Caesurae MANA

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Editorial

Dear Beautiful Souls,

To care for those who once cared
for us is one of the highest honors.
~ Tia Walker

The duties and responsibilities of an individual are profoundly encapsulated in Tia Walker's quote, where she shares her thoughts on the moral essence of reciprocating to the wonderful souls who contour our futurity by fostering us from the inception of our journey. The act of passion and compassion is not merely our obligation, but it is our honour to serve them. It pertains to the elderly souls whom we encounter in our journey. We shall feel a sense of completeness when we serve the elderly souls. Our little fingers were secure in their hands; they worked indefatigably, sacrificing their today for our tomorrow. The vicious circle of bounteous and accepting is universal; it is the changing of the guard.

The beautiful elderly souls are considered to be the living libraries – truly repositories of stories, principles, and values. They spread the message of love, peace, sacrifice, and wisdom. When we marginalise our living libraries, we are severing our childhood, our roots – the tree can never grow sans the roots. We received wondrous creative pieces, including poems, short stories, memoirs, and a painting depicting the nuances of the vicious circle of giving and accepting and the importance of our elders, who have always been the givers for us to become what we are.

The works in the July issue represent the journey of respecting the giver and the sacrifier – the elders – inculcating the principles and values to shape our journey. The July issue shall remain etched in our journey to correct our mistakes and respect the path that has been shown by our elders. An enriching and captivating journey includes not only having mutual

respect for our fellow travellers but also honouring our elders by caring for and giving them the due respect.

I extend my gratitude to Prof. Jayita Sengupta (President of Caesurae Collective Society and the chief editor of Caesurae Journal) for giving me the luxury of selecting the theme (Elderly Care with Compassion and Respect) for this year's issue. Her unwavering support has been both inspiring and captivating in this beautiful literary journey.

Honouring their (elders) importance in our journey is not about kindness but giving them our love, gratitude, reverence, and humanity. Let us give the silver strands of hair the crowns of honour, respecting their presence, preserving their dignity, and treating them as the soul of our inception.

Love & Light,

Orbindu Ganga
Editor, MANA, Caesurae Journal
Vol 6, Issue 2, July Issue, MANA 2025
Member, Editorial Board, Caesurae Journal



ORBINDU GANGA

Orbindu Ganga is an author, editor, poet, publisher, consultant, researcher, content writer, and spiritual healer. He holds a post-graduate degree in science from India and is the inaugural recipient of the Dr Mitra Augustine Gold Medal for academic excellence. He is the owner of CynFynEnliven, a company that provides publishing, consulting, and content services. He was the co-founder and director of the literary and research editorial boards of two journals, INNSÆI and MatruAkshar Journals. His diverse expertise spans finance, banking, publishing, and soft skills training. Additionally, he is the creator of the Subconscious Observation Belief System (SOBS) and is a certified life coach, spiritual coach, and mindset coach under SOBS. He has been featured three times in "The Year of Poet" (2019–2021) by Inner Child Press International Publication (United States of America). He has published more than two hundred poems, twenty science articles, fifteen articles, ten books, three research papers, two short stories, and other creative works.

PAINTING



SHE WHO WATCHES THE MORNING

This dreamy, impressionistic painting captures the quiet dignity of an elderly woman facing a window where light gently spills in. With silver-black strands tucked softly at her crown and a profile marked by grace, her stillness speaks of years lived, love remembered, and peace earned. Inspired by the artist's own grandmother, this piece is a tribute to the inner radiance of those who sit in silence, yet carry entire histories within them.



JULIE MILES

Julie is an American poet, author, and founder of Still Waters Poetry, a gentle space for poetic reflection and soulful connection. Her work explores themes of spiritual resilience, healing, familial bonds, and the sacred rhythm of ordinary life. Featured in international anthologies and literary journals, Julie writes with the clarity of lived wisdom and the tenderness of one who listens deeply. Her debut poetry collection will be released this year. When she's not writing, she is tending to the hearts of her family, fellow poets, and her own quiet transformation. She believes in the power of stillness, the grace of compassion, and the lifelong unfolding of the soul.

POETRY

AISHWARIYA LAXMI

TO MY PARENTS WITH LOVE

It's sometimes hard
To be even-tempered
When you are
Dealing with the elderly
Or the infirm
Especially when you aren't
In the pink of health yourself
But I keep reminding myself
That remaining calm
Is probably more important
Than any of the other things I do
For when you look after your parents
Who have sacrificed their all to bring you up
Been there for you when your world
Has repeatedly fallen apart
And life has all but stopped
Shouldn't you show through
Every gesture and word
Just how much they mean to you

And never use a harsh tone
Or a mean word?
Is the least I can do
And I always strive to be
A better daughter today
Than I was yesterday



AISHWARIYA LAXMI

Aishwariya Laxmi is the author of *Birds of Paradise: Poems on Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness* published by Alien Buddha Press and available on Amazon USA. She writes on www.aishwariyalaxmi.com and has co-authored 45 multi–author anthologies.

AKANKSHA PANDEY

THE EMBRACE

Old blankets,
Have become tattered.
They have thinned and aged over time,
No longer capable of providing
The same level of warmth they once offered.
So we purchase new ones,
More plush and velvety,
We relish their freshness and vigour,
Alas! Only for a brief moment.
Old blankets,
Then flood our memories,
Just like grandparents do,
Because they are the coziest,
The most familiar.
They were once immaculate,
Like the bright, hopeful future we welcome.
But they performed their best,
Shielding us from every ice-cold storm,
Preventing from getting frozen to death,
Supporting us through all these years,
Until we could buy these new velvety ones.
They then resigned
And settled,
In a shadowy place,
Tucked away in a corner,
Awaiting some care,
Much like the quiet space where wisdom resides.

They can still serve in small proportions,
Their stories softly murmuring,
But not as much as before.
They remain familiar and snuggly,
Vintage and classic,
Upholding the vibrations of joy and support.
They need to be preserved,
In one way or another,
Forever.
For some things, like the warmth of an old blanket
Or the hug of a grandparent,
Can never truly be ousted.



AKANKSHA PANDEY

Akanksha Pandey is an assistant professor at Shri Ramswaroop Memorial University as well as a research scholar in the Department of English and Modern European Languages at the University of Lucknow. Apart from publishing research papers in edited volumes and journals, her poems have appeared at several places, including Rhetorica-A Literary Journal of Arts, The Stroke *Stories Publishing House*, *Setu*

Journal (Pittsburgh, USA), *The Criterion: An International Journal in English* and an anthology by the All India Forum for English Students, Scholars and Trainers. She has also worked as the co-editor of the departmental journal - "Rhetorica - A Literary Journal of Arts" for two years.

