

# PENNING

LETTERS



DECEMBER 2018

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The Letters



### **This issue's guest editor is Jemma Neville**

Jemma Neville is a writer with a background in human rights law. Her first book, *On Constitution Street*, explores human rights in practice on one single street. When researching the book, Jemma wrote and sent letters to her neighbours. Eventually, she received a reply to each letter. Some of the neighbours have since become regular penpals.

Jemma is Director of the national development agency for community-led arts, Voluntary Arts Scotland and was formerly Communications and Outreach Coordinator at the Scottish Human Rights Commission. She was the inaugural Community Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies in Humanities, University of Edinburgh, and was shortlisted for the Guardian International Development Journalism Award.

@jemma\_tweets





# FOREWORD

It was a privilege to be guest editor for this PENings issue on the theme of Letters.

In exercising the right to freedom of expression, there is by necessity a relationship between the writer and reader. Letter-writing is about the giving and receiving of stories- stories that travel between the hands that put pen to paper and the hands that open a letter.

Letters are also an act of protest and permanence- of providing testimony to those in persecution, imprisonment or exile. They signal to human rights abusers that someone is watching. Letter-writing is a classic campaign tool favoured by human rights activists.

In our day to day lives in the age of instant messaging, sensible people are reviving the habit of sending hand-written post. Whether a holiday postcard, a declaration of love, or a message in a bottle, some things are just better said in writing.

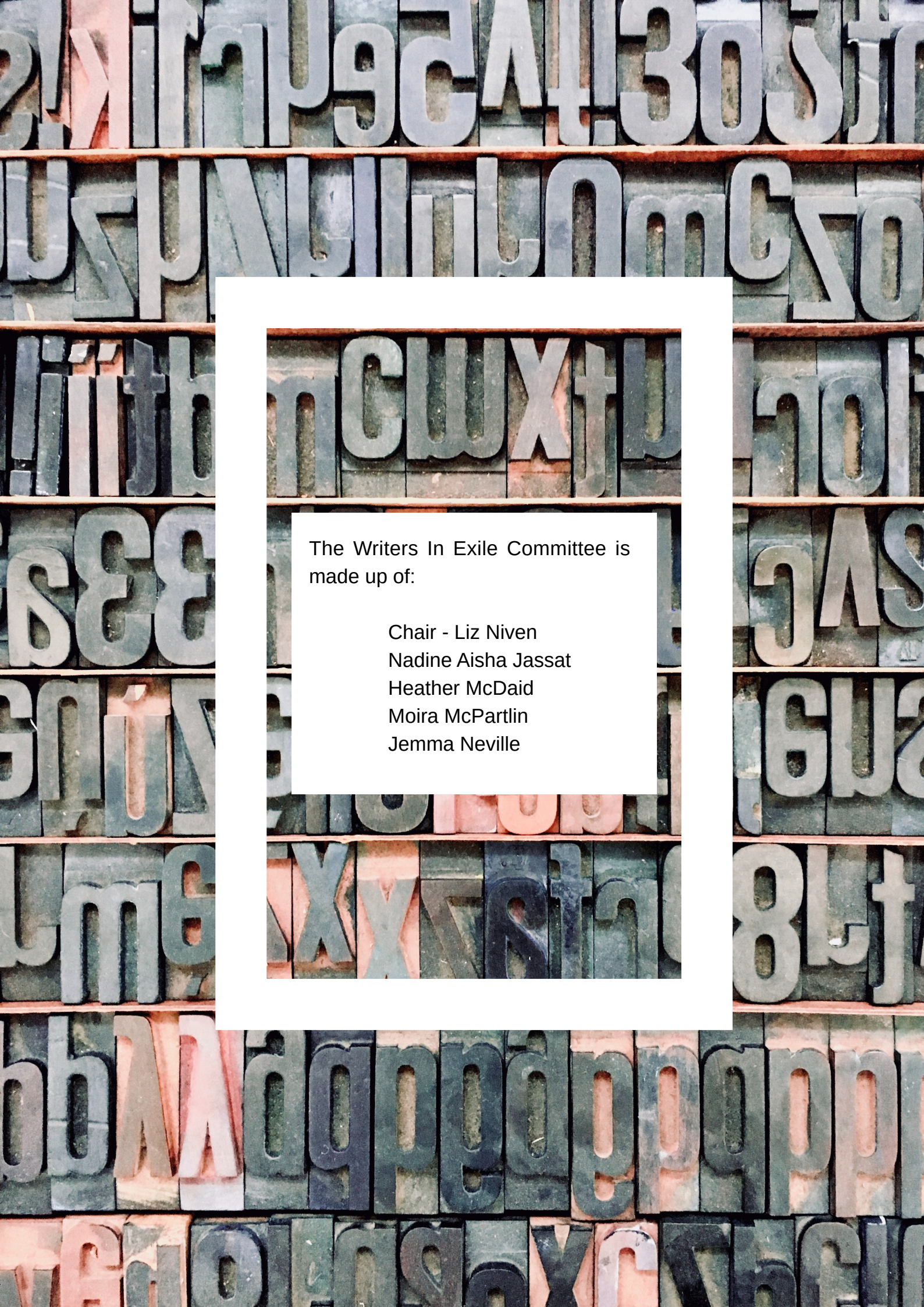
In this edition of PENnings, we received poems and prose written in many languages and forms. They are set in Caracas, Venezuela, the trenches of WWI, and the ruins of a tomb in Lahore, Pakistan. In one letter, the dearest is a Scottish munro. Others gave us the imagery of letters falling from a rainy sky and of the words in a letter being gifted as inheritance to a granddaughter.

I hope you enjoy reading these letters as much as I did.

You've got post...

Jemma Neville





The Writers In Exile Committee is  
made up of:

Chair - Liz Niven  
Nadine Aisha Jassat  
Heather McDaid  
Moir McPartlin  
Jemma Neville



# NABANEETA

# DEV SEN

## FEATURED WRITER



**Nabaneeta Dev Sen** (b. 1938) grew up amidst an atmosphere of poetry and creativity as the daughter of two leading Bengali poets, Narendra Dev and Radharani Devi in Kolkata. It was Rabindranath Tagore who named her and his influence remained strong in the Dev household. For Nabaneeta, writing has been like breathing – an everyday activity in her family. She graduated from Presidency College and did her Master's from Jadavpur University, before going on to doing a Master's from Harvard and a PhD from Indiana University in the USA. Nabaneeta is a leading poet, short story writer, novelist, travel writer, essayist, playwright and children's writer from Bengal. She has written over 80 books and been translated into several languages and her writing is marked by her remarkable wit, her infectious sense of humour and deep humanism.

In 2000, Nabaneeta founded Soi (female soulmate) – the Women Writers Association and in 2013, Soi Creative Women which gives a special place to women writers and provides a platform for the feminist ethos in society constricted by patriarchy. Soi Boi Mela is a Book Festival which gives space and voice to women writers and gives awards to leading women writers, some of whom are from minority communities. Nabaneeta has campaigned actively for women writers' voices to be heard, has been a spokesperson for women's rights, is a staunch internationalist and amidst the rise of right wing ideology worldwide, she remains staunchly left in her thinking and writing as she embodies socialist values and liberal humanism.

