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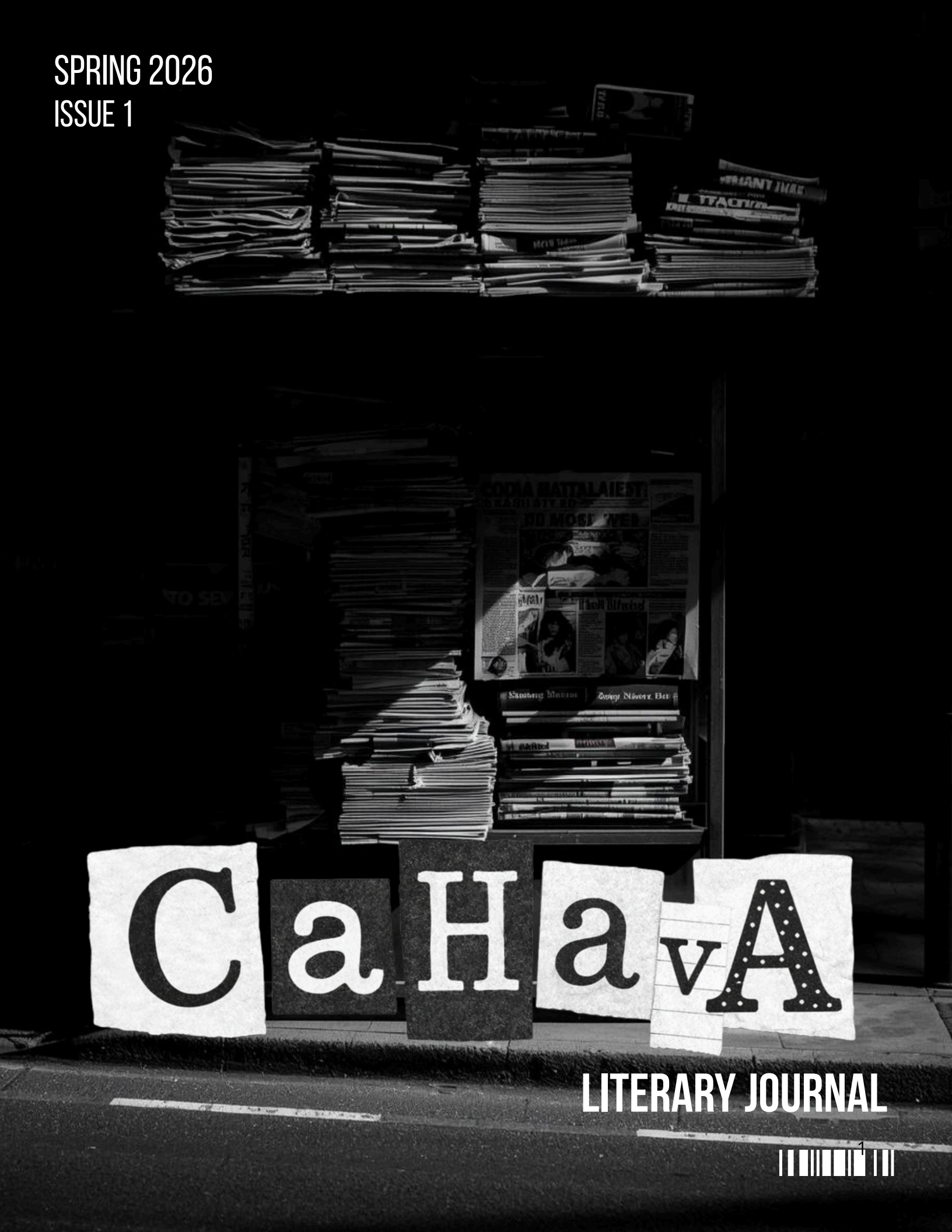
ISSUE 1



CaHavA

LITERARY JOURNAL

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We began working on launching Cahava in mid-2025 and our discussions kept getting stymied by the same question: will anybody actually submit to a brand-new, unknown journal?

We feared we might have to beg our friends for material. We joked about writing ourselves and publishing under random pseudonyms. But the response we got back from the community left us baffled – in a good way. We received more than 1,100 submissions overall, including over 700 entries for the Short Story Contest.

This made the task of deciding a winner very daunting. We ended up shortlisting five stories – but it was not easy.