BINDIYA BAMMI

FRAGILE

[Ode to Amma]

In the wrinkles of her ashen cheeks
A lifetime lies sketched
In the crinkles of her hazy gaze
A gash of pain lies etched
From barely parted lips
Some thoughts unfold, some are on hold
In feebly whispered tones
Half-forgotten stories lie half-told
In the braid of her wintry hair
Long-lost spring of youth lies plaited
In the lifeline of her trembling hands
A destiny is writ, sealed and fated
In the waves of her meandering mind
Long-ago memories stay afloat and mill
At which turn does the wheel of time
Come to a standstill
Her tightly clenched fists
Wrestle to open still
Her tortured bent knees
Struggle against their will
Twisted, gnarled fingers still
Yearn in prayer to fold
The pearly gates of heaven still
House is not the body but the soul



BINDIYA BAMMI

Bindiya is a multifaceted personality who spent her formative years in Assam. She has carved a niche as a professional charcoal artist, holding successful solo exhibitions in India and abroad. She has been involved in social work for 20 years, managing Tata Tea's Childcare/Labour Welfare Program, Assam, and serving as the chairperson of projects, Raksha School for Special Children, Cochin. A Life Master representing India internationally since 2017, winning one gold and one silver medal, and was selected for the Asian Games. She is a Bridge Federation of India EC member, spearheading a nationwide Bridge Education program. She has three books on the anvil and believes in higher consciousness and healing.

CHAYAN DAS

MY STEADFAST STAR

The house where I was born and grew up;
Today is inhabited by my grandmother, forlorn.
A pious lady she is
With Silver locks
Whose indomitable spirit, time has failed to mock.
She is a golden treasure,
Who has always thought of others' pleasure.
Her affectionate presence and kind words
Had always touched my heart with an invisible chord.
But in my heart, often fears deepen;
Without you, darkness in my life would creep in.
The stories you told me in the lap of the night,
Are fond memories that make my leisure hours bright.
You remind me that old age is an age full of experience,
Which we all fear to avoid since incipience.
Time's widening space has forced me to stay away from you, afar,
All I say to you is, see you soon, my steadfast star.



CHAYAN DAS

Chayan Das is a teacher at St. Francis Xavier English Medium School, Andal. He has been committed to helping students learn in a fun-filled environment. Along with this, he has a passion for writing, through which he believes in pouring out his thoughts and emotions and touching the hearts of his readers.

He believes, “Poetry is a beautiful journey through the corridors of the mind. It gives wings to imagination. It is a mystical experience that heals the soul.” Through his contribution to this anthology, he hopes to delve into a creative world, a world where words can build castles, where emotions, passion, and thoughts conspire together to create Magic.

DR DIMITRIS P. KRANIOTIS

CRACKED

Withered flower of fire
A sad thought
Of an old lady

A breath…
A breath of life
That was interrupted

Hope blown out
By the breath of calamity
The mirror cracked

What can you say now?
You do not think
You only ask



DR DIMITRIS P. KRANIOTIS

Dimitris P. Kraniotis was born in 1966 in Larissa Prefecture in Greece. He studied medicine at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. He lives in Larissa (Greece) and works as a medical doctor (internist). He is the author of 11 poetry books. He has won international awards for his poetry, which has been translated into 36 languages and published in many countries. He participated in many international poetry festivals. He is a Doctor of Literature (Litt.D.), an academician in Italy, president of the 22nd World Congress of Poets (UPLI), president of the World Poets Society (WPS), director of Mediterranean Poetry Festival (Larissa, Greece), and chairman of the Writers for Peace Committee of PEN Greece.

DR MANDAVI CHOUDHARY

BECOMING HIS MOTHER

My father is in his seventies now,
Shoulders drooping,
The wild winds of youth have quieted.
Once a rebel with cigarettes and slogans,
A hunk in baggy jeans,
A soul who marched with the Socialists
And hitchhiked across dreams.

Today,
That man who wandered the world without maps
Struggles to cross the road without pause.
I've watched him retire;
Not just from his work,
But from the long summer of his strength.
Yet in his heart,
A teenage spark still flickers.

He wants the first mango from the basket.
He lights up at the doorbell's chime,
Throws tantrums for attention
And I,
Who once was held in those steady hands,
Now hold them
To guide him forward.

He is not old.

Not to me.
He's my young boy.
We bicker like siblings,
But we are growing;
He becomes my child,
And I, inch by inch, turn into his mother.

I scold him now:
"Don't stay up so late,"
"Don't step out in the noon sun."
I watch him with the eyes that once watched me.
The roles shift gently,
Like shadows in a setting sun.

It's hard to say
Who the parent is anymore.
But in this strange, tender reversal,
He is still
The most unconventional,
The coolest father I'll ever know.

And when I wrap him in my arms
As though he were my baby,
I feel …
He sees me rising;
Not just as his daughter,
But as the mother
He never expected to find
In me.

That's us, now!
Our pasts and presents
Blurring softly
Into something beautifully new.



DR MANDAVI CHOUDHARY

Dr Mandavi Choudhary is an assistant professor in the Department of English at Satyawati College (Evening), D.U. Her research explores the cultural and historical significance of Indian jewellery, with a focus on its literary and symbolic dimensions. A published poet in the confessional tradition, she brings a creative lens to her academic work. Her areas of interest include American confessional poetry, British romanticism, and cultural studies. Dr Choudhary's interdisciplinary approach bridges scholarship and creative expression, enriching both her research and teaching practice.

INDRANI CHATTERJEE

INDEMNIFY THE FLAME OF OTHER DAYS!

The nerves get enfeebled and the inner engineering starts decelerating,
The Eventide hours seek tender clemency before the last parting.
The detained life now stands isolated, yearning to be cloaked in the fervour of dear ones.
And see through the light of juvenile eyes and intensive care that augments their vision.

Those gold creases lined on the forehead epitomise the lore gathered,
Trying to preside over the floating generation with exhortation of life to curve them wiser.
Now the trembling hands need firm and
credible grips to ossify their steps.
Those hands that never flinched to delegate munificently,
Needs the equitable care of young figures in fervour to drape.

Let humanity not fail that they once laid the foundation for the present to savour the glory of living,
It's now the turn for the robust shoulders to wrap the genarians in holistic caregiving.
They aren't deserted souls even if their loins have bent with preponderance of age,
A little tendance and attention of dignity they deserve at their mellow stage.

Delegate them with a small token of appreciation as a gift,
And see their lucid eyes shine with ecstasy and how their spirit lifts.
Keep the beat of movements slow to beseem with their rhythm of life
The slender flame of their earthly tenure, replete with love, deference and positive vibes.



INDRANI CHATTERJEE

She is Indrani Chatterjee, a published author and mother to her only autistic child. She is a verse composer and pens for several social platforms. Even from the barred layers of felicity, her emotions occasionally well up to inundate the white in blue. Nothing is ceremonial in her revelation and approach, purely self-motivated. She only wishes her readers to glide along with the rhythmic undulations of her penmanship. She has co-authored a number of anthologies of reputed publications.

She is also an ardent music lover specialising in Rabindra Sangeet (songs composed by Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore). Currently pursuing a graduation course in the same. Her son also shares the same love for music.

JULIE MILES

THE QUIET CHAIR

(for those who have given everything)

The chair by the window leans like her spine-
curved, weathered, yet upright with grace.
She watches sparrows settle on the fence,
their chatter fills the silence
that her children once broke
with muddy boots and laughter.

Her hands, now map-soft and trembling,
once mended wounds and wove peace
into the hems of every passing storm.

She asks for nothing-
but smiles when the nurse remembers
to water the violet
her grandson gave her three springs ago.

In her stillness,
she becomes the whole room's pulse
a steady rhythm of having lived
and quietly deserving love.



