

# failed ~~haiku~~

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**kelly moyer** 'Failed' Editor

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*haibun*

# Cast List

*In order of appearance*  
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Ganesh R.  
Jenny Shepherd  
Eavonka Ettinger  
Surashree Joshi  
Doug Sylver  
Joshua Michael Stewart  
Ingrid Baluchi  
Bryan D. Cook  
Lulu Sinnott  
Paul Beech  
John Budan  
Cynthia Rowe  
Arvinder Kaur  
Gail Oare  
Caroline Giles Banks  
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Jahnavi Gogoi  
Harshada Kulkarni  
Cynthia Anderson  
Norma Bradley  
Mohua Maulik  
Nalini Shetty  
Jenny Dunbar  
Hannan Khan

## **Twig by Twig**

Since moving to Kolkata, my Sunday mornings have followed a predictable routine—house cleaning. An hour of scrubbing and tidying later, I step onto the balcony, seeking a brief escape from my chores. I observe the commotion on the streets, the one thing that is aplenty in this city.

As I lean against the railing, my eyes settle on a crow perched on the ledge of the neighboring flat. Holding a bit-sized shoot under her feet, my all-weather friend fine tunes her prized possession. She supervises her workmanship and after what seems like a moment of deliberation, adds it to her growing collection. Then, without pause, she takes off in search of the next perfect addition to her nest. Watching her work with such quiet determination, I feel a familiar tug—a reminder of my own task waiting indoors.

earning my stripes i rediscover myself

**Ganesh R.**

## **An Ancient Gesture**

A crowded Tube train: I only get a seat, because someone offers me theirs, when they see my walking stick.

I notice the woman opposite me, chatting to the Goth, teenage girl next to her, who I assume is her daughter. They are laughing and smiling, and as always, when I see a scene like this, a small knife turns inside me, and I feel guilty of my envy.

The woman must have become aware of my gaze, and smiles, then looks down at my feet. She then says: "One of your shoelaces is undone." I say thank you, mumbling something about how I always do a double knot, so have no idea how it happened, and start to bend down to retie it. I must look as if I'm struggling, as she suddenly says, "Would you like me to do it for you?" When I flusteredly agree, she kneels at my feet on the dirty floor and ties the bow with a double knot. She pats my foot, before she stands up, and returns to her seat, as I thank her profusely.

She and the girl then carry on talking, as if nothing has happened.

the touch  
of someone else's mother  
somehow biblical

**Jenny Shepherd**

## **Pulp**

First, the confusion. Why is he running towards me? Is that a log?

Then, the shock. He's hit me with it. Thrown it at my head. Stunned into silence.

Suddenly, the blood. It's dripping from my lashes.

Now, I scream.

*purple moon  
callus tissue covers  
the tree's wound*

**Eavonka Ettinger**

## **Progression**

A teacher learns every day, either on her own or through the courtesy of her students. Teaching a language is so much more than just giving students a set of grammar rules and a glossary. Yesterday, as we discussed pronouns, the magnitude of the topic in today's day and age hit me like a freight train.

west wind  
which way do  
the leaves blow

**Surashree Joshi**

## **Focal Points**

I don't pull my poems, infrequent as they are, out of the air. But find them, often as I'm out for a walk, running errands. I'll see a carpenter's level, seven feet long, on a walkway, ready to go to work, and it starts a poem of palindromes. Or a porcini mushroom, sprouting near the trunk of a white birch tree, and the symbiotic relationships all around me pop up, too.

After buying groceries to get through the day, I'll hurry home to my computer, plotting. Neighbors out with their dogs pause to chat but I wish them "good morning" and continue, head down, on my way. They probably think I have to go to the bathroom or something. Yes, I have a poem to write and can't be distracted. That is truly something.

thanking the blue jay  
in advance for not  
caw caw cawing

**Doug Sylver**

## **Sunday in the Park**

As one police officer handcuffs a thin woman, her body bent over the back of a squad car, another officer carries away a small boy with arms straight as spears, stiff with war, his cheeks slicked with tears. The child shouts, “Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck you!” until the officer buckles him in the seat of another cruiser flashing blue and closes the door on his raw and high-pitched anguish.

marsh marigolds  
a mallard leads her brood  
into the reeds

**Joshua Michael Stewart**



## Focus

Early every morning as we drive past to work, they're lined up patiently waiting their turn at the communal outdoor hand pump. School children, some very young, stand by their bright yellow plastic 20-liter jerry cans, along with a few elderly women, their backs ramrod straight from a lifetime of carrying loads on their heads. Many have walked miles from scattered villages inland.

We've flushed the toilet, cleaned our teeth, showered, boiled the kettle, washed dishes and 'smalls', and watered plants, turning on faucets—conveniences we scarcely acknowledge. In the heat of the day, pure, clean, cold water is always at hand.

