experiences such as anarchy, reminiscence, and adolescent shenanigans.

### **Derek Aitken**

Derek was born and raised in Calgary. He has enjoyed writing fiction since early childhood and poetry since high school. However, he hopes no eyes ever see the early saccharine melodrama hidden away in boxes in his basement. In other contexts he is most interested in writing in the science fiction, fantasy, and horror genres. Derek enjoys walking his yappy dog Billy, creating hodgepodge costumes, and singing karaoke badly. People say that nobody can lick their elbow, but when he heard this he felt compelled to try and discovered that he can.

### **Catalina Berguno Astorga**

Catalina was born in Santiago, Chile and moved to Canada when she was seven years old. Ever since she was a kid, Catalina enjoyed the

pleasures of books, often staying past her bedtime and using the moon as a source of light so her parents wouldn't burst in her room to take her book away. Many sleep deprived nights later, Catalina is currently a Journalism and Digital Design student at Mount Royal University with a minor in Creative Writing. With past experience in podcasting and news writing, Catalina loves delving into different forms of storytelling, fiction and nonfiction. In her spare time she enjoys going for long walks, reading and exploring new places to eat around the city.

## Project Coordinators

**Natalie Meisner**, PhD is a Professor of English at MRU, Calgary's fifth Poet Laureate and a celebrated Canadian author.

**Aida Patient**, Creative Writing project co-editor, is an Associate Professor in the Department of English, Languages, and Cultures at MRU where she teaches and researches women's writing and early modern literature.

## Project Support Team

**Wissam Shalaby**, as the Manager of Gateway Services at Immigrant Services Calgary, leads a team committed to helping newcomers integrate and thrive in Canada. With a background in Business Administration, Childhood Education, and Career & Academic Advising, she drives innovative strategies and approaches that enhance services for newcomers, empowering them to overcome barriers and achieve their goals in Canada.

**Meenakshi Lamba** is an immigrant from India who moved to Canada in 2002. With a diverse career path, she initially worked in the oil and gas industry before transitioning to the non-profit sector. Meenakshi has dedicated over 7 years of her career to Immigrant Services Calgary, where she serves as the Co-lead for the Gateway program. She finds immense fulfillment in her work, particularly in supporting and empowering newcomers to Canada. Passionate about helping others, Meenakshi received an honour in 2022 to be in the top ten Asian Changemakers in Calgary by CBC and Certificate of Community appreciation from Indian Society of Calgary and Hands of Hope in 2024.

Meenakshi is committed to making a positive impact on the lives of immigrants and refugees as they navigate their new lives in Canada.

**Parminder Gill** is a Gateway Newcomer Planner and CISP Program Facilitator, highly devoted to giving back to her community through various ISC activities, which she has been doing for more than ten years. Born and raised in India and holding a master's degree in sociology, she is very enthusiastic about encouraging the pursuit of excellence in the community and enjoys working with multicultural seniors.

**Yuchang (Joy) Tan** is a Gateway Newcomer Planner at Immigrant Services Calgary, where she has been working with CISP's immigrant seniors since 2009. Born and raised in China and holding a Bachelor of Arts degree, she is passionate about helping newcomers to settle in Calgary and loves guiding multicultural seniors on their journey to become integral part of the Canadian society.

**Aida Patient**, Creative Writing project co-editor, is an Associate Professor in the Department of English, Languages, and Cultures at MRU where she teaches and researches women's writing and early modern literature.

**McKenna Clark** is a Mount Royal University graduate of the Information Design Program, where she learned her love for art and design. Post graduation she's worked as a freelance designer for magazines, artists, and friends while she starts her early career in communications.

**Juliane El Ashry** is a graphic designer passionate about bringing stories to life through visuals. Currently in her final year of a Graphic Design degree, Juliane specializes in creating illustrations that enhance narrative depth and emotion.

As the illustrator for Roots, she worked closely with the authors to develop visuals that reflect the novel's tone and themes. Her approach blends expressive composition with thoughtful detail, ensuring each illustration complements the story's atmosphere. Inspired by water colour and pastel texture used in family stories, Juliane's work aims to immerse readers in the world of the book. Promoting a welcoming and home-like effect.

Beyond book illustration, Juliane has experience in branding, editorial design, and visual storytelling. Her work is influenced by a love for literature, cultural heritage, and experimental art. She aspires to continue crafting compelling designs and narratives, with the goal of becoming an art director in the future.







# Foreword



Immigrant Services Calgary is proud to be part of this anthology series, an ongoing collaboration between the Community Initiatives for Immigrant Seniors Program (CISP) at Immigrant Services Calgary and the Creative Writing students at Mount Royal University.

This sixth project, themed “Roots,” explores various aspects of identity, including origin, growth and connection. Seniors from the CISP have written stories that link their past to their present. They share their immigrant experiences, providing readers with insight into their heritage and identity.

Participating in this project has provided both our immigrant seniors and the Creative Writing students at Mount Royal University with a unique platform for interaction. We express our profound appreciation to both groups for their dedication and creativity in producing this resource.

As you read these pages, we hope you are inspired to reflect on your roots.

Souhila Loucif  
Director, Client Services  
Immigrant Services Calgary

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# Letters



An Abstract Metaphysical Way  
**A Letter to My Uncle**

Dearest Nantu Mama,

First, I like to remember the special moments we had together. In the early stages of my life, you took me everywhere.

You woke me up early in the mornings. You dressed me while I was still half asleep. You fed me hard-boiled eggs, watching as I stubbornly kept half of each egg tucked away in my cheeks, refusing to eat them. You coaxed me to finish just one, promising I'd never have to eat another if I did. You said that to me every day.

You walked me to school. You walked me back home. You took me to the playground, and in those moments, I believed everything was okay.

Now, I want to remember what happened between us.

One day, I walked into the kitchen, and you were having a screaming match with your sister, my mother. I wanted to believe everything was still going to be okay.

Until that night when you kneeled at my bedside, held my cheek, and said, "I'll be leaving tomorrow."

I simply replied, "Alright."

For some reason, I understood and didn't at the same time. But I accepted it, and that acceptance came too soon. Perhaps if I had said something, we would have had more time together. But you already flew back home to Bangladesh, and all I could do was wait until I saw you again.

You flew back home to Bangladesh, and I did not see, hear from, or know about you for a decade.

Then one day you appeared at my doorstep, with your decade-old son, my cousin. You were going to move down the street from us. But when we locked eyes, we were silent. We said virtually nothing, and that silence spoke volumes about our relationship.

I loved your son, my cousin, with all my heart—I did, I really did. But when you showed up, it was already too late. I had forgotten who you were to me.

But not in a menacing way—no vexation or anger existed between us. But too much time had passed, and I had moved on.

## AJ Jacob

So I learned to love my new cousin. I woke him up in the early mornings by flicking the lights on and off. We ate cereal together, and one day he asked for a hard-boiled egg, and I made one for him. He asked if he could have half. And I gave it to him. He swallowed it faster than me, but I managed to stomach it.

I walked him to and from his house. I walked him to school and to the playground. And in those moments, things were more than okay.

I realized that in some abstract metaphysical way, I am still waiting for you. Waiting for you to return to me and have what we once had. And again, in some abstract metaphysical way, loving my cousin is what I needed to do to feel better about you leaving me.

And perhaps, in some abstract metaphysical way, I wish this letter will reach you. Wherever you are.

And I still love you,

Arroy



## An Unsent Letter

Dear Father,

Time flies, and it has been 13 years since you left us. Over the past 13 years, I have thought of you every day. Every time I think of you, my heart is filled with endless nostalgia and gratitude.

Father, I want to say that you are a man of integrity and kindness and these valuable characteristics have deeply influenced me. Your integrity has taught me to stick to the truth and never tell a lie or intentionally mislead others. Your kindness has taught me how to treat others with tolerance and love. These precious qualities have helped me win the respect and trust from my former colleagues, students and friends.

Every year, on Teachers' Day (October the 10th) I receive many warm greetings and best wishes from students. One of the students said: "This is a special day, I'd like to take this opportunity to say thanks to you. You are not only the teacher to transmit knowledge, but also like my parents to guide on my way of life. On this holiday, I want to express my sincere respect and best wishes to you."

You are talented, you love to learn. You love ancient Chinese poetry so you often quote ancient poetry to educate us. I still remember one by Meng Haoran:

### *Song of the Parting Son*

*From the threads a mother's hands weaves,  
a gown for parting son is made.  
Sewn stitch by stitch before he leaves,  
for fear his return will be delayed.  
Such kindness as young grass receives from the warm sun can't  
be repaid*

Father, do you remember reading this poem to my son and my nephew before they went off to study in Canada? You wanted them to realize the great and selfless love of their mothers. You also told all of us at the farewell dinner that whenever and wherever we would be we should remember where we came from and be grateful to our parents and express our love and respect them with our actions-that we should also pass this love to more people so that the world will be full of warmth and care.

Yan Jia

Father, you understand two foreign languages -- English and Japanese -- which makes me deeply admire you. I still remember part of the poem by Walt Whitman you often recited:

*I aspire a society where everyone is equal and free to pursue their dreams.*

*True democracy is not the distribution of power, but the ability of everyone to have a voice.*

Although I didn't understand the meaning of the sentences at that time, I developed a keen interest in English and began working hard to learn it. Now I am glad to tell you I have kept learning English in Calgary, Canada. I have fallen in love with creative writing. I am proud to tell you I've published three articles in the last year: "Love Escorts Us to Safety," "Making the Moment Eternity," and "Father's Love."

Are you all well in the other world? Please forgive me because I can't go to your graveyard often and send you some necessities. But you know your daughter will always remember the happy time with you and will never forget the root I am from.

Father, I believe when you hear that you will be proud of your daughter.

May everything be alright with you and mum in heaven!

With regards,

Your daughter,

Yan





## A Letter to My Husband



My dear husband, Sardar Parmjeet Singh Jatana,

On July 17, 1996, you went to heaven. Our family was just starting as our three kids were very young. Before you went to heaven you planted mango trees, jackfruit trees, guava trees, Sagwan trees and so many more on our farm. Now those trees have fruit. Our kids are a bit older. When everyone picks the fruit, we remember you. The roots of the trees have grown deeply in the ground. I really miss you. Your kids, your parents and your sister really miss you. I took care of our family and farm when you left.

Not long after, our brave oldest daughter went to Canada. She worked hard for seven years, and her struggle allowed us to be sponsored and come to Canada in 2007. You would be so proud and amazed by her strength. After coming to Canada, our three kids got university degrees. Everyone missed you when they graduated. Our trees were still growing strong on the farm. They never stopped growing.

Now we are settled in Canada. Our children are married, and we also have grandkids. Our grandkids always tell me they miss their grandfather, even though they never met you. They want to know who you are. They want me to bring them to the trees in India. They want to taste all the different kinds of fruit.

Today is October 14. I am sending you this letter because today is the anniversary of our marriage. I am thinking about you and all the life that we have lived since you went to heaven. I am thinking about all the trees and all the fruit that they have given us over the years since you left.

We live with your memory strong in our hearts. You planted seeds of strength in our family. Now we are still strong and happy. Do not worry about us. These roots are still growing strong.

Sincerely,

Sukhvir Kaur Jatana

## An Old Apple Tree

I woke up early and realized it was raining. The faint sound of drops knocking on my window and heavy dark gray clouds peeking into my bedroom kept me in bed. The sun did not promise even a single ray. I looked sadly at the raindrops flowing down the glass and thought about how to find an excuse not to go anywhere. With this weather, it would be better to stay at home and sit comfortably on the sofa, a fresh brew of ginger tea with lemon and honey, and a book about my favourite love story.

I wanted to do nothing.

Such moments do not happen often in my life. But then I remembered that I was responsible for this event. All my friends, whom I convinced to go with me, are expecting me. My commitment and good upbringing won my internal debate, and I went to get dressed. Rubber boots, waterproof pants, raincoat and hat -- not a very pleasant prospect.

My destination was an hour and a half away from my home. My husband was driving, so I plunged into my thoughts. I closed my eyes and tried to listen to my feelings. I wanted to catch that impulse of the soul that ignited a spark of joy in me, which attracted people. In a moment, I was so relaxed that my subconscious carried me away into memories of the old house...

This house originally belonged to my great-grandfather, then to my grandfather. After my grandfather passed away, my father inherited it. The house was a small -- a one-story rural type. The house had two rooms, a kitchen and a small hallway. Inside the house was a stove that had to be heated with wood. Outside there was a small bench near the house, under an old apple tree. I would sit here for hours and inhale the aroma of ripe apples while listening to the singing of birds. Flowers bloomed in the front-yard, and the old apple tree spread its long branches to create shade in the hot weather. In spring, I could smell budding flowers and watch the bees that collected nectar. The apple tree, as well as the vegetable garden and flower bed, was all made with love by the hands of my grandfather. He skillfully took care of everything and gladly treated all his grandchildren (including me) with sweet fruits from the beds and trees. I was the youngest grandchild, but I remember how my grandpa patiently taught us how to water flowers, how to harvest properly, and how to take care of the garden. This knowledge felt invaluable. I will always remember such moments, these were real skills. We were allowed to do everything: weed the beds, water budding strouts, cut branches from trees, and even climb the old apple

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tree to remove the fruits. Us grandkids were interested in everything, and we wanted to participate in all the affairs of adults. These were the moments when knowledge was passed down from one generation to the next. It felt like we were on an equal footing and were very excited to be entrusted with important matters. Growing up, those were the happiest moments.

When I got married, I started my family in this house. This was the time of my formation as a person; the time of growing up and realizing myself as a mother of two beautiful children. It was the time to build a career, to build relationships with people and to make new friends. As a hostess, I wanted to improve my home. I decided to expand our space to make a fashionable kitchen. My husband and I added children's bedrooms and a large living room. I also found it necessary to add a garage to the house for our new car. In the place where the garage was going to go, was the old apple tree. It continued to produce a large harvest of apples every year. We could not even manage it ourselves and always treated all our neighbors and friends with apples until the season was over and the tree was bare. It was decided, that harvest, to cut down the old apple tree. And we did. The old apple tree was with us for three generations, on which all children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren grew up, receiving vitamins from juicy bites. The old apple tree had the energy of love, the warmth of the hearts of our ancestors, the care for the family, and a memory of those no longer here. But back then, at that moment, I wasn't paying attention to it. We built the house we wanted, with our garage, and lived in it till we left for Canada.

...My husband slowed down and said that we had reached our destination. I opened my eyes and got out of the car. The rain was drizzling; it was damp and chilly. Our friends also came and joined us. In addition to our company, there were people from other organizations, a total of about a hundred people gathered. We were all volunteers. We were united by one very important idea: "Tree Planting Event in Toronto Parks." The head of the Conservation areas and parks instructed everyone, told us what to do, gave us equipment and together we began. We planted trees with other people. Everyone was in a great mood and after a while the rain stopped and the sun came out. We all began to undress our heavy coats and I felt a surge of energy. Joy was born in my soul.

I wanted to sing, and at that moment an insight came. I subconsciously choose to go every spring to plant trees. Instead of one apple tree, I plant around eight trees in parks every year; something that allowed me to regain my lost youth. How good I felt. I realized that I needed to take my grandson with me and plant trees with him. I wanted to tell him about nature and how to protect it. I wanted to take him to an apple farm and tell him the story of our family; the story of

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the old apple tree that once fed my son (his father) with its fruits. In this way, I will be able to stretch a thread to my ancestors and pass on their care through the energy of love to my grandchildren. I could teach my grandchildren to love and protect nature, just as I had been taught, and maybe we will plant a new apple tree together. Perhaps, the new apple tree will nurture the young branches of our family tree on a hot day. After such an insight came to me, I mentally faced the good old apple tree from my childhood:

Dear Apple Tree,

I remember you from the days of my childhood. You were beautiful. You gave us shade from the sun's heat, and cooled us down after mending the garden. You fed us delicious apples, from which we made jam, juice, and even wine. You were part of our family. But one day I cut you down to build a house for my children. At the time, it seemed right, but now I feel your absence. A few years later, we moved to live in Canada. My life continued on, but my mind would go back to you. I'll always remember the taste of your apples, the sweet and sour juice that dripped from my lips when I took a crunchy bite. The smell of sweet jam all over the house, and the buzzing of bees that couldn't fly by without drinking your magic nectar. I want to thank you for all the years you serviced our family. I want to bow low to you and ask forgiveness for having acted so thoughtlessly -- from ripping your roots from the dirt. I promise to correct my mistakes and do something useful for people and our beautiful earth.



## **I Have Something to Say**

I have always wanted to give words of gratitude to my fate for everything that was, is at the moment, and may happen in my future.