JULIE MILES

Julie is an American poet, author, and founder of Still Waters Poetry, a gentle space for poetic reflection and soulful connection. Her work explores themes of spiritual resilience, healing, familial bonds, and the sacred rhythm of ordinary life. Featured in international anthologies and literary journals, Julie writes with the clarity of lived wisdom and the tenderness of one who listens deeply. Her debut poetry collection will be released this year. When she's not writing, she is tending to the hearts of her family, fellow poets, and her own quiet transformation. She believes in the power of stillness, the grace of compassion, and the lifelong unfolding of the soul.

ORBINDU GANGA

LATE REPENTANCE COSTS DEARLY

The umbilical cord was severed.
Leaving the invisible connection to stay,
Not to be visible to the form, being
Within her for nine months, he snored,
Breathing, hitting, canoeing, and kayaking,
Her womb wobbled, being his home.

Sizzling as a diver, trembling between
The bones, the chiaroscuro opened
The new world, seeing coloured light,
He was frightened; vagitus continued
Until teary eyes held him together,
In synergy, the warmth gave him solace,
Her fragrance of love and touch consoled.

He came with anecdotes at school,
Every day conversation with her made
Him have a sound sleep, being her best
Friend, her day begins with her son's
Smile, and night slept with his hug.

Conversations attenuated as he reached
College; he came late at night, sometimes
in the wee hours, before she could ask

About his whereabouts, he would
Have left home sans a word.

Joining his first job, he was exultant,
She saw his smile after school
Days, his conversations with his
Mother blossomed, for which
She was indebted to the Almighty,
Went to the temple for his blessings,
He was her only son after her husband's
Untimely death, raising him single-handedly
With no support from her relatives.

He was besotted with someone.
He knew from school days,
Efflorescenced during the college days,
Giving his time for her, he exchanged
Rings with halcyon days blossomed.

Two years later, she met with
An accident - he was shattered.
Mother consoled him for the loss
'Was irreplaceable,' he muttered
himself, a disquieted mother devoted
Her whole time for him, he realised
His mistake was being away from his
Mother from college days.

Giving his time to his mother,
Started his own firm to be with
His mother: as the age caught her,
She was in discomfort, giving all his
Time to his mother: years passed by.
His mother healed, but his untimely
Sleep, taking care of his mother, he
Became weak. One day, his eyes
Greyed, never opened again.



ORBINDU GANGA

Orbindu Ganga is an author, editor, poet, publisher, consultant, researcher, content writer, and spiritual healer. He holds a post-graduate degree in science from India and is the inaugural recipient of the Dr Mitra Augustine Gold Medal for academic excellence. He is the owner of CynFynEnliven, a company that provides publishing, consulting, and content services. He was the co-founder and director of the literary and research editorial boards of two journals, INNSÆI and MatruAkshar

Journals. His diverse expertise spans finance, banking, publishing, and soft skills training. Additionally, he is the creator of the Subconscious Observation Belief System (SOBS) and is a certified life coach, spiritual coach, and mindset coach under SOBS. He has been featured three times in "The Year of Poet" (2019–2021) by Inner Child Press International Publication (United States of America). He has published more than two hundred poems, twenty science articles, fifteen articles, ten books, three research papers, two short stories, and other creative works.

RIYA HAITH

THE YELLOW LEAF

The night when the tempest ravaged
I saw a yellow leaf in front of my door
I picked it up and observed
It lost its cozy shelter
Time snatched its youth and beauty
I noticed its paleness
Like an oyster shell encases its pearl in its bosom
The tree could not keep it so lovingly
Its pain echoed in my ear like the unforgettable verses
The yellow leaf brought a deluge to my eyes
I threw up in the air to diminish all its miseries
It flew briskly and started its journey towards an unknown land
I cherished this memory in my heart
A river of celestial love flowed inside my soul
At the moment of departure, I sang a song of love
I played the flute with the agony of the unspoken words.



RIYA HAITH

Riya Haith is a government employee from West Bengal. She completed her master's degree in English literature. She lost her parents at a very young age. She loves to paint her imagination with words. Riya is a bilingual writer. Her poems and short stories have been published in various magazines and anthologies in both Bengali and English, and she has also written a novella.

SHARMISTHA MUKHERJEE

A TRIBUTE TO GRANDMOTHERLY LOVE

To those wrinkled hands that loved us unconditionally,
To those feeble voices that told stories occasionally.
To those eyes that lit up upon seeing our success,
To those laps where, after school, we found our naps.
To those efforts made to protect us from beatings by parents,
To their overflowing love for us — always so apparent.

That person is my grandmother, so dear,
Who was my place of comfort when I was broken inside,
Who sat by my side, setting her health troubles aside.
Who used to be the happiest person on my birthday,
Who bought me presents from her little savings, to my dismay.
Who taught me the true values of being human,
Who showed me that love can always be given.
Who showed how one gets more perturbed when we are sick,
Who always spread light around us — gentle and quick.

But alas! How little time we have to hold onto them,
How little time to say thank you for every apophthegm.
How little time to whisper, “I miss you” or “I love you,”
How little time to hold their hands and pray their heartbeat won’t skew.
For they are the ones who leave this world too soon,
Teaching us lessons of unconditional love and compassion — a lifelong boon.



SHARMISTHA MUKHERJEE

Sharmistha Mukherjee is a budding poet, writer, and translator based in Kolkata, West Bengal. Inspired by nature and the nuances of human emotion, her writing delves into themes such as the environment, social issues, and the intricacies of everyday life. An environmental activist at heart, she is also a multilingual enthusiast, having completed the B2 level in Spanish. Alongside her literary pursuits, she enjoys singing, reciting poetry, and drawing. A graduate in recitation from Prachin Kala Kendra, she continues to embrace the arts as a vital part of her identity. Her work reflects empathy, curiosity, and a deep reverence for the world around her.

SHORT STORIES

GOVIND GUNJAN

OLD MAN IN A METROPOLIS

Whenever I reminisce about my bygone days, my heart leaps into my mouth. It was a paradise in the beginning, but it turned into a hellish night. I still feel the darkest night of my life that unfolded before me in Delhi about five years ago.

I was living in Delhi with my husband after he retired from a prominent bank. We were each other's entire world. My eldest son had settled in California with his wife and two daughters, while my youngest son owned a shop in our hometown, located a hundred kilometres away.

It was September 2012 when we came across an apartment on the third floor of a multi-story building, surrounded by the lush company of tall trees. My husband instantly decided to purchase the apartment. It featured two bedrooms, a hall, a small kitchen, and a balcony that overlooked the serene greenery. A mango tree positioned just beneath the balcony was the prime attraction for us.

In the mornings, my husband would sit in his chair on the balcony, which had a glass-covered tea table. He would read his newspapers, listen to the radio, and enjoy his two cups of coffee—one at seven in the morning and the second at eight o'clock before heading to the bathroom.

Twenty years ago, when my husband joined the Delhi branch office of the bank as a deputy manager upon his promotion, we were thrilled to discover a new place like Delhi to call home. At that time, our eldest son Anurag was in the final year of his engineering studies and had secured a position at a California-based company with an attractive salary package. He had a promising career ahead, and our spirits were high. Since then, we have resided in Delhi. Our life in our private Eden was brimming with vitality. While there was a mango tree in place of an apple tree, it truly felt like our Eden of joy, where the two of us lived akin to Adam and Eve. Despite the absence of neighbouring people around us, we didn't feel perturbed. We understood

well that the lack of neighbourliness often leads to the breakdown of our traditional sense of community, yet we found ourselves in a helpless situation. I attempted to foster a connection with our neighbours, but my efforts were in vain. They possessed neither the time nor the interest.