Her awards have been many, which include the Mahadevi Verma Award (1992), Celli Award from the Rockefeller Foundation (1993), the Sahitya Akademi Award (1999), the Padma Shri in 2000 for Literature and Education and Mystic Kalinga Literary Award (2017). She held the Maytag Chair of Creative Writing and Comparative

Literature at Colorado College and was Professor of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University. Her parents were founder members of Indian PEN and today Nabaneeta is the Vice President of West Bengal PEN, India. Nabaneeta was an invited writer at the Edinburgh International Book Festival, when 60 years of Indian Independence and Partition were celebrated and held her audience captive by her reading and engagement with the audience. She has just been flown to Boston for treatment as she is very ill.



# KAYAK

*Nabaneeta Dev Sen*

Kaushiki was on the balcony. Watching boats go by. The very moment they had arrived here, day before yesterday, Tukudi's mother had burst out: 'There! There! Look! Kaushiki, so many boats pass this way! I never seem to get my fill of them!'

Tukudi's mother is a bit of a hankering type. Can't get enough of watching boats! Really! She's not exactly young, you know. Tukudi goes to college here. This was Kaushiki's first visit to America, but everything seemed so familiar – she seemed to have seen all there was to see in films. Of course, there is the slight discomfort of having so many white people on the streets. Strangely, Ma looks so dark here – but she isn't really, even if she isn't as fair as Kaushiki. But then, compared to the whites, Kaushiki herself might be considered dark. Who knows. She can't see herself on the streets, can she?

Quite a country, this. People on the streets always walk on pavements, cross at the zebra crossing, even the dogs seem to know the traffic signals. There was this dog waiting at the traffic lights yesterday. Here they have traffic lights for people too – the signal says 'DON'T WALK' then a white signal says 'WALK'. The dog had a blind gentleman with him, he had a stick and dark glasses. The dog walked him across the street like it was the easiest thing on earth! Kaushiki liked that better than these silly boats.

Right at this moment, Tukudi's mother let out a cry: 'Look Tukudi! Look at them rowing away on the rowboat!'

Kaushiki looked over her shoulder and shook her head: 'That's not a row boat. That's a kayak.'

Tukudi's mother's eyes almost popped out. 'Kayak? What kayak? Isn't that what eskimos have?'

Kaushiki continued to lecture her gravely: 'A kayak is just for one person. A canoe can have more than one person but not more than four. A rowboat usually has six to eight people rowing.' Of course, Kaushiki wasn't entirely sure about this knowledge she was imparting, but this was her belief and she generously passed it on to Tukudi's mother. Tukudi's mother may be a professor like Kaushiki's mum, but she didn't seem to know all this.

'Really?' she said, her eyes big and wide. 'Gosh! You kids know so much these days – why, when we were your age, we didn't even have half your knowledge!'

'You don't, even at this age,' said Kaushiki to herself. But she wouldn't say it aloud. She just smiled.

Where's Ma gone now? Must be making tea. Ma excels at overdoing things. Why does she need to make tea in someone else's house? And not just tea. She charged into the kitchen yesterday, insisting on washing the dishes. Tukudi's mother laughed and said, 'Don't worry, the machine will do all that. There's a dishwasher.'

Kaushiki was so curious to see how the dishwasher washes dishes. Wouldn't the crockery be smashed to bits in there? How will it clean the cups and dishes? Does it have a brush inside it? And a scrubber too? Does it have two hands tucked away inside it as well? But Kaushiki won't even ask these questions, never mind her curiosity. She's not the hankering type like Tukudi's mother.

But Kaushiki's mum spoke up: 'I can never figure out how a dishwasher washes dishes. I can still understand clothes being washed in a washing machine, but crockery...?'

'Oh, it's simple here ...' Tukudi's mother opened the machine to demonstrate how the dishes need to be lined up inside. Then she poured in the soap and shut it. You couldn't see a thing after that. Only hear the loud gush-gush of the machine. Just to prove that it was working, obviously. No big revelation, this. She still didn't know how it worked. But what she did know was that you had to clean up the dishes and wash off the remnants of food with hot water before putting it into the machine. Pretty pointless, this exercise. If you are fiddling to such an extent with dirty dishes and hot water, may as well just clean them with soap too, while you're at it. What's the point of such a machine?

Kaushiki is on holiday here. Well not exactly a holiday. She has come to stay with her father. In a week they will leave for Canada. That's where they'll live. Baba had come to Canada two years ago. Ma has finally managed to wrap things up back home and so they are now joining Baba. Grandma had to be put in a decent old people's home, you see. Their house was sold off before they left. It wouldn't be a good idea to bring Grandma to this country at her age. She has her pooja for her gods, she has her beliefs and habits. Cleanliness and worship are her passions. Here people eat beef and pork. (As if they don't back home! What about the ham Kaushiki's had? Or the kebab rolls? But Grandma doesn't know.)

They brought their tea out onto the balcony. Tukudi's mother had made lovely, hot fish cakes, just like home. It was slightly smelly though, since she had used tuna. And she had also made a lovely crunchy mixture, trying to approximate the daal moot back home. With puffed rice cereal, tiny savoury biscuits, peanuts, cashews, raisins, salt, turmeric, chilli powder, fired mustard seeds – quite delicious! Ma's got some classy Darjeeling tea from India. They'll have their own little tea party.

Kaushiki doesn't like tea. Although it's not forbidden – after all she's old enough, at 13. Many of her friends drink tea. But she prefers cold milk with cocoa – chilled, it's just like a chocolate milk shake. The daal moot was nice. It reminded her of Grandma.







Grandma loves daal moot. Because she can't chew very well now, Ma brought her mixtures that were easier on the teeth. Grandma ate it when she got it from the big shops. Wonder who's going to get her that now in the old people's home?

'It really is a beautiful balcony!' said Ma. 'Can't believe we are indoors – boats on the river, people strolling on the river bank...'

What nonsense, thought Kaushiki. Where does Ma see people strolling? Everyone's running. Ever since their arrival, Kaushiki has been on the balcony, scrutinizing her surroundings. Not a single person is strolling, or even walking. In Calcutta people walk around the lakes, people sit on the benches near the water. Here everyone runs. Continuously. At first she thought they were practising for a race. Then she realized that the runners were endless. So she was forced to ask Tukudi's mother– who else? She said, 'They are jogging. People here are very concerned about their health. They are obsessed with their bodies, never mind whether they are youngsters of 16 or old people of 76. And oh, you can't call them old people, you know that, don't you? Like you can't call the blind blind or the lame lame. Careful, don't ever refer to a deaf-mute as that, okay? All that is over. Doesn't work at all now. It's very politically incorrect, see? You have to call old people senior citizens. The mute is now speech impaired, the deaf hearing impaired.'