1)"Savan Falls for Everyone" by Hannan Khan
2)"Cubbyholes" by Neil Jacobs
3)"I Don't Know What You Mean When You Say, "I'm Happy" by Andrew Jones
4)"The Theory of Singing Trees" by Súnmisọ́lá Olúdé
5)"The Orchid Remembers" by Layla Sabourian

All five stories were exceptional, but we kept returning to the simplistic originality of Andrew's story. Congratulations to Andrew for winning our Short Story Contest. We are also delighted to publish "Cubbyholes" in this issue and are committed to publishing all remaining pieces in subsequent issues. We are incredibly proud of the progress we have made in the last few months. However, the initial stages of any new projects are often the easiest, as the team is super charged with momentum. We have all witnessed journals pop up and shortly fizzle out. We have many great pieces in the pipeline. The gauge of real success will be when the 20th – or even the 40th - issue of Cahava is published. That is the future we are committed to building.

But none of this happens without our contributors. In the end, we could only publish a handful of authors, but we are forever thankful to EACH and EVERY single one of you. Thank you for making us believe in ourselves.

The Cahava Team

I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU MEAN WHEN YOU SAY, "I'M HAPPY."

Winner
SHORT STORY CONTEST

ANDREW RUCKER JONES

Dear Chandler,

I am writing you a letter because I love to write, and you love to read. You laugh at *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* every night until I have to cover my ears to think about my blog.

Please take the trash out when the bag is full.

I love you.

Love, Carol

Dear Chandler,

It's good I love you so much, because you didn't take the trash out last night, even though I asked you to. There were maggots in the trashcan when I got home from work. I took the trash out.

I can't concentrate on my work if I'm worrying about maggots at home. It makes my skin crawl.

The trash will probably be full again tomorrow. Please take it out if it is.

Love, Carol

Dear Chandler,

I thought about what you said last night when we fought.

I know mopping the hospital floor and keeping the soap dispensers full and changing the toilet paper rolls and cleaning the toilets makes you tired. I know you want to relax when you get home. But keeping the printers and copiers full of paper and loading and unloading the office dishwasher and recording attendance makes me tired, too, but I still cook dinner and do the laundry.

We promised each other we would live without help when we got married last month. I know we can. But I need you to take the trash out, or we can't.

Love, Carol

Dear Chandler,

I'm sorry I keep writing. You told me you hate it. You like to read funny things. That's why I put this in the next *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* you haven't read. I bought it for you.

I have to write, Chandler. When we talk, all the words spin around like toilet paper when you flush. I can't grab them, I can't understand them, and then they're gone and I can't get them back. When the words are on paper, they don't go anywhere, and I can understand them.

Could you write back?

Love, Carol

Dear Chandler,

I don't know what you mean when you say, "I'm happy." I'm happy, too. I don't know why you think I'm not. I just want you to take the trash out. And I don't want to fight.

Love, Carol

Dear Chandler,

I don't think you're stupid. Plenty of people in our advocacy group didn't go to college like I did. Stu didn't go to college, but he started a company for flavored popcorn. Linda didn't go to college, but she's a model and an actress. And I think you could have gotten into college through an inclusion program like I did.

You left my letters on your nightstand, so I read them again. I don't understand how we got from taking out the trash to thinking you're stupid.

Love, Carol

Dear Chandler,

You're right.

A friend at work told me I should say that. It would help.

But I don't like saying things that aren't true, so I thought about what you're right about. I made a list.

1.I went to college. I audited some classes with regular students and passed.

2.I write a blog to advocate for other people with Down syndrome.

3.It was my idea to live together without help.

4.My job pays more, and my education helped. I work with Excel, and I do a good job of it.

Most of all, and I didn't put this one in the list because it's more important, I want you to do better for yourself. I want you to work with Excel, too. I know you can do it. But all you do is sit on the couch!

Love, Carol

Dear Chandler,

I don't want you to sleep in the living room anymore. I miss you.

Love, Carol

Dear Chandler,

I left you alone, like you wanted, for three days. Can we talk now?

Do you remember when we fought and you said, “You want me to be someone else”? Those words got stuck in my head, like when the toilet gets clogged. I don’t want you to be someone else. You’re my Chandler, and I love you. I married you because I think you’re great.

But you reminded me of something that happened to me. When I was looking for a job, Sandra, my career counselor, remember? said there was another job that paid a little more and she knew the people there, and they would take me and be nice to me, but it was farther away. I would have to switch buses instead of taking just one bus like now. I told her I didn’t want that job because switching buses scares me. I know what to do if one bus is late, or if it takes a detour, but I might get lost if something happens to both buses. She told me it wasn’t a problem, and we could work out a plan. I said no. She said I could always call a taxi. I said no again. She told me the money would help. I said no louder. She told me to calm down, because I was getting upset over nothing. But it wasn’t nothing! She wanted me to do something I was scared to do. I didn’t want to. I do lots of scary things, but not switching buses.