Sometimes, I perceive such individuals in a rather peculiar manner. They resemble neutrons in their nucleus, devoid of the emotional charge that connects them to others. They harbour suspicions about everyone and maintain their distance within their small nucleus. My husband paid little heed to what others thought and advised me not to concern myself with them. Only a handful of individuals were familiar with us or expressed interest in getting to know us, but ultimately, it was their lives, and we had to adapt to the way of life in a metropolitan city.

We had spent a considerable amount of time here, so we seldom visited our hometown, perhaps once or twice a year. However, Amit, my younger son, frequently visited us from our hometown along with our granddaughter Reena, and upon their arrival, our Eden of joy would flourish with even more cheerfulness. Reena, an adorable and talkative sixteen-year-old, had a keen interest in temples and gardens around Delhi. She always took us to new places that we had rarely explored before. Her presence brought true joy, and I cherished her company immensely.

This was our entire small world, where we had no complaints about anything. Our days were spent in comfort. On Reena's birthday, we were all together in Delhi with both my sons, daughters-in-law, and our grandchildren. It was a perfectly lovely day, I believe, an appropriately lovely day. We visited the Mughal Garden, where the air was filled with the auspicious fragrance of lovely flowers, and our eyes feasted on beautiful colours. Our hearts swelled with the joy of togetherness. The day was bright, and the evening was soothing as we returned. For Reena's birthday, my daughter-in-law served a delicious cake that Navin greatly enjoyed.

"Papa... would you like another piece of cake?" she asked.

"That would be delightful. Thank you," he replied.

"No, no more cake..." I intervened, holding her hand to prevent her from serving another piece to Navin. His blood sugar was rising, and I was concerned. They all shared a laugh.

"It's my birthday cake, and it won't do any harm, Grandma," Reena said candidly.

"I understand, dear, but I worry about his increasing sugar levels. It was high last week, and you're well aware of how negligent your grandpa can be about his health," I retorted.

The next day, they all returned to our hometown. Navin wanted to accompany them to the railway station to bid them farewell, but Amit advised against it. I had booked a cab for them in the morning, and they left. The home now felt barren and empty, which was in stark contrast to the Eden it had become when they were around. This sense of emptiness always lingered after their departure, leaving us listless for a while.

It is indeed embarrassing at this age to live away from your relatives. The next morning, I woke up with a very unpleasant headache and a strong sense of remorse, mixed with panic. I got up, took a tepid bath, and prepared coffee for both of us. Navin rarely showed his distress outwardly, but I was well aware that he was feeling nostalgic. He had learned to cope with the natural progression of things that come with time, but for me, fixing situations took longer. With Navin, however, things usually resolved quickly.

We decided to visit the city mall this evening, where James Cameron's mega-hit film "Titanic" had been released that week. The mall was bustling with the faces of youngsters excited to watch the movie. We thoroughly enjoyed it, and it lifted our gloomy mood. The flawlessly crafted film about the tragic voyage was a spellbinding epic that captivated us. The stunning Kate Winslet, who portrayed the heartrending, tragic love story of the lovely Rose Winslet and the charming Jack Dawson, left a profound impact on us. One line of dialogue lingered in my mind: "I promise not to ever let the pain and sadness of losing you outweigh the

happiness and joy you gave to me..." Little did I know that these would become my own words one day, alas?

It was a late night in July. The sky was turbulent and wet, as a heavy thunderstorm raged with torrential rain. The window glass shook violently in the rush of the strong wind. It was sultry weather with immense dark clouds rolling across the sky, and the rain continued until morning, causing flooding everywhere.

At eleven o'clock, I was watching a TV serial while Navin lay on the couch reading a novel. Suddenly, Navin seemed to experience discomfort in his chest and struggled to catch his breath. Startled and shocked, I noticed beads of sweat forming on his forehead. I rushed over to him in a state of panic, holding him close. He managed to convey that he needed to use the bathroom. I helped him and guided him there.

I waited anxiously for him to come out, calling his name, but his response was faint. Worry crept in, and fear began to take hold of me. I called out, "Oh, please tell me what's happening... Are you okay?"

Eventually, the bathroom door opened, and he emerged, stumbling and drenched in sweat. I took hold of his hand and led him back to the couch. His half-closed eyes revealed the intensity of his pain and distress.

"Please lie down here... Don't worry, dear. It will be better in a few minutes," I pleaded, my voice trembling.

He opened his eyes slightly and gazed at me. I was overwhelmed with a sense of despair, unsure of what to do.

"What's happening to you, dear? Please tell me," I said, tears welling up in my eyes.

Suddenly, I made the decision to call the hospital for an ambulance. It was clear that this was an emergency. I fumbled for my cell phone and dialled the emergency hospital number, but there was no response. The network was down due to the pouring rain that had been ongoing through the night. It was midnight, and panic set in as I realised I didn't know what to do. Navin remained silent, not uttering a single word.

I gently shook him again, but he remained unresponsive. His eyes were closed, and his hands had stiffened. This sight filled my heart with intense agony. I felt lost, not knowing what to do. In such a short time, he seemed almost lifeless. He had left me shattered. Tears streamed down my face as I cried aloud, "Oh, you can't leave me like this." I attempted to rouse him, but his head turned and fell to the side.

This was something I never anticipated. I was utterly alone with no one to help or support me. The neighbouring apartments were locked, and no one was around. Despite my loud cries, there was no one to hear. I repeatedly tried my cell phone to call the hospital, but to my dread, there were no signals. After what felt like an eternity of agonising moments, my cell phone finally caught a network, connecting me to the hospital. They noted down my address and promised to send an ambulance as soon as possible. With no other option, I could only wait, engulfed in darkness and despair. A heavy weight of darkness seemed to envelop my soul, and my heart burned with an intense fire that consumed my tears. An eerie silence hung on my lips. I cradled Navin's head in my lap, stroking him gently, holding onto the hope that he would open his eyes. In those moments, time and place seemed to lose their meaning. I didn't even remember to call my son in our hometown. The hospital personnel had not arrived yet, and this filled me with a desperate worry.

As time passed, my concern grew. Once again, I stepped onto the balcony and looked down. Except for a drenched street dog lying miserably near the gate, there was no sign of life anywhere. Rainwater had formed puddles under the lamp post. A breeze rustled the mango tree in the courtyard, causing a few twigs to fall and break. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Did I

hear a soft knock at the door? I turned back and listened, but when I rushed to open the door, there was no one there. The sound was a result of the gusty, rain-laden wind knocking against the door.

My heart sank deeper into a dark and unfathomable abyss. I gazed at Navin's face in my lap; he appeared as though sleeping peacefully. He had transcended all pain and suffering. A small frozen smile lingered on the corner of his lips, almost as if mocking my futile cries. At that point, my heart felt empty and devoid of meaning. "Oh my god, help me... I'm utterly devastated," I whispered. A cruel fate had befallen me, and without Navin, I felt lost.

I leaned over his chest, holding him tightly. His body still retained a trace of warmth, but that warmth was slowly fading into the coldness of lifelessness. My fingers brushed against his face and hair. "Please wake up," I pleaded through tears. "You can't do this to me. No, it's not possible. This can't be happening." Panic gripped me.