So you can't call the blind that? So what will they call the Blind School? Kaushiki was astounded. What a strange country! Well, everyone knows that you don't call the deaf deaf and the blind blind to their face. It's ruder. But how can you do away with the words altogether? Just delete them from the dictionary?

Huffing and puffing away by the riverside to keep fit. Huh! Such a lovely river and not a single person sparing half a glance towards it! Just exercising in clean air, is that what all this beauty is about? Really!

So many styles of hurtling about. Most are running on their own feet. Some have tied wheels to their feet. Some stand on a wooden board with wheels and rush around. They even zip across the street on that! The very sight of it terrified Kaushiki. What if they trip and fall? And some have tied to their feet strange narrow strips on which they have stuck wheels – four small ones on each in a row – and zoom off balancing on these. Strange name too: rollerblades. Kaushiki had seen roller skates in India, with their sturdy wheels they looked like foot-size trucks. This was very different. All the wheels were in one single row. But what speed! Gosh, they reminded Kaushiki of the robbers of the past – dacoits who run on stilts and robbed villages long ago. These people would make great snatchers on these rollerblades. The riverside was pretty deserted in the evenings.

Evenings. Tell me another. The day seems to drag on forever in this country. The sun doesn't set before seven in the evening. The twilight carried on until nine-thirty or ten. Even at ten at night it looks like six-thirty in the evening. Come to think



of it, what seemed like dusk yesterday to Kaushiki must have been actually pretty late at night. Naturally there weren't too many people at the riverside. Well. It does take time to understand things of course. It's a new place, a new country.

Kaushiki will go to school in Canada. It's not that difficult to get enrolled in school there. Not like back home. In India if you merely managed to get admission in a school you were in seventh heaven! (This is such a bad thought. Why would we need to be in heaven? Is heaven the best place? It's not such a great idea to go to heaven either. It's clearly not a wonderful holiday destination. In Bengal we are quite obsessed with this heaven thing. As if that's the ultimate destination. But nobody really wants to pack off their dear ones to heaven right? Strange language habits.)

Grandma's face flashed in Kaushiki's mind. Ever since Grandpa went to heaven, Grandma has been obsessed with her gods and super-finicky about cleanliness. And what else could she do anyway? She had no other work – her whole life revolved around Grandpa.

Kaushiki's parents were busy professionals, but Bindudi was so efficient. Bharati used to come twice a day to clean the floors, wash the clothes and do the dishes. Bindudi cooked, served, tidied things about the house, organised the wardrobes, got clothes ironed, packed lunch for Kaushiki, looked after Ma's needs as well. Bindudi has now gone to work for some other household. Kaushiki's family doesn't even have a house in Calcutta, let alone a household.

Kaushiki had gone with Ma to drop Grandma off at the old people's home. It was full of old ladies. There must be quite a few of them. A lot of them have sons and daughters in the US or Canada. They send money regularly, so their mothers are looked after well. Some even take their mothers over to Canada or the US for a holiday at times.

Kaushiki's mum wants to bring Grandma over to Canada too, if possible, once they have settled down. You see, Ma hasn't ever been to these countries either! First she has to understand the situation then decide. What if Grandma doesn't fit in? Baba doesn't understand anything. He just goes on saying, 'No, it's absolutely impossible for Ma to live in this country.'

But Kaushiki's mum doesn't agree. She believes that once Grandma is here, she will change. She won't weep for Grandpa secretly all day, as she does now. Ma didn't want to keep Grandma in an old people's home. Baba insisted. 'That's the best option,' he explained. 'It has doctors and nurses, people to look after her when she's sick. She will have a room and a bathroom of her own, she could spend all her time at her pooja with her gods. It also has a kitchenette, but the management supplies the food. You can eat in the dining room, chatting with others, or in your own room, alone. Excellent arrangements all around.'

Somehow, Kaushiki still felt that those who lived there were not that happy.

They had to make a deposit at the home for Grandma's admission there, out of the money they got from selling the house. But then the house was Grandma's – they couldn't sell it without her signature. So Baba flew down and got it all sorted out before bringing them here.

Around this time every evening, when the sun goes down, Grandma goes into her pooja room for her evening prayers. God alone knows what she does in that little room for hours on end three times a day! Yet she's such a cheerful person otherwise. Even when Kaushiki was leaving, she didn't break down. Her smile stuck on, as sweet as ever.

Kaushiki's mum was telling Tukudi's mother, 'My mother-in-law is very strong. She might break but won't ever be forced to bend. Her only son, her only grandchild, everyone was leaving for a distant land, but she didn't shed a single tear!' Tukudi's mother said, 'Really? Must say she has a lot of self-control. Can't be that she doesn't feel the pain.'

Kaushiki knows that Grandma is always saying, 'We are women, see? Our hearts might shatter but our mouths won't open. Careful, don't chatter away so much. It's very bad for you if everyone knows our mind.'

But Kaushiki still chatters on. Not that Grandma doesn't but maybe she doesn't let out the words she holds closest to her heart. Like when they left, Grandma wanted to stay in her house alone with Bindudi. Baba put his foot down. It was not safe. How could two women – and one of them so old – stay all alone? Okay, so she is physically fit today. What if she is unwell tomorrow? Can't depend on Bindudi to take care of her, right? And Grandma's brothers are even older. Who would look after her? So ...

'Kushi, what are you thinking? Your cold milk is getting warm.' Ma nudged Kaushiki out of her thoughts. She gulped down the chocolate milk in one go. Grandma loved chocolates. Then someone joked that chocolate had egg in them. That was it. She wouldn't touch a chocolate after that. She is a pure vegetarian, naturally, being a widow. Ma kept saying chocolates didn't have anything to do with eggs, but would Grandma listen?

'Watching the leaves change colour, are you Kaushiki? Really, it's so amazing! The leaves take on so many colours, red, orange, golden, isn't it just like a tree in full blossom?' Tukudi's mother's words focused Kaushiki's eyes on the trees in front. Yes indeed! The trees were blazing with red and golden leaves, just a few leaves remained green. And the ground beneath was literally covered with fallen leaves. She hadn't noticed this before. In all the three days that she had been here. The first day, of course, she was half-asleep. Yesterday and today were better, but she still didn't feel entirely fit. Can't sleep at night, and she feels sleepy all day. Tukudi's mother said, 'Jet lag. Everyone has it. The time difference is too much to ignore.'

When it's night here, it's day back home, so you can't sleep properly. You'll get used to it. It's always like this the first few days.'

Does Grandma nod off at odd times because she wakes up so early in the morning? Is that a kind of jet lag too? Does everyone have this when they get old? Will Kaushiki have it too? When she is old.

It suddenly occurred to Kaushiki that once upon a time, Grandma too was 13. Did they have old people's homes then? And when Kaushiki is old, what will they have?