Repatriating home, an advertisement on television for fruit-flavored brands attracts our attention. It reads: 'Makes good water taste even better'.

scotch on the rocks—  
pacing the melting iceberg  
a lone polar bear

## **Who Are We to Question?**

As the only doctor for miles around where he lives in the Caucasus mountains, Grandpa's short stature, bald head topped with a fedora, and pronounced limp from a riding accident in his youth, make him instantly recognized. A man much respected, he travels the rough terrain on horseback, announcing his whereabouts through areas of tribal conflict with his familiar ear-piercing finger whistle, guaranteeing safe passage.

One snowy night, answering the knock at his door, a little girl wearing a blue cotton flowery dress urges him to visit her sick mother in the hamlet nearby. Not waiting, she disappears into the night as Grandpa dresses hurriedly and saddles his horse. The house is located, and finding the door unlocked and no one around, he makes his way to the woman's bedside. Pale and feverish, she searches his face, asking him how he had known to come?

Shocked at Grandpa's reply and his concern for the girl's inadequate clothing, the woman stays his hand, whispering that her daughter loved her blue dress. She had been buried in it the summer before.

ethereality  
snow fairies  
dance over daisies

**Ingrid Baluchi**

## **Penance**

I take a wrong turn in my haste to Prince Edward Island's North Cape for the inauguration of the largest windmill in Canada. Arriving in my pinstripe suit, I am greeted by a crew of riggers.

"You're late, Sir," says the foreman, "so now you'll have to climb 'er!"

A tubular tower higher than the Peace Tower at Ottawa's Parliament and I have to scale it to regain the respect of the team. They'll brook no excuses even though I financed its construction.

Stuffed into orange overalls with a matching hard hat and lamp, I enter the hatchway and begin my climb up a narrow ladder without a safety harness. The floor recedes to the size of a dime, knuckles hurt, knees shake and sweat pours.

Exiting the top hatch, I swing onto the roof of a rotor-housing the size of a mini bus and gingerly shuffle my ass towards massive blades quivering with me in the gulf gusts.

What a spectacular vista! Distant shores in a scudding ocean, tiny boats lobstering, rakers harvesting Irish moss, and patchworks of dark potato green and vibrant canola yellow.

Hoping they don't unfetter the blades, I soon retreat with hands cramping on the rungs. Respect is restored, with just a few smirks. I drive away steering with my elbows and resolving never to be late again.

*fanning*  
*in the breeze*  
*humpback spume*

**Bryan D. Cook**

## **what bad luck, what good luck**

In the bucketing rain, cars parked on both sides of the narrow road, the Jeep in front of me halts. I have four chattering six-year-olds in the car. The Jeep's reverse lights come on and they begin backing towards me. I beep the horn loudly and try to find reverse, but they bump heavily into the front of my car. The children are rigid, silent, and feel my fear when four burly Chinese men walk back in the rain. I wonder how I will communicate. I open the window and the driver leans down and speaks in a flat Dublin accent, "I'm really sorry, it's all my fault."

when the dogs prove  
harmless  
the cat pulls her claws in

**Lulu Sinnott**

## **First Cry**

It's a Tuesday in July 1949.

A young man, Alf, his day's work done, is whistling happily, the tune *Night Riders in the Sky*, a catchy cowboy number.

Earlier this evening his heavily pregnant wife, Margaret, was returning from a shopping trip with her mum, when, quite suddenly, she knew her baby was on the way.

Arriving home, the nurse was sent for, and now, at 8 o'clock, my baby brother is born.

And yes, I hear his first cry.

the wonder of  
brotherly love  
without rivalry

**Paul Beech**

## **Family Member**

Written inside in faded pencil, “Made by Grandpa Brown 1840, Baraboo, Wisconsin.” Five years later it was packed in a wagon headed west on the Oregon Trail. If only it could speak about the harrowing five-month journey, of floods and drought, and the burial of a daughter somewhere in a shallow grave along the Platte River. There are telltale square holes around drawers that were nailed shut to keep them from slamming open on the jostling trail. And there are the visible outlines of the ropes that secured it tightly to the bouncing wagon. Burn marks from a grandfather’s pipe, cosmetic stains and bobby pins lost in cracks by my mother add to the signatures. Teeth marks and scratches are memories of loving pets. The handmade dresser made of rare butternut wood so long ago still warms a bedroom with its light chestnut brown glow and reddish tinged patina.

after restoring  
ancestor spirits  
lost in dust

**John Budan**

## **adept in white coat**

I saw you with your boots on often, but not on the day Mama found you stretched full length gazing at the sky, blank-eyed. I never saw you that day at all. You were gone by the time I arrived, and it seems as though you never left, for I have no evidence . . . When you donned your boots, it was always a great display. You pulled them on to do “man’s work,” tilling the soil, aerating the sods. “Only adept when clad in your white coat,” she’d say, “tending your patients.” But she was wrong. Weekends you cared for your dahlias, blooms flourishing, august, generous . . . like you. I regret not seeing you that last time with your boots laced tight and you on your back, blank-eyed, gazing at the sky.