Another rumble of thunder echoed in the distant sky. It was the longest night, a night that seemed destined never to end. And it didn't end. Its shadow lingered in my days, frozen for eternity. Suddenly, my cell phone slipped from the corner of the couch to the floor, and the sound startled me. I picked it up and dialled Amit, my younger son, this time. Hearing his voice, I couldn't hold back my tears as I begged him to come here immediately. He tried to console me, assuring me that he would be there before morning. I couldn't muster any further words; my voice caught in my throat.

The night stretched on endlessly, and I struggled to find solace. Though all the lights were on, they couldn't penetrate the darkness within me. I gazed at Navin, lying on the couch, knowing he would never rise again, and I sat by his side, unable to sleep.

The harrowing hours felt infinite. Suddenly, a loud knock resonated at the door. Two people in white entered, representatives from the hospital. They had brought an ambulance

parked below. Doors on the ground floor also opened, and people rushed upstairs. My mind was a whirlwind, and I couldn't recall who they were. They assisted the hospital staff in carrying Navin's body, and they rode the elevator down. I followed them, too dazed to understand or comprehend. They tried to console me, but how could I be consoled? I was devastated, disconnected from the reality around me. I didn't know the time or what was happening. Dawn was breaking, yet the sky remained dark due to the rain clouds. We arrived at the city hospital around seven, and the doctor on duty checked Navin's pulse before solemnly nodding. "It's too late... I'm sorry," he said. Then he looked at me and inquired, "Are you alone with him?"

I stumbled and nearly fell, but he caught me and helped me to sit on a bench nearby. I fumbled with my cell phone again and called Amit, informing him that I was at the hospital and providing him with the address. They were on their way and said they would reach the hospital within half an hour. I relayed this information to the doctor, who advised me that once my son arrived, we should take the body home to avoid unnecessary post-mortem procedures. The doctor explained that it was a severe heart attack that had taken Navin.

The white-walled hospital felt like an unyielding sanctuary of illness. I wondered why Amit was taking so long, why he hadn't arrived yet. Lost in a whirlpool of confusion, I tumbled from the bench to the floor in a half-conscious state. Clinging to the stretcher's legs, on which Navin lay in eternal rest, I barely had a grasp on reality.

I cannot recall how much time passed in that state, but when I regained awareness, I saw Navin seated beside me. He appeared concerned, and I realised that I was in our own home. There was no hospital, and Navin was as healthy as ever. The relief washed over me as the nightmare dissolved. Tears welled up in my eyes.

"You're okay... Oh, you're fine..." I wept, my emotions overwhelming me.

"You had a dreadful nightmare," Navin tried to console me.

"Yes, God forbid, it was an utterly terrifying dream," I responded, my voice shaky. Then I wiped away my tears and told him, "But it's over now, and I've made up my mind. We're not going to live in Delhi any longer, away from our children. We're going to live with Amit in our hometown."

Navin looked astonished, struggling to comprehend what I was saying. However, I was as resolute as a rock – we were not going to stay there any longer.



GOVIND GUNJAN

Born on August 28, 1956, Govind Gunjan is a dedicated writer with a rich literary journey. He has authored twelve books spanning essays, poetry, a novel, literary criticism, and other genres in Hindi. His works have been well-received, with many poems and articles featured in leading magazines.

One of his essays has been included in the syllabus of the Punjab Education Board and the CBSE curriculum in states like Delhi, Uttar

Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Bihar, reflecting the academic value of his writings.

Govind Gunjan is a two-time recipient of the prestigious Madhya Pradesh Sahitya Academy Awards, along with several other national and state-level honors, celebrating his significant contributions to Indian literature.

GOWHER BHAT

A SON NOT BY BLOOD

Zahoor Hussain Hakeem had just passed his 10th class when the offer came to care for an elderly woman in Srinagar city. His family's income was modest, barely enough to cover their daily needs. His parents, worn down by years of hard work and little reward, looked to Zahoor with quiet hope—their young son who could lift them out of hardship if only given the chance. When a distant relative mentioned that Booba Laal, an 85-year-old widow living alone in Srinagar, needed help, Zahoor accepted the job without hesitation. He didn't want to go. He didn't dream of leaving his village's green fields or his childhood friends behind. A knot of dread tightened in his stomach at the thought of the unfamiliar city. But the burden of responsibility and his family's struggle made the decision clear.

Booba Laal's children had long since moved abroad, caught in their own lives and ambitions, unable to care for the mother who had given them everything. Her house, once full of laughter and warmth, had grown quiet and cold. The only sounds were the occasional creaks of the old wooden floorboards and the ticking of a clock that seemed to count down her loneliness.

When Zahoor arrived at her doorstep, the frail woman eyed him cautiously. Her silver hair was neatly tied back, but her eyes—sharp and tired—betrayed years of solitude.

"You're just a village boy," she said softly, almost as if testing him.

Zahoor bowed his head respectfully. "Yes, Booba Laal, but I will serve you as my own mother."

Her lips twitched in what might have been the ghost of a smile. She wasn't used to kindness. Not really. Not in years. For a moment, she wondered if this village boy could truly be different.

From the first day, Zahoor threw himself into his work. The house was cluttered and dusty, and Booba Laal's frail hands could no longer tend the garden she once loved. Zahoor cleaned every corner, swept the floors until they gleamed, and watered the stubborn flowers outside her window.

He learned to cook her favourite dishes—simple meals made with love. He simmered 'halwa-e-gajar' (carrot halwa) with just the right hint of cardamom and prepared Kashmiri dum aloo that reminded her of Eid festivals long past. When she struggled to get up from her chair, Zahoor was there, steadying her with gentle hands.

At night, after the chores were done and Booba Laal was settled, Zahoor logged into his remote education classes. Distance learning was his lifeline—a path to a better future he had never imagined. Though exhaustion tugged at his limbs, he pressed on, balancing the demands of study and caregiving. His fingers traced the keyboard, the glow of the screen lighting up his hopeful eyes.

One evening, as Zahoor stirred a pot of meat slowly simmering on the stove, Booba Laal watched him with a softness she hadn't shown since her children left.

"You've brought warmth back to this old house, Zahoor," she said quietly, her voice trembling with emotion. "My children forgot what it means to care."

Zahoor smiled shyly, feeling the weight of her words settle in his chest. "I don't do this for money alone. You are like my own mother."

Her eyes glistened with tears she refused to shed. "You give me more than help. You give me company, respect... love."

Days bled into months, and seasons passed. Zahoor listened to stories from Booba Laal's

youth — tales of lush orchards bursting with spring blossoms, of joyous festivals beneath the endless Kashmir sky, of laughter and music now muffled by time. He absorbed her history as if it were his own, savouring each memory she shared—of childhood games by the Jhelum, of vendors calling out their wares in Lal Chowk, of the scent of saffron fields in Pampore.

One cold winter morning, wrapped in a faded shawl, Booba Laal sat silently, staring at a yellowed photograph.

"This was my husband," she whispered, her voice fragile. "And these are my children... all so far away."

Zahoor took her hand in his, warmth bridging the years and distance between them. "You are not alone anymore. I am here."

She squeezed his hand, her silent gratitude more powerful than words.

