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TEXT poetry

B N Oakman

The Poet of Mycenae

After Alice Oswald's 'Nobody'

after Agamemnon sacrifices their daughter Iphigenia
to persuade fickle gods to grant fair winds for Troy
he fears Clytemnestra's wrath may turn on him
while she rules Mycenae during his adventuring
so, he pays a poet, somebody never named by Homer
and instructs him to spy upon her and send word to him
should he observe so much as a hint of adultery

the horizon barely closes over Agamemnon's flotilla
before his cousin Aegisthus seizes the unfortunate poet
rows him to a rocky outcrop where he dumps him to die
a feast for birds of prey that leaves nothing of him but bones

whereupon Clytemnestra welcomes Aegisthus as her lover

ten years pass before Agamemnon sails home to Mycenae
a conqueror high on opiates of omnipotence
a king everywhere greeted on bended knee
a man seemingly indifferent to the fate of his poor agent
from whom he has received no correspondence
to warn of lethal liaison between his queen and her lover
who conspire to flatter, deceive, and murder him

during thousands of nights camped outside Troy's walls

did Agamemnon never reflect on his wisdom in hiring
a minstrel unversed in the dark arts of a dangerous trade
someone penurious after decades of devotion to poetry
who might lunge gratefully for a dangled purse of silver
to only later ponder his shortcomings
while dying on forgotten rocks, a nonentity
shuddering with every shriek and swoop of circling seabirds

BN Oakman's poetry is widely published in Australia (including in Best Australian Poems 2014 and 2015) and internationally. His collections include In Defence of Hawaiian Shirts (IP 2010) and Second Thoughts (IP 2014) plus two chapbooks. In 2016 the distinguished Australian actor John Flaus recorded 25 of his poems for a CD titled What Did I Know? Once upon a time Oakman was an academic economist. www.bnoakmanpoet.weebly.com



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TEXT poetry

Sharon Kernot

!

It's a dog's cock,
a shrieker, a startler,
a screamer, a gasper,
a slammer –
an exclamatory marker!

It's a shout pole, spark-spot
smasher, soldier!

What excitement!

What surprise!

What dramatic effect!

Bang bang bang!!!

Three on the page

and you're dead,

the editor said.

You over-excited whamer!

You complete amateur!

Made, Sharon says, with various typographic nicknames given to the exclamation mark. Sharon Kernot is a poet, short story writer and novelist. Her YA verse novel The Art of Taxidermy was shortlisted for a number of prizes including the 2019 Prime Minister's Literary Awards. Her writing has appeared in a variety of journals and anthologies including Best Australian Poems, APJ, Island, Verandah, Mascara, Southerly, Meniscus, Aesthetica and Australian Love Stories. Her latest novel, Birdy, will be published by Text in 2023.



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TEXT prose

Susan Presto

Agentic State and the Uberrnensch

The truth is too strange ... but the future is at stake. Please read carefully between the lines.
– *Mr Jones* (2019) / George Orwell

The agentic state – the individual defines themselves as a soldier carrying out the orders of others. An agentic state is a state of mind in which a person will allow other people to direct their behaviours and pass responsibility for the consequences of the behaviours to the person telling them what to do. One becomes alienated from their own conscience. An instrument carrying out the wishes of others. A person chooses to become agentic and once it is chosen, it is difficult to go back.

Was it the moonlight or the way it reflected off him?

He was fully grown, and he lay on his back atop a small grassy hill in a space among the trees.

I saw him see me.

I just know what I felt.

I looked for him again every night until it became apparent that he slept there only on the full moon.

It is going to be hard to be understood from here.

It unfolded so naturally.

Although there is no doubt that it isn't natural.

The rages became out of control.

Uncontrollable.

Always surprising in their frequency and origin.

It was impossible to negotiate.

Where once food or toys would distract the growing ape, the fully grown male ape refused to be placated.

Someone should have thought this through.

I did not, I just complied,

and in the end, this is where I'll be judged.

If I explain myself well enough, could there be some understanding?

It is asking a lot, understanding.

But it is not for me that you need to.

It began as an emergency.

I understood the term 'going ape' from this moment.

The previously containable behaviour of the ape, as it grew quietly in the confines of the cages surrounded by food and toys, might have been that of a different beast.

Where was the calm cognisant creature on a hill under a moon?

I witnessed the incredibility of a huge healthy apex mammal screaming to assert its rights upon a weaker race.

For the record:

Horror

Fear

Confusion

Responsibility

Anger

And eventually power.

But first, absolute betrayal.

The ape toyed with the worker. A small man about to be snapped in half.

Why I opened the gate to help is still a mystery.

What was my plan?

I didn't think anything through.