I have always wanted to thank my parents for bringing me into this world. Express my gratitude to them for their unconditional love and care. For teaching me to take responsibility for my life. For teaching me to help people by being honest and teaching me how to deal with difficulties. My dearest Mom and Dad, I cannot thank you enough for giving me a basic knowledge of how to run a household, cook food, have a family, and be a good mother. For giving me a good education and always believing in me. You both were an example of intelligence and decency to me. You will always be in my heart. *-I love you.*

I have always wanted to say words of gratitude to my grandmother for her support and kindness. For her sunny smile and delicious food. For her abilities to make any situation soft and less dramatic. My grandma taught me to enjoy the little things in life and helped me believe that I could be the best and the happiest person. She told me fairy tales in a way that my imagination saw colourful films with beautiful characters and exciting adventures. All her stories ended with a bright celebration of justice and love. She was like a kind sorceress who taught me to love books, and dreams, and believe in goodness. She taught me to boldly look into the eyes of life itself. *-I miss you.*

I have always wanted to thank my grandfather for his love for the garden. He loved blooming flowers, towering trees, and nature's music. He had the ability to talk to plants and translate bird language to me, which turned the moment into magic. He whistled, and birds willingly flew to him, then we fed them. I wanted him to teach me the language of birds too. *-I appreciate you.*

I have always wanted to say words of gratitude to my aunt and uncle for their out-of-the-box thinking, and for teaching me the beauty of painting. Their passion for art infected me and gave me a boost of creativity. I fell in love with exhibitions, museums, theaters, music, and even tried to create and participate in student productions myself. They set a great example of free self-expression through creativity, through writing poetry, manifesting one's individuality through singing and dancing. Art is an opportunity to see a smile on people's faces, to convey a piece of my soul to them, to share joy with them. From my aunt and uncle, I learned how to enjoy the creativity of life, to appreciate every moment because it will not happen again. *-I admire you.*

I have always wanted to thank my teachers from School and University for their patience and professionalism. For teaching me to learn, and for helping me fall in love with science. Only thanks to them

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did I have a desire to achieve goals, a desire to bring my started work to the end. My life is proof of this. *-I respect you.*

I have always wanted to say words of gratitude to my brother, who taught me the manners of a true lady. We went to the theater together and played the role of a couple in love. We could hardly hold back our laughter, but we held hands and pretended to be serious adults. I have gratitude to my cousins, who gave me a lesson in ethics and aesthetics. A previously unknown world of fashion, my cousins opened the doors to the beauty of the body and soul. My deepest thanks to my friend who taught me about the world of understanding relationships and conscious behavior. This prompted me to get a second diploma in psychology. I wanted to travel, learn about the world and culture of other countries with my friend. I was interested in how I could expand the framework in which I lived, how to remove boundaries and allow myself into the new and unknown. I have increased self-esteem and confidence in my abilities. I realized that I could cope with any task. *-I cherish you.*

I have always wanted to thank all the people who have ever offended me, betrayed me, said hurtful words, turned away from me, brought me suffering, or deceived me. They could not have given me a better lesson in life. I remember the resentment that squeezed my chest; I remember how tears poured continuously from my eyes and it was impossible to take a breath from sobs. I remember how I wanted to scream, but the sound got stuck in my throat. I remember this heartbreaking pain for which there are no pills. Only time can drown out my suffering. I know how hard it is to lose people close to you, how to lose faith in friendship, how hard it is to forgive betrayal. But all these moments of suffering increased my mental strength, taught me to concentrate on the main thing, taught me to forgive, accept other people and to understand the reasons why they did this to me. I cultivated love in my heart. I realized that only love can free me from suffering and bring harmony to my life. This is how I grow mentally, psychologically and become wiser, and my soul becomes purer. When we understand what true unconditional love is, then it becomes clear what our mission is, what our main task in life is. *-I forgive you.*

I have always wanted to thank myself for my ability to understand people, to respect their opinions. For the desire for self-improvement, for the ability to set a goal and go towards it, for all my achievements in life, for the ability to always see the good in people. I learned to forgive, empathize, help, and love. These are the main wisdoms that I want to pass on to my children, grandchildren and subsequent generations. *-I honor you.*



# A Letter to Paradise

My older sister,

I have been gathering my thoughts for a long time. I have wanted to write you this letter in hopes that it will reach you in the upper world. I hope this world is a paradise, where your soul lives in peace next to angels and saints. Some might say I'm crazy for writing to paradise, but I truly believe my letter will reach you.



You were the first-born child of our parent's family. You died six years before I was born. Your little heart and little body couldn't cope with the intense burn -- you were only one and a half years old.

My dear sister, do you know what a beautiful girl you were? There is only one family photo of you, but in the photo, you look like an angel with huge smart eyes and a cute smile on your plump lips. You look very much like dad, just like me.

You know I was named after you, and I have a feeling that I was destined to live my life for the two of us. It has not always been easy, but I try my best. I have recently begun to realize why I am able to be so strong and overcome many difficulties in my life. It is you who helps me redouble my strength, because I live with you in my heart.

I hope you understand now that our parents, our brother, and a little sister have gone to paradise, just like you. Love them and take care of them for the two of us.

A little about me:

Everything is fine in my life. I am a happy mother and grandmother. You have a niece and a nephew. They are adults now with their own families. I know you would be as happy for them as I am. Everything is fine- but I have missed you all my life. I am sure you and I would have been the closest and dearest if you were here with me.

I feel better now that I finally wrote to you. Dearest sister, please show me some signal that you have received my letter. Maybe a bright ray of sunshine will touch my face and will wake me up, or a bird will fly to my balcony and catch my attention with a pretty song.

For now, thank you for listening to me. I'll be waiting for an answer from you, even if it is in my own mind.

Your younger sister.

# The Root of My Problem

In dark crevices of my cranium, Doubt says I have no potential,  
so I stay embedded behind my dreams where I am sensational;  
Only delusional minds surrender to ideas so trivial.

It is Doubt who roots itself into the side of my hip- my friend,  
and mockingly whispers how talent will decay alongside my end;  
Stupid girl, humanity is far too populous for you to ascend.

My eyes hungrily roam the profound words of other people's truth,  
Doubt huffs down my neck to insinuate I'm wasted my youth;  
Your desperation for success shatters under Doubt's boot.

I assume my purpose manifests as an average working bee,  
to follow meager rolls with my concerns locked with a key;  
Mediocrity waves through your veins like a violent sea.

I stare with determined tension at my scribbles on a page,  
then I smoke weed and crawl into my mind's feeble cage;  
You're so pathetic- fantasizing about you on a stage.

Then, for days, I avoid the metaphors parading in my dreams,  
and, neglected, metaphors dissolve from my cranium's seams;  
Ignore those aspirations, drown them out with your screams.

Turn a blind eye to my poetic words while my insecurities peak,  
I am inherently terrified my metaphors are naïve and weak;  
Hang it up, not a single speck of you is special or unique.  
I know festering deep in the depths of my self,  
is the root of my problem- my anxiety in wealth;  
It's time you place your dreams on a dusty shelf.

For years and years, I lay and rot on my twin size bed,  
I'll only be successful in the confines of my head;  
Alas, your destiny in life is to wait until you're dead.

I ponder the people who win awards for their talent,  
and I imagine myself becoming part of that fragment;  
Don't compare yourself- those people are valiant.



Spencer Catherine

I know I won't soar if I don't leave the enclosure of my room,  
but Doubt locks the door and retains my ambition in ruin;

Close your eyes- Doubt will tuck you into your tomb.

Wait -time isn't stopping- rather it keeps on ticking,  
trust yourself, Spencer, there is no glory in quitting;

*Banish that Doubt and its voice begins fading.*



# Childhood



# The P-P-P in Purple



When I was younger, purple was my favorite colour. I was young, fun, and spun splatters and drawings in purple crayon and paint. The p-p-p- of the word was enough to satisfy an itch, let alone the colour itself. Something about the simple twist of lavender and indigo - its perfect balance. And I realized purple was perfect because it was my interpretation of being a girl.

But as a boy, I was quick to realize that I was wrong for thinking so.

One day in the first grade, in our smelly classroom reeking of boiled eggs and piss, we plopped onto the fuzzy carpet in front of our teacher who asked everyone,

“Whose favourite colour is green?”

The one sitting next to me, and a couple others behind me raised their hands.

“Whose favourite colour is yellow?”

The girls at the front shot their hands in the air simultaneously and giggled.

“How about red?”

No one.

“Blue?”

That's when I noticed that almost all of the boys around raised their hands, proudly and firmly, like young men eager to serve their country on the battlefield.

“Purple?”

It was my time to shine. The p-p-p- of the word coming out of my teacher's mouth was enough for me to smile, so I shot my hand in the air.

But instead of our regularly programmed silence, there were giggles, and I sunk my hand down when I saw that the girls stared with their hands up, and the boys put theirs down to laugh.

I looked back at the teacher, who looked at me once, before she said to everyone else:

“Orange?”

For 10 years after that day, my favourite colour was blue. I was older, more mature, and bought socks and wrist-watches in sky blue or navy. The bl-bl-bl of the word was interesting enough to appreciate the colour. Something about the basic pastel of teal or navy was great - a solid colour. And I realized, blue was good, because it was my interpretation of what was easier.

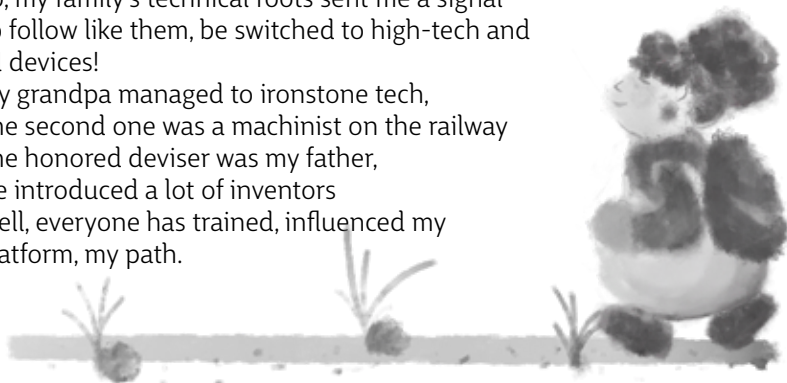
## My Thorny Choice

Who am I and why? – What is the question!  
To be a doctor or a mentor? – No way!  
So, maybe a salesperson connect to me? – No facts!  
Like a navy or a sailor to fight wars in the ocean,  
Without home, comfort...too long away!

To be a banker – so boring!  
Can choose a baker... but extremely hot!  
Try to be a bookkeeper, because I like to work with numbers, but not all  
seven days a week!  
Too much for me to be a policeman or a justice...  
Venturous life – is not my choice today!  
My God, my Lord, give me a right decision,  
I always was at tough collision and  
Wait for your relative mark!  
— Hey, silly human, wake up and watch  
Your progenitor tree!  
You see a lot of right solutions with future way  
Don't ask me!! —

Well, look attentively at evolution and  
Make a test to understand my way.  
At first, we have technical side!  
Grandpa, grandpa, my mom and dad.  
The second part: grandma and grandma,  
They both united their family with work and love,  
As was a great accomplishment from mum.

So, my family's technical roots sent me a signal  
To follow like them, be switched to high-tech and  
all devices!  
My grandpa managed to ironstone tech,  
The second one was a machinist on the railway  
The honored deviser was my father,  
He introduced a lot of inventors  
Well, everyone has trained, influenced my  
platform, my path.



## **Dominion Hill**

British Columbia is brimming with life and greenery – from the vast Rocky Mountains to the sandy beaches to the swarms of trees and lakes that fill everything in between. The first half of my life was spent in British Columbia, and yet among all the great geographical features of the province, it was a hill in the park behind my childhood home that made the biggest impression. Just a seemingly simple hill with an off-centre tree perched on top.

I remember standing at the bottom of the hill as a child in spring. It seemed so massive. In my young eyes the hill was a mountain by itself, our little kingdom like Mount Olympus. The green grass sloped up and up. My calves strained and burned while I raced to the top in Herculean effort with my brother and cousins beside me. The leaves of the trees around us rattled in the wind like applause, urging us on. We laughed, shrieked with joy, and taunted each other until we reached the tree on top of the hill. I leaned against the rough bark while I tried to catch my breath. It always took me a bit longer than the others because of the asthma, but what's a kid supposed to do when the last one to the top is a rotten egg?

While air seared its way back into my lungs, I imagined the roots of the tree traversing deep into the earth, intertwining with the damp, dark soil – feeding me with it. The roots grew through the hand that rested on the bark to my lungs, turning into bronchioles to aid my breath and nourish my play.

Then, came the best part. We would roll down the hill until we hit the bottom and then start the race up once again. Over and over until our bodies flattened the tufts of grass into paths and smeared yellow-green stains into our clothes. Until the smell of earth and dirt was imprinted on us as if we were one with the ground.

Summers were spent just the same with our races up and down the hill. Sometimes we would stop to laze under the tree. We'd watch the sunlight filter through the leafy canopy above or find shapes and faces in the clouds. Like the earth below, the sky above the hill was part of our kingdom. I was invincible. Childhood filled me with hubris like Icarus. I felt as if I could touch the sun, but the sun couldn't touch me. Isn't that the sweetest mark of innocence: the ignorance?

The heat of childhood drove us wild. We ran rampant in the neighbourhood as we played Nicky Nicky Nine Doors and ran through sprinklers while beating away the ever-present mosquitoes. Our favourite pastime was accosting our local Medusa: a poodle-haired racist lady that couldn't stand the sight of us. It was righteous work. And

## Jasmeet Khaira

of course, we raced our bikes up and down the hill over fallen branches and divots like the best of daredevils.

The heat faded to autumn and warmth receded from the world like Persephone to the underworld. The BC rain dampened the satisfactory crunch of fallen leaves. It wasn't as fun rolling down the hill while trying to dodge a labyrinth of puddles, but we still made the hike up the hill to enjoy the view.

We'd still visit the hill sometimes when everything officially died away into brown and became blanketed in winter's snow. It was the same game of racing up the hill, except this time we would sled down. Down on a cracked green plastic sled, and when that finally gave away one winter, we got crafty and slid down on black garbage bags.

The frigid snow packed into the open spaces between my gloves and coat sleeves, sometimes even between my scarf and collar. It crunched and crushed into gatherings of ice against the fabric and my skin. My cheeks brightened with a numb redness, but the cold on my exposed skin was contrasted by the icky, warm sweat that clung to me under my layers of winter clothing – a juxtaposition spurred on by the repeated climbing and descending of the hill.

Over and over. No matter the season.

I was a blind, content Sisyphus.

Why did I stop running up that hill? When was the last time? Was there really a day when there was no reason to climb the hill?

When did childhood become myth?



Lili Zhang

# I was Born in a Place Far Away

I was born in a place, far away near the sky.

That is the place where, for the first time, the first time,  
Mom kissed me tenderly with love;  
Dad hugged me tightly with smiles.

That is the place where, for the first time, the first time,  
I breathed the fresh air of the world  
and was touched by sunshine.

That is the place where, for the first time, the first time,  
I opened my eyes,  
seeing white clouds in the blue sky,  
and heard the people around me talking about my laughs and cries.

That is the place where, for the first time, the first time,  
I stood on the earth  
and took the first step of my journey of thousands of miles.

This is the place where I grew up, had my childhood with joy,  
and my dream was to fly.  
This is the place I could only return to during my sleep countless times;  
however, I missed day and night.

My friend, you made me sleepless for over sixty years.  
Although you look old, and so am I,  
today we meet again.  
How can I help but cry?

My friend, today is the last time I see  
you with my last sight.  
Do you know how sad I am to say  
goodbye  
and to take half a step away?  
You will live in my heart forever till I  
die.

I was born in this place, far away near  
the sky.



## Dear 11, Love 23

You have no idea what is coming.

You are eleven years old with your first pair of glasses—brown cat-eye frames—painfully early 2000s clothes, a sweaty, sticky discomfort, and the itchy beginnings of skin-peeling dysphoria. Things are not easy for you now, and they will never be easy for us—not in the way we desperately desire—and a decade of pain and isolation and slogging through the swampy mires of our stupid, sludgy brain awaits you.

Your world is only as big as your new hometown and newer friends. “Future” is a word with two syllables and six letters you cannot conceptualize.

You are not sick yet, but it is coming.

At first, it is only paranoia.

Digging packaging out of the recycling, reading and re-reading ingredients, following the tiny, tight-packed text with a fingernail, convinced you missed some fatal detail. Drinking glass after glass of water, trying to flush our system, hoping it will help. But it is not anaphylaxis; you are not dying, and that anxiety is wasted.

Then, dinner stretches, hungrily hoarding minute after minute in imperceptible increments, until it is an hours-long ordeal. Sitting alone at the table—leftovers stored and dishes done—chewing and chewing and chewing food into a million microscopic particles, jaw a bone blender, until all that's left is a textureless, flavourless paste, just barely able to pass through the wall our throat has become.

Our parents tell you to stop chewing and swallow the food, assuming you are being an obstinate little shit—which is true, in general, but could not be more wrong about this. Explain that something is physically wrong: a medical issue, not a psychological one. Do not tell them that you can't swallow, that manually pureeing your dinner is necessary: they are too familiar with our ever-evolving neuroses to realize something more is wrong.

When our body all but seals our throat, three square meals a day become three bottles of chocolate-flavoured meal replacement shakes a day. Those 720 calories are not enough to stave off the constant claws of hunger—you are a growing girl, after all—and you end up crawling, a fumbling spy, into the pantry to steal another. Just one more: that's all you need to keep the hunger at bay for a little longer.

This marks the point of no return, where our remaining childhood becomes jumping through every hoop and navigating every tripwire the healthcare system lovingly puts in your way. Don't bother with your family doctor; he'll try his best, but he can do nothing. Ask Mama to take



## Ruby O'Donnell

you to the emergency room at Calgary Children's Hospital, and you can cut out the intervening roadblocks.

Inevitably, you end up in the same place: a too-crowded, too-colourful room full of sick and injured kids, coughing or crying or simply screaming if they lack the capacity to communicate their discomfort. Anticipation and impatience drive you to the point of distraction, and, despite having eagerly awaited The House of Hades' release, you start the same page again and again until you give up on reading entirely, so request audiobooks instead of letting Mama fill your eReader with new titles to occupy you in the endless wait.

After seven hours and two relocations, you are left in an empty waiting room with the promise of finally seeing a doctor soon.

By this point, you are angry at the unfair world, at this stupid hospital, and at Mama for being so calm and steady while you are aching and shaking and lightheaded.

No one is at fault for this situation, but you are a cracked fountain perpetually spilling hurt, frustrated, hungry, and scared. It wears you down like water does rock, making you want to erupt in a firestorm of volcanic rage until the external is as broken as the internal feels.

As always, Mama—who has suffered through your darkening mood and the looming temper tantrum of epic proportions through every dragging minute of this awful, infinite day—is the easiest target.

For once in your life, bite your damn tongue.

Use your words instead of lashing out. Mama bringing jello and rice pudding from the cafeteria, letting you curl up as close to her as the welded-together hospital chairs allow, and reading aloud from the book she, at least, has managed to pass the wasted hours with, does not require yelling at her and breaking down in tears. Her love may not be enough to fill your stomach, but it is enough to keep your fragile body warm. Allow her to defrost your misery, even if only a little.

Eventually, you get not one but two actual doctors rather than another weary, disinterested nurse. One of them is Dr. M, the gastroenterologist who will oversee our care until we graduate from Children's at 18. A few years later, while we're in for a routine procedure, we'll run into the other doctor—whose name got eaten away at some point by your starving brain—again. Despite having met only once before, he remembers you, and his genuine delight at how well we are doing by then reminds us that, no matter how jaded we've become, many healthcare workers do truly care.

They'll say a lot of words you immediately forget, exhausted in every sense of the word, but what matters is they have a possible diagnosis—something no one has even managed to ballpark so far. In under 48 hours, they have you scheduled for an endoscopy. Experience with the sluggish turning of the healthcare system's wheels will make us realize just how severe your condition must have been to warrant an

emergency procedure.

