

Balcony



Editor
Jill Charles

Issue No. 6 | March, 2026



Flower painted by Jerry Kaiser

Balcony



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Dr. Gautam Bandyopadhyay is a retired technology and innovation management professional with more than forty years of industrial experience in multinational corporations. Writing & photography is his retirement-hobby.

Front & Back Cover

*Strolling at sunset at
Chippewa Lake, Ohio*

Jerry Kaiser

USA



Jerry Kaiser is a floral designer and artist. He is currently working as a human rights volunteer, resettling refugees in the Chicago area.

Front & Back Inside Cover

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Editorial



Balcony invites readers from around the world to journey with us on life's road. Writers and artists share their experiences in stories, poems, photos and visual art. We see De Kwok's triumphant "Rose" photo and Jerry Kaiser's brightly colored "Flower", a sketch capturing the beauty of autumn. We meet the caring family of Allen Love in "Daniah and Miah Came Over Here for a Visit" and share the lasting parent-child bond through gender transition in Jessica Crichton's "Purple." A woman stands up for her freedom in Raheal Hanna's "Siren Song" and flavors and human rights mix in "Incredulous Wok" by Tinamaria Penn Hare. Travel Russia's rivers and lakes with Debajyoti Chatterji, to Perth, Australia with Suparna Chatterjee to Michigan's Upper Peninsula with Bakul Bannerjee, and into Uzbekistan's Silk Road cities with Ruma Sikdar. We hope you will journey with us in our daily life and shared world. *Balcony* welcomes new creative submissions; contact me for English pieces and Ranjita Chattopadhyay for Bengali pieces.

Ms. Jill Charles

English Editor – Balcony

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Tanima Basu

Magome-Villa



We traveled to Japan last summer. Along our journey, we visited the Kiso Valley, nestled between Tokyo and Kyoto. Kyoto, known as the Temple Town, is renowned for its historic sites. On a rainy day, we stopped at Magome, a charming and picturesque town. The city is stunning, with traditional Japanese wooden houses—some several centuries old—beautifully preserved and still used in daily life. The gentle sound of raindrops and the earthy scent of moss created a magical, almost mystical atmosphere during our stay. For those moments, it felt as if time itself stood still.



Tanima Basu is a senior Statistician at the University of Michigan. Her mind is always crunching numbers but a stream of Art runs deep inside that she inherited from her artist dad.

Ana Brawls

Between Two Oceans

At first, I wasn't fond of the Indian Ocean.
I was used to its cousin, the Atlantic
balmy, like a summer night.

The water here shimmered in layered shades,
Inviting, enticing, mesmerising.
It **recoiled** like a snake,
Then **struck** my defenceless body.

The **crispy** waves **crushed** into me,
Their icy **bite** invading my skin
Its cold embrace stole my breath
Like a toddler running for a hug
Only to be smacked on the hand.

On the second day of February,
I hoped to find roses in the ocean.
Yemanja received no offering here.
Had there been believers bathing on the shore,
perhaps the ocean would hush the cold winds
the ones that make a **liar** of the bright blue sky.

Only in autumn, the ocean quietens
Its strong currents contained beneath a calm surface.
Selling the *myth* of perpetual stability.
The perfect *playground* where I believe everything is possible.

Then winter arrives with confused waves,
Mammoth tides announcing torrential rain,
and maddening winds
That drag on for days, and days.

In spring, the ocean speaks to me.
It asks me to understand its currents and moods:
*'I am so vast, multicultural, I carry different currents
they roll from different directions,
greet each other in passing; but never mix.'*

I came to understand it I came to accept it.
It still knocks the air out of me
but it does so with the gentle force of a mother bird,
coaxing her chick from the branch
because it's ready to fly.

Ana Brawls

Wooden Chest

I came across the Oceans three to be exact
Inside the wooden chest, my only possessions
One last gift from my four grand-aunties
Four women
 Unmarried
virginally preserved
From the sin of men.

Will the possessions in this wooden chest
carry the knowledge to survive here?
In this land, so dry *so dry*
So silent, and deprived
Of colour, and sound,
Of vibrations emitted by joyful people,
Music and magnificent animals,
My eyes can't see *here*.

My heart was ablaze when I looked back
The horizon floating in the heat.
Here, I don't know what is waiting for me
But I know a few things won't be waiting for me
a warm welcome a bed a kind smile

Who am I? The shadow of millions
The **explosion** of existence the **echo** of extinct cultures
Married by the pressing forces
Of slavery AND assimilation.
Extracted forgotten

'*You're not welcome here.*'
 'I know, but I will be useful.'
'*You're not welcome, but useful.*'

Disdainful gazes
Untrusting smiles
Empty promises
I will work so hard you won't believe it!
I can be useful.
 '*Yeah, na... You are too different.*'

Voices whisper along the way...
 '*A speech therapist will sort you out.*'

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Woman Whispered with good intentions.
'You should go home... have a babe or two.'
Man Mumbled with the snake smile.
*'I don't know why ...
they hired you. There is no place for you here.'*

Stones thrown **heads** cracking **doubt** setting
We are all looking for **validation**.
Newcomers look at you,
Looking for **acceptance**.
Looking for a **home**, a smile
We are **ALL** looking to belong.

I speak from past experiences
Yet, my past experiences
Is someone else's present.



I live and work on Wadandi and Pibelman Boodja, whose ancestors and their descendants are the traditional owners of this country.

Jill Charles

City Birds

(inspired by Secret Birds art exhibit by Tony Fitzpatrick at DePaul Art Museum, Summer 2016)

You never suspected
How many city birds there are
Tan mourning doves in the alley
Purple martins over the lake
Blue jay and cardinal in the oak tree
Goldfinch in the grass
Disguised as a dandelion
Peregrine falcon patrols the El stop
We are city birds.

No room to nest
But we moved in anyway
Pigeon mom feeds pink babies
In their nest under
A barbershop awning.
Speckled sparrows chirp
Behind neon signs.

Birds were here before the city
Before Jean Baptiste Pointe Du Sable
Built Fort Chicago
Black and white magpie
Swooped over the prairie
Short-eared owl on the moonflower vine
Some birds were dropped here
Glossy starlings arrived in English cages.

It's our town too
From ducks paddling
Over litter in the river
To robins lining a nest
With fast food napkins.

You know how it is
You're a city bird too.



Jill Charles lives in Crystal Lake, Illinois with her husband, stepson and mother-in-law. and works in a non-profit office. Jill is co-editor of *Balcony* literary magazine. Read her jazz age novel, *Marlene's Piano*, available from Booklocker.com.

Tinamaria Hare

Incredulous Wok

what can i stir today?
gossiping women who reform
like rice with a big wooden spoon

what can i stir today?
fresh little broccoli trees
missing branches
like children with absent fathers.

what can i stir today?
langston's "deferred dreams"
cooking like peeled onions
red tomatoes making new sauce.

what can i stir today?
empathy for our nation
reaching to other nations
like long steam peppers
till we are one.

what can i stir today?
fresh meat strengthening good choices
empathy for our country
reaching to other nations
until we are one.

what can i stir today?
fresh meat strengthening good choices
tofu for infinite vegans continued consciousness
as the earth regenerates clean soil.

what can I stir today?
basic cauliflower needs
affordable housing
entitlement health care
fresh food
suitable clothing
a medley made of love oiled with hope

what can I stir today?

SOULS.



Tinamaria Penn is a Contemporary Creative Word Artist. Her arts background includes writing since the age of twelve. Equally, Tinamaria has a love for photography. Tinamaria is a native of Cleveland, Ohio who decided to try the Big City, Chicago. Tinamaria

Penn released her first poetry book *Clarity In Three Dimensions*, Oct. 2013. Tinamaria's poetry and prose is published in church newsletters, literary magazines, and *The Journal of Original Thought*, and *Batayan*. Tinamaria was chosen as the Featured Philosopher for the week by the Neighborhood Writing Alliance March 2012. Tinamaria's highest honor is a memorable poetry performance at Quincy University for the hundred year anniversary of Father Augustus Tolton's ordination and first mass, and she also edited a children's book about Father Tolton, *A Boy Called Gus*. Tinamaria uses her writings and photography to reflect the human condition and uncover the romance hidden in the mundane and magic in the everyday.

Maureen Peifer

The Wedding

Vibrant green trumpet vine
Takes the trellis every summer
Conquers the pergola
orange red trumpets blowing kisses
to the eager bees and happy hummingbirds
Creates a palace of shade below
Invites you in to disappear
with your book in its cool green
Quietly in late August, Ms. Autumn Joy
Creeps up and over, tiny buds and
lighter leaves, unnoticed until
one September day, she explodes
Tiny ivory stars carpeting her lover
Wrapping the trumpets, caressing his vines
Crooning softly
We are one, we are one



September, 2025



Maureen Peifer is a Chicagoan with a lifelong love of literature, writing, travel, and teaching. She is currently the retired librarian of the Montessori school where she previously taught.

Robert Hare

Light left untitled

Chandlers pass the light
As the day breaks open
The sky painted cloudy greys of blue
Worried about what was lost
I say thank you

Sounds of people walking away
Into the darkness chased out by beams of light slowly filling our space
What's left is what's left
This is our day to take
I say thank you

Echoes of foot steps and fading images still linger at times
We take what we have
Still meeting at our same place
Turn on what we have to brighten our day
I say thank you

Today we take our place
Our meeting place
We get in our zone
The heat from our hearts to open minds
We burn marks on the white space
Then we talk about how it sounds
How it feels
What it looks like
After we write

Something seems different today
What to do we write about next
Our topic and goals
As we sit around the table
Talking amongst each other

Listening for a prompt
Something to inspire us to write more
As our group seems to dissolve decrease
Disappearing into thin air
Air holds a silent content

The conversation of what does the future hold
For the writing group
As writers we hold the future of what to read
For our readers
What we leave behind as our day ends

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Light passes on through filtered eyes
Readers read on
Complementing wise words
Readers give thanks that way

Some readers are moved by what we say
Then choose to write their own day
Based off the images of light they've been given
Using brilliant inspiration to fuel thoughts out loud
Creative light spreads to the next as being passes down

Untitled will not stay that way
We have found a place to be named
Moving forward through out our day



Robert Hare I am originally from Evanston IL. Currently married to Tinamaria Penn. Grandfather to LaShia Kirby. This piece was written around 2014. Originally reflecting our writing group name change from Neighborhood Writing Alliance to Chicago Writing Alliance. The meaning has evolved and grew as a letter to the next generation. My Daughter Yani and the young world I've had the privilege to help.

Raheal Hanna

Siren's Song

Pulling back...

in a seeming constant state

of repel

The world stated

in terms of this womanhood

give...give...give

and so its characters

took...took...took

my lifeblood, bloodlet

As I lay wounded and infected

screaming, pleading

Who. Am. I. Now?

With no one in proximity to explain

in fact, those who saw efforts

to heal and refrain

gifted disdain, detest, and disappearance

for having the audacity to ask

for more than I was receiving

And so now

I'm learning to pull back

seeing with new eyes

a bruised heart

and discerning mind

quietly noticing

that it's in the repel

where truth and lies

undress to bathe

and come clean

in the lather of life

It's in the pull back

where those arrows

sharp with emotion

are drawn taut

and laser focused

so when released

travel forward and beyond

ripping through

skin

sinew

bone

birthing a throbbing

iridescent

unrecognizable

newness

It's in the repel

when stillness and silence

cause inner oceans to swell

Balcony

awakening chilled trills
ravenous runs
and deafening knells
dormant decades within
releasing this Siren's Song
dissonate octaves

sung in shades of:
Bemoaned brown
Forlorn cerulean
Pink pariah
and
Silver solitude



Raheal Hanna applies writing poetry to assist her through life's emotional spectrum with humor, grit, and grace. As a Chicago native, she is very much the quintessential, and applies that sensibility to her pen strokes. In addition to poetry, Raheal also enjoys composing literary nonfiction, songwriting, and short stories.

Lashia Kirby

fill up my mug

in my void, waiting to charge
waiting to be born again
no, it's not when I come back into my human skin
but rather when I use these bones,
to move to the stove
to heat up water

pacing to hear the music of the boil's rhythm
I use the time that consumes me
out of reach for a living
nature blooms out to hold hands
sacrifices its body to strengthen mine
I give back with my oxygen
and my beauty for the bees' honey

presently stepping back by the stove
I fill up my mug with symbolism
to overcome materialism
I feel upon my mug with spells
that cover up my cracks inside of me

I feel of my mark by calm serenity
filled up my might of different mugs
where our stories steep and spill
fill up your mug



My name is Lashia Kirby. I am the granddaughter of Tinamaria and Robert Hare, though in the world of pens, I go by Solar. I am an 18-year-old Black woman, shaped by two cities Cleveland, Ohio, where I was born, and Illinois, where I continue to grow. I am currently walking the path of college, majoring in computer science. Yet, my journey is far from one-dimensional. Alongside technology, I am also pursuing creative dreams that align with the purpose of this submission, namely becoming a publisher and author. *I thank you for your time when given, and I hope my work resonates with your spirit and mission.*

Nandini Bhattacharya

Grief Attacks; a sonnet

grief can attack too if panic attacks
why not grief; but the fight or flight response
is useless when the saber-toothed one barks
needlessly loudly and the frilly mons
veneris says bring it on bring it on
my shame is only as bad as the shame
of thousands, no millions, before me gone
to the funhouse where we play such games
in hempen bowers my prison and its cage
me shadow to its shape asking daylight
what business here when all the world's a stage
and watching my life go by is my right
in my hempen bower says beast full of rage
fangs flashing in the tremble of last light

Bird

Goddess of wayward lives
of bad girls, golden hearts, shaved legs
give me strength

Everything is a poem
prayer a riot of poetic flight
someone stays up
raising hell, praying

Last century's birds
throw themselves against the window
that refuses.
They turn to shadows, divets in grey unborn skies.
To hide, regroup.

It takes a much-maligned pellet
For a black hole to drown
in the quilted cosmos
and wait, hungry, for a lost wayfarer to stray, stumble in, and vanish;
Nothing clear, hard, like sheet glass, saves.
The wayfarers wish they'd been good
or a bird
saved at the very end
good or not.

Tsunami

O see
vast cornea
blinded every day
by Phoebus;
original Prometheus
stole the fire and could, did keep it

So old
Tiresias
Sings of the curse
But sometimes rebellious
then perilous
and shore-clingers must evacuate

Old sea
heaves one shoulder
giant dripping boulder
coronary ripple
called tsunami
drowns sun-worshippers in ancient hate



Nandini Bhattacharya was born and raised in India and has called the United States her second continent for the last thirty years. She was first runner-up for the Los Angeles Review Flash Fiction contest (2017-2018), a finalist for the Fourth River Folio Contest for Prose Prize (2018), long-listed for the Disquiet International Literary Prize (2019 and 2020), and a finalist for the Reynolds-Price International Women's Literary Award (2019). *Love's Garden*, a work of WWII historical fiction is her first novel and draws on major events surrounding the British Empire in India and especially Calcutta (Kolkata).

Kathy Powers

A Time to Relax?

I'll have to check my calendar

If I'm up in the morning, no.

If I'm Zooming, no.

If my dailies extend with cat hairball throw up, no.

If...



Kathy Powers is a civil rights activist who developed her passions from coping with bipolar disorder symptoms. She has a tagline: "Advocacy is my therapy." Through advocacy she has discovered truth and beauty in helping people and sharing art.

Jessica Crichton

Purple

I always hated pink.

Gender norms have never been normal for me. I loved the Ninja Turtles as much as my dollhouses, and to this day I still want that elusive Optimus Prime toy. As a child I was encouraged to explore by a motivational mother bent on her daughter's self-discovery. I learned all I know of mothering from her.

So when my daughter asked to become my son, I didn't hesitate. My reply felt almost rehearsed its flow from my lips smooth and cool.

“Of course!”

It was all so easy. So simple.

She he hugged me tight, liquid light shining from excited eyes.

“Thank you mum!”

She always loved pink.

As a little girl, my son was the belle of the school. She wanted to be a princess. She wanted to be a fashion designer. She'd watch me put on makeup and ask me often,

“Mum, am I pretty?”

My answer was standard, but heartfelt.

“You are beautiful. Inside and out.”

If we'd had the freedom to paint walls, hers would have been pink.

As the world sets in...

I can't protect him from others' insecurity. Their own doubts about the world and their place in it reflect back on him in the form of hurtful words and pronouns intentionally misplaced.

I still misplace them sometimes.

I am insecure.

I doubt.

It was so easy to let her go.

Balcony

It was so simple to see her wave goodbye.

“What's your favorite color now?”

He shrugs.

The carrots crunch under my knife.

My heart crunches with them.

I shrug back. “Maybe purple?”

A good compromise. Halfway between pink and blue.

Like an unhealed bruise.

She hated purple.

Maybe he wouldn't.

He stares out at the rain without an answer.

I never hated blue. It's a soothing color. The color of skies in summer. Of water. And ice.

“What about... blue?”

I choke out the word, hoping he doesn't notice my hesitation.

Gendered colors have always been like gender norms to me. Boys can wear pink. Girls can wear blue. Silly, really, to think otherwise.

“Mum? Am I pretty?”

“You are beautiful, inside and out.”

Princesses never interested me.

“Mum, does she live happily ever after?”

“A princess always does.”

I always believed in happy endings. I knew hers would be the happiest.

It was so easy to say goodbye.

And now she is gone.

The hated pink is gone.

Balcony

Part of my soul is gone.

“Mum?” he says, turning from the rain to smile at me.

I sniff, aware of the water on my cheeks, and smile back. “Yes?”

“I think... yeah. I like blue.”

I nod and turn back to the cutting board.

I always hated pink anyway.

Salt is good on carrots, even the liquid kind.

I feel arms around my shoulders. Strong. Tall.

My son.

“Mum?”

I nod again, unable to speak.

“Blue is beautiful,” he says. “Purple too. And yellow and red and orange. My favorite color is the rainbow.”

I pull back to look my son in the eye. “And pink?”

His green eyes once hers pause in-between emotions. A moment's lifelong purgatory of uncertainty.

Then,

“Mum, am I pretty?”

The standard answer begins to form on my tongue. I stop it, for the first time unsure what to say.

“Do you still want to be?”

There it is again in his eyes. Uncertainty. Fear.

He nods without a word.

“Then of course you are.”

The fear remains.

“Inside and out?”

A slap in the face. A punch to the gut.

Balcony

And then I see it.

My child's rainbow.

Her long brown curls were cut short and dyed purple for him.

Her lacy aquamarine tops were replaced by his blue and red striped chest binder.

But the soul that shined from her luminous emerald eyes is still the soul shining from his.

I hold him tight, close to my heart where he lives and always will. Every color of him. Every facet of his beauty and power. And I know my answer is anything but standard.

“Always and forever, you are beautiful. Inside and out.”



Jessica Crichton was first a writer, then a mother of five great kids who are now not-so-little, and she loves being both!

She lives in Washington state with her husband Larry, and spends most of her free time thinking about the looniest things on and off the planet. Some of them she even writes down! She also has one of those fancy master's degrees in writing, but she usually just breaks the rules she learned anyway. How else could she be her weirdest?

Otherwise, Jessica loves Dr. Who, plays D&D, Bioshock, and Skyrim, and sings karaoke whenever possible. Her favorite dinosaur is the triceratops, and her favorite color is burnt orange, in case you were wondering.

Balcony



Rose photographed by De Kwok



De Kwok is a photographer based out of San Francisco and Guerneville, CA. His work has been shown in galleries worldwide: Seattle, NYC, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Australia, Ireland and Germany. De's latest photobook, *Codependency*, was selected for inclusion in the *On The Shelf* exhibition at Chicago's Filter Fest from Sept 5-Oct 25, 2025. More of his work is at dekwok.com.

Erin Banerjee

Snapshot Australia: Bridgetown — Hills, Heritage & Heart

About three and a half hours drive, south of Perth, the landscape begins to change. Tree-lined roads wind round fabulous sights, paddocks roll with grain and the hills gradually rise as you enter the Blackwood Valley. Tucked among them is Bridgetown — one of Western Australia’s inland towns, and a place that has quietly reinvented itself over time.

I recently headed down to Bridgetown for a family summer escape — a little R&R, good food and time to properly switch off. It didn’t disappoint.

We stayed at an Airbnb known as “The Apple”, a heritage farmhouse with a genuine old-world feel. Inside, it was filled with antique furniture and thoughtful details that made it feel like stepping back in time. Outside, rolling hills stretched out around us, and the garden was the kind you could happily wander through with a morning coffee or an evening glass of wine, taking it all in at your own pace.

Founded in the 1860s and originally known as Bridgetown-on-Blackwood, the town began as a timber town. Jarrah and karri trees from the surrounding forests were logged. When logging declined, agriculture stepped up. The fertile valley soils proved ideal for orchards and farming, and apples in particular became the byword for the district. Today, stone fruit, avocados and grapes all compete for notice.

Running through the centre of town, the Blackwood River has always been important to Bridgetown’s story — first as a lifeline for early settlers and now as a defining feature. Walking tracks and picnic spots along the river add to the town’s relaxed appeal, and you feel that this is a place where time moves at a more comfortable pace.