Despite the long days and tiring nights, Zahoor's education flourished. With Booba Laal's encouragement and the modest money she provided, he completed a bachelor's in education, a diploma in computers, and finally, a master's degree in political science — all through distance learning. Every letter, every certificate, and every small celebration was shared with her, their bond growing deeper with each achievement.

When the acceptance letter for his master's arrived, Zahoor found Booba Laal sitting by the window, staring at the rain tapping softly on the glass. He held out the crisp white envelope, his hand trembling slightly with a mix of pride and disbelief. "I did it, Booba Laal," he said, voice thick with emotion. "I finished."

Tears spilled down her cheeks as she pulled him close, her grip surprisingly strong. "You have made my heart full, my son. Truly full, after so long."

In return for his unwavering care, Booba Laal gave Zahoor more than a roof and food. She gave him belongings. She introduced him to neighbours as “my Zahoor,” and he felt truly seen for the first time. In a life that once seemed destined for hardship, Zahoor found family—not by blood, but by love.

Their days were not without hardship. Sometimes illness slowed Booba Laal’s frail body. Zahoor would sit with her for hours, massaging her aching joints, whispering prayers, and recounting tales from his childhood village. One rainy afternoon, as she looked out at the grey skies, she murmured, “Sometimes, I think the rain is the tears I never cried.”

Zahoor brushed a tear from her cheek. “You taught me how to care, Booba Laal. Your kindness is my strength.”

The first time Booba Laal truly smiled was a day Zahoor brought her a small potted jasmine plant from the market. She traced the delicate white flowers with a trembling finger.

“I haven’t had flowers in years,” she whispered. “Thank you, my son.”

Zahoor felt a surge of warmth — a confirmation that his efforts were more than duty; they were making a difference.

As the years passed, Zahoor became more than a caretaker. He was a companion, a son, and a friend. He shared with her his dreams of becoming a teacher, of someday returning to his village and building a school where children like him could learn without leaving home. Booba Laal listened, her eyes bright with hope she hadn’t dared to feel in decades.

When Booba Laal’s health began to fail more rapidly, Zahoor never wavered. He stayed by her side through cold nights and lonely mornings, reading poetry and stories to her when her

eyes grew too tired. He spoke softly, recounting tales of Kashmir's beauty, of snow-laden peaks and the fragrance of wild saffron in spring.

And when the day came that she quietly slipped away, Zahoor arranged the funeral with the same care and respect he had shown her in life. The neighbours who had watched their story unfold spoke of the bond between them — a rare and beautiful example of compassion, respect, and love transcending the barriers of blood and circumstance.

At her grave, beneath the weeping willow, Zahoor knelt, whispering, "You were my home, my mother, my guide. You gave me a future when I had none."

As he rose, a cool breeze brushed his face, carrying with it the faint scent of jasmine—a final gift from the woman who had become family.

Zahoor's life had changed forever. In Booba Laal's quiet home, he had found more than work—he had found a family, a purpose, and a heart forever shaped by the hands that had given and received care with unwavering devotion. He carried her memory not as a burden, but as a guiding light, a testament to the profound connection that blossomed between a young man from a village and an old woman who was once alone. The promise of building a school, a dream Booba Laal had nurtured with him, now felt more tangible than ever. It was not just a tribute to her but a continuation of the care and hope she had instilled in him, ensuring that her legacy of kindness would ripple outwards, touching generations to come.

Many years later, Zahoor stood on a patch of land in his home village, a small, vibrant structure rising behind him. The "Booba Laal Memorial School" was inscribed above its bright blue door, a testament to a love that had defied convention. Inside, the laughter of children echoed, a sound that would have brought joy to Booba Laal's heart. Zahoor, now a seasoned teacher, moved among them with the same patience and compassion he had shown his surrogate mother. He taught not just from textbooks but from the lessons of life she had imparted: the

importance of dignity, the power of a kind word, and the boundless strength of human connection. He had indeed returned home, building a future for others, just as Booba Laal had helped him build his own. Her quiet house in Srinagar was no longer cold or lonely; its warmth had simply expanded, carried by Zahoor to light up countless other lives.



GOWHER BHAT

Gowher Bhat is a passionate creative writer, storyteller, freelance journalist, and published author from Kashmir. He is drawn to stories that capture the resilience of the human spirit. In *A Son Not by Blood*, he explores themes of love, compassion, and chosen family, reflecting on the deep connections that make us human.

SHALINI NANDKEOLYAR

FADING LIGHT

"Vanya… Vaaaanyaaa… Vaaanyaa", the name rang through the still night like the night watchman's shrill whistle. Vanya woke up with a start! She looked at her husband, Shivansh, sleeping soundly – nothing could wake him up! She sighed and tiptoed to her Mother-in-law's room. She found her sitting up, holding her pillow, fear etched into her brooding eyes. She clung to Vanya like a lost, terrified child.

"Those figures in white," she looked towards the two large windows behind her bed. There was nothing there, just the crescent moon and the silhouette of the eucalyptus tree, swaying gently in the summer breeze. She clutched her tighter, "They are staring at me. They have come to take me". Vanya cradled her lovingly, rocking her and assuring her that no one would take her. She lay her down and pulled a chair to sit beside her. "Mummy, chant the 'Hanuman Chalisa'. You know Hanuman Ji will take care of you". A hint of a smile appeared, and she began to chant in her raspy voice! With a mind confused and her memory, fading and erratic, how could she recite the Hanuman Chalisa faultlessly without a single flaw! Vanya wondered at the vagaries and the intricate nuances of the abstraction we call the mind, let alone a confused mind state!

Vanya's Mother-in-law was diagnosed with dementia a couple of years ago. Her short-term memory had faded into oblivion. She did not remember much and often slipped into the past. She would look at Vanya distantly, thinking it was her Sister-in-law who had passed away years ago. Vanya would keep reminding her that she was her daughter-in-law, her son, Shivansh's wife, but she would shake her head vehemently, insisting her daughter-in-law's name was also Vanya, but she was twenty years old!

She glanced at her father-in-law sleeping peacefully beside her, oblivious of everything. Daddy too was ninety but still quite fit for his age. Every now and then, she would open her eyes

and glance at Vanya, making sure she was not alone. Vanya kept stroking her head until she drifted off to sleep, her plump face lined with deep furrows, each with its own story to tell…

Vanya looked at her watch. It was two at night! Her eyes looked dark and weary. Her days were long, and there was no domestic help. Each day was a challenge, but she fulfilled every duty with love and compassion. These were her parents' teachings, and she followed them implicitly. She crossed the drawing room, tiptoed into her own room. Shivansh had not stirred! Sleep evaded her like a whimsical child! She tossed and turned. Mummy's instructions in rare moments of clarity replayed again and again.

"I want my funeral pyre to be of sandalwood, soaked in ghee. Don't do my last rites in the Aarya Samaj way. Do it for thirteen days." Exhaustion took over, and she fell into a shallow, restless sleep.

Shivansh was trying to wake her up. "Vanya…Vaaanyaaa …" the voice grew louder and louder.

"Jee, Mummy coming …".