No matter how scary it seems in the moment, please do not insist that you are actually 'Jane' every time someone asks, You're Ruby, right? They won't place the IV—the only part you're actually afraid of—until your consciousness has already been stolen by a haze of orange-scented anesthesia (whose reek, a mixture of sickly sweetness and gym socks, remains in our nose for hours and our memory forever), and the poor anesthesiologist, who is the only one to even briefly believe your claims, does not deserve that moment of shock and panic before you feel guilty and admit your identity.

*Eosinophilic esophagitis* is a confusing jumble of letters, lost almost immediately to the sieve chronic hunger has made of your memory. EOE is much easier to remember and to spell. It's an allergy, technically, that causes the esophagus to swell because our white blood cells—you remember white blood cells, right, from that Magic Schoolbus episode—have arbitrarily labelled something we've ingested a threat.

The condition is barely out of its infancy. When you Google "EOE," trying and failing to make your friends understand your new reality, finding relevant articles takes several attempts and specifiers. One day, those three little letters alone will be enough to generate pages and pages of results on the condition, but we will have already created a concise package of information to explain it by then.

For now, their understanding is unimportant. Your friends' interest in our condition begins and ends with the extent to which it overlaps with their own lives. We'll never forget how when you texted, I just spent eight hours in the hospital, it went ignored in favour of the unending back-and-forth of, Lemongrab is the best! and, No, Peppermint Butler is! as they argued over whose favourite Adventure Time character was superior.

Worry about everyone else's understanding later or never—it's not like they can ever be bothered to remember a thing we say anyway. For now, just remember to take the medications, no matter how unpleasant they taste. Take them daily, as many times as prescribed, and never forget a dose. It'll make things a little easier, and you'll only have access to them for so long before the onus of managing the EOE is a responsibility solely ours.

Being a sick kid is costly in normal experiences and time. Missing the first day of junior year because it takes months to align Dr. M's schedule with day surgery availability, and all you can do is accept the date and time they give, choking down the disappointment and frustration. Spending winter break hunched over your desk until the wee hours of the morning, unable to sleep with the fiery ache in our throat and twinging esophagus—the result of an endoscopy underwent four days before Christmas. Check-ins with your gastroenterologist leave you bowing out of class activities you enjoy and arriving late to friends'

## Ruby O'Donnell

houses. Our childhood becomes years of hospital trips, endless hours spent waiting in day surgery, annual appointments, and restrictive changes to your diet.

Months spent walking the line of starvation change a person, damaging our relationship with food irreparably. Hunger will be our companion, curled in the hollow pit of our stomach while shredding us from the inside out; in time, we are all but immune. We will always bear the marks of that initial illness, of the way it suffocated, a boa constrictor coiled around the esophagus—squeezing and squeezing until only liquids could trickle through.

But, one day, we will consider ourselves lucky: lucky to have been in the right place at the right time to land Dr. M, a pediatric gastroenterologist who was not only familiar with the condition but who diagnosed and treated it in dozens of other children before, during, and after us. One day, we will be grateful to have a mother who busted her ass advocating for us, who managed to find alternatives and substitutions that accommodated our dietary changes in a time when nut-free, dairy-free “milk” was nearly impossible to find.

One day, we will be many new and different things, but today, you are eleven years old and still in love with life and your vibrant worldview. Today, your problems are no bigger than the pebbles in your shoes and more manageable than your math homework. Go on, text your friends, run through a field screaming like a wild animal, lose hours in the invitingly blank pages of your sketchbook: grab our childhood by the hand—soft, clammy palms pressed together—and make the most of the moments.

The future can wait until you get back.



## Now, Here I Am,

I come from my parents family.  
From a warm light wooden house  
On the bank of a small river  
Where I was a caring daughter  
And a big sister to my younger siblings

I come from my kind mother and caring father.  
A childhood of unforgettable times with friends  
Barefoot on the grass and dusty roads  
Running through the puddles  
In the warm summer rain

I come from my youth.  
From my school and university  
With new knowledge and relationships  
From years which flew by so fast  
Only worrying about the excitement and joy of first love

I am from now, in my adult life.  
With lovely children and grandchildren  
I am a happy and successful woman  
Because I absorbed all the good things  
From my experience and family roots.



## **A Day Worth Remembering**

It seems to me people remember the place where they were born- where they grew up. And, like me, they want to remain there for at least a day, or maybe an hour, or even in a dream.

I remember my parent's home. I remember my brother and my sister - where we lived as a complete and happy family.

I distinctly remember how I loved to meet the dawn on the riverbank during an early summer morning. I remember looking up to the east sky and admiring the sun, coming out of the horizon. Above the river, I see the fog as a blanket of a pale blue that covers the slumbering surface of the water. The dark gray night sky was illuminated by the rays of the rising sun, instantly changing the colour of the sky from gray to blue. A pale pink faded to crimson and even orange. I was amazed how a dazzling bright ball raised up in the sky and the dark night world of shadows disappeared- revealing a light kingdom of a new day.

I remember seeing how nature and the village would wake up, how my mom would rise after a night's sleep and immediately set her task to milk our beautiful cow, named Star. I could hear my mother's voice speaking so softly and kindly to Star: "Get up! Get up! It's time, there is light, and we are going to milk you! Don't you hear the cow herder calling you to the field?"

I remember the ringing knocks of milk hitting the edge of a special bucket made of stainless steel. And our cat, Mashka, with her three kittens sitting in the doorway of the barn. Mashka would meow and lazily squint her eyes, waiting for fresh warm milk for their early breakfast.

And I remember going to the river, about 100 meters away from our house, and sitting on the soft green grass lining the bank. The river bank brings back warm memories, and I mentally dissolve into the nature surrounding me with its lush and earthy sounds. In my memory there appears images of my neighbours and their kids. My friends with whom felt like we were siblings- like we were one family.

I remember many hours spent swimming in the river, as warm as fresh milk. We would compete to see who could swim the fastest to the opposite bank of the river. We dived to see who could hold their breath under the water the longest. I remember how we went fishing off this

## Raisa Arodz

river bank in the morning. Our parents allowed us to make a fire on the bank, and we cooked fish soup in a bucket. This soup was made from the small fish we just caught. The fish were silvery minnows or olive-brown ruffe with a spiny fin at the top of their bodies. I remember how delicious that fish soup was mixed with the smell of smoke from the fire. I can still feel the spicy-sweet taste of the soup on my tongue.

I remember our endless games of catch-up, lapta (a Russian game), and hide-and seek. There were a lot of us, around the same age, barefooted and tanned. We dressed in summer sundresses and shorts- all faded from the sun.

I also remember my evening walks down the long river with a boy from my class; he was my first love. I vividly remember his touch on my hand, which permeated my whole body like electricity.

I remember the bitter smell and taste of wormwood in my nose and on my tongue at the same time, as if a slice of unripe grapefruit were in my mouth. I still remember the fresh smell of burdock- and the delicate smell of daisies, that had a bright sun in the middle surrounded by dazzling white petals around the edges.

In ringing silence, I remember hearing a loud croaking chorus of frogs, the chatter of grasshoppers, and nuzzling bees and wasps. And, of course, the diversity of singing birds. I heard the thrill of a nightingale, the tweet of a titmouse and a sparrow, the hooting of an owl, and the cooing of a pigeon. To this day, even in thought, it's still so mesmerizing.

But why do I remember everything in such detail?

Perhaps, this is because of the roots of my memory. My memory immortalizes all from my past exactly as it was in that time. I think that my family's roots call me back to the past- to my family- with its warmth, love, care, and reminder of my endless carefree years of childhood and youth.

My dreams call me to a native nature, expressive and spontaneous, enchanting me with its beauty and the sounds of waking up from a short summer slumber...

I want it all to come back to me, and not just exist in my dream-like memory.



# **Family Ties and Traditions**



# The Jackfruit Parable

Family members nurture each other. Mothers can care for their sons, and godfathers their neighbours. And from what I've seen, a father can care for his apple tree.

My family planted it in our backyard the month we moved into our home in northeastern Calgary in 2010. It came as one baby tree with branches, roots, and the potential to become something bountiful. It withstood blanketing snow, destructive thunder, and the occasional soccer ball to the leaves. And for 10 years since that day, it lay dormant and forgettable. It never grew any taller, leafier, or anything worthwhile.

My father was disappointed. He wanted to be the first house on our block to actually grow a live apple tree, a pioneer in Calgarian horticulture, where he could harvest new fruit every summer. I discovered this from my aunt, his sister, while her son, my cousin, kept screaming at my laptop over horror game playthroughs.

She told me that he lived and breathed gardening. Apparently, before he sought asylum in Canada, Bangladesh was his haven of horticulture. She told me stories of when the two of them were younger, she watched him in the paddy fields, hearing the squish of his bare feet against the mud and crop. Sometimes she joined him in the harvest, and the two of them would enjoy their reap of jackfruit, taking in its sweet scent of dew. The Bengali jackfruit was supposedly sweeter, juicier, and more nourishing than any other Canadian apple combined.

When she told me all this, I looked outside and saw him shoveling the snow around the frozen apple tree.

That same winter, my aunt and my dad had a falling out. He cut her off completely for the time being, and that was the last I saw her and my cousin for some time. I was confused, frustrated, and found myself missing my aunt's soft voice and my cousin's horrid screams. But it was common for South Asian families to do this—the second there was an ounce of kerfuffle, everyone disappeared from each other's lives like white steam vanishing into thin air over a hand's waft.

You also can't really confront your family either. I did not bother because I knew I would get the same old retort, argument, or literal walk-out I've gotten for 22 years before.

So instead of celebrating New Year's over my aunt's savory chicken roast and buttered biryani, I spent the last day of 2019 alone with my father. We ordered a pizza and ate in silence. When I finished my slice, I looked outside to where my father always shoveled around the apple



## AJ Jacob

tree. He didn't shovel the snow, and the path to the tree was folded away in white, camouflaged into the scenery, almost like he personally asked December to erase it from his reality.

2020 entered our lives and the winter died, but soon came the spring, summer, and a virus we couldn't ignore. The apple tree was no longer frozen, but rather, the world.

My father and I had to learn how to become used to each other again, as there used to always be at least one of us not in the house; either at school or work.

When the lockdown was announced, it became clear to me that our dynamic was inevitably going to change. Before, we couldn't get used to each other's presence very well. But then, we had no choice but to look each other in the eye every now and then; a couple more seconds every day.

We never became best friends, but we grew to appreciate one new thing about each other the longer the world continued to burn.

And with our newfound appreciation for each other, so did a newfound sense of bravery, to finally say what needed to be said. To ask the important question, the one that has plagued both of our hearts.

So I took advantage of it. And I asked him one day, in the middle of supper, in the middle of twilight, "Dad, why don't you talk with your sister anymore?"

And he paused, and he thought, and he looked up.

And he said: "I don't remember."

At the end of twilight, I took him outside for a walk. That night was warm, crickets chirping from somewhere tall and grassy, the twisted orange and indigo splotched between the stars.

Walking out the backyard to enter the park trail, I paused. I stared, thinking that the sky was playing tricks on my mind. Did I have COVID?

Could COVID cause hallucinations?

I called for my dad and he was in awe, just as I was.

Apple blooms decorated the tree's leaves like ornaments on Christmas Eve. The apple tree had grown, and it was preparing to bear fruit.

The two of us walked around it, in the same path that my dad always shoveled snow off of. Was this moment born by chance? Even after a decade? Or was this moment always destined to occur? Would it have happened in 20 years, or even 50 years?

Maybe, as long as we waited, it was always bound to come.

I turned to my father, and he re-embodied that young boy from Bangladesh, and excitedly inspected the flowers and fruit buds, half-blinded eyes and a wrinkled grin.

I decided to go for the sucker punch, or, more like a softened hug, to the gut. I told him, "Auntie used to tell me stories of how the two of you harvested jackfruit."

He didn't look at me.

Then I said, "Apples aren't as sweet as jackfruit. But it's what you've got."

And in his eyes, I finally saw it—a man's stubbornness and scorn dissipating for just a second as he remembered the scent of jackfruit once again, like he did once with his sister.

Later that summer, the government partly lifted indoor and outdoor restrictions. One day, the doorbell rang, and I opened the door to see my cousin smiling flash like he always had been. He beautifully never changed.

But I was not prepared for him of all people to be at my doorstep.

"How are you here?"

"I dunno. I think your dad told us to come over."

From the driveway, my aunt appeared with a bucket from home.

She smiled and waved at me as she paced to the backyard.

My cousin stepped inside and asked, "Where's my mom going?"

When it had clicked in my head, I took him to the window and we stared, the clouds magically blocking the sun so we could see everything without thinking we were hallucinating.

We watched two wrinkly kids pick at our apple tree, fruit by fruit, blossom by blossom, glancing at each other without saying a word, but smiling to themselves when they turned away.



## **My Christmas Traditions**

Roots... where do they come from? What is their essence? We could ask ourselves many of these questions, but they are born with us, they come in our blood, deep within us. If we go back in history, we can infer that they are in our ancestors, who — together with the conquerors — merged not only their customs, but also their culture, language, lineage, beliefs, values, and traditions.

That is why, depending on the country, we could have similarities in origins, beliefs and attitudes. An example of this is Latin America, who upon being discovered by Spain, the language that predominated and that was taught to our first nations was Spanish, and not only that, but they managed to merge the gastronomic culture, and above all, the cultural part, in terms of festive traditions, religious celebrations and music.

Venezuela, my native country, is an indigenous gastronomic base. We have casabe, made with a root called yuca, which, by grating it and cooking it on a griddle, is what would be like bread for Europeans. We also have corn as an indigenous base, with which various dishes are made, such as arepa and cachapa, as well as the main Christmas food, which is hallaca.

As for musical culture, we have a European base. The harp, the guitar, and with the base, the Venezuelan cuatro was created, accompanied by the harp and maracas. They form the group of Venezuelan folk music.

For us Venezuelians, the month of December is a month of joy, celebration, sharing with family and inviting friends. Everything depends on each family, some only between two or three people, and others with all the members collaborating making the hallacas, listening to Christmas music, singing and toasting with wine. It becomes a big party. Christmas traditions pass from generation to generation with some changes, but always respecting its origin.

Generally, the basis of these traditions come from what we see our mothers and grandmothers do, and when it is our turn to carry them

## Ana Melendez

out we can improve or adapt according to the conditions of our time.

Some of the traditional activities that we carried out during the month of December were the most awaited by children and young people, since it was the opportunity to get together to enjoy them with family and in groups of friends and neighbors. One of those included the peserbre ("the crib"), a nativity scene that is the representation of the birth of Baby Jesus. The children would write a letter asking Baby Jesus the gifts they wanted. This is a religious tradition, which even today, is the source of emotion in children, since in their innocence, the children believe that Baby Jesus truly reads their letters and pleases them with gifts they ask for.

One tradition that is still maintained is the elaboration of the Christmas tree, whether artificial or natural pine, in every house there is a nativity scene and a tree, which is decorated with balls, garlands, and all kinds of Christmas decorations that embellishes it.

In Venezuela we have what we call la patineta ("the skating"), an event where we skate together with the Christmas masses. These masses are celebrated between December 16 and 24, before Christmas dinner. In my time, masses were held at midnight, and after concluding it, children and young people generally went skating until dawn, since we were on school vacation during the time of festivities. That tradition has already been lost, due to the lack of security of the places, and the masses are held at times when people feel safe. Where I lived, they are held at 6 a.m. and from the 24th to 7 p.m. so that families are home early.

My grandmother used to prepare the Christmas meal beginning in December, making first the sweets for the main days of December 24 and 25. Then she would prepare the turkey, the chickens for the salad and the hallacas and the pork loin or a roast of meat. Why so much? Because in her time it was common to make food for the whole family. Children, siblings, nephews and met every year in different houses but always together.

And lastly, there is the other Christmas tradition which is the arrival of the Three Wise Men on January 6. There we can say that the celebration of Christmas ends.

When my grandmother, Dionisia, died, things changed. Instead of the whole family getting together on the 24th, each family did it separately and only on the 25th did they exchange gifts and on the first of the New Year they got together again, each one bringing food to share. In my case, loyal to tradition, I had my daughters learn how to make the typical dishes, the main ones, because there aren't many of us and we don't make as much food as my grandmother and my mother did, and now my daughters are in charge of continuing at least the main dish, the hallaca. In the case of my youngest daughter, Vanessa, married a German man, so she has had to adapt her traditions and merge them with those of her husband.

### Ana Melendez

My children's Christmas were so joyful and creative that I will still remember them with nostalgia, because there were family dinners often shared with some Chinese neighbors, who joined us for dinner for 35 years, enjoying it with their daughters and ours. Unfortunately, that changed as result of the political change we experienced in the country, causing this tradition to be reduced to its minimum expression. I have not enjoyed a Christmas dinner with my daughters and my husband and my neighbors for approximately 8 or more years. We all emigrated, some for safety, others for many reasons, hence the importance of instilling tradition in children. They are the ones who will continue in one way or another to remember what my grandmother did and uniting them with the traditions of the country where they were born and lived.



## **Past, Present and Future**

Who would have said that on the day of my birth in my beautiful land I would spend unforgettable days doing what I loved. That beautiful land is called Anaco and it is in Venezuela.

I lived without direction, many times without fears and often indifferent to seeing the days and years go by, in company or in solitude, learning to develop myself in everything I studied and learned in the time I lived there until I moved to the city.

What time? The one that belonged to me or the one defined by others? Time without fears, only hopes. When I say time I mean my childhood, adolescence, youth and my adult stages, dreams, goals, projects to accomplish, time to look ahead and walk towards what you felt was yours.

My time, where did you stay? Where did you go? Who came between you and me? Between what I managed to achieve and build, and what I want to continue achieving? I fear one day losing the roots of where I was born throughout the paths I have traveled in my life.

Looking back and analyzing my life from my childhood and everything I have lived until now, I take a new look at that new life that I began to form 45 years ago when I got married. I was young, with fears and doubts of what I should do and how to navigate my way on that new path with my husband, whom I love. I formed my own home with great enthusiasm with my husband. We were two people with different lifestyles, character, and each with our customs and our different traditions in each family. We had to make our own as a new family without forgetting or leaving behind where we came from. In my new life I have the good fortune of having three beautiful children, two girls and a boy, whom we raised with love. We had to find that balance that would give us new firm roots to form ourselves as a couple and future parents, wanting to give our children an identity of which they would be part so that when they grew up so they would have good foundations and tools to also form their own families.

