

failed ~~haiku~~

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Haibun

**Selections in this section were made by
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Cast of Characters

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On the Other Side

My wife and I want to look after my mother-in-law's grave. As we are about to enter the cemetery, we notice a new signboard: "Everyone is obliged to look after her/his grave and keep the area around it tidy." We are taken aback and look at each other questioningly. Then my wife says: "Here I don't want to be buried. I don't want to have to clean, when I'm dead."

household chores
longlife batteries also
peter out

Pitt Buerken

THE CONVERSATION

Coming from an all boys school, it's always a big deal for me to break ice with girls in the new co-educational intermediate college. Notwithstanding the inhibitions, I remain calm and manage to cast a friendly smile here and there to the girls. In response, this girl with bob haircut and laughing eyes smiles back but she seems to convey unspoken words whenever we run into each other inside the classroom.

Finally, I decide to make efforts and excuses to be near her. Sitting behind her, I trip over words to ask if she could lend me a pen.

rising tide...
lying on the beach
a message bottle

Jagajit Salam

Levity

Big Mama tells us the jagged tree stumps jutting up from a distant pond in wintertime are fish who came up for a breath and froze in place. No matter the actual names of the shrubs in the yard, they're all "japonica" to her. The couch is a trolley car and Elvis Presley is Wesley Presley. When we drive under an overpass, she tells us to duck. If we don't, she pretends to wipe the blood from our heads and throw it out the car window. On a windy day, she tells us a vacant rocking chair on a stranger's porch is moving gently forward and back because the Holy Spirit is sitting in it. Peas are pee-eye-zees, a bad cold pee-new-moanya, our grandfather Evander is Punk. When she eats a chocolate mint, she wails like the siren of a fire engine.

high summer
watermelon
and reminiscence

Gayle Worthy

Into the Unknown

You are upset. So am I: my ticket for tomorrow's early morning train has not been delivered to me by Tukaram who was entrusted with this job. It is past midnight when we realise this. The weather is wicked. The sky has split open; a fierce wind buffets windows and tears at tree limbs, casting ghostly shadows on the panes. I plead. I beg fearfully: Don't go out on such an infernal night. But disregarding your weak heart you go. And return, wet and tired from driving all that distance and back.

Next morning finds me imploring again to let me stay with you and take care of you. You are fuming and blackmail: If you don't I will. So not wanting to upset you more, with a heavy heart I board the train that takes me away from you to our daughters. Neither of us is aware we are waving our final goodbye. missing a step...
that one snapped fibre
in the web

Shernaz Wadia

Aubade

The cabin sits at the top of a hill half-hidden by overgrown paths under autumn's blanket. Heavy dew covers last night's fire pit. A lone path leads to the fishing hole platform where cobwebs adorn two wooden chairs. A rickety bridge leads over a ravine stream to the outhouse and wood shed.

Inside the cabin, his schnauzer snores between his patched window and his strewn classics, Thoreau, Tolstoy, Voltaire, Hugo lining a dirt floor. He rocks on the patio chair transfixed by the sunrise between the oak branches.

rusted jalopy
he slowly opens
her last letter

Colleen M. Farrelly

Bridges of Jefferson County

I fell in love. It was on a bridge. Neither over nor above. Not yet underneath. He was a she and I was it. That was before. Now we are together, spirits blended, minds fused, and bodies melded in a riotous upheaval of eldritch nightmare bliss. That's what he/she said. I am still undecided and noncommittal. The fact that you cannot tell one from the other has nothing to do with it. If the City does not approve next year's maintenance budget, we will fall. Stuck like glue to the bittersweet end.

that my friends
would be inharmonious
unwellness personified

Keech Ballard

Focal Length

My camera and I walk to a secret pond in the dunes to snap dragonflies. We sit and watch the emeralds and blues catapult hither and thither. Suddenly one brakes and hovers on the spot in the sunlight a few inches away

zoom lens
dragonfly at my knees
the tease

Ann Smith

A Divorcé's Monologue

A scab has formed over the wound of memory, but the pain remains inside with blood clots and brain hypoxia. Each time I feel healed, you appear at once from nowhere to scratch off the scab. Is this the sin I must atone for or the fate to accept till death?

those old days...
wood crackling
in the fireplace
repetition of
what we remember

Although I must be blamed for my love for disco and dance partner and for knocking down the great wall of our marriage, I wish you could give me a chance to be your doormat for the rest of my life because you are the only woman I love with my heart.

evening walk
two mockers
squawk and strafe
in nest defense
as I pass a low tree

John Zheng

Bodies

It is an autumn afternoon. We are playing in the field by the hospital. Suddenly, everyone stops as the ambulance arrives with the wounded. Standing under a Mahua tree we hear about the fight between the unions. The next day we learn of the death of some of the wounded.