That slower rhythm is part of Bridgetown’s appeal. Heritage shop-fronts line the main street, gardens are fragrant with roses even in the hot summer, and the town slumbers in the sun. Yet it is far from sleepy. Over time, Bridgetown has developed into an arts and cultural hub.

Despite its modest population Bridgetown hosts events of statewide significance. The long-running Bridgetown Blues Festival transforms the town each year, drawing acclaimed artists and music lovers from across the country. Equally impressive is the Blackwood Marathon, which brings runners to the



region to tackle a course that winds through the valley's challenging hills. For a small inland town to sustain events of this scale speaks of its community strength and volunteer spirit.

But let's not forget food and produce! The wider Blackwood Valley is known for its orchards and vineyards, and the produce flows into the town's cafés, cellar doors and dining venues. Visitors can explore boutique wineries and distilleries scattered throughout the valley. We stopped at Silkwood winery for some truly delicious wine, which showcased the cold-climate peppery, yet smooth red wines that the region is famous for. The white wine was also yummy!

And of course not missing out on cider! The Cidery and Blackwood Valley Brewing Co is one of those places you really shouldn't skip when you're in Bridgetown. They're best known for their boutique ciders made from locally sourced Pink Lady apples, and you can genuinely taste the freshness. The cider is crisp, beautifully balanced and easy to enjoy, and they also brew a solid range of craft beers and spirits on site. It's a relaxed, welcoming spot that perfectly reflects the Blackwood Valley's apple-growing roots.



In a state well known for its vast distances and dramatic landscapes, Bridgetown stands out for something quieter. It's a breath of fresh air in the hills — a place where history, good food, creativity and community sit comfortably side by side. It suits couples looking for a weekend away, families wanting space to reconnect, and anyone needing to slow down and decompress from the everyday pace of life. You arrive expecting a small regional stopover; you leave understanding why so many people choose to stay.



Hi, I'm Erin — a Perth-based occupational therapist specialising in mental health and dementia care. Mum of two lively boys. I love dancing and art and run my own multicultural dance group. Passionate about creativity, community and bringing people together through movement.

Chayan Chatterjee

The Smallest Change I Could Measure

On the evening I left Kolkata, the sky was the old bruise of monsoon. A fine rain glazed the road to the terminal, turning it into a trembling sodium-lit puddle. Inside, the soft chime of boarding calls threaded through the scrape of trolley wheels and the rustle of plastic-wrapped suitcases. My mother's hand kept finding my cheek as if re-confirming a map; my father stood a step back, practicing the careful steadiness he used when things needed to hold. I held on to my backpack and trolley bags, carrying an ambition that made everything else feel underpacked. I was flying to Perth to spend the better part of my twenties chasing whispers in spacetime—gravitational waves, those tiny stretches and squeezes in the fabric of space and time that travel for billions of years across the vastness of the cosmos. Born when massive objects—black holes and neutron stars—accelerate and collide, they carry the imprint of those events with almost no distortion. On Earth we catch them with giant laser interferometers, watching for changes in length smaller than a proton across kilometers of vacuum—the smallest change humans have ever measured. And I was about to become a part of that global effort.

In Kolkata, noise is a right. The city speaks even when you don't. Vendors, tram bells, the cricket commentary drifting from radios, the layered prayer of a street that believes sound is proof of life. Perth, when I landed, felt like someone had pressed pause, and welcomed me with a kind of silence I'd never known. The streets were wide, the skies theatrical, and the river—lined with black swans and gently swaying reeds—offered a kind of peace that felt both generous and disorienting. It took me weeks to realize I wasn't waiting for something to happen. This was it. This was the rhythm now.

A few weeks into that new rhythm, when I still flinched crossing the street and the silence of my apartment hadn't quite stopped sounding like absence, my supervisor, Professor Linqing Wen, invited me and another new student on a drive north—to see stars, she said, “the way they were meant to be seen.”

We left Perth in the late afternoon, heading toward the desert. The sun slid across the windshield in long golden slants as the suburbs thinned into scrubland. Conversation came in bursts: stretches of silence, then sudden questions about black holes, memory, her time in Beijing, our homes in India. Linqing drove with the calm assurance of someone who understood the long game—not just in science, but in life. She didn't offer grand advice. Just stories. About how the field had changed, about how much of research was simply knowing how to stay.

By the time we reached the Pinnacles Desert, the light had shifted to amber. Thousands of limestone pillars jutted from the ochre sand like fossilized thoughts, sharp and still. It was hard to tell if they'd grown from the earth or fallen from the sky. We wandered slowly through them, letting the sun set around us. The desert cooled with purpose. One by one, the stars arrived—not as pinpricks but as an emergence, a slow unveiling, as if the sky was remembering itself.

I lay on the sand, elbows propped behind me, eyes wide. Above us, the Milky Way spilled across the heavens in a streak of white dust. I had never seen the galaxy like that before—visible, present, thick with implication. I didn't feel small, exactly. I felt placed. There was something clarifying about it: that in the vastness of the universe, you could be both tiny and meaningful.

That evening didn't go into any paper. It wasn't part of my research log. But in the long timeline of that first year—the nights spent debugging code that fought back, the quiet calls home—it anchored something. It reminded me what this field is really about. Not just data and precision, but awe. The raw, disarming fact that the universe offers us stories written in gravity, and all we have to do is learn how to listen.

Between long coding hours and late-night readings, I slowly began to explore Perth—not just the city, but the space it made possible. I'd take the train to Cottesloe Beach, where the Indian Ocean unfolded in perfect gradients of blue, and the horizon felt like a vanishing point for thought. Sunsets there didn't happen—they arrived with orchestration, painting the sky in citrus hues while surfers carved slow arcs into the last light. I visited Kings Park in spring, when wildflowers unscrolled their bright defiance against the bushland, and walked the Swan River path where the wind always seemed to carry a hint of salt and eucalyptus. Perth, in its stillness, taught me to notice more—to see the rhythm beneath the quiet, the beauty in what didn't demand attention.

A few months later, I found myself on a different kind of stage—under bright auditorium lights, holding a wireless mic, trying to explain gravitational waves in under three minutes to a room full of people who had never heard of spacetime ripples. I was participating in the **Three Minute Thesis** competition, trying to distill years of work—signal processing, astrophysical modeling, detector noise, the sheer improbability of measuring something smaller than a proton—into a story that mattered to someone outside the field.

I had always thought of research as a private act, a dialogue between self and code, self and data, self and doubt. But this was different. This was performance. Not in the sense of acting, but of revealing. Peeling back the layers of jargon to get to the awe underneath. I watched as faces leaned in, as curiosity lit up corners of the room like a well-placed equation. And when I won—when I stood holding the big prize cheque and the larger astonishment of it—I realized something had shifted.

The award opened doors, yes. Invitations to give public talks, to speak at schools, museums, talk shows and podcasts. But more than that, it cracked open the boundary between who I was in the lab and who I could be in the world. I began to understand science communication not as a side note, but as an extension of the same impulse that brought me to physics in the first place: to make sense of wonder. To share it. To find the language that can carry someone else across the bridge from confusion to clarity, or at least to curiosity.

Each outreach event became its own kind of experiment. What if I used poetry instead of plots? What if I framed gravitational waves as time-traveling messengers? What metaphors held up? What images failed? I watched how schoolchildren responded with more honesty than most peer reviewers—wide-eyed when it clicked, brutally bored when it didn't. They taught me to listen. To adapt. To remember that this work only matters if it can live beyond the confines of our equations.

Now, years later, I still carry that first desert sky in me. That night in the Pinnacles, when the stars didn't just appear—they arrived. I carry the soft insistence of my mother's hand, the silence of my first Perth apartment, the rhythm of debugging and the music of explaining. And I carry the belief that science is not just about what we know, but about how we share what we're still learning.

Gravitational waves are the smallest change we can measure. But they have taught me something larger—that meaning is not just in the data, but in the telling. That awe is a form of knowledge. And that sometimes, the most profound measurements we make are of our own becoming.



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Gautam Bandyopadhyay

Patriots' Day 2013 – A Personal Diary

April 15, 2013 - AM

It was the Patriots' Day in Boston, a special holiday in Massachusetts celebrated annually on the third Monday of April to commemorate the first battles of the American Revolutionary War. It was also the day of the Boston Marathon, which was set to start later that morning.

For my daughter, Sharmi, and her husband, Cabul, it was a busy morning. They woke up at 5:30 AM. Cabul needed to get ready to leave for Boston in time to join the starting line for the Marathon. He was a proud participant in this elite event.

The Boston Marathon has been held on Patriots' Day every year since its inception in 1897, even during wartime - except in 2020 and 2021, when the event was canceled or postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is one of the six World Marathon Majors, covering several cities and towns in the Greater Boston area. The race, which began with just 18 participants in 1897, now attracts an average of 20,000 runners, including top athletes from around the world. As New England's most widely viewed sporting event, it draws over 500,000 spectators annually.

For many amateur distance runners, participating in the Boston Marathon is a coveted achievement. Our son-in-law, Cabul, was one of them. Earning a spot at the starting line in Hopkinton required excellent physical conditioning, demonstrated through participation in other long-distance races, as well as a dedicated six-month training regimen. Additionally, amateur runners needed sponsorship from a major organization and a commitment to raising funds for a charitable cause. We were incredibly proud that a member of our family was part of this elite event.

At around 6:30 AM, Cabul and Sharmi left their apartment in Bedford, MA, and headed to downtown Boston. Sharmi dropped Cabul near the finish line on Boylston Street, where he would board a shuttle that would take him to the starting point 26 miles away in Hopkinton.

From there, Sharmi drove to the Boston Logan airport, about 15 minutes away, to pick up her sister Mili, who was arriving by a red-eye flight from San Francisco to join the celebration. The sisters then returned to downtown Boston, parked in the Boston Common garage, and walked to the center of activities in Boylston Street before 7:30 AM - well before the crowds began to gather. It was a bright sunny day with a crisp New England chill in the air, promising comfortable conditions for both runners and spectators.

Preparations for the marathon were complete, and the race was about to begin in Hopkinton. The wheelchair division was set to start at 9:00 AM, followed by the professional runners at 9:30 AM. Then, more than 20,000 amateur runners would start in four staggered waves between 10:00 AM and 11:15 AM. Cabul was scheduled to start with one of those four amateur groups.

Boston's downtown streets were lined with professional crowd-control measures with strict security protocols. The Boston Athletic Association, with its long history of organizing the event, had everything well in control. Boylston street was colorfully decorated with thousands of promotional fliers - national flags from several countries were flying along the running route adding to the international flavor to the race.

Before settling in, Mili and Sharmi stopped at a nearby CVS to buy snacks and two collapsible chairs in preparation for the long day ahead. Arriving early, they had their choice of viewing spots and selected a prime location near the India flag, right by the finish line. They set up their chairs against the rope barrier that

separated the runners from the spectators, ensuring an unobstructed view. Cabul wasn't expected to reach Boylston Street until around 3:00 PM, so they had plenty of time to enjoy the event. This was also the time they called family and friends and posted their smiling picture in Facebook.

By 10:30 AM, the first wheelchair racers were approaching the finish line. Hiroyuki Yamamoto from Japan was the first to cross, greeted by thunderous applause from the cheering crowd and the ringing of nearby church bells. Twenty minutes later, Tatyana McFadden won the women's wheelchair race to similar acclaim.



Facebook posting of sisters from the finish line, Boston Marathon, April 15, 2013 – 8:30 AM

Mili and Sharmi watched in awe as the elite runners arrived. The men's winner, Lelisa Desisa from Ethiopia, crossed the finish line just after 11:30 AM, followed by the women's winner, Rita Jeptoo from Kenya, about twenty minutes later. As professional runners continued to stream in, the crowd erupted in cheers, applause, and the sound of ringing church bells, adding to the festive atmosphere.

As the day progressed, the number of spectators on Boylston Street swelled. While some left after the elite runners finished, many others arrived - some to celebrate the event, and many to witness their loved ones achieve their lifetime goal of completing the Boston Marathon.

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Patriots' Day – PM

The sisters sat comfortably near the front, cheering as a steady stream of runners crossed the finish line. By 1:00 PM, many of the 23,000 amateur participants had begun to arrive. Though exhausted from the grueling 26.2-mile race, they were filled with excitement and pride at the rare feat they had just achieved. It was a time for celebration, as friends and families eagerly awaited reunions in the designated meeting areas.

As the afternoon progressed, Mili and Sharmi grew anxious about Cabul's arrival. They were tracking his progress on their phones and knew he was behind his expected pace - but they didn't know why. The Boston Marathon is a demanding challenge for any runner including Cabul. Even elite athletes sometimes drop out due to cramps, injuries, heat exhaustion, or dehydration. The sisters were understandably apprehensive, hoping he would complete the race in good health and reasonable time.

My wife Jayanti and I had planned to reach the finish line by 2:00 PM, before Cabul's expected arrival. Unfortunately, we made the poor decision to drive into downtown Boston on a day when tens of thousands of spectators had flooded the city. The traffic was chaotic, and finding parking proved impossible. After more than an hour of circling in frustration, we reluctantly gave up and headed home, realizing we would likely miss the moment altogether.

I was disappointed at myself - we should have known better and certainly should have used public transportation to get into the city.

It was a little after 2:45 PM - Cabul was expected to arrive on Boylston Street any moment, and the girls were also expecting to see us at the finish line.

Suddenly, the festive atmosphere was shattered by a loud explosion - like an oversized firecracker. It came from the left, not far from where the sisters were sitting. Mili caught sight of smoke and confusion out of the corner of her eye. It looked like people were thrown by the blast. Chaos erupted immediately.

Instinctively, Mili grabbed Sharmi's hand, and together with the crowd around them, they began moving away from the explosion site. But just as they started running, a second blast went off in the very direction they were heading. Panic spread like wildfire as the crowd scrambled in all directions. To them, it felt like a terrorist attack.

At the time of the second explosion, the sisters were at the intersection of Dartmouth and Boylston, about 1,000 feet from the blast sites. They quickly turned right onto Dartmouth Street, trying to get as far from Boylston as possible. As they ran, their thoughts turned to Jayanti and me - we were supposed to be arriving at the finish line around the same time. Mili, panicking, called my cell phone.

Jayanti and I had just started driving back, frustrated and disheartened. We had only been on the road for about five minutes, still within Boston city limits, when Mili's call came in.

I assumed she was calling to ask why we hadn't arrived yet. But instead, I heard her frightened voice: "Where are you guys?"

"We couldn't find any parking and we're late - we're heading back," I said, still frustrated.

But Mili didn't respond to that. Her voice was panicked. "Just keep going. Don't come here. There have been two explosions. We're trying to get away from the area."

"Explosions? What do you mean?" I asked, alarmed.

She was clearly running, breathing hard as she spoke. "Baba, this is serious. Sharmi and I, and everyone else, are trying to get away. It's real chaos."

I was confused and concerned. I quickly switched on the radio, hoping the news would confirm what was happening. There was nothing yet.

I pressed her again: "Explosions? Like an accident? Or a bomb?"

"It could be a bomb - some people might be hurt," she replied breathlessly. "Baba, keep going. We'll call you once we're safe. We must get away now." Then she hung up.

Jayanti and I were stunned. We knew it had to be serious - Mili wouldn't react like that otherwise.

We didn't have to wait long. Within minutes, the radio broke into regular programming. Two bombs had exploded at the Boylston Street finish line, about 200 yards apart, in a span of 14 seconds. The second blast had occurred at 2:49 PM. I looked at my watch - it was 2:52 PM. In the last three minutes, before the news even reached the public, we had already heard from Mili as it was unfolding.

We struggled to grasp the gravity of the situation. Memories of the 9/11 attacks twelve years earlier rushed back - the fear, the confusion, and the destruction. I began to panic, thinking of Mili and Sharmi, and Cabul, who was likely still somewhere on the race route.

The radio was now filled with reports of injuries, even possible fatalities. I couldn't stop thinking about the smiling faces of our daughters posted on Facebook earlier that day. They had been sitting right at the front, in their red and blue chairs, near the rope separating spectators from the runners - apparently close to where the explosions had occurred.

My mind raced. Would there be more explosions? I tried calling Mili and Sharmi again, but their phones wouldn't connect. We soon learned that cell networks in the area were down. We had no way to reach them or Cabul.

We drove back to our condo in Middleton, twenty miles away, as fast as we could. By the time we arrived, “Boston bombing” was all over the news. The horrifying TV footage showed scenes from the very area where the blasts had gone off not long before. It confirmed the worst - many were injured, and there could be fatalities.

One of the most chilling images replayed again and again - runners just yards from the finish line being thrown to the ground by the force of the blast. Their legs buckled, some collapsed mid-stride. It was devastating to watch.

We sat frozen in front of the television, desperately scanning the footage for any familiar faces. Too many of our friends had been at the finish line that day. The fact that Mili had called us so soon after the explosions gave us hope that she and Sharmi had escaped without any physical harm.

We hadn’t heard from our daughters for what felt like the longest time - those were the scariest hours of my life. Meanwhile, calls started pouring in from friends and relatives across the U.S., India, and elsewhere. Many had seen the pictures the sisters had posted from the marathon finish line on Facebook and were understandably worried. All I could tell them was that I had spoken to Mili briefly after the event, and it seemed they had managed to get away from the danger.

Nearly two hours later, I finally received a text from Sharmi. They were safe and had moved away from the marathon area. A few hours later, I learned the details of their escape.

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In the moments following the explosions, Mili and Sharmi’s first instinct was to take shelter inside a building. But memories of 9/11 and the collapse of the Twin Towers haunted them. They feared more blasts and the vulnerability of high-rises. So instead, they kept running - four blocks away to Beacon Street - far enough, they hoped, from the chaos erupting behind them.

As they fled Boylston Street, everything felt like a surreal, out-of-focus movie - crowds running in panic, sirens blaring, voices shouting in confusion. When they finally paused on Beacon Street, they could catch their breath for the first time. Now, at a relatively safe distance, they began to consider their next steps.

Sharmi remembered that her high school friend, Lauren, was in Boston for a marathon watch party. Despite the overloaded network, her text got through. Lauren wasn’t far. They started walking toward her address.

Beacon Street, surprisingly, was still calm. The panic hadn’t fully spread there yet, though the sounds of fire trucks, ambulances, and police cars racing toward Boylston filled the air. Unaware of the bombing, some pedestrians even stopped to ask what had happened. Soon, police began redirecting people and traffic away from the marathon zone.

When the sisters reached Lauren’s address, she was anxiously waiting outside. With teary eyes and tight hugs, they embraced. Inside the apartment, Mili and Sharmi finally felt a semblance of safety, though they were still shaken and disoriented by what they’d just experienced. It all felt unreal.

Inside, the TV was on full volume, broadcasting live footage from Boylston Street. A dozen young adults sat glued to the screen, their faces tense with worry. When the sisters entered, everyone stood up to embrace them. Mili and Sharmi looked at the screen, and saw the chaos they had just escaped, continuing to unfold.

The scenes from the two explosion sites were horrific. Police officers and volunteers were helping emergency responders triage the wounded and prepare them for transport to nearby hospitals. On the screen, the sisters were shocked to recognize their own red and blue chairs, now flipped over and lying just a short distance from the first blast site. The reality of their narrow escape finally sank in. By sheer luck, the spot they had chosen, beneath the Indian flag, was far enough from the explosions to spare them.

Speculation was already spreading on the news. Who was responsible? Was this a terrorist attack? Were more bombs planted in the city? Early reports indicated that the devices were powerful, homemade pressure-cooker bombs designed for maximum damage and remotely detonated.

While Mili and Sharmi began to feel a little safer in Lauren's apartment, their thoughts turned to Cabul. The race had been stopped immediately after the explosions. Their phone tracker showed that Cabul had been about three miles from the finish line when it happened, certainly a safe distance. But he hadn't been reachable since.

When their phones finally started working again, they called me to say they were safe. They also told me that although they hadn't spoken to Cabul yet, he had likely avoided the worst of it.

Mili and Sharmi were anxious to leave Boston. They knew that law enforcement, including the FBI, had already begun arriving to launch an intense manhunt. The sisters left Lauren's apartment and began walking through side streets toward the Boston Common garage, where their car was parked. On the way, they called Shoma, a childhood friend who lived in Brookline with her husband and two children. Shoma had grown up in the same neighborhood in Acton and was a few years older.

To their immense relief, Shoma answered and told them that Cabul had just arrived at her house. He had suffered a serious muscle pull midway through the race near Wellesley College but had continued at a walking pace. Shoma's family had been cheering near Brookline, about four miles from the finish line, and saw Cabul limping but determined to finish. Soon after, Cabul learned of the explosions and the cancellation of the race. His phone had stopped working, and worried about Mili and Sharmi, he made his way to Shoma's house - the nearest place where he hoped to get some news.

With the reassurance that Cabul was safe, Mili started driving. Though they left the garage around 4:00 PM., it took more than two hours to reach Shoma's house just five miles away. Roads were blocked, and they had to navigate back streets and detours to get there.

Their reunion was tearful, filled with hugs, relief, and disbelief. It felt miraculous that all of them had made it through unharmed. Exhausted, they collapsed onto the sofa to finally rest after an unimaginably stressful day.

After a hastily prepared dinner at Shoma's house, the three of them drove to Sharmi and Cabul's home in Bedford, arriving around 8:30 PM. As they entered, they turned on the TV.