We decided as a family that the December holidays would be spent one day with each family. For example, we would spend December 24 with my husband's family and the 31st with my family and so the following year we exchanged the dates. The time of Holy Week is always spent with the family. We had the tradition of exchanging gifts at Christmas, and the beautiful tradition of writing a letter to Baby Jesus and placing it on the tree or in the nativity scene.

Just as when I thought about the past and saw myself with my brothers, now in the present I see my children as they formed their own roots within their own family. Also each one of them has their family.

## Yoleinys Rodríguez

Another tradition was to spend holidays with their uncles and cousins. It was very important for them when they were children, our tradition as a new family was to celebrate Christmas, birthdays and important dates all the five of us together.

My children are now grown up and professionals in their fields and due to immigration we found ourselves in need of separating physically. We communicate through messages, calls and video. It's very important. My three children are already married. My son has a son, my grandson is beautiful and handsome, one of my daughters has a beautiful girl, my granddaughter is beautiful and somehow we communicate daily.

They have no right to want to make us disappear from where we are, I trust in time and I know that that root is there in that place that they try to erase from my mind, as one erases a poorly written writing.

I only think about what I will do when that time returns and I can go back to those paths with the same happiness as when I was a child.

I know that there is still a long way to go and when I feel that I have no direction, I will take from my heart memories and strength to lift my spirit and move forward, I tremble when I say your name DICTATORSHIP, you have very little left, I and my roots will win.

Thinking about all that has happened in my life and looking at today, I feel a vivid nostalgia for everything that has occurred, but at the same time feel joyous that I formed my beautiful family. When those feelings of nostalgia come to my mind, I search in my heart for all those memories treasured there, I nourish myself with them and I move forward, always looking to see beyond, of what I can continue doing, traveling and accumulating, to continue saving more and more for when I need it again. To live is to continue living.



# The Roots in Our Scalps

My mother's hair is nothing like how it used to be. It's currently a light brown, hints of orange, the same dye job she complains about every single time. Her hair looks pretty good for her age, all things considered. It's long and without patches and it stretches out in fine sheets of counterfeit brown. My mother's hair is nothing like how it used to be. In old photographs it's closer to black, the kind of hair only hispanics can foster. I see her with my dad in a photo taken twenty something years ago. She's thinner, she's in her wedding dress, she is nothing but shades and shapes. Her hair is curled into neat ringlets framing her forehead and making her face the subject.

My grandmother's hair is nothing like it used to be. It's gray and dull and frizzy and escaping her scalp in blotches and patches. She loses more of it everyday and it likes to stand up, displaying the sagging of her eyelid with the absence of her left eye. She's an old woman now, and she's likely going to die. Maybe not this year, but the next, or the one after that, or a couple of months earlier. She'll die and be lowered into her final bed and her gray hair will leave her scalp and form a pillow in her coffin.

My sister's hair is a figment of what it used to be. It used to be so frizzy and unruly, like my grandmother's, and in the midst of her teenage rebellion she stuck the hair straightener to her curls and purged her heritage with miniature heat waves. She still straightens her hair to this day, dark curly sheets that are naturally wiry and tough and hard to comb through. Sometimes I still picture her, standing in the bathroom wafting the scent of burning hair, the colonizer sending steam coils around her head. I remember the way she used to get ready, but we're both grown up now and she had to leave at some point. My hair is a reminder of her; the same toughness, the same thickness, the same urge to defy what was given to us. It's our hair, and we both spent so much of our lives trying to rip it out.

I look in the mirror and struggle as I pry the comb through my hair and it just sits there, stuck in motion, and the harder I push the strands strain under the pressure and my scalp screams and I let go. My brother, now he got lucky with the hair genes. He doesn't have to worry about passing a hand over his head and it getting caught in a wiry net of black. When I was younger I kept my hair short, I thought it made me less conspicuous.

My mom dressed me in Gap and Hollister and Abercrombie and as I grew older I realized that wearing the brands the other boys liked made



## Felix Da Costa Gomez

my skin no less brown; you can pour milk on dirt but it doesn't change the fact that it's still dirt.

Perhaps I am not the way I used to be. I've never really tried to think back to that time, to our arrival, the space in that three year old's head. I wonder if at his age he spoke Spanish better than I do, if his tongue slid seamlessly over the scalding landscape of his country. His hair was curlier, tighter, before adapting to the cold weather of the adopted country. I'm trying to remember the day I came home from school and decided to destroy my culture by slathering pomade through my hair and combing the curls out. I called the texture of my hair ugly, muttering curses as the comb fought through the strands and ripped some out. I'm trying to remember the day I came home from school and decided to speak to my parents in just English. The words escape me like rapidly fleeting dreams after coming to consciousness, and I like to think that if I sit for long enough that my language will gradually come back to me. Maybe I just need to meditate. Let my mind seep into the orifice of my skull as my banished tongue sits heavy in a bed of flesh. Let my hair grow over the ground and imbed itself into the dirt and sprout a tree of shame and displacement and nothingness. I'll trespass into my blood and swim in that morbid ocean, let the genealogy bask in my soul and perhaps I will come back as what I was supposed to be. But not today, or any day, because I let the white man win a long time ago.

I sit across from him and listen to him speak about how Venezuela doesn't have a race. Mestizos, Mulachos, German descendants, Portuguese descendants, all a byproduct of the Europeans' unsatisfied hunger. I tell him I was born in Venezuela, but not that I'm from there, and he knows what I mean because he regards me as a Canadian. The Calgary Catholic school system groans under the weight of our conversation; he's speaking in Spanish and I am responding as such, in gringo dialect. The Calgary Catholic school system cackles under the weight of our conversation, and I think I see Bishop Grandin's pasty, white, wrinkly face and perfectly combed white hair looming as a specter on the other side of the Riddell Library's meeting room. His hair is straight, and Juan follows my distracted gaze as I acknowledge my unruly curls.

He talks about geography, about how the dusty desert-like mountains coexist with the shrubbery and trees in an abomination spat out from God's viscera. He speaks about Venezuela as if it is the only real country and all other countries separated from it like an alternate telling of pangea. I sit there with my notebook, sliding my pencil over my knuckles in a repetitive motion, and I close my eyes and try to reach for the memories I've forgotten.

I can't tell you the name of the street, or how to get there, but somewhere in Caracas, the city where my father grew up, exists my aunt's house. The front of the house is guarded with pillars of brick

## Felix Da Costa Gomez

and in an opening made by the brick fence there is a massive iron gate that squeaks with every slight push. Past the gate, the cracked concrete driveway disappears under the shadow of the veranda and under the shade the porch of the house is adorned with a hammock in the colors of the Venezuelan flag, yellow, blue and red. There are wooden chairs too, where my cousins and I would sit gloomily and glare at the cousin that managed to win the race to the hammock. Jesus Daniel. I remember now, that's the name of the cousin closest to my age. He has brown skin like me and the same curly hair, but his eyes are darker. We look enough alike, we could probably pass as brothers. Now that I think back on it, all of my cousins had hair like mine yet I'm the only one that has been displaced. I wonder how different our experiences are. I wonder if they could ever understand the concept of self racism.

Back when the country wasn't so bad, we would visit every couple of years for Christmas. Jesus Daniel and my aunt's family would come to greet us at the airport and Jesus Daniel was always so excited to talk to me; face beaming, eyes glistening, and every question was responded to in poorly accentuated Spanish. Sometimes I thought he laughed at me, maybe it was just in my head. He spoke to me only in Spanish and I answered the best that I could, and as Christmas vacation continued some of the accent came back to my tongue and I flicked the apostrophes in all of the right places using my tongue like a dagger against my teeth. When it was time to leave, my Spanish got worse; the country carried medicinal properties for colonized, white washed boys. Not to mention, my hair also became frizzier. Jesus Daniel and I would go a couple of years at a time without seeing each other but when we reunited, it was as if I never left. He would take me out on walks through the streets of Caracas, against my mother's warnings, and he would tell me the names of places I didn't care for and we would talk about school there and school in Canada. He was wearing jeans and a sweatshirt, and I was sweating in beige shorts and a white tee.

He said "I've never seen a Venezuelan that can't handle the heat." I haven't seen my cousin in eleven years.

My dad's hair used to be a lot like mine when he was younger. During Christmas time we look through our collection of photograph binders and I find a picture of him when he was around my age. His hair was longer, and it formed an afro around the peak of his massive ears. He keeps his hair short now, short enough to give the impression that it's straight. All the darkness has been drained from my father's hair, reduced to a spotted plain of grey and white. I kind of envy my dad. Not for any good reason, just the color of his skin. My dad is fair skinned with pale green eyes. Most people speak to him in fluent English first and when he responds with the jumbled mess spewing out his tongue they say things slower and use simpler words. His English isn't bad, but he sounds foreign enough to tell that Canada isn't his native land.

## Felix Da Costa Gomez

When I'm out with my dad, I wonder if people can tell that I'm his son. Can they look past the shade of our complexion and look at the bone structure of our faces, the setting of our brows and our serious demeanour? My dad laughs a lot more than I do, he's always so easygoing. One time, it was just him and I at the movie theatre. I can't remember the reason, we rarely go out just the two of us. Our seats were perfect, right in the middle of the theatre, and my dad started shoveling his hand halfway through the popcorn bag before the advertisements started playing. When the screen did flash into life, my dad pointed and laughed loudly even though there was nothing remotely funny about the ads. He looked at my face and I was red, I guess as red as I'm capable of being with brown skin.

"Are you embarrassed to be out with your old man?" He asked in his broken English. He was still laughing.

"Yes."

"Hey," he jabbed me with his elbow. Popcorn spilled onto my lap. "I was the same way."

I wonder, when people see us in public, can they look past the texture of my hair?



## Christmastide/Svyatki

In Russia we don't celebrate Halloween. However, there is a similar Christian holiday called Christmastide. Christmastide lasts two weeks, from the Nativity of Christ on January 7th to the Baptism of Christ on January 19th. At this liminal time spirits, evil spirits, walk the earth.

On these days people go caroling, dress up in costumes, tell fortunes, and prepare festive dishes. Caroling begins on January 7th. Koliadka, or carols, are the ritual songs of the Slavs. Before midnight, young people go around houses to wish happiness and prosperity to the owners. People always dress up in animal costumes when they go caroling, for example: a coat, a bear, a wolf, a horse. Also, guys could dress up as gypsies, hunchbacked old men or other characters. The main character is always a bear, played by the fattest guy in the company. They are supposed to ward off evil spirits. The host greets the carolers with treats, sweets and small coins. In the carols the first lines praised the arrival of the holiday of Kolyada, and informed the owners of the house about it. In the second part they praised the hosts. The owner is called the "Bright Month," the hostess is called "The Red Sun," and their children are called "The Pure Stars."

A popular song still sung today is:

*"Kolyada, kolyada  
Give me some pie  
Pancakes and a flatbread  
In the back window"*

People prepare for the rounds of the carolers in advance. Pancakes, sauerkraut, mushrooms and nuts are a must on the holiday table. Kvass and dried fruit compote are served as drinks. Kvass is an ancient and still widely popular bread-based drink. Kvass is a non-alcoholic drink.

These holy days are considered the most suitable time for divinatory predictions. Fortune telling helps diviners to catch luck. Adolescent girls tell fortunes to find out the name of their future husband and their wedding date. The girls go out into the street, run up to the first man they see and ask his name. His name will be the name of the future groom.

Another example is fortune telling on a plate. The session takes place in complete silence. Most people are already asleep. Then the mystery of fortune telling begins. The ritual requires three to four people, white paper with letters and numbers, a small white plane, and

### Svetlana Danilova

candles made of wax. When all preparations are completed, the girls place their fingers on the plate and they call the spirit by name. The plate starts moving slowly and the arrow shows the name of the groom, the future husband, by letters.

I wondered, too. I never took them seriously. We were eighteen. We were students, cheerful and beautiful. We were not only guessing about grooms, but also whether we would pass. We found it unusual and interesting.

Does this holiday remind you of anything?



## New Year's Eve, 2015

It was my first time back in Chile since I was seven years old and the thought of meeting my dad's side of the family again was overwhelming me.

I stared at my reflection in front of my grandma's mirror, putting on my earrings. My parents told me I had to look purposely poor when I walked outside to not draw any attention to the wrong people but New Year's was an exception, wasn't it? It was a strange contrast since Chileans equally valued the importance of looking presentable to others just as much as they didn't like looking like bait to potential robbers. Nevertheless, I hoped I was tip-toeing between that balance with my long white summer dress and false gold earrings.

My grandma comes into the room. I was still growing accustomed to her presence. In the eight years I hadn't seen her, the lines in her eyes had grown deeper, her hair now cut around her shoulders.

I was also shocked to learn that she was under five feet. I swore she was taller as a kid.

"We're leaving," she said. We were celebrating New Year's at my auntie's house.

"I'm done." I ran my hands through the dress. This will have to do.

My auntie's house was a three-bedroom single floor place with a backyard big enough to accommodate a big family. It felt odd to see my dad's sister be a married, responsible mom. I remembered her as a young woman who fancied Usher and would wake up at 3 p.m. because she'd gone clubbing the night before.

Family members - uncles, aunties, cousins - were already gathered outside and inside the living room. Many of the women hovered around the kitchen preparing the side dishes. And music. Lots of music. It blasted through the walls, the classic hispanic melodies echoing everywhere.

Family members gasped upon seeing my dad and I. They pulled us into hugs, telling me how much they've missed us, how long it's been and oh my God I've grown so much.

My cousins smoked in the corner, some of them with a cup of alcohol in their hands. They were underage. I gaped in shock. My dad was very strict about waiting until I was eighteen to drink. The rules seemed very lax around here.

The women in my age group huddled around outside the yard as well, talking amongst themselves. I thought I'd have to worm my way into the group. They certainly didn't know me that well.

They smiled and locked my arms around theirs. They told me how pretty my dress was. They asked questions about me. How was school?

Catalina Berguno Astorga

What music did I prefer?

They asked how life was in Canada.

I glanced at my dad.

I suddenly felt very small. An invisible weight fell upon my shoulders. There was a fantasy associated with living in Canada. As if living there was a solution to all your problems. How do you shatter that belief and tell them that living there was just as hard, only with a better sense of security?

But it seemed I didn't have to try very hard.

"It's fine," I shrugged.

They smiled, not looking disappointed with my response.

The family ate dinner, the table long enough to pass the dishes around through multiple hands. Everyone laughed. Everyone laughed. I expected awkwardness upon seeing them again. It seemed like the only one feeling awkward was me.

My cousins and I regrouped after dinner was over. We talked amongst ourselves.

All of a sudden, one of my cousins, Violeta, gasped with excitement.

"You know what we should do?" she said. She seemed the most attached to me, eager to talk and play with me. It boggled my mind. I wasn't used to inciting that reaction from people.

"What?" One of my cousins asked.

Violeta said we should make a choreography for my dad, tio Victor to them. To welcome him to the family.

"That's a great idea!" said my cousin.

I didn't relish the thought of performing in front of other people. To my surprise, they didn't peer pressure me and continued to include me in the conversation while they prepared.

I watched them plan a dance with the Spanish version of the song "Let it Go" from Frozen. It was a nice gesture, I thought.

Once they finished their choreography, my cousin came up to my dad and said, "we have something for you."

"Yeah?" He looked surprised. And happy. Very happy.

As my cousins performed their surprisingly synchronized performance, I took a look at my dad. His eyes were softened, maybe a little teared up. This meant a lot to him, I realized. He fit in here. The family certainly made us feel like my dad and I did.

I surveyed my surroundings. One of my baby cousins was absent, put to nap in his room with the music still blasting. One aunt was picking up the plates. It was the middle of the night, long past midnight and the party was still ongoing. I was used to having to wait until midnight in Canada and then going home shortly afterwards.



## Catalina Berguno Astorga

It's like the party died after the clock hit twelve, its climax over. In here though, it felt like the celebration had only begun.

I went inside the living room where one of my uncles was passed out on the couch. He was in a deep sleep, the music seemingly not bothering him.

My aunt Jocelyn stood beside one of the other couches, searching for an item inside her cosmetic bag.

An idea struck me.

"Can I borrow your bag?" I grinned.

She blinked, confused. I pointed towards my uncle.

Her eyes widened in understanding.

"Here," she said. She handed me her lipstick.

A smudge of lipstick and a unibrow later, my uncle looked like a brand new woman. My cousins hovered around my masterpiece, whispering and giggling. My uncle's mouth hung open, his double chin prominent as he laid on the couch.

My aunt pulled out her phone. Her camera flashed. She burst out laughing.

At this point, the sun was about to come up. Most of the family were sitting down, talking in low voices. The lack of sleep had caught up to us. "Oh, he's going to love this," she snorted. The rest of the family laughed. I smiled, feeling a warm feeling in my chest.

I had fun. More than fun. My heart felt full. But the day was almost over and this was the most alive I've felt in years.

A twinge of sadness hit me at the thought of never experiencing this again.

I glanced at my dad, who was talking to his sister. He hadn't stopped smiling all day.

What did we move away to Canada for, exactly?

I was happy. He was happy. We traded a community for security.

I wondered if he believed the trade-off was worth it. I never doubted it, me being a little too young to understand the weight of my parent's decision at the time. But was it all bad? I mourned for a family that I didn't know very well. Just a couple of days in Chile and already I saw the contrast between where I lived and where I was born. I suddenly understood why most of my family chose to stay here. Chile had plenty of problems, but you never had to worry about facing them alone.

Or maybe I was romanticizing the idea of living here. After all, we were here on vacation. We didn't live here anymore. It was easy to forget the reasons why we left when it was no longer my reality. Sometimes the grass wasn't always greener on the other side.

My dad came up to me. He told me we would be leaving soon.

"Alright," I responded.



# Purim

In my birth country of Uzbekistan there is no holiday like Halloween. There were costumes only for New Year's carnivals on fairy tale themes. However, in Israel there is a holiday called Purim, which takes place in March in the Spring. Purim is about when Esther saves Jews in Persia from a pogrom. Esther was Queen of Persia when a government official, named Haman, convinced the King to decree all the Jewish people were to be killed. Esther's clever actions put an end to Haman's plan to kill all the Jews in the Persian Empire.