The ape's teeth were around his head, huge jaws capable of such lethal damage.

Research suggests it was the colours of my robe that distracted the animal.

He stopped and put the tiny man down on the ground, an unconscious rag doll with pissed pants.

I remember terror, smiling with my hands up in front of me.

Nothing will ever feel closer to dying than the moment the animal calmly came towards me and I had to acknowledge the difference between companionable moonlit silence and the sheer size and power of this creature. Did I expect recognition, respect?

I just expected death.

The fur was not soft. That was the most distinct thing I wish to remember about any of it.

It positively gleamed in the sun and each strand was articulated by the colours that changed down its length, yet it moved and waved as the ape raged, as if under water.

I closed my eyes and waited for it.

Running?

Fighting?

Protesting?

Pointless.

What my husband saw was his wife inside the cage, eyes closed sobbing, ready for death.

He'd seen the worker in the raging ape's mouth.

He never moved, just watched and waited.

The ape did what he did and ambled away. I didn't move or open my eyes. I did not know if it was over because I was still breathing but feeling nothing.

I did not know if I was still alive because although my eyes were closed, I had been forced to watch from above, and watched with unbearable sympathy and love. Did I die?

I don't know how long it was until human hands must have lifted me, carried me carefully into the laboratory, and laid me down. I did not speak for a very long time.

I don't know how long.

I couldn't.

I had nothing to say that wasn't a scream of protest and bewilderment. I wanted to beg my husband to tell me why he didn't stop it, but I didn't have the words.

The laboratory was cold and way too bright and everybody was all over me, and what I wanted was a dark quiet hole to crawl into.

I abdicated thought, I became the experiment.

And that's my defence.

Did he plan this? I will never know, but I do know how happy he was that it happened, and I quickly realised my value in his eyes and for some reason, I was grateful. I would therefore be considered a willing participant in my husband's experiment. But that truth is, I was just there, and I had no idea how much the man who loved me, was prepared to sacrifice. I know he has written many words about what happened, but his words are triumphant and proud and my awful part in this story is that of a miraculous outcome: I don't have a name. There is no talk of the blood and the horror or the pain. Or now. No thought of what such a success would mean, or what would happen next, least of all what would happen to the two of us. But it's true what they say, the facts are the facts. Everything that happened next could have been stopped at any time. They are right to ask me why.

I look into the golden eyes of my strange and wonderful child and I hate myself for questioning anything. This morning she hops out of my bed and leaves a warm spot for me to roll into. She lopes into the morning sunshine by the window and leans on the frame. Her soft breath mists the glass and she lifts an impossibly long finger and writes her name in breath. I can smell her musky warm scent still in the sheets.

The sun through the trees outside casts bright shiny stripes across her fur.

What have I done?

Susan Presto: Writer, nature lover. Always learning.



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TEXT prose

Saurabh Anand

Kahi toh koi karan hoga

Prologue

While I was an international student in the US in late 2020, I lost my Nani Maa, the Hindi word for maternal grandmother, in India during the COVID-19 pandemic. Before she passed away, she was briefly admitted to the hospital. During that time, I was in the first semester of my former doctoral program, which was a little extra stressful in itself. I had barely gotten to know the faculty members and my colleagues. When my Nani Maa passed away, I was towards the end of my first semester, and my emotional well-being was displaced. After barely finding my bearings, I started reading migratory losses narratives and other creative writings explicitly written by international students to find emotional solace. This was the beginning of my exploring the rhetorics of grief (Castellanos, 2017), especially among international students who are often multilingual too. Research shows that the spectrum of grief tends to be long and feel stagnant longer in the context of transnational students when they lose someone back home (Nesteruk, 2018).

I must admit here that initially, I struggled to find international students' narratives on grief, their journey of coming to terms with those griefs, and ways to heal, which indicates a lack of representation of diverse writers in creative writing. However, reading Ichikawa (2021) and Popli (2022) was an emotional turning point for me as an early career rhetorician interested in interdisciplinary rhetorical connections with trauma and grief. Both authors narrated how they navigated the trauma of losing their father while pursuing studies in a foreign land and coped with the impact of loss on their student academic and professional identities. Finally, they urged for more research into migratory loss and ways to provide support. With that background, I wrote my journey of self-healing by reflecting on the feelings immediately after receiving the news of my Nani's demise (Anand, 2021). However, that is also not the entire picture. In the following creative nonfiction, I aim to nudge the conversation around migratory loss that continues to stay longer among transnational students and show how the rhetoric of migratory loss experiences intersect with storytelling.