I think I was being like Sandra. I’m still angry at her, but I don’t want you to be angry at me. I’ll stop trying to make you do things that scare you.

Love, Carol

Dear Chandler,

I love you too.

Love, Carol

P.S. Taking the trash out isn’t scary.

Andrew Rucker Jones is a former IT dweeb, thrown-in-the-deep-end real estate manager, and American expatriate in Germany. He has had the honor of being published in The Four Faced Liar, Dark Matter Magazine, and Tales from Fiddler’s Green, among many others.

RESUMÉ

MARK THOMAS

Offensive linemen, bass anglers
and serial killers.
Most of their time is spent
not doing the activities
that define them.

They are what they are not.

And I am what I am not
but, I hope,
for completely different reasons.

Mark Thomas is an artist and writer living in St. Catharines, Canada. Check out his work at flamingdogshit.com

SO BE IT

DIPTI MISRA

TRANSLATED FROM URDU/HINDI

She is not mine, yet I love her still; so be it.
If to custom and tradition this is treason - then
so be it.

I called the truth as the truth; when I said it, I said it
If in the eyes of society this is idiocy - then
so be it.

If the moth caught ablaze, is the candle to blame? (1)
To burn all night and incinerate was written as its fate - then
so be it.

Despite claiming friendship, this angst (for her) is alike an enemy
Yet, if it is my disposition to die for her still - then
so be it

Did I ever proclaim her mine? Said I would become hers?
That she not become a stranger, just that is my one desire still - then
so be it.

Are separated, and will remain ions apart, the earth and the sky
Despite these distances, if there is affinity between the two still– then
so be it

She is not mine, yet I love her still; so be it.
If to custom and tradition this is treason - then
so be it.

(1) A moth's attraction towards a candle/flame and the danger it poses, is a recurring metaphor in Urdu, Hindi and Persian poetry. All the great poets of those traditions have used this metaphor and the trend continues to present day in Bollywood songs. Link

Dipti Misra is an Indian poet, ghazal writer, and actress. She has published acclaimed poetry collections, written songs and acted in serials/films. Her work has earned recognition across South Asian circles across the globe.

RESIGNATION TO FOREVER

GWENNA BELLE

I choke on silence shaped like him
A phantom flittering in the air
Hovering in spaces I dare not swim
And I'm screaming it's not fair

To hold back is violence
A whispering blade that tells me
You'll only become a nuisance
But it's devastating to set him free

Each step I take away feels like a betrayal
Yet to remain too close would be worse
Falling into a detrimental arrayal
Subjecting myself to an endless curse

I feel him pull, like the tide does the shore
Not in words, but in an aching absence
Each breath I take hurts me to my core
Like a crime sending me away from the balance

I hold my longing in a clenched fist
With a fire that burns to touch
Tasting of ash that makes my stomach twist
The bitter sacrifice of caring too much

Will this distance fade into a forever
With endless blow after blow
My hands tremble at the endeavor
Still, I know I must let him go

Gwenna Belle is a self-proclaimed author who writes with one goal: to change at least one person's life. Born in Minnesota, she has travelled across the world, absorbing different cultures and sights. With her first novel, Lainhide, in the works, she includes firsthand experiences in her writing.
Instagram: @itsgwenna
Tiktok: @itsgwenna

CUBBYHOLES

NEIL JACOBS

Juliette but call me Jules, like she's studded in diamonds. Jules of English rose freckles and strawberry hair. Jules of the eye roll. Jules of we're in Comet Electrical after lectures and I say the stereo is tinny but looks nice and she says function before fashion Danny. I know she's right. The stereo is for shit, but it will be a knock-out on the bedside table. As I count out the money and hand it to the salesman Jules barks, when your ears bleed, don't say I didn't warn you. In study group she's been christened the Queen of Put-Downs. A sneer here, a twitch of the nostrils there. The hardiest of boys crumbling in their seats, checking downstairs they didn't wet their pants. She isn't intentionally mean, she's just searingly honest. Back in the dorm room, I set up the hi-fi on the nightstand, give The Immaculate Collection a spin. The metallic hiss on Borderline so unbearable I skip to the next track. Mam's hand is on my shoulder. She's reciting Shehecheyanu, the prayer for new things.