Every channel was broadcasting wall-to-wall coverage of the bombing and the search for the suspects. That night, before bed, they learned that the FBI and local law enforcement had already launched a massive manhunt. Until the perpetrators were found and their motives understood, the entire region remained on edge.

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The Morning After

The morning after the fateful Patriots' Day was another mild and beautiful spring day in Boston. But Cabul and the sisters could barely sleep at night. The catastrophic events from the marathon felt like a terrible nightmare, and the scenes kept coming back whenever they tried to close their eyes.

They woke up early. It was a workday, and they needed to get ready.

Mili had an early morning flight to New York for a prescheduled business meeting. Surprisingly, the ride to the airport and boarding process went smoothly, despite the chaos that had gripped the city just the day before. As she settled into her seat on the plane, a sobering thought struck her. How easy it had been for her to leave Boston? Could the bomber, or bombers, have also slipped away unnoticed? That possibility was chilling.

After landing in New York, Mili headed straight to her meeting in Manhattan. By then, the Boston bombing had become a national headline. Her colleagues, already aware of her presence near the blast site, were relieved to see her walk in, safe and healthy. Though she was shaken, Mili joined the meeting as scheduled.

Over 200 miles from Boston and nearly twenty hours since the bombing, the group eventually shifted their attention to the business at hand. The news continued to unfold, but for a few hours, Mili was absorbed in work, temporarily distanced from the trauma.

Later that afternoon, while riding in a taxi back to the airport, the car radio was on. News updates revealed that Boston was now under full lockdown, with a massive manhunt underway. Mili listened, horrified, as the details unfolded. Three people had died, including an eight-year-old boy, and more than a hundred were injured - many severely and some having lost limbs. Several victims remained in critical condition.

As she walked toward her gate at the airport, she paused by a TV monitor showing live coverage. On screen was the photo of a young boy, one of the victims. His face looked eerily familiar. Could he have been the same boy she'd seen earlier that morning, standing with his family near the snack stand at CVS? A wave of sadness washed over her. With a heavy heart, she turned and continued toward her gate.

Mili was emotionally and physically drained—from the trauma of the bombing, the whirlwind of travel, and the intensity of the last 48 hours. Once the plane took off, she fell asleep almost immediately and didn't wake until the announcement of their arrival in San Francisco, five hours later.

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Sharmi, who had dropped Mili off at Logan Airport that morning, headed directly to McLean Hospital, where she worked as a clinical psychologist. Since the bombing, she had been in a state of shock, struggling to think clearly. The chaos and horror of the explosions kept looping in her mind.

She had hoped that being around colleagues and returning to her daily routine might restore some sense of normalcy. But instead, things became more difficult. Everyone wanted to hear her account - what had she seen, how had they escaped, had she noticed anything unusual before or after the blasts? The questions were relentless and answering them brought no comfort.

Overwhelmed and still reeling emotionally, Sharmi left work early. She needed space to process, to step back from the grief and fear that had consumed her since the day before.

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Days After

Unfortunately, the uncertainty and tension in the region showed little sign of improvement in the days that followed. Boston was soon placed under a total lockdown. The FBI, along with local law enforcement and forensic teams, launched an extensive investigation, combing through surveillance footage near the bombing site.

Remarkably, just 72 hours after the attack, on April 18, investigators uncovered a crucial lead. The FBI released two images and appealed to the public for help in identifying the individuals. They were soon recognized as Tamerlan Tsarnaev and his younger brother, Dzhokhar - who were later confirmed to be the prime suspects of the Boston Marathon bombing.

That same day, after the release of the images, the brothers went on the run, sparking a violent and chaotic sequence of events. These included the robbery of a convenience store, the murder of an MIT police officer for his firearm, the hijacking of a vehicle, and a fierce shootout with police in the Boston suburb of Watertown. During the confrontation, Tamerlan was killed, while Dzhokhar managed to flee.

A day later, on the evening of April 19, after an intense manhunt involving thousands of law enforcement personnel, Dzhokhar was finally located. He was wounded and in critical condition, hiding inside a boat in the backyard of a Watertown resident. Thus ended a terrifying and unforgettable week for the people of Boston and the entire nation.

The manhunt and investigation dominated national news, unfolding live each evening as millions of viewers stayed glued to their screens, anxiously awaiting each new development. But for Sharmi, the nonstop coverage was overwhelming. She desperately wished to escape it. The very mention of the bombing triggered painful memories of trauma, reviving anxiety and depression she longed to leave behind.

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Road to Recovery

After the deadly confrontations and eventual capture of the surviving Tsarnaev brother, the city of Boston began to come together to support the victims and their families, and to honor the first responders, who had risked their lives to save others. The now-iconic slogan “Boston Strong” emerged during this period of grief as a tribute to the resilience and strength of the people of Boston.

While the loss, destruction, and suspenseful manhunt dominated the headlines for weeks, many forgot about runners like Cabul and thousands of others whose marathon dreams were abruptly cut short. These amateur runners had trained for months, some for years, arriving at the Hopkinton starting line with the hope of achieving a lifelong goal - crossing the finish line on Boylston Street. But their efforts were halted at exactly 2:55 PM that fateful day. Cabul, just three miles from the finish line, was confused and frustrated, with no idea why the marathon clocks had stopped, and the race had been abandoned.

About two weeks after the bombing, as Boston began its slow return to normalcy, we thought it might be healing for Sharmi, Cabul, as well as for Jayanti and me, to go to Boylston Street and find some closure for that incomplete day. Sharmi, still emotionally shaken, reluctantly agreed to join us.

On Saturday May 6, exactly three weeks after the marathon, we drove to Boston and arrived on Boylston Street around noon. It was a deeply sobering moment. The memories of that day came rushing back. Some remnants from the marathon still lingered - banners, signs, and displays. But what stood out the most were the “Boston Strong” messages, now everywhere. Some were hoisted above the street, nearly every storefront bore the slogan as a symbol of the city’s unbreakable spirit.

We walked to the exact spots where the bombs had exploded. Red markers identified the locations, and a few fresh bouquets of flowers lay nearby. Sharmi pointed out the Indian flag that still fluttered at the site where she had been sitting with Mili, just 30 to 40 feet from the first explosion. Suddenly, tears streamed down her face. She was overcome with survivor’s guilt. “We made it out safely,” she kept repeating, “but so many didn’t...”

Most visitors in the area had solemn expressions, as if trying to imagine the horror of those moments. Makeshift memorials had sprung up along the sidewalk to honor the victims and the injured. In addition to eight-year-old Martin Richard, two others lost their lives near the finish line; they were 22-year-old Lu Lingzi, a Boston University graduate student from China, and 29-year-old Krystle Campbell, a local who had attended the marathon every year. Also killed in the aftermath was 27-year-old MIT police officer Sean Collier, shot in his patrol car by the older Tsarnaev brother before their violent confrontation with law enforcement on April 19.

The victims’ names and photographs were prominently displayed at the memorials. Visitors had left thousands of flower bouquets, baseball caps from Boston and other U.S. teams, and hundreds of Teddy Bears

in memory of the young boy. Walls were covered with messages, prayers for the families, and tributes expressing the overwhelming spirit of “Boston Strong” – of the resilience, courage, and unity.

Sharmi knelt and added her own message to the wall. It was a profoundly sad moment, yet I felt a quiet sense of peace in being there with Sharmi and Cabul, who were both confronting their grief in their own way.

Before we left, Cabul stepped onto the marathon route and jogged about 100 yards, symbolically crossing the finish line that had eluded him on the fateful race day. It brought a brief, lighthearted moment. We all smiled and hugged him at the end of that short jog, a small but meaningful act of closure.



May 6, 2013 – Cabul and Sharmi celebrating Cabul's symbolic 'crossing the finish line', that eluded him on the race day

Year After

At the end of the summer of 2013, just a few months after the tragic marathon bombing, Cabul received some welcome news from the Boston Athletic Association, organizers of the Boston Marathon. They announced that every runner who was still on the course at the time of the bombing and thus unable to finish, would be awarded the commemorative medal typically reserved for finishers. Additionally, these runners were offered a complimentary entry to the 2014 Boston Marathon, should they choose to participate.



Memorial at the finish line for those who lost their lives on the 2013 Marathon Day

For Cabul, this was a very welcome news. While the medal was a kind gesture, it didn't feel the same as earning it by completing the race. The opportunity to run again in Boston felt like a rare second chance. But the decision to accept it was not an easy one - especially for his wife, Sharmi.

The memory of Cabul's intense training for the 2013 race was still fresh. It had taken a toll on both, not only the physical and mental demands on Cabul but also the many adjustments Sharmi had to make in her own life to support his training. And now, there was a new factor to consider - Sharmi had just found out that she was pregnant. By the time of the 2014 marathon, she would be in her seventh month. Was it wise to take on such an emotionally and physically demanding event during this stage of their lives?

After much soul-searching and reassurance from her doctor, Sharmi and Cabul agreed to go for it. Cabul would train again for his dream run. It was December 2013, giving him about four months to prepare.

Race day, April 21, 2014, fell, as always, on the third Monday of the month, celebrated as Patriots' Day in New England. This particular year marked the one year anniversary of the bombing. Despite the painful memories, tens of thousands of runners and spectators returned to Boston to honor the victims and stand in solidarity with the city.

The race started as usual in Hopkinton early in the morning. Not surprisingly, security was tight. The city and race organizers had implemented a series of new safety protocols like, heightened police presence along the course, bomb-sniffing dogs, surveillance cameras, and strict security screenings for all including bag checks and metal detectors.

But the extra security didn't dampen the spirit of the marathon. Spectators lined the course, waving signs of encouragement. Many runners wore "Boston Strong" shirts and gear, celebrating the city's resilience and unity in the wake of the 2013 bombing.

That morning, Cabul left home as scheduled. After seeing him off, Sharmi and I sat down to figure out our day. Understandably, she was anxious and unsure of what she wanted to do. Now well into her pregnancy, I was concerned for her and didn't want her to do anything that might be physically or emotionally overwhelming.

The trauma from the year before was still vivid in Sharmi's memory. She had no intention of going to the finish line again. Still, she agreed, hesitantly, to find a place along the route to cheer for Cabul. We drove to Brookline, near the same spot where his run had been halted the previous year.

Seeing Cabul approach us brought immense relief. Though visibly tired, he looked strong. This was far better than the year before, when a muscle pull had left him limping at that same location.

When Cabul spotted us, his face lit up. He stopped briefly to hug Sharmi and me. It was a deeply emotional moment - nervous but filled with hope. Sharmi's eyes welled up with tears as Cabul resumed his run toward Boston.

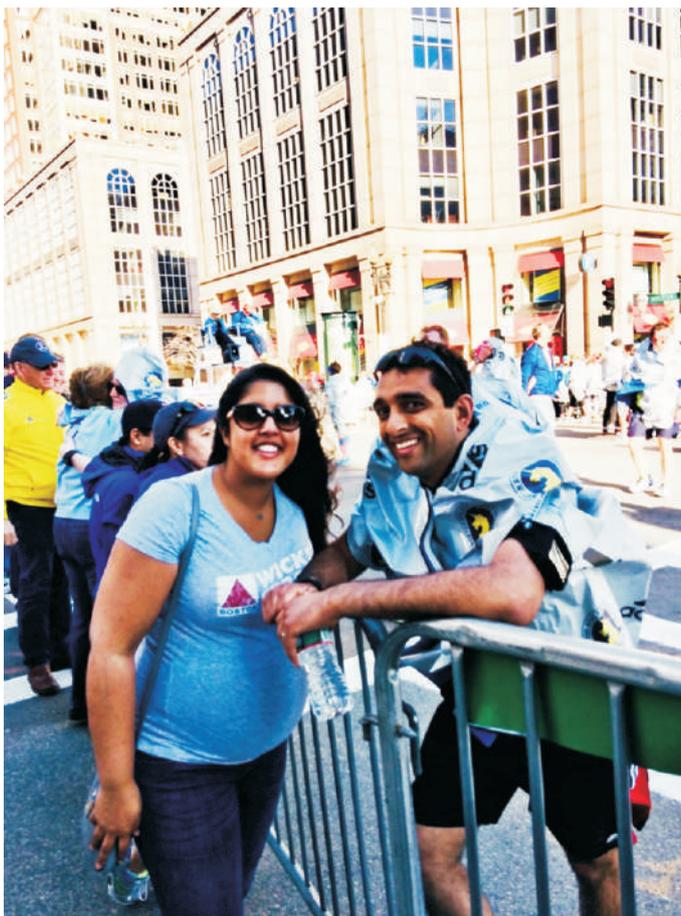
I turned to her and asked, "Should we head home now?"

She thought for a moment, then said softly, "Let's go to Boston. I still don't want to be at the finish line, but maybe we can be nearby."

I was surprised. She was clearly torn but also buoyed by seeing Cabul doing well. Remembering last year's parking nightmare, I was hesitant to drive into the city. But Sharmi, familiar with the area, guided us to a spot in the Boston Common. From there, we walked to Newbury Street, one block from Boylston.

As we neared the corner of Newbury and Dorchester, we found the street closed to pedestrians. Dorchester Street held haunting memories – it is the route Sharmi and Mili had taken to escape the chaos after the explosions. To get closer to the finish line, we had to pass through a new security checkpoint set up for the 2014 marathon.

We stopped there. Cabul's estimated arrival time was approaching. I asked gently, "Do you want to go to the finish line, Sharmi?" I didn't want to pressure her or leave her alone.



Patriot Day 2014 - Cabul and Sharmi at the finish line after Cabul's successful run

Balcony

She hesitated. Then, with sudden resolve, said, “Let’s just go. I want to see him finish the race.”

“Are you sure? Do you feel okay?”

“I feel good,” she said, energized. “I think it’ll be good - for both Cabul and me.”

We passed through security and reached the finish line area on Boylston Street in about five minutes. As expected, the street was packed with cheering spectators. We found a spot near the front and anxiously waited.

I couldn’t help but scan the crowd, my eyes catching every security guard in sight. No backpacks or large bags were allowed, like those used in the bombing. The memory loomed large, but so did the hope of closure.

Soon after 3:00 PM, we spotted Cabul on Boylston Street. The moment they had waited for through months of training, pain, and emotional weight, had finally arrived. With a triumphant smile, Cabul crossed the finish line, his eyes searching for us in the crowd. He made his way over, and Sharmi embraced him in a long, tearful hug.

It was a beautiful moment - one of healing, pride, and quiet victory.

As we drove home, Sharmi cried openly. She said it felt like a great weight had been lifted. Being there at the finish line, despite everything, meant more to her than she had realized. Watching Cabul finally complete what he had started gave her peace, and a sense of hope as they looked ahead to their growing family.



Dr. Gautam Bandyopadhyay is a retired technology and innovation management professional with more than forty years of industrial experience in multinational corporations. Writing is his retirement-hobby. His hope is that someday his American-born children and grandchildren would be interested to read his writings to understand a little bit of their father/grandfather who arrived in USA as an engineering Ph.D. student in University of California, Berkeley, fifty years ago.

Debajyoti Chatterji

On a Slow Boat to Moscow

Back in 2007, my wife and I traveled from St Petersburg to Moscow on a Russian riverboat. The 870-mile, 5-day voyage took us through the Neva and the Volga Rivers and many interconnected lakes, canals and locks. We also spent three days in St Petersburg and two days in Moscow. During this 10-day journey, we visited several historic towns, saw numerous palaces, churches, monuments, and enjoyed spectacular scenery. Equally important, we learned a lot about the physical immensity of Russia, its political and cultural history, and the experiences and aspirations of the Russian people.

In hindsight, it was a good time to travel in Russia. The turbulent years of Gorbachev and Yeltsin were over, and Putin had consolidated his hold on Russia. The economy was stable, and Putin had emerged, in the eyes of the people, as a strong and decisive leader. People were openly discussing the evils of communism and slowly but steadily embracing a capitalistic mindset. Tourists from Western countries, especially America, were welcome and increasing rapidly in number. Hope and enthusiasm were evident among all our tour guides.

Today, the situation is very different. Because of the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, most Western countries imposed severe sanctions on Russia. As a consequence, the Russian economy suffered badly, and tourism dropped precipitously. Now it is hard to imagine a riverboat full of American tourists languidly cruising from St Petersburg to Moscow.

The glossy brochure caught my eye as I rummaged through the pile of junk mail. A cruise on the “Waterways of the Czars”, the cover page screamed in bold letters. I showed it to Sikha. It didn’t take us long to make up our minds. We had wanted to go to Russia for some time. And our previous experience with a river cruise (on the Nile in Egypt) had been very positive.

Before making the reservations, we called our friends, Doyle and Barbara, in Florida. Without hesitation, they agreed to join us. We booked two cabins, across from each other, on a late-July/early-August cruise that would take us from St. Petersburg to Moscow on a Russian riverboat. At the time of booking, we were reminded that getting Russian visas was our responsibility. That proved to be a rather formal and prolonged affair but not challenging.

Our flight to St Petersburg was uneventful. The stopover at Stockholm gave us a chance to stretch our legs, have some coffee, meet several other passengers also headed for the same cruise, and admire the functionality and cleanliness of the airport.

As promised, we were received at the airport by the cruise representative and transported to the boat at the pier on the Neva River. There was a sister boat of the same cruise line, docked next to our vessel. We quickly learned that these two boats followed the same itinerary, and the two captains engaged in friendly one-upmanship throughout the voyage.



Our riverboat on the Neva River, St Petersburg

Balcony

Setting foot for the first time on a huge ocean liner carrying two or three thousand passengers can be disorienting even to a seasoned traveler. In contrast, it takes only a short while to figure out the layout of a riverboat. After finding our cabins, we checked out all the common and important areas: the reception desk, the library, the lounging decks, and of course, the dining rooms and bars. The whole process took less than half an hour, and we developed a pleasant “at-home” feeling quite quickly.

Most of the riverboats in Russia are relatively old: built 15-20 years ago but refurbished in the last 3-5 years. All are designed to fit the narrow locks on the rivers, so they have similar dimensions (approximately 400 feet in length) and similar capacities (about 200 passengers and 100 crew members). Our boat was compact, clean and comfortable – not huge and showy like modern ocean liners that resemble floating 5-star mega-hotels. The cabins in Russian riverboats, however, tend to be small in size. The standard cabins in our boat (about 100 sq ft) had two single beds – with one convertible into a sofa during the day — and a small table and a pint-size refrigerator. There was a closet with double doors, and several shelves on the wall behind the sofa-bed provided additional storage space. A tiny dressing area completed the living space. The bathroom was a miracle of multipurpose efficiency. A sink, a toilet, a small towel shelf, a small toiletries shelf, a handheld shower, and a shower curtain adorned this space, roughly 3 ft by 4 ft in size. At the time of taking a shower, the passenger had to pull the shower curtain around the toilet and the towel shelf – and like it or not, spray water everywhere: on the sink, the walls and the separating curtain! At first, we all thought this was a major inconvenience. However, after a couple of days, we got used to it. The arrangement worked well, even if it was severely cramped. The so-called deluxe cabins (about 200 sq ft) had a full-size bed and a sitting area but the bathroom layout was no different. All cabins had air-conditioning and 220 V outlets. No TV, phone or alarm clock in any room, standard or deluxe.

Our itinerary included a three-night stay on board the boat in St Petersburg, a five-night long voyage through some of the grandest lakes, rivers and canals in Russia, and a two-night stay in Moscow. The boat made sightseeing stops at Kizhi, Goritzky, Yaroslavl and Uglich – four towns known for their historical monuments and/or natural beauty. Shore excursions, with a few exceptions, were included in the cost of the cruise. This was a significant difference from cruises on ocean liners, where extra (and usually steep) charges are the norm for virtually all shore excursions. And those charges could add up to a pretty penny on a ten-day journey!

Our stay in St Petersburg was busy, tiring but memorable. We spent the first evening in a leisurely manner and went to bed soon after dinner to recover from our jet lag. The next two days covered a lot of territory, literally and figuratively. We visited the Winter Palace of Catherine the Great and the Czars’ village, the Fortress of Peter and Paul, and drove through the city’s main thoroughfares, stopping at several interesting sites. A tour of the Hermitage Museum, one of the world’s best endowed, was a rather hurried affair; the place was awesome but too crowded and noisy for enjoyment. We



Winter Palace of Catherine, St Petersburg



Peterhof Palace, St Petersburg

Balcony

spent half a day at the spectacular Peterhof Palace, the summer residence of the czars. Peter the Great built it to emulate Versailles in both size and opulence. The palace faces the Gulf of Finland, surrounded by exquisite gardens and fountains.

We didn't know how tired we were until we went to see the ballet, *Swan Lake*, on the second evening at the St Petersburg Conservatory. The performance was first-rate. However, everyone seemed to be fading away at one point or another. The combination of lingering jet lag and tiring walks through historic sites did a number on most of us.



Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

When we left the Conservatory at about 10:45 pm, there was still light outside, even though the sky was overcast. A quick check of the ship's daily flyer showed that the sun rose that day at 4:36 am and set at 11:23 pm. Someone pointed out that had we been in St Petersburg a few weeks earlier, we would have witnessed "white nights", when sunlight could be enjoyed almost the entire night!