On Purim in Israel, all the adults and all the children put on costumes, and there is a ceremonial procession called an Adloyada. The main streets are closed for the Adloyada ceremonial procession. Pastries called Hamantashen, ears of Haman, are eaten. They are three-sided cookies with jam. Music and the voice of the host fill the streets with sound. I perceived this costume ball as freedom, because in a costume, you come out of yourself and can be whatever you want, free from conventions. My first costume was Cleopatra and later I dressed up as a musketeer. I love this cheerful holiday of Purim!



# Culture Shock with Halloween & Qingming Festival

When I came to Canada in October, the Halloween Festival was coming. I first saw a lot of scary things everywhere outside related to Halloween, which were black and white ghosts, witches, skeletons, big spiders, cobwebs, black cats, crosses with words, vampires and so on. These things were in people's front yards, hung in windows and trees. They had carved pumpkin lanterns beside their front doors. These things were so strange that I felt afraid and it really impacted me very much, because I had never seen a festival showing things like these, but I was so curious.

During that time, I learned something associated with Halloween in my English class. One of the older Halloween cultural traditions in Western countries came from the ancient Irish Celtic people holding a festival of Samhain for the dead and spirits. It was a time to honour all saints and nature. People lit bonfires or candles and wore costumes to ward off ghosts, remembered their ancestors and dead loves, and also celebrated the harvest season and expected new life better. Over time, the modern Halloween evolved into a day of activities on October 31, like trick-or-treating, carving jack-o-lanterns, festive gatherings, donning costumes and eating treats.

On the last day of October in the evening, children dressed up in their fun costumes, such as princess, Ultraman, Superman, Spiderman, witches, Super elves and fairies. They walked door to door around the neighbourhoods and ask for candies. When the door opens they say, "Trick-or-Treat!" to the owner, and with a smile, the homeowner will give them some candies, apples or snacks. In later years when I lived in Canada before the Halloween Festival, I would buy some candies and snacks for children who would come to my house to get them. When I see the dressed-up children come to my house I can say, "Your costumes are so cute or awesome," then give them candies, and the children are very happy on the day. After, they will say, "Happy Halloween" to me and go on their way. A very nice evening, isn't it!

Why I had this culture shock with Halloween is because I was living in China. In China we have a traditional festival similar to Halloween in honor of our ancestors. I would like to introduce it. It is called Qingming Festival on April 5 and also called Tomb-Sweep Day. It is an official Festival, so people have a day off and will go home to get together to visit and sweep their ancestral tombs, and remove weeds. Paying respect to remember them, so no matter how far away they live, they will remember where they come from.

## Grace Xing

Traditionally, people offer some things in front of the tomb, including lighting some incense sticks, foods, fruits like apples and oranges, alcoholic drinks, handicrafts flowers, joss papers that look like money and more. They will stay there with offerings for a while and may say some words in silence thinking and praying to their ancestral spirits. Then burning the flowers and joss papers, pouring alcohol to the ground. They think their ancestors could receive their offers. In addition, people who live far away and can't travel to their ancestors' tombs may burn papers from a far distance for the commemorating. People believe that doing this can bring good luck to them because their ancestors will bless them.

In my experience, I did something similar for our family's ancestors with my parents when I was young. However, twelve years ago my father passed away, so for Qingming Festival I would go with my child, my brother or sister to Tomb-Sweeping for our ancestors and my father. It is a good way to keep the tradition alive. What is more, the communication among relatives will make whole families become stronger because they are united by the same ancestors, so they will treat each other as family members and give support to each other.

On the Day, people also put flowers and writing cards in the martyrs' cemetery to commemorate the sacrificing veteran soldiers and people who made a great contribution to the country. The Qingming Festival is not only for commemorating the dead, but also a time for people to enjoy themselves. They fly kites in the shapes of butterflies, kind of animals, characters from folktales or Chinese opera, go for spring outings to breathe fresh air, and eat seasonal fresh foods, cold dishes and vegetables. It is an important, meaningful traditional culture having been preserved in our country for a long history. We should pass it on from generation after generation. That's a great cultural root, isn't it?

Halloween Festival and Qingming Festival are both for remembering and honouring the dead, but people do something very different, such as Halloween decorations being totally different from Qingming Festival. Now, I have learned more information connecting the cultural traditions of Halloween Festival with Chinese Qingming Festival. So, I no longer have the culture shock to fear the decorations before and on Halloween Festival.



# All That Was Will Be Again

December 7th

Frost decorated the window into which my five fingers scratched lines into the rime frost. Pulling down to the bottom of the sill that light shone through. I looked down at the ephemeral white snow stinging underneath my fingernails. As I watched, the evanescent ice transmuted into water, I shivered in the light of this December dawn and contemplated the transformative cycles of water; the essence of life. All that was will be again. The same as it ever was.

Five days earlier my father found out he had cancer, now he waited in his bed for an ambulance to take him to his final resting place, a hospice. Once, a tall and muscular man, however, in the previous two years his body had been ravaged by rheumatoid arthritis. For around a year he became crippled by this affliction.. Then he received new medication that worked so well it seemed he would return to his previous healthy, active self. Before this his rituals of health made me never question that he would live to be one-hundred years old. His own father died of skin cancer before I was born and this motivated him to keep healthy with special foods and exercise. My paternal grandfather existed to me only in photographs and in my brother's middle name "Thomas".

In October he began vomiting constantly and he started feeling intense pain again. We assumed it was resurgent arthritis. The vomiting, and other painful symptoms he was experiencing, were possible side effects of his injections. At his age ambulances were free, so he took one to the hospital, with the intention that they would adjust his medication more quickly. Unexpectedly, they kept him overnight for further testing.

When my mother and I visited him we sat for a while before he said: "Why are you still here? You must be bored, go home."

The next day he came home, but his skin had turned yellow. The hospital called to tell us of the web of tumours that spread from his oesophagus to his stomach, liver and other organs. Loose, yellow folds of skin hung off my father's skeletal form as he lay in the bed, dying. Despite his other healthy habits, his one vice of chewing tobacco dripped carcinogens down into his throat for many decades.

My aunt and uncle drove down the night before from Edmonton to see him. We all hovered around his bedroom looking out the window, waiting for the ambulance, not sure how to react in the situation. My small brown dog Billy sat on the bed guarding his patriarch. He

appeared to know the weakened state of his clan's eldest member and had shifted from sleeping on my bed to his. Peering out the door of the bedroom he would growl at anyone who approached, expressing the fierceness and loyalty of his half-chihuahua ancestors, who folklore says guide their masters to the afterlife as psychopomps. He would not be forced to be buried alive with his charge, as ancient tradition might dictate, but the dedication and commitment was there. Given the need I am sure the tiny beast would hurl himself at a foe with pin sharp teeth and all the strength his ten pounds could muster. A ferocious flurry of fang and claw. Proudly dying a warrior's death.

In the weeks previous within the darkened master bedroom my father had lain. As bodyguard to my father, the small dog positioned himself amidst the man's emaciated limbs prepared to strike out, even once or twice growling at me, suspicious, when I attended to the dying man with watery sponges.

"Get him out, he shouldn't be here in the dark all day. It is not good for him," my father said of the beast's dedication. However, if removed all his energy was dedicated to returning to his post to protect the weakened patriarch.

"I hate that stupid dog" My father would say, as the dog's tiny face peered out watching, waiting, his twin glistening black orbs felt as though they were a portal to the realm of death he sensed approaching.

He looked into Billy's eyes and told him:

"You're ugly, and stupid."

To which the fluffy, toy-sized dog wagged its tail happily. He knew what words did not say. All this dog's life this patriarch had once thrown his toys, played pulling on his ropes while they pretended to growl at each other, bought him bones at the butcher, and snuck him food from dinner plates beneath the table. The dog observed, felt and knew who the man really was, beneath facetious machismo.

Billy reared onto his hind legs, yipped and growled as the ambulance pulled up. Like a meerkat sentinel he looked at each person in the room to make sure they were aware of his warning of invaders. Two EMTs walked up towards the house with a stretcher. Billy leapt back to the space between the yellow skeletal legs and arms of my father to assume a new defensive position staring at the doorway. Beady eyes blazed with incredulous rage, a guttural snarl reverberated in his tiny body. I tried to capture the teddy bear faced guardian, but he evaded me as best he could, certain of his protective mission that I audaciously, foolishly, obstructed. Finally, I caught him.

Two EMTs came into the house with a stretcher and eased my dad onto it. Held in my arms Billy tried his best to wiggle free and engage in combat with the kidnappers of his vulnerable charge.

"Do you want help carrying that?" my uncle asked the two women.

"No, we're fine." They seemed annoyed at the suggestion.

## Derek Aitken

On the way out of the house they dropped my father on the front steps and he winced and cried out in pain. I locked up the beast in the house and got in the ambulance with my father. They assured him the dog could visit the hospice, to which he replied: "I hate that dumb dog."

"He's joking" I said.

"No I'm not," he replied.

At the hospice I inspected where my father would reside in his last months. A huge window looked over the city and the Rocky Mountains in the distance; which were painted scarlet, orange and yellow by the setting sun. My father and I discussed how I would order him Prime Video to watch on his tablet. Television and film to fill the last couple months he had left. He became uncomfortable, and writhed, complaining of pain. A nurse came to settle him down with more medication.

"Goodbye! We will see you tomorrow, first thing in the morning," I said as we left.

He looked at me, but didn't reply. Wincing again in pain. He vaguely, barely raised his hand as if to half-say goodbye.

This was to be where we'd spend our last Christmas with Dad, in this hospice decorated like a festive wonderland. I took pictures on my cell phone of the WiFi passwords posted on the walls to use in the months to come. I imagined I might be here every night, seeing a sunset out this window shimmering down the mountains in the distance. The dog Billy would be relieved to find my father here. Oblivious to the splendour of mountains out the window, but mirroring his ancestors' residence in tombs.

My brother, his wife and daughter would arrive from Toronto in two days for a month. An unexpected emergency flight to see Grandfather Aitken, one last time. My father's brother and cousins were planning to drive from Saskatchewan. My cousin in Australia, who once lived with my nuclear family, planned to talk to my dad on a Skype call the next day. I mostly remembered them quarreling, but such things are forgotten, and buried, when staring down the hungry, gaping maw of death's eternity.

December 8th - 4:00 AM

I stayed up at home writing in my journal a list of questions I wanted to ask my father before he died. I believed we had only a few months left together and wanted to construct a chronicle. I would have to be organized to capitalize on the little time that remained. I fell asleep next to the notebook, resting on my blanket.

Then my mother touched me gently and shook my shoulder softly until I was awake and whispered to me.

"Derek. Your father died. They just called." I don't know if I replied.

She went to her bed.

Thinking I had months left to resolve all of our past, it didn't feel real. Was this a dream? Stunned, I laid there for a long time. When my mother left I went out of the house to the garage to be alone, but clicking claws on the wooden floors told me I was being followed out.

In the garage, surrounded by all my father's lifetime of possessions and projects, I sat on a white plastic chair. My face crumpled into a silent wail. Too distraught to form a sound, tears streamed down my face. Panting and gasping for breath my mouth stuck open and snot streamed down my chin the biting cold stirred me slowly to action. Billy was shivering under our blanket. We ventured into the house again, Billy led me to my bed and made sure I was asleep, or at least with closed eyes, laying down before searching the house again. His claws clicking on the hardwood. He found a scent in the laundry basket and jumped inside, extracting my father's balled socks in his mouth. He took this clue to his round, soft dog bed on my bedroom floor. He placed the balled socks into his nest and rested his chin upon them, an odoriferous pillow, to contemplate the scent he sought as we drifted away to sleep. Soon, the sun began to rise.

A week and a half later the funeral came and I gave my speech scrawled on paper, hands shaking as the mourners looked up at me. My three year old niece joined her father as he gave his own speech, he held her as she smiled and waved at the crowd.

In the months that followed Billy would gaze out the window, waiting, patiently. If the car came back he would run past us to the car to search for the, apparently, misplaced pack member. I forgot to water my father's many plants. They died and shrivelled up. The dog continued to decorate his bed with more stolen socks until eventually he could find no more.



## Where to Lay My Eggs

Every spring in the early 1960s when I was over ten years old, vendors came to the alleys, shouting loudly to sell chicks. A chick cost only seven Chinese cents, even cheaper than an egg. Dozens of chicks were placed in a straw-woven basket with a thick cover, chirping non-stop. These chicks were culled from a nearby chicken farm and only a few days old. People watching around the basket were discussing how to distinguish male from female chicks, and said active chicks were more likely to survive. We all intended to pick out female ones. I chose five lovely ones from them carefully.

I made a mini chicken farm for them. It was a used paper shoe box. I fed them water-soaked millet. I intended to give the chicks some water, but I did not dare. Because people said that you mustn't let them drink water; otherwise, they would die. I did not know if it was true or not.

When finding some food, a chick would call in a happy tone while pecking. The other chicks would come quickly and eat together. At night, the temperature in our room dropped to about ten degrees Celsius. All the chicks huddled together and tried to get to the center. I put some cotton around them, clothes over them, and a glass bottle filled with warm water next to them. The chicks stopped twittering when they felt warm.

A few days later, when I opened the cover of the paper box in the morning, the chicks jumped onto the edge of the paper box and then to the desk one after another, looking for a new world to find something different to eat. They even flew to the ground. When a chick found itself alone, it would cry in a high-pitched voice looking for the other chicks. If it could not find any other chicks, it would follow me wherever I went.

Two weeks later, the weather warmed up, and I put the paper box in the courtyard. The chicks scrambled to fly to the yard. They stretched their legs, spread their wings, ran and jumped like doing morning exercises. I noticed a chick had grown its first feather. Later on, I realized that female chicks grow feathers much earlier than males. The chicks pecked in the earth, but there was nothing edible for them there. Two years later, I learned in biology class that chickens need to eat gravel to aid their digestion.

In a small vegetable plot, a chick was busy pulling soil to its body with its claws in the sunshine. This chick was enjoying a bath. The cries of the chicks in a happy melody came from every corner of the courtyard. The chickens expressed their thoughts, ideas, feelings and emotions to you with different tones, rhythms and melodies in their



## Lili Zhang

calls. This was how they communicated with me.

When the chicks grew bigger, the paper box was too small for them, so I built a chicken house with bricks for them. I fixed two wooden sticks above the ground inside the house to create a roost, so that chickens would fly onto the sticks and sleep at night. In the winter, the chickens often stood with one leg while holding the other one under the body. On cold nights, they lay on the sticks with their claws covered by their bodies, and buried their heads in their wings. The chickens loved a clean place. They did not poop inside the chicken house. What a sensible animal!

Chickens like to eat vegetables and grains. My brother and I collected the discarded vegetables from nearby restaurants and stores. We chopped the vegetables, added cornmeal and cooked them to feed the chickens. During holidays, we had some bones from fish, chicken or pork ribs left after eating, and I smashed them with an axe. The chickens rushed to eat them. They also like to eat eggshells. These were the best foods we could provide for them.

The next spring, the chicks had grown into adult chickens. One day, I noticed a hen, whose face looked redder, had tried to find a way to get out of the coop. Later, it lay on the ground inside the chicken house and then left, went inside, lay on the ground and then got out again several times.

After about an hour, the hen kept clucking in a tone that I had never heard. I hurried to the chicken house and found an egg on the ground inside. The egg was brown and still warm, and there was some blood on the eggshell. It was not easy for a hen to lay an egg, especially its first egg. A hen would lie down for a while, and then stand up, turn around almost for an hour to lay its first egg. I fed the hen some food, and it greedily gobbled down big mouthfuls. In the following days, I found several eggs inside the chicken house, but one of them was broken. It might have broken when falling onto the ground or have been pecked by another chicken, I guessed.

I realized the reason why the hen tried to find a way to get out of the coop was because the hen wanted to find a good place to lay eggs. The chicken house was not an ideal place to lay eggs: the ground was hard, cold, wet and uncomfortable, and there were other chickens around nearby. The hen wanted to find a place that was clean, quiet, safe and cozy to lay eggs. I had to create a suitable place for them.

I made a nest with straw as a delivery room for hens, and put it on top of the chicken house where it was away from other chickens and easy for hens to notice. But not a single hen flew to the nest to lay eggs. I had to think of another place. I put the nest on a table beside the window inside the storage hut next to the chicken coop. The hens were able to look at the nest from the yard. It was a comfortable place for laying eggs, I thought.

## Lili Zhang

However, the hens did not agree with me. When a hen was going to lay an egg, I opened the window of the storage hut and then put the hen in the nest. The hen did not like to stay in the nest, and instead flew to the yard through the window.

What should I do?

I found the old small paper box, put some straw in it, and then placed it next to the nest, telling the hen, "This was your home when you were small."

What made me happy was that this time, the hen did not fly away but jumped into the small paper box. The hen sat there quietly, and its eyes stared into mine, as if to say: "Yes, this is my home. I did not forget it. It's a safe place to lay my eggs."

To my surprise, the other hens followed suit. Sitting in the small paper box, they looked calm, composed and confident. Sometimes when two hens would lay eggs at the same time, one would occupy the small paper box and the other the nest. Gradually, more hens would lay eggs in the nest. The nest was more comfortable, I guessed. However, the most important reason was that it was beside the small paper box.

Having laid an egg, the hen would remain atop the egg for more than ten minutes. Eventually, it would outstretch its neck, continuously calling out in a short, high voice like cheerful dancing music, announcing its joy and excitement.



# **An Unforgettable Ancient Festival in Iran**

The Iranians have a rich culture of festivals and ceremonies, each holding a symbolic meaning based on mythical beliefs and natural phenomena. Sadeh is one of the most important Iranian festivals, celebrated magnificently in Ancient Persia, dating back 2,500 years. It's attributed to Zoroastrianism, the first monotheistic religion in Iran. Zoroastrians believe that this celebration is held to respect the importance of light, fire, and energy as the blessings of God (Ahura Mazda). Zoroastrians do not worship fire, but it represents the light of God and symbolizes purity and truth; the eternal flame of wisdom is considered a holy element in their religion.

The Zoroastrian fire temples are places of worship where the sacred flame, kept in special jars, burns continuously. Iran's fire temples are among the main ones out of 167 temples around the world, and their fires have not been turned off for approximately 1,500 years. This celebration has been held by kings, emperors, and ordinary people since the pre-Islamic period and has continued to this day, with no significant changes made to it. This ceremony is very special to farmers because they believe that on this day, the earth begins to warm after a hard winter and becomes ready for the next spring harvest.