Mahua trees are huge. With the sweetness and the hidden booze in their flowers, ghosts love to revel there. But, they can travel the distance of space and time.

old monk
the musty smell
of his stories

Neology

When can it be said
it has passed the threshold of context
through the trammels of subjectivity
and has stood the hotbed of frequency
like a newfound
God
ready for a new book?
Rarely so, but
like a bird finding a new fruit
I found a new meaning:
I am not Alone
when alone
I am only Alone
in a crowd.

alone (ə-lōn')

noun.

a non-participating member

Biswajit Mishra

Sunflowers

Long time ago, the old man lost his belongings along with his personal library. Sometimes, he takes his walking stick and the faded hat and goes down into the city to look for books. He knows an easy access point to the paper recycling bin, then piles everything there is to read into a bag and returns to his world of sunflower walls and cloud ceiling. From the hump of the horizon, streak lightnings spread out all over and the enamel sky cracks.

world, where to?
the truth lies
in sunflower fields

Lavana Kray

Between the Said and the Unsaid

Lunch? I text my tardy husband who is out for a meeting.

No

Hungry, I wrestle with the terse response and fire back:

1. No – you have not had lunch? Should I wait for you?
2. No – you will not have lunch today?
3. No – You have not yet had lunch and you will have lunch at home but I should go ahead?

3

haiku thrive on
negative spaces
test our equations

Mohua Maulik

True Crime

Who knows from the outside of a family what goes on inside.
Maybe it was a gradual disintegration, but it seemed so sudden,
the falling apart. The boys had the perfect life until they didn't.
Their father was dead, and their mother accused of his murder.
My brother, my nephews, my sister-in-law.

family history
in the deep of the night
the wail of sirens

Marianne Paul

Helpless

The high-tech world of supermarkets can be challenging for us octogenarians. Only rocket scientists can navigate the complex coupon system and self-checkout is not for the feint of heart. I receive forty hits on how to open the plastic grocery bags. A wise man from India insists that I always carry two potatoes with me when I shop. I am told to put the bag between them and to rub with a "vigorous motion" until the bag slides open. Other suggestions include stepping on it, spitting, licking, sucking, using an exact knife, and not using a bag. More than one person has advised me to "just ask the nearest woman."

lame...
the clicking wheels
of a broken cart

John Budan

Fire and Rain

A child I loved when she was a teenager is on the phone. She is a forty year old woman now. She is talking around the subject. I realize she is making that difficult call and ask her if a mutual friend has died. No, not him, another one. I am shocked. The deceased friend was only fifty-five and had no serious health problems. He collapsed while enjoying happy hour. I thank her for telling me. We talk through the call she needs to make to the dead man's best friend.

mailing cards
with paper bouquets-
not seeing you again

Shasta Hatter

Hardwired

Household Cavalry back in 1933 was a brutal regiment where chargers came first. "Make much of your horse!" came the command. In unison, troopers stretched forward like robots to pat necks.

Years later, he throws the marmalade through the open window onto the lawn when there's been more than one spread. "We were so hungry, we stole the horses' oats"!

Early morning, he checks to see if the shank waists of our shoes have also been polished. We've passed the test but, walking off to school, it's no joke the mess my sister's face is in. Her hives are back and he's applied iodine blobs liberally. It's not for the first time she'll be in for a ribbing.