St Petersburg sits on the edge of the Arctic Circle – and is the largest city in that part of the globe. But geography is not its only claim to fame. Rich in history and impressive architecture, the city boasts wide streets laid out according to a well-designed plan, numerous broad canals and bridges crisscrossing the city, beautiful waterfront promenades and palaces, and abundant green space in the form of parks and gardens. Peter the Great founded the city in 1703 to defend Russia against the Swedes with the ambition of creating a grand European city in the style of Paris and Vienna. In time, the city grew not just in power but also in prestige. It was the capital of Russia for more than two hundred years (Moscow regained its status as Russia's capital in 1917 after the Bolshevik Revolution). Over the next three centuries, St Petersburg (or Petrograd in Russian) nurtured Russian authors, artists and musicians, like Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tchaikovsky, Gogol, Turgenyev, and many others. The city was renamed Leningrad in 1924, and took a unique place in world history as it defeated Hitler's infamous siege in 1944, signaling the beginning of the end of the Second World War. In 1991, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the citizens re-baptized the city as St Petersburg by popular vote.

Not everything we saw in the St Petersburg area was pleasing to the eye, though. While the older buildings in and around the city center looked majestic and well-maintained, there were dozens and dozens of Soviet-era monstrosities of apartment houses in the outlying areas. Poorly constructed in the first place, these massive concrete blocks looked ugly and bleak, and many showed abundant signs of neglect and decay. In the countryside near the Czar's village, most of the small wooden houses were in a run-down condition. Our guide explained that many had been dachas or second homes of party honchos during the Soviet rule, and now the owners did not have enough money to repair or renovate their properties.

On Day 4, our boat pulled out of the dock and made its way slowly north on the Neva River which runs from Lake Ladoga, Europe's largest freshwater lake (6800 sq miles in area), for a distance of 46 miles and empties into the Finnish Bay of the Baltic Sea. Neva is often called the "main street" of St Petersburg. Embracing 42 islands, the river feeds numerous canals, brings drinking water to the city, and carries commercial cargo to the Baltic Sea. We spent the next five nights on "the waterways of the czars": an impressive system of interconnected rivers, lakes, canals and locks. From the Neva River, we first cruised the southern side of Lake Ladoga and the entire length of the Svir River (104 miles) — and then entered Lake Onega, an enormous lake. Then came the Sheksna River and the Volga, in that order. Finally, we cruised the Moscow Canal to reach our final destination: Moscow. The total length of the cruise was about 870 miles. In contrast, the distance between St Petersburg and Moscow by road is about 700 miles.

For much of the cruise, we admired the immensity of the lakes and rivers. In many places, we could barely see the shoreline. Only occasionally would the waterway narrow to a width of 250 ft. or so. Our boat was impressively stable throughout the 870 miles long voyage. Not a single passenger, to our knowledge, complained of motion sickness. Until we entered the Moscow Canal on Day 8, miles and miles of forests adorned the banks of the waterways. Nearer to Moscow, factories and apartment houses and billboards began to raise their ugly heads. Mostly, the banks were enchanting; occasionally, they were plain and featureless. Small villages and towns appeared at regular intervals. Even more regularly, we saw graceful (and often colorful) onion-shaped domes, characteristic of Russian Orthodox churches, peeking through tall cedars and lindens or from behind jumbles of two-story dwellings made of wooden siding and metal roofs. Here and there, we saw people fishing near the banks or walking their dogs. Almost always, we could see one or two river boats behind or ahead of us. Surprisingly, we saw very few private pleasure crafts on the waterway. Even near Moscow, marinas were rare.



A church submerged in a man-made lake created during Stalin era

My favorite memory of the cruise is that of a moonlit night on Lake Ladoga when the vast body of water was a shimmering mirror with a dark tree line barely visible along one bank. I could not see the other bank at all. The boat purred along, leaving in its wake gentle waves that created a million mirrors of their own. The sky was full of stars, and the world was at peace with itself.

We also came across some sad consequences of “modernizing and expanding” the waterway during the Stalin era. In the 1930s, Stalin decided to modify the old canal system and generate hydroelectric power by damming and flooding vast sections of land. Many towns and villages were erased from the face of the earth in this process. Today, two tall churches, slowly crumbling into pieces, stand partially submerged in the artificial lakes thus created, silent witnesses to a tragic period in Russian history.

A typical day during the voyage consisted of a half-day shore excursion, either in the morning or afternoon, with the rest of the time free for relaxing, reading, playing cards or games, or sunning on the deck. Meals on board were quite good, beautifully presented — and gracefully served by eager-to-please, gentlemanly Russian waitresses. The dining room gave a 270-degree view of the outside. It was a good place to make friends, and we soon got to know several co-passengers. And, it was fun to celebrate my 63rd birthday there! In a grand surprise, the restaurant manager and the crew of ten waitresses, dressed in pretty Russian outfits, surprised me with a cake with candles and Russian birthday songs. I learned later from Sikha that when she had gone to the reception desk to enquire about a possible surprise celebration, she was told that it had already



Birthday celebration a pleasant surprise from the crew

been planned by the manager! The cruise management had checked all the passengers' passports (which were deposited with the bursar upon boarding) to identify potential birthday boys and birthday girls. A fine touch by the management indeed.

Our first stop was at an artisan's village, Mandrogy, established only a few years ago by a Russian entrepreneur to encourage and showcase Russian handicrafts to the tourists. Being the shopper she is, Sikha went ashore with our friends while I stayed back to read my paperback. The place, I learned later, had quality merchandise but was pricey – and was a fairly pleasant place. The next stop was at Kizhi, an island in the northern part of Lake Onega, primarily to see the two tall, entirely wooden churches, built during Peter the Great's time, with a total of 31 classic onion-shaped domes. The domes were covered with aspen shingles that looked silvery to flaming red, depending on the time of the day. This was a remarkable testimony to the devotion and hard work of early 18th century Russian peasants who built these magnificent structures in a lonely corner of frigid Northern Russia with little money and primitive tools.



An artisan's village in Mandrogy, one of our stops

Goritzy was our next stop. The small town is famous for the monastery founded by Saint Cyril (who brought Cyrillic alphabet to Russia from Byzantium) in 1397. Over the following centuries, the monastery expanded manifold, became a bastion and gained strong political influence. It fell into decline by the end of the 18th century, and today stands as a museum. Only two monks live there now but during the communist rule, the number was a round zero. Lenin believed that religion was “the opium of the people”, and the Soviets shut down virtually all churches, synagogues and mosques in the country. Not surprisingly, very few churches we visited during our 10-day trip were active places of worship even today. The post-Soviet Russian government has handed over many of the churches to appropriate church authorities but they don't have enough money or support to conduct services on a daily basis. Some hold weekly service while others do only “special services” on high holy days. We learned from our guide that even today, less than 10 percent of Russian weddings take place in churches, the vast majority being civil marriages held in administrative offices.

The shore excursion in Yaroslavl was a pleasant departure from the routine of visiting churches and more churches. A large city with over 600,000 inhabitants, it is a pretty city with waterfront promenades, beautiful parks, garden and fountains, — and of course large and impressive churches. The Volga River reaches a width of over 2600 ft in Yaroslavl. The city is one of the oldest in Russia, being founded by Prince Yaroslavl a thousand years ago. — The day was sunny and mildly breezy when we took a walking tour of the waterfront and the gardens, snapping pictures, watching young couples with children in tow, and two newly marrieds kissing passionately in a gazebo overlooking the Volga.

Our final stop before Moscow was Uglich, a small industrial city right on the river bank, featuring an ancient Kremlin (meaning a fortress complex). Our walking tour took us through two churches in the Kremlin: Cathedral of Our Savior's Transfiguration and Church of St Dimitrius on the Blood, the latter in honor of Prince Dimitry, young son of Ivan the Terrible, who was allegedly murdered by Boris Godunov, an infamous character in Russian history. A vivid fresco on an inside wall of the church depicts the scene of Dimitry's murder by assailants.

Until our visit to Russia, I had never been inside a Russian Orthodox church. We certainly got a good exposure to such churches during our trip. Russian churches are indeed very different from, say, Roman Catholic churches – in outside appearance, inside floor plan as well as interior decoration. The often-colorful

onion-shaped domes, usually many in number, are characteristic of the external appearance. Inside the layout is usually square in shape, not in the form of a cross as in a Catholic cathedral. The most eye-catching difference inside lies in the decoration. All walls and ceilings of Russian Orthodox churches are totally covered with frescoed images of saints and scenes from the Bible. Icons (meaning exact images) of saints are extremely important to Russians in their homes and in their daily lives. Every church – and many roadside souvenirs stands – sold hundreds of icons in every conceivable size.



*Church of the Transfiguration, Kizhi Island
(307 years old, all-wooden construction)*

Speaking of souvenirs stands, we encountered them at every stop. They were there at all piers, near churches and palaces, and near theatres, museums and parks – basically anywhere tourist traffic was expected. The vendors were mildly pushy but never aggressive. They generally sold Russian handicrafts: wooden nesting dolls, icons, jewelry boxes made from aspen bark, amber jewelry, etc. Some stands carried textile products – scarves, tablecloths, t-shirts and the like – while others sold fur hats and coats. Only a few times did we see vodka and beer stores. Unlike bazaars in Asia and Middle East, price negotiations were low key and discounts quite modest. The shoppers among us enjoyed the shopping times allotted during all the shore excursions. While Sikha bought traditional Russian handicraft, I bought an album of Soviet era postage stamps, red t-shirts with CCCP logo and other reminders of those harsh days.

Before going to Russia, I had a vague image in my mind of average Russians: generally poor — large men, often with beards and not well-dressed, and large women, plainly clothed and stern in demeanor. Years of Hollywood caricature might have been responsible for this imagery. In Russia, I (and many others on our cruise) certainly received a gentle re-education. People were not visibly affluent but not visibly poor either. Men and women alike were mostly trim; we saw rather limited number of overweight people, whether in big cities or in small remote towns. Young men and women far outnumbered senior citizens. We did see a few old ladies, selling small bouquets of flowers, near the piers – basically seeking alms in exchange for token items. Clearly there was poverty in Russia but it seemed to be hitting the old and the very old much harder than the young. That Russia is not affluent like its western European neighbors or the US was obvious, at least to me, from two simple observations. Lawns and flowerbeds— even near major tourist destinations —were un-mowed and full of weeds (the one exception being the exquisite Kremlin gardens and grounds in Moscow). And few private motorboats were visible on even the most scenic and urban parts of the waterway.

During the cruise we had the opportunity to attend lectures on Russian cuisine, Russian handicraft and Russian history and modern life. Valera, the guide who addressed the last subject at length spoke excellent English, had lots of interesting facts, and was frank and bitter – bitter about the Soviet era and the era of Gorbachev and Yeltsin. While Russian history from the 11th century to the beginning of the 20th century was informative, the parts that captured my attention most were the three remarkable periods in the last 100 years: the Soviet era (beginning with the October 1917 Bolshevik revolution and lasting about 70 years), the Gorbachev-Yeltsin transition years (approximately 1985-2000), and the current Russian Democratic period (Putin, post-2000). Valera disliked the Soviet period intensely but simply loathed the Gorbachev-Yeltsin years. The country was in a total chaos, especially under Gorbachev, and Valera gave stark examples of the chaos following the rapid introduction of the “market economy”. “We simply did not know what market economy meant. We had read about it in books but no one, including Gorbachev, who was a lifelong Communist, had any experience with it”, Valera explained. Yeltsin and his associates were thugs and crooks, he asserted — and told us the story of the mysterious “vouchers” that were given to every Russian by Yeltsin whose purpose and value could not be fathomed by anyone. People thought they were useless papers and sold them to whoever would buy them for whatever price. But then, lo and behold, suddenly the government

announced, after the vouchers had been scooped up by people-in-the-know, that these vouchers constituted shares of newly privatized Russian oil and natural gas companies, the jewels in the crown of state resources! Overnight Russia created a handful of billionaire oil czars, at the expense of hundreds of millions of common people.

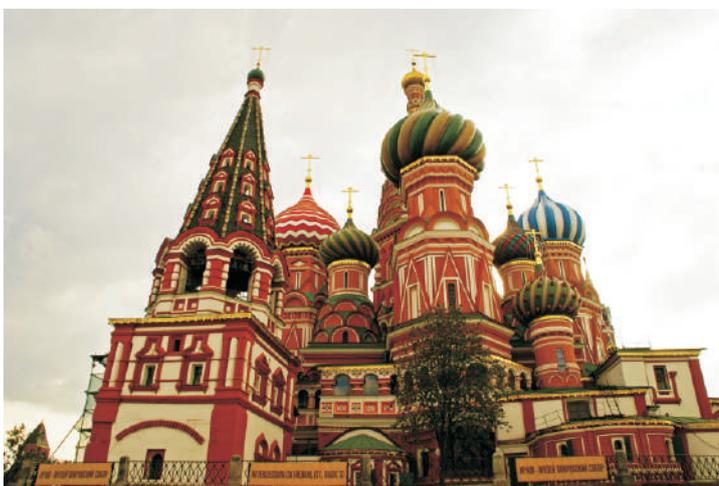
The one action by Yeltsin that was unhesitatingly commended by Valera (and by the other guides during their presentations on subjects of their choice) was the “privatization” of state-owned homes and apartments. During the Soviet era, people did not own their residences, the state did. The citizen paid a rent to the state for the use of the property. Yeltsin made the residing citizen the outright owner of the apartment or house where he or she lived. So overnight every Russian citizen became owner of private property, an act that removed the terrifying burden of “free market housing” off the shoulders of millions of Russians. New private high-rise apartments in cities like Moscow are sleek and fancy but they are exorbitantly pricey. Yet people can afford to live in Moscow or St Petersburg because they don’t have to buy an apartment; they can live where they lived before, no matter how cramped or shabby their quarters might be.

According to a recent survey of Russian public opinion, shared with us by Valera, Putin is a highly liked “strong, thoughtful and disciplined” leader, with over 70 percent popularity. The most hated Russian leader, according to the same poll, was Boris Yeltsin, closely followed by Stalin and Gorbachev.

I cannot vouch for the reliability of the survey nor can I be sure that Valera’s sentiments are shared by the majority of Russians. But similarly negative feelings about the Soviet era and the Gorbachev/Yeltsin years were often expressed – may be with less flair and facts — by other guides during everyday sightseeing commentaries.

Listening to the talks on the Russian history, I could not help but conclude that, since its very inception in the 11th century, the country had been ruled by absolute power – power in the hands of emperors, czars, communist party honchos, and then by “elected” presidents – but not by true representation and will of the people. Things may be changing now under Putin slowly and with some encouraging signs.

Back to the cruise and our final destination, Moscow, a huge, bustling metropolis of almost 13 million people. Like St Petersburg, the city is full of grand buildings, parks, museums, galleries, wide boulevards, and most notably churches, hundreds of them, large and small, to be seen everywhere. Traffic was murderous most of the time, and there were billboards galore. Free market has definitely grown strong roots in Moscow. The architecture is rather mixed: majestic imperial buildings next to bland blocks of concrete apartments, and fine parks adjoining garish-looking shopping areas. A tourist could spend days visiting the many fine historical sites in the city, enjoy a variety of cultural programs, and admire the treasures in grand museums and galleries. We had only two days in Moscow and were doomed to a severely selective tour of the most famous sites: the huge Red Square with the beautiful Cathedral of St Basil, the wonderfully ornate GUM Department store, and the stark Lenin Mausoleum. The walled Kremlin complex of palaces (now turned into government buildings and museums) with churches and gardens was certainly worthy of its international reputation as a massive historic landmark. The Armory in the Kremlin complex has an enormous collection of czarist treasures – from imperial jewels to czarinas’ dresses, from royal coaches to battle arms, from Faberge eggs to antique tapestries. We also made a quick stop in front of the Moscow University, a splendid example of the Stalinist gothic architecture. Some passengers took the optional tour of the Tretyakov Gallery, the largest and most prestigious gallery in Moscow, but Sikha and I were too tired to visit another crowded building on our penultimate day in Russia.



Cathedral of St Basil, Moscow

We saw a performance of the Moscow circus, and we were really glad that we did. The circus is housed in a permanent building, and performances are held year-round. Unlike the Swan Lake performance in St Petersburg that was attended mostly by foreign tourists like us, the Moscow Circus crowd was mainly Russian. The one-ring circus with a live band in a very showy arena was a class act, beautifully staged and orchestrated from the beginning to the end. The Bolshoi Ballet, the other famous cultural symbol of the city, was closed for renovation, so we could only view it from outside.



GUM Department Store, Moscow

The last evening on board the ship was a nice time for all to reminisce about the trip, exchange addresses and phone numbers, raise farewell toasts, give hugs and kisses, — and hand out gratuities in envelopes to the crew. We had gotten to know and like the waitresses; they spoke broken English but gave excellent service. Not surprisingly, Sikha became a little teary-eyed while saying goodbye to them.



Kremlin, Red Square, Moscow

Our Florida friends had a 7 am flight out of Moscow the next day, so had to go to bed early. They (and a number other passengers with similar departure times) were scheduled to disembark at 4 am. But they were not going to be sent off without breakfasts. The dining room served breakfasts to these early leavers at 2 am! Our flight was at a more civilized time, 1:30 pm, so we could partake in the normal breakfast session at 7 am.

The cruise on the “Waterways of the Czars” was a memorable experience. But did we see the real Russia? Yes and no. Russia is a mind-bogglingly immense country; it is by far the largest country in the world (6.6 million sq miles, 75 per cent bigger than the US) with 143 million people and eleven time zones (that’s right, eleven). It stretches across some 5000 miles and is home to many ethnic peoples and cultures. Quite naturally, our trip covered a small part of this vast country, and we had only limited but tantalizing glimpses of the real Russia. But there were no curtains separating us from the country or the people; no one was blocking our view at any place or at any time. The one shortcoming of a cruise like ours, however, was the unintentional insularity characteristic of group tours with packed itineraries. No real opportunity to mingle with the people, visit their homes, eat with them and hear their hopes and concerns first-hand. In fact, we never even ate in a Russian restaurant – all our meals were served on the boat. We may take the Trans-Siberian Railroad someday from Moscow to Vladivostok! That surely would give us an up-close-and-personal view of this great country and its people.



Devjyoti Chatterji was born in the historic city of Puri, Odisha, where he spent his childhood. He completed his B.Sc. from Ravenshaw College in Cuttack, and later pursued engineering at the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Kharagpur. After completing his education in India, he moved to the United States for higher studies. In the whirlwind of work and professional life, his literary pursuits took a backseat. However, following his retirement, the passion of his youth has returned with renewed vigor. Now a resident of New Jersey, he actively participates in various Bengali cultural organizations. He spends his time writing poetry and researching the history of Bengali immigrants, rediscovering his love for literature and heritage.

Suparna Chatterjee

Memory of Salt and Silence: Grief and Echoes of Childhood

Last August, grief arrived like a monsoon - sudden, overwhelming, and relentless. In the brief span between January and August, I lost both my parents. The silence that followed was not hollow - it stretched like a vast sky, heavy with the echoes of their laughter, their love, and the quiet weight of memory. In that silence, my childhood stirred - not just in thought, but in sensation. It returned in the stray white cloud drifting across a blue sky, in the aroma of spices spluttering in hot mustard oil, in the rustle of starched cotton sarees, and in the cool touch of tiled floors under bare feet.

Their house, once vibrant with voices and footsteps, had fallen into a hush commanded by the summer heat. The ceiling fan spun lazily above, its rhythm matching the slow heartbeat of the afternoon. On the walls, framed photographs of Ma and Baba watched over us - Ma smiling gently, Baba's brows furrowed in quiet contemplation. As food was served to those who came to pay them respects, I could almost hear Ma in the kitchen, her bangles clinking softly as she stirred the pot, the scent of *panch phoron* rising like a memory.

I walked barefoot through the rooms of the house in Kolkata, each step echoing with memories. The worn tiles beneath my feet held the laughter of childhood, the aroma of festive meals, and the hush of quiet evenings. This house had been our world - alive with stories, arguments, celebrations, and love. Each meal shared with my uncle, aunts, and cousins felt like stepping into a living scrapbook - stories from their childhoods unfolding between bites, laughter echoing through the room, and smiles stitched together from memories long tucked away. We would be listening, smiling, and quietly cherishing the threads that connect us across time. But today, it stood still. The silence was heavy, fragrant with incense curling in front of our parents' photo. It felt like the house itself was holding its breath, waiting to be let go. I wandered slowly, gathering its essence one last time before it would belong to someone else.

In the *thakur ghor*, I paused by the old wooden cabinet, its glass doors fogged with age. Inside were remnants of Ma's spiritual journey - postcards of deities, faded photographs of saints, puja plates, a brass bell, and a small tin of sandalwood paste. I reached for the bell and rang it once. The sound was sharp, clear, and startling in the stillness. It felt as though the house had exhaled.

Outside, the stray cloud drifted on, indifferent to the grief within. But in that moment, I felt Ma's presence - not in ghostly whispers, but in the tangible things she had touched, the rituals she had kept, the stories she had told. I sat cross-legged on the floor, letting the memories wash over me like the first rain after a long drought.

Grief sharpens memory. It turns the ordinary into relics.

There is a drawer in my home that stays closed - not from neglect, but out of quiet reverence. Inside, folded with care, are the belongings Baba used during his time with us in Perth. A Punjabi, a shawl, a pen he left behind, and the faint remnants of his aftershave on the clothes he wore. The shawl still carries that sharp, citrusy scent - a fragrance that once lingered in the air long after he had left the room. It comforts me and unsettles me too. It is a reminder of presence and absence, woven together. A whisper of him that lives on in fabric and fragrance.