She tied her dishevelled hair into a knot, washed her face, and rushed into the kitchen to make tea. Daddy's soft voice— "What happened, beti? You're late today?" Mummy didn't sleep much last night. She was very frightened; she mumbled – no one knew the night's story! Mummy looked blank – the night erased from her troubled mind. She inched closer to Vanya in utter distress. "When I opened the tap in the bathroom to bathe, there was no water; only snakes were pouring from the tap! The terror in her voice rose to a crescendo!!! These hallucinations were getting worse. Shivansh popped in to check on his mother, worry written all over his face. "Ask Doctor Mukherjee to see her," I requested. He nodded, saddened immensely to see his mother's pitiful condition.

"Vanya, who is this?" She looked lost, confused, and blank as she struggled to remember who it could be! Shivansh came to sit beside her. She smiled with that familiar, faraway expression known only to her!

"Mummy, he is Shivansh, your son…", a fleeting moment of recognition lit up her eyes. She touched his cheeks with that heart-warming, special adorable look she had only for her son.

"You've become so thin, son!" (Shivansh was far from thin!!!) A miraculous moment of eternity when time stood still to let her experience the overwhelming, indescribable beauty of her love for her son. Alas! In a flash, her expression changed to a heartbreaking vacant state of confusion and helplessness. She asked again, "Vanya, who is this?" The tragedy, the irony, the complexity, the futility, the uncertainty, the hidden nuances which unfolded silently …

A poignant journey we call life! Her beloved son, who was her life, the proverbial apple of her eyes–one day to come to be completely obliterated from her mind! How much she had loved him! She doted on him. No one could measure up to him; no one was good enough for him. Her extreme possessiveness–all to end in this unbearable pathos!!! The morning dew still glistened on the grass. Rivulets of tears coursed down Vanya's cheeks.

She followed Shivansh and hugged him in a vain attempt to wipe the pain he must be going through. As always, he smiled and changed the subject. He never shared much with anyone. He was an extrovert, but to a certain point. Beyond that, even Vanya could not trespass, but she knew every fleeting expression that crossed his face, the silence of his unspoken words, and the pain that he tried to hide from everyone with his benign smile. She kept holding his hand silently – words were unnecessary. He said, "you look tired. Let me get something for lunch. It's too much for you." Vanya shook her head. Her mother-in-law would not be able to eat food from outside. She got up to go. Mother-in-law had to be bathed and dressed. Her bedsores had to be cleaned and disinfected, the part that Vanya hated the most.

That fateful night, Mother's condition worsened, and she had to be rushed to the hospital. After completing the formalities, Vanya came back with her father-in-law. He was tired and concerned. Shivansh reassured her; he had fed her 'rasogullas', her favourite sweet. The doctor had given her a sedative, and she was fast asleep.

Morning came after what seemed like an eternity! Vanya had slept fitfully. The dogs howled incessantly, and she felt an eerie feeling creeping up suddenly. Was it some kind of an ominous foreboding? The night seemed darker, moonless, unending... She missed Shivansh terribly. Dawn awakened her to a flurry of morning chores. She had to be in the hospital so Shivansh could come home for a little while. The driver was already there. Daddy had to be given breakfast. She had no time to breathe.

The hospital room was small and spartan – a bed, a chair and a side table, cluttered with medicines, with light filtering in through a small window. Why could they not make the hospital room a little brighter and cheerier, she thought.

Vanya pulled the chair closer to the bed and sat down. She reached out to hold her mother-in-law's hand. She opened her eyes and whispered her name softly, "Vanya, you've come?" – a half smile played momentarily on her peaked face. Her eyes closed the next moment. "How are you feeling, Mummy?". She didn't respond. Vanya kept caressing her head gently, trying to comfort and soothe her. Her heart ached to see her so helpless. She was such a domineering figure, highly educated, and the president of a number of associations. She was always surrounded by friends and well-wishers, but no one came now to visit. Where had all those days gone? Only pathos and an uncomfortable silence hung around the room like wisps of grey clouds.

Vanya was so young when she had come to that house as a bride, innocent, and very child-like. Her mother had taught her to be timid, speak only when she was asked to say something, keep her eyes lowered at all times and most importantly, to listen to her mother-in-law and father-in-law and always be obedient…the pampered child of her doting parents had to grow up

overnight! She never seemed to do anything right! She was no match for Shivansh in any way. He was the most eligible bachelor, and there was a bevy of beautiful girls eager to marry him - Mummy would never miss an opportunity to tell her this constantly. Vanya would swallow her hurts under the veil of unshed tears. She would try harder to please her mother-in-law, but no, she could never measure up to her expectations. Her resentments and her sarcastic remarks grew louder with each passing year. But what irony awaited! Destiny surely had some bizarre designs in the whole sequence of events! Her mother-in-law did not remember her own husband or her dearly beloved only child. 'Vanya' was the only name that formed on her lips unceasingly! Hers was the only face she was able to recognise in the last few years. Vanya wondered at her own metamorphosis! When and how forgiveness washed her heart anew. Her hurts and pain transformed into a fountain of love and compassion. She bathed in the beauty of its purest essence. It was sheer grace! This precious gift was the unfolding of an amazing miracle! Her own journey of resilience and walking on the path of light.

Vanya reverie was broken with the sound of uneven, belaboured breathing! She shuddered as she saw her mother-in-law struggle with each painful breath. She ran to the sisters' duty station and hurried back to the room. The nurse followed her, and the doctor shortly after. There was a flurry of activities. Vanya stood numb. She called Shivansh to come immediately; her heart sank with concern. The doctor called her out. She saw his grave expression and understood–it was just a matter of time. She must inform the family.

She composed herself as best as she could and wiped away the beads of perspiration from her mother-in-law's face – each breath was a struggle... Vanya held her cold and inert hand. All she could do was close her eyes and pray fervently. A soft glow suffused her entire being. She guided the light towards Mummy, gently urging her to go towards that radiance, the light divine… her heart seemed to automatically chant *Mahamrityнjaya mantra*.

"She is no more", the doctor's voice was a whisper!

Vanya had no recollection of how much time had passed – was it a few moments? It seemed like eternity!

The light faded away into a strange, shadowy stillness. Nothing remained.

Shivansh and his father walked into the room. Vanya guided her father-in-law to the chair. She moved away and let him have the last few moments of quietude with the one who had been his love for seventy-five years.

Shivansh was standing by the window. She yearned to put her arms around him, but all she could say was, “you are too late. She’s gone…” she started to weep uncontrollably. It was Shivansh who was trying to console her.

A shaft of Sun filtered into the room; a ray of light in the fading morn… an end and a new beginning in this drama of life.

From somewhere deep within, the fragrance of Tagore’s words cascaded like dewdrops: "Death is not extinguishing the light; it is only putting out the lamp because the dawn has come."



SHALINI NANDKEOLYAR

Shalini Nandkeolyar is multitalented! She holds a diploma in acting from the New York Academy of Theatrical Arts and has acted in several plays. Her academic pursuits led her to study English literature and philosophy, and she also holds a degree in business management. Shalini is a gifted singer, known for her Bhajan album *Arpanam*. Painting is another of her passions. Her poems have been widely published in literary journals, magazines, and several anthologies in both Hindi and English. Her poetry is exquisite, rich in imagery, and filled with wisdom. Shalini is also a Reiki Master, a dedicated seeker on a path of deep surrender.

MEMOIRS

JULIE MILES

THE LAST ORANGE

She was always up before the birds—my grandmother. Before the stars could tuck themselves into morning's blanket, she was already in her worn robe, boiling water for tea, humming a hymn.