It's Valentine's Day late morning and I'm possessed, obsessed with the idea of giving Jules a rose. Me, Danny of the Moorfield council estate carrying the hopes of my lopsided family. Danny, son of Michael Solomon last seen at the Old Penny nursing his third double scotch. My mam Arleen, daughter of Saul Mark - dead at fifty-three - one too many vorsht sandwiches stuck in his throat. Danny of the pointy face with features too big for their own good. Danny of we're in Comet Electrical and I reply, well forty pounds is all I can afford so it'll have to do.

This whole rose business. It's a peculiar fascination for a boy of my inclinations. I'm not twenty or fifty or ninety percent. I'm not confused or in denial. I'm a surefire lover of cock, cock which has been in short supply. A suck here, a fumble there. A single finger up the arse. In the Tesco carpark under a grey Yorkshire sky. I'm desperate for an outlet for my rampant affections. Yearning to take part in historic traditions. To be in with the folk giving tokens of love. And there must be a boy who this flower's for, but I'm not brave enough yet.

I'm in Sainsbury's, willing myself on by the tubs of red. Telling myself it's a great idea, no a brilliant idea, to buy one of these wilting flowers, the best of the bunch long gone to deserving housewives and greedy mistresses. It's mystifying, the decisions we make. I'm at the checkout, a child behind me insisting he's a good boy, deserving of two Aeros. A boy delighting in ramming the trolley into my shins. I tap on the conveyor belt pretending to be in a hurry but the cashier, Cassie, she's a talker. Cassie of cheeks the size of side plates. Cassie of I'd better be getting a dozen roses tonight or I'll chop off his knob and shove it down his throat. Cassie of questions like, have you been going together long? Are you cooking her tea? An endless stream of curiosity about a love that lives in my imagination, about a ludicrous gesture doomed to fail. I give her the money. She returns the change and the rose leaning in a plastic bag.

I'm cupping my privates in the tub, the hot tap running. The rose is rallying in the sink. It's bizarre, the conjuring we do submerged in water. Cassie wielding a knife, ready to lob off her boyfriend's cock. Telling him he'd better run, thinking what a waste of a perfectly good penis. I glance at mine shriveled, terrified of being gobbled up by Jules's militant vagina after I hand her the bloom and she demands sex in the Students' Union toilets. Someone tries the bathroom door and asks if I'll be long.

I'm in front of the mirror pushing my hair to the side, to a place it doesn't want to go. Slathering on pomade for a 50's side part, digging the teeth of a comb into my scalp, certain the line will bring Jules to her knees. Not that I want her there, grasping at my silver chain, reaching for the Star of David, twisting my nipples, sticking a finger up my arse, for I'm sure that's how she rolls. Jules of perfect diction and her mother's Land Rover. Jules of leather and chains. Under strict instruction, my hair succumbs to its ill-fated mission, proof I'm not a man condemned. Proof that the boy with black bags for luggage and a mam who cleans middle-school toilets isn't destined for a life in the proletariat cesspit. I wipe my hands on the towel and give the finger to any doubter. It's not Jules's body I want, it's her standing.

I unlock the door to my room, hang the towel on one of the hooks. When we toured the halls, our guide pointed them out. Everyone gets two hooks, like it was an extravagance. Like the line had been fed to her by Marketing. Other than the hooks, the room was basic. A narrow bed and a flimsy wardrobe. Short curtains that let in the light. In a drawer, nestled amongst worn-out skivvies are the Calvin Kleins, fresh in their crispy wrapper. A treat from the bargain bin at Fenwick's. I stretch the elastic band, let it slap on my stomach. In the expensive cotton, my package is elevated, a half-decent size. Enough to give Vijay the rose instead of Jules and for him to be mildly impressed.

Vijay of George Michael stubble. Of banter and winks and giant man hugs. Of my left hand. He's close to exalted. A man confident in his existence, beloved and adored. The type of man who occupies the back row in lecture halls and is so regal taking a shit, he leaves the stall door cracked open. Vijay of Danny, hey Danny. You on for Silence of The Lambs? I pass a sliver of his jeans around his ankles, his fresh Reeboks. At the sink, I wash my hands and he's still going. Vijay of there's this one scene where Hannibal Lecter cuts off a man's face.