Baba was a man of quiet precision. His handwriting, always with a jotter refill pen, slanted artistically across the page. He wielded the English language with clarity and grace, choosing his words with the same care he took in folding his shirts. When he spoke, it was never hurried. His voice carried a calm authority, and his words - crisp, deliberate - had the power to soothe, instruct, or inspire.

He had a gift for fixing things. Torn handbags, ripped books, frayed salwars - nothing was beyond his repair. But it was not just objects he mended. Baba had a way of untangling the knots in my life. Whether it was the mess of wool during a knitting project or the emotional tangles of school and college, he approached each challenge with patience and skill. His hands, steady and sure, seemed to carry a quiet magic.

I remember sitting beside him as he worked, watching the way he threaded needles or glued pages back into place. There was a rhythm to his movements, a kind of meditative grace. He never made a fuss, never sought praise. He simply fixed what was broken, and in doing so, made the world feel whole again.

Now, in his absence, I find myself reaching for that same steadiness. I try to emulate his calm, his clarity, his ability to mend. But there are things I cannot fix - like the ache of missing him, or the silence that fills the spaces he once occupied.

Ma's voice lingers on in our kitchen, in the way I hum while stirring milk for payesh, her favourite ritual. The clink of her bangles, the rhythm of her footsteps, the way she would press her palm to my forehead when I was unwell - all come rushing back, uninvited but welcome. These memories do not ask permission. They arrive like breath - essential, involuntary.

I find myself peeling mandarins slowly, just as we did on winter afternoons on our terrace in Kolkata. The burst of citrus in the air makes my eyes water, and for a moment, I am back in the city of my childhood - sunlight slanting across the walls, woollen blankets soaking in the last warmth of the season, laughter bouncing off the rooftops. My sister and I would compete to spit the seeds the farthest, our giggles rising above the hum of the city. Ma would sit quietly, her hair slick with fresh oil and twisted into a neat bun at the nape of her neck, the soft, familiar scent of KeoKarpin lingering in the air like a whispered memory, drifting behind her like a tender echo from another time.

Even the textures of childhood return: the scratchy wool of school sweaters, the gentle chill of tiled floors cradling my cheek - summer's hush wrapped in stillness, the grainy feel of chalk dust on my fingers after writing on the class board. These sensations, once mundane, now shimmer with meaning. They are the language of love I did not know I was learning.

There were occasional Sunday mornings when Baba would take me to the local market. The air was thick with the scent of ripe mangoes, fresh coriander, and the metallic tang of fish laid out on ice. He had let me choose the brightest marigolds for the puja, and we would return home with jute bags heavy with groceries and stories. I remember the way he held my hand - firm, protective, and always warm. In the chaos of the market, his presence was my calm.

On rainy afternoons, Ma would prepare an array of *telebhaja* - golden, crispy fritters that filled the home with their irresistible aroma. There were delicate onion rings, or *piyanjee*, thin slices of eggplant dipped in spiced batter - *beguni* - and rounds of potato, transformed into *phloori*, each one perfectly crisp. She served them hot, straight from the pan, alongside steaming cups of *cha*, the perfect comfort against the rhythm of falling rain. The windows fogged up, the radio played old Bengali songs on *Onurodher Ashor*, and the world outside blurred into a watercolour of grey and green. Inside, everything was golden. I would sit cross-legged on the floor, drawing with wax crayons on old newspaper sheets, while Ma stirred the batter, her bangles chiming like tiny bells of comfort.

Migration, like grief, is a transformation. It reshapes the self, redefines belonging. When I moved from Kolkata to Perth thirty-three years ago, the shift was not just physical - it was emotional, cultural, and deeply personal. The language around me changed, the rhythm of life slowed, and the familiar sounds of street vendors, temple bells, and monsoon rains were replaced by the hum of suburban stillness. In this new landscape, I found myself reaching for fragments of home - not out of resistance, but out of longing. Longing for a world where love was spoken in spices and silence, in rituals and routines, in familiarity and faces that emit warmth.

Balcony

My husband, with his innate sweet tooth and gentle understanding, became my anchor. Whenever the ache of homesickness crept in - often unannounced, triggered by a scent, a song, or a quiet moment - he would offer to make his famous sugar toast. Just buttered bread with a sprinkle of sugar, but to me, it was more than comfort food. It was a gesture of love, a bridge to my childhood, a reminder that someone saw my sorrow and wanted to ease it. In that simple act, I felt seen. I felt held.

Cooking for me became another portal to the past. The draft of spices rising from the pan would suddenly transport me to lazy Sunday afternoons in Kolkata. I would be back on our terrace with Ma and my sister, peeling mandarins under the pale winter sun. That moment - so ordinary then - now glows golden in memory, a snapshot of innocence and belonging.

The warm, mellow scent of ghee - soft and golden - pulls me back to the quiet childhood kitchen, so unlike the bold, piercing aroma of mustard oil. Even now, the sound of cumin, mustard, and fennel seeds crackling in hot oil lingers like a half-remembered lullaby from home. Ma's voice drifts back to me, soft and sure, reminding me how a simple dish could turn magical with just a change in the cooking medium. Ghee for richness, mustard oil for boldness, coconut oil for comfort - each choice carries her touch, her knowing. In those quiet kitchen moments, it feels like she is passing down a kind of gentle sorcery, one spoonful at a time.

The evening call of Ma's conch shell during pujo still lingers in my soul - a sacred rhythm echoing through time, etched in memory like incense in the air. Clothes once danced in the breeze, strung across terraces on nylon lines - our own patchwork sky. A bent TV antenna, always being adjusted for better reception, doubled as a perch for crows and sparrows.

Mishti doi, thick and sweet, served in cool earthen pots. Jhalmuri, crisp and fiery, scooped from newspaper cones by the college gate vendor - each bite a story. Even the traffic - rickshaws weaving through honking buses, the occasional tram gliding by - once felt like chaos. Now, it feels like a symphony I did not know I would miss until it faded into memory.

Durga Puja was the heartbeat of our growing up years. The city transformed - pandals rose like dreams on every corner, the air thick with incense and anticipation. We would dress in new clothes, visit family, eat bhog on banana leaves, and listen to the dhak echoing through the night. In Perth we try to recreate the spirit, not the same, but it is something. It is a way to keep the rhythm alive, to whisper to the past: I remember.

In my growing up in Kolkata, birthdays were not just dates on a calendar - they were celebrations of love, creativity, and tradition. In our middle-class Bengali household, the number of gifts did not matter as much as the thought behind them. My mother, ever resourceful, would wrap simple stationery - erasers shaped like animals, glitter pens, notebooks with cartoon covers - in imaginative packaging to spark my curiosity. Each gift was a small marvel, a token of her affection and ingenuity.

Payesh was non-negotiable. That creamy, cardamom-scented rice pudding, slow-cooked with love, was the soul of every birthday. Alongside it came the cake, adorned with candles, often from Nahoum's - the legendary Jewish bakery tucked inside New Market. Its rich plum cake or buttery vanilla sponge was a birthday staple, and the ritual of picking it up was as cherished as the cake itself.

But nothing matched the glamour of the birthday dress. While Durga Puja demanded a new outfit for each day - from Shoshti to Nabami - my birthday dress held a special place. It was chosen with care, bought from New Market, where the air buzzed with bargaining and the scent of leather, spices, and fresh fabric. Baba would take a rare day off to accompany me, his presence turning the shopping trip into a treasured event. I remember the thrill of touching sequined frocks and lace-trimmed skirts, imagining how I would look in each one, knowing he would nod with quiet approval.

Balcony

These birthday rituals - simple, sensory, and deeply personal - became emotional landmarks. They remind me that joy does not always come from grandeur, but from the love tucked into everyday gestures: a mother's creative wrapping, a father's early morning outing, a slice of cake shared under fairy lights.

I adorn vases with fresh-cut flowers from the garden, cook Ma's signature dish with care, and clean the house with the same meticulousness she taught me. I mend old clothes to fit right, snip patterns to reuse with intention, fold blankets with precision, and peel mandarins slowly - each act a gentle invocation of the past. These are not just habits. They are anchors. In a new land, these small gestures reminded me: I had not left home behind. I carried it with me.

My parents are no longer here, and their absence echoes through the quiet moments of my days. Yet they live on - in the way I stir a pot, in the scent of cardamom rising from the kitchen, in the rituals that anchor me. Their love is stitched into the fabric of my being, invisible but enduring. Between Kolkata and Perth, between memory and becoming, I carry them with me. I am still growing, still unfolding - shaped by their legacy, sustained by the love they left behind.



Suparna is a Senior IT project manager in the public sector. Amid tight schedules, her dream of becoming an author thrives, driven by a passion for storytelling. Her narratives echo the migrant's grief, seasoned with lived experiences and the joy of travel. Balancing work with the enchantment of motherhood, Suparna finds laughter, love, and a craving for precious time with her family.

Indrani Mondal

Rakto Karobi – A Persistent, Modern Dilemma – Thoughts then and Now

Rakto Karabi is one of the most discussed and most analyzed plays written by Bengal poet laureate Rabindranath Tagore, in the early twentieth century. It is interesting to note that over the years this play has been adopted and presented with experimental variations and different styles by several renowned theater groups mostly from Bengal, even though poet himself had cautioned against interpreting this piece as a stylized allegory. The play was translated in English, also in the early twentieth century, by the poet Laureate himself, with the title Red Oleanders. The English version of the play got a lukewarm reception as it was considered too symbolic for a stage performance by Western critics.

When I read Rakto Karobi as a student and tried to understand its significance, here's what my thoughts were. Rakto Karobi seemed metaphoric and non-substantial to me on first read. Soon I realized it was mostly about a war of worlds - the colossal strength of the world of industrialization, very evident in the early twentieth century, against the much neglected because subtle and outdated, strength of the world of agriculture. Though this war of worlds was the backdrop of the play and at the center of it, I couldn't find much action packed depictions of the war itself except in snippets and suggestions. It just had this basic theme of the tension of these two ideologies of blatant materialism and mindfulness, which though drawn to each other, can never meet and reconcile due to their inherent differences. This straightforward war of worlds was made complex by portraying it through a war of words in a love hate relationship dynamic. For me the tide of evocative language and wordy dialogue hampered the pace of the play's performance. I missed the actual incidents of conflict and drama that usually characterizes staged plays.

As my understanding and appreciation of Tagorian literature matured, I soon realized that Rakto Karobi was penned by a playwright who was also a versatile romantic poet and a profound philosopher. Thus his love of language and word nuances would be apparent in his play, needless to say. Also humans were fast losing touch with Nature and the craze for materialistic possessions was often at the cost of ignoring Nature's healing powers and its crucial role in the wholistic wellbeing of society. The poet had environmental issues on his mind and was trying to interest his audience in that cause. The characters that had seemed disembodied to me when I first read the play, soon took on new depth and dimension.

Ranjan though never seen in the play, became a tangible emblem of the always loved and adored simple, pure life, untainted by greed of material might. Nandini stood for the sensitive and discerning mind that could figure out the value that Ranjan personified. She needed to symbolize that precious awareness through the tender natural wealth and abundant color of red oleander or Rakto karobi flowers, the poet's direct reference to treasures in Nature. The passion with which Nandini awaits and pursues Ranjan takes this conflict of perspectives as the background of the play, to the level of a love story. The love story in turn spills over to a much wider plane of finding the true meaning of what happiness is for each of us in our lives.

The poet playwright's emphasis remains all along that true and quintessential joy lies in acknowledging the role of simplicity, humility and naturalism in our human existence, away from momentary satisfactions that physical grandeur brings. Tragedy strikes when the valuable, ever sought after ideal is slaughtered by conniving materialists and Ranjan is assassinated by double crossing, power hungry materialist middlemen and war lords.

Raja, personifies material might, which gives him ultimate strength to control. He is always depicted as behind a screen or a barrier to symbolize his distance from regular petty workers of the soil and poor laborers whose hard work and rigorous toil make him rich and give him the power to rule. In this way, I soon realized that in this multilayered play of tensions and tug of war of power, the word wars filled with intense rapid fire

conversations loaded with double meaning, were really very interesting and often gripping. Even though the poet himself had forbidden reading between the lines of this play and finding loaded underlying meaning, it was easy to see Rakto Karobi is a play with a purpose and a definite message. The interplay of different philosophies in the play are there because there were also raising crucial questions in the poet philosopher's sensitive, thoughtful mind.

In the past Rakto Karobi's focus to me was the love story of Nandini and Ranjan who passionately tried to find and hold on to each other knowing full well that worldly forces would always keep them apart.

But later on and specially now, the character of Raja seems most realistic and true to the times. This role of the king who sits atop all the material wealth his underlings acquire for him is the most tormented persona of all in the play. He can never be satisfied with what he is and has, as he is constantly questioned by the earnest Nandini who dares to defy his strength and openly adores what Ranjan stands for. Her ardent hope and conviction that the pure and the good will eventually triumph, fascinates him and eventually raises doubts in his mind about the veracity of his wealth and sovereignty. His ego is hit hard when he finds that his own henchmen, fearing his weakening towards Nandini's philosophy, symbolized poetically by her lovely Rakto karobi, have fooled him into killing Ranjan, the very symbol of his antithesis and Nandini's ideal. It makes him question his position of ultimate power that he had hitherto believed in. Unable to bear the guilt and truly swayed by what the naturalists believe in, he joins Nandini and her followers ready to fight materialism and find a new all inclusive way of life where man and nature can live in harmony and there is no greed.

This conclusion clearly hints at Tagore's faith in naturalism showing the way to temper materialist surfeit with purity and simplicity a very modern wholistic approach to life and living. So it is not hard to see that Rakto Karobi is more than a play, it is a declaration of Tagorian philosophy which had its firm roots in the ancient Upanishadic values of simple living and high thinking, which could temper the terrors and power games that too much materialistic wealth and forceful control bring.

Indeed it was this model on which Tagore later built his brainchild and his greatest legacy Vishwa Bharati University, in Shantiniketan. The mission of this school is to provide education and vocational training that reflect a harmonious blend of traditional values and modern science in contemporary learning, encompassing global participation and universal accord.



Indrani Mondal studied in Calcutta and Jadavpur Universities, India, and holds a PhD in Philosophy and Social Studies. A freelance writer in both English and Bengali, over the last decade Indrani has written fiction, nonfiction and poetry mainly on social and cultural issues facing immigrants and has published three books of poetry "Fugitive Wings", "Pratidin Sati Hoi" and "Raater Sarir". She is an active member of the Chicago Creative Circle, Unmesh and is the current coeditor of a bilingual online newsletter.

Ranajit Mitra

Benubonochaya – Kolkata

Sunday by the lake

I woke up before dawn on Sunday when it was still quite dark. Looking through the large window I saw the lake ringed by tall, leafy trees. The trees seemed like silent, ghostly sentinels of the water that was dark and so mysterious; deep and so unforgiving.

As it got a little lighter, the color of the water changed and the surface became calm, glassy, and still; like a mirror it reflected the brooding sky.

In a little while, the first rays of the rising sun touched the lake, and the water turned a golden hue, and you could see small fish cracking ripples on the surface. A flock of birds, their wings the color of sunlight, stretched out towards the sky and flew away.

The voice of the morning Ajan from a nearby mosque floated across the lake, melodious and haunting.

From my balcony I saw a group of boys, from the huts by the lake, jump in the water and race each other across the water.

The lake was ringed by wooden platforms, and in the late morning, men spread their fishing gear on them and started casting. Peals of joy rang out every time an angler hooked a fish.

But in the afternoon, huge dark clouds spread their wings and the wind started to moan. The fishermen packed up and left in a hurry.

Soon the rains came. Torrents of water, lofted by the wind, drifted over the lake in waves; thunder boomed and lightning streaked across the sky. A deluge of water filled the world and nothing was visible any more. The clouds raced each other to the horizon. Who were they going to rendezvous with?

Meghdoot revisited!!

Finally, the rain subsided, then even the drizzle petered out, and all was calm and peaceful. The dirt and grime were gone; everything was clean and new.

The sun came out in all its majesty and slowly started its descent. The sky evolved into beautiful shades of red and pink, and the golden orb reflected on the water. Streaks of sunlight filtered and refracted through the tree branches and cast wondrous, fleeting shadows. The birds chirped all the way to their nests.

Lovers, two by two, sauntered on the path by the lake, totally absorbed in each other, as they passed under my balcony.

In the distance, the sun finally sank into the void of the lake and a magnificent stillness reigned. Then all was dark, and the vast silence of the night descended over the lake.

Another day had passed.



Ranajit was born in Kolkata. He was educated at St. Joseph's Irish Christian Brothers School and then at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Kharagpur. Later he obtained a Masters Degree from the State University of New York. Had a long career in the USA in Telecommunications and traveled the world on business for many years. Currently he lives in New Jersey.

Anandita Chowdhury

The Music Teacher

Rita woke up with a start. Had she dozed off on the couch again? And this sleep, why does it descend upon her whenever she settles down to watch TV, and elude her when she goes up to bed?

The doorbell rings. This is what must have woken her up. But who can it be?

Rita looks down at herself. She has not bothered to change out of her pjs today. Again. This is a new habit, one she tells herself she must break out of, tomorrow. That tomorrow never seems to come.

"Ritamashi!"

A voice calls from outside.

"Ke re!" Who is it? Rita answers by habit.

There was a time this verbal exchange through her closed door was very common. A time quite some time ago. How does that reply come back to her instantly?

She opens the door to a young woman clad in kurti and leggings, hair tied back in a ponytail, a hesitant soft smile on her face.

"Chinte parcho Mashi?"

Does she know her, Rita thinks for a moment, and then,

"Sampurna!"

With a cry of joy Rita grabs her arm and pulls her in. "Come, come, oh I am seeing you after such a long time, how are you! Come, sit, sit!"

Rita sees Sampurna looking around, her gaze landing on the packing boxes. "I am planning to sell the house and move to be near Babu," Rita explains.

"Oh, where is Babuda now?"

"He is in California, did you get to meet his wife Joyce? No, I don't think so, you had already married and moved by then. Right?"

Sampurna doesn't seem to hear. She notices Shyamol's photo with the garland on it. Her face falls. "Oh! Shyamolmesho!"

"He passed away last year. That's why Babu doesn't want me to stay here by myself. How are your parents doing? Haven't heard from them for ages, are they doing well in Kolkata?"

"Mashi, ma passed away in the second wave of the pandemic. I could not even go, the flights were restricted by then. Baba never seemed to recover from the shock, stopped going out of the house, then out of the room altogether, even when I managed to visit later. He passed away soon after too."

Rita had met Asha at the grocery store. She had overheard someone lamenting the nonavailability of 'poto', and drawn by the common language and love of poto, gone over and introduced herself, much to the embarrassment of Shyamol. An exchange of phone numbers, multiple phone calls and an invitation for dinner later, Rita and Shyamol had found good friends in Asha and Samirda. When it turned out that Rita was a trained singer, Asha had expressed her wish to revive her long ignored hobby of singing. Thus began Rita's music school. First in her living room, and as she started getting more students through word of mouth, the

basement became her classroom. Soon the second generation started coming in, parents adamant on bestowing upon them the love for Bengali music and culture.

"Why don't you organize a Rabindra Jayanti?" asked one such parent. And so started Rita's school's first performance, again in her basement. And of course, the performance was followed by a potluck dinner, without which any Bengali event is incomplete. A few years later it moved to the basement of the local temple, her basement no longer big enough to house the ever growing number of students and their parents.

All these memories pass through Rita's mind like a slideshow. After Sampurna got married and moved to be with her husband in the UK, Samirda took early retirement and moved back to Kolkata with Asha. The initial frequent phone calls started tapering off after some time, and then stopped completely, no one noticing exactly when.

And now, both of them gone...

"Oh, why didn't I call more often! Maybe talking to old friends would have helped. I am so sorry Somi!"

Somi! Sampurna hears her childhood name after so long!

Rita continues, "Are you still in UK? I forget the name of the place where you live. Is your husband visiting with you too? Why didn't you bring him?"

Sampurna hesitates. She does not want to give any more disturbing news to Mashi, she looks so fragile already. But there is no way around it.

"We got divorced, Mashi."

Rita stares at Sampurna, bewildered. She remembers her conversations with Asha and Samirda. She, and all the other Bengali women of her group and age, had been envious of them, had congratulated them again and again for "bringing their daughter up right", instilling traditional values in her, so she had gone ahead and chosen a Bengali boy for herself. Rita had smiled and made nice when her son had introduced Joyce to her, but had lamented later at night to Shyamol. Why did he have to choose a foreigner (conveniently forgetting that they had chosen to bring him up in a foreign land), how will this American girl ever be a dutiful daughter-in-law, why couldn't he have picked one of their friends' daughters?

Years later, there is Joyce now, with her regular weekly phone calls, arranging grocery deliveries for Rita, reminding Rita of her upcoming doctor appointments, asking about and keeping track of her medical reports and tests. And here is Sampurna, her perfect marriage following her lavish wedding to her perfect parent-approved community-applauded Bengali groom, failed.

Rita feels again, as she has taken to feel of late, that she cannot make heads or tails of the world around her anymore.