We stop by the fountain.

sandpaper . . .
a calico cat
busy grooming

Ingrid Baluchi

self-healing

The yellow and brown leaves of chinar settle in on the windowsill like a jigsaw puzzle that needs to be solved. They are dead, useless, and soundless until the autumn breeze tickles them to fall on the ground, get mixed with soil, and nourish the tree they were once part of. I am trying to solve the jigsaw puzzle of my life where certain regrets fall on the windowsill of my conscious mind, and I am waiting for the wind of understanding to tickle them, make them fall, so that they can mix with the soil of peace, and nourish my soul.

evening sunlight
in my wet eyes
no more excuses

Hifsa Ashraf

Crossing Upsal Street

The walk to Phillips Grocery Store was short, but I had to cross Upsal Street to get there. If I got home from school quickly, a safety guard might still be on duty. But that meant my mother had to pass her grocery list to me like a runner handing off the baton. If I got to the intersection when the light was already green, I waited for the next green light so I would have the entire light to make it across the busy street. Once inside Phillips, children were made to wait until all the adults were served. If I stood too near the pickles, Mrs. Phillips yelled at me to get my nose out of the barrel. Nosy Nase was her name for me. If I stood near the penny candy, she eyed me even more suspiciously. As I waited, with jigglng legs since I hadn't had time to pee, my fear of the return trip grew. After four pm the traffic on Upsal Street increased and crossing it was even more hazardous. I never told my parents I was scared to cross Upsal Street since cowards were frowned upon. I was much older before I wondered why my mother, home all day, couldn't take care of this chore herself. Maybe she was afraid of Upsal Street too.

half-blinded by snow
my father directs cars
till the traffic cop comes

Patricia Abbott

check out

I remember it vividly – you sat on that seat in the burger joint, eating that disgusting burger. Of course you hated it. You're gone now – not dead, just restricted. The toilets were closed then, too. One day soon, this shitty roadside diner will be as well....

one
for the road
firefly

unicorns

I don't know if you even saw me on the seawall path – I caught your voice on the breeze, deeper than ever. Something about mortgages and your new husband. Stopping and talking was out of the question. Too much time has passed; tragedies you can't know, never got the chance to know. In some ways it's better like this....

new love
is it better to stay
unicorns

Tim Gardiner

Admitting to quirks

binge watching
one more end-of-day wait
for moonlight

She, la lune, most recently appeared at the end of her daily orbit as two day apparitions. Immortalized on FarceBrook. Every summer, I forget to bring my tripod to the Alps, left “home alone” in the city, so I always quibble with myself about the disappointing quality I find in the myriad of photos for each month’s waning and waxing occasion.

My favorite scene from last night's 2024 Olympic Games Opening Ceremony was Sequana, the goddess of the Seine wearing a 21st century metallic armor inspired by that worn by Jeanne d'Arc. She rode alone by night, carrying the Olympic spirit. Millions watched, mesmerized.

And I, yes I did, even photographed the TV.

still a child
the garden hose cools enough
for a shower

Alfred Booth

Syrians in Paris

The sky is dark, it's very cold, there are few people on the street, it seems the day does not want to start. The family who spends their nights on the sidewalk of the Saint Michel fountain, I heard they are refugees from the Middle East, is still there, looking for a bit of warmth among the cartoons and the blankets.

ice on the ground -
the child and the dog
embrace

ice on the ground -
the girl and the doll
embrace

Antonio Mangiameli

Levity

Big Mama tells us the jagged tree stumps jutting up from a distant pond in wintertime are fish who came up for a breath and froze in place. No matter the actual names of the shrubs in the yard, they're all "japonica" to her. The couch is a trolley car and Elvis Presley is Wesley Presley. When we drive under an overpass, she tells us to duck. If we don't, she pretends to wipe the blood from our heads and throw it out the car window. On a windy day, she tells us a vacant rocking chair on a stranger's porch is moving gently forward and back because the Holy Spirit is sitting in it. Peas are pee-eye-zees, a bad cold pee-new-moanya, our grandfather Evander is Punk. When she eats a chocolate mint, she wails like the siren of a fire engine.

high summer
watermelon
and reminiscence

Gayle Worthy

in this clinic...