It begins with setting a great fire near sunset on the tenth of Bahman (January 30) while praying for the triumph of light over darkness. As a symbol of unity, people gather to collect firewood in the days before the celebration and make a big pile across the plains. Before sunset, Zoroastrian Mobeds (religious men), all wearing white garments, hold flaming torches, walk around the woodpile three times and read prayers from the Avesta. They praise the fire, known as one of the four main elements of the world (fire, water, wind, and earth).

The fire, as one of the vital sources of this religion, is brought from the fire temple early in the morning as a holy element to light the branches. Ordinary people gather around the fire and celebrate its warmth and brightness by singing, dancing, and playing music. Later, as flames recede, some people jump over the fire, and when it goes out, farmers take some of the ash from the ground to add it to the soil of their farms to bless them and protect them from drought and cold. As the festival ends, the organizers of Sadeh start distributing food among the people gathered on this blessed day.

Today, the Sadeh Festival is held as a glorious event in other countries such as Tajikistan, India, Australia, and some European

### Maryam Haghighi

countries where a significant population of Zoroastrians live. In Iran, Yazd, Khorasan, and Kerman are the main centres for celebrating this event. Many people from other cities and even other countries travel to Iran to experience the magic of this ancient ritual and visit the mysterious fire temples.

Sadeh is one of those important ceremonies, such as Nowrouz and Yalda, that in Iranian history, even after invasions from different nations, such as the Mongols, Turks, and Arabs, who tried severely to eradicate all Persian culture, has maintained its original spirit, thanks to the blessings hidden in its soul.

Last year, this festival was registered as an intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO, with hopes that careful measures will be taken to conserve and promote it for the next generations. With more than 2,000 years of history, the celebration of light and fire as a symbol of the victory of brightness over darkness is an excellent example of the endurance of Iranian culture, which is revealed well in this ritual.



# Notions of Home



# Roots

Roots,  
deep in the soil, the source of life, the kinship of family,  
the initial harbor for everyone.

Roots,  
silently grow and soundlessly expand,  
seek the light in the darkness and listen to life's voice in the silence.

Roots,  
not only the foundation of the tree, but also the soul of humans,  
no matter how far we go,  
sowing the seeds of love will last.

Roots,  
the marks of time,  
recording the trace of the years.  
Every fallen leaf or the parting son will be reluctant to say goodbye to them.

Roots,  
the bridge connecting the past and the future,  
symbolizing the culture,  
history and values passed on by the ancestors,  
not only reflect the continuation of family,  
but the transmission of culture as well.

Roots,  
the guardians of life,  
shelter us from the wind and rain,  
supporting everything with tenacity and purpose.

Roots,  
a faraway place, a place of dreams,  
a newcomer living in Calgary, Canada,  
embracing the warm spring sun,  
enjoying a summer barbecue on the grassland,  
walking along Bow River and breathing the fresh air in fall,  
looking forward to Santa's gifts in the white snow covered world.

Roots,  
with roots in mind,  
greeting with different people on the way,  
integrating into Canada's diverse culture,  
spreading the seeds of love in this new land.



## The Place Where My Dream Began

It is a quiet typical quadrangle dwelling in a back street. The courtyard is not very big, living with only six families. However, it is the Haven I dream of, the place of my roots, the place of my birth. The small courtyard is very clean and quiet, because on the workdays, adults went to work and teens went to school. In the evening, busy people returned home, curling smoke rose, the aroma of cooking came, and many people's taste buds opened.

The most unforgettable thing was a jujube tree in the small courtyard. In my heart it was so tall and straight. In Spring, when I inadvertently looked up at the sky, and found small buds dotted on the tree, and then, green leaves turned into shade, and later, jujube flowers blossomed. The fragrance pervaded the small yard. A few sparrows skipped on the jujube, twitter, brought endless joy.

In Summer, the jujube tree was luxuriant, like a parasol, blocking the extremely hot sun, shading the people in the yard. Under the tree, children played, adults chatted, cats napped, laughter filled the small yard.

In Autumn, the jujube tree bore fruit. Green and red dates covered the tree, just like thousands of little lanterns hanging up on it, making people dream infinitely. A big brother climbed up the tree, knocking the branches, the date falling on the ground. A few young partners and I held a basket, constantly picking up the fruit. From time to time, taking one to the mouth, enjoying the juicy sweet dates.

In Winter, the jujube tree stood firm, ready to go, looking forward to the arrival of spring. That's my childhood memory; the beauty of life in the eyes of a four-year-old girl. I am deeply attached to that place because that was where my life started -- a place where my dreams began.



## ¶ Come from

I come from  
Kaifeng, Bianjing, Dongjing, magical names for one city in central China  
From an ancient capital of eight Chinese dynasties  
From a fascinating earth stacked with seven layers  
From a place that has withstood the deluge,  
standing resolute, testing its enduring strength amidst the swirling  
waters  
From a land rivaling New York City thousands of years ago  
From legends that tell ups and down of the metropolis  
From the beautiful painting that reflects its unwillingness to accept  
mediocre history  
From a place slumbered into oblivion for millennia,  
Until one night it awakened from its long lost sleep

I come from  
a city whose poets appear in the textbooks  
From a city where a mother's poem book nurtured generations after  
generations  
From a city with cool and delicious chrysanthemum tea  
From a remarkable locale, a place where, as a clock strikes the witching  
hour,  
a throng of 100,000 university scholars converged upon our home,  
drawn by an irresistible urge to savor the exquisite taste of steamed  
dumplings,  
each lovingly stuffed with a savory, warm broth  
sweet and sour carp backed with noodles,  
soup dumplings,  
chicken blood soup,  
bucket chicken,  
fried bean jelly, famous all over the country  
From a utopia where Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism and Judaism lives in  
harmony  
From a firm belief in the great Lord Bao's personification of justice  
From a city of warmhearted humans, ready to embrace everyone



Yan Jia

I come from

Kaifeng

From a no longer bustling city, but it once was

From a city symbolizing the spirit,

it represents the determination and strength of our country's people

From a place where dreaming of

its continuous prosperity,

lasts forever.





## Stay in Power

How are you, my native city Kharkov?  
I remember my beloved city: a place of science, education and culture.  
I remember our light streets, green and clean.  
Crowded with thousands of students, who enjoyed walking in our  
squares and parks.  
Our city was full of cultural events, concerts and exhibitions.  
Everyone had many places to go by themselves and with their friends.  
And so we have lived the happy life...

But suddenly everything has changed, and our life turned to total  
horror.

The war started in our country...  
I feel the pain and the trouble of my native city,  
His executions  
From destruction of his buildings and exploded roads,  
Which like tattered veins are bleeding on the city's flesh.

Gorgeous and well-kept, my city  
Now looks tormented, pinched, and devastated from the attack.  
This is wild, this is cruel and has no compassion or sympathy.

I see our great parks, now tormented.  
Like segments of skin, they are ripped and torn up.  
So lost is this beauty and integrity.  
The injury can't be repaired,  
Because the beast only wants to kill and will prey again, and again.  
Tortured is the victim, with no attention to the splendor and glory of my  
city.  
But my native city is alive,  
My city, my hero, has very heroic history,  
So nobody can ever stop the pulse of my city's heart,  
Our unity, and our history cannot expire,  
And we will add the glorious picture of our victory soon.

# **The Mutual Influences of Eastern and Western Cultures**

The interactions between Eastern and Western cultures have always been one of the fascinating and complex topics in human history. These interactions, especially in the contemporary world with globalization and increased cultural exchanges, have taken on new dimensions. I would like to share with you a bit about significant symbols such as Anahita and Haji Firuz, as well as the role of immigrants and refugees from Asian and African countries in these cultural exchanges.

In today's world, comparative philosophies are an important field of study in universities and educational institutions. In this context, Eastern and Western philosophies are taught simultaneously. For example, Indian philosophies such as Buddhism and Hinduism have gained particular attention in Western countries, addressing concepts like awareness, truth, and suffering. This scholarly exchange allows students and researchers to approach philosophical issues from diverse perspectives, making a deeper understanding of cultural diversity.

The emergence of new religious movements inspired by various principles of Eastern and Western religions reflects cultural convergence. For example, yoga and meditation, rooted in Eastern cultures, have gained significant popularity in Western societies.

Contemporary literature continues to serve as a bridge between different cultures. Poets and writers like Goethe and Harold Pinter have created impactful works by combining cultural elements from both sides. Their poetry and prose explore themes of identity, migration, and cultural exchange, reflecting the complexities of life in the modern world.

Immigrants and refugees from Asian and African countries play a crucial role in transmitting their cultural symbols and blending them with Western culture. These individuals enrich their new communities by bringing their customs, languages, and arts. For instance, traditional celebrations and ceremonies from these migrants, such as the Chinese New Year or Iranian Nowruz, have become part of local culture, enhancing the cultural and social diversity of Western societies. Another example in Canada is the annual Tirgan celebration in Toronto.

In North America, indigenous cultures existed long before Christopher Columbus arrived. Subsequently, European cultures entered

the continent, and later, immigration from Africa, Asia, particularly from the Middle East and China, the cultures of Canada, the United States, and South America became symbols of cultural fusion and the creation of a new culture. This cultural diversity has contributed to the social and economic richness of these countries, generating new artistic, literary and architectural works.

Anahita, the ancient goddess of water and fertility in Iranian culture, symbolizes purity and life. This character is depicted as a cultural and religious symbol in contemporary literature and art, and in the West, it is recognized as a symbol of nature and femininity. For instance, in contemporary visual arts, artists utilize the symbol of Anahita to explore themes related to women's empowerment and their connection to nature. This mutual influence underscores the importance of symbols in establishing cultural connections.

The field of science and technology is also a significant area for examining the mutual influences of cultures. Major technology companies like Google and Microsoft draw on traditional Eastern methods, including systems thinking and user-centered design, in their innovation and product development processes. This demonstrates how Eastern concepts and methods can enhance creativity and innovation processes in the Western world.

Food culture is another area where cultural interactions are clearly observable. Fusion foods that combine elements from both food traditions have become increasingly popular. For example, sushi with Italian flavors or pizza with Indian spices are symbols of creativity and innovation in contemporary cuisine. Furthermore, Eastern spices and ingredients, such as Iranian saffron and cardamom, are increasingly used in Western cooking. This trend not only contributes to flavor diversity but also reflects the economic and cultural impacts of trade between cultures.

In the realm of fashion and lifestyle, the mutual influences of Eastern and Western cultures are evident. The contemporary fashion industry is particularly affected by various cultures. Fashion designers incorporate elements of Eastern culture, such as fabrics, patterns, and traditional symbols, blending them with modern designs

For example, the use of silk fabrics and geometric patterns from Eastern traditions in fashion shows and modern clothing designs illustrates these cultural interactions.

Healthy lifestyles also serve as an influential area in this cultural exchange. Practices like yoga and meditation, rooted in Eastern cultures, have gained popularity in Western societies, embraced as part of a holistic approach to health and well-being.

Cultural festivals and ceremonies provide rich grounds for examining mutual influences. Figures like Santa Claus and Nowruz symbolize joy and generosity in their respective cultures. Santa Claus

### Alireza Hajihashemi

is recognized in Western culture as a gift-giver during Christmas, while Nowruz represents the New Year and rebirth in Iranian culture, both embodying similar values of joy, family, and celebration.

Haji Firuz, a character associated with Nowruz, bears similarities to Halloween figures. Haji Firuz symbolizes joy and celebration in spring, while Halloween engages with fear and activities related to spirits. This contrast highlights the various ways cultures express the spirit of celebration, whether through joy or reflection on the cycles of life and death.

The mutual influences of Eastern and Western cultures are clearly observable in various aspects of contemporary life. These interactions not only contribute to cultural richness but also lay the groundwork for the creation of new identities and transformations in lifestyles and thinking within different societies. By recognizing and celebrating these cultural exchanges, we can foster a more inclusive and connected world that respects the value of diverse traditions and shared human experiences. This awareness enables us to leverage each other's cultural strengths and coexist in a more complex and diverse world.

Ultimately, emphasizing cultural interactions reminds us that cultures not only learn from one another but also engage in a continuous process of growth and transformation that can contribute to the advancement of humanity.



# LA CALLE ACUARIO

## Aquarius Street

(Translated from Spanish)

Talking about Aquarius Street is talking about the biggest and best part of my life.

That name is a compendium of very happy and fun moments, anecdotes, events, people, laughter, tears and, above all, many memories, mostly beautiful, although some sad.

Our house is located there, where our children grew up and where we have lived more than half of our existence.

It is a beautiful house, solidly built in concrete and clay blocks, with a slab and tile roof, with two slopes, ceramic floors, with a porch, a staircase at the main entrance and two parking gates. It also has two medium-sized garden areas, located on both sides. It currently has five bedrooms, two of them with private bathrooms, 4 and 1/2 bathrooms, a reception room, kitchen, living-dining room, laundry room and patio.

With my wife's consent, I named it "Terepaima" in honor of a very brave aboriginal chief who existed during the time of the Spanish conquest and a very famous mountain near my hometown.

Having just acquired it, I proceeded to plant two pine trees and two "pilones" in the front. Over the years, they obviously grew in a spectacular way and also left their mark on my memory.

The pine trees because at Christmas time they were decorated and illuminated and adorned the house greatly. Eventually, and with great pain in my soul, they had to be cut down because their roots invaded the drainage pipes.

The "pilones" also grew splendidous and became the residence of numerous birds that brightened the dawn with their songs and that came to cause a fun competition to park the vehicles under their enormous shade to avoid the inclement midday sun.

But sadly, they also had to be cut down because their roots, as they developed, lifted the sidewalk and were threatening the integrity of the

front fence.

Of course, we made some modifications to its initial structure and layout, according to the needs that arose over time and the growth of the family, such as the construction of an additional master bedroom, the paving of the patio (backyard), roofing of the parking ramps, expansion of the kitchen and laundry area, an underground water tank and a shed for the hydropneumatic equipment and the gas cylinders for the emergency power plant, but maintaining its original style.

When I was a child, for no reason that I remember, I did not like the Portuguese and the Chinese. Much later they made me understand that many times their distant behavior was due to language difficulties and cultural differences.

In short, by one of life's ironies, on Aquarius Street, the neighbors I had, right in front of the house, were Chinese and Portuguese.

Over time and with the passage of life, both became more than friends, brothers for life. We shared many unforgettable pleasant moments, parties, meetings and trips; also really sad moments that marked and changed things forever, such as the death of Chucho, my youngest son, and then, a few years later, the death of Gaby, Arturo's wife.

The first to arrive in the neighborhood were Ada and Sammy, who are originally from Hong Kong. They had two daughters: Winnie and Bonnie.

As I worked in Puerto Cabello, I had to leave the house early because it took me almost an hour to get to the Customs facilities due to the distance and traffic. At that time, the Chinese Sammy was always watering the plants and grass in his garden and when he saw me he greeted me with a cheerful "good morning neighbor," to which I responded in kind.

We followed the same routine until December when, for reasons related to their business, they virtually disappeared from the map for the entire month, reappearing for Christmas Eve.

After Christmas dinner and the arrival of Baby Jesus, the Chinese invited us to their house to share the rest of the evening in the festive atmosphere of that date. There we met some of their relatives and had a great time.

After that first celebration, we began a firm and close friendship, which lasts until today, so it was no longer necessary to go out to water the plants in the garden every day first thing in the morning.

Sharing Christmas dinner became one of the most significant permanent rituals for both families.

Then Arturo, the Portuguese, arrived with his family made up of his wife Gaby and three children: Marisol, Arturito and Liliana.

The first to establish contact were the women, since the lady, who from the beginning was extremely pleasant and communicative,

### Juan de Jesús Rodríguez Valero

initiated a friendly contact with my wife and my mother-in-law.

After a short while, my wife told me that I should be on the lookout since the Portuguese was going to invite us to a farm they had acquired.

The following Saturday, I was in the garage washing the car when Arturo approached me and, in fact, invited me. We continued talking while I finished with the vehicle when, suddenly, the man turned around and left, leaving me talking to myself.

Disgusted, I went into the house and told my wife what had just happened and she, laughing, told me that Gaby had forgotten to mention that he was deaf and, since when I was talking to him I was looking away, he didn't hear anything and thinking that I wasn't paying attention to him, he got bored and left.

Having clarified the point, we went to the farm where we spent a very pleasant day in the countryside the following weekend.

From then on, whenever one of the three, Sammy, Arturo or I, saw one of the other two, a conversation would immediately begin at the door of one of the three houses and eventually, after a while, the missing member of the group would appear and, invariably, the essential beers, very cold, would appear to refresh the throat and continue the chatter.

At that time, the governor on duty implemented a police patrol with "policemen on duty" that consisted of placing permanent officers in each housing estate, and that was based on the agents' personal knowledge of who lived in the area, in order to improve neighborhood security.

The fact is that when the patrol that watched over our street made its routine rounds and, coincidentally, we were talking, of course, we were always well armed with a beer in hand.

One night, as I was returning home, I noticed that the police had stopped an unknown vehicle and were identifying the occupants. I stopped my car at a safe distance so as not to hinder the operation. When one of the officers recognized me, he signaled me to continue. As I passed in front of them, I managed to hear him say to his colleague, "This is the first time I've seen him without a beer in his hand," and they began to laugh out loud.

Other memorable occasions were the Christmas celebrations and the farewell to the Old Year, which, of course, continued with the arrival of the New Year.

The decorations of the houses, inside with the Nativity scene, the Christmas tree, the tablecloths and other ornaments and outside with the Christmas wreath and garlands on the door and light installations in front and on the trees, the food and drinks, prepared by the women, or bought from a recommended "chef", and which included traditional Creole delicacies, such as hallacas, pernil (pig leg), hen salad and ham bread. But then they included typical Portuguese and Chinese dishes



### Juan de Jesús Rodríguez Valero

such as black cake, broas and Chinese-style suckling pig which became an essential element in the celebrations.

The launching of fireworks was the jewel in the crown. It began with a fun competition to see who had the most, the best or the greatest variety and the best technique for their own safety. Eventually, we decided to join forces and gathered the different inventories which resulted in greater delight for ourselves and even for the neighbors and curious people who were located at both ends of the block to enjoy a very impressive, colorful and...totally free spectacle.

Initially we launched the rockets one by one, with the nervousness that comes with holding an explosive device in our hands. Then the rocket launcher tubes appeared. This launcher was made up of a piece of metal tube attached to a Christmas tree base that was no longer in use.