The river was alive with boats slicing through the water, the surf fanning out behind each. Kaushiki saw someone sitting on a bench on the riverside, among all these running people. From the back, she could just make out the shock of white hair and the overcoat. All those running around had shorts and T-shirts on, with big, fat running shoes and socks. She couldn't make out this person's face. But there were birds fluttering about the seated figure. The person dug into his overcoat pocket and threw some stuff at the birds. They pecked at it excitedly. Next to this figure on the bench sat a big fluffy white dog. Very serious. Not trying to scare off the birds or anything. The birds too seemed quite unconcerned by this dog watching them gravely.

He must be an old person. He must have come for a walk by the river. Not for a jog, or for exercise. So there still are people here who go for walks just for the heck of it? People who think of birds?

Every afternoon after lunch, Grandma used to go up to the terrace and scatter a handful of rice for the crows Oh, the number of crows that would come to her then! What do those crows do now? Does Grandma feed the birds in the old people's home as well? They would allow it, surely, wouldn't they?

Even Kaushiki herself has never stayed in a boarding school. Obviously Grandma had not. She was married when she was 17, now she is 69. It must have been sad for her to leave the house she had stayed in for so long – for her whole life – and move into a boarding house. But she hadn't said anything. She accepted Baba's decision. What if one day Kaushiki puts Baba in an old people's home and moves to Venezuela?

'Is the fish cake okay, Kaushiki?'

'It's delicious. The daal moot is very nice too!'

'What about some more chocolate milk? With some ice-cream in it?' Tukudi's mother tried to entice her.

'No milk. But I wouldn't mind some ice-cream on its own.' Kaushiki was a smart girl.

Sipping her tea, Tukudi's mother said, 'Let's go, Kaushiki. Before your father turns up, let's go to my friend Ruth's house. Ruth has written several books for



children'. Kaushiki loved the idea. It would be great to meet a children's author. 'Shall we go, Ma?' she asked. Her mother gave a quick nod, clearly she was as eager to meet this writer as Kaushiki herself. My god! Just dropping in on a neighbour, and even for that they have to call and seek permission beforehand! Tukudi's mother called up and asked Ruth if it was a convenient time to come over. They seem to have such rules here. Nobody materialises at another's doorstep without notice. They need prior permission. And in Calcutta? Everyone drops in, day and night. They never, ever ask. At times, it really creates problem for Ma and Baba. But they never say that to anybody.

Ruth answered the doorbell. Closely cropped red hair, glasses, blue jeans and a T-shirt. Difficult to tell whether she's a man or a woman at first glance. But yes, she had some lipstick on. 'Hi Shamita! Come on in!' Ruth welcomes them cheerfully and leads them into her home. 'My mother's here.' The words seem to spit out enormous irritation. 'Please don't mind if she bores you. She's driving me up the wall.'





Kaushiki was shocked. How could anyone talk about one's mother like this. She looked at her own mother trying to figure out what she was thinking. That was impossible. Ma had that smiley politeness pasted on her face. Even Kaushiki could never figure out what she thought behind that mask.

There was an old lady knitting away in Ruth's living room. The moment she saw them she chirped: 'Oh your Indian neighbours, are they, Ruth? Come in, come in!'

'Uh, Mother, do have patience. I'll introduce them to you,' said Ruth.

'This is my mother. She was in Florida, but now I have brought her near us.'

'I am Shamita,' said Tukudi's mother, 'this is my friend Rupashri and is this her daughter Kaushiki.'

'I never remember names,' said Ruth's mother. 'And your names are too complicated!'

'What nonsense!' snapped Ruth.

'You think their names are too complicated! Or have you lost your memory altogether? This is Shamita, and this is ... what was it ... Rup...Rup...'

'Rupa is fine,' said Kaushiki's mother hastily, 'and this is Kushi.'

Ruth stared at her mother and hissed 'Rupa. Kushi. Complicated names, you think? Maybe you should pay some attention for a change.'

Ruth's mother seemed genuinely surprised now. 'Rupa? Kushi? I thought I heard long and complex names. Really, never hear anything right these days.'

Kaushiki's heart went out to her. 'You heard right,' she explained quickly. 'First we did give you long and complex names. Ma's name is Ru-pa-shri. The shorter version of that is Rupa. I am Kau-shi-ki. Kushi for short.'

'You see we are Bengalis,' Tukudi's mother laughed. 'We have two names each, a complicated one and an easy one.'

At that, Ruth's mother laughed too. 'See, I was right! First you gave me the tough one, didn't you?'

'Just stick to your own business will you?' snapped Ruth again. 'There is no need for such research on their names.'

Kaushiki was stunned. What a way to speak to one's own mother! Will Ma ever speak to her mother like that?

'Let's go to the other room. Mother will chatter away if we stay here.'

Even Tukudi's mother was surprised at that. 'So what?' she said. 'Let her. That will be very nice.'

'Mother talks too much these days. Naturally she doesn't like that colony for senior citizens where she is now. Why would she? People mind their own business there. She hates it.'

'Of course I hate it. I have spent 20 years in sunny Florida. Everyone is friendly there, we know each other. I wanted to stay on after your father's death, with my

neighbours and friends, but you insisted ...'

'It's impossible for me to keep running to Florida to look after you. It's possible if you are nearby. Besides, the colony where I have placed you is one of the very best.'

'It better be. It's so expensive. Not that you don't have the money – you made quite a killing from selling my house in Florida. How long will I last anyway? I am in my nineties...'

'And I am 62, don't forget. I am a granny too!'

What, 62? A granny? Kaushiki couldn't believe it. She had taken Ruth to be about the same age as Ma. No, definitely a weird country. Can't even tell one's age here.

Ruth's mother was exactly like her own grandmothers, but Ruth was not like her mum. Ruth was not like anyone she knew. Huh, Ruth! Ruthless would have been a better name for her. So does 'Ruth' mean mercy? Kindness? Benevolence? Sympathy? God knows.

Ruth's mother was silent. Tukudi's mother tried to change the topic. 'What's that you're knitting? A cardigan, is it?'

'No, it's a scarf,' she replied.

'It's lovely! Who is it for?'

'Thanks,' said Ruth's mother, flashing the sweetest smile. 'Let's see who I give it to.' She looked at Ruth.

'Must be for her darling grand-daughter!' Ruth almost spat out.

'Who else can I give it to, other than your daughter? She's such a treasure – loves me very much. She sends me so many photographs ...'

'Doesn't ever think of visiting you though!'

'She did come to see me, just the other day ...'

'That's because she wanted a holiday at Cape Cod. Not because she wanted to see you!'

Ruth's mother fell silent at that. She looked depressed. What kind of talk was this, thought Kaushiki. What was wrong with Ruth – why was she saying hurtful things to her mother? If her mother loves Ruth's daughter, shouldn't she be happy? Then why did Kaushiki detect a dash of envy in her words? Kaushiki looked at her mother. Ma was staring at the floor.

How can this insensitive woman write for children? Is it possible to be cruel to the elderly and yet love children? One who doesn't love one's own mother and daughter, can she make other children happy? And Kaushiki and her parents will live in a country like this?