The wait within miasma of plaster too long on a Gen Y ankle, whiskers burgeoning around the edges, signatures faded to grubby messages on an unrepentant cast. Same prints on the wall: fish market ... green tree frog ... pelican. The soap in the corner blares softly, the TV a drone of irrelevance. Actors stiff as your neck, stiff as your thoughts. The phone rings, the queue builds up, the nurse flaps her hand for the healthcare card. "Only one more treatment, I promise you the last." The man in the lab coat: will he say it again, he's said it before?

returning home
the path choked
with wild grass

Cynthia Rowe

Earthbound

'Dusty Carpet!' As if seeking inspiration, he fixes a frown upon the only patch of carpet between us that's not strewn with piles of boxes, stray tools and old car batteries. It's a dull swirly brown carpet, well suited to its lowly purpose in a garage customers' waiting room. The garage owner is known for his reliability in servicing horse jockeys' cars in return for insider tips. As for me, I'm the kind of feeble punter who's just a pinsticker. We always start our conversation with the same joke: I ask if he has any good tips for today's turf action and he replies with: 'Dusty Carpet. Never been beaten!'

My car, I'm told, will take all day to fix so I'm glad I brought my fold-up bike. As I navigate my way outside through the piles of clutter, I nearly bump into another customer. Despite his bad limp, he skilfully evades my clumsiness and I realise he's an ex-jockey whose job now is trolley attendant at the local supermarket. I've often admired his weaving expertise as he steers his slinky-line of trolleys between careless shoppers. I've always preferred to think with his final energetic shove over the white marker strip on the ground into the trolley corra he's re-enacting some glorious surge across a racetrack's finishing line and not inspired by bitterness at having to retire early with injuries:

unfolding a bicycle
how fallen jockeys
straighten out each limb

I stop only briefly to discuss with him the garage owner's pick du jour: 'Bella Blueskies'. An apt choice considering the cloudless summer day today. In fact, the heat is already building up so I decide to cycle home by the longer, shadier route of country lanes. After a couple of miles, a puzzling distant roar gives me an excuse to dismount and rest awhile. I stand in the pale green cool of a beech tree beside a paddock that's bare and parched due to over-grazing. I watch a brood mare drinking from a leaking water trough, her week-old foal beside her, cautiously adjusting the slant of his front legs in the small pool of water by the trough. The mare is not at all perturbed by the roaring noise which I now realise comes from a flotilla of hot-air balloons. They come nearer, no longer faint thumbprint shapes against the sky but now floating by as big-bellied globes with different colours and patterns. Every year, there is a Balloon Fiesta with dozens of hot-air balloons launched from the local racecourse so no doubt the old mare has become nonchalant about them sailing overhead. To my surprise though, the foal shows no alarm either and doesn't even follow her when she ambles off to search among the short dusty blades of grass...

gaudy balloons
the foal stares down
at shiny brown hooves

Sheila Barksdale

Ghosted

first kiss
the sudden rush
of leaves

And then a match out of nowhere the flame flickering in flight
with the faintest fizz before falling in an arc onto our bed of
ferns smoke trailing from her mouth as it curled and burned
itself to an ember and the night turned dark once more and
forever.

death cleaning
at the back of Mam's wardrobe
her letters

Girdle Bug

My favorite corset was a Charneau. Aunty Jean gave it to me. Said she only wore it once. Said it made her sweat. Threads were perfect – fat, and slightly floppy – though some had rotted over the years. By then she was wearing Playtex Panty Briefs. On nights out. I found a pair once in the washing. Latex was too thin. Did manage to pull some elastic from the waistband. Don't think she noticed.

hitching down
eight rubber legs ...
fly tying class

Lew Watts

Misunderstood

He could never say what he wanted to say. Somewhere between his heart and his lips, words got twisted, the intent misdirected.

piddling rain regrets seeping into everything

It Will Always Be a Jungle Out There

When I was a kid, I would get up early on Saturdays and spend the morning watching cartoons, old Tarzan movies, and re-runs of The Cisco Kid. For Christmas, I asked for a horse just like Diablo, the mount the Kid rode into the black & white sunsets of our television set. My parents managed to corral a plastic figurine of a look-alike. Nevertheless, when asked the question in elementary school that I still can't answer — What do you want to be when you grow up? — I responded without hesitation, "Tarzan." I was in love with Tarzan, the Johnny Weissmuller version. I modeled my swimming style on his, heroically escaping or chasing down a crocodile in a splash of flailing arms; I swung from tree to tree on ropes my father had hung like vines; I learned the jungle call, ululating well enough to trigger the dogs in the neighborhood. About the time I stumbled into puberty, I had memorized the ape-language glossary in the back of a tattered Tarzan paperback. But that's also when Jane caught my eye. It was hard to find a girlfriend willing to swing through the jungle.