Sampurna hates that she had upset Ritamashi so much. Why did she have to come here today?

Really, why had she come? She perhaps didn't know the answer herself. When she and Rono admitted to themselves, after years of trying, that there was no salvaging their marriage, things had moved along civilly enough. Still, staying there, near their common friends who felt awkward and uncertain around them, coming across Rono on the daily runs of routine life, proved to be too much for her. An opening in the New Jersey office of her company seemed to be a sign, a sign that the world wanted her to come home, for New Jersey was home to her. But, the struggle with the sudden deaths of her parents so close together, and tension within the marriage itself, had sapped all her energy over the years. She had not managed to, even in this age of super connectivity, keep in touch with her old friends.

Feeling lost and lonely, she had started going through the boxes of personal belongings brought over from her parent's home in Kolkata. And had come across tons of pictures of herself, taken by and saved diligently by her proud parents. Tiny Sampurna, trying hard to manage her red bordered white sari, standing on stage, Ritamashi on the harmonium beside her. A little older Sampurna, in a yellow sari this time, singing in

front of the idol of Ma Saraswati. And a lot more pictures of her on the stage, with her music school buddies, Ma and Baba and numerous mashis and meshos. This house, music lessons, the rehearsals, the yummy snacks always on hand, Babuda, Shyamolmesho. And Ritamashi, always Ritamashi, with her welcoming smile after opening the door with the habitual "ke re" when you rang the doorbell, her infinite patience in correcting their accents, her dedication in teaching them about Gurudev, for that's what they have always been taught to call him, going over and over every single line of his song they were learning till they got it right.

She had not realized clearly before how much Ritamashi was part of her childhood. Today, on this sudden realization, she had to, absolutely had to, come and see her. Ma and Baba were no longer here, but Mashi and Mesho were, she had hoped. She took a chance, not being sure if Mashi still resided at the old address, and it looks like she would have missed Mashi too if she had waited.

But now, Sampurna was here, Ritamashi was sitting in front of her, the shock of all the sad news mixed with joy of meeting her after years in her eyes, her gentle hands touching Sampurna's. Sampurna grasps the old wrinkled hand. Or, maybe she tries to reach back to her childhood one more time.

"Mashi, will you sing for me? Please?"

Rita tries to tell Sampurna of her tired broken voice. She wants to tell her that taking care of Shyamol during his long illness had forced her to cancel so many classes that the new parents and students of today had left one by one. She wants to tell her that she had not sung since then. Something in Sampurna's eyes stops her.

Out comes the harmonium from one of the boxes. Rita, no longer able to sit on the floor, has Sampurna place it on a table. Her fingers move over the keys with the ease of years of practice. Music comes back to her, like a long lost friend fate has bestowed upon her the chance to meet again.

The voice is not as strong as before, the tunes not as perfect, the energy not as high...

Sampurna does not care. As Rita starts

"Aache dukkho aache mrityu..." somewhere from the deep crevices of Sampurna's memory come back the long forgotten words, the familiar tune. One day years ago, she had been dropped off to the class earlier than the scheduled time and had come upon Mashi sitting and listening to this song. Something about the song, even not fully understood by her young self, had pulled at her heartstrings. She had insisted Mashi teach her this, and to her surprise and delight, Mashi had indulged her. She had always loved this song, but somehow today the words seem all the more poignant to her.

Sampurna joins her voice with Ritamashi, tears streaming down her face.

The two women, old and young, teacher and disciple, pour their hearts out in the song, the words a salve over the open wounds of their minds, the melody washing away their pain.

Their minds find peace and solace at long last.



Anandita Chowdhury writes about the urban middle class of Kolkata, her birthplace, and the immigrant population of the USA, her home for the past two decades. She works in a public library, among books and the people who love them. Her writings have been published in numerous magazines in both countries.

Bakul Banerjee

Traveling to a Snow Country

Sitting at the end of the table in the cafeteria at the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center (SLAC), I had a great vantage point for observing the body language of scientists from many fields. We gathered there to brainstorm the computing power requirements necessary to continue state-of-the-art research. I was one of the organizers of the exascale computing workshop at Menlo Park, California. I had the opportunity to quietly listen to their stories about adventures and misadventures in a variety of fields related to extreme science, like high-energy physics, geology, and biology. Physicists looked for neutrinos in a science laboratory built in an old mineshaft hundreds of feet underground. Environmental scientists ventured to extremely inhospitable places, where one team member had to be on bear watch with a rifle, while the other two carried out the research work. My thoughts lingered on a trip I took in the late seventies. It was peculiar, but nonetheless, a wonderful experience.

My advisor, Peter, had organized a field trip to the Upper Peninsula, Michigan. He wanted to survey the shores of Lake Superior. Three of Peter's graduate students, Ted, Linda, and I, were to accompany him in a van. We planned to meet with one of Peter's colleagues and his undergraduate students from Flint, Michigan. Then the big group was to travel together to the Upper Peninsula. A good plan, right? Wrong. The plan was to leave balmy Baltimore by the end of January. Although the exact objective of the project is a blur to me now, it had something to do with measurements of various geophysical parameters of the ice fields, particularly the geomagnetism, by the shore of Lake Superior.

My husband, Pranab, did not like the idea of my taking the trip. After several arguments and a promise that everything for the trip would be paid for, I managed to convince my husband, who was less than three years into our arranged marriage, that this would be a very good thing for my career. When he mentioned the incidental expenses, I told him that he wouldn't have to part with any of my monthly research fellowship money that I had been giving him. I was excited about the adventure. I had never taken such a field trip. My parents hadn't allowed me to take any school or college trips in India. Their priority was to send their daughter to the best schools in India. Field trips were nothing but fluff to my mother. I was a math student who never really went anywhere.

Ted and Linda helped me make a list of things required in the snow country.

"You will need snow boots and a thick parka. And, of course, a good pair of gloves, a wool cap, and a scarf. Your regular coat will not be sufficient." Linda said. I knew what a parka was. Pranab had a nice one, although I thought my A-line dress coat was very warm.

"If possible, get snow pants as well."

"What's that?" I had never heard about them before.

"They are pants made out of parka material. It is not a must, but snow boots you must have." I remembered the toddler next door wore something like that when he played outside. Do they make them for grown-ups also? I didn't know what snow boots were either. Still, I felt too embarrassed to ask another question, apart from keeping up with the Ph.D. program work in a tough university, commuting from home, and juggling my night job as a cook and housekeeper of the household. It included throwing feasts for dozens of Pranab's friends on weekends. As a result, I didn't pay much attention to other things.

The plans for the trip were finalized a couple of weeks before Christmas.

On the Saturday before Christmas, Montgomery Ward, our favorite department store at that time, had a big pre-Christmas sale, complete with a 99-cent breakfast. Two eggs, scrambled, perfectly crisp buttered

toasts, and jam on a Styrofoam divided plate, along with a cup of coffee I could not have done that cheaper. After breakfast, Pranab and I headed for the men's section. He bought a nice suit, probably his fifth or sixth one, for himself. Then, we checked out parkas and snow boots in the women's section. They had snowpants as well. I went from rack to rack, looking at parkas. He followed me as I examined the price tags.

"My fingers are burning." Every time he looked at the price of the garment, he would grimace his handsome face and shake his hand frantically, pretending as if his fingers were on fire.

"You know, I have that new parka. You can borrow it. It will be a little loose on you, but you can wear my big sweater under it. I will wear one of my dress coats in the meantime." At this point, I did not even want to mention snow pants. How fascinating it was to see that our identities are shaped by the clothes we wear, whether in school, on ice fields, or at Bengali parties!

Exiting the women's department, we walked over to the Kmart next door, looking for boots. The search for snow boots ended with the purchase of a pair of steel-toed, yellow work boots on sale for Pranab. My loving spouse assured me that since I would have to wear double socks in the snow country, they should work fine. Our next stop was the flea market, where he picked up a gently used turtleneck, a pair of heavy work socks, and a pair of new gloves, and, this time, in my own size. He, a well-paid young scientist, did not forget to remind me that, unlike other Indian husbands, he was being extremely generous. I was keen on experiencing the collaboration of my colleagues, learning about the instruments, and the vast, snow-covered land by an equally majestic lake. I ignored his comments.

It was the last day of January. I was excited about the upcoming trip beginning in three days. That evening, he came home and gave me the bad news casually.

"You have to cancel your trip. I have scheduled the arthroscopic surgery during the week you are planning to take the trip. I will need somebody to take care of me."

"Isn't it an optional surgery? You would not play tennis until the summer. I told you about the trip a month back. It will last for only six days. Why did you schedule the surgery now?" I was stunned.

"Well, I scheduled it today. What is the big deal?" Those words lit fire in my brain.

"No, I won't cancel the trip. You can ask Leela to give you a ride if you cannot postpone it. If necessary, you can stay in her spare bedroom. You have already spent many nights there after all those parties."

I took the risk of condemnation to the eternal hell reserved for selfish wives. I endured long faces and tantrums, but I wouldn't give up this chance to participate in this unique experience. Before I left, I made sure to pack the refrigerator with Pranab's favorite Indian dishes. Leela had agreed to give Pranab rides to and from the outpatient surgery center.

Ted, who was driving the van during the first leg, picked me up from my home. The journey from Baltimore began smoothly. Our destination was the city of Flint. However, I had heard the weathermen predicting a great blizzard sweeping through the Northern states. I did not want to talk about the bad weather with anybody, fearing that I might jinx the trip. For my hardy classmates and the professor, the prediction of a blizzard was not a showstopper. Even when I settled down in the back seat, my heart kept throbbing, fearing that something might happen at the last moment and I wouldn't be able to travel. That was probably the one time I was glad that the phone line to my mother's home in Kolkata, India, was down before I left. I did not want to speak to her. I am certain to this day that if I had connected with her, she would have talked me out of taking the trip. I was sure that Pranab had already called her, complaining that it was my duty to stay home with him.

Peter was in the driver's seat as we crossed Pennsylvania and entered Ohio. Ravaged by the blizzard and drifting snow, Interstate 76 was barely passable. Yet, Peter made his progress slowly. Peter's wife, sitting on the front passenger seat, kept chatting continuously as she supplied coffee to him. I counted fourteen big trucks, playing dead caterpillars, were buried in snow, stretched out on their sides by the roadside. I stopped

counting cars in ditches. We pulled into a large truck stop. That was the first time I saw truck stops full of stranded semis with their engines running. As the road got worse, conversations in the van about geological expeditions became more interesting. Unlike my geologist sojourners, I spent my entire life up to that point working with mathematical theories, primarily written with Greek letters. I was hungry for stories and gobbled them up. When I was growing up, stories from my parents were all around me. I realized how much I missed them. The road condition remained treacherous throughout. I learned that the key to safe driving on an icy road was to slow down and relax, as Peter and Ted did.

By late evening, we reached Flint. I was exhausted from just sitting in the backseat. Our hostess was excellent. I paid attention to the lovely touches throughout the home. The dinner was nourishing. I couldn't keep my eyes open, so I went to bed.

I was ready before dawn. We started out for the Upper Peninsula the next morning before sunrise. About a dozen undergraduate students, both men and women, would travel together in different cars and vans. Our caravan went past Detroit and Chicago. As we neared Grand Marais, little fishing shacks on Lake Superior dotted the snow-covered landscape. Peter explained that the life inside those unassuming shacks was by no means harsh. They would be warmed up by heaters. I found it hard to believe that they would drill holes through ice. Fishermen would scoop up the curious fish with a net. Easy peasy. Yet, my tropical mind could not figure out why people would spend days in such discomfort.

The caravan of cars and vans arrived at Grand Marais, on the northern shore of Lake Superior, late in the evening. In the waning twilight, I saw outlines of a wooden log house and another warehouse-like place with a pitched roof sitting in the middle of the sparse village, with only a few cottages scattered far away. One of them was flying a large flag of the US. It turned out that the place was a restaurant, a bar, a general store, and a post office.

"Put all your clothes on, especially the scarf and the hat," Linda warned me ahead of time, "it would be windy". I stepped out into the cold, and a fierce wind blowing from the lake almost knocked me down. My right foot came out of the ill-fitting boot. My glasses fogged up immediately. On our way here, we heard that the temperature was hovering around zero degrees. Fortunately, talking about the wind chill index was not popular back then.

Rays of the sun, already behind the horizon, were being absorbed by a thin layer of clouds. A luminous light had filled the sky. The vast frozen snowfield around me was steadily spreading a wide swath of soft glow of reflected light, which mingled with the clear indigo sky above. I, a tropical woman, could never imagine that such a magical light existed in the real world. The motel and the country store, huddled among a few conifer trees, wearing a blanket of several feet of snow, were patiently waiting to be photographed. I wished to beam my father up here as I had a chance to catch a few reruns of Star Trek.

"Hey, come over here. Look at the lake," Ted called me. I walked over to him, but where was the lake? I could only see an unknown planetary landscape packed with giant boulders of ice. Frozen waves of ice disappeared toward the sea-green horizon. On the lakeshore, I inhaled and exhaled the pure air to cleanse every blood cell within me.

Within five minutes, I had had enough of the wind and limped carefully toward the store. By then, everybody was taking out their luggage. Grabbing my red duffel bag and purse, I waited for the others, watching from inside the glass door of the store as they unpacked their gear. Most of the vans had various items strapped to their luggage racks. Later, I learned that they were skis, poles, and snowshoes, something like a tennis racket. I had seen a couple of James Bond movies on TV and was thrilled to see a ski for real. I also learned that snowshoes were very different from snow boots.

The store had everything; more importantly, it was an all-purpose gathering place.

The dinner was beer-battered fried Pike, the best fish fry I've ever tasted. I understood what motivated those anglers to remain holed up on the ice. Our conversation continued for hours, just like back home, where

everybody gathered around the dining room table and talked until my mother ordered us away. Once again, I thought about how much I missed regular conversations in my Baltimore home.

"When I was growing up here, we did not have any fancy ski equipment. We made ski poles from tree branches. We skied everywhere, of course, only after we finished clearing the long driveway," Peter said. I remembered my childhood chores. Though they were tedious, I did not have to suffer through any harsh weather.

"Tell me about your trip to the Aleutian Islands last summer." I probed. Peter studied volcanoes.

"I did gather good data. After that, it can be a mind-numbing experience. Waiting for volcanoes to do something, anything, was like watching grass grow. Despite the significant expense of getting near the volcanoes, there was no easy way to leave early, as I had to wait for the scheduled biplanes to pick me up. There was nothing to do other than drink at the local bar in the evening." I wondered how different my life was.

It was well past midnight when I went to bed. In the middle of the night, we woke up with a knock on the door. It was Ted with his bags.

"Can I crash on your floor tonight? Weird stuff is going on in our room." He rolled out his heavy-duty mummy sleeping bag on the floor. All of us went back to sleep within minutes. It was terrific that I could sleep anywhere, anytime at that age. Ted and Linda never told me about the weird stuff.

My misery began the next day. As I entered the restaurant, looking forward to a nice breakfast, I was stopped by a red-faced, friendly man. I could not really understand his incoherent questions. I kept smiling a lot. I took pride in being approachable and always tried to carry on a conversation with whoever talked to me, but I was puzzled by this man. I noticed waving hands from the table where we sat last night. Everybody at Peter's table was laughing, looking toward me. I did not understand what was happening until Ted came forward.

"Let's go," he told me, nudging me.

"Who is he?" I asked.

"Never mind he is drunk." He said as he led me away. I understood why everybody was laughing. There were four drinks in front of Peter a glass of whisky, a glass half-full of beer, a cup of tea, and a mug of coffee.

I spent the rest of the morning walking around the lakeshore while others left for cross-country skiing. After a nice cheeseburger lunch early, it was naptime for me. When I woke up, it was early afternoon. Linda was sleeping like a log on the next bed. The motel lobby was full of people returning from a morning of cross-country skiing. They were dressed in many colors of ski jackets and matching snow pants. The lightweight fitted snow boots were nothing like my work boots. I headed out for the restaurant, looking for Peter and Ted. At the entrance of the restaurant, a woman in a pink outfit was placing her skis and poles on the ski-rack. I could tell those were expensive, too.

Later, we started surveying the magnetic field of the area. Peter tried to put a pair of skis on my feet. That was a useless effort. I kept getting them tangled and falling down. Later, Peter suggested snowshoes. It was a somewhat better solution, but my boots kept coming off my feet. Boots were too big, despite being stuffed with multiple socks. I landed on the snow with my socked feet. I decided to ditch the snowshoes and stomped through the snow in my boots, tying them tightly. I volunteered to carry the magnetometer using its pole as a walking stick. I did not dare to look at any of the undergraduate students in the eye, knowing fully well what a sorry figure I was presenting. Linda and Ted were always nearby, helping and encouraging me throughout. My classmates would become my lifelong friends.

The next day, five of us drove around the countryside to see the logging operations. Rugged people were cutting down tall trees with massive chainsaws. I was happy to see that they wore work boots similar to mine

if only my boots had fitted me. They also wore red and black plaid shirts like mine. Giant yellow machines were everywhere, stripping the logs and stacking them in one sweep. Other machines were hauling the logs away.

"They can do this operation only in the dead of winter. It is much easier to move logs over frozen ground." Peter commented as if he had read my mind. With some help from others, I climbed into the seat of one of the side-loaders. Linda took pictures. I thought I looked cute in the white knitted hat, one of my prized purchases from last winter. After two more days of surveying, the weather cleared up. We began our uneventful journey back.

I called Leela to thank her for giving Pranab rides to the surgical center.

"Oh! That was no big deal. I dropped him off at the outpatient center before I went shopping and picked him up after a couple of hours. It was a day surgery, after all. He was fine by then," she replied, "but you should have been here with your husband."

About half an inch-long gash on Pranab's left knee was covered with a thin bandage. He had returned to work the next day.

That was the last trip where the experience was priceless, and I had no significant responsibilities beyond just showing up.

My cell phone started buzzing continuously. The automatic compilation that somebody launched accidentally in Chicago was going haywire, sending error messages. I turned off the phone and headed out to the meeting hall.

Samira E. Robinson

Anthony's and My Journey of Love

I'm not sure why, but some question the very power of love. They seem to impose restrictions on the love one person can have for another. They ask if they are "worthy" of the love? Or can the one receiving the love really feel and know the love in a genuine and lasting way? They wonder if they are loved as much as another - their sibling, friend, or even a stranger. They discount relationships that are considered non-traditional or not blood-related. If we are not careful, we limit the power of love to our preconceived notions and assuming, selective and self-serving ways.

How dare we question Love's power?

The qualities and power of love have proven to be universal. The universality of love is just what Love intended. The power of love was never made for limitations. Love doesn't spring forth only to be bound. This principle of life has no beginning and no end, it just is. Even where there is darkness, the light of love can bring illumination.

There is a trueness to love. It has an inescapable character to it. Love calms and it energizes. It maintains and it transforms. It is the wholeness and all-ness of life! We find this out for ourselves when we let love flow to, in and through us without hindering its presence, purpose or power.

Love bursts through boundaries and reveals its vastness. It is principle and produces after its own kind. In times where and when love is seemingly absent it works its way into our body, heart and soul. It reveals its eternal and abiding presence to us.

Love can be an anchor and an awakening.

I am thankful to know love and to be known by love. I celebrate my mother for this my first manifestation of love. I took communion with Love and love expressed itself through a magnitude of ways and people from childhood to adult life. So much so that I believe I was born of and to love!

If we are receptive to it, we will know love, perhaps in unexpected and inspiring ways.

My mother's way of love helped to inspire me to love as a mother and shaped its outworking in my life.

"Mommy, was I in "other mommy's" stomach, and I got out of her stomach and into your stomach?" When Anthony said those words to me I was admittedly stunned. How do I explain to this child, my beloved, the breadth and depth of our relationship of love? I became for him a new point of contact, exposure and expression of love manifesting as care, protection and guidance.

It was just as startling when Anthony first called me mommy. I had never called myself mommy or referred to myself as mom to him. I was Ms. Samira. But intuitively he knew. Granted he likely heard it from the Daycare providers when I dropped him off and picked him up from school. They referred to me as mom. And I was delightfully the subject of his hand-made Mother's Day cards each year! Or maybe he related our togetherness akin to his toddler peers who called the lady who brought and picked them up from school and shared hugs and kisses with them as mommy. Soon others saw and celebrated in recognition of our truth, and they called me his mother. And I was. I am.

I realized that it was the profound love and connection that this child feels for me and I for him that prompted this perplexing question about in whose tummy did his life begin? When others presented the idea that he had another mother (a reality that he had already reconciled) it troubled him in trying to reconcile that someone was trying to convince him that someone other than I was the "real" parent.

Balcony

Our time together was real. The safety and comfort he felt in my care was real. The book reading and storytelling we did at bedtime was real. The meditative music we fell asleep listening to together was real. The healthy meals and snacks I prepared and provided him were real. The playful and educational adventures we shared were real. Each birthday he celebrated in my care was real. My advocacy for his well-being was real.

Yet it was an unexpected statement that was hard to answer in a way that a three-year-old would understand. I had shown him my love in action from receiving him into my home as a baby and integrating him into my life and me into his. He had quickly come to know me as a comforter when he woke up in the middle of the night crying and climbed out of his bed to find me, thinking he was alone and uncared for to find my love lifting him safe into my arms and wiping away his tears. I remember well the day our bond was sealed and we both knew we belonged together.