Then, Arturo designed a launcher with the capacity to send out a dozen rockets at a time and which was later expanded, by means of a metal angle, to 36 rockets simultaneously. Additionally, we had firecrackers, "tumbarranchos" (explosive bars), strips of Chinese firecrackers, ¼ kilo, torches, whistles, mortars and flares for the children.

Each one had a turn to light their round and we all enjoyed watching them ascend, explode loudly and brightly illuminate the sky. Then, as the smoke and the smell of gunpowder dispersed, we toasted to a happy and joyful start to the year.

Also fondly remembered are the barbecues, birthdays, get-togethers to play dominoes or just to chat, trips to the beach, etc. Any excuse was good and valid to get together in any of the three houses. Countless times we chatted sitting on the entrance stairs, always well accompanied by beers, wines, whiskeys and the inevitable snacks prepared by the ladies.

Later, trips to the countryside, other cities and then international trips arrived.

We shared a cruise through the Caribbean and then trips to the United States and Europe, mainly to Portugal, but which included a wonderful stay in Madeira, Gaby's home island.

Sharing meals and sweets prepared by my mother-in-law Mercedes María, a super veteran and excellent cook, assisted by my wife Ana Mercedes, and the Portuguese and Chinese delicacies prepared by Gaby and Ada and also by Arturo and Sammy who were skilled cooks-grillers, turned simple lunches or dinners into true banquets.

With the purchase of the apartments in Tucacas, trips to the beach took on an incredible dimension in duration, excitement and enjoyment. Many weekends, carnivals, Easter and school holidays.

Bathing in the different pools, tanning in the sun, a refreshing drink to cushion the heat and the obligatory barbecues added many beautiful and pleasant episodes to our lives.

**Juan de Jesús Rodríguez Valero**

But life goes on, the children grew up and went their own ways. Little by little we were left alone and now we are scattered in different countries, we communicate through video calls to remember with nostalgia the old times, to know each other and to comment on our new lifestyles

In short, it was a very pleasant time with wonderful memories that we shared, more than as friends and neighbors, as a true family.



# The Edge of my Childhood

I want to tell you about the land of my childhood. I was born in Russia in a harsh region called Eastern Siberia. All my life can be called Siberian History. My region is very rich in natural resources: oil, gas, fur, and timber. This region contains the only deposit of charoite stone in the world. Many fashionistas would like to have a necklace made of such a wonderful stone. I grew up in the city Irkutsk. Irkutsk is an ancient city in Russia that has preserved its ancient layout and development. It combines antiquity and modernity: narrow streets, merchant “lace” houses, stone and wooden manors and modern skyscrapers.

Eastern Siberia is home to the sable, a furry animal, and the animal appears on the Irkutsk coat of arms. The sable fur is very beautiful and the colour varies from light yellow to dark brown. The sable fur was highly prized in ancient times. Only a royal person might wear sable fur. Sable is the personification of such qualities as wisdom, power and generosity.

Although there are cities that are more beautiful and taller, but I am in love with my city at the middle of the earth. The pride of my region is the famous Lake Baikal. The lake has an unusual shape of a crescent moon. On the horizon with mountain ranges and hills, beautiful landscapes, almost untouched by humans, fascinate and delight. On the horizon there are mountain ranges, and hills covered in wild rosemary. The hills are painted an unusual pink-lilac colour by the rosemary flowers against the background of blue-green water, and majestic cedars pierce the sky. The divine scent of flowers and pine needles float over the area.



### Svetlana Danilova

The sunrises on Lake Baikal look especially stunning. The sun rises lazily over the horizon, painting the hills in crimson orange tones. Early in the morning you get up and go to the shore of the lake, stretch out your hands to the sun and it rolls around in your palms. This view literally excites the imagination. While you are admiring the sunrise, fishermen are sailing up in boats at night to catch the baikal omul fish. We take a few pieces from them and this means that we will prepare the famous omul fish soup called Ukha on a fire. We make a fire from firewood brought from the mainland and draw the cleanest water in the world from a lake. The subtleties of soup preparation begin. Fish soup cooked on a fire has an excellent taste and aroma.

When I am far from these places I want to return to my childhood, to where I was waited for and loved. My heart is rushing to the end.

## Where I Come From

I come from Iran, an ancient country with many historical places and a history of more than two thousand five hundred years. A brilliant civilization of great scientists like Abu Alisina (Ibn Sina) (980-1031) who studied medicine and became a physician at only eighteen years old. He lived during the Islamic Golden age and wrote books like the Shafa (The Book of Healing) and the Ghanoon (The Canon of Medicine). He is known in the west as the father of early modern medicine.

Iran, home of great poets like Hafez, Saadi and Ferdowsi who wrote Shahnameh, the national epic of Iran. I made a journey to see the resting place, the Tomb of Saadi. I paused outside to remember that we human beings are members of a whole.

*In creation of one essence & soul  
If one member is afflicted with pain  
Other members uneasy  
will remain  
If you've no sympathy for  
human pain  
The name of human  
You cannot retain.*

The Fal-e Hafez is an ancient tradition in which a reader asks Hafez for advice when facing a difficulty or an important juncture in their life—treating his book as an oracle and opening them with a deep wish from their for guidance:

Every morning, I hope that the morning breeze will carry messages to my friends and acquaintances...

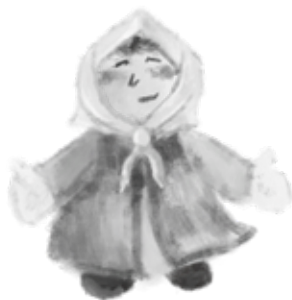
I was born in a place surrounded by beautiful nature, with the scents of oranges blossoms and roses. With trees bearing delicious fruits, where the nightingale and sparrow sing.

I have moved here to Canada and now live in friendship and kindness with people of many different cultures. I learned how to adapt myself, make friends in this country where even the animals are treated as friends and family members.



## **Without the Past There is no Future**

The history of every state begins with the indigenous people. Their way of life is formed by national traditions, culture, science, territory, and natural features of their place of residence. Human reason and wisdom determine the optimal possibilities for survival and the procreation and happy existence of people in the country.



I have lived most of my life in Kyrgyzstan, located in the heart of Central Asia. I fell in love with this small but beautiful country. I admire the wisdom and resilience of the Kyrgyzs- the indigenous inhabitants of Kyrgyzstan. The centuries old history of these people surprises with its versatility.

The Kyrgyz are very hospitable and friendly people. In the summer, when livestock breeders drive their cattle high into the mountains to green and lush pastures called Jailoo, Their time is spent in yurts.

Our family really loved visiting friends in Jailoo. We enjoyed the coolness on hot days, admired the magnificent mountain landscapes, picked mushrooms, berries, and edelweiss- mountain flowers. The yurt has hospitable hosts- our friends were always waiting for us. The kumiss, tea, and boorsok were incredibly tasty. In the evening, traditional beshbarmak was prepared, translated from kyrgyz it means five fingers. Listening to the songs of nomads, applauding the dancing girls, enjoying the competitions of young dashing horsemen; I was glad that the indigenous people of Kyrgyzstan preserved the traditions of their ancestors, their culture, humanity, kindness, and passed it onto the younger generations.

The emergence of the Kyrgyz people goes back to ancient times. The first mention of them was in Chinese writings 2200 years ago. The Kyrgyz descended from Scythian nomadic tribes. As a result of wars in the 5th century BC, the Kyrgyz Turkic Khanate was formed.

The historical path of development and formation of Kyrgyzstan was long and difficult. Only in 1991 did Kyrgyzstan become an independent state.

Even in distant past times, the country's convenient location in the center of Asia made it a centre for civilization. The freedom-loving and warlike people kept China and Mongolia at bay. To protect the country from attacks by Kyrgyz nomads, the Great Wall of China was built in the 2nd century. The Kyrgyz went east beyond the Yenisei River and then

### Liubov Truzhnikova

into the Tien Shan mountains. The Kyrgyz Khanate was formed here. Which became the current state of Kyrgyzstan.

The identity of the indigenous people, the nomadic way of life, the national characteristics of the character of the people and the territorial location of the country determined the culture, traditions and laws of the state. The Kyrgyz people honor the traditions of their ancestors, take care of their roots and pass our knowledge from generation to generation. Everyone is required to know their ancestry up to the seventh generation.

The Kyrgyz people are the people of the White Kanaks, Akkalpak is a national headdress worn by Ufeh from the age of six. The white felt top symbolizes the Tien Shan snowy mountain peaks. Black velvet lapels resemble the foothills of the mountains.

Legends and chronicles about the Kyrgyz are reflected in the epic "Manas" and in the works of the famous writer Chyngyz Aitmatov.

Kyrgyzstan unites 40 nomadic clans. The total population is seven million people. The national language is Kyrgyz of the Turkic group.

Nomads live in Yurts. The yurt is one of the most important parts of Kyrgyz culture and a symbol of nomadic life. Yurts are dome-shaped houses made of felt that can be easily disassembled and transported from place to place. In the middle there is a fireplace, the smoke from which escapes through the upper opening of the yurt. The right side of the yurt is for women, the left is for men.

The cuisine of nomads is determined primarily by satiety and simplicity. Beshbarmak is finely chopped young sheep meat, poured with broth and mixed with noodles. Chuchuk is a sausage made from horse meat.

Alcoholic drinks are kumis and bozo. Kumis is made from mare's milk, and bozo from millet barley and corn. Kuurma tea is tea with the addition of flourfride in oil, salt and milk. Boorsoks are pieces of dough fried in butter are served with tea.

It is impossible to imagine the life of nomads without equestrian competitions. Of particular importance is a game called kok-Boruk-goat pulling. Riders of two teams compete in agility, speed and endurance. They take the goat carcass from each other. Those who take possession of it become the winner, who receives the title of horseman, a beautiful bride, money, livestock, and more.

National clothing corresponds to the nomadic lifestyle. It is made from felt, leather, wood, and rough fabric. The designs use patterns and themes inspired by nature and tribal traditions.

Today Kyrgyz people wear modern European clothing, but there are traditional elements in it which they are very proud of.

The modern Kyrgyz Republic is a prosperous sovereign state.

By preserving the past, the Kyrgyz are building a wonderful future for their country!

## Growing Without Roots

I ask myself: Do I have roots? I don't think so.

I consider myself a rootless person.

My parents were assigned to a hospital in Wuhan, China after graduating from Peking University in 1953. I lived in that city for 66 years.

Because my parents were doctors, I grew up in the hospital dormitory. All my neighbours were medical workers. People with medical backgrounds have a different way of thinking and talking with ordinary people- more factual than abstract.

Since I was old enough to understand, I was told that I came into this world by the combination of a father's sperm and a mother's egg. The human gene links my face to my parents. We have common characteristics, and in some cases, common diseases. I understand that heretics are features passed from parent to child through DNA- but I am not a plant, so I do not have roots.

When I was ten years old, Chairman Mao started a Cultural Revolution in China. The Cultural Revolution was set to purge China of the Capitalist and traditional ways of thinking. This social movement changed how Chinese people thought about their old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits. On the contrary to what is now known as the four olds, the Chinese government wanted to establish new ideas, new culture, new customs, and new habits. This era in my memory overturned how I think. Because of the Cultural Revolution, I didn't attend school for several years, and when I did go back to school, I only studied the little red books written by Chairman Mao.

During this time, Chairman Mao's teachings considered family trees to be a part of old culture, and were ordered to be destroyed. If any family photos were discovered by the Red Guards, the family caught would be in great danger; some families suffered political persecution or torture. My family was lucky to have kept some photo's secret.

Members of my family lived in different cities. Transportation was underdeveloped back then, and family members who were not in the same city rarely interacted. I only met my father's parents once when I was six years old. I don't remember much, I just remember them hugging me. My mother's father died before I was born. Her mother visited a limited number of times, and she would cook delicious food and bring sweets for me. But these memories are very few, and I feel as if I only know them by old photos.



## Hongfeng Yin

I once asked my parents and grandparents what kind of people they used to be. My parents avoided answering my question and told me I'd understand when I grew up. When I was still in school, I would have to fill out forms and there would be a blank column for filling out family backgrounds, which always made my parents feel so embarrassed. I later realized that my family did not belong to China's working class because my grandparents on my father's side went to study in the United States. Chairman Mao disliked the USA, so my grandparents were classified as traitors during the Cultural Revolution. They eventually resumed their status as ordinary people. However, the impact of the Cultural Revolution is forever in my life. I no longer pay attention to family trees. Rather, I think living should be in the present, and the past should be like smoke- eventually fading away.

I always question if there are roots in humans. If there are, how far should human roots be traced? If roots come from family, then what are the roots of immigrants and adopted children?

In many places in China, there is a saying that five generations of relatives are relatives. Starting with oneself, the five generations push up to the great-great-grandparents. The five generations of relatives can be regarded as a large family, with the same genes or roots. I am the sperm of my father and the egg of my mother; beyond that is in the past. But if people do have roots, then maybe immigrants and adoptive children have two different roots.

I always thought of myself as a rootless person. I was taught that my past was not a part of me. But maybe like a plant, I can grow roots too.



## Where Did I Come From

Where did I come from?  
There is no point in guessing, but you can imagine  
My boundless Universe  
And in it live, just like me,  
Burning of sand-stars!

The Great Almighty God  
Created a beautiful abode.  
I am surprised how He could  
And I am delighted - I am a resident in it!

He gave natural parents  
For the warmth of the soul and affection  
And in my memory of them  
I keep love and gratitude.

Their love is a warm breeze  
Blows over the face and soul  
And on the road of life and time it  
Helps me move forward.

He gave a beautiful world of flowers  
Diverse and fragrant,  
Which delights the gaze  
And gives me private peace.

He gave me food from the fruit  
Trees, herbs and minerals.  
He gave animals and birds-eagles-  
To see rivers, rocks in flight.

He gave bread and it smells of the earth,  
The water of a stream and the bright sun,  
The tired hands of plowmen,  
Having given themselves to the bottom.

Liubov Truzhnikova

And fruits - drops of rain  
And the aromas of the sun's light.  
They absorbed happiness into themselves  
And the rays of daylight.

He gave me a house - the ark of the family,  
Where it is so cozy and calm.  
He shelters us from troubles  
And saves us from war.

My family is my support!  
What the Lord gave for my good  
I will pass on to my children  
For a better life on Earth..

They will understand that to live happily  
On our little Earth  
We must preserve our dear home  
And peace of peoples  
Always and everywhere!



## Sharing Memories of Home

I come from Hamedan, Iran. I was born there and moved to Canada five years ago. I have three children and a seven-year-old grandson, and we all live in Calgary. Hamedan, my hometown, is a beautiful and historical city with four distinct seasons, nestled in a mountainous region. Although my grandson has never been to Hamedan, he is often curious and asks me about it.

One such moment came last summer when my family and I visited Banff. As we wandered through the city, the cool weather, towering mountains, and serene beauty reminded me of Hamedan. Turning to my grandson, I asked, "Would you like to come with me on a trip to my historical town? A city with high mountains, clear springs, and delicious fruit gardens?"

He nodded eagerly, saying he would love to learn about Hamedan. To spark his imagination, I began to describe it.

"I was born and raised in Hamedan," I said.

"It was just my father, my mother, and I. My father loved nature. On weekends, we would explore the countryside, visit historical sites, or pay respects to the tombs of poets."

"I love nature too!" my grandson replied enthusiastically.

I smiled and continued, "Hamedan is a beautiful city on the slopes of Mount Alvand, which stands 11,600 feet tall. The mountain is surrounded by valleys, meadows, and rugged peaks. It nourishes countless rivers and streams, bringing life to serene valleys along their path. In spring, the hillsides are covered with aromatic herbs like thyme and mint. Villagers gather these herbs and sell them in the bazaar."

I continued my explanation, stating, "My mother and I often visited the bazaar to buy fresh thyme for tea. She would dry the herbs to preserve them, especially for when someone was sick. I can still remember the comforting aroma of her herbal teas. Even now, the smell of sage brings those moments rushing back."

After reminiscing, I suggested, "Let's go have some herbal tea at a local cafe."

## Zahra Abbasi

We went to a coffee shop and ordered two cups of tea. As we waited, we talked about the different types of tea, like thyme, sour tea, and mint tea, each with unique benefits. As we sipped our tea, my grandson asked, “Are there any animals in the mountains of Hamedan?”

“Oh, yes,” I said.

“The region is home to diverse wildlife—black eagles soaring high above, foxes and wolves prowling the land, and nimble mountain goats scaling the rocky slopes. In late spring, you can also hear streams flowing through the valleys, their gentle sounds blending with the songs of colourful birds.”

After we finished our tea, the conversation stayed with my grandson, leaving him curious about my hometown. To deepen his understanding, I shared another memory about a hike I took with my children around Mount Alvand.

“I remember a late spring day when my children and I hiked on the slopes of Mount Alvand. The air was filled with the scent of fresh herbs, and wildflowers painted the landscape. Along the trail, we saw a mountain goat and her baby gracefully navigating the rugged rocks.”

My grandson said, “That’s just like spring in Calgary when we see deer and their fawns.”

“It is,” I replied, adding, “Moments like these deepen my admiration and respect for nature and its creatures.”

Reflecting on that hike, I realized how much those serene mountain moments have stayed with me. The soothing sound of the stream, the songs of birds, and the untouched beauty of the landscape continue to bring me peace even years later. Sharing these memories with my grandson reminded me of the enduring connection I feel to Hamedan’s natural wonders and the deep calm they inspire.



# **Roots in Nature**



## Orange

The vivacious hue of orange always evokes the ripples in my heart. It is not only a color, but also an emotional carrier, carrying my longing love for life.

My love of orange began with a mountain hike. As the darkened early summer gently embraced us, we set out toward the top of Mount Tai, near my home province of Henan. I was brimming with an insatiable curiosity and profound appreciation for the majestic landscape that unfolded before us. After several hours climbing, we finally reached the top. At that time, many tourists had gathered there, although they were tired, they were all in high spirits, cameras in hand, posting, waiting for the long-awaited moment -- sunrise.

We found a good place to watch the sunrise. The skyline in the distance gradually glimmered, as if nature were making final preparations for the magnificence to come. The color of the sky gradually twisted from deep to light blue, and then slowly became tinged with a faint blush. The gradual change was so soft and beautiful that I cannot help but hold my breath, in fear of missing any detail.

As time went on, the flush grew thicker and thicker, as if the whole East had been set on fire. At that point, murmurs and exclamations began to rise from the crowd. Everyone adjusted their camera angles, trying to capture the perfect moment.