From the other hook, I take down the duffel coat, mam's hand stroking the cuff. She's rummaging through piles of clothes at the Welfare Board bazaar. She picks up a jacket, holds it against me checking the width of the shoulders. It reeks of cigarettes and old men. Inside there's a price tag and she puts it back down on the table. From the bottom of the pile, she pulls on a sleeve, thick fuzzy navy. In a frenzy, she's heaving and lifting, excavating the coat like it's a loved one trapped under rubble. Further inspections, testing every toggle, tugging on the leather straps, running her finger around the rim of the hood. She tells me to try it on, that she's sure this one's the right size. A woman's standing behind the table with backcombed hair and drop earrings, a woman I know as Mrs. Kaminsky, guardian of the after-school club. She nods, says what a smart coat. That she knows who donated it. That they're the type of people who look after their stuff.

“No way,” I tell mam. “I’m not wearing it.”
“You’ll be glad for it up there.”
“I look like Paddington.”

I fasten the toggles, the rose tucked in the inside pocket, squashed against my chest. I imagine leaving a trail of fallen petals in the street, a lustful man picking up the scent. Me living out my dream of meeting middle-aged men and having sex with them in the woods. At the bus stop, a child in a stroller throws a book of nursery rhymes to the ground. Her mother bends down and returns it to her daughter’s hand. It happens again. To the kid, it’s a hilarious game. Jules would be fuming. Jules of we’re at the Quayside outside the club. Men buzzing in her ear and her turning away on her heels. I motion to the bus stop across the road.
“Nope. They smell of kebabs and blow jobs.”
“It’s only ten minutes. Come on.”
“Nothing good happens on the night bus.”
“I’ll see you tomorrow. Piaget remember. Chapter 11.”

I’m on the top deck reading Piaget. Mam’s sat next to me with the university prospectus reeling off a list of reasons I should stay home. How she won’t bother me. That I can save money, get a part-time job. I should be with our own, which I interpret to mean she wants me to pair off with Suzie Goldman and be married within the year. I tell her I have to leave, that there’s more to life than these shitty flats and Aunt Reenie’s breadcrumb chicken.
The man opposite me is staring. His head is shaved clean, no trace of stubble. There’s a tattoo of a swan on the side of his neck.
“Nice coat,” he says, unzipping his bomber jacket.
“Are you taking the piss? I look like Paddington.”
“And merry fucking Valentine’s Day to you.”

I’m strutting under the arches, through the quadrangle to the Ridley building. The lampposts are decked in posters, would-be politicians vying for a spot at this year’s student conference in Blackpool. The Anti-Vivisectionists are taped under the Farmers’ Alliance. The New Christian Movement to the right of Atheists for Good. I enter the foyer of the Psychology department. Pinned to the cork boards are photocopies of a guy I know. Mark Falkner, chair of the Jewish Society. Eight of them in a grid. Sixteen vacant eyes, his pompous face multiplied. He’s running as an independent, a voice for all students. Some story about him fighting to keep a Holocaust denier out the UK. Every one of the posters is inked. A swastika here, a Yiddo there. Mam’s stood next to me tutting. You can try. You can leave but the only safe place for you is here. And what about going to gay bars, I wanted to ask. What about my hopes of a weekend away in Brighton? Can a person be safe if they’re not free?

I’m hurrying up the concrete stairs to leave the rose for Jules. Jules of we’re in the Union bar and she’s telling me about a man she met during her work experience. Handsome, a dead ringer for Luke Perry. In his thirties. Goes by Trevor. Wanted to take her away for a weekend to Brussels. Made all these big promises about what he’d do to her and how she’s never have it so good. She’d told him she wanted a trial run. To test the goods before she committed. And he was naked in front of her in the newly built Barratt’s estate, his limp dick useless.

What if she comes in early to read up on Piaget? What if she laughs in my face, or worse, what if she misinterprets the flower as desirous? I won’t be another Trevor. Duffel coat on the floor, me limp in her dorm room and her saying again function before fashion Danny.

At the top of the stairs is Vijay, with his bear paw hands and sculpted chest. With his perfectly fitting jeans and self-assurance. His effusive hello mate. The way he pulls me into his argyle jumper and holds me there for a second too long, making me wonder. After he releases me, I'm tempted to reach inside the coat and give him the rose. Vijay of I hold the flower against his heart, watch his pupils explode, and kiss him on the cheek. And he says something like, I hoped you were. And we end up back at his flat, me lifting his jumper over his head. Him biting my ear, ramming his tongue in deep. Telling me this Indian prince is going to breed your Jewish arse. Except barriers like Vijay are impermeable. He passes me on the steps and carries on down.