hanging on
the last tree I climbed
a sprouting stump

Bob Lucky

Alchemy

For a moment, there's magic. Lead turns to gold. The conviction there's something worth saying, as if the goddess Matangi shed her light. But the firm, clawed hand of reason finds the hand holding the pencil limp and uncertain. And like Sisyphus rolling his boulder up a hill, the tip breaks and the eraser emerges.

gram's recipe book
the way she repeated
exactly

Wearing a Name Tag

Who knows what they're thinking: were they right or wrong, or still trying to get a fix. We rolled down our distant railroad tracks with the occasional gathering at a depot. I wonder, did they expect my train to take me further, or for me to derail. I look through the windowpane. The grass on the lawn will dry up soon, be buried by winter, like questions that shouldn't be asked.

family funeral
between the cool handshakes
squeaks of leather shoes

Richard L. Matta

How Far Gone

Horsing around with my best friend on the tennis court, I start running backwards. She's lobbed the equivalent of a pop fly, impossible to return and way past the baseline. Nevertheless, I whoop like I might pull it off, leaning back, back, until...gravity kicks in and I fall over, hitting my head. I'm out cold for some minutes. My friend's mother fusses over me until my own mom arrives to take me home. No visit to the doctor—in the 60s, we didn't do that. I had a bump on my noggin for a while, and life went on. But to this day, when I push myself too hard, the back of my head hurts.

rounding the bend
the past I never
left behind

Cynthia Anderson

Maverick Street - - Present past pluperfect

When the deep purple crawls over sleepless garden walls ..I'm wide awake deep in the heart of Texas summer swelter. .cicadas shriek outside buzzing alien codes to one another from the oleanders by my window. Just a lonely boy's blue bedroom in the still of the night - - tossing and turning all night twisting the night away in sweat-soaked sheets - - parents slumber n' snore snug in their anechoic velvet chamber about ten thousand miles down the hallway....

*the graveyard shift
old Mister Sandman
late as always*

...on the nightstand stands my talismanic white 1958 Zenith clock-radio (it's 4:13 a.m.) with the gold lightning bolt zig-zag "Z" on the grill — vacuum tubes send the glowing orange totemic guardians up the wall so I stay tuned-in to Ricci Ware's all-nighter "Milkman's Matinee" benzadrine banter over KTSA 550 AM on your dial with all his friends Dion and the Belmonts, Fats Domino, Roy Orbison, Peggy Lee, Ray Charles, Paul Anka, The Platters, Little Anthony, The Diamonds, The Five Satins, Everly Brothers, Sarah Vaughan..... to keep the witchdevils at bay until daybreak. For now, I know they're certainly waiting out in the laurel bushes.

the wayward wind
seventy-seven years
in the retroworld*

*title of a hit 50's tune by Gogi Grant that haunted me as a kid;
still does

Mark Meyer

Gumusservi

So often the moon is there on the terrace, We play my childhood games. It hides behind the mogra and peeps out with a smile, just like mother used to. Sometimes I think the moon with its bright countenance resembles my father who now lives somewhere close to the moon. This time when I was away, the moon on my terrace was in my thoughts--how alone it must be, how lonely.

rusted mirror
each day a change
in my reflection

Arvinder Kaur

Mirage

Matilda's only a phone call away. Who'd have thought? Sexy voice too. Sophia Loren in her prime. Lollobrigida? Elizabeth Taylor ... Maybe all three. Quite irresistible. Can you blame me for pressing all the numbers she wanted me to? Only her own phone's gone dead. And my bank account is empty. Venezuela!

Fagin's song
entertains the audience
no oscar

Dipankar Dasgupta

Survival of the Fittest

Lunchtime finds us on safari at the far end of the playing field. We made it there almost unnoticed: the long-legged girls don't even see us, flocking round the student teacher; sporting gods distract themselves pursuing other goals; and since we are so low upon the school's Linnaean scale even the older bullies let us pass with barely any menace in their looks. Our search begins. Hands delve down to part the flora searching for the fauna we were told it must conceal. But nature's seen us coming: a butterfly flees first, followed by a squirming worm, and then, to great relief all round, a beetle scurries down a crack and out of reach. It has to be the spider, then, corralled into seven sweaty palms – the eighth (reserved) being mine. I squint into the sky and from a moment of obeisance turning back - my magnifying glass held high - begin to focus down on what we said we'd come to see.