While her mind strayed, Kaushiki's hands picked up an album of photographs lying in front of her. Ruth's mother perked up immediately: 'My grand-daughter gave that to me. Look, look, that's her! It has all her pictures – of her college, her camping,



her boyfriend. You see I lived in Florida, so she sent me photographs all the time. She wrote to me giving all her news, she called me every week! She does that even now!’

Kaushiki noticed how Ruth’s mother’s voice had changed, how her face was lit up with joy. Yes, Kaushiki understood her, never mind Ruth. ‘What a beautiful album!’ whispered the old lady, ‘it has her whole life sketched out just for me. That’s her graduating from high school. That’s her in college. Let me show you something else...’ Her voice dipped conspiratorially as she turned to open a drawer from the small table next to her and brought out a red notebook. ‘And she’s given me this. She’s said whenever I feel like talking to her, I should write down whatever I want to tell her, in this. So that when she’s here, she doesn’t miss a single thought of mine. Isn’t it wonderful how much she loves me?’

‘Yes.’ Kaushiki looked Ruth’s mother in the eye.

Ruth thinks her mother talks too much. And her daughter does not want a single thought of her grandmother to be lost. With such lack of basic understanding, how does Ruth write?

‘Must get home,’ Ma spoke Kaushiki’s mind.

‘What, already?’ Have something to drink, won’t you?’

But they left for home. Baba and Tukudi’s father should have come back by now.

Once out of Ruth’s door, Kaushiki blurted out: ‘How can you be friends with Ruth? She treats her mother so badly She loves neither her mother nor her daughter. How can she write for children?’

‘This is hardly bad,’ said Tukudi’s mother softly. ‘Ruth is far better than many. She kept her mother in a holiday home at Cape Cod for the summer. She’s busy arranging her mother’s woollens for the winter already. Of course her mother’s convinced that she will not last the freezing winter here. Poor woman. People retire and go to spend their last days in Florida. It’s so nice and warm there. Instead, at age 90, she had to move here from Florida after her husband died. Ruth does go and visit her mother often. She cooks things for her mother. She doesn’t really treat her badly at all. You should see some of the others. They hardly ever see their parents once they have deposited them in the old people’s home. Just send them cards off and on. Flowers on their birthdays. Chocolates at Christmas. And greetings cards for Mother’s Day or Father’s Day. That’s it. Just the fact that one is arranging for a summer holiday home for one’s mother means she is being cared for especially well. This is a tough country. Their ways are very different from ours.’

Not that different, though Kaushiki. Grandma is in an old people’s home. How many times will Baba and Ma go to visit her from Canada? They’ll do just what people here do: they’ll write letters. No flowers, no chocolates, just letters. Picture postcards. One day Grandma too will say to strangers, ‘Isn’t it wonderful how much

my grand-daughter loves me? See, she's sent me so many photographs...'

There was a lump in Kaushiki's throat. She wanted to dash off to Calcutta. She didn't want to stay here. The moment she grew up, grew up enough to live by herself, she would go straight back home. She'd live in Calcutta like grown-ups did, just herself and Grandma.

Kaushiki's eyes drifted over the river. There was a boat there. A steamer. Its lights danced on the ripples in the water. This was a steamer, thought Kaushiki, this house of Tukudi's. The house they lived in back home was a row-boat. It had Grandpa, Grandma, Bab, Ma, Kaushiki and Bindudi. Six people. Now? Kaushiki Baba and Ma will live together in Canada, that will be a canoe And Grandma is alone. In a Kayak. Kaushiki saw a mountain stream gushing through the rocks, just like she had seen in films so many times and in that white frothy water was a kayak, with Grandma rowing hard as she ducked the rocks and sped off, carried away by the mountain current into the distance, alone.

*Translated from the Bengali story, Kayak, for children by TLM*

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*Scottish PEN and the Writers In Exile Committee would like to thank the following people for the publication of this piece:*

*Thanks to Scottish PEN member, Diana Hendry who transcribed the piece for publication*

*Thanks to Scottish PEN member and trustee, Bashabi Fraser who suggested Nabaneeta Dev Sen for this issue's featured writer*







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# FICTION

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Tammy Swift-Adams lives in Dunbar and is a member of Tyne and Esk writers. She started writing poetry in 2014 and has seen poems published in *The Interpreters House* and *Lighten Up Online*. She has also provided poems to non-poetry magazines *The Scottish Planner* and *Full Potential*, the magazine produced by Downs Syndrome Scotland. She was longlisted in this year's Plough Poetry Prize and has previously been a top 10 finalist in a Poems on a Beermat competition. Some of her poems are inspired by her work as a town planner. Other spring from random thoughts or events.



## TAMMY SWIFT-ADAMS

## GIANNI MASTRANGIOLI SALAZAR



Gianni Mastrangioli is a Venezuelan activist and writer who defends the freedom of expression being affected by Nicolás Maduro's administration. He is a professional historian, graduated from the Central University of Venezuela in 2015. Since 2017, he has dedicated to elaborate literary chronicles which are focused on breaking the silence of persons, situations, and spaces indisputably condemned to the obscurity of censorship. He is the author of the column "El aguacate pensante" (newspaper Caracota Digital), and journalist for World Trade Center Venezuela. He is Director of Cultural affairs for the humanitarian organization 'Yo estoy aquí. He currently lives in Edinburgh.







# DEAR SCHIEHALLION

*Tammy Swift-Adams*

Dear Schiehallion

I write with what I hope will be pleasing news.

Following lengthy and rigorous pre-qualification testing, you have been selected as the candidate-mountain for our experiment to establish the density of the earth. The judging panel of the Committee of Attraction was particularly impressed with your isolated position and near-perfect symmetry. You are by far the most gravitationally-striking of the mountains we have seen.

I trust you will appreciate the sizeable honour this decision bestows. The anticipated success of The Schiehallion Experiment, as it shall now be known, will be a great tribute to the capabilities of our enlightened and learned nation, and to your qualities as a first-rate mountain.

I must turn now to practical matters. On the first morning of the experiment, please present yourself in your usual location. No special uniform or apparatus is required on your part. A team of fully-equipped scientists, led by myself, will suspend a pendulum in your general vicinity. This will be repeated until sufficient observations have been made. With each suspension we will be looking to detect and measure a slight deflection of the plumb-line. Based on what we have seen of you to date, we have no doubt in your ability to effect this.

The exact length of the experiment will be determined by weather conditions. Accurate measurement is fully dependent on our ability to clearly observe a pre-selected set of starts at a precise moment in their celestial motion.

We ask that you refrain from consorting with other mountains or similar geological masses until the experiment is complete. Any attempt to do so will jeopardise both our chances of success and our grant from the Royal Society, and will result in the instant cancellation of the experiment. In such circumstances you will be responsible for any financial or reputational loss to the project. Any artificial manipulation of the plumb-bob or zenith distances will be treated with equal severity.

Providing you adhere to these simple terms and conditions, you will not be held liable for any failure in the experiment. Once the test is complete you will be free to return to your day-to-day business as a prominent Perthshire mountain.