In those last weeks, her hands shook when she peeled an orange, but she still offered me the first piece. "Eat," she whispered, her voice barely louder than the kettle's sigh. "It's sweet today."

I didn't know then how sacred that moment was. I didn't know it would be the last orange we'd share.

She had raised seven children, buried two, and prayed over every inch of her worn-out linoleum floor. When she sat down, it was never to rest, only to make space for someone else. Her lap was where secrets were safe and wounds remembered how to heal.

That day, I fed her spoon by spoon. Her lips trembled, but she smiled. "I never wanted to be a burden," she said.

"You never were," I replied, holding her hand—the same hand that had braided my hair and stirred Sunday gravy with a rhythm only grandmothers know.

When she passed, it was with the gentleness she gave to everyone else. Quietly, with dignity. Like a sunset that asks for nothing in return but gives light till the last breath.

Now, every time I peel an orange, I pause.

And I remember.



JULIE MILES

Julie is an American poet, author, and founder of Still Waters Poetry, a gentle space for poetic reflection and soulful connection. Her work explores themes of spiritual resilience, healing, familial bonds, and the sacred rhythm of ordinary life. Featured in international anthologies and literary journals, Julie writes with the clarity of lived wisdom and the tenderness of one who listens deeply. Her debut poetry collection will be released this year. When she's not writing, she is tending to the hearts of her family, fellow poets, and her own quiet transformation. She believes in the power of stillness, the grace of compassion, and the lifelong unfolding of the soul.

KALAIVANI RADHAKRISHNAN

AMMACHI—MY WISE SHERO

It has been over 1,000 days since I lost Ammachi (maternal grandmother in Tamil) to Covid, and not a single day has passed without her thoughts. Her name is 'Aram Valartha Nayagi,' which means the shero who upholds morals, rightfully named so. As I grow older, she grows on me. I am truly blessed to have been loved by an intelligent, kind, and the most beautiful woman of my lifetime. I am penning down my memories with her to relive and share her wisdom and charisma.

I am the first grandchild in the family, and therefore, I received a lot of love and affection from everyone. Due to my father's job, we relocated frequently during my early childhood, and my introverted nature didn't help me make friends. The holidays I spent in my ammachi veedu (grandma's house) in Chennai are my stable childhood memories, and she is my close friend whom I have known for the longest duration.

There used to be a lot of (backhanded) compliments floating around about how she was uneducated but still could do this, that, blah, blah, blah. When I was in third grade, I had my Tamil exam the next day, and I wanted someone to quiz me. Somehow, all the educated adults in my family were unavailable, and my Ammachi took my notebook and started questioning me. That was like a superhero transformation moment for me and is etched forever.

One of my favourite activities was making vadam (a side dish made from drying small balls of rice paste and then frying them as needed) with her during my summer holidays. We would talk randomly and work. She was inquisitive about science, especially marine life, so I would share whatever I learned in school. My vadams were nowhere near perfect; they would be oversized and unstructured, inviting criticism from whoever oversaw me. The other ladies (including my mom) would redo whatever I did after I left the terrace. Little did they know that I noticed. But Ammachi would fry my vadams for herself and teach me how making smaller ones would make the snack crunchier. She didn't discard my efforts but still taught me the reasoning

behind others' preferences. She cared more about how I would feel rather than the grammar of how things were supposed to be, and always had wiggle room to negotiate the aesthetics and get creative. "Do you want to make round vadams or unstructured vadams?" was her question. If I answered 'round', then she would model and show me how to move my fingers to get them round. Her attention to detail was impeccable. Now, whenever I hear big talks about inclusivity and compassionate leadership, I proudly recall Ammachi. The warmth of the morning sun, the warmth of Ammachi, and the warmth of this memory fill my soul with such profound calmness.

We watched a lot of National Geographic Channel programmes together; I would translate the content into Tamil. She recited many stories for me, especially my favourite, 'Kosu aatha kadhai', a folk tale about a she-mosquito's adventurous journey, customised to my taste. People have jokingly said to slap the mosquito and move on with our lives. Later, in my school, I learnt a poem called 'The Gecko' by Leon Gellert, an Australian poet. It was about the lizard and how it was considered disgusting, but how it possessed goodness and beauty in its own way. I was like, "Wow, ammachi vellakaarana maathiri yosikkirukkangale," meaning my ammachi's thought processes were similar to the whites. (nothing to do with racism. It's a politically incorrect expression for forward thinking and supremacy)

Ammachi never forced me to learn anything or confine myself to the 'what will you do at your in-law's place' narrative. I showed interest in flowers, and she taught me how to string them. The impatient kiddo I was, I would make a mess and struggle to be tender and delicate. But she never complained and always allowed me to try countless times. When I showed interest in kolams, she taught me the math behind them—extrapolation, combinations, sensitivity to length, and slope of the curves, which is enough to do the magic. I used to rely on procedure papers and practices. Unless I see someone keeping the dots, getting to see where they start, how they progress, and how they close the loop, I wouldn't be able to replicate those kolams. Ammachi made me understand that I am limiting myself by developing such dependencies on others. She made me realise that if I took longer than necessary to make an art form, I would have difficulty making it a sustainable hobby. Her solution was 'kannu paatha kai seiyyanum,' which means 'if

you see something, you should be skilled enough to replicate it without external intervention'. Of course, such an abstract idea was beyond my brain and frustrated me, but she handheld me into execution. Later, when I got introduced to reverse engineering, thanks to Ammachi, I already had a good grasp of the concept.

She always had a very interesting take on things and sound reasoning for the same. She had such a great affinity for Lord Shiva, not for the auspiciousness but for her sympathy towards him for the lack of origin, end, and caregivers in his life. She recognised the low-key traits of people and things. She says, 'to know if someone is a good tailor, look for the neatness of the stitches at the back of the cloth; if someone is a good cook, look for the neatness of their kitchen after they prepared the meal.' Because when someone is excellent at what they do, it is natural for them to go beyond what is absolutely necessary. If you are tempted to ask why I suck at cooking. Then it's because when she asked me if I wanted to learn cooking, I said no.

There still are people who feel threatened by a woman's intelligence. Pity them that they have never experienced pure love from one. That love is a safe space amid the chaotic world. That love is the freedom to be the unapologetic, authentic YOU. That love is poetry and divinity. That love is everything that a human soul could ever crave!

Ammachi, I wish you had compatible people who would have cherished, celebrated, and treasured you for who you are. I wish that you had a family dynamic fuelled by love and not by patriarchy and control. I wish you had known not to take the pressure to fit in somewhere if you didn't organically feel a sense of belonging. I wish you were not suffocated and silenced by collective mediocrity. I wish you were my contemporary friend, and I could have done everything in my power to make you shine the brightest. I wish our last conversation wasn't our last conversation. I wish others got to know you as I do. You are way beyond a sister, a wife, a mom, and a grandma. You are an inspiration and the queen of my heart. You grow on me every single day, you incredible woman. You will continue living through my art, my standards, and my value system!



Kalaivani Radhakrishnan

Kalaivani Radhakrishnan is a computer engineer with a rich set of experience in IT, education and the fitness sector. She is an avid learner who loves to explore new things. She is passionate about doodling, travelling, and entrepreneurship. She also loves to pen down her thoughts, dreams and untold stories.

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