Kahi toh koi karan hoga

I was visiting India, my home, after three long years due to the COVID pandemic. So much had happened since my last visit. I lost my dog. My Nani Maa had passed away. In less than a few weeks' stay in Delhi, I heard my uncle's mother had passed away in Mumbai. She was my aunt's (my mother's sister's) mother-in-law. She was around my Nani Maa's age. They each had a grandchild – Pritiya and me – who shared a special bond with their Nani Maas. We stayed with our Nani Maas more than in our own houses and made countless memories. The only difference was that Pritiya, the grandchild of my uncle's mother, could attend her Nani Maa's funeral, but I couldn't. I stayed away, studying in a different country; in my Nani Maa's language, it was *future banana*: To build my future.

After landing at Mumbai airport, I realized my heart was beating faster. My brain constantly signaled me to calm down. But how could I? It wasn't long since my Nani Maa had passed

away – just in 2020, I had barely recovered from it. Getting closer to my uncle’s mother’s funeral, I started recollecting how much I had wanted to come back home to attend my Nani Maa’s funeral and the guilt I constantly felt, even while writing this piece. I could attend some rituals on sporadic video calls, but that was all. I often consoled myself by saying that *something is better than nothing*.

Having reached my uncle’s house, after less than 15 minutes I left again with my aunt and her kids for my uncle’s parental home to attend ceremonies. The cab dropped us a few meters before the apartment complex where my uncle’s mother had lived. An ambulance was standing beside the complex, which was in a courtyard shape. A mix of relatives and neighbourhood ladies were standing in a corner by the courtyard’s entrance, murmuring. Men gathered across the other corner of the courtyard. Both groups left some space in the courtyard between them.

I was about to enter the complex when I saw my uncle’s mother’s bier being carried into the courtyard from the upper floor. Decked with flower petals and layered in white cloth, the bier was placed on the ground, in the courtyard’s middle, to conclude the final rituals of that day before the ambulance could take her to the cremation ground. To perform the ritual, neighbours and relatives formed a small circle around the bier, presented flowers, touched her feet, and folded hands to bid my uncle’s mother farewell. Then, I saw someone I could not help but notice. Pritiya.

Like most of us, Pritiya was crying. Her eyes were red and puffy. Pritiya was continuously looking at her Nani Maa, barely blinking her eyes. It appeared she didn’t want to lose even a moment of securing the painting of her departing Nani Maa in her eyes. A concluding ritual included putting some *Gangajal*, holy Ganga River water, in the mouth of the deceased person by immediate family members. Upon seeing Pritiya performing the ritual, I felt a strange mix of emotions. I was happier for Pritiya for being lucky enough to say goodbye to her Nani Maa.

Losing a loved one is never easy, whether the loss happens today or 50 years in the future. It causes the same wreathing pain. But when a migrant loses someone back at home, and when they can't visit and be there, the loss becomes more heart-wrenching because grief-processing seems to stagnate. One feels in a vacuum all the time. It's like being alone and invisible on a busy New York Street. The degree of loss gets amplified by tapping into the guilt of living away and becoming prey to circumstances. That was COVID-19 for me.

Seeing Pritika bidding goodbye to her Nani Maa was not less painful, but I was relieved that Pritiya did not have to witness her Nani Maa's demise the way I did. Spending some time with her later, during further rituals, I was relieved to sense she would process her grief of losing one of her greatest supporters whenever she could find the state of mind and energy, without going through the additional pain of surviving migratory loss. Looking at Pritiya's Nani Maa departing, I wished myself to be in Pritiya's place, and my Nani Maa in place of Pritiya's Nani Maa. Still, I remembered my Nani Maa's words: *Kahi toh koi karan hoga* (*There must be a reason behind it*).

As the bier was lifted into the ambulance, I chanted *Mahamrityunjay Mantra* and prayed for the soul. I'd probably never get the answers to why I was destined to be away from my Nani Maa when she passed away. Pritiya witnessing her Nani Maa's last rites and not sharing the pain of losing her Nani Maa with me from thousands and thousands of miles away in a foreign land gave me uncanny and strange relief. I was relieved for her. Things could have been worse. Unburdened by the fact that Pritiya could see her Nani Maa go, I felt liberated by finding Pritiya's bereavement witnessed by my uncle and other relatives, who offered her emotional support during those heavy moments. It was something that I had to do myself, for myself. Migratory loss is not new, but often remains silenced and hidden in the crevasses of guilt of not being present, witnessing the loss, and experiencing grief. But then, I recollect my Nani Maa's words: *Kahi toh koi karan hoga*. Her words keep me going, and urge me to stay persistent in focussing on the future my Nani Maa and I envisioned together.

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Saurabh Anand is a doctoral student in the Department of English at the University of Georgia, USA. In this memoir piece, he reflects on migratory loss among international students and hopes to extend the conversation on how migratory loss experiences intersect with storytelling.