Yours,





# VENEZUELA, A COUNTRY WITHOUT DUMMIES

*Gianni Mastrangoli Salazar*

As I hastily packed up my belongings from my mother's house, I came across a collection of albums and cassettes on VHS. At this moment I began to reminisce. There is a video that I particularly love; my birthday, 1996. I was hitting a piñata and blowing out candles, I had a nice cake, colourful clowns, and pepitos – a local salty sweet treat. I remember mum dressing me up like a collection doll dolly for my outdoor party at which I was meant to be everyone's attention. I felt so happy on that day; in fact, happiness was always surrounding me. Unfortunately, for the people of Venezuela it is an unusual occurrence to find happiness these days, especially for children. Every Sunday, the little toddlers, who occupy the bunk beds of the house of 'Las Villas de los Chiquiticos' – The Village of the Little ones –, look like they are ready to take a picture at their first day at school; however, this is not the case, it is not their first day at school, nor their birthday party, but the official visit day.

The official visit day is the only occasion where they are treated as proper human beings. 'Las Villas de los Chiquiticos' house is an orphanage located in the western part of Caracas city, and staff make both boys and girls wear fancy shirts for their weekly meeting with their biological parents.

One of the social workers I spoke with sent me a letter claiming "we try to make them as happy as possible". I decided to contact her after finding these headlines while having breakfast. Safe to say my appetite vanished: "Eight babies were left behind in several hospital and public places at Sucre District in Caracas", newspapers said. I read it approximately three times, then went to prepare some coffee. Unbelievable. Words such as 'babies' and 'behind' were reflected on my glasses as I confirmed that my hometown's moral integrity is currently under threat. I served my cup of coffee while asking myself: 'which of these new-borns will govern us in the future? Which of these babies will truly be able to overcome resentment? Who is going to help us?

I washed my face and read it again. "Left behind". "Babies". I did not feel longing for

the present, but for a future of unaccomplished hopes.

Which of these new-borns will govern us in the future?

Which of them will be able to put resentment aside?

Which of them manipulate us as a society?

Which of them will help us?

Who is responsible for the consequences?

Yes. We are a country of orphan citizens, all living in adoption to our own murderers and executioners.

In another email the woman tells me that, compared to 2016, where she only received twenty-six requests for relocation of children in her institution, 2017 ended with almost one hundred and fifty. "In the course of 2018, some 280,000 children could die from malnutrition." Figures that are translated into the long waiting lists that rest on your desk. And it should be noted that 'Las Villas de los Chiquiticos' is one of the largest orphanages in Venezuela. Until recently, their rooms had been partially empty, with only the odd report of sexual abuse, as if this wasn't bad enough. The cases that are now being reported are of extreme starvation. Parents are unable to feed their children. Can you imagine?

"When I think of the little innocent bony bodies arriving with empty stomachs, I weep in despair. My blood boils up. I lose control", the social worker said.

My mother was a fan of parks. Near the date of my birthday, she put crossed knives in the window to keep it from raining that day. She wanted to make me happy: give me everything, to be the number one in face painting, in winning the raffles, in knocking down the piñata and in cutting and eating the piece of cake. The case is that the world looks so perfect in some moments of life, so affable. As it should be at that age. But the cassette jams; there is a good trace of the video that is lost, which has deteriorated over the years. From the moment the candies fall to the floor until when I blew the candle and people are hugging me, they are just spots. And the recording goes off. It is the end. The television is black, black as the later times, as security, as the full acceptance of who we are today.

According to the Caritas organization in Venezuela, children are the first victims of



the food and social crisis that this stunted country is going through. “50,000 citizens have their lives affected for the first quarter of this year due to malnutrition, which surely have been suffering since 2015,” warn the specialists. “A fall to the void”. The general levels of hunger are increasing, and among the smallest have exceeded the threshold of the red danger zone.

The last letter I received from the social worker was a series of photographs, and from then on, she did not wrote to me again. I had pleaded with her to send me some photographs so I could begin to imagine the conditions. In this mission I succeeded, although on reflection I wish these images had never entered my mind. I can only try to begin to explain them. The first one I downloaded was that of a brick house with a cement patio, in the middle sat a dirty and worn slide. Nobody playing, laughing or having fun. In the second, a pair of white shoes arranged on a wooden ledge, polished, a little whiter than normal. As if someone had scrubbed them with soap until they appeared newly purchased. It was in the third photo where I concentrated all my attention, for hours. It was the portrait of a female teenager with dark skin and swollen cheekbones; with faded clothes, no combination. She was holding her baby, so strong that it showed in the expression on her face. Suddenly, it was as if she were turning around, facing me, and talking to me. “What else can I do? What will happen now that I have separated from my little girl? Who will give me work? Will I eat when I arrive home? Can I Scream?”

I did not know what to answer her. I felt selfish. Selfish because I have a video of happy memories which I turn to every time that insatiable thirst for affection comes to me. I apologised, but I do not think she heard me. Then I turned off the laptop and went to make another coffee. To continue reflecting, until the thoughts turned into spots, just like the recording.

# VENEZUELA, PAÍS SIN CHUPONES

*Spanish Translation*

En una evocación de anhelados recuerdos, me traje un montón de álbumes y casetes en VHS de casa de mi mamá. Hay un video en particular que me encanta; uno donde salgo dándole palo a la piñata. Parque Vinicio Adames, 1996. Una torta con arequipe. Pepitos. Payasitas llenas de témpera. Yo parecía un muñequito de colección, como si fueran a tomarme una foto de fin de año escolar. Lucía bonito, más o menos como arreglan, todos los domingos, a las criaturitas que ocupan las literas de “Las Villas de los Chiquiticos”, ubicada en la caraqueña avenida Río de Janeiro. A los varoncitos se les viste con camisa de cuello y, a las hembritas, se les echa gelatina de escarcha en las trencitas del pelo. A ellos se les prepara para el día de visitas y no para una fiesta de cumpleaños. Es la única ocasión donde se les rinde homenaje en esa triste infancia; en ese despecho feroz y deshumanizante que representa el camino a la adultez.

“Intentamos que sean lo más feliz posible”, me escribió una de las trabajadoras sociales por correo electrónico, con quien conversé un par de veces. Decidí contactarla después de toparme con esos titulares que te roban las ganas de desayunar. “En el distrito Sucre de Caracas, ocho bebés fueron abandonados en diversos hospitales y espacios públicos”. Recuerdo que lo leí tres veces. Luego fui por un café, me lavé la cara y volví a releerlo. “Abandonados”. “Bebés”. Palabras que se reflejaban en los cristales de mis lentes. Sentí nostalgia no por lo que ya está, sino por un futuro de esperanzas incumplidas. ¿Quién de aquellos neonatos nos gobernará mañana?, ¿cuál de todos logrará zafarse del rencor?, ¿cuál de ellos nos estafará?, ¿quién nos tenderá la mano? Sí. Somos una nación de ciudadanos huérfanos, entregados todos en adopción a sus propios asesinos y verdugos.

¿Cómo nos pasarán factura estos destetados sobrevivientes?