I'm in the common room by the mail sorter peering through angled letters. I pass the Ms and the Ns and arrive at the Ps. There's a shuffle of feet, Sally of pedantic corrections boiling the kettle and highlighting words in a textbook. It's happening. This ridiculous Valentine's Day stunt. I reach for the rose, feel a flaky petal between my fingers. Then I see her in pieces through the cubbyholes. Glistening strawberry hair upper right, a thin wrist four down, one in. The Ralph Lauren logo in the middle. White collar standing upright. Jules of the moment. Jules of Surrey, of horseback riding and European mini breaks. Jules of soft dewy lips, a Picasso in cubes.

I turn my back, the rose tucked inside the duffel coat, and I hear her talking to Libby, Libby of no consequence. And Jules says, "I thought so too. We shook on it. A thousand pounds cash. Then he backtracks and points to a scratch above the wheel. He hands me seven hundred quid for the Land Rover and says take it or leave it sweetheart. Can you believe it? The bastard jewed me. He jewed me down."

And I'm shrunk. My hand moves to my chest, to the Star of David around my neck. Mam's opposite me peering through the cubbyholes, her curly hair in a rain hood. We're at the station, checking on our train.

"You looked straight through me."

"When?"

"In the quadrangle. I waved and you ignored me, too busy fawning over some shiksa."

"You're paranoid, mam. I never saw you."

"No, you were gawping at that girl."

"What girl?"

"With the Barbour jacket and the strawberry hair."

My mam, of rubber gloves and elbows in toilets. Of jumble sale clothes and jam jars for pennies. Of covering me in towels when the meter clicked off. We're stood on the platform and she says without raising her voice, "You think I don't know, son? The way you laughed at me with your friends. The sniggering behind my back. You can try wash it off but they won't let you. They'll never let you forget who you are and where you come from."

And it's done. This terrible idea is done. Juliette call me Jules, like she's studded in diamonds, collects her mail and turns on her heels.

Neil Jacobs is a queer, Yorkshire-born writer whose fiction excavates the fault lines of class, identity, and belonging, the places where who we are collides with who we're supposed to be. His work is inventive and emotionally precise. He brings to his writing the same forensic curiosity he has spent decades applying as a psychologist, exploring why people do what they do. He lives in Provincetown, Massachusetts with his husband and cat and is currently working on his second novel.

Link

MOTHER

AVA CHARLES

Nine months of becoming a home
for someone she had never met.

Needles four times a day,
insulin marking her skin
like silent proof
of what she carried.

Four children.
Four epidurals.
Four times her body broke open
to bring love into the world.

A back that aches every day,
stretch marks that map her sacrifice
lines that whispered,
one day, this child will love you enough
to make it all worth it.

So she gave again.
Everything.
Her body,
her sleep,
her identity.

Believing this love
would finally fill the emptiness
she carried for so long.

But even here
it felt the same.

Still needed.
Still giving.
Still somehow… not enough.

Ava Charles lives in Marseille writing poems exploring longing, relationships, and the quiet gravity of ordinary moments.

A MOTHER'S COFFEE

DABNEY BALDRIDGE

A
mother
can glean
caffeine
from steam
wafting from a
fresh-made cup
undrunk, waiting
on the countertop
wishing to be
remembered.
Needs unnumbered, tasks half done, she sets
the mug of warm liquid down, like Tantalus wondering
if it will ever touch her lips. So it sits, growing cold, until a moment
of quiet when onto turn-table glass it goes with a sigh
and a prayer. Working hands rest at last, clasp- ing
the curve of ceramic, hot to the touch. After a little
while, the mug half emptied, is forgotten again cream
threatening to curdle after hours in the open air.
It seems a Sisyphean task, to finish the cup after
the sun has long since risen and past its zenith, but
a mother forges on, forever reheating the ambrosial brew
until she drags the last wakeful drop from the dregs,
thankful that though her strength is drained, she
is a well, not a cup, fed forever by the ground.