harvestman
something and nothing new
under the sun

Herb Tate

****Retirement ****

The river swells after last night's rain, moving slowly past the rocks and fallen branches. I walk the familiar path, watching it all without a word. The quiet offers enough, a place where nothing needs explanation. I sit by the bank, letting the moment pass through me.

river mist—
the stones I used to skip
still there

**** Torpor ****

A soft breeze stirs the curtains, barely shifting the air in the quiet room. The shadows on the wall stretch and contract, echoing the ebb and flow of thoughts too faint to form. I sit, hands folded, feeling the weight of time hang between moments. No rush to fill the space, no need to rearrange what silence has already settled.

fading light
the long pause
before speaking

Nalini Shetty

Twig of Love

I remember him from the years when everything sparkled with new light. There may have been a hint of love as we shared adventures, grains of sand in our clothes and laughed until dawn. Then, in the dancing crowds we came apart. We slipped off into the world leaving little marks, bits and pieces of each other for each other.

And now a voice from the past calls, thinking I'd like to know. He tells me he's died. I'm grieving for a little twig of love that never blossomed. It joins the debris on the sidewalk of my journey.

city asleep
in the rain, rivulets
find their way

Echoes

Mom's memory seemed shorter each day as our names and faces faded in no special order. Late afternoon she swept spots of sunlight while humming a child's song, a lullaby with no name.

outgoing tide
she blinked and life
drifted

At her funeral one by one we spoke of love, memories a good life brings.

ebb and flow
sand in a paper cup
pouring out dreams

Carol Raisfeld

When a Death Poem Becomes Just a Poem

old hands
losing my grip
on many things

Several writers of death poems were waiting to be executed when they wrote their poems. This clearly makes the timing easier, though, concentration might be an issue. Others were waiting to go into battle. The rest of us just have to guess. A man like me, who does little more dangerous than shopping and eating fried food may not get the same warning of approaching death. As I fought for breath last winter, I gave the subject some thought.

I recovered, but I expect you had guessed that. But what if I hadn't, and I'd left behind the poem about my neighbour's ugly child? Would that be handed down as my death poem? Or would it be tactfully ignored?

playing my fence
like a xylophone
—the ginger brat

Simon Wilson

Saṃsāra

Old Hindi songs are the perfect companions for my walks, their melodies woven for a realm where time meanders and haste is sacrilege. Sometimes, I pause on the culverts, watching herons glide on the backs of cows in the fields or witness a myna boldly approach a calf, an intimacy it reserves for the young. Every wildflower and homegrown blossom suddenly commands my reverence, drawing me into a quiet supplication. As “Musafir Hoon Yaaro” serenades my path, I transform into Rajesh Khanna on his steed, traversing mountains—except my feet are my horse, ever reminding me of my former life as a city girl. This new self walks slower, with deliberate grace and deep, meditative breaths, savouring the unhurried dance of nature. My rebirth occurred two years ago in Wayanad, where the tendrils of capitalism finally loosened their grip. These songs are the soundtrack to my transformation, a whisper of the past guiding me through the present.

avidyā
the snakeskin lies
outside the burrow

Vidya Premkumar

Lesson of the Bowed Head

Dad threw a branch at my dog's legs because she wasn't listening. I walk behind him at a certain distance, and the dog is ahead of him. Neither of us wants to get close to father and master. We're both scared of being hit. My dog is a female. Her name is Paw. She has four paws. She doesn't limp. Neither do I. I don't look father in the face when he sometimes turns toward me. I'm too short. I'd have to lift my head along with my nose to look up. Doing that too often can give you a headache. That's what mom says.

Silent stillness
between the steps
dry forest floor

Maciej Faliński

CHANCE OPERATION

Cynthia not Cynthia answered a question with a poem in her husband's dream. He didn't understand & called out in his sleep for clarity. This stirred her from her dream, one where she was writing a poem exploring the odds — what are the odds?

At breakfast, her husband recounted his dream, prompting Cynthia not Cynthia to question the odds of two who've shared a bed for decades merging their dreams. Could the poem she wrote while sleeping be the same one that made him call out? The one she spoke in his dream?

probability
entwined bodies & spirits
two ancient serpents

Cynthia Bargar

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