Sin embargo, al país, como a los familiares, se le aprecia no tanto por ser bueno

-o propio-, y se le idealiza como a los seres queridos. Buscamos con ahínco lo que nos falta; lo que sentimos que dio significado positivo a nuestro colectivo pasado. O a eso que fuimos y ya no seremos. Otro correo electrónico. La mujer me dice que, comparado con el 2016, donde nada más recibió veintiséis solicitudes de reubicaciones de niños en su institución, el 2017 cerró con casi ciento cincuenta. “En el transcurso del 2018 podrían fallecer unos 280.000 niños por desnutrición”. Cifras que van traduciendo en las largas listas de espera que reposan sobre su escritorio. Y cabe destacar que “Las Villas de los Chiquiticos” es una de los orfanatos más grandes de Venezuela. Hasta hace poco, sus habitaciones habían estado parcialmente vacías. Los casos que se procesaban cada año, eran esporádicos. Abuso sexual, maltrato. Orfandad por muerte de los progenitores. Ya sabes, excepciones.

“Al pensar en más barrigas inocentes y más cuerpitos huesudos que llegan, me desespero. Me hierve la sangre. Pierdo fuerzas”.

Mi mamá era fanática de los parques. Cerca de la fecha de mi cumpleaños, ponía cuchillos cruzados en la ventana para evitar que lloviera ese día. Me quería hacer feliz; dármelo todo. Ser el número uno en pintarse la carita, en ganarse las rifas, en tumbar la piñata y en picar y comerse el pedazo de torta. Es que el mundo luce tan perfecto en algunos instantes de la vida, tan afable. Como debe serlo a esa edad. Pero el casete se tranca; hay un buen trazo del video que está perdido, que se deterioró por los años. Desde el momento en que los caramelos caen al piso hasta cuando soplé la vela y la gente me está abrazando, son sólo manchas. Y la grabación se apaga. Fin. El televisor queda negro, negro como las épocas posteriores, como la seguridad, como la aceptación plena de quienes somos actualmente.

Según la organización Caritas de Venezuela, los niños son las primeras víctimas de la crisis alimentaria y social por la que atraviesa este raquítico país. “50.000 ciudadanos tienen su vida comprometida para el primer trimestre de este año debido a la desnutrición, que de seguro vienen padeciendo desde el 2015”, alertan los especialistas. “Una caída al vacío”. Los niveles generales de hambre están aumentando, y entre los más pequeños ha superado el umbral de la zona roja.

Lo último que recibí de la trabajadora social fue una serie de fotografías. A partir de allí, no volvió a responderme. Le había pedido que por favor me ilustrase con imágenes. Más vale que no. La primera que descargué era la de una casa de ladrillos con un patio de cemento; en el medio, un tobogán sucio y desgastado. Desierto, sin nadie que estuviera jugando, riendo, divirtiéndose. En la segunda,



pares de zapaticos blancos, acomodados en una repisa de madera. Lustrados, más blancos de lo normal. Como si alguien los hubiera fregado con jabón hasta sacarles dignidad, apariencia a recién comprado. Pero fue en la tercera foto donde concentré toda mi atención. Por horas. Era el retrato de una adolescente de piel morena y pómulos hinchados; con ropa desteñida, sin combinación. Estaba apretujando a una niña en su pecho, tan fuerte que se notaba en la expresión de su rostro. De pronto, fue como si ella se volteara, de cara a mí, y me hablase. ¿Qué otra cosa puedo hacer? ¿Qué vendrá ahora que me separe de mi chama? Cónchale, ¿quién me da trabajo? ¿Y si grito? ¿Qué comeré cuando llegue a mi casa?

Pero no supe qué contestarle. Me sentí egoísta. Egoísta porque yo sí tengo un video de recuerdos felices al cual recurro cada vez que me viene esa insaciable sed de afecto. Le pedí disculpas, pero no creo que ella me haya escuchado. Entonces apagué la laptop y me fui a hacer otro café. A seguir meditando, antes que, como en el casete, los pensamientos se me convirtiesen en manchas.



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# POETRY

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Rizwan Akhtar's debut collection of poems *Lahore, I Am Coming* (2017) is published by Punjab University Press. He works as an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Punjab University, Lahore, Pakistan. He completed his PhD in postcolonial literature from the University of Essex, UK in 2013. He has published poems in well-established poetry magazines of the UK, US, India, Canada, and New Zealand. He was a part of the workshop on poetry with Derek Walcott at the University of Essex in 2010.

## RIZWAN AKHTAR

## XINYI JIANG

Xinyi Jiang was born in China's Qingdao, studied in Nanjing and Shanghai and taught in Fudan University. She came to the UK in 1999 and had lived in England and Wales before settling in Scotland in 2006. She discovered poetry when studying MLitt Writing Practice and Study with Dundee University.

Writes in Scots and English, translates from Finnish. Collections: *From Coiled Roots* (IDP 2013), *A Landscape Blossoms Within Me* (from the Finnish of Eeva Kilpi, Arc 2014), *Glamourie* (IDP 2015). Honours: 1st prize placings in Glasgow University/Radio Clyde Poetry Competition, 1985; Herald Millennium Poetry Competition, 1999; Sangschaw Scots Poetry Competition (translation), 2017. Also prize-winner in Northwords Competition, 1995; McCash Scots Poetry Competition, 2014; Cornwall Contemporary Poetry Competition 2016; Off the Stanza Poetry Competition, 2017; Sangschaw Scots Poetry Competition (translation), 2018.

## DONALD ADAMSON



# REMAINS

*Rizwan Akhtar*

Not finding you I ransacked the drawers  
where a pile of letters harassed me  
unaddressed shreds of silence  
removed the curtain to let the light  
choose words housing dust...  
for a casual excursion we went  
to the ruins of a tomb outside Lahore  
of an emperor whose grave was treated  
by torrential rains almost sagged  
birds' excrements quashed on floors  
I held your hand inside a vestibule  
wind-whispering pavilions grew ghostly  
someone entered from the back entrance  
caught us breathing — unable to write  
the memory of cracking walls, and  
chipped borders the only evidence on  
paper was your presence and the year.



# LOVE LETTERS

*Xinyi Jiang*

One, two, three, four, a day.  
The calligraphies showed off

my name in many styles.  
Collectable stamps, designer envelopes.

I was an envied but cool  
babe of a tall, handsome

fugitive, June 1989  
to January 1990,

my destiny was sealed in three  
large shoe boxes,

dragged from dorm to dorm,  
as rats and cockroaches chewed,

pissed and made them their nests,  
before crawling into our son's crib.

I heard you're a celebrity, your wife  
30 years your junior.



# THE ELSEWHERE FOLK (FOR M.E.)

*Donald Adamson*

Of course we fancied you,  
the boys at music camp  
and rightly so, and so did I.  
You were a foreign flower  
displaced by war, made to grow  
in upland-Ayrshire's stony ground.