Suddenly, an orange light broke through the clouds and lit up the whole sky. The sun rose slowly, revealing its brilliant face. All that waiting was absolutely worth this one moment. I click the shutter to record this beautiful instance that will last forever. It was at that moment I began to love orange.

Since then, whenever I see the colour, it seems as if I see the rising sun, full of hope and power. The bright and warm color, just like the sun, dispels the haze in my heart and makes me feel extremely comfortable and happy.

Orange, like a bright color in my life, gives me a boost of optimism no matter when and where I am.



## Lilac

The color lilac brings me peace,  
Positive feelings and a sense of sublimity.  
This color gives me strength and energy  
And the presence of the aroma of lilac flowers.  
It is associated with spring,  
When nature wakes up  
And new life appears again.  
I constantly use perfume  
With the aroma of lilac,  
As if this color is always with me.  
I love jewelry with amethyst stones.





## Once Upon a Home

Blue-eyed, white-winged,  
Belarus is my dear mother,  
The mirrors of her lakes look gentle,  
And her forest breathes fairy tales.

The rivers run like a network of veins,  
In her fields a man sows bread.  
As if flax is swaying in waves,  
I feel calm here, it's easy to breathe.

So many troubles have passed through her land,  
She endured so many terrible torments.  
But she is alive, so I do not grieve,  
And she smiles at all her suns.

Blue-eyed, white-winged,  
Still the same, so kind and sweet.  
Wherever I am, I won't forget her  
Belarus, my mother, is in my heart forever.



## Where I Came From...

I came from the land of fields and orchards;  
I am united with the spirit of the fertile land.  
I hear the sound of whispering rye spikelet,  
I sing with the bees over the golden ripe wheat.

I came from the land of forests and lakes;  
I am filled with the rustle of leaves in the silence.  
I hear the murmur of clear pure springs.  
I sing with a spirit of patience and peace.

I came from the world of joy for all beings;  
I am looking at people through the blue eyes of lakes,  
I hear folk tales of the traditions from my genus.  
I sing with the power of nature over the years.

I came soaked in light from every one of my lineage;  
I am nurturing the growth of my family tree.  
I hear the prayers from the people of my country,  
I sing "Hallelujah" to my beautiful native land.

I come to share my love with all people;  
I come to understand, accept, and love everyone.  
I come to reveal that we live in same house,  
And the name of this house is our planet earth!



# Don't Worry, We'll Get There

Just before twilight  
amours the sky with pale  
purples, a rickety carriage  
whisks me away. The carriage  
is not actually pulled by a  
horse, like some might expect,  
but the owner will argue it  
does pull with the power of a  
hundred and eighty horses.



This carriage is a silvery  
Jetta that smells of motor oil  
and rusty wrenches. The air conditioning doesn't work, so hot air seeps  
through the threads of my blouse and causes my skin to become tacky  
with sweat. I absently smooth down my styled curls with the palm of my  
hand. I despise how summer's warm weather dampens my bangs while  
coiling my curls into lumpy tangles. My handsome driver begrudgingly  
peels down the windows in hopes that a cool breeze will invite itself in.

"I'll fix it one day," he promises.

"You said that last year."

"But I mean it this year. My back is soaked from my sweat."

"So is mine. At least you're wearing a hat- my hair is starting to look  
like a poodle."

"A beautiful poodle," he grins.

I affectionately roll my eyes and settle into my throne of cracked  
black leather. I meddle with the stereo till my name pops up as the sole  
connector to Bluetooth. The handsome knight driving the carriage, my  
boyfriend, aggressively grips the steering wheel. His knuckles bloom  
a faint yellow. His back is stiff against his seat. He narrows his eyes in  
frustration at the rows and rows of other carriages making their way  
along the drab road, and grumbles to himself about traffic blocking his  
path.

I laugh at him.

"If you wanna get into the left lane, you're gonna have to be more  
aggressive," I say.

"I'm trying to be nice."

"You're in the city- there is no such thing as being a nice driver."

## Spencer Catherine

"Okay- miss passenger princess- I don't need comments from the peanut gallery."

"But without me the drive would be so boring."

He doesn't respond. Rather, he stares intensely at the left-side mirror attached to the carriage. I giggle at his stubbornness and reach over to pet the chestnut mullet- which curls out from under his hat- to comfort him. He quietly leans his head back into my touch. I give him a cheeky grin then move to choose a playlist of electric pop- hoping it will cover the sound of screeching drills digging deep into the earth and the deafening horns that bark out in warning. He frowns at my missing touch.

We begin our journey in the kingdom of Calgary, where I was raised to rule the streets of a concrete castle. As a young girl, I often pranced around sky-scraping towers built from bricks of buzzing lights. I've spent years exploring twisting pavement to uncover creaky wooden stores selling potions for problematic skin.

To those, like my boyfriend, who spent their childhoods frolicking down toadstool trails and jumping into puddles of sticky mud, the kingdom of Calgary is a cesspool of greed and grime. In his mind, a kingdom like Calgary invites congestion and capitalism to fester in the sewers and pollute the waters with a fast-paced mentality. I'm amused by his frustration of endless carriages jammed tightly onto one route. To me, the stretches of crumbled roads active with sporadic flashes of red lights signifies a reminder of humanity. He grumbles at the constant breaking, so I rub his elbow carefully, then give his elbow a slight pinch.

While we slowly carry north, I stare in awe at the silhouette of the concrete castle etched into the violet sky. I can see it through the carriage's right-side mirror, as if it's being framed in a moment of the past. Although it looks small in distance, I know there are thousands of people who putter within the castle walls- searching for a place where they belong.

A metallic dragon soars above us. Its hefty wings are spread fearlessly while the machine creature quickly glides through the sky- roaring for attention. I turn to my boyfriend- grinning to myself as he presses his chest against the steering wheel to glance curiously at the dragon.

"Where do you think it's going?" He asks, tracking the movement with his eyes.

"I'm not sure. Maybe somewhere in Europe," I say.

"I've never been on one. We should ride it together," he responds.

I don't have the heart to tell him that I've been riding metallic dragons since I was thirteen-years old, as it is typical for city princesses such as myself to be well travelled.

"You'd love it for the first bit, but then you might get antsy. I get bored on planes after a while," I say.

Spencer Catherine

"If I got a window seat, I'd never get bored."

I laugh at him.

"I also hate the food they serve. If we go on long trips, we'll have to pack lots of snacks."

He hums, and I turn to see him wrinkling his nose, "All I smell is engine oil."

"I'm pretty sure that's the Jetta."

"Yeah- okay." He scoffs, "it's probably this truck in front of us speeding in the turning lane just to cut everyone off."

"Yeah, I don't know why people do that to be honest with you," I agree, watching the carriages painfully readjust for one more.

"I swear, everyone in the city got their driver's license from a cereal box," my boyfriend complains.

"Not me," I rebuttal, "My driving examiner said he almost fell asleep during my test- that's how good I was."

"Yeah right- with the way you drive?" He turns to give me a grin, "There's a reason you're my passenger princess."

I stick my tongue out at him, then sing off key to all my favourite songs. He leans back into his seat; his body is still stiff. He taps his fingers impatiently against the wheel and mumbles to himself about the inconveniences of too many people living in one place.

"Don't worry, lover boy. We'll get there eventually," I say between my singing.

He huffs dramatically but doesn't respond.

Eventually, to my boyfriend's delight, the congestion of Calgary's royal subjects eases up and the carriage is able to speed past troll guarded bridges into lush open fields. I glance once more at the side mirror and watch the peaks of Calgary's castle decline into the horizon- until there is nothing but the lavender blush of a setting sun blooming across the sky.

Without the protection of the kingdom's enclosed wood houses, a mischievous wind dives through the open windows and wildly pulls at my hair. I cry out at the disturbance. My hands frantically try to contain my thrashing brown curls. I grumble at my bad luck with keeping my hair in order, but I'm thankful for the breeze's cool touch. I quickly roll up my window- but a few strands of untamed hair get caught between the door frame and the glass. I whine at my predicament.

He laughs at me.

My boyfriend takes the opportunity of my distracted distress to seize the Bluetooth and play soft country music. I'm not a big fan of country music, but at this moment, I don't mind the change in melody. Rather, it suits the serenity of the passing rural farms.

I shuffle on my creaky throne for a perfect spot, then lift my feet to rest on the dash in front of me. I watch in admiration as colossal trees sway along to the music of the wind. Long strands of gold grass flutter

## Spencer Catherine

in unison over rolling hills. The lanky metal lamps, used to illuminate Calgary during the Moon's transitional reign, are replaced by timber pillars connected by lengthy cords. Sitting atop of the cords are rows and rows of inky birds, all singing in a tune that reminds me of waking up to sunshine rays.

I turn down the stereo, to which my boyfriend gives me a prying look, and listen carefully to nature's orchestra.

"I don't turn down your music," he banters.

"Sorry. I never noticed how pretty the tree's sound," I say.

"The countryside has much better acoustics than the city."

"Hey- my city can sound pretty too."

"Sure. If you like the sound of cars honking."

I don't have a jab back, so silence falls between us.

I turn the stereo back to the original volume and listen as he softly hums along. He sinks carelessly into his seat- his hands lazily hold the wheel.

Darkness rapidly envelopes the sky. I stare wide-eyed at the sparkling white lights twinkling rhythmically above us. A stream of transparent light slowly wiggles around the sky, like a flag waving in the wind. I suddenly drag my feet off the dash and press my chest to the front of the dusty carriage dash to catch a glimpse of the brilliant light show.

"I've never seen this before," I say faintly. My eyes are glued to the sky.

"The northern lights? They're pretty rare around here. When I was working in Saskatchewan, there was one night the whole sky was purple and pink. Real pretty," he replies.

A candy-apple red appears in the sky- stretching as if it were an uncoiled ribbon. The red-light swims across the atmosphere like a long eel, and dances elegantly between the glittering stars. I feel my jaw drop at the sight. I'm unable to look away as a jade green colour blooms along the bottom of the red, melting together as if being painted in real time by an unseen artist.

At my request, he pulls the carriage off to the side of our current path. He halts all one hundred and eighty horses just so I can hop out into the brisk air and watch the colourful lights flourish enchantingly above me.

"I've never seen this before," I'm so mesmerized by the northern lights that my brain can't come up with anything else to say.

"Welcome to the countryside, Hunny," my boyfriend says as he sneaks up behind me and places his large hand on the curve of my waist. I feel him giving me an encouraging squeeze.

"Look at all the stars," I point in random directions above my head.

"I think that's the little dipper."

"So, is that one the big dipper than?"

"I suppose so."

"What's that one?"

"Um, I'm not sure," my boyfriend pauses for a thought, "we should download one of the apps that tells us all the different stars."

"Wow," I'm stuck in awe of the red and green lights rippling across the night sky.

"I know you're excited, but close your mouth or you might catch flies," he says teasingly.

Spellbound by the northern lights, I can only muster the spirit to crane my neck towards him and stick my tongue out at him.

The mischievous wind from before runs past me, stirring my hair again, then filtering off into a dense patch of trees. The leaves rustle in a frenzy. I turn to catch a glimpse of the trees dancing but the lack of light conceals all but vague shadows of towering wood. Goosebumps rise on my arms, and I notice the sound of a branch snapping somewhere in the shallow darkness.

"I'm cold. I wanna go back into the car," I fret. I lean my weight back onto his sturdy chest.

"Okay, hop in," he says as he opens the carriage door for me, "I'll turn the seat warmers on."

"But I thought the seat warmers didn't work."

"Mine do. But the passenger princess' seat doesn't."

"Rude."

He laughs at me.

Montana settles back into the driver's side of the carriage and pulls out a computerized paper and quill to notify his brother we are almost at the farm. I stare out the window towards the dim forest. The evergreens are still, as if they're listening for an intrusive noise. I squint my eyes to try and see through the midnight curtains. My eyes spot nothing. No wait- in the gap of thick tree trunks are two glowing yellow eyes watching me intensely from the shadows. I lock the carriage door.

"Can we go now?" I demand.

"Don't worry," my boyfriend says -his eyes wrinkle slightly when he smiles, "we'll get there."

He hauls the carriage onto the peaceful path of the countryside, and I lean back into my seat. My boyfriend reaches his hand over to rest on my thigh; I can feel his warmth pressing to my skin and causing goosebumps for a different reason than the chill of a late summer night. Seeing open roads clouded in twilight makes me miss the brightness and certainty of the kingdom of Calgary. But the northern lights continue to prance across the sky- their colours bleeding richer in shade- and I settle into my throne of cracked black leather. I feel a relieving sense of belonging. I move to hold his heavy hand in mine. I should unwind, as the passenger princess, for my knight is here to protect me.

## I Come From...

I come from Hamedan, my hometown, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. This city rests at the foot of the grand Alvand Mountain, which rises around 11,600 feet. Its surroundings are filled with gorgeous valleys, lush meadows, clear springs, and countless rugged peaks. Alvand is the life-giving source for many rivers and streams, benefitting the rich and diverse plants and animals such as foxes, wolves, black eagles, mountain goats, and much more in these beautiful, wild landscapes.

I come from a city that was once the vibrant capital of the Median Empire, dating back to 600 years before Christ. Later, the famous Silk Road passed through this magical city, connecting it to many parts of the ancient world. At the heart of Hamedan, there's a circular square from which six main streets branch out at exactly 60-degree angles. In the afternoons, people gather there for relaxed strolls, chats with friends, and to see street vendors selling their goods.

I come from a place filled with ancient bazaars, each with its unique charm and specialties. Tourists love visiting these markets, where different sellers and artisans display their crafts, from Persian carpets to ceramics, leather goods, and copper items, each in their own special area based on what they make or sell.

I come from a city with a rich cultural heritage, home to philosophers, poets, and writers. Many influential figures, like Avicenna, the great philosopher, physician, and poet, and poets such as Baba Taher, Aref Qazvini, and Mirzadeh Eshghi, have connections to Hamedan and are buried here. Their mausoleums are visited by many locals and tourists alike.

I come from a city with deep historical roots, reflected in its many archaeological sites and artifacts. Museums around the world display treasures discovered in Hamedan. The tomb of Esther and Mordecai, buried here around 2,500 years ago, draws visitors from the global Jewish community. Hamedan has long been a place where people of different faiths have lived peacefully together.

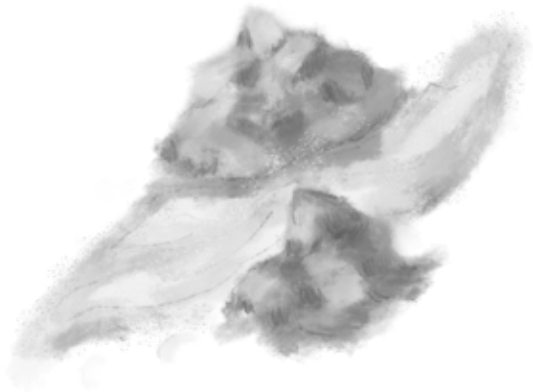
I come from an ancient city that was once called Hegmatana and



### Zahra Abbasi

later Ekbatan before becoming known as Hamedan. One of its famous natural wonders is the Ali Sadr Water Cave—a beautiful, must-see attraction for anyone visiting the area.

I come from a region blessed by the Alvand Mountain, with meadows and fields rich in fertile soil. An incredible variety of fruits grow here; there are too many to list. This region is also rich in aromatic and medicinal herbs like fragrant thyme and mint, but thinking of them always makes me feel homesick!



## **Hamedan & its Guardian Alvand**

Overlooking Hamedan, a guardian of treasure,  
A single glance brings endless pleasure.

Alvand Mountain so gorgeous and tall,  
An idol beloved by the young and the old, by all.

In winter, its peaks wear a mantle of snow,  
In summer, life-giving waters freely flow.

Rivers meander like serpents through the land,  
Silent, yet watchful, a guardian so grand.

Patiently observing the folly of men,  
Truly magnificent, holy, beyond our ken.

## I Come From...

I come from a land with an ancient history, rich in myths and heroes, where Persepolis stands glorious, a memory of a magnificent culture.

I come from a land with a beautiful language and great literature, where the poetry of Rumi, Ferdowsi, Hafez, and Khayyam echoes through time.

I come from a land with compassionate people, where Turks, Kurds, Balouches, and others with different dialects, customs, and traditional clothing live beside each other in unity, peace, and harmony.

I come from a four-season land where Spring breathes life into rich plains, where summer's warmth nourishes nature's growth and beauty, where autumn paints the forests with vivid colours, and where winter snow nourishes the soil while it rests in peace, stretching from the snow-covered peaks of the West to the warm sands of the South.

I come from a vast and breathtaking land where the Alborz and Zagros mountains extending their arms as generous protectors. I come from a land with rivers roaring across it as its vital arteries, where Karun, Zayandehrood, and Aras rivers pour their souls into the seas of both the North and the South.

I come from mysterious deserts, where golden hills roll endlessly, and camels are loyal companions, essential for survival.

I come from a land with Hyrcanian forests dating back 25 million years and Hara forests thriving in the Southern waters.

I come from a land with resilient people throughout its history, a land not always joyful, where chaos has always been hidden somewhere, but laughter and hope find their way even in the darkest moments.

I come from Rumi's land, who believes:

"Where I come from is not important. Where my soul goes and what I do in my life to impact others' lives should be the essence of my existence."

So, bound to my  
homeland roots and  
gazing at the new horizons  
ahead of me, I try to leave  
a mark of kindness, and it  
is this journey that defines  
who I am.



## Roots

I am looking at the trees.  
I am thinking: "How can they stand so firmly?"  
They are fed by roots,  
And what is a root, anyway?  
The part that supports,  
The part that is hidden underground,  
That carries water and nourishes the plant  
Through various branches and fibers.

Later on, I am in a dental clinic to repair my broken tooth.  
A photo of a tooth catches my attention, and I think:  
"Oh, teeth have roots, too."

"I thought to myself: "Oh, I have a root, too."  
My roots have grown and maintained me.  
My roots can be my parents, my environment, the people around me.

All the people in society have a root that nurtures and flourishes them.  
I see successful people around me.  
I set an example to want to be like them.

I wonder, am I a root for someone too?  
Perhaps for my children, or those around me.  
I hope I am a strong root, one that gives support, just as I have been  
supported by those who came before me.





*A Collection of Creative Non-Fiction*

# ROOTS

*by*

*Immigrant Seniors and Mount Royal University Students*