*bleak harvest  
inside the child’s pumpkin  
candlelight sputters*

**Cynthia Rowe**

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## **Crepuscule**

Landmark days make us all nostalgic. My birthdays used to be a big deal in my childhood home with my parents inviting their friends home for high tea and a cake-cutting ceremony. I remember on one of the birthdays my mother got me a silk kimono with a sakura print—I wore it and felt like a princess. When I was about to descend the stairs into the living room packed with guests, she handed me a folding fan. It had fragile wood ribs and bamboo leaves painted in hues of green. “*Sensu* compliments the kimono so well.” She looked at me and smiled.

Now, on my birthdays, we have quiet evenings while children join in on FaceTime to say cheers!

fixing  
my imaginary tiara  
tousled hair

**Arvinder Kaur**



## **Environmental Take-Away of Friday Night Pizza**

Tally the price of the tomato paste, add transportation cost and the btu's of the wood-fire stove burning for, say, four peak dinner hours on average.

For the sake of argument and easy math, assume an average of 100 pizzas a night, large or small.

Then subtract the unnecessary heating of a hundred home ovens per night for forty minutes, less if the cook doesn't pre-heat, for the 100 pizzas: half pick-up, half-delivery. Wait—

Make that ninety percent delivery, less the savings for some efficiency because of planned-out routes.

Then there's the wear on tread and economics of tire replacement.

And remember: We'll eventually need to pay for the oily stench—from both the rusty delivery van and its cargo—wafting toward the ozone.

Plus, the cost of unemployment deductions for a full-time owner-baker and the delivery kid.

And adjust somehow for the unknowable effect of pocketed gratuities.

The calculation of it all too much to swallow.

the twenty-minute wait  
for extra cheese  
another expert toss-up

**Gail Oare**

## **Serendipity Lost**

The Anthropology Library at the University of California-Berkeley is closing. The banishment of over 80,000 books and field notes to the dark netherworld of a warehouse is a death knell for brick and mortar libraries and the social sciences.

Vision quests and majestic temples, confederacies and kings, potlatches and bitcoin markets, cuneiform tablets and email continue to marvel. Could seeds for meeting tomorrow's challenges for sustenance and shelter, governance and belief be lying fallow in sealed boxes?

browsing the stacks  
books I did not know  
I was looking for

**Caroline Giles Banks**

## Nocturne

Sometimes I have trouble sleeping. Random thoughts of random problems queue up to invade my mind—the one dismissed, the next arrives. I toss and turn, but then, with a soft rustle, she reaches over and gently draws me in.

*in a bed*  
*in a cuddle*  
*inner peace*

**David Brieze**

## **A Conundrum**

A democracy . . . America was founded by debate, discussions and compromise. Having the freedom to speak freely and openly and be listened to with respect are blessings. This process has not been easy, and as previous generations have struggled it's now our turn.

our differences  
a burden of blessings  
a conundrum

**Robert Erlandson**

## **Tipping Points**

We set off on the brink of sunrise. Along the horizon, a blush of light gradually suffuses the blue-grey sky, casting golden filaments upward onto the feathered clouds. Below, a honeyed hue creeps across the milky-white stone landscape of Cappadocia. Forged millennia ago, from the blistering lava of volcanic eruptions, its undulating folds and chimney-like peaks, now pockmarked with pigeon cotes, spread out below. Around us, a swarm of balloons hang in the morning sky, carrying their human cargo securely in their baskets. Some have reached the limits of their climb; others float just above the chimney tops. Save for the soft funnelling of hot air into the balloon's envelope, we are embraced by silence. Climbing to the highest point of our flight, we pause on the cusp of heaven.

a paper bag  
catches the wind  
uncharted flight path

**Fionnuala Waldron**

## Hourglass

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**

## **Deliverance**

Her ears had become sharply attuned to certain sounds. The turn of a screw cap on a bottle of cheap whiskey; the slightest creak of the cabinet door in need of repairs. The loud noise that emanated from her parents' bedroom and finally her mother's quiet sobbing. Often, she discovered her with smudged eyeliner and purple bruises on her delicate wrists. On her tenth birthday, the man she knew as her father did not return home. The relief she felt soon became a festering wound. Now, at forty, she turns her face away from the mini bar at home, fists clenched, perspiration on her upper lip. There is a profuse urge to float away in the middle of the afternoon. Instead, she slips out through the back door and vanishes into the wilderness like a wood nymph.

battling her  
father's demons  
shinrin-yoku



## **Sunflowers**

The snow had not melted completely. It remained in shadows and under the Douglas fir. Grandmother found one of his paintings in the garden shed. Sunflowers had run amok in a sunny meadow and the clouds were sheep with fluffy tails. Below was a signature in blue crayon. He must have been seven. The parents never spoke of him, anymore. As if taking his name would destroy the fragile peace they had made with the world. More children had followed him into the family. They lived, they were loved, and it was as if he never existed. Yet, every day the old matriarch lit a candle at the altar and asked for forgiveness because she had looked away for just a second when he ran out to retrieve a ball, in front of a speeding car.

a song  
dying on the lips  
morning glory

**Jahnavi Gogoi**

## **Burgeoning**

all these days  
a firefly  
inside me

Look at how well these treehoppers camouflage with the thorns. Do you believe they are voiceless? They send their whispers through these twigs. The tree hears them. Don't you see the old you, hidden yet longing to be seen? Or perhaps you have never wished to reveal your true self for fear that people will see the fire in you and change. Yes, they will, so will you. There will be ants. Someday, the trees will listen. Even if they don't, you'll keep singing.

ecdysis  
my self-esteem  
returns  
on the same perch  
a crimson dragonfly

**Harshada Kulkarni**

## **Energized**

During a series of windstorms and power outages, we realize it's past time to replenish emergency supplies. A 40-pack of AA batteries arrives by courier. Checking the expiration date, I'm pleased to find it reads 12 years from now—2037. Seems like batteries last longer than they used to. My next thought: they might well outlive Bill and me.

former girl scout  
my motto  
ever ready

**Cynthia Anderson**

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## **Granddog Visit**

My daughter stopped by with Ellie who was just groomed. Her coat white, she jumped into my arms and tucked herself by my side. She is thirteen years of age in human count. Seventy-two in dog years. Her teeth are loose. *I am not old*, she whispers as she jumps off my lap.

what we can't see holding on to a root

**Norma Bradley**

## **Prarabdha\***

First day of college. A packed classroom of whispers and rustles. The door opens and two scrawny boys shuffle in.

Forty years later, one of them is a renowned surgeon while the other boy has long succumbed to a brain tumor.

white lotus  
planting the seeds  
of a new prayer

\*Prarabdha is that part of the past karma which is responsible for the present body. It cannot be avoided or changed.

## **Possibilities**

Waking to a dark, cold emptiness, I wander to the balcony, swatting away a hovering fly. A relay chorus of answering crows and the soft coos of the fluttering pigeons usher in the dawn.

A rolled up newspaper drops with a thud. The grate of a rusty lock, and a nonenal aroma—the gentleman, who lives below, comes out to pick flowers for his morning prayers. Hawkers' calls echo and wander nearer. Flute notes float through swirling curry flavors.

A fresh gust of wind brings a whiff of cigarette entwined with incense smoke and the sound of a conch shell blowing, thrice.

The phone beeps.

sun rays  
the melting ice flows  
into a new story

**Mohua Maulik**

## **Dissolving**

A lone voice rises in the dusk. No instruments, no rhythm—only  
breath shaping devotion. The walls drink in the sound. So do I.

Sufi singing  
somewhere between  
earth and sky

**Nalini Shetty**

## **Remember**

a river beneath

the child stares out, lights fizz in the rain, blur across roofs. She presses her lips on the pane, tastes the cold, draws a line across the mist patch, looks again. The essence of that place would always stay, its coal air and river fog

where smoke flows and tides run out  
many miles ago

**Jenny Dunbar**



## Three Saxophone Notes Before The Void

The teeming city doesn't breathe; it convulses wildly, stutters, roughly exhales static / Neon veins violently throb under a sable sky choked with smog, skyscraper buildings leaning like weary giants / So-called celebrities' billboards flicker, blatantly selling hunger, selling escape / An old man cracks open a roasted chestnut—skin flakes away like the peeling paint of forgotten doorways / His delicate fingers, soot-kissed, quiver slightly before pressing another ember-scorched shell between calloused palms / The chestnut vendor has no name, only the sweet scent of burnt sugar trailing behind him

In an alley, a gatto—spine knot twisted, ribs harp-string taut—pours itself into an abandoned tire / Its green-glass eyes mirror the city's ghosts, the ones no one actually talks about / The micione watches something slither through the puddle of Day-Glo water / A discarded newspaper flutters near a storm drain, fake headlines melting into yesterday's rain

Somewhere, above, a third-floor window gapes open like a missing tooth / A jazzy saxophone sobs into the sagacious night—three notes, then silence like a lover biting back a name / The melody swiftly drips down the hollow walls, pooling in the splits of pavement where someone once stood too long, tarrying / The swarming streets are swollen with footsteps that have nowhere to go

crowded sidewalks hum  
still, her echo stays with me—  
night's faint lullaby

**Hannan Khan**

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