For my forever son Anthony, there is no limit to my love for you. Or your love for me. At age six you still run and jump into my arms when you see me.

I love you with the love you needed when you first came into my life and into my heart.

You love me with the love every child loves back with as they embrace love's nurturing and transforming power.

You became a reflection of the light of love in which you were immersed. Our love has withstood life's struggles and it will overcome the tests of time.

When we live love in both thought and action we experience its authentic and permeating power. I am thankful for the universal principle of life that brought us together! It is a love that is remembered and that transcends place and time.



Samira E. Robinson is a prolific poet and writer who uses storytelling and Spoken Word as a catalyst for community building, spiritual connection, and self-awareness. Samira has created and presented workshops for The Chicago Public Library and her novel book of poetry *This Side of Heaven* is available through the CPL catalog.

Allen Love

Daniya and Miah Came Over for a Visit



Daniya and Miah came over for a visit to granny's house. That's where they called her granny and I'm glad I saw them two. They came from someone's funeral and someone passed away. I know Daniya and Miah stopped over here for a visit and they had a conversation with their granny. They stayed for a while and Daniya came over. She got her stuff from the basement. It was her television and her stuff she had and her prom picture that Miah had in her hand.

Daniya and Miah had a good time and Miah put her hand on her face while she was talking and that's the quiet girl and I can tell she is quiet. It was about what I'm going to write about today and I want to paint a picture. I was about to talk about when Miah, the one who was taking her sandals off her feet was hurting her and she was sitting in the chair.

Daniya and Miah came a long way. They live in the suburbs in Richton Park and it's far from here and

she drives this far. Daniya and Miah are having a good time over there and Daniya gave me \$20 for my birthday and I gave her a hug and I didn't kiss her and Daniya didn't want anybody kissing on her and all she wanted was a hug and I gave Daniya a hug. It's about Daniya's Hugs I wrote about and she is the one who came over for a visit. Then Daniya said don't take any picture of her and I didn't anyway she won't see it and I'm going to write about it .I want to paint this picture with words about Daniya's Hugs.

Miah is having a conversation with granny and she was talking to her and I saw that picture and I'm going to take a picture of Miah is next to her granny and she means so much to her a lot and I want to throw some words out there because she was caring and she was sharing and she is the one got the braids in her hair and she looks beautiful. Miah has a smile on her face and she can be a quiet girl. Miah got short and Miah is the one who got on a white shirt and black pants and blue sandals on her feet.



Miah is having a conversation with her granny

Miah is the one who comes over what makes her feel good to see her granny and she always calls her that while she was a little girl. I can tell she was calling her that granny is about the word for short and it was the love and the bond in the family towards Miah. Miah was coming outside, she was about to go home and Miah was a happy girl and Miah is the one who is a quiet girl. I like that and I want to write. Miah is the one who loves to be like her sister and they spend time together. Daniya is the one who loves her younger sister so much and wants to hug her.

Miah is the one always respectful. She has manners and that's the one who comes over for a visit and I'm glad I saw Miah. She makes me feel good. I make her feel happy and she is always on my mind everyday I can think of Miah. Miah can be beautiful and Miah can put a smile on her face and Miah is the one make everybody feel good and Miah is the one who loves us and I love her too and she came over to see us.

Miah got a picture of Daniya's senior prom. I can picture it. She looked beautiful in that picture and Daniya got on a barge dress. Daniya is the one in the picture by herself and she loves that picture and she looks beautiful in that dress and I can see that dress she wore at that prom and I want to capture it on this document. Miah is the one holding Daniya's picture in her hand. She went to her prom a long time ago with her date. Miah liked that picture when she was there at Daniya going to her prom.

Miah was looking at the trees over there next door. She was looking at something, the trees are the color green. Miah was staring at the trees and that tree made her feel better when she was putting her hand on her face and she was sitting in the chair. I saw that picture. I'm going to take a picture of Daniya and Miah at the table and that Daniya is always texting on her cell phone. She was on her touch screen phone.

Miah is about to go home and Daniya too and I had a conversation with Daniya. We were talking about why I didn't go with my father. He went the wrong way he was in Joliet and it was in Indiana he posted to come west and he got lost and because of his memory lost. I was about to say that's his dimension. He shouldn't drive anything and they should take the keys away from him and I told Daniya I got a sister and we were talking for a little bit and she is taking off going home.



Miah got a picture of Daniya's senior prom



The Trees

Balcony

I saw the trees and I saw the trees in front of the house and the color of the trees is green and I like the trees it remind me of how much I feel in the morning and I take a picture of the tree and I can see the color of green and it's growing and that tree been there ever since grandma was here and I like about the tree is front of the house and it's small. I can write about that tree and I can use it for a family tree. I have a big family. I can see that tree when we are young. I saw that tree and Daniya and Miah used to live over here and they saw that tree was there a long time ago.

They thought that the tree was still there and I like to picture the tree when it was about the family I write about. I feel good and when I write about it and I want to be motivated in the morning I write about this family. It was about something else to write about what makes me feel good about the tree. I want to see that tree and we always sit on the porch and I think of Daniya and Miah. I give them a hug and I want more than anything they came over for a visit and I saw that tree I'm going to write about.

That tree is growing and it's in front of the house and I can see we was growing up that tree is still there until this day when I was glancing at the tree and it bring back some memories when I want to watch the tree and we all grow up we see that tree in front of the house and it's reminds me of family always there when we need anything and I look at Daniya I tell her I love you I give her a big hug and called it as a day.



Allen Love is from Chicago. He is a writer with autism and attends Literacy Chicago. His parents are Susie and Albert Jr. He has two other sisters on his father's side and their names are Lisa, who is a school teacher and Jasmine who is working for the CTA. Lisa has three children and grandchildren Rodney, Tasia, Garlyn, A'nya, Amira, Beverly, Naoki and King. Jasmine has four children Jaylan, Ava, Averie and Halo.

Lily Pope

The World in an Eye

I wandered the lonesome forest, currently blanketed in a thick layer of clouds: I was melancholy once more. These woods that lay behind my white picket fence were a lovely place for a person poor in spirit to release her mind from the pains of reality and soak in her own thoughts. However much I loved this dreary sea of deciduous trees, this would likely be the last time I would be allowed to wander it for quite some time. A sigh escaped my lips at the thought, and my feet dragged in the ferns below me. I would attempt to savor my stroll if it would be my last. Though I wished to enjoy my small adventure, the weather obviously held a grudge against me. A slow drizzle had begun, softly attacking green leaves. In hopes of waiting out the militia of sad clouds, I took a seat beneath a weathered maple tree, choosing it as my company for its welcoming branches - spread open wide as if inviting my embrace.

In the midst of reminiscing about my early days meandering through the canopy of trees with my father, I was startled by a boy who fell at my unsuspecting feet, seemingly from the branches above. He crouched in front of me with worn clothes and a rag wrapped around his head as if to shield his eyes from my inquisitive stare. Before I could properly introduce myself, the boy with rust colored hair extended a rough hand with dirt under the nails and asked, "Will you play a game with me?"

"I don't even know your name" my unused voice croaked.

The boy was persistent, and with his hand still extended, he introduced himself, "Hello, young lady. My name is Fynn. What is your name?"

"Dolores,"

"Can I call you Lola? Dolores is much too long to remember." With my nose pointed to the grey sky I nodded once - only once. He then grabbed my hand, ripping me from my comfortable seat on the ground. The world spun around me in somber greens as I was pulled to my feet, and then we were spinning, too: hands holding onto each other tightly. Laughter erupted from our throats, and the faster we spun the more frantic we became. The ground hit us with a pronounced thump. The last streams of giggles were released as the world tilted, rose, and fell around our bodies that lay on the forest floor.

When everything was still once more, I let my curiosity take hold of my mouth, "Fynn, what is under your blindfold?"

"My eyes," was his simple response.

"Could I see your eyes?" I asked shyly, a blush spreading throughout my unwilling skin. Fynn nodded and sat up so he could face me head on, his red curls falling carelessly over his blindfold. I mirrored his movement. Slowly he untied the rag as I waited in profound anticipation; I could hear the uneven breath that seeped from both of our lips. First were his eyebrows, then his eyelashes, and finally his breathtaking eyes. My body was drawn towards the forest that existed inside them. A ring of dark trees, followed by dappled leaves and sun soaked amber flecks. Stunned by his gorgeous eyes, I could not speak, but he could, "I am tired of sitting now, Lola," his words began to quiet, "Can we play another game?" And before I knew it I was falling into his pure black pupils, and I did not resist.

After the terrifying dark, I was reborn in brilliant light. My surroundings didn't seem to have changed- the same old maple in my beloved forest - but the rain had stopped and the hazel eyed boy had disappeared. I sat with my mouth agape and my eyes wide against the trunk wreathed in moss, and I let the world wash over me - marinating me with its beauty. I had thought that I was in the same forest I had grown up in, but I could not

have been more wrong. The air was lighter and sparkled in the warm sunlight; the trees were alive with the rustling wind; and butterflies floated softly around me. I swore I even heard a tinkling noise, or the faint ringing of a bell: the perfect summer afternoon. The heaviness I held inside vanished, and my future responsibilities were lost in the breeze that flowed through my thin blond hair.

That is when I felt movement on my once-tired back, and a steadying voice from behind me, “Hello my blue-eyed girl, I have missed you.” The oddly familiar voice gave me such a fright that I stumbled up from the soft ground, only to fall down once more. When I cautiously looked behind me, hoping I would find who I thought that voice belonged to, I found the same old tree. However, the bark had changed so that a face appeared to be embedded in the trunk. Two eyebrows, two eyes, a slight raise in the bark that must have been the nose, and a smile that I knew all too well.

“Father?” I asked breathlessly, with hope that pierced my heart. He nodded, making the branches shake above my head, filling me with unfettered happiness. I ran to my tree and hugged it as I cried tears of joy. A branch patted my shoulder consolingly.

“How are you here?” I inquired.

“That is of no importance Lola, I am here. That is what matters. But I fear you must go soon. You are not meant for this place,” the tree whispered. I laid my head down on the soft ground and stared up into the branches, only to find a white cat with curious blue eyes hanging from a branch and staring at me. The cat, who was also strangely familiar, then pulled itself back onto the strong branch and ran down the tree swiftly, settling itself beside me, but looking straight ahead.

“Who is this darling cat?” I asked my father, but he did not respond. When I looked at his wrinkled face it had begun to shrink back into the wood until it was almost gone. I could not do anything to stop him from disappearing back into the trunk, so instead I put my forehead to the warm bark and whispered, “I love you father, and I miss you. I wish you could come back to mother and me: she is miserable without you. I am miserable.” Then, sobs racked my body the same way they did when we learned he was not coming back. The solemn cat who perched beside me placed her paw politely on my open palm. For some reason I felt strongly that this cat understood me, so I began to speak to her in a small voice, “My father told me that I must go soon, but I do not know if I would like to. If I stay here forever I need not go to London, and I might see father again - if he comes back. Do you think he will come back?” I wasn't sure if the cat could even hear me, but when she shook her head “no” in response to my question and her sad blue eyes met mine, I knew that she could understand me just fine. I decided to introduce myself.

“My name is Lola, what is your name?” The cat did not react.

“May I call you Cat?” With her velvet nose pointed in the air, she nodded once. “Wonderful! Well then, let us go explore, Cat. We have much to discover, I am sure.”

Our adventure began rather dully with Cat leading me through the trees, my thoughts consumed by the strange interaction with my father. I never thought I would see him again, but there he was. *How?* My hand brushed by passing trees until the trees began to change to be skinnier and skinnier - much younger than the rest of the ancient forest. My white picket fence would be soon, I thought, but I still did not know if I wanted to return to my empty mother. Why was Cat leading me in this direction? Stopping at another young sapling, I scanned the surrounding area in confusion. This was not a part of the forest I was accustomed to; rather, it was exactly where my house should be! An unwelcome emotion enveloped my body until I sank to the ground under the weight of it. In the short grass I mourned the loss of my father and home in great, heaving sobs; I would be stuck under the warm sun ever alone! After a moment or two I had calmed myself, but I did not know where to go, so I continued to sit amongst saplings and cheery yellow dandelions. They sadly did nothing to uplift my sulking mood, nor did the glaring sun.

Cat had left me, I realized, and I was alone again. Just as I thought this, a flash of movement from the tall trees I had come from caught my eye. With intent eyes, I watched the tree line in an attempt to label the

Balcony

unknown creature. As I was about to give up my seemingly helpless search, a small red fox jumped out of the trees in a playful movement, and came rushing towards me. Then, only a foot away from my surprised face, he stopped, staring at me with his hazel eyes. The fox nuzzled my teary face and licked the salt away. I laughed in joy at his friendliness. Finally, a friend in this lonesome forest!

“I can only play with you for a second, fox,” I laughed, “After that, I must figure out why my house isn't here.” The fox then rolled over, I assumed for me to pet him, but when I tried he nipped at my fingers. I quickly pulled my defenseless hand away. The fox then began to circle me slowly in the dandelion patch as he licked his chops. Fear took a hold of me, and all I wanted to do was run, but I could not move an inch. The fox looked hungry as I looked to the forest in the vain hope that there would be someone to save me. There was no one, no one apart from the white cat who now sat beneath the shaded canopy, watching curiously.

I knew it was time to accept my dreary fate, so I closed my teary eyes in resignation. When I heard a yelp, I opened my eyes to see the fox screaming back to the cover of the forest as a doe stood proudly in front of me. Cautiously, I told the strong animal thank you. She lowered her graceful head until her nose rested on my forehead, and I reached my pale hand to her soft brown shoulder so I might embrace my savior. While I held onto the doe I thought of my mother who was so destroyed by my father's death. I would do anything to get a chance to apologize to my mother, to whom I could be so cruel. Why hadn't I realized that she was mourning too?

As I wished to be back home, the world around me turned to blinding white light. At first I thought that the sun must have fallen down on us, only I felt not warm, but very cold. I squeezed my eyes shut to protect myself from the merciless sun, and when I opened them I was back at my old maple tree. My mother's arms enveloped me as I cried tears of joy in my cloudy, dreary, beautiful forest.



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Nahar Trina

The Most Forgettable Murder

“Oh no! What a disaster!”

The piercing cry of a woman shattered the silence of dawn and struck Sabur Ali's ears like a blow. Around this time every morning, Sabur Ali felt a strong pressure in his lower abdomen. This time he has to get up. He had just relieved himself and slipped back under the warmth of the quilt when the wailing startled him upright. He tried to figure out which household the crying woman belonged to. To the east lay Paresh Kumar Pramanik's homestead. He thought, “The sound came from that direction. Oh dear! What calamity has struck?” Sabur Ali stood up and adjusted his lungi, the garment worn by men across South Asian villages, in courtyards and fields alike. The sudden movement displaced the quilt, his wife grunted in irritation and turned over. He wrapped the hanging shawl around himself and stepped out onto the veranda. Though the biting cold hadn't fully set in yet, the early morning chill still demanded warm clothing. His upper body was shielded by the shawl's warmth, but the cold wind took advantage of the gap beneath his lungi, biting him sharply. Even while urinating, he got bitten once, cursed again, though only he knew at whom.

Standing in the middle of the silent courtyard, Sabur Ali scanned his surroundings. Then, heading east, he stepped silently toward the source of the sound. On the clean veranda, he saw Paresh's wife Maloti sprawled out, crying uncontrollably. His heart sank. “Oh no! Could it be Paresh...” Maloti is a gentle, soft-spoken woman. As a long-time neighbor, Sabur had never heard her raise her voice. What grief had struck her so early in the morning? Hearing the story from Maloti's sobbing lips left Sabur stunned. Regaining his senses, he rushed toward the fields.

As daylight grew, so did the mourning. The cries spread from east to west, north to south, spiraling through the village and casting a shadow of sorrow over Maheshpur. Curious and anxious faces gathered in the courtyards. What comfort could one offer in such a heartbreaking moment? Many stood speechless, unable to find words. Some whispered among themselves. The crowd was more shocked than sorrowful.

The first witness to the tragedy was Paresh Kumar Pramanik. He always had the habit of waking up at the crack of dawn. After cleaning himself, he would sit on the veranda and chant prayers. He'd nibble on puffed rice from a bowl, waiting for his wife to wake up and prepare a proper breakfast before heading to the fields. Until then, he let her sleep undisturbed. She worked tirelessly from dawn to dusk and deserved rest. Maloti used to be annoyed by Paresh's habit of waking up at dawn. “You toil day and night in the fields, working like five men alone. If you don't rest properly, your body won't hold up!” she'd scold. But Paresh understood the love hidden in her sharp words. He'd smile and try to pacify her, never arguing. Eventually, Maloti stopped protesting.

In sixteen years of marriage, Maloti had not had any children. Paresh suspected the fault might lie with him. Maloti, shedding tears in secret, believed it was her own failing that deprived her husband of fatherhood. Despite the years, she still heard whispers from relatives living just a few yards away. Elders considered seeing her face first thing in the morning a bad omen. Yet Paresh never uttered a word of blame. Maloti felt endless gratitude toward him. Barring the deep ache of not having children, their home life flows in quiet harmony. They found joy in nurturing their garden trees like children. Their lives, like those of others in Maheshpur, revolved around farming and care.

Like every other day, Paresh had woken early and sat on the veranda. For some reason, he decided to walk toward the fields. Pushing through the thin veil of mist floating like milk skin over the dawn, he reached the field and was stunned. Disoriented, he ran back home and collapsed on the veranda. Maloti was still asleep. His sobbing woke her with a jolt, her heart pounding erratically. Hearing the dreadful news, she rushed to

inform their relatives. Her cries tore through the serenity of dawn. “Whom do I blame? Who could commit such a disaster, oh God...”

Next to Paresh's land, his cousins Maloy and Ajay cultivated their own plots. The three brothers had adjacent fields lined with mango trees. In Maheshpur, nearly every household grew mangoes. Few homes lacked mango trees in their yards. Earlier, the village's lowlands yielded three crops a year. But the cost often outweighed the profit. The grain yield wasn't high enough to be lucrative. Five maunds of paddy produced only two and a half maunds of rice. The dilemma: would it feed the family for a year or be sold? Farmers were drowning in debt. Following advice from the local agriculture department, Paresh, Sabur, and Joynul abandoned triple cropping and turned to mango cultivation. Though risky, the promise of profit was tempting. When each tree began yielding three to four maunds of mangoes, the farmers were overjoyed. Seeing more profit in fruit than grain, others joined in. Nineteen years passed. In the two years before and after the pandemic, mango yields declined. Meanwhile, grain prices soared, prompting some farmers to return to triple cropping. The village chief, Torofdar, encouraged this shift. He claimed the shade from mango trees around his land hindered crop growth. Using this argument, he negotiated with some farmers to reclaim triple-crop land. But most refused. “We've raised these trees like children. We won't cut them while we're alive.” Torofdar left disappointed. These incidents happened just last month.

Sabur Ali sat silently, lost in thought. While the entire village slept in deep slumber, unknown demons had struck. The mango orchard was far from the homestead, so no one had any inkling that daylight would bring such darkness. Since the moment Sabur Ali had rushed from Paresh's house to the field, even as the sun climbed high overhead, he hadn't moved. He didn't even notice where his shawl had fallen. Grief had turned him to stone. His wife, children, and relatives arrived after hearing the news from neighbors. Despite coaxing, he could barely sip a few drops of water. “It's already midday, and the man hasn't eaten.” Crying, his wife took their daughter and returned home. Sabur's eldest son stood beside him, his chest burning with sorrow for Rupjan. He thought, “Maybe Aunt Rupjan has lost her mind like Uncle Paresh.”

Rupjan's wailing made it hard to hold back tears. Her mute husband Joynul tried several times to comfort her in his own quiet way, then gave up. Sitting motionless in helpless despair, Joynul looked like a tree struck by lightning. His blank gaze followed Rupjan as she beat her chest with both hands and ran across the field, crying out, “Whom do I tell? Where do I seek justice?” Even the crows, disturbed by her lament, forgot to fly and sat silently in the trees.

The people of Maheshpur were simple folk, never meddling in others' affairs. No one could recall any enemy, individual or group, who might have caused such devastation. Yet disaster had indeed descended upon Maheshpur. Piercing the darkness, it had left a trail of death and sorrow across the village. Every household echoed with mourning. In the fields and courtyards of the farmers lay rows upon rows of corpses-not of people, but of mango trees. Trees they had raised like children, watered with sweat and love. The farmers were stunned by the loss of their precious treasures.

“The mute has no enemies,” goes the saying but here, its truth seemed bitterly mocked. Trees that had never spoken, never harmed anyone, had overnight become lifeless bodies. The entire village wept endlessly. But this grief reached neither the ears of the Almighty creator nor the corridors of authority. These were unjudged, ordinary murders. And in this tragedy, not just Maheshpur no human soul on Earth seemed connected. If anything, perhaps aliens from another planet were involved. So, dear people, do not be overly disturbed by the massacre of hundreds of mango trees in a village called Maheshpur, under the cover of night.



Nahar Trina, was born in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and currently lives in the USA. She is a writer specializing in compelling stories, essays, translations, and literary criticism. Her works have been featured in various literary magazines and websites in both Bengals. So far, she has published seven books. She recently published her debut English-language flash fiction collection, *Fleeting Impressions*, on Amazon.