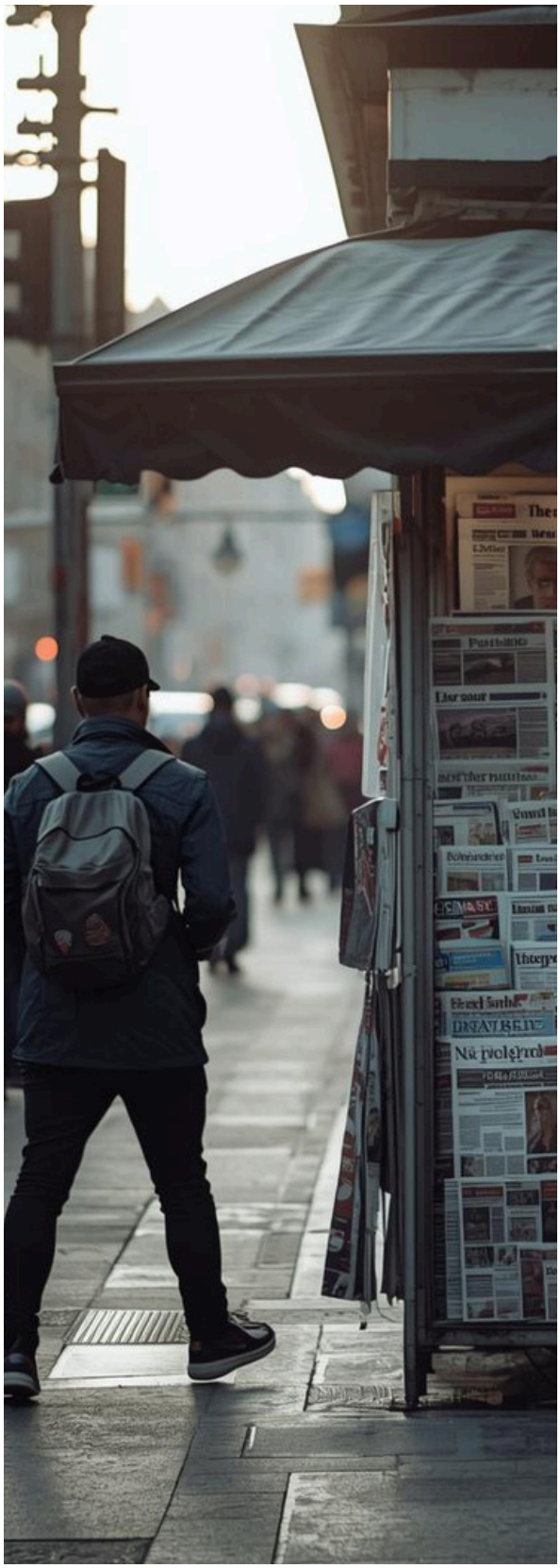
Dabney Baldridge is a busy mother of four living in Maryland who writes in the middle of life's messiness to create beauty out of chaos. Her poetry is published in or forthcoming in Bad Clown Books, Solid Food Press, Everyday Epiklesis, Calla Press, and The Way Back to Ourselves, among others. You can find more of her work on Substack, @dabneywrites.

JEALOUS

JEREMY GOTTFRIED

Jealous, because her curls bounce
in ringlets, coils, sculptures.
How, I wonder?
chemicals, a hairdresser,
or incarnated wealth,
or maybe an oral history spoken in mother daughter tongue.
Hands and care and mirrors,
her mother before her and her mother's mother,
a sacrament of wet hair, combs, keratin physics, ritual,
passed down like a folktale.

My hair is all effort, my curls crazed,
my curls crazed,
crown frizz,
mom's hair even frizzier than mine.
I am self-taught, street-hair.
I've been told I should give up hot water,
be kinder to my scalp.
That's like giving up dairy to be kinder to your gut.
No more ice cream? Imagine.
Maybe I just need to watch a tiktok.



Jeremy Gottfried is a Brooklyn-based poet and musician who releases original music under the name Jeremy Aaron. An Oberlin College alumnus, his poetry has appeared on the Rattlecast, and he currently serves as Board President of Voices in the Heights, a NYC-based music nonprofit. Link

WHEN THE HOUSE BEGAN TO BLOOM

HRIDOY KUNDU

On the third Thursday in March, the wallpaper in Eleanor Vale's dining room split open and began to grow leaves.

At first she thought it was a trick of the light. But then the seam in the wall puckered outward. A pale stem, tender as a vein, pushed through the plaster with a dry little crack.

Eleanor set down her teacup.

The stem unfurled a leaf the color of new apples.

She stared at it from the doorway, one hand still resting on the chipped blue frame, and felt not fear exactly but offense, as if the house had committed a breach of manners. Nothing living had entered these walls in years unless it could be boiled, dusted, or cut back. Her husband had liked order. Even now, eleven months after his funeral, the rooms held his preferences the way old wood holds smoke.

The leaf trembled slightly in the still air.

"No," Eleanor said.

The plant continued its small green work.

She crossed the room at once, fetched the kitchen shears, and clipped the stem flush with the wall. Sap beaded at the cut. She dropped the piece into the bin, wiped the blades, and stood watching the wound in the wallpaper.