I wrote to you often, eager  
for the postman who might bring  
your neatly phrased replies,  
observant and ironic. Now,  
years later, you say  
you still have my letters. And I wonder  
if I should ask to read them –

and if, behind my embarrassing  
teenage scribbles I'd find  
something of myself, in transit  
with the displaced –  
the elsewhere folk whose heart  
can never rest, in or beyond  
the place assigned as home.



# A TALE OF TWO Ss

*Donald Adamson*

my wee granddaughter  
whose name ends in double s  
writes it like this

Ss

as if she knows  
how wrong it is if letters meekly  
follow each other  
when they could meet  
face to face


Caroline is originally from Northern Ireland, now living in Ayrshire. She writes stories through her poems, mainly on philosophical, political and life experience themes and has been published in the UK, Ireland and the U.S. She is the social media manager for the Federation of Writers Scotland, is on the Poets Advisory Group for the Scottish Poetry Library, is a keen part of the Women Aloud NI community and a member of Scottish Pen.

She writes books on journaling and happiness and wellbeing, and runs a number of workshops that dare people to be happier.



## **CAROLINE JOHNSTONE**

## **CHRIS BOYLAND**



Chris Boyland is a prize-winning poet, who lives and works in Glasgow and whose practice focusses on writing poetry for the page and for performance. His work has been published by a range of Scottish magazines and anthologies and he has performed at events across central Scotland, in venues such as King Tut's Wah Wah Hut and the Tron Theatre.



# FOR ALL WE LOST

*Caroline Johnstone*

Pre-populated by the Ministry of Information, field postcards gave three options - fighting/injured/in some far off hospital bed; alive at the point of posting.

Newspapers spun stories of misinformation, fake news as fact and downright lies to build morale, to bury massed grave details, bypass 16 million poppies falling.

Every detail checked, censored; black scored like the mourning clothes, preserving life, locations; cut into clueless shapes - jigsaws of hopeless hope.

Codes deciphered, letters, meaningful marks on a page, a map, a weather report; demanded censorship, a bland "somewhere in France."

It ended with an Armistice declared for friend and foe (white feathers, enemies abroad): joy at finding war had ended, laments and last posts for all we lost.





# THE LETTERS

*Chris Boyland*

Over the town, it rains letters  
written on good notepaper, on exercise book paper  
on anything at all. Scraps and screeds and tracts  
fluttering from the sky like falling kites  
each one anonymous, addressed only, "To my love."

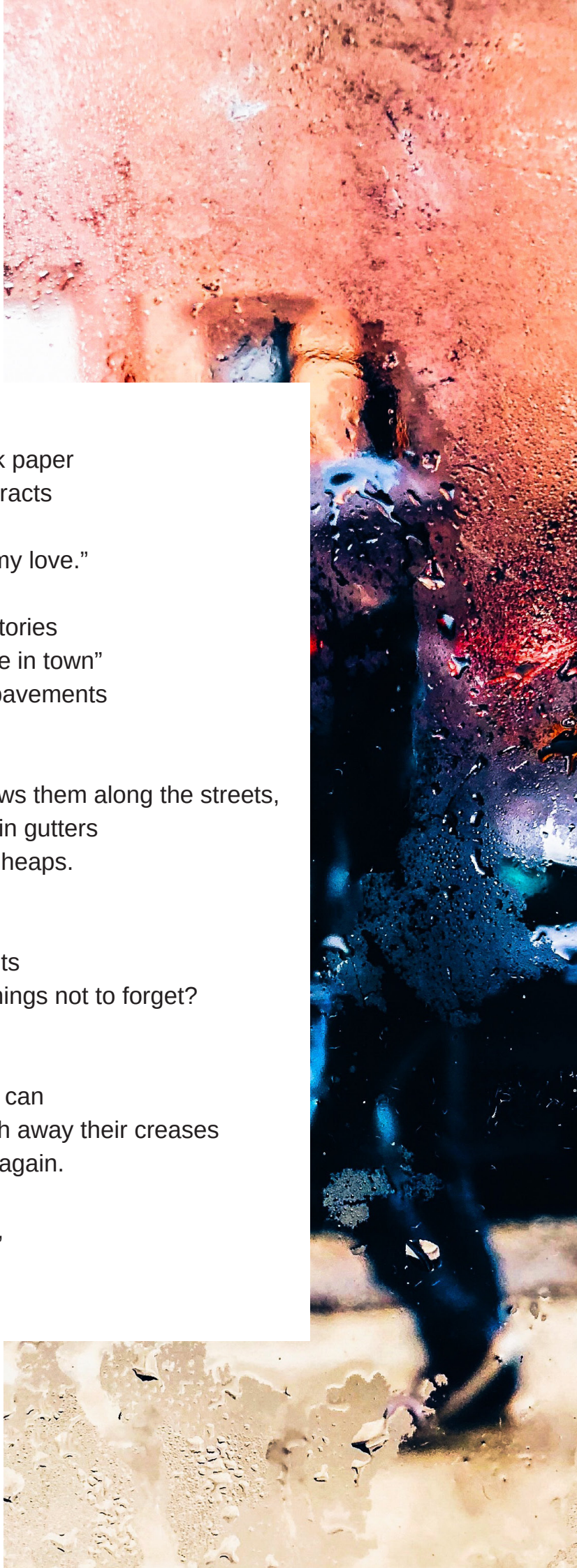
In the absence of names, people make up stories  
"there's a letter here", they say, "for everyone in town"  
scurrying about to find theirs, reading from pavements  
and letters draped over clothes lines.

The wind catches handfuls of paper and blows them along the streets,  
unwanted letters lie soggy and bleeding ink in gutters  
till men in overalls come and rake them into heaps.

"Where do they come from?" people ask  
"Who has written these words, these thoughts  
these wishes, these dreams, these lists of things not to forget?  
And why are they falling from the sky?"

I know but tell no-one. I collect as many as I can  
lay them out on the kitchen table and smooth away their creases  
read them and re-read them, over and over again.

These are all the letters I could have written,  
the things I could have said, to you  
but never did.





## PHOTOS UNDER VARIOUS CREATIVE COMMONS LICENSES

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Foreward (page 3-4): Image 'Letter "P" on gray wall' by Alex Read. Downloaded from [Unsplash](#)

Page 5: 'Letterpress' by Fabio Santaniello Bruun. Downloaded from [Unsplash](#)

### **Kayak**

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Image 3 (page 20) 'Indian Street Scene' by Annie Spratt. Downloaded from [Unsplash](#)

### **Dear Schiehallion**

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Page 25: 'Mesmorizing Sunrise' by JANUPRASAD. Downloaded from [Unsplash](#)

### **Venezuela, A Country Without Dummies**

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### **Remains**

Page 34: 'Rear Window' by Florencia Viadana. Downloaded from [Unsplash](#)

### **Love Letters**

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### **The Elsewhere Folk (For M.E.)**

Page 36: 'Untitled' by Joanna Kosinska. Downloaded from [Unsplash](#)

### **A Tale of Two Ss**

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### **For All We Lost**

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## The Letters

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