Alok Bandyopadhyay

Impact of Artificial Intelligence on global health

Artificial intelligence (AI) is the capability of computational systems to perform tasks typically associated with human intelligence, such as learning, reasoning, problem-solving, perception, and decision-making. Unlike natural intelligence, AI is artificial, meaning it is a product of human engineering rather than a naturally occurring phenomenon. It refers to computer systems designed to simulate human cognitive functions and take actions that maximize their chances of achieving defined goals. The “artificial” aspect emphasizes that these intelligent behaviors are created and implemented by humans in machines, rather than emerging biologically, making AI both a scientific field of research and a technological achievement. We will discuss here the impact of AI on global health

Interesting Health Topics for a Presentation

Health is one of the most dynamic and multidisciplinary fields, constantly shaped by advances in science, technology, and global socio-political changes. In recent years, discussions on health have expanded beyond traditional medicine to include factors such as social behavior, environment, lifestyle, and public policy. Several emerging and highly relevant health topics are ideal for engaging presentations because they address contemporary issues that directly influence millions of lives. These include the impact of social media on mental health, the benefits of intermittent fasting, the role of gut health in overall well-being, the effects of climate change on global health, strategies for managing stress and promoting mental well-being, the rise of chronic diseases, the impact of air pollution, the future of personalized medicine, and the role of public health organizations in crisis management.

The Impact of Social Media on Mental Health

The advent of social media has revolutionized how individuals communicate, share information, and construct identities. While these platforms provide opportunities for social interaction and global connectivity, they also pose significant risks to mental health. Numerous studies have found correlations between excessive social media use and increased levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and sleep disturbances (Twenge & Campbell, 2018).

Adolescents and young adults are vulnerable to the effects of constant comparison, cyberbullying, and the pressure to curate an idealized online presence. Research shows that passive consumption of content—such as scrolling without interaction—can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and isolation, while active engagement may foster social connection (Verduyn et al., 2017).

However, social media is not inherently harmful. It can be a valuable tool for health communication, peer support, and advocacy if used responsibly. The challenge lies in promoting digital literacy, encouraging balanced use, and developing policies that protect users from harmful online practices.

The Benefits of Intermittent Fasting

Intermittent fasting (IF) has gained popularity not only as a weight management strategy but also as a potential approach to improving metabolic and cognitive health. Unlike traditional diets that focus on what foods to consume, IF emphasizes when to eat, cycling between eating and fasting. Common methods include the 16:8 method (16 hours of fasting with an 8-hour eating window) and alternate-day fasting.

Scientific evidence suggests that IF may improve insulin sensitivity, reduce inflammation, and promote cellular repair processes such as autophagy (Patterson & Sears, 2017). Animal studies also show potential benefits for brain health, including enhanced neuroplasticity and resistance to age-related cognitive decline (Longo & Panda, 2016).

While intermittent fasting is not universally suitable—especially for individuals with certain medical conditions, pregnant women, or those with eating disorders—it provides a flexible approach to dietary management. Importantly, IF should be practiced with an emphasis on nutrient-dense foods, rather than as a license to consume unhealthy meals during eating periods.

The Role of Gut Health in Overall Well-being

The gut microbiome, a complex community of trillions of microorganisms living in the digestive tract, has emerged as a central player in human health. This ecosystem influences not only digestion but also immune function, metabolism, and even mood and cognition through the gut-brain axis (Cryan et al., 2019).

An imbalance in gut microbiota, known as dysbiosis, has been linked to a wide range of conditions, including obesity, type 2 diabetes, inflammatory bowel disease, and even neurological disorders such as depression and Parkinson’s disease. Diet is one of the most significant factors influencing gut health. Diets high in fiber, fermented foods, and prebiotics promote microbial diversity and beneficial bacterial populations, whereas high-fat and high-sugar diets can reduce diversity and increase harmful microbes.

The role of probiotics and prebiotics in maintaining gut health is an area of active research, with growing evidence supporting their benefits. Presentations on this topic could explore not only the scientific mechanisms but also practical dietary recommendations to support gut health in daily life.

The Effects of Climate Change on Global Health

Climate change is no longer a distant environmental issue—it is a pressing public health crisis. Rising global temperatures, extreme weather events, and shifting ecological patterns have direct and indirect impacts on human health. Heatwaves, for instance, increase risks of heatstroke and cardiovascular strain, especially in vulnerable populations such as the elderly.

Vector-borne diseases such as malaria, dengue, and Lyme disease are spreading to new geographic areas due to changing temperatures and precipitation patterns that expand the habitats of mosquitoes and ticks (Watts et al., 2021). Climate change also exacerbates respiratory illnesses by worsening air pollution and increasing the frequency of wildfires.

Furthermore, food security is threatened by changing agricultural conditions, which may lead to malnutrition and undernutrition in many regions. The psychological toll of climate-related disasters, often referred to as “eco-anxiety,” also highlights the mental health dimension of this crisis. Thus, addressing climate change is essential not only for environmental sustainability but also for protecting global health.

Strategies for Managing Stress and Promoting Mental Well-being

Stress has become an almost universal experience in modern societies, particularly due to fast-paced lifestyles, job insecurity, and the constant connectivity afforded by digital devices. Chronic stress contributes to numerous health problems, including cardiovascular disease, weakened immunity, digestive disorders, and mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression.

Effective stress management strategies include mindfulness meditation, physical exercise, proper sleep, and social support. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is also widely recognized for its ability to help individuals reframe negative thought patterns and develop healthier coping mechanisms (Hofmann et al., 2012).

Organizations and educational institutions play a critical role in promoting mental well-being by fostering supportive environments, reducing stigma surrounding mental health, and offering accessible counseling services. Presentations on this topic can also highlight digital mental health tools, such as mobile apps for meditation and therapy, which are gaining popularity in expanding access to care.

The Rise of Chronic Diseases

Chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes, and chronic respiratory conditions, are the leading causes of death worldwide. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020), non-

communicable diseases account for approximately 71% of global deaths annually. Lifestyle factors—such as unhealthy diets, sedentary behavior, tobacco use, and alcohol consumption—are major contributors to this burden.

The economic impact of chronic diseases is also staggering, straining healthcare systems and reducing productivity. Preventive strategies such as health education, early screening, and public policies to promote healthier environments are essential to mitigate this growing challenge. Unlike infectious diseases, chronic illnesses require long-term management, making healthcare delivery and patient education crucial components of effective prevention and treatment strategies.

The Impact of Air Pollution

Air pollution is often referred to as a “silent killer” because its effects on health can be subtle yet devastating. Fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}), nitrogen dioxide, sulfur dioxide, and ozone are among the most harmful pollutants. Long-term exposure to these pollutants has been linked to cardiovascular disease, stroke, lung cancer, and respiratory illnesses such as asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) (Cohen et al., 2017).

Children are especially vulnerable because their lungs are still developing, and older adults are at increased risk due to weakened physiological resilience. Moreover, recent studies suggest a link between air pollution and cognitive decline, raising concerns about its role in dementia and Alzheimer’s disease.

Addressing air pollution requires a multisectoral approach, including stricter regulations on industrial emissions, promotion of clean energy, and urban planning strategies that reduce vehicle dependency.

The Future of Personalized Medicine

Personalized medicine, sometimes referred to as precision medicine, represents a paradigm shift from a “one-size-fits-all” approach to individualized care based on genetic, environmental, and lifestyle factors. Advances in genomics, proteomics, and bioinformatics have made it possible to tailor treatments to a person’s unique biological profile.

For example, in oncology, genetic testing can identify specific mutations in tumors, allowing targeted therapies that are more effective and less toxic than traditional chemotherapy. Similarly, pharmacogenomics helps predict how individuals metabolize certain drugs, reducing the risk of adverse drug reactions.

The future of personalized medicine holds promises for improving treatment outcomes, reducing healthcare costs, and empowering patients with greater control over their health. However, ethical challenges such as genetic privacy, data security, and equitable access remain significant barriers to widespread adoption.

The Role of Public Health Organizations in Crisis Management

Public health organizations play a central role in managing crises such as pandemics, natural disasters, and humanitarian emergencies. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of effective surveillance systems, clear communication, and international collaboration. Agencies like the World Health Organization (WHO) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are tasked with coordinating responses, disseminating guidelines, and supporting research and vaccine development.

Crisis management in public health requires balancing immediate responses with long-term resilience. This includes investing in healthcare infrastructure, training healthcare workers, and ensuring equitable distribution of resources. Lessons learned from recent crises highlight the need for transparency, rapid decision-making, and community engagement to build public trust.

Conclusion

Health is shaped by an intricate web of biological, social, and environmental factors, and the topics discussed above reflect some of the most pressing challenges and opportunities of our time. The impact of

social media on mental health, the benefits of intermittent fasting, the significance of gut health, and the threats posed by climate change and air pollution all highlight the interconnectedness of lifestyle, environment, and well-being. Meanwhile, the rise of chronic diseases, the promise of personalized medicine, and the critical role of public health organizations underscore the need for both preventive strategies and innovative approaches to healthcare delivery.

These subjects not only provide rich material for engaging presentations but also encourage audiences to think critically about their health behaviors and the broader systems that influence them. By raising awareness and fostering informed discussions, presentations on these topics can contribute to healthier individuals and societies.

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Ruma Sikdar

Uzbekistan: Central Asian Treasure

As an influencer of Indian culture, Uzbekistan is not mentioned in the way Britania is. Of the two conquerors, only the Uzbeks melted in the local population, much like the Spanish and Portuguese in South America. Uzbekistan, this Central Asian nation went through many geographical incarnations through the centuries, ending up as a part of the former Soviet Union, which collapsed to produce an independent Uzbekistan. We saw many Indian tourists there during our visit in 2024. Direct flights from Delhi to Tashkent have encouraged such visits nowadays, for experiencing old ties established six hundred years ago. Uzbeks are overwhelmingly Muslim. The state now has a veneer of secular postures. Uzbek is the official language while a tiny minority speak Russian and Tajik. Historically, their culture is deeply influenced by Persian and Arabic.

We visited four major cities, namely Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva. I will begin with Tashkent, the capital and the largest city.

Tashkent-Ancient Roots, Modern Soul

Since 1865, Tashkent was the capital of Russian Turkestan. During Soviet times, the city witnessed major growth and demographic changes. Much of its infrastructure was destroyed during the 1966 Tashkent earthquake. It was soon rebuilt as a model Soviet city, becoming the fourth largest after Moscow, Leningrad and Kyiv. Tashkent has a long and rich history and was an important part of the Silk Route (or Road). The current Tashkent architecture is a balance of traditional Persian design and modern innovation.

Our first Tashkent stop was the Hazrati Imam Complex, the religious heart of Old Tashkent. This complex mostly survived the earthquake. Reconstruction and renovation restored it to its original historical appearance in 2007. It contains the Hazrati Imam Mosque, Muiy Mubarak Library and the Barakhan Madrasah. This architectural monument dated from the 16th to 20th centuries.



Library and Mosque

The Muiy Mubarak Library houses the 7th century Osman Quran, said to be the world's oldest Quran and one of the only 7 written on deer skin. The center of the library showcased the Holy Quran. The library also displays other editions of the Quran and related manuscripts. Adjacent to the library is the interior of the Hazrati Imam Mosque. This mosque is considered an architectural monument.

Barakhan Madrasah, not shown, was built in the 15th century as an Islamic School. Today it stands as an important historical landmark and houses several stores where artists create amazing works of art.

Chorsu Bazaar, in the old town, existed for centuries as an important trading hub along the Silk Road. Over centuries, its blue dome has remained an iconic symbol of Tashkent. All daily necessities are sold here.

Several other important landmarks in Tashkent were built recently or during the Soviet rule. They are Temurid State Museum with stunning interior decor, State Museum of Applied Arts displaying textiles, embroidery and similar other works of art, a space program-themed metro station honoring Soviet Cosmonauts Yuri Gagarin and Valentina Tereshkova and a monument dedicated to Lal Bahadur Shastri, former prime minister of India, who died in Tashkent in 1966. Despite much loss of its historical buildings to the earthquake, Tashkent is still a city that carries its own charm.

Samarkand – Eternal Beauty, Timeless Spirit

From Tashkent, we rode a train to Samarkand, a city in Southeastern Uzbekistan. It is among the oldest continuously inhabited cities in Central Asia and the third largest city of half a million. Islam entered Samarkand in the 8th century. Before that, most inhabitants of Samarkand were Zoroastrians. Many Nestorians and Buddhists also lived there. In the early 13th century Genghis Khan conquered Samarkand, Bukhara and Urgench and massacred the population.

In the 14th and 15th centuries, Samarkand became the imperial capital of the powerful Timurid Empire. This period saw significant architectural achievements. Samarkand is also historically important due to its strategic location on the Silk Route. Its historic center is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Timur Lane (1336-1405) was a Turco-Mongol conqueror who founded the Timurid Empire in and around modern-day Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia. His conquests and actions, especially the large-scale massacres he inflicted on other countries, including India, are often described as genocidal in nature by scholars and historians. Despite that, he is widely regarded as one of the greatest military leaders and tacticians in history. Timur was loved and revered throughout his empire, then and now, for bringing glory to his Timurid Empire. Timur was the grandfather of the Timurid Sultan, astronomer and mathematician Ulubegh and the ancestor of Babur (1483-1530), founder of India's Mughal Empire.

The Gur-i-Amir Complex in Samarkand contains Timur Lane's Mausoleum, built by Timur in 1404 and is now fully restored. This masterpiece occupies a very important place in the history of world Islamic architecture. It also had significant influence on later Mughal architecture, built by Timur's descendants in India, such as Humayun's tomb in Delhi and Taj



Chorsu Bazar



Timur Mausoleum

Mahal in Agra. Historical sources mention that the mausoleum was designed and constructed under the direction of Muhammad Isfahani, a Persian architect from Isfahan, Central Iran. Below is the stunning interior of the mausoleum. We are standing next to Timur's and his favorite grandson, Ulugh Begh's tombs.

The Registan Square is at the heart of Samarkand. It was regarded as the hub of the Timurid Renaissance and is framed by three Madrasahs. In the bottom photo, we are standing in front of the Registan Square. On the left is Ulubegh Madrasah (1420), in the middle is Sher-dor Madrasah (17th century) and on the right is Tilya-Kori Madrasah (17th century).

The photo on top shows us with a couple of young local ladies who are planning to study foreign languages in college. They wanted to practice English with us. Funny thing is that we did most of talking. Ulugh Begh Madrasah is to the left. Ulugh Begh, favorite grandson of Timur, was highly noted for his astronomical observations and his star catalog was the world's best before Tycho Brahe of Denmark. His massive observatory in Samarkand was the best in the Islamic world. He had significant interests in arts and strongly encouraged education for women. While other Madrasahs were mostly focused on religious studies, this Madrasah and another he built in Bukhara, were the largest scientific educational establishments in the country. Students came from many regions to attend this highly regarded center of learning. Ulugh Begh, however, during his reign, failed in governance. His enemies including his own son took advantage of his weakness and assassinated him.

Below is a photograph of Ulugh Begh Madrasa and Bibi-Khanum Mosque. Sarah Khanum, a direct descendant of Genghis Khan, was the chief consort of Timur Lane. In the 15th century, this was one of the most magnificent mosques in the world and a masterpiece of the Timurid Renaissance. Major parts of the mosque were restored in the Soviet period. This mosque was commissioned by Sarah Khanum herself.

The Shah-i-Zinda ensemble, shown below, includes mausoleums and other ritualistic buildings of the 11th-19th centuries. With all its mosques, mausoleums and madrasah, nearly 20 buildings, Shah -i-Zinda is considered a real holy place in Islam and visited by people from the Islamic world. I decided not to climb 40 steep stairs while Subhas went up with the guide.

While I was resting, a group of very friendly ladies with practically no knowledge of English, stopped and gave me hugs. One of them uttered the word "Hindustan". They



Registan Square



Begh Madrasa and Bibi Mosque

appeared to be simple and caring and I thoroughly enjoyed all the nonverbal “conversations” with these wonderful ladies. Our final stop was visiting a silk carpet factory.

The next morning, we took a train to Bukhara.

Bukhara-The Living Museum of Silk Road

With a history of 2000 years, this old city of Bukhara, along with Samarkand, used to be the epicenter of Persian culture in Medieval Asia until the fall of the Timurid dynasty. Bukhara, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, boasts around 140 historic monuments.

The Silk Route, active from the 2nd century BCE to the 15th century, was a vital trade and cultural link between East and West. Connecting China in the east to Venice and Genoa in Europe it fostered trade, exchange and spread of ideas that included religion, art and knowledge. Its lasting historical impact can be symbolized by Marco Polo's famous visit to Kublai Khan's China.

Trading domes, shown above, are historic structures located at the intersection of trade routes. They served as covered marketplaces. Four restored trading domes remain in the historic center of Bukhara. Goods exchanged included silk, cotton, wool, glass, gold, silver, spices, tea etc. This trading dome now sells outfits for women. There are many fine restaurants and modern hotels in this historic district, including the one in which we stayed.

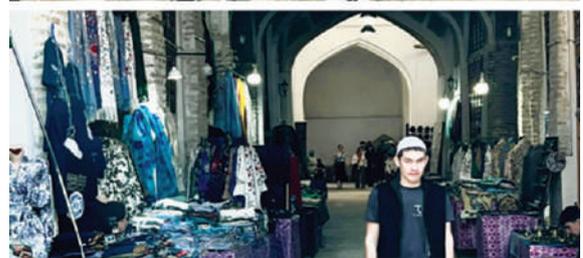
A restored old bathhouse (hammam) and a caravan serai stand next to the trading dome. There is also an Old Mosque nearby.

Caravan serais were roadside inns along the silk route. Serais offered food, shelter, water and often acted as marketplaces. There were stables for horses, donkeys and mules to rest. One can easily picture a traveler selling his goods all day inside the traders' dome, then taking a bath inside the hammam, praying inside the Mosque and finally resting inside the Serai. The Silk Route comes alive here!

On the top are Kalyan Minaret (1127 AD, the most visible landmark of Bukhara) and Kalan Mosque (1397, one of the largest in Central Asia). At bottom is Mir-i-Arab Madrasah (a functioning religious institution dating back to the 16th century). During times of war, warriors used the minaret as a watch tower, also known as the tower of death. Other points of interest are the highly decorated Aldulaziz Khan's Madrasah, Ulugh Begh's



Shah-i-Zinda



Serai Dome



Caravan Serai

Madrasah, Magog-i-Atari Mosque, the Jewish Mahallah, the Nadir Devanbegi Madrasah, the Ark Citadel of Bukhara, the Samani Mausoleum displaying Zoroastrian architecture and outside Bukhara, the Bahauddin Naqshbodi Architectural Complex and the Summer Country Residence of the Emirs.

We took a chauffeured car to Khiva, as there was no train.

Khiva- A city frozen in time

The city of Khiva (population 93,000) was established around 2500 years ago. It is split into two parts- Dichin Kala, the outer town and Itchin Kala, the inner town which is encircled by brick walls and is a world heritage site.

On top one can see the statues of a caravan at the entrance to Itchin Kala. It used to be the last resting place of caravans before crossing the desert to Iran. Socializing over a cup of tea between two merchants is frozen in statues here. Itchin Kala retains 50 historic monuments and 250 houses mostly dating from the 18th centuries. Our hotel was inside Itchin Kala and we saw people in these old homes. There are several restaurants inside the complex. Khiva is located near Amu Darya River, so fish is plentiful here. Itchin Kala is a wonderful example of a fully protected ancient city.

Khiva was under limited Timurid control and after Timur's death, his successors struggled to control distant regions like Khiva and in 1511, the Khiva Khanate was formed with Khiva as its capital. The Soviets replaced the Khanate in 1920 and Khiva became an official part of the Soviet Union.

There are many beautiful historical buildings inside including madrasahs, mausoleums, mosques and palaces of the Khans now converted into museums.

The Khans could have up to 4 wives and 40 concubines. On the top is the general harem area showing one of the four queen's bedrooms. The 40 concubines lived in 6 rooms.

Closing Remarks

I like to thank my husband Subhas for taking the photographs and helping with editing. Special thanks go to Debajyoti Chatterji for his encouragement to write this travelogue.



Kalyan Complex



Entrance to Itchin Kala



Harem of the Khans

Balcony

Our entire tour was private. We had ample time to discuss central Asia's history, architecture, culture, and societal ethos with our guides (three out of four were women). Uzbekistan was under Soviet rule for 67 years. The guides believed that this rule was both good and bad for people. It was good for women because they got a chance to get educated and be independent. Drinking is legal, 21 being the legal age. Unfortunately, alcoholism is prevalent among men. Bollywood is popular among common people. People still observe Zoroastrian rituals during weddings. Overall, Uzbekistan is clean, orderly, and appeared to be quite a tourist friendly country.



Ruma Sikdar, Cincinnati Ohio, is a retired psychologist from Cincinnati Public Schools where she worked closely with inner city children with special needs for many years. After retirement, smitten by *wanderlust*, she and her husband have been traveling extensively all over the world. She has been sharing her travel experiences regularly on social media.



Leaves and Flowers by Jerry Kaiser inspired by Late Scottish Artist Rory McEwen



Leaves by Jerry Kaiser inspired by Late Scottish Artist Rory McEwen



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