There, she thought. Settled.

By evening, three more shoots had emerged.

One from beneath the sideboard. One through the crack where the ceiling medallion met plaster. One, offensively vigorous, directly through the seat of the mahogany dining chair no one had sat in since the condolence casseroles stopped coming.

Eleanor slept badly. The house made strange settling sounds in the dark, soft ticks and sighs like a throat clearing before speech.

In the morning the dining room smelled faintly of damp soil.

She telephoned the plumber first, then, when he laughed and said roots were outside his remit, a handyman, then a pest control company, though she could not say precisely what pest she meant.

"Well," the pest company employee said at last, "that's new."

"I don't pay people to narrate the obvious."

No broken pipe. No nest. No subsidence. No explanation that belonged to the normal world.

"It's as if," he said, scratching the back of his neck, "the house is growing it."

"Houses do not grow things."

He looked around. A tendril had wrapped itself lightly around the brass candlestick on the mantel, as if to disagree.

The employee recommended mold treatment, dehumidifiers, perhaps a priest if Eleanor was open-minded. She was not. She wrote him a check with sharp pen strokes and saw him out.

After he left, she took a hammer to the roots.

For two hours she moved room to room in old gardening gloves and sensible shoes, breaking stems, pulling up runners, prying up floorboards where green shoots forced through the seams. She was sixty-eight and not, by temperament, the sort of woman who smashed things, but rage gave her a rough, efficient strength. Pieces of plaster fell like brittle snow. Potting-earth smell thickened in the air. By dusk the hallway looked as if a riot had passed through it.

Only then did she notice the first flower.

It had opened inside the pocket watch on the mantel.
The watch had belonged to her son, Thomas. Silver, dented near the hinge. Stopped at 2:17 for twenty-six years.

Eleanor went very still.

The flower was tiny and white, with a yellow throat. It rose from the face of the watch as though time itself had put out a stem. Its roots, impossibly fine, threaded through the cracked glass.

For a moment she was not in her sitting room but back in the hospital corridor with its odor of bleach and coffee, watching a doctor approach with the careful face of a man carrying bad news in both hands. Thomas had been seventeen. There had been rain that night too. Rain hammering the windows. Rain sliding down the parking lot lights in sheets. His watch, retrieved from a plastic bag of belongings, had stopped at the instant the car folded around the oak tree.

Eleanor had never repaired it. It was not usefulness she had wanted from the thing. It was witness.

Now a white flower trembled in its center, alive and indecently delicate.

She reached out, then snatched her hand back as if the petals might burn.

“No,” she said again, but there was less authority in it now.

That night she dreamed of the house breathing.

Not metaphorically. Breathing.

The walls expanded and contracted with a slow rhythm. Floorboards rose beneath her bare feet like ribs. From the ceiling hung roots as fine as hair, swaying. Thomas walked ahead of her down the corridor, not as the broken boy from the morgue but as a child in mud-splashed wellingtons, looking over his shoulder with impatience.

Come on, he said.

When she woke, the pillow was wet.

By the end of the week, the growth had spread to every room.

Moss stitched the edges of the staircase. Ferns uncurled from the bathroom grout. Thick vines crowded the library shelves, weaving around Martin’s histories and atlases, tugging books half-free as if searching for light or language. The greenhouse smell had deepened into something wilder, layered with crushed leaf, bark, rain, and the faint sweetness of unseen blossoms.

Outside, however, the garden remained unchanged. The phenomenon was wholly interior, as if the house were digesting itself and replacing timber, plaster, and dust with a different anatomy.

Neighbors noticed, of course.

Her neighbor from next door knocked on Saturday under the pretense of returning a casserole dish from the funeral, though eleven months had elapsed and the dish had likely been hers to begin with. Eleanor opened the door just wide enough to prevent intrusion.

“You haven’t been to church,” her Neighbour said, peering past her shoulder.

“I have not burst into flames. Make of that what you will.”

The Neighbour, who possessed the stubborn charity of the devout, handed over a loaf cake anyway. Before Eleanor could close the door, a vine drifted into view behind her, looped lazily across the hall mirror, and the Neighbour gasped.

“Saints preserve us.”

“Saints were free to intervene at any earlier point in my life,” Eleanor said. “Their delay has been notable.”

By evening half the street knew. By Tuesday someone had posted blurry photographs online under the heading WITCH HOUSE? Eleanor discovered this only because the grocer’s apprentice nearly dