



*Sonder : A Collection of Poems & Short Fictions*

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## Editor's Note

Writing has established itself as a channel through which man finds expression to the impulse of creativity, thought, imagination and perception. Writing per se could be either creative or non-creative. Non creative writing deals with ideas and its purpose is to inform and to help widen one's knowledge. On the other hand, creative writing is an expression of one's creative urge where one has a choice of drawing inspiration from esoteric experiences which could be exclusively subjective or involving a broad human perspective.

India and the North East in particular, is a culturally rich and varied region. It is a vast reservoir of myths, legends and fascinating folktales. The country is home to the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, and many more Booker and Pulitzer-prize winners. The North East in this context, has not lagged far behind, for it has produced eminent writers known and recognized world-wide. Realizing this latent potential we, therefore, embarked on a journey-one that eventually led to this book.

The participants who attended the "Workshop on Creative Writing in English" are as diverse as they are talented. We, therefore felt that the right step forward would be to provide a platform to these creative minds so as to inspire many others to also come forward and give concrete expression to their latent potential.

It is often said, that one can be transported to beautiful worlds through books and this book is no exception because it evolved from some of the best and budding creative minds. The book is divided into three sections the first section comprises a collection of essays from established North East writers themselves, while the second and the third section are compiled from a collection of selected poems and compiled from a collection of selected poems and short stories received at the Creative Writing Workshop.

The first section of this book begins with Dhruba Hazarika's chronological rendering of the beginnings of creative writing in the North East which sets the stage for an eclectic collection of essays pertaining to different genres of creative and critical writing. These articles by Mitra Phukan, Dr. A. S. Guha, Ramendra Kumar and Dr. Ashes Gupta are not only intellectually stimulating and thought provoking but they also function as touchstones for the new entrants into the literary and publishing world, lighting the way for the younger generation of writers.

The other two sections of the book are creative pieces which we received from our participants at the Workshop. These contributors are drawn from the different North Eastern states some of whom are students, members of the teaching fraternity, particularly from the Literature and Languages Departments, or individuals inclined towards creative writing. A few of the contributors included have been writing for quite some time, while some have only just started writing through the past few years. Thus, this collection as a whole represents the spirit of the twenty first century.

In this aspect, the creative pieces chosen to be part of the collection entitled "Sonder" are a reflection of present reality, showcasing a new interpretation of life, a new interpretation of beauty and in a newly evolved style. The profundity of the thoughts that are manifested in the act of writing is commendable and inspirational. From the encounters of everyday life – the trivial and the mundane; the romantic expressions of love to the existential angst of youth, the search for identity and their place in relation to mainland India these are familiar to us and to others whom we just got to know, is our writers we hope will engage the readers as they give expression to the complexity of life itself.

This maiden journey of ours with writers - some of whom humble attempt aimed at promoting creative writing amongst the young and old, bridging the gulf of culture viz-a-viz promoting cultural ties and hoping to add more names to the already existing distinguished

group of North East writers writing in English.

As the Editor, I express my gratitude to the North East Writers' Forum (NEWF), the Sahitya Akademi Shillong chapter, the Indian Council of Social Science and Research (NERC), NEHU and Shillong College for having supported the Creative Writing Workshop sowing the very seed which has now borne fruit.

I wish to express my deep appreciation to Dr. A.S.Guha and Mitra Phukan for readily consenting to review the submissions in spite of their busy schedules. I am indebted to our Principal and the entire Department of English of Shillong College for the support and assistance all the way. I would fail in my duty as the Editor if I do not express my gratitude to Ms Rupanjali Baruah of Wordsmith Publishers who readily consented to publish the book after taking a peek at the draft manuscript.

This book would not have emerged without the valuable submissions from all our dear contributors. I express my gratitude to Dhruba Hazarika, Mitra Phukan, Dr. Ashes Gupta, Dr. A. S. Guha and Ramendra Kumar for their insightful essays which were part of the Workshop. I express my heartfelt thanks to each and every contributor of this book. I hope the book becomes the window to our shared world and the shared voices within tell our story.

I congratulate you and wish you all the very best in your future endeavours.

**Amanda Basaiawmoit**  
Editor



## FOREWORD

Some of the greatest philosophers in history have been fascinated by the wonder of creativity. To cite a few examples: Kant conceived of artistic genius as an innate capacity to produce works of “exemplary originality” through the free play of the imagination, a process which does not consist in following rules, can neither be learned nor taught, and is mysterious even to geniuses themselves; Schopenhauer stressed that the greatest artists are distinguished not only by the technical skill they employ in the production of art, but also by the capacity to “lose themselves” in the experience of what is beautiful and sublime; Nietzsche saw the greatest feats of creativity, exemplified in the tragic poetry of ancient Greece, as being born out of a rare cooperation between the “Dionysian” spirit of ecstatic intoxication, which imbues the work with vitality and passion, and the “Apollonian” spirit of sober restraint, which tempers chaos with order and form. This is just a glimpse of what each of these philosophers has to say about creativity.

For me, creativity is the vehicle of self-expression and part of what makes us who we are. In fact there is little that shapes the human experience as profoundly and pervasively as creativity. Creativity drives progress in every human endeavour, from the arts to the sciences, business, and technology. Just as we celebrate and honour people for their creativity, I congratulate the contributors in this book who desire to archive their thoughts through the artistic medium of creative writing.



This act of theirs is a testament not only of man's search for beauty and the need to express himself, but also the willingness to share wisdom and knowledge acquired along the way.

Each of these writers has given shape to a myriad of experiences both personal and social. They have perceived the ordinary moments of life with extraordinary insight; they express the anxieties of modern life, precariously holding on to the remnants of tradition and culture, and they write about the intense love they feel for the land and its people. It is through stories that are woven in the minds of these creative writers that we tell the world who we are and celebrate where we are from. Indeed, all the contributors have managed to incorporate that distinctive essence and nuances that characterize the region they call home and it fills me with great pleasure to see these artists as socially conscious individuals who are reaching out to a larger audience to share what I believe is a communitarian outlook of society where each individual is an important thread within the fabric of the community as a whole.

I congratulate the Department of English for having undertaken the task of enriching the already existing treasury of North east writings by coming up with this publication. I am sure this book will be of immense help in stoking the spark of creativity that is already kindling in young writers and in those who are aspiring to be part of this wonderful circle that enjoys the privilege of living both in the real world and the world of the imagination.

**(Dr. K. D. Ramsiej)**  
**Principal**  
**Shillong College**



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## Creative Writing in English in the North East

~Dhruba Hazarika

Many years ago, perhaps sometime between 1972 and 1974, walking the streets of Shillong with a friend who already had a collection of eclectically vibrant poems, till then unpublished under his belt, I had voiced the need for a journal or a magazine that would cater to creative writing in English in Shillong. As we talked, friend Ananya Guha had handed over to me several pages comprising nascent poems which years later blossomed into a collection titled “What Else Is Alive?”

I left Shillong in the late Seventies and settled down in Guwahati. Going through the *Assam Tribune* one day I remember reading an article by Prof. Gobindo Prasad Sarma of Gauhati University. Why is it, he asked, that despite thousands of students passing out with flying colours from some of the finest English-medium schools in the NE none had yet penned a novel in English? Was the creative spark missing? Were the students who were aspiring to be writers caught in that twilight zone between expressing one’s thoughts in a supposedly foreign language when compared to the language bequeathed by their genetic ancestors? Or was it something else; less simple? Was it a lack of a creative soil that disallowed creative growth? What were the ingredients of this soil? Reading, and more reading? Accompanied by a passion for relishing one’s own works in print? Were there any magazines or journals to emboss these prints? Or, at another level, was it because surcharged as we were in academia, creative writing was at best a dirty word that ruined one’s professional job prospects. Even then, back in Shillong in the early Seventies, even prior to that camera-specific interlude with Ananya Guha I remember coming across a collection of short stories by Mr. Murli Melwani “Stories of a

Salesman” published by Chapala Book Stall. Are fine collection about everyday incidents all centred in Shillong and written without any unnecessary details or without those sentences that I have always considered as unwanted flippancy of human thoughts. I do not possess the book but I remember thinking after having read Gobindo Prasad Sarma’s article that if Mr. Melwani could write as well that, there was every reason for him to try his hand at a full-fledged novel. I have never met Mr. Melwani but some forty years later came to know he had settled in the United States.

All this I mention by way of an introduction simply to tell you that the genesis of creative writing in English in the North East began, albeit hesitantly, a bit cagily in Shillong itself. Perhaps in one context I err. The first novel written in English “Shadows In The Afternoon,” was authored by Professor Jyotsna Bhattacharjee in 1960 who retired as head of department of philosophy in Cotton College. Yet, I would venture to rectify my own observation by specifying that one book does not a literary summer make. For as the years passed, egged on by occasional contributions to *The Junior Statesman* and *The Telegraph Magazine Supplement* as well by Arup Dutta’s path-breaking books it was left to the four stalwarts, to make this summer come alive: Desmond Kharmawphlang, Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih, Robin Ngangom and the effervescent Ananya Guha – all from Shillong, all contemporaries, all gifted with a poetic fervour moulding their individual intellectual and creative personalities. While folk-tales and legends wound themselves in Desmond’s taut, almost reluctant evocation of a perennial mystic that hovers around such tales – tales converted to succinct, contemplative verse in his seminal works like *Here* and others, Robin Ngangom found voice in his remarkable *Words and The Silence* that was published in 1990. Wrought in love and sensuality and in the agony born of geographical displacement, Robin has written several other collections, each encapsulating the pining for a lost

homeland and the perplexity that often accosts a sensitive poet when faced with violence and its needless progeny.

In this cataclysmic corner of India, dubbed the North East where humour in writing is ostensibly rare, comes a beacon in the shape of a Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih. Kynpham has written in almost every conceivable genre that creative writing allows : from poems to fiction to folk-tales but personally I have found his poems a class apart. There have been times when I have stopped suddenly in the middle of a meeting in office simply to grin away in front of the other members remembering a line or two from Kynpham's inimitable poetry. Kynpham's humour encompasses political satire as well as his unerring ability for homing into the mundane, excelling at crafting that very difficult of literary exercises, what sometimes is called tragedy and comedy rolled dexterously into one singular piece.

To Ananya Shankar Guha whom I have already referred to earlier, comes an aura of helplessness of the spirit, perhaps of the soul; I would not call it pessimism nor sadness but an angst, that razor's edge between having everything and yet not having anything, that surreal zone described by a poet of yore as "walking the minefields in paradise".

With the four having sprouted seemingly from the pine-clad hills, creative writing in English began to gather momentum from 1985 to 1995, a seed-time that crept itself into the valleys in Assam and in Manipur and then winding its way up to Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim and Mizoram. It was a seed-time because this was the period that allowed a kind of fermentation, a liberty that the nascent poet, the author had not quite clearly reckoned with earlier. It was almost as if having gorged on all the books worth reading it was now time to distil, good or bad, whatever had been digested. Ten formative years that culminated in the almost unconventional formation of the North East Writers' Forum in 1996.

From the early Eighties to the late Nineties dark days held sway over Assam, when guns overshadowed roses, rubbing out the sunshine from what we know of as the creative impulse. In this darkened cavern it was an English language daily, *The Sentinel*, published from Guwahati, which offered many a youngish writer to express her creative urges. Over a couple of years, several of these contributors came to know one another. One late January evening in 1996 led by the exuberant Meenaxi Bhattacharjee we met; Mitra Phukan, Indrani Rai Medhi, Srutimala Duara, Pranjanya Barua and I to form a small literary club (somewhat in the lines of the Shillong Poetry Society that had flourished in the previous decade in Shillong) so that we would be able to help each other out through consultations and recommended reading in improving our writing skills. Very soon, Arup Dutta, already an internationally well-known author (*The Kaziranga Trail*, et al) and D.N. Bezbaruah, the courageous editor of *The Sentinel* joined the bandwagon. I remember ringing Pankaj Thapa who is based in Gangtok, whose cartoons find print in international magazines as well as Nini Nungalang and Sebastian Zumvu from Nagaland and Mamang Dai (whose collection, *River Poems* and the gently woven novel *The Legends Of Pen sam* spawned a style unique to the north-east. In fact Mamangs' contribution to both fiction and poetry has earned her the rightful accolade of being honoured with the prestigious Padma Shri to ask them if they would care to join us. We held that first meeting in October 1996 in the Circuit House at Guwahati where more than fifty poets and writers from all the eight states participated. From then on, there has been no looking back and despite several ups and downs the North East Writers' Forum now has more than 300 members including the legendary late James Dokhuma, the thespian Ratan Thiyam and the prolific Chandrakanta Murasingh who espouse the cause translations of works in the regional languages to English so as to reach a wider audience apart from encouraging writings originally in English. If contribution is the hallmark that personifies an organization the best that the Forum could do was to provide a



platform for those who sought a literary herd wrought in the same birth pangs, that of writing in English.

Creative writing in English in India had begun almost three quarters of a century ago if one were to think of Nirad Chaudhuri's *Autobiography of An Indian* as a creative exercise. Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Kamala Das, Anita Desai, Khushwant Singh, Sasthi Brata, Dom Moraes, Nissim Ezekiel, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Raja Rao, Arun Joshi, Nayantara Sehgal, Kamala Makaradya, Ruskin Bond as well as the great Manohar Malgaonkar established a base upon which later writers trod forward. A later generation probably led by Vikram Seth, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Amitav Ghosh and Shashi Tharoor marched forward confidently enough to encourage hundreds of other writers and poets. Over the years all over India there have been outpourings of creative writing in English propelled by an academic education in school and college through the English language coupled with a wide reading of assorted international literature in translation, from the Russians to the Latin Americans, from the Africans to the Europeans. Add to this the freedom in reading, during one's childhood, the classics from Shakespeare to Jane Austen, from William Golding to Harper Lee. And perhaps the best thing that could have happened was that every teacher worth her salt in the various schools allowed the budding poet to exercise her imagination the way she wanted to. For, in all my formative years in Shillong never once did I feel the great wall of literary prohibition, that some societies are infamous for, breathing down my literary neck.

Somewhere down the line the creative writer in English in the North East, whether a poet or a novelist, has been made that much richer due to this reading. But reading alone is not the final thrust that allows the imagination to pen down lines. Perhaps more than anything else it is the physical and the emotional experience that allows the creative writer to craft her lines. The North East has its share of both dark as well as bright days and

those of us who have written about violence can well understand the weaving of human trauma into words. But the North East is not only home to sporadic violence. It is also home to great love for its hills and rivers and its valleys and lakes. From this too has arisen stories by authors such as Jahnvi Phukan, Anjum Hasan and Mitra Phukan, Temsula Ao ( conferred the Padma Shri for her literary works) and Robert G Lyngdoh. Another classic example of writing beyond violence is *Boats on Land* by Janice Pariat. To have read this unique collection of stories is an experience by itself, a catharsis of sorts. The North Eastern prescription is that of a cultural milieu framed upon a geographical network that surpasses narrow human bonding. When the attempt is in the reverse, creativity in writing faces a downhill task. But voices cannot be restrained whether spoken or written and therefore creative writing in English in the North East continues to sparkle through the works of Esther Syiem, Ravikanta Singh, Ankush Saikia (who can take on the best of thriller writers from the Occident), Chetan Shrestha (*The King's Harvest* remains a major contribution to NE literature) to Kaushik Barua, Uddipana Goswami, Monalisa Changkija, Easterine Iralu. There are several others, including Aruni Kashyap and Bijoya Sawian as well as Mona Zote but it is next to impossible to embrace all within this space given to me. For the moment suffice it to know that even as we struggle, consciously or subconsciously to establish the North Eastern literary paradigm our writers continue to paint their canvases with their metaphor-evocative literary juices.

Creative writing does not generate easily. Nor does it generate easily when such writing is written in a language that is supposedly not in what euphemistically is known as one's mother-tongue. But the forces that allow a writer to choose her own language are about as ineluctable as the winds that foment the monsoons over the Arabian Sea into the Indian subcontinent. Prowling between the more well-known recognized languages (Assamese, Bodo, Meitei, Khasi, etc ) are many more languages

and dialects in the North East, each possessing an abundance of self-respect as the other. In this tussle, between one's language to which one is born into, to the one that one chooses in one's adult life is a proselytization that allows its own creativity, mainly born out of two forces marginally or ever severely clashing to give forth a new spark. We, who write in English, in the North East know very well the untarnished love we carry for our indigenous culture and lingua franca and the simultaneous love for writing in English.

I thank Shillong College for having organized the Workshop on Creative Writing in English and for taking up the onus to come up with this collection. I congratulate each of the contributors who have been featured here and hope that the spark of creativity that burns in each one of us, ignites many more.

## Poetry: The Creative Art

~Dr. Ananya S. Guha

Poetry goes beyond literal statements, to understand poetry is to feel the mood, the swing and pulse of a poem. As readers of poetry run into difficulty if we are always searching for 'meanings' in a poem, by which they mean the literal meaning. Rather we should seek interpretation, discern the evocativeness of a poem. The logic of poetry rests on images, the mind's eye of pictures: the sky, the trees, the hills and these can lead to more complex image building or comparisons-similes or metaphors.

First however, while reading a poem one should read out aloud, that will give the feel or the rhythm of a poem, if the poem is regularly rhymed, then reading the poem would be more fun. But verse or regular rhyme does not always mean poetry, for example Nursery Rhymes may or may not be considered to be poetry, but children's verse is something to be reckoned with, because when we initiate a child to poetry we cannot do so by making him or her read first Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey". Poets have written for children, and will continue to do keeping a target audience in mind. The child's world of fantasy, mystery and surprises are continuously explored by poets.

Today we are in the midst of what they call verse libre or free verse. Rhyme is in a crisis of sorts, although some poets use internal or irregular rhyme. It is not easy to write a poem in sustained regular verse, and yet make it poetic (remember what I said earlier, verse is not necessarily poetry and also the other way round). But verse is a conventional hazard (if I may say so). A writer may use it or not depending upon the interest or ability of their craft. Verse or no verse, the craft of poetry is most

significant, the ability to use the right kind of words, not words that are an eye sore, but compact, finished and chiselled. The starting point to inculcate the creative art of writing, that is writing poetry of course, is the child. If we are to educate school children in poetry, then reading it must be fun. A child who picks up the nuances of reading should shortly go into writing-exploration and experimental. Do not search only for meanings in poetry, this is the examination oriented attitude. Read a poem to understand it intensely. It may happen that as a reader one may remember only a line or two of a poem, that is because these lines have struck you. These lines one may often quote forgetting the others. Why? Because these lines have made a poetic dent on the mind.

As for the themes of poetry you can write on anything as someone once said-from love to toothpaste! To be eclectic in choice of themes or subjects is the hallmark of a great poet.

## **Elements of the Short Story : A Personal View.**

*~Mitra Phukan.*

In the genre of fiction, one of the most popular forms is the Short Story. The definition of a short story, like the definition of all creative arts, is often stretched, as newer practitioners push the envelope, broadening and deepening the scope of the form. However, it is, largely, a piece of fiction, incorporating plot, character, descriptions and usually dialogue. The writer, through this piece of fiction, usually illustrates a theme, in his or her own individual way.

The short story, by classification, needs to be short. Of course the length varies from piece to piece, writer to writer. There is an elasticity here. These days, one can and does have Twitter stories, so brief that they fit into the hundred and forty character format. There are stories that are known as “Short shorts”, others can be so long that they verge on being a novella. However, there are certain elements beyond that of length that definitely mark out good writings within this category.

It has been aptly said that if the novel is the art of the gaze, the short story is the art of the glance. While the novelist has the liberty of a much larger canvas, the short story writer’s is a smaller space. This means that she does not have the luxury of elaborations. She cannot set the stage for the story with atmospheric descriptions, for instance. Long winded dialogues, character descriptions, especially physical descriptions, cannot happen. This means, also, that the *pace* of a short story has to be brisk. Things have to move, they have to happen, within that word count.

One of the best guides to any kind of writing is the dictum, “Have something to say, then say it as briefly as possible.” This is especially true of the short story. Prolivity is never good, but it is something to be absolutely shunned in the case of short stories.

Stories have to have a beginning, a middle and an end. This is true of both the great epics, as well as the short shorts, and of all the categories in between. Within this, the writer has a great deal of flexibility to move forward as she wishes. The “beginning, middle and end” format need not necessarily be in chronological order. One can start at a particular time, and jump to a flashback, and then flash forward. The important thing is that there should be a continuity, an internal logic to the narrative. There is the introduction, the body, the climax, the dénouement. Within this, the plotline can be linear, or it can zigzag back and forth.

Both the long and short fiction styles present challenges to the writer. The novelist has to populate her work with many more characters than the short story writer, for instance. She has to fill up the space, she has to create, as it were, a complete world within the covers of the book. The short story writer’s is a slice of life, rather than the whole world. And indeed, both the novelist and the short story writer, look at the same theme differently, and use the medium of words in different ways to create two different works.

As far as theme is concerned, the short story can only carry one, or a very limited number, to be successful. Whereas, it is necessary for the novelist to have more themes, a main theme and subsidiary ones, in order to create richness and variety in the work.

The short story writer has to pen her work tightly. She has to make each word count. On the other hand, the work has to

have aesthetic beauty, as well. Therefore, each sentence, each phrase should have, ideally, multiple layers. The words should have, through their power of suggestivity, an evocativeness that suggests worlds beyond that which is delineated. The story should have the power to suggest a larger universe, of which this is an integral part. And yet the short story should be, in itself, whole, complete, capable of standing on its own. Masters of short stories can put in shades of significance, and layers of meaning, through just a phrase, or sentence.

While styles of storytelling vary from author to author, it is seen that the short story works best if there is an immediacy to it. The opening sentence of the story should enable the reader to plunge straight into the work, and place her right in the thick of things. It is called "The Art of the Start." Many of the best authors do this by having something "happen" in the first few sentences itself, after which they either go forward, or flash back. That is, they begin in the middle. But then, there are no hard and fast rules about achieving immediacy, just as there are no hard and fast rules about writing a fine short story. Rules should be broken, and the only rule should be that the story should tell a tale.

There should be coherence as far as "effect" is concerned. The short story writer cannot play around with different "effects", with different "moods," in the way that a novelist can. The very first sentence should convey also an effect that can be sustained throughout, to the end of the story.

There is also the question of "point of view." In many ways, this can make or break a story. It is seen from experience that if a story doesn't seem to be working, changing the point of view immediately makes it zippier, more relevant. A first person narration usually has more immediacy, but this may not always work. There is also the question of what mode



of narration is to be followed. Is it from the point of view of one of the characters? If so, which one? Through whose eyes is the story best seen? Or is it to be in the “author omniscient” mode? These are questions that have to be decided beforehand, prior to the story actually being written.

Of almost equal importance in a short story is the end. It is seen that many of the best short stories end with a twist in the tale. While this is not mandatory, it does seem to have become a kind of convention. Readers have come to expect a kind of surprise, even if a mild one, at the end. Here again, the craft of plotting comes into play. There are usually many points within a story that can provide a twist to the tail of the tale. It is upto the writer to choose a particular twist for the tail, and work towards it throughout the story, while at the same time not being too obvious about it. This “punch line” can be just a sentence, or at most a paragraph. It need not be an explanatory sentence at all, but maybe an action, or a dialogue, that can provide the needed last-minute punch to the tale.

It must be remembered, though, that in the process of putting in the punch in the tail, one should not forget the “body” of the work. This is after all the meat of the matter.

As for style, and language, here too, the underlying tone is brevity. The short story writer does not have the luxury of using too many metaphors or other figures of speech, no matter how beautiful. However, by the judicious use of language, fine writers convey much more than is apparent at first glance.

Since the canvas of the short story is small, the number of characters cannot be large. Besides, the author cannot have long descriptive passages about the character’s traits, such as are found in Victorian novels, for instance. The best writers delineate character not through descriptions but through actions,

happenings. If a character is described as running to catch a train, pushing aside people on a crowded platform (for instance), there is both immediacy and a sense of character, rather than if the writer were to state, simply, “He was late as usual. So late that he missed the train.” Actions here speak louder than words, and in the short story this is important. For by delineating action several things are achieved. The plot is taken forward, character is established, pace is given momentum, and the story moves forward.

One of the most important aspects of the short story is dialogue. Not only do characters speak to each other through dialogue, in the short story, dialogue also speaks *about* character to the reader, besides sometimes also taking the story forward. The cadence, the texture of dialogue should be very specific to the character. This is true of all styles of fiction, of course, but it is perhaps even truer of short stories, where every aspect has the task of performing multiple functions.

**Here and Now Writing :  
Heralding A Brave New Literature**

*~ Ramendra Kumar*

A decade and a half ago, soon after the publication of my first book for children, I went with a brand new manuscript to a rather well known publisher in New Delhi. He flipped through the manuscript like a doctor going through promotional literature on the latest female contraceptive and looked at me.

“Mr. Kumar. Your manuscript looks interesting. But I am afraid it doesn’t quite fit into our scheme of things.”

“Mr. Sanjay (his first name) what kind of writing are you looking for?” I asked. I had spent two hours and 1100 rupees on a taxi and I wasn’t going to give up that easily.

He looked at me with a rather bored expression and suppressing a yawn replied, “Mr. Kumar why don’t you rewrite the Ramayana for us?”

I stared at him. “But Mr. Sanjay, that has been done thousands of times. Moreover, for doing a cover version of the Ramayana you can get any graduate in English who has a bit of interest in writing. You don’t need a creative writer for that. Where is the creative challenge in this kind of writing?”

“Mr. Kumar we are not in the business of offering challenges. For that you can participate in game shows on TV. We are in the business of publishing. And like in any other business, here too our focus is on our bottom line not on Corporate or Creative Social Responsibility. And for your information there is a huge demand for Ramayana and Mahabharata in places like Bali, Java and Sumatra. If you are interested we can work out the details.”

I shook my head, thanked him and walked out.

In the 15 years or so since then the scenario hasn't changed all that much for children's writing in India.

I would like to discuss briefly the current scene.

Many writers who have faltered and failed in writing for adults meander into what they consider a rather easy genre. Bored housewives, expert school teachers and experienced parents who have whetted their tale-telling skills on children are usually bitten by the writing bug. They read up everything available ranging from fables to fairy tales and parables to mythology. They then fasten their seat belts and are ready to launch themselves as children's writers.

And a result we have 'made-over' versions of *Aesop's* fables, the *Panchatantra* tales, the *Jataka* stories et al. The creativity of the writers is all spent in modernizing the names and settings. The tale of hare and the tortoise would appear in a new avatar as a story between Montu and Pinki set in the grounds of a public school in Noida! The poem of the fox and the sour grapes would cleverly be retold as the saga of Golu and the Golgappas!

This reminds me of a little incident which happened during the *Asian Conference of Story Telling* in New Delhi, a few years ago. A lady with very impressive credentials in the field of Library Science and an equally impressive personality was giving tips to children's writers on how to write for children.

"All writers attempting to write for children should keep in mind that they have to go down to the level of children," she concluded with a flourish, waiting for the applause which naturally followed.

During the interaction session I raised my hand to ask a question. She transferred her imperious gaze to me and lifted her eyebrows.

"Ma'am, thanks for your very illuminating discourse, but I have a small point to make."

She nodded impatiently. Obviously she didn't have time to waste on a 'non-pedigree' writer like me.

"Ma'am, I think you got the direction wrong. We children's writers don't have to go down to the level of children; rather we have to rise up to the level of the young and vibrant minds. For ma'am children are the closest that you get to God and God lives up there, not down below." There was a stunned silence for some time and suddenly the entire hall no. 5 of *India Habitat Centre* exploded with clouds and cheers.

The point I am trying to make is that the first set of people responsible for the state of children's writing in India is the writer themselves.

As an MBA in marketing the primary lesson I was taught was to respect the customer. For us the customer is the child. However, instead of respecting the child we patronize her and take her for granted. The books being churned out by writers and publishers are a testimony to this fact. Most of the books written for children are rehashes of earlier classics or fantasies in a new avatar. And the reason is obvious. Most writers do not have the talent, the perseverance and the confidence to try out anything new. As a result they are comfortable with retelling epics or revisiting *Harry Potter*.

As far as the publishers are concerned they consider the fairy/ folk tale /fantasy segment safe since there is already a huge body of work and hence a ready market in this genre. Therefore they indulge in either reprinting age old fables and popular fantasies or going in for their remix versions authored by uncles and aunties parading as writers.

Yet another very strong allergy, most 'new-age' publishers have is for writing that talks about values. Any mention of ideals is considered preachy, moralistic and didactic and hence an absolute no-no. For these followers of the reel life Silk Smitha,

children's had to be only 'Entertainment, Entertainment, and Entertainment.'

I wonder why value driven writing is considered such an anathema. Some of our most famous and successful filmmakers have created cinema which enthralls as well as elevates. Prime examples of this genre are *Hrishikesh Mukherjee* and *Raj Kumar Hirani*. If on celluloid values can be considered healthy why not in print or in cyberspace?

I would like to put forth a strong case for a different genre of writing. I would like to take the liberty of naming this segment of writing - Here and Now genre.

Now what do I mean by 'Here and Now writing'?

This is the writing which is set in today, not in the once upon a time. It is concerned not with the past perfect but the present (tense or otherwise). Kids of today face problems, along with opportunities come counter predicaments which their earlier generations never did have. This scenario throws up greater challenges as well as higher levels of responsibility.

Also, this writing is not preachy, it is fast paced and riveting but has a value subtly tucked in somewhere.

Many writers do not want to write in this genre because this is one of the most difficult ones to write in. It is far easier to churn out fantasies than to explore real life issues. The publishers too are wary of foraying in this arena. The reasons may be because of lack of good quality literature and also apprehension to make a sortie in an uncharted territory.

I, as you would have guessed by now, have been devoted mainly to 'Here and Now' writing. My latest novel which is under publication is titled '*And the Jhelum Flows*'. It is a story of Kashmir in the here and now. I visited Kashmir a couple of years back and interacted with men and women across the spectrum to get the feel of the reality on the ground.

The tale that unfolded was of a Paradise well and truly lost. I have made an attempt to tell a story which is a raw, no holds barred narrative that speaks for the common man who has been marginalized in his own land and years for his Janat. The book weaves together several narratives to create a montage

of hatred and violence and amidst all this, the most important four letter word in today's fractured times: Hope.

I am confident my latest attempt at realistic fiction will be as well received as my earlier books.

I would like to reiterate that I have been going on book promotion tours to different cities which include Book Reading sessions and Meet the Author programmes in leading book stores and creative writing workshops in schools. I have been telling realistic stories in all these forums. The response of the young and the young at heart has been fantastic.

Thus our experience shows that the readers love 'Here and Now' writing, research proves that it is very much in demand and there are at least a few writers who have carved a niche in this category – then pray what is stopping the publishers and the academics to attempt to take the road less travelled? Isn't it high time the creators of a brave new literature as well as a discerning readership get a chance to reach out to each other and create a synergy which is beyond time and space?

Is anyone out there listening...?

## Opening A New world

### The Art of Reviewing

~*Dr Ashes Gupta*

In an evenly balanced academic world, creation and criticism play equally significant roles. This arises from the very simple notion that no art, leave alone literature, is born in and for a vacuum. Appreciation fuels creativity and constructive criticism improves upon the skill of an artist. Instead of going in to intense theoretical debates about how one should apportion one's loyalties between the artist and the critic, I would like to stress upon the idea of enjoyment and pleasure as the most important ingredients of a successful review. Obviously, therefore the art of reviewing for me would be based on these two twin principles. Reviewing cannot and should not be a compulsion, rather it should be a happy choice. Hence, for that matter interest and liking would be the propellants for a reviewer. A reviewers' job is analogous to that of a detective. The reviewer picks up hints and clues, analyses, deciphers and decodes them and draws his inferences with substantiated logic. Moreover, the art of reviewing requires again a happy balance between the faculties of head and heart. What is determined by the intellect should also be marinated in emotion.

The task becomes all the more complicated when one approaches the literature of the North East. In an attempt to touch the base, I anchor myself in my soil and venture to establish that a proper reviewing of North Eastern literature requires a close affinity with the cultural and aesthetic nuances of the North East. The cultural relativistic perspective needs to be adopted in this regard, as we often tend to subject North Eastern Literature to a wrong ideology of standardization that is alien to its ethos. The



cultural baggage of a white Westerner attempting to 'civilize' us or the mainlander 'linking us to the 'mainstream'(???) needs to be scrutinized as they are 'good' but do not belong to us and are therefore unwanted. The rustling of pine leaves in Shillong on a moonlit wintry night is distinctly different from that in England or for that matter from the sound of deodars in Shantiniketan. The art of review in my opinion has to tap that essential flavour of life that constitutes literature in my part of the country. In the North East, every tree is endowed with life, every mountain has a soul, rivers are eloquent and the mist creates magic. The success of the reviewer lies in unearthing those essences of being.

Of course a reviewer also has to be alert for errors. He cannot be a doting mother, oblivious of all the wrong doings of her child. But what the reviewer should avoid in his art of reviewing is to superimpose determiners that are extraneous to the culture in which the text is contextualized. The success of a proper review lies in the reviewer's fidelity to the craft of writing and his empathy with the source culture. I have intentionally avoided the term sympathy as it creates a top-down hierarchy thus privileging the sympathizer. Markers of literary criticism are many and are approximated to be accurate, but ultimately what rules is the finer judgement which again is a fine balance of the head and heart. Though clinical detachment was once considered to be the in thing, what I propose is a finely brewed sense of liking tempered with logic, interspersed, if and when required with an equally finely tuned disapproval of what is unwanted or superfluous. It's like counselling an adolescent child about your preferences and your disapproval, the thin line of balance has to be meticulously maintained between what you approve and what you think should be avoided.



*Poetry*

**Rangebok Lyngwa***As it is*

Let us gather and meet.  
Yet again,  
Today someone, breathed his last.  
Let us act like we give a damn,  
That we mourn,  
To gather only,  
With gossip of politics  
And cloak ourselves,  
In pretences.  
Let us mask our fatigued bodies  
With religion, issues  
While sipping hot cups of tea  
Red or milked  
Served in paper cups  
And munching on edibles  
Bought in kilos  
Waiting for a longing  
To head back to monotony  
Or wish that then  
A blabbering kin  
Stubbornly pulls and pulls,  
To force a fairly cooked meal  
Down your acidic throat  
Now choked with 'kwai'.  
Or if not  
Before you leave

You part with soothing words  
Or stuff a hundred rupee note  
In the hands of supposedly mourning  
women.

Let us ignore the poor soul  
Before he mingles in the dust  
Or scatter in the skies  
Of an already polluted world  
Let us bid farewell to the living  
And not pay heed to death  
The helpless soul  
Who as of now is bared to on-lookers  
Or concealed behind lacy  
curtains  
A duty accomplished  
Let us head back and wonder  
What awaits for us,  
When the sun does rise again



*Kwai*: refers to the Khasi betel nut

## Willie Gordon Suting

### *If Only Time Would Take Me Back To That Moment*

If only time would take me back to that moment,  
when our eyes met,  
when the world around us seemed all in a stillness.  
I forgot the lighted cigarette in my hand  
and she failed to hear what her friend spoke.  
It was as if I said hello with my sad eyes,  
and she said hey with hers.  
It was as if we knew one another for many years  
but couldn't utter one another's names...  
Then a light drizzle fell on our hair and shoulders,  
and we stood looking around,  
looking around like clueless children.  
The drizzle awoke us  
and we quietly sighed.  
I saw my cigarette nearly reached its butt end  
and she followed the hand of her friend into a taxi.  
They entered swiftly.  
As I took out another cigarette,  
she looked back at me from the rear window  
and the car slowly vanished into the busy street...  
...If only time would take me back to that moment...



*In His Small Bed*

He renounced all pleasures of life,  
And buried himself for years  
In his small bed.

The darkness inside the warm blanket  
Was where he lived.

It was after some years that he believed  
He could see and hear some people  
Who were afar.

He smiled hearing one of them  
Crack a joke

He cried seeing one of them  
Felt sadness creep inside her heart.

He believed he was omniscient,  
Omnipresent.

A day came when he thought of himself  
As a prophet of God and

A saint, sadly, who's death was near.

When he lost his mind,

No believer came to see him.

There was not a knock on the door.



## Tialila Kikon

### *The Other*

Tell me who is the 'other'  
If I am the other to you  
You are the other to me  
No centre without margins  
No west without east.

Come now sit with me  
Let us incinerate all prejudices  
Let us erase all political divide  
Let us bury all racial hatred  
Let us extinguish all religious intolerance.

Tell me, tell me your stories  
And I will tell you mine  
How insane you and I  
We are no different  
And it is a wonderful world.





## A Tale of Jealousy and Revenge

Of the many stories I heard from grandmother  
This particular story I remember vividly  
Of *Longkongla* and her son.

A lonely life blessed with motherhood  
As a handsome child out of a hornbill's feather  
Into her arms grew.

Named *Songmaket* and *Ozukumer* as well  
Became the envy of the village folks,  
For he grew to be the most beloved.

Grandmother heaved in sadness  
And her angst overrun the story.

She becomes restless and anxious  
as *Longkongla's* son set out one day  
with friends and foes to the river  
of no return to be beaten and crushed  
like the bitter roots.

A story of jealousy, of wrath and of revenge.  
A story of humanity's fall from grace.

The evening *Longkongla* awaited  
Her beloved son to return must have been  
Tormentingly long.

"Good folks, pray tell me  
Have you seen my son?"

A painful yearning  
Only a mother can fathom.

Grandma's voice becomes feebler  
 As she continued the tale...  
 Longkongla's world began to crumble  
 Piece by piece as she received the fingers  
 Of her son which she knew too well.  
 Longkongla's silent fury, blazing red  
 Till the jingling laughter's all turn to ash  
 And "forgiveness" hung its head in shame.  
 Hunted by the village folks  
 She tries to rise above holding on to a  
 thread Sent from the skies but not too high.  
 She falls down below imprinting her blood  
 On the kabusung.  
 A reminder of the tragic destiny  
 Of 'jealousy' and 'revenge.'



*A tale of jealousy and revenge* : According to Ao-Naga folktale, Longkongla is a woman who possessed supernatural powers. Songmaket is her son, who is supposed to have evolved out of a bird's feather and hence his mother named him Ozukumer as well which means 'evolved from a bird.' Songmaket means one with no flaws and hence he became the envy of the villagers who plotted to kill him. After he was killed, his mother in her painfull fury decided to avenge his death. One day while all the parents were out in the field, longkongla lured the children to an empty house and set it on fire. Upon being discovered she tried to escape only to fall upon the Kabusung (is the name of a tree that oozes red sap when cut) and till today, the Ao's believe it to be Longkongla's blood.

## *Bleeding Humanity*

Dust to dust yet how often we forget  
That we live on borrowed time.  
We lust and we greed  
As though earth is our eternity  
We hate we fight we kill.  
Layers and layers of lie pose as truth  
When power whisks away creamy smooth  
The rights of the poor.  
Sinister politics wear a smile  
And selfish hands keep swaying still.

Alas! too many broken dreams  
Fill the streets with guns and  
Misguided ideologies  
Ignorant about what they fight for.

Prayers compete even as they trail  
The same destination.  
Human-made religions tear apart souls  
Intolerance with bridges all burned.

Politics and religion with diabolic tails  
lash and whip about the earth  
Sowing an addiction that thrills to kill  
Blood-lust for power and control  
As heaven above shed blood-red tears.  
Brother to brother only guns and bombs  
As mothers resign to painful numbness,  
Fathers helplessly watch and sisters  
Voicelessly miserable.

Suddenly amusing thoughts cross my mind;  
No hungry child if ammunitions could feed  
No war if humanity was the only religion on earth  
No confusion is hypocrisy spared its plastic smile.



## Noami C. Nonglait

### **Ka Lyer**

Ka Lyer<sup>1</sup> howling outside  
Unnerves me!

What stories does it have to tell  
While travelling miles to reach these hills<sup>2</sup>?

Did it see the Peacock<sup>3</sup> lamenting  
For its beloved Sun?

Did it witness the iron head of an arrow . . .  
Pierce the ribs of U Sier Lapalang<sup>4</sup>?

Did it hear of cries and lullabies .  
. . By women who are only  
ordinary?

What stories does it carry -  
This ageless Lyer?

Did this ageless Lyer witness  
The mindless rape of ka Mei Ramew<sup>5</sup>?  
Since Ka Lyer is only a daughter of Ka Mei Ramew

What duties did it perform?

This beautiful terrifying Lyer with its long black hair

Has travelled ages to retell us stories...

Did ka Lyer witness the Golden Ladder, U Lum Sohpetbneng<sup>6</sup>  
snap?

Then terror loomed large as ka Diengiei<sup>7</sup> grew... darkness  
prevailed!

Did you oh, ka Lyer, witness Ka Sngi<sup>8</sup>

Exiling itself in ka Krem Lamet ka Krem Latang?

Did you oh, ka Lyer, carry the voice of U Syiar<sup>9</sup>

Who with its humble voice brought ka Sngi back?

I thought, this is what ka Lyer told me

In my dreams I heard...

Ka Lyer of past memories piping little tunes

And whistling high above in the Pine trees!



<sup>1</sup> *Ka Lyer* is the wind. In the Khasi Creation Myth, *Ka Lyer* is one of the daughters of *Ka Mei Ramew* (Mother Earth).

<sup>2</sup> *hills* refer to the Khasi Hills

<sup>3</sup> *The Peacock*- The story of the Peacock that laments for its beloved wife, the sun after it had left her for the yellow fields, mistaking it for another beautiful woman.

<sup>4</sup> *U Sier Lapalang*- The Legend of the Stag that was warned by its mother not to go to the hills, lest it is hunted by hunters. The stag is killed by the hunters by an iron spear.

<sup>5</sup> *Mei Ramew* or Mother Earth.

<sup>6</sup> *The Golden Ladder* or *U Lum Sohpetbneng* is a part of the Creation Myth. When man and the whole world were doomed, the Golden Ladder was snapped by God, so that the seven Huts or *HynniewTrep* cannot go to the heavens anymore. This is the end of the Golden Period.

<sup>7</sup> In the Creation Myth, *Ka Diengiei* is a tree that grew to the point of covering the whole earth and plunging it into darkness and this is the period of Darkness.

<sup>8</sup> *Ka Sngi* or the Sun hid itself in the *Krem Lamet Krem Latang* or the Cave Lamet Latang, since it was laughed and jeered at by the animals as it was dancing with its own brother, *U Bnai* or the Moon to celebrate the end of the reign of Darkness.

<sup>9</sup> *U Syiar* or the Rooster was chosen to bring the Sun back, to end darkness again and finally to offer itself as a sacrifice for the mistakes of man and the animals.

**Dr. Preetinicha B. Prodhani**

### **Our Muses**

When we learned about the muses  
We mused together  
Moving our reeds  
In the same leaflet  
We wrote the same story.

We heard of caves  
Curved some icons  
In our bodies  
Heard of ancient cities  
Tolled some myths of rootedness  
In our tongues.

We sipped coffee from the same cup  
Drank the same beer  
Emptied the same medicine bottles  
Remained present and absent together.

We breathed from  
Each other's chest  
Smoked the same pipe  
We were two  
But never a couple.



## Our Mythical Vessel

We started our vessel that very day  
You had come with your umbrella-holder  
And a swarm of fun-loving friends.  
My mother welcomed you with rituals.  
My father wiped our departure with sweating specks.

We sailed on along the notes of ululation  
Your oar proud as a winning cock  
Speeded our immersion in to a weird dusk  
And then, the storm roared  
The gluttonous ocean devoured the rest  
Leaving you and me undigested.

We sailed on a log  
Muzzling hope of life  
Our log turned into an arc  
And the thunder said –  
'Keep a couple of each of the species.'  
You felt horrified  
As your science told you about  
The abundance of species  
But I knew the myth.

Inside the boat we sighed out  
Dampness and dearth  
The crow assured our futile endeavour  
You became the dove  
'And carried back hope in your beak'  
The crowd marched landward.

Responding to your call  
I tried to stride along  
But realized I had grown roots  
Perplexed, we sensed another vessel nearby  
The roaring couple there were sprouting wings  
To turn into a pair of dove  
And fly away together to defy the myth.



Amanda B. Basaiawmoit

*A Few lines on a Line*

Like two convergent lines  
we never met except this once  
In the past,  
you lived in my hill, but we never met.  
Our times of origin differed,  
You were way ahead of me while I began quite late;  
But then strange  
that one intersection, the common point  
was enough to create an impact ,  
leave an indelible mark.

This geometry of connections  
made me realize the relevance of opposites  
and the equality that it creates  
like the opposites angles.  
Strangely these very opposites  
lying on opposite sides of the plane  
supplement each other  
to go full circle.  
So when we met,  
that one significant moment of intersection,  
the connecting handshake, the warm smile  
and the few words of familiarity  
were enough to last a lifetime.



The geometry of emotions and  
the proven law of opposites  
made me see myself in you  
sent a warm shiver down my spine  
transferring the warmth melting the cold heart  
that I lost myself in your words

Perhaps had I met you earlier  
as a line in the line of things  
You'd be a neighbour too familiar for comfort  
and maybe you would have lost your worth  
the parallelism would exist.

However, at present,  
The divergence brought the bitter realization  
That we may never meet again  
I continue living, feeling the pangs of separation  
Living in this same Hill  
way above the plains to where you have flown to,  
and made your nest  
Now all that remains in the old hill is my loneliness.



*An Apology to Mei-Ri-Sawkun\**

Science tells us we evolved.  
Our ancestors tell us otherwise.  
They say we're Romantics,  
not in love with ourselves  
but in love with you.  
Our shared stories  
passed from one to the next  
by word of mouth.  
A proof of this.  
The treasure trove of tradition  
followed by one and the next .  
A proof of this.  
But again brothers,  
Science tells us we evolved.  
Can this be questioned?  
Equipped with an education,  
that makes me reason the words  
I cannot deny the truth.  
We have evolved.  
We have changed.  
We are now a lost civilization,  
having cut the bond we share.  
We are now an unreasonable lot,  
having been tempted by greed.  
We are the modern Judas  
Having sold you for pieces of silver  
This and all these  
Are proof  
We have evolved  
If once we were apes  
Now we are monsters in disguise  
But you,  
You my dearest mother.  
Have you evolved?

With passing Moons and Suns,  
 you dear Mother ,  
 duty bound to us -children,  
 you never failed us.  
 Your Sun shone every morning.  
 Your Moon chased every night.  
 Your Water quenched our thirst.  
 Your Earth our needs did provide.  
 Having nurtured generations  
 Yes, you have evolved.  
 Age does take its toll.  
 You've bled and now worn out.  
 Afflicted and suffering,  
 you cry out to your children  
 like a grumpy old woman.  
 Flashing and fuming.  
 But we,  
 Yes, we who are evolved.  
 Yes, we who are educated.  
 More equipped and enlightened  
 I cross my fingers, for it's a lie.  
 We do not heed your cry.  
 Like prodigal sons,  
 we return to you  
 only once in a year  
 to celebrate not your day  
 but to celebrate our return.  
 Yes brothers  
 If once we were apes  
 Now we are monstrous men.



*Mei-Ri-Sawkun* is an indigenous Khasi concept which means' mother earth which cradles its children and all else that exist around them.

## Donboklang Rynfathiang

### Monkey Business

Monkey-shadows dripping like black tar in the summer Sun  
Shadowy figures figuring out earnings oozing like smooth sin.  
The corporate smiles of political-monkeys mockingly infiltrate the  
barracks of misplaced gunners  
The condescending compensations of bureaucratic-monkeys  
intoxicate the ignorant villagers  
The cacophonous cadenza of musical-monkeys seduce the vulgar  
teenagers  
The thin figures of EMO-monkeys wearing “i love a good spanking”  
T-shirts are now reflected in the dish-waters of dying parents.  
Swinging along with bated breath, I watch the fatal drama of deceit.  
Every monkey calls everyone a monkey.

*18th November, 2010.*

Name : DonboklangRyntathiang  
Designation : Maram  
Address : West Khasi Hills  
Care of : Nongkyndong / Bastiwalla  
Contact No : 108

## **Wahrit**

Every winter vacation, we'd go to Wahrit.

It was a thriving village where I once burnt the village market after I had quenched my boyish craving for a 'Ma-kyllain.

The winter holidays were too short for a full village adventure and the mischievous deeds were continued in small episodes stretched through many winters.

Here in Mawlai, I am clad in the infamous garb of a Maram.

"Go back to your Wild West Khasi Hills, you son of a maram," the customary reprimand of my father's kin, the original inhabitants of Mawlai.

This place is not my own.

Those who love me call me a 'sahbiej' and those who feel threatened by my poor presence suspect my love.

The truth is 39 years of living in Mawlai has made me a pucca maram.

I will never be able to return to the market.

My burning desire left no ashes.

For the hill, where the market once stood, now shoulders the Government's unhealthy health center and my playground is now a parking lot for the marwari' dalals.

My people pray that they may fall sick only on a Friday.  
The wise Doctor from civilized Shillong comes on a Friday only.  
Do they miss my grandfather, a quack, an ignorant man who  
showed them patience and the Tiew lily in his garden when  
they broke a leg?

A pacifist in church matters but a disciple of the Khasi world  
view

He was always there for them.

May God give me the strength to return to my own place, poor  
and violent and sickly it may be.

May my dead forefathers plead for my case - a dwelling in my  
own remote, savage place.

*31st May 2013.*



*Wahrit* : Literally meaning a small river - a rivulet, a brook,  
a stream

*Maram* : Resident of West Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya.  
Owing to the backwardness of the district, the word Maram  
has been used derogatorily to mean an individual from the  
West Khasi Hills who is socially backward and therefore a  
savage rustic.

*Mawlai* : A locality of Shillong considered a rustic outpost  
by the Shillong elite.

*Sahbiej* : A distortion of the word 'savage'. Within the  
context of the poem 'Sah' means to remain stagnant without  
progress and 'biej' means fool or foolish or backward.

*Ma-kyllain* : A kind of cigarette prepared by the smoker  
himself using a particular paper and finely chopped tobacco.  
This is quite popular among the people of West Khasi Hills  
since it is cheap and easily prepared. The word Ma-kyllain  
is now used to describe a rustic from West Khasi Hills.

*Tiew* : Short for Syntiew meaning flower. The Tiew Lily is  
usually used by practitioners of herbal medicine to help  
people when they break a leg or bone.

## *Lalnunsanga Ralte*

*A Good Death* (to be read with a thick Japanese accent)

I want a funny death  
 One that you cannot help but laugh at  
 I want my epitaph to read something like -  
 'He Choked on a Bad Metaphor'  
 Or  
 'He was testing his helmet. It survived.'  
 Or  
 'He swallowed an eager pill for his diarrhoea.  
 It stopped his heart on the way down.'  
 I don't want the kind that causes sorrow.  
 I don't want one that causes rage.  
 A death that causes other deaths  
 That causes other deaths and so on.  
 I don't want one that disturb flags  
 To raise or lower like a prostitute's undergarments  
 I have never pledged allegiance to anyone. Flags that is.  
 I don't want prayers  
 Negotiations are over. Hopefully I've done enough.  
 If you must. Pray for yourself.  
 I don't want one that equates me to children in Syria And have  
 leaders salivating over mileage  
 Or a shirtless Putin stroking his gun.  
 I'd rather have a death  
 That tests the pastor's resolve  
 To stay sombre as he perform his rites  
 Cursing that tickle under his collar Perhaps for some drama  
 I'll have Robin Ngangom read his poem  
 On how he hates funerals  
 At my funeral.  
 That itself would be another irony.



## God's Love

If a moment of magic should pass  
Anywhere between now and never  
If just for a second we can fathom  
The nature of blood and how it flows  
Through us all with a force  
That turns the atom, that turns the earth, that turns the universe  
If we can see the thread that joins  
The infant's laughter to the roar of the sea  
Amplified by the space that covers the galaxy  
Reverberating back into the pores of our skin  
And all that exists is not outside but within  
When for one magical second  
We are one and everyone, a sum of parts and a part of a sum  
And the pulse of the dead throbs  
In the veins of the living  
And that  
Any widow's lost husband is our lost husband  
Any parent's lost children is our lost children  
The blood on a killer's hand is blood on our hands  
When hurt, any hurt, anywhere  
We grieve with the sincerity we grieve our own  
Only then let us speak of God  
Or whom He loves.





## **Cheraw**

I cannot place it in terms of the bigger picture  
But it's somewhere south of where I am; here  
A place that is built on some great mercy of Providence  
With houses teetering on cliffs.  
We are known for our dance that have bamboos snapping at  
ankles  
As our young men and women, dressed in traditions best  
Hop in and out.  
The essence of this dance is the understanding of rhythm and  
balance  
Where one wrong movement would lead to disaster.

*one-two  
three-four  
one-two  
three-four*

This dry and dusty place boasts of small towns and big houses  
With comprehensive differences in warmth and sizes.  
Out of these, the hopes of future generations  
Hardly able to walk with pants worn at knees  
And shoes that can feed a family for months.  
(But what is food compared to the latest fashion)  
Subbing identity for brands, a living, breathing advertisement.  
And in their coolest, hippiest ignorance  
Sing along to an apt tune  
“Pretty fly for a white guy”  
(O well, you know he doesn't really get it anyway)

*one-two  
three-four  
one-two  
three-four*

We also have our share of democracy's champions; the politicians

Who in years of election give huge contributions to charity and churches.

(For votes mind you.....keep your salvation)

Then the righteous elders that go home to ignored wives and children,

And illegitimate grandchildren

That sit around a table for a perfect family portrait, and pray  
To a God that does not live within them.

We also have our revivals, as the crowds go

In throngs, to see the magic show.

The deaf hear, the dumb speak, the children see Visions of  
angels and Christ; slowly

Convincing ourselves of strength in our shaky faith. Multitudes  
would bow in awe at the spectacle

*But,*

*if in a single raindrop*

*or a humming insect*

*you do not see the miracle*

*then you do not see God.*

*one-two*

*three-four*

*one-two*

*three-four*

A word of praise for our ingenuity

We do not have liquor here, but we find inventive ways to get  
high

Off household appliances and medicines.

Mean those meant to fix meant for a fix.

And Jim, poor Jim.

He's hanging on a shoestring.

The diluted blood in his veins ran cold.

His relief from pain became his pain.  
And in the songs of mourning and accompanying drums,  
Mother would cry, "...It's my fault!"  
Silent father would whisper, "It's my fault."  
In the corner of each isolated spot, they would discover  
repentance  
Regain the rhythm to the dance,  
But Jim, poor Jim,  
He is dead.

*one-two*  
*three-four*  
*one-two*  
*three-four*



*Cheraw* : Usually referred to as the bamboo dance. It is a ritual dance performed in Mizoram. It is characterized by the use of bamboo staves, which are kept in cross and horizontal forms on the ground. While the male dancers move these bamboo staves in rhythmic beats, the female dancers perform by stepping in and out of the bamboo blocks.

## Iadalang Pyngrope

### All in a day's work

The newspaper headlines  
Hit me hard this morning  
Turning my cup of tea insipid  
Somewhere they shot a woman  
Smashed her skull into smithereens  
All in a day's work.

A thousand miles away  
Their comrade seeks refuge  
Just another bobbing head in the crowd  
Taking furtive steps on city pavements  
Unknowingly, stalked silently  
By phantoms in the shadows.

Far away, the children cry  
For a father who disappeared  
One day, when they returned home from school.

In a nearby village, the children cry  
For a mother who was gunned down mercilessly  
By those who love their land a little too much.



## Bird Song

I bought a beautiful bird cage once  
Complete with bird inside  
It enthralled everyone  
Chorusing from my tin-roof  
Each morning, my Made in China bird sang  
For as long as the battery lasted  
But while the melody filled the air  
Birds flocked to our plum tree  
Coaxed by one of their kind (or so they thought)  
They plumed their tails and flitted from branch to branch  
The blossoms fluttered and fell, covering the ground beneath  
And the birds chirped loudly, calling out  
To one who did not know one season from another.  
Life's ironies too often repeat themselves  
Attracted by impostors, we, unknowingly, are taken in.



*Anthony Ranglong*

**Fragrant Wildness**

Fickleness shatters my placid isle  
Discrediting my assets as ruining a file.  
My mind paints a picture of a Moorish mustang  
Galloping, grazing, neighing with full sovereignty  
No vicious whip, no callous spur, no nasty fang  
No coercing rein, no peg to tether the mighty liberty  
Only the adventurous uncertainty lies valiant.  
But is not every moment the gold mine of the audacious?  
I am the cultivated wild, a child shorn of every plaint.  
Here is my sole aspiration, to transmute me precious  
Galloping on the lawn of society invulnerable  
Fully robust, wholly radiant from a nourishing liberty  
No abashing secrets to conceal, no staining politics to rumble  
No smothering music to dance to, only hardy originality!  
To “Tarzan” my frame, to “Aristotle” my mind!  
This is the utopia recipe of my kind!



*Gayreen Lyngdoh*

**Nothing**

My mind is a blank square.

All thinking and feeling pushed

Beyond the four walls boundary

Lulled into a numbing despair.

From the periphery

Thoughts, like angry dragons clamour to get back in.

But for the time being

Let them be, I pray.

Leave my mind a blank sheet of nothingness

No thoughts!

No feelings!

Just a merciful oblivion.



## Janith Chakma

### Mirana

She carried the burden on her shoulder  
Through the blinding snow and storm.  
Didn't think twice neither shrugged her shoulder  
For this was the accepted social norm.

She led her people through thick and thin  
For Furion wanted her to lead the way.  
As she shone bright on the darkest nights  
And led her people without going astray.

Mirana was skilled, she was brave  
She was persistent in her nature.  
Yet her respect for her husband, Furion  
Was her most serene feature.

She still leads the way, even in the dark  
And even today she still has her spark.





## Linthoi Ningthoujam

### Ima Market

Every morning  
 The market embraces all.  
 The ones with radiant *chandon*  
 And ironed *phaneks* sit in the shed  
 (before the CM brought an earthquake and it tumbled. Yes,  
 he is God himself, at least in our state. He can kill anyone.  
 He has just one shortcoming; he cannot, perhaps will not,  
 bring anyone back to life. I doubt he is undermining his  
 powers.)

Now, coming back.  
 The shrivelled ones sit on the pavement  
 Thin like split bamboos  
 They can run around easily When the high and mighty  
 Comes and chases them for the greater "good" of Imphal  
 city.

Killing drunk husbands  
 And beating lazy son-in-laws  
 With words spitting from Crimson-stained mouth  
 'Aha, look at that young flower-seller Flirting with her  
 customer.  
 No good will come.  
 No good will come'  
 And they looked away from each other Their clouded eyes  
 lingering on those times  
 Early-rising elderly men  
 Slightly touched their hands  
 As they exchange notes and hope Before going back to  
 cobwebs  
 And daily savings for daughter's wedding.  
 The market weaves such stories  
 Deepens its roots and elongates its branches

Women pick its fruits and flowers  
 Keep them between folded *phaneks*  
 Wear them on midnight tresses.  
 The market lets you be the woman  
 You want to be.  
 You will find faithful and naive ones, cunning ones  
 And bitches even.  
 You will find women crying  
 Crumbling on each other's shoulders  
 Reason or not  
 With no mansplaining of why women "always" cry.  
 You will find them laughing in ecstasy  
 And men dare not dig up the history of hysteria.  
 The market embraces all  
 lets you change every day, every moment.  
 And one fine day, someone from a faraway land will come  
 Click a photograph or two  
 of them  
 On the spot with the most ethnic clothes  
 And will gloss and cut  
 And colour and trim  
 To the precision of a book cover or a calendar page and  
 there  
 'Economic Empowerment: Women of Northeast India'  
 Freezing all their moments of warmth  
 Levelling all their stories to a flat paper.



*Ima Market* : Is a market in Imphal run by women only.  
*Chandon* : Facial decoration of Hindu Meitei.  
*Phanek* : Traditional lower garment of Meitei women.

*Introduction to Curfew*

It was the end of May.  
 Mother looked at the calendar  
 And quietly smoked *khoiju-leikha*  
 From corner to corner of the house.  
 Then came the news.  
 Gathering his threatened authority  
 The shaking teacher said  
 'Come for sit-in-protest on Sunday.'  
 So *ooti* and bicycle were cancelled  
 For dissent knew no holiday.  
 Humid clouds loomed above  
 I sweated under my *phanek*  
 Curfew knew no rain  
 No dark clouds.  
 Its shadows spread  
 Heaven started to cry hails.

With no buses  
 Hand in hand we walked back  
 The bank of Chandranadi meandering us home.  
 The rebels smirked and shouted  
 'Long Live Manipur.'  
 The realists looked out for trucks and Gypsies.

Tired and cold as I reached  
 I shouted at Mother  
 'Why didn't you stop me?'  
 She looked at Father  
 Father at the old dog  
 The dog up at the sky and whimpered.

When it rains blood in Imphal  
 It rains words from my pen.  
 I am ashamed  
 It takes blood to write.  
 But I have stopped blaming curfew.  
 It is normal, isn't it?  
 For we all have curfew stories  
 Following us everywhere  
 On the streets of Delhi  
 On the tip of our shoes  
 From the curl of the C  
 To the twirls of the W  
 Hidden memories, exposed stories.

I never knew that years later  
 Under the guard of the capital city  
 In between pieces of pork fats  
 Smelling bamboo shoot from my hand  
 I will recall it  
 'Ah, those were the days!'

When I see pictures of curfew  
 I dream I am a bird flying back  
 To the valley of the nine hills  
 I will never know  
 If it is the cause  
 The memories  
 A strange curse  
 Or is it my pen's shameless attempt  
 To benefit from curfew  
 Yet again?  
 Has my dear pen taken the path  
 Of the *babus* and *mantris*?

Tonight, I blame my memories  
 'Won't you just let me sleep?'  
 This is not home  
 There is no curfew.  
 And I have to earn a living  
 Like my father did.  
 On the first day of curfew  
 He scribbled on the wall  
 'What will happen to you, Mother Manipur?'  
 In letters legible to his brothers  
 But small for his wife and children.  
 When curfew opened the week after  
 He woke up early, took a bath  
 Dressed and smiled  
 'Got to buy some vegetables.'  
 On the way he met his friend  
 'O Tamo, how was curfew this time?'  
 'Can't say anything, Ibungo.  
 When we were younger, curfew used to be...'  
 And off they went to Ima market.  
 And the children hurried to the Nambul River  
 To sail their paper boats  
 Before the next rain Before the next curfew.



*Khoiju leikha* : Dried leaves smoked to ward off evil spirits

*Ooti* : A Manipuri dish

*Tamo* : Elder brother

*Ibungo* : Younger brother

*Phanek* : Traditional lower garment of Meitei women.

## Remembrance

Fireflies have left for wilderness of time forlorn  
Only their path lingers in the dark  
Bereft of a memory keeper.  
In a June that closes school gates  
Empty classrooms hold on to footprints of children hurried  
towards life  
Banners of protest shrouding their destiny.  
Their summer dreams under mango trees  
Pawned to politics  
In a town reeking of waiting and loss.

I once traced for words  
In raindrops spilling lovers' longings  
Soaking a teenage narrative of shambles and becoming;  
Words, this town has now burnt on its own lips.  
In this valley of a waning green  
Rice fields yearn to harvest hope in each grain,  
In this horrendous coupling of nature and violence  
The wind hums a song of despair.  
I will cup them between intimacy of pages and ink  
Touch and memorise them on my fingers  
And carry to the city  
These wretched images of my hometown  
Hammered to our existence  
This ritualistic mockery of my homecoming  
I now call remembrance.



## Karen L. Donoghue

### What's in a name?

Donoghue, how do you pronounce that?  
 The 'g' is silent.  
 A tiny patch of blonde hair  
 On my younger brother's head  
 Was a celebrated validation of identity.  
 Sharp features of my older brother  
 Always marked how he was different from  
 Other Mizos.  
 Legitimation of claims to being "Donoghue".  
 I have always been Donoghue  
 With some reservation  
 With some apology  
 For my thick, black hair  
 And small, dark eyes  
 My short stature  
 And broad, snub nose.  
 Donoghue, where are you from?  
 My father is from Tamil Nadu.  
 Do you speak Tamil then?  
 No, but my nana can give  
 A piece of her mind in perfect Tamil.  
 And my father can  
 Draw out words in Tamil  
 Can I claim Tamil-ness on their quota?  
 Then I remember Apu on his dying bed  
 And his attempts to teach me  
 How to read Mizo  
 And be Mizo.  
 I think of how I have trained

My Anglo tongue and manner  
To be Mizo.

I am as much my mother's daughter  
As I am my father's.  
In trying to reconcile identities  
And hoping to belong  
I realize  
I cannot fit into neat categories  
Rigidly perpetuated  
For convenience.

My family tree remains obscure  
Like a lovely mystery  
I may never want to solve.

But if I am Donoghue  
Then my legacy is laughter and family  
The warm hugs of my grandpa  
And the morning conversations  
His gentle mouth articulated  
Despite his Parkinson's.

And if I am Pachuau  
Then my legacy is kindness  
Safely wrapped in Api's scarf  
The only thing I inherited from her.

I am a minority among minorities  
I am also a walking evidence of love  
I am Donoghue and Pachuau  
Simultaneously, unapologetically.



*Nana- Paternal grandmother*  
*Apu- Maternal grandfather*  
*Grandpa- Paternal grandfather*  
*Api- Maternal grandmother*



## Loss

I once held you with many moons and stars  
Spread on an open palm  
Facing the sky, unafraid  
Arms stretched upwards  
Challenging her vastness  
To snatch you from among them.  
But you were easy to find.  
The brightest among them all  
You gave yourself away  
And me.



## Roots

Tonight.

We sat huddled around the blower  
For heat and comfort  
While between sips of green tea  
We pondered  
How authority and morality  
Are imposed and translated  
And how Western theory  
Often falls short of being related  
To tribal communities and our way of life  
How expressions of community are fascism to some  
How 'Mizo' applies to all of us  
How it applies to none.

We sat huddled around the blower  
For heat and comfort  
While between sips of green tea  
We brewed resolutions and revolutions  
In heady conversation  
Punctuated by inappropriate humour  
We have made our own.  
As each friend and scholar left  
I realised that tiny waves  
Against the tide will endure  
Long after we're gone  
Here are my roots  
I choose to be near blowers  
With nice cups of green tea.



## Kamal Kumar Tanti

### No Nation for atheist

When I pronounce  
I am an atheist  
People around  
Looks at me suspiciously.  
There is no nation for atheist.  
The country is for Hindus.  
The other country is for Muslims.  
The countries are for Christians.  
When I pronounce  
I am an atheist  
Young boys and girls around  
Looks at me amazed.  
Where there is Nation  
There is religion.  
No Nation for atheist.



## Homeless

I am a homeless  
and home-less.

Always dreamt of a home  
but have a house.

I made a promise  
To my son  
A home.

Home of his own.  
Because  
I am homeless.



## Tree-owner

Every second  
I look at the leaves  
Of the tree I own

I lose my own voice.

Voice is secondary.  
Leaves are  
Primary.

Leaves never  
Carry voices.

I am a tree-owner.  
And living a life of  
Timeless voices.



***Rueben L. C. Lulam***

**These Hills Are Yours, Not Mine**

Etched in stone and memory and history  
These hills are yours, not mine.  
Yet, I too, was born on their windy slopes.  
And if you were to ask these pines  
They would tell you that they remember me  
Through 39 summers in their shade.

These hills are yours, not mine.  
And were I to claim nativity in their heart  
I'd be asked if I have ever bled for them  
That I should make such a claim;  
For birth, love and a sense of belonging cannot validate  
me.

When I must finally pass on  
Perhaps, like you  
I will be buried beneath the happy blossoms of winter  
cherry trees.  
But will I be joining my ancestors at a homecoming  
Or will I be visiting as a guest?  
For, having lived all my years in these hills,  
There is nothing of theirs that I have truly known  
That they should now call me one of their own.

These hills are yours, not mine  
And when I bow to drink from their springs  
I must do so in borrowed sips  
Like the deer tentatively  
Eyes on the lookout and ears alert  
For reminders that I must heed  
That my life here, its belonging  
invalidated,  
Serves only to etch forever  
In stone  
In memory  
In history  
That these hills are yours, not mine.  
*[April 2013 & 12 Nov 2015]*



## Citrus

### I

*(For U Neeru and Hriati)*

When plucking an orange  
It holds on  
Resists  
But there's the snap  
And then  
Fighting no more  
As if happy to  
As if wanting to  
Gives itself fully  
And travels the trajectory  
To its reception in the hunger of your open palm  
So too may death be  
Into God's embrace

### II

Squeeze lemon  
Juice running into cup  
Next  
Sugar half a spoon  
Then tea  
Faultlessly brewed to draw flavour and colour  
Into water freshly boiled  
A perfect cup spills like abundance over its rim  
While the sun spills like sorrow over the hill  
Into the orchard on its windward slope  
Where Jesus is weeping in the gathering shade  
And  
In the infinity of His solitude  
Is turning into man

*19 OCT 2013 AND 18 OCT 2014*





## Laitkor\*

fade in  
pine trees  
across a field  
like warriors in gothic motif  
ready for battle

tilt down  
a lone black cart in a field of snow

roll credits

'god'

APRIL 1997



*Laitkor*: A village in East Khasi Hills close to Shillong Peak

## Iamon M. Syiem

### Shadow People

Shadow in the night  
Though she holds a rainbow in her hand  
There is no light to guide her  
So she moves carefully into the night  
Nobody carried a lamp for her  
Nobody gave her the time  
She moves around the dark  
Skirting the edges of sanity  
Afraid she may lose it.  
The darkness deepens in places  
At times a flickering light shines through  
Like the overworked rainbow in her hand

"I am a shadow", she said  
"I am a shadow", he said  
"We are shadows"  
Crazily reeling between  
Confines of cold pavement  
On both sides where the lights are on  
Onlookers of the light smiling, frowning  
Indifferent never reaching us  
With rainbow in our hands  
As though the colours in our lives  
Have no impact on their lives

We are just opaque shadows  
Shouting for an existence  
For meaning  
For understanding  
For a word to live on  
In an endless night  
Someday maybe  
The Sun will shine  
And dark eyes will open  
Then shadows  
Will stagger from the darkness  
And merge into the light.



## **Dead Men Rule**

Dead men rule.  
From the graves  
Over the lives of men  
Who cower beneath the weight  
Of what has been thought before.  
Traditions and custom.  
The rule of law.  
Democracies of people  
Who cannot understand  
How they should govern themselves  
And where they want to go.  
Who shelter insecurities  
Behind corporate thinking  
And so-called collective wisdom.

Dead men rule.  
Imposing concepts, ideologies  
Of an unproven reality  
On the world of the living  
Shaping destinies  
Peoples and nations  
Never answering  
The questions  
That constantly plague  
Decision makers, the common man  
Of the wisdom, of the choices  
Constantly made  
Confirmed, affirmed  
Blindly followed  
Aristotle, Plato, Marx

Hegel, Freud or  
Religious leaders enlightened  
For a while but never knowing  
If the oil will remain  
To light succeeding generations  
Yet in the darkness of blind living  
Any light will do  
Even if it is only reflections  
And a glimmer of the true

Dead men still speak  
From the graves  
The language of those  
Who had rested in silence  
While the living listen  
For their whispers  
And reassure themselves  
They are not dead yet  
In doing so they fan their own hope  
That they will not die  
That they too will rule  
From their graves  
Their own succeeding generations  
Or at least try.



## Balawan J. Mawrie

### The Junkie

Peering into his defeated eyes  
Which tell his tragic tale  
Of his weak inner strength  
When his strong will failed

In the bondage of manic depression  
Enslaved by his own mind  
Within a claustrophobic enclosure  
Longing for that silver line

Murderous thoughts culminate  
As the wind turns biting cold  
For to him the white dust that glitters  
Is more precious than gold

Shivers run through his skin  
No difference between night and day  
His parched throat unbearable  
The 'fix' of Salvation: a needle away

On the brink of insanity  
A delicate balance is maintained  
There is no predicting what comes next  
In this schizophrenic lane

He steals! He kills!  
His sadistic rampage that breeds  
Taking him through the darkest hell  
Till he gets what he needs

At last! The dust so precious  
Lay before his sight  
Life returns to his face  
As he sucks his soul through a pipe.



*Short fictions*

## Roger Manners

### The Mawbyinna

*Dung-da dung-da dung*, the sound of beating drums pull me out of my dream to leave me in the dark chamber of a dank cave. The earthy fragrance of pine trees swirl into the cavern accompanied by their wind song, I stretch and pull myself up digging my claws into the hard ground—I've never slept in nor woken in my familiar body before, this is a little strange. I saunter out into the breeze, under the shade of a thick canopy—I'm in the *lawkyntang*. What am I doing here? I walk briskly to the edge of the trees and peer out of the undergrowth; I can't be seen walking around near a village in this form. The noise and the pulsing beat of the drum, is coming from my house, a stone's throw away from the edge of the clearing. I inch closer and crouch beside the long grass growing around the *mawbri*. The smell of *dohiong* wafts over the distance and my stomach rumbles; I'm hungry. The yard is packed with people, it seems like the whole clan is gathered in this little space. How am I missing all of this? I crawl around the edge and get to a part where the foliage of the forest meets the boundary wall of the house; I might be able to get something to eat now; the body's instincts are taking over my human mind. I smell the blood of a sacrificial chicken on top of the wall but before I reach the spot a voice, the priest's voice permeates the booming of the drum:

*Koba duh me karynieng, me u Donborlang wat buh khoh wat buh jaw. Sneng lang me u Kñi me u Kong, wat buh khoh wat buh jaw. Sneng ryngkat me u long kha me u man kha, wat buh khoh wat buh jaw.*

O thou who hast lost thy stature, thou *Donborlang* have no regrets, feel no bitterness. Give counsel together thou maternal uncle, thou maternal brother, have no regrets, feel no bitterness. Give counsel thou together thou *u long kha* (who



causes to be), thou *u man kha* (who causes to grow), have no regrets, feel no bitterness.

*Donborlang?* That can't be. I quickly turn around and head up towards the other side of the hill where the cremation ground is, at the opposite edge of this sacred grove. I don't have the memory of saying good bye; I have a vague memory of being sick and none whatsoever of entering *dreamtime*, of entering this body. Am I stuck as a tiger for the rest of my days? Will the instincts of the tiger take over my human self? Will I be lost forever? Questions are overflowing as I charge blindly through the under growth, not giving a care to the laws of the *lawkyntang*; I'm sure the spirit guardians will understand my quandary. Everything goes black around me...

I wake up still feeling groggy with everything quiet as the evening wears on; I look up and see the three menhirs that guard the entrance into the *lawkyntang* blocking my path. I must have collided head on in my blind rush through the forest. I pick myself up slowly and continue on my path even though it may already be too late to pick up any remaining scent of myself.

The smell of charred flesh & wood carried by the wind gives me hope and I press forward through the dark around and within me. It takes a short while to reach the grounds and I rummage through the warm, charred wood but find nothing, of course, how will I forget? All the bones have been taken out of these burnt remains; there is nothing around with my scent on it. I just wanted to make sure it was me and that I hadn't misheard my name in the ritual. I have to go back to the house in the middle of the night and find out for sure.

Night comes slowly, largely because I'm fighting these hunger pangs and this tiger instinct to feed itself; I just don't feel like eating, especially hunting something and eating it raw while I'm still in this predator's body. I walk slowly back towards the house, it's dark now, so I don't really have to walk through the eerie forest but it best to stay safe so I walk around the edge.

As the house approaches, I see the lights dimming and

low voices of people gambling but I can't wait for five days for the funeral rites to get over, so I move stealthily towards the low stone wall surrounding the garden and leap over it hoping nobody hears me. On the other side, I see the new *mawkynroh* sitting at the edge of the cabbage patch. I quickly move towards it and start to move the *mawkhang* with a claw. One by one, they drop into the dirt and I see the white cloth bundle lying there inside, my ears quick and I hear voices saying, "It's here" and the curtains in the window start to move as the scent from the bundle reaches my nose. That's all I need. I take a giant stride and bound over the wall and take cover behind it. On the other side, I hear voices and the main door opening and then a few wary footsteps moving towards the *mawkynroh*. I hear my brother saying, "His spirit was here, see it opened the *mawkynroh*. A dog couldn't do that."

My heart is pounding as I run madly through the *lawkyntang*, everything that happened today starts playing in reverse. What do I do now? The drums at the *mawkynroh* ceremony now beat faintly in my memory as the menhirs I'd run into earlier loom in front of me. There's a flash in my eyes and everything goes dark for an instant. I still hear the drum beating *dung-da dung-da dung* as my vision clears of the dark. I've been taken to another time when I was approaching the same house in the arms of my father. This is the first time that I've ever come to my father's parent's house, and I can see my grandparents waiting at the entrance of the compound to welcome me with a dish in their hands. I feel my stomach rumble and start to cry, so my mother takes me from my father's arms and as we enter the compound, my grandmother takes hold of me and cradling me in the arm feeds me the first spoonful of mashed rice and banana. I have just started to enjoy solid foods and I quickly munch the food with my half grown teeth. After the first spoon. I quickly pass among my father's sisters, then brothers who all take turns in trying to feed me the same fare but my hunger is quickly appeased and start regurgitating the mush. The drums now start beating again as the priest chants

and performs a ceremony to the ancestors of my father's clan asking them to care for me and help me grow up to be a righteous man. At the end of this, the priest goes near three deep holes near where lie three menhirs on the ground, holding a *dieng pyrshit* leaf in his hand and mumbling something illegible. He slaps his hand on to the biggest menhir trapping the leaf in between and picks the menhir up with little or no effort and fits it into the hole. He does this with the other two rocks, the *mawkait* is complete, and all this while the drum is still beating and my vision again starts to fade, and I am back at the edge of the sacred grove. Hunger and thirst ravish me now. I know where I can find something, hopefully. It's a pity there are no streams or rivers that run through human settlement in this region. I now realise as a hunter, why it is impossible to find game in the forests near the village. There is no water source for the animals, they'd all been hogged by us humans, maybe not us just humans. I might be trapped in this body forever, who knows. I hope not though.

Walking over the rolling hills seems like a task even to this powerful body that is now mine, it also taking quite an effort to control the natural instincts of the host. As I approach the *maw umkoi* I see a group of four women sitting on it opening bundles of food getting ready for a morning meal before they go to the fields. They must have walked a long way from home to be eating out away from the villages, so early in the morning. I slow down and crouch lying in wait, so I that I gain access to the pool of water near the dolmen that they are sitting on when a beautiful aroma of freshly cooked *putharo*, *dohiong* and tea comes floating in the morning breeze. Stomach rumbles deep and without warning my body is flying over the ground in long bounds and the group of women scatter forgetting all their possessions and friends. The smell of food too much for the hungry tiger within me, or should I say within which I am. I quickly pillage the bundles of sticky, warm *putharo*. I see them edging back to the top of the hill. I pay them no heed, what will they do to me? Next I start to tear at the leaves that the *dohiong*

is are wrapped in and make a mess of it, but I lick it all up and head down to the pool of water. The water tastes like ash on the bones that are washed in it. How can it be? This pool is dug quite a few months back; must be my tiger taste buds!

After a sip and a plunge to wash off the dirt from my misadventures in the last day, I start walking away from the *maw umkoi* at own pace. I see a group of men running towards me in the distance with sticks in their hands, the women must have sent word to them. The food must have been for them too, there is enough of it to feed a group of eight for breakfast and lunch. I now need to figure out what to do, maybe go look for my friend who is a fellow *riewkhla*. Maybe he'll be able to think of what I should do. I couldn't live the rest of my days as a tiger, how do I survive? I cannot imagine being hunted down, or hunting anything down. A tiger doesn't scavenge or do what I just did today out of instinct just because I am so hungry. I decide to find a peaceful spot where I won't be disturbed by humans or disturb them. The best place I think of is the hill, a distance from here called the *lumkyllang*, which has a *mawlum* on the top of it with a large dolmen where I can rest. The *mawlum* was erected by a very rich clan a few decades ago to perpetuate the memories of those ancestors of theirs who fought in the war against the Garos from the region near the borders of Assam. It is quite far from any village or field, so the chances of anybody crossing paths with me is very unlikely. I head off through the grassy hills towards my destination.

I pass through a deserted granite quarry which is a rare site in the Khasi hills because it is full of limestone and sandstone. The granite is primarily used to make the *mawbyinna* here and neighbouring region. While walking through the forest I stumble upon an incomplete *maw Niam Thymmai* at the edge of a *mawbah* which probably means that the renovations are not complete yet. I decide to have a look. The main section of the *mawbah* is incomplete and the hollow

hasn't been filled within the bones of which ever clan this *mawbah* belongs to, and I am feeling a little tired from all the excitements so I decide to take a little nap before I continue with my wandering. *Dung-da dung-da dung*; I awake to drum beats and immediately remember how all this started, I need to get out of here and get away from human civilization. I exit the *mawbah* and head towards the *Mawpud Hima Myllem* which is the landmark that I have to pass to get to the *mawlum* of the *Manar* clan.

Rambling through the hills like this, pointlessly, has made me tired, and looking for my fellow *riewkhla* friend might be a bit of a problem if he is not in this *khla* state. The day that we met as *riewkhla* was the day that *Mar Phalyngki* erected the *mawbyinna* at *Nartiang*, when he used his errand boy as the reinforcement for the *mawbyinna* five times his height for the market place. It was a horrendous sight : *Mar Phalyngki* had picked up the *mawbyinna* with a *dieng pyrshit* leaf while uttering the magic spell but the *mawbyinna* wouldn't stand straight so he took it out and dropped his lime-box inside and asked his errand boy to go inside and get it out, then he dropped the *mawbyinna* on the boy and the biggest *mawbyinna* stood straight ever since. I have now reached the *mawlum* and the grass underneath the dolmen has grown to touch the underside of the table rock which is high enough for me to lie down. This might be the perfect place for me to make my base for the time being. I crawl under and lay down to sleep for the night.

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*Law kyntang*

*Mawbri* : Boundary stones

*Dohiong* : Meat curry made with ground black sesame seeds.

*Mawkynroh* : A stone for building purposes

*Mawkhang* : A big flat stone used as a cover

*Dieng pyrshit* : A tree whose bark is used to dye thread into yellow colour and is used in rituals pertaining to death

*Mawkait* : Literally meaning banana stones are of a set of memorial stones erected to commemorate the name and fame of paternal grand parents. In position it refers to one which stand at the extreme left hand side

*Maw umkoi* : Refers to a set of triliths erected near a pool or pond where bones of those who die an unnatural death are cleansed before keeping in the clan bone repository.

*Putharo* : A kind of steamed rice cake

*Riewkhla* : refers to a mighty man

*Lum kyllang* : Is a big rock mountain in West Khasi Hills, famous in Khasi legend about a fight between the two powerful mountain spirit brothers Kyllang and Symper

*Mawlum* : Meaning stone of the hill are dolmens or menhirs erected on hill tops to commemorate or perpetuate the memories of the dead ancestors

*Mawbynna* : A memorial stone, a monolith

*Maw Niam Thymmai* : Sacred or religious stones consisting of triliths and a dolmen which are erected when a clan ossuary is repaired, rebuilt or remodeled

*Mawbah* : A big stone or rock like a box usually used as an ancestral bone repository

*Mawpud Hima Myllem* : A stone indicating boundary of the Hima Myllem or kingdom of the Myllem chief

*Manar* : A Khasi clan

*Khla* : Tiger

*Mar Phalangki* : is said to be a strong Lieutenant of the Jiantia Kings who is said to have lifted and erected the largest and tallest monolith present till date in the Nartiang Monolith Park

*Nartiang* : A place in Jiantia Hills famous for the Monolith park.

**Pynsuklin Syiemiong****Mundane with a Twist**

Life is what you want it to be. You either allow it to control you or let it go the other way round. Frankly, I'd like to say that we have to play it like a game. It entirely depends on us and at the end, all we have to do is question ourselves whether we are good or bad players. One must be wondering why I am trying to define life in the first place...after all it is a very personal, very subjective issue. The reason is simply because as we try to live out life, we are also trying to make sense out of the myriad and mundane experiences that is often associated with it.

At this point, I would like to relate a very personal experience which I had encountered, simply because it has touched me in a very special way.

A while ago, I was returning home from the college where I am working and it was starting to rain. I did not have an umbrella but I was eager to reach home to my two very young children. I took a chance and left the college anyway. As I was walking, a fellow colleague came driving behind me and as luck would have it, I was offered a lift at least halfway home, to which I gratefully accepted. The moment I got into the car, the rain started to pour. I cannot imagine what I would do having had I not a lift. At the same time, I was saying a silent prayer hoping that the rain would stop by the time I have to get down. As I was chatting with my colleague, it was also raining cats and dogs outside. Ironically, there was this huge traffic jam which bought me some time away from the rain and actually saved me from getting wet. By the time I got down from the car, the rain had really thinned down and I considered myself very lucky, but it was only for a moment before the rain suddenly gathered momentum and began to pour down very heavily. I desperately looked around for a taxi but could not get one. All the cabs that plied by were either full or not going towards my

destination. There I found myself on the verge of soaking through when along came a crowded bus and stopped right where I was standing. I asked myself whether I should board it or not. By the time I made my decision to board it, it had already passed me by and I had to run after it. The bus conductor seeing my frantic face stopped the bus and I thankfully got in.

Once inside, I had to catch my breath, and was feeling a little flustered since I could not remember the last time I had sat in a public bus. It was really crowded and I found myself a place to stand right next to where a very elderly couple, probably in their early seventies, were sitting. The old lady looked at me and gestured her companion to make some space for me to sit along with them. The old man looked at me and was at the same time in a position to get up and offer me his seat. I spontaneously asked him not to do such a thing and politely refused the seat.

They both asked me whether I would be all right standing, to which I replied that I was totally fine with it. Many thoughts were reeling inside my head as I tried to understand what just had happened. I was in a state of shock. Why would they even care and be so kind to me, a total stranger and somebody much younger to them? It made me think whether I would do the same had I been in the same position like them. The bus reached a certain junction where more people got in and I had to move away from where I was standing. This time I found myself standing near the seat of a young girl, probably a college student. She looked at me and in a split second she stood up and offered me her seat. Again I found myself at a loss for words. I thanked her for her gesture but declined her offer saying that I was fine, standing. Soon enough we reached a junction where many people got down and I finally got a seat found. As I sat there, I kept thinking of what had just happened. I glanced back at the old couple and saw that they were having a conversation. I looked at the young girl and saw that she was reading something from a pamphlet. I realized that such moments are part of the



mundane things that occur in our everyday lives. I felt happy that I got the chance to be a part of such moments. I know that it may not sound much but I felt the most wonderful feeling as I sat there. After all, I was offered a seat, twice, by people of two generations that are so wide apart; how often does this happen?

The thought of the elderly couple and the young girl who were willing to sacrifice their comfort for a person like me made me think that there is still some good sense and kindness around us, that we are not totally lost in a world steeped in selfishness and hatred. I was really humbled by the kind gesture of the elderly couple, and at the same time I felt encouraged by the behaviour of the young girl for it made me realize that there are still some sensitive and sensible people amongst our modern younger generation. It proves the fact that the spirit of love and respect for other fellow human beings even in this day and age is still prevalent.

As the bus reached its final junction, the girl quickly got down and I stood up from my seat and glanced at the old couple. In spite of everyone's rush to get down from the bus, I could not help noticing that the man was holding the woman's hand and was trying to lead her out of the bus, and at the same time calmly telling her that it does not matter even if they are the last people to get down from the bus since it is a much safer option for both of them. I could not help smiling at them and they in turn smiled back at me. It was a touching moment for me to see such love and care. When I finally got down from the bus, I felt a strange kind of joy surging in my heart and I suddenly felt very hopeful with life around me.

In this day and age, it is actually very easy to fall prey to the daily pressures that life puts before us and some of us are really bogged down by it. It is really up to us how we deal with it. I think it would make a lot of difference if we learn to be happy with the little things that life paints for us; only then, we

will be able to value the bigger, higher and nobler things it offers us. For instance, I would have never imagined that a simple and impulsive bus ride on a rainy day would be such a learning experience for me. It actually taught me to learn and appreciate the small mundane things that surround life... because when you look really closely, in them, you will find great beauty.



## The Story Tellers Group

### The Girl in a Pink Dress with White Flowers

It was one of those hot summer days, and with the summer break came the Mela to the town. Children all over town were excited to hear of this Mela. It happened one night as I was lying in my bed, my father told me stories of the time when he was a young man and how he had followed the trail of one beautiful girl of his locality at the Mela, hoping to become friends with her. But since she was with a group of friends, therefore, he was unable to approach her for fear of being laughed at. At that time, what was most attractive in the Mela was the Giant Ferris Wheel. I could not wait to go to the Mela the following day. That night, my grandfather gave me a ten rupee note and I was thankful for it.

The day that the Mela opened was a great and a hot day. This little girl with curly black tresses, and wide black eyes looked all around her clutching on to her crisp little ten rupee note. She could see many make-shift shops with a variety of treats to offer chocolates of various shapes and sizes, pink puff sugar candies, *Badam Kulfi*, Ice creams, sugarcane juice, mango juice with a sprinkling of black salt, puff corns, hot corn mixed with butter, salt and a dash of lemon juice filled the air.

On the other side of the ground, she could see games of various sorts Fishing, Lucky dip, Blow the candle in one Breath, Hit the Bull's Eye, Hit the Pyramid Cans with three Balls, Shoot the Balloons, Throw Rings into the little trinkets available on display and a hoard of other games. When one wins, there is always a prize waiting. This little girl in a pink dress with white flowers was lost in the crowd and was wondering to herself how she was going to spend the amount of money. She should spend it wisely since that is the only little note she had.

As she was walking amidst the throng of people, she spotted the Giant Ferris Wheel. The Giant Ferris Wheel seemed to be calling to her with its splendid lights all lit up. Its bright seats seem to be smiling at her. She always wanted to sit on it, but was never allowed since she was too young then. But, today she thought maybe, I shall try my luck. As she approached the Giant Ferris Wheel, she gave the ten rupee note to the man who seemed to be the operator. He was wearing only a white vest and shorts. In this heat, he could not bear wearing a shirt. He took the ten rupee note and the little girl felt grateful that she was allowed to sit on the Giant Ferris Wheel for the first time in her life. After clasping the safety bar, the little girl in the pink dress with white flowers felt thrilled as the Giant Ferris Wheel turned slowly. As the Giant Ferris Wheel went up... and up... and up.... higher than the trees growing in the surrounding, the little girl in the pink dress with white flowers could feel the breeze blowing against her curly head. She could feel an excitement and a kind of being weightless as the Giant Ferris wheel moved higher to make a turn. Reaching the zenith, the little girl in the pink dress with white flowers could see the people below who looked like little ants busy at work for the winter. She could see the colourful tents and the flags of various colours fluttering in the air. Above all this, she could hear screams of excitement from other young girls who were sitting on the Giant Ferris Wheel. As the Giant Ferris Wheel was descending, her eyes caught a big, white - washed wall.

This wall has always been of interest to young children. The little girl in the pink dress with white flowers suddenly remembered how her little brother always wanted to know what was behind this great, white - washed wall. Oh, how she wished her little brother to be there too! As the Giant Ferris Wheel started to move up . . . and up . . . and up, the little girl was excited. At last, she saw what was within that white - washed wall that always caught her imagination.

As the Giant Ferris Wheel reached half – way up to reach the zenith for the second time, she could finally see what was within those walls; The little girl saw a beautiful ornate garden with roses, beautiful shrubs, and sweet peas that seem fill the air with sweet scent. In the well mowed lawn, there was a white haired woman, who was wearing a *jainkyrshah* and was chewing *kwai* . Her face looked tenderly at the little ones around her. As she was knitting, she was also weaving stories to the young ones who were listening to her attentively. At that point of time, the little girl felt a twinge in her heart and she wished that her grandmother was still alive. Just as the Giant Ferris Wheel was descending again, and the feeling of weightlessness pressed in her stomach, she saw in the corner of the garden, a little boy around twelve years of age, furiously tending to the garden. He did not seem to belong there. As the Giant Ferris Wheel was descending again and taking the next turn, the little girl wished and imagined herself within the company of those little ones. She felt welcomed in their company. She wondered what the story was all about. Again excitement surged in her little heart when it started beating fast, as the Giant Ferris Wheel went up . . . and up . . . and up. Reaching the zenith again, she could see the grandmother gently summoning the little boy, who did not seem to belong there, with the wave of her hand. The boy got up with a bright face and walked towards the grandmother who gave him delicious looking sweets of a variety of sorts. The little girl on the Giant Ferris Wheel felt a great relief to find that the grandmother was not only loving and caring to her little ones, but she extended that warmth to the boy who did not seem to belong there.

But, as she wanted to see more, the Giant Ferris Wheel descended again and stopped with a great jolt. The little girl was awakened with a jolt and she realised that her ride had ended too fast. As the operator unclasped the safety rod, the little girl hopped and with great excitement, she wanted to tell

someone about her experience. Hopping along joyfully, she tried to tell the operator what she had seen.

“Do you know what I saw behind that great white wall?” asked the little girl to the operator.

The operator replied, “Frankly, my dear, I don’t care. This heat is killing me!”

The little girl was shocked at the rudeness of the operator because all the beautiful experience she had, all the beautiful observation she made was almost destroyed. But, she gathered up strength and said, “One day, you will care when I write my story and by then, you would have gone with the breeze!”



*Mela* : A fair

*Badam kulfi* : A popular frozen dairy dessert made with milk, fresh cream and chopped or crushed almonds.

*Jainkyrshah* : A kind of traditional apron worn by Khasi ladies

*Kwai* : Betel nut

John 'Chhana' Lalchhanchhuaha

## Headhunting : A Victims' Account

*Or a neck-deep analysis of Democratic decapitation, wrapped around feminism and perfectly logical, inferential love-making.*

**PART - I of a languidly lopsided two-part series.**

### • Partition

Curse headhunting!

Why the head? Why can it not be a hand, or maybe a toe or ear or tongue?

I *think*, because that is all I can do at this point, hanging helplessly by a thin cord around my claimer's waist. It is not so bad when he stops to regain his breath or to scan the horizon. Or even when he rests me down on the grass so he can stop to take a bite. Always he places me facing either a boring old tree-trunk or an equally dull view of a rock face.

I had reason to be proud once, resting atop the usual body that every head comes with but that is besides the point. Only yesterday, these tribes raided our village and I (with an able body then) took up my sword to do my part, dashing towards my nearest adversary, with only one thing in mind – a trophy. I had sharpened my blade countless times for years and was dying to put it to use. Then, I died; the blade unused but sharper than ever.

This man cut me down from behind as I was fighting another! I would have gotten a hero's burial and halfway to *Pialral* had it not been for the custom of cutting off an opponent's head after beating him in combat, for that is precisely what he did to me. But then again, I would have done the same exact thing to him. Moreover, I would have happily cut down any opponent, whether he was facing me or not. All is fair in the game of barbaric village raiding.

As I lay there wounded, I only prayed that he would make the cut clean and dignified. I still cannot tell. The last thing I saw on the battlefield was my village going up in flames as my claimer decided to simply walk out of the fight early a smart move I must admit, although somewhat against the general code of savage conduct. Still, I suppose dying in battle would automatically nullify one's accumulated head-count. Then, grabbing me by the hair, he tied me to a rope around his waist, where I now find myself hopelessly lobbing about. With that, I bobbed further and further still from my headless body, never to see it again. At least he did not stuff me in a bag, or this would have been a most uneventful journey and an even duller narrative.

Coming to a dew pond by the path, he loosened my rope and washed the dry blood off my face, also scrubbing my hair on a nearby rock. I needed that and silently thanked him as I sat (or to roost) on a boulder, drying in the noontime sun. I would be hungry at this point *but* of course. I am also thankful for it seemed that the cut on my neck was rather smooth and it rested me soothingly on the tepid rock. Evidently, he had sharpened his sword as well. I paused to wonder at my sudden change in perspective for the enemy of mine, him who had just felled me. I think I had come to understand the true meaning of warrior-ship. Either that or I left *hate and scorn* behind with the rest of my body.

While thought about all at the man turned away from me, untied his shoulder-length hair, scratched it profusely and dropped the blood-painted cloth around his chest and waist; my mind laughed at that revelation of an utterly unmanly form and then frowned at the thought which almost made me fall from my perch!

He was not a man!

The figure turns around - a murky waterfall of hair suspended with a slant head whose flow was broken by a generous surprise. Feet as pure as young wheat stepped into the water and walked cautiously deeper into the pond; strong, yet delicate hands splay water in the air. I have blinked to make sure what I was seeing is real but it was!

A woman!



She submerged herself musically into the water until she came back, water caressing her compelling form, until in time she walked out of the pool, in no hurry whatsoever to put her clothes back on. She was beautiful as far as I saw and may have mentioned before; I thought I sweated a little but not from the heat. Taking a piece of smoked pork from her pack, she devoured it quickly and ferociously and drowned it with a mouthful of water from a water-horn. My throat may be thirsty too. What was I thinking? I wanted her to tie me around her waist again and remind myself not to smile when she did that. I had certain views on women, now I had a perfect view of a perfect specimen; she is as indeed something to behold and I believe I saw her with genuine verdict, especially without certain parts of me to glaze my judgment. I gave her a ten – ten *gayals*, which is ten times more than I even had, or had. I only wished I was more than the one-eighth of a man as I was now.

After readying herself again for the journey back home, she graciously ties my hair in a bunch above my forehead and fixed the rope, also drying me with her cloth. I stare at her face unblinking, for obvious reasons, at her mysterious façade and saw that it revealed many things, which would have been impossible, were my entire body still attached to me. Judging by the marks on her face I could tell she was a fighter not by choice but by birth. The half-content look in her eyes told me that she had accomplished something great with the raid and maybe she was going home to someone in waiting, while also regretting the fact that she had to part such a handsome head from its body. When she wrapped the cloth around her frame, I felt a sharp pang of regret as if she had thrown ash over a blooming stiff-necked flower. Then she kissed my forehead and began walking. I stood corrected the flower bloomed imperfect yet charmingly obscure under the ash.

She started singing a happy song about killing and pillaging sometime near dusk, and I figured that we were almost at our destination. I would sing too if I could. It was not often that a woman took you home with such pride. Would they welcome her

like a champion despite the fact that she took an early leave or the obvious fact that she was a woman warrior? Only one thing confused me gravely – how could I be in love when my heart was miles away, probably six feet underground? A sharp ringing filled my ears and I fell to the ground, face first. Desperately rolling to my side, I saw two figures wrestling in the thickets, forcing birds to retreat from their nests, one of them was the woman. In a moment, a monstrous creature covered in dark fur lunged at me from the dark only to be stopped by a strong flash of steel. The woman kept a stubborn grip on the creature's mane and repeatedly ran her sword across its chest. All I asked for was a sword, arms to swing it with and a torso for support; in short, a body! I was bested in combat but watching a woman fight a tiger-man and not being able to do anything was true defeat. In all that confusion, I found myself rolling helplessly down some hill, the world spinning until I stopped abruptly at the edge of a cliff. I could tell, for I was staring directly into the horizon where the sun lingered behind a pair of perfectly similar hills - I swore they were handmade - that somehow reminded me of a certain head-huntress.

Was I afraid? I couldn't tell but I felt rather calm on that spot as I watched the sun let go of its last hour. In time, she would find me I thought. That was good, love should calm.

Dark came with a light drizzle and the world disappeared before my very eyes, slowly replaced by the diffident stars. Funny, I always thought people turned into stars when they died. If that were true, a few thousand years from now there would be no differences between day and night; ugly skies overcrowded with too much goodness.

The un-burden of bodily endowment led me to ponder on the purpose of life, the shape of pig tails and rice that grows without husk.

I would desire that exact state of mind (body-less-ness) for all my kin if it were not for the fact that all I actually needed now to save the world were arms to push me off the ground and feet to take me anywhere but here. My only ability in that predicament was to travel forward in time, one time at a time. Alas, it was too late now. I was someone else's misplaced trophy and no volunteer ever went out looking for a lost head. Indeed, I was useless without the rest of me.

Curse headhunting!

I found myself being lifted off the ground by unfamiliar, uncaring hands and dropped into a cloth bag which completely rid me of my only meaningful privilege in connection with the world – the ability to see. This was definitely not my maiden; she would *never* put me in a bag!

I got tossed around in the dark, empty spaces for a long time, only pausing briefly now and then until finally a rise and a half-fall made me realize that that bag had been hung.

## · PART - II – Amalgamation

That predicament and its excessive use of my mental faculties must have drained me out for I fell asleep in no time. One may say that it was most unlikely to do so in such a situation but I concurred, unless you had ever been beheaded and then stuffed into a dark bag. In my defense, I was not narrating in my slumber but rather passing on the tale to my dream state.

I dreamt of many things – about today, about rice-beer and most specially, about my maiden. Fortunate wasn't it that dreams were in one's head; else what would one such as me be doing in sleep except think of dreaming?

When I was but a young boy, barely tall enough to climb over the giant log across the *Zawlbuk's* entryway, my first task was to gather firewood. I took much effort in the nearby woods, trying to find the best set of firewood ever, picking up one and mostly throwing it away in search of a better one. Coming back to the *Zawlbuk*, I found that all the other boys had completed their tasks long before me and were now listening to tales from the most respected man in the gathering. He was the one who repeatedly drank some strange speech-enhancing liquid from a large earthen pitcher near the fire. I walked to the enclosure for the firewood and painstakingly dropped one twig after another from my bundle of flawless firewood into the pile of neglect. I cringed as one of the men picked up a casual handful and tossed it into the saturated blaze; stick number fourteen was among the first to be sent in.

I hoped that one day no one would have to listen to their elders and could do anything that they pleased. That would be the ideal society indeed, but I knew that day would never come. So, about twenty years later, I personally received firewood from little boys and congratulated the ones that brought good firewood which, on my advice, they took home and placed aside. Sadly, the children caught on quickly and too soon we had too many ordained firewood and no *actual* firewood!

A deafening crash shook me from my reverie.

"Where is it?" Cried an aggressive voice.

"Where is what?" Replied another who was considerably closer to me.

"The head you stole."

"I did no such thing!"

"Lies"! The accusation was followed by a sharp yelp and the sound of tearing flesh. A waft of bloody stench filled my nose which would most certainly cause me to regurgitate if I had a stomach.

There are sounds of wood being tossed about and men murmuring at one another when at last, light entered from above me. One of my seekers extended his arms into the bag and lifted me out into the open, looking me straight into the eyes. "There you are," he said and tucked me under his arm as he signaled the other three or four to follow. I caught a glimpse of the man who bagged me – he lay spread-eagle on the bamboo floor with a wide careless cleave across his chest. There was more of him on the floor than inside his body and having being caught lying, had a curious look on his face – the kind you have mid-way between lying and then realizing that you have been exposed. And here I was, thinking that the last thief on earth had gone extinct from a society where all you needed to lock your house was a piece of stick. Like me, he would have had something to talk, or think about, had they taken his head, but now it seemed he would spend the rest of his death staring at the straw ceiling.

Headhunting had its upside.

For the first time, after my unfortunate partition, I now had a frontal view of where I was going. The man holding me (whom I shall now call 'the hero') took excessive care as he walked, as if afraid to give me motion-sickness with his stride. As curious as I was about the motives of these men, my mind was crowded with the thought that there actually *was* a volunteer party that went out in search of lost heads. There seemed to be one for everything!

When they rested to eat, the hero carefully placed me on a flat rock or patch of grass and combed my hair briskly with his hand, reminding me of a certain someone. Even the fact that my maiden and that man did not put me in a bag gave me hope.

By evening, we came to a shed at the foot of a gradual slope where we rested for the night. We could have easily moved for another hour or so before dark but that was a good sign. It meant that we were just outside a village and with

daybreak, would come my grand induction as a trophy.

I couldn't sleep. As happy as I was to finally come to my final resting place in some champion's home my mind drifted back to my rightful owner. The sharp pain I felt as I was cut down in battle serves as a sweet reminder of the one who rightly deserved to keep me. I did not disdain my current quandary, but if ever that poor lonely head were given the right to choose, it would be to return to that head-huntress – that claimant not only to my head but to my entire being.

With dawn came the battle-cries of the returning heroes in my company. If I could I would jump from my place and rush up the hill to meet the village-folk!

As if sensing my desire, the hero picked me up by the hair and raised me high above his head. I was filled with elation as I saw the throng of people running down the slope with songs and all sorts of musical instruments – drums, pipes and gongs. The children were the first to reach us as they huddled in jubilation around our group. The women arrived next and threw garlands over the heroes' heads, their voices filled with seductive mirth. The old people watched from a safe yet curious distance.

Not because of any defect in my ears, the sound of the welcome parade dissolved. I noticed all the dancing people still, but I do not see them. I saw a woman shyly shuffling amidst the crowd towards me.

Waterfall, hills, sunset.

The woman!

Our eyes met, not by accident but purposefully, which was strange because she was a woman and I was a decapitated head. Slowly, she made her way towards me, or perhaps the man holding me by the hair. I refuse to drown my hopes.

“As a sign of goodwill and tribute to the chief of our village,” cried the hero looking across at an old fellow donning the feather of the king-crow, “I shall submit this most valuable trophy to his household.” The old chief nodded his head and stretched out a palm to my maiden, “My daughter shall accept it

and have it groomed.”

She walked up to me and smiled. Then, placing her familiar hands under my jaw raised me in the air to a loud cheer. Then she leaned towards the hero and whispered, “Do not tell anyone.”

“Your secret is safe with me, princess,” the hero replies as another girl leapt into his arms. The children ran back home, the young men and women craned their necks and the old maintained their stand, all in their own ways looking for something newer and more interesting.

Thus, I found myself leaning gently against her breast as she took me back home. Lost as I was, unclaimed for a time, stolen for a brief moment, I found myself in my owner’s house where I shall spend the rest of my long death in the chief’s hall. She put me on a special shelf facing her bed and thinking of how I could have easily spent the rest of my days under the earth, I manage to steal a smile.

Thank God for headhunting.



*Pialral* : It is the ultimate heaven according to the folk myth of the Mizo tribe of North East India. The Mizo word literally means “beyond the world.” Unlike most concepts of heaven, it is not the final resting place of the spirits of the good and the righteous, nor there is a role for god or any supernatural, but is simply a reservation for extraordinary achievers during their lifetime to enjoy eternal bliss and luxury

*Zawlbuk* : It is a Duhlian word which means bachelor’s dormitory. It is however much deeper in its significance than what can be understood from such a simple meaning. It is the social organization which has a prominent role in shaping the youths into responsible adult members of the society.

*Gayal* : Also referred to as mithun, is a large domestic bovine.

*Rueben L. C. Lulam*

## Reflections

During our annual school sports, there was the Wheel Barrow Race, a novelty item specifically for extremely non-athletic people like me. It was a sort of consolation so that even athletically-challenged boys like me could feel that we were part of something, that we had something to contribute. A strategy, no doubt, born of good intentions and the goodness of the heart of the Christian Brothers. In any other context, this was something kids might do at a picnic. But here we non-athletes were: stuck in a bunch for the Wheel Barrow Race. So, after the athletic stars took to the tracks and to the field amidst loud cheers and severe competition, we geeks would line up for this grandest of events.

Being nerdy geeks, we took this rare physical opportunity rather seriously. You would not find anyone with even the mildest athletic prowess among our ranks but, for us, this was the event that we actually asked our parents to come and watch. Those who had siblings and friends asked them to come along too. As if to reinforce the classic geek statement, there were no girlfriends. So fathers, mothers and siblings it was. And for those who had them, even friends. This was it, the Wheel Barrow Race. My partner and I even did warm up exercises before this testosterone charged event, determined to contribute valuable points to McCann House, our house among four – Roe, McGhee and O’Leary.

The wheel barrow race was done in pairs, with a partner – one being the wheel barrow, the other, pushing. Summoning every ounce of foolishness, I volunteered to be the wheel barrow. As the wheel barrow, the only parts of my body that touched the ground were my palms. My partner held my ankles and pushed while, in the absence of actual wheels, I hand-walked. So we got into position. The countdown sounded off and the whistle



blew. (The whistle – for all other events, they fired a gun and star athletes smoked down the tracks. We had a sappy old priest in a lethargic cassock holding a green plastic whistle to his lips.) Anyway, the whistle blew. What I didn't know was that this thing was supposed to go on for several laps. Laps, actually. None of us knew that – that was the one event with no practice sessions, no heats leading up to the finals, nothing to prepare us for that hazard. My head was spinning, the crowd was hooting, my arms were about to collapse, the crowd was cheering, I was close to fainting, the sappy old priest threw his file to the ground laughing then finally, the last lap. My partner pushed and screamed at me to go faster, I screamed at him to stop pushing and slow down. My palms hurt, my arms were aching, I was out of wind but, finally, we were close to the end of the race. Then, two feet before the finish line, my arms gave out. My partner did not stop pushing and we completed those last two feet of the race on the left side of my face, gloriously wheel-barrowing to the finish line behind everyone else.



***Clifford War*****Aftermath.**

I shot a gun at earth, and the bullets went deep into the soil. There wasn't much else to say. It was as if earth decided that was nothing unusual and moved on while I stood there watching, waiting for my victim to react. There was no reaction, no bleeding, no scar that rain couldn't fix right up. Nothing noteworthy had happened, and no one but I had witnessed it. I couldn't bring myself to move on. I sought more.

I shot a gun at sky. The bullets sung gloriously, whizzing through the lower stratosphere ready to take on anything in its path. They shot upwards, effortlessly, almost able to touch freedom. And then, quite ingloriously, they fell back down. Gravity had its way with them. She brought them crashing back down, only to land at a deserted construction site, one that was left unfinished because the architect died, and his family decided it should be left unfinished because they were swimming in debt and couldn't afford to finish what he'd started. It was hard to have dreams when strapped for money. There wasn't much else to say about it. Nothing noteworthy had happened yet again. I felt cheated of the glorious victory I was promised. I couldn't forgive myself for having become even more insignificant because of it. And so I sought more.

I shot a gun into oceans. This was by far the most frustrating. It rained that day. The drops of water pelted the surface of the water, leaving a flurry of pock-marks in its wake, blurring the surface of the water, and my eyesight. The bright flashes of light and the popped- corn like bang of the gun going off before me were accompanied by nothing else. That was it. No trace of bullet was to be seen, and yet no damage was done to my victim. The rain drowned out my screams of agony, and honestly you couldn't really tell if I was crying anyway. This couldn't be it. I couldn't let it go. I was not to be cheated. And so I sought more.

I shot a gun at mirror. The clear image I saw before me, that simultaneous pointing a gun and not pointing a gun at myself, shattered. Neither I nor he fell to the ground. He stood there with a face so intent on being gratified, it drove me wild. How he could mock me with such wanting on his face, as though his needs were greater than mine? I shot him a few more times before I was done. There were a million pieces of him now. A million reflections staring back at their creator, twice that number in eyes looking up at their God. Life after death, and not before; and I orchestrated it. I felt a surge of pleasure pull through me for the first time. I sought more.

The first time I shot a gun at mankind, I was practiced. I seasoned myself against all failure. I readied my weapon and shot mankind straight between the eyes. I had missed the first few times, but I sure found my target soon after. Cries, followed by nothing. Life, and then nothing. Fear, and then nothing. I had taken everything from mankind, yet I had nothing. There was nothing left to say about it. Nothingness seemed to be the end of it all and yet, it was also the spring from which spewed forth a multitude of questions and blood. The blood flowed greatly, out of the unkind orifice that cratered mankind's once lovely face. Now nothing remained but shock and disbelief, etched onto the still shade of grey that lay before me. I wanted to tell people of what I had learned from my experiments with humanity, but they put me behind bars for having a dream. They thought me a murderer, but there were always two sides to a coin. I thought myself a God. They put me "where I belong," and left me at the constant worship of my now most loyal followers, mould and neglect..

I killed mankind. And I had no one else to talk to about it, except you. Are you listening?



## Poets and Authors Index

1. *Rangebok Lyngwa is a Lecturer in Shillong Polytechnic. Besides teaching communication skills to young minds, the poet shares an immense interest in representing what he sees, hears and feels in society through his poems. The themes dealt in are everyday fragmented images of a living condition that each individual is subjected and forced to conform to. If a poet could paint through his words a picture true and ideal, the effectiveness of that image then is the realization of the witness who sees the flaw and understands the responsibility of shaping it so that a better work of art could be presented on the canvass of life.*
2. *Willie Gordon Suting is a writer and poet from Shillong, Meghalaya. His writings have appeared in Café Dissensus Everyday magazine, Thumbprint magazine, Raiot webzine, Teksto magazine, The Northeast Today magazine and Sunday Supplement of The Shillong Times newspaper. Willie blogs at [williegordonsutingblog.wordpress.com](http://williegordonsutingblog.wordpress.com)*
3. *Tialila Kikon (b.1973) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Mount Tiyi*

Government College, Wokha Nagaland. Having graduated from St. Joseph's College, Jakhama, she joined NEHU Shillong and completed her Masters in English Literature. Currently Tialila is enrolled as a Research Scholar in the Department of English, Assam University, Diphu Campus.

4. Naomi C. Nonglait is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English St. Mary's College. She loves sketching and writing. Currently she is pursuing her research from North Eastern Hill University.
5. Dr. Preetinicha Barman Prodhani (born 1982) teaches English at Women's College, Shillong. She has published her poems in Assamese, Rajbanshi, Bengali and English in various journals and periodicals apart from several papers in research journals. She has also published her Assamese translations of Pakistani short stories. Girish Karnad and Orhan Pamuk were the areas of her research for her MPhil and PhD degrees respectively.
6. Amanda Bashisha Basaiawmoit is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Shillong College. For her poetry is the inner voice in us and a poet is someone who hears and expresses that voice in a way that we all recognise. The

*first poem "A Few Lines on A Line" is an outcome of the Creative Writing Workshop and one which would lead to many more. "An Apology to Mei-Ri-Sawkun" is her reflection on the ritualistic celebration of WED every year.*

7. *Donboklang Ryntathiang was born at Mawlai Shillong in the year 1975. He did his schooling in three schools. After a few years in St Edmund's School he went to a lesser known school Nongkwar Secondary School where he was able to bunk classes at will and get easy holidays whenever there's heavy rainfall since the roof would always leak. He then joined St Anthony's College, did his Honours in English and graduated in 1998. In 2000, he finished his Masters in English from NEHU, Shillong. He started playing music while he was in class 9 and in 1999 he along with four friends formed a band called 'Snow White'. Since his interest had always been music, he started writing poetry only after finishing his Masters. He is presently the bass guitarist of the band 'Snow White' and is an Assistant Professor in English at Seng Khasi College.*
8. *Lalnunsanga Ralte is a Research Scholar at North Eastern Hill University. He is a prolific writer who has not yet published his works. Currently he is working as*

*an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Christian Academy College, Shillong*

9. *Iadalang Pyngrope has published two books, Mosaic, a collection of poems and One Sohra Summer, a novel. Her poetry is inspired by daily experiences, seemingly mundane incidents, the many facets of life itself. She hopes to write more books and her interests at the moment are translation and Khasi Literature. She teaches English Literature at Synod College, Shillong.*
10. *Anthony Ranglong is an Assistant Professor in St. Anthony's College Extension, Byndihati Campus. An alumnus of St. Anthony's College, Shillong and North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, he holds a Masters in English Literature. A lover of poetry, his pet hobbies consist of motorcycling and composing poems. Calling himself "The Bard of the Negatives", he celebrates his limitations and flaws. His poetry often laments the unbridgeable gap between his utopian bliss and his existential plight.*
11. *Gayreen Lyngdoh, or 'Kong Careen' as she is generally called, lives in Shillong, Meghalaya with her husband Tejdor, her mother and an ever-increasing family of young people. She did her Doctoral*

*studies on Chinese and Chinese-American women narratives and teaches Literature in Synod College, Shillong.*

12. *Janith Chakma was born in Longudu, a tiny village in Rangmati, Bangladesh. He has been away from the comforts of the home since Class VI, studying in Shillong which has led to distances in relationships. He tried to open up to the few friends he had here in Shillong, but could never do so completely. Therefore, he started writing to release his pent up emotions. When smitten by the love bug he wrote of love, when homesick and suffering his writings expressed sorrow and longing. He feels that writing has kept him going. Now with the passage of time, things are falling into place and he has adjusted to the living in these hills above his plains but the habit of writing has stuck and he still writes.*
  
13. *Linthoi Ningthoujam was born in Imphal, Manipur, in 1987. She is currently pursuing her PhD in Comparative Indian Literature from the University of Delhi, Delhi, where she lives.*
  
14. *Karen L. Donoghue teaches Mass Communication and Journalism. She began writing songs at 15 and was part of an all-girl band, Afflatus. She writes to make sense*



of everything. And so she doesn't implode. Her hope is to grow in empathy through her works and the works of others.

15. *Kamal Kumar Tanti (b. 1982) is a promising young voice in the contemporary Assamese Poetry. Kamal is a bilingual poet and writer, who writes both in English and Assamese languages. He belongs to Adivasi Tea-garden Labourer Community of Assam. His first collection of Assamese poetry Marangburu Amar Pita (Our Father Marangburu), published in 2007, won him the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar for 2012, for Assamese language and Munin Barkotoki Literary Award in 2008. Kamal's English poems have appeared in many journals, and have been included in several anthologies of English poems, including 40 Under 40: an anthology of Post-Globalization Poetry, Shout It Out! Anthology, The World I Write In, etc. Kamal has a PhD in Astronomy & Astrophysics, and is currently working as an Assistant Professor of Physics at University of Technology and Management, Meghalaya and lives in Shillong.*
16. *Reuben L.C. Lulam is a quiet but observant young man, which accounts for his creativity. A humble person that he is, he considers most 2015 at Shillong College. This is short*

*of his poems not worthy to be published but nudged by many friends who disagree with him he has taken the bold step to come out of the closet.*

17. *Iamon M. Syiem is an Associate Professor in the Sociology Department of St. Edmund's College. She has been actively involved with various organisations related to social issues. It is this interest of hers that has made her a compulsive scribbler, one with a keen eye.*
18. *Balawan Joshua Mawrie is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Environmental Science who loves football and connects to works of art that reflect the reality of life. He is a prolific writer but has never published any. This poem "Junkie" is his first submission one that was inspired by the suicide of a close friend.*
19. *Roger Manners being born and raised in Nepal, the author had always looked for ways to know more about the traditions of the land where he came from; every opportunity that presented itself was always directed to this cause. Not having grown up in the Khasi community for him meant that there was always a thirst to know & experience more about the culture of his people. Therefore, equipped with an outsider's perspective and an understanding developed over the years through encounters with friends, family, acquaintances & the*

land itself he believe she has a vantage point that few others growing up within the society itself do. It let him look at the whole from the outside while participating in it, putting it at a personal level which one can describe as an out of body experience of sorts. Writing for him is an outlet, a way to articulate the soup floating within his head. This story "The Mawbyinna" was researched and written as a college assignment for a liberal arts class called Researching Traditions at Srishti School of Art, Design & Technology, Bengaluru.

20. Pynsuklin Syiemiong is currently working as an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Sankardev College, Shillong and is also pursuing research in English Language Education at the English and Foreign Languages University, Shillong Campus.
21. *The Story Tellers Group* are Elvis, Surojit Sen, I. M. Syiem, Ardella Challam, Merlin, B. R. Lyngdoh, Naomi C. Nonglait, Daphlapynhun, Deepak, Melamshwa, Arundhati Paul, Samantha, Embhalang and Jennifer. The group was randomly formed at the Childrens' Writing Session of the National Workshop on Creative Writing held in May,

story entitled "The Girl in a Pink Dress with White Flowers" is an outcome of their collaborative effort when given a situation to eke out a short story.

22. John 'Çhhana' Lalchhanchhuaha graduated from St. Anthony's College, Shillong and pursued further studies at NEHU in the Department of Biochemistry. After realizing that his love for writing would not let go that easily he decided to pursue a master's degree in English. He spends most of his time alternating between drawing and writing.
23. Clifford War is a young boy from Shillong. When he's not setting up sick plays in DoTA 2, obsessing about Japan, working and winning at life (apparently) at the same time, or procrastinating his long overdue trip back to the gym, Clifford can be found among very select groups of people (it's the same people in smaller groups!), ranting about the latest BJP gossip there is to be had, recommending political comedians and their opinions on the Trump Administration or, in such cases, writing something even you could have written.





Bliss Love IDENTITY Wild Humanity  
 Rebels Blank Comfort Margins  
 headhunting LIBERTY Feels Feelings  
 Citrus Existence Ethnic Rhythm Penalties Touch  
 curfew Thoughts Other Dissent Pitifulistic  
 destiny Street NORTH EAST Fragrant  
 WORLD Pleasure Moment DUST  
 REVENGE mystery Remembrance Market JEALOUSY  
 ROOTS naive RESOLUTIONS Name  
 Belong HOPE Narratives BRAVE  
 PROVIDENCE Life HISTORY MANKIND  
 SPACER Generations SACRIFICE TELL  
 Motifs Solitude VOICE Concepts Infinity  
 LANGUAGE choices Beautiful Revolution  
 IDEOLOGIES Reaction Beautiful Revolution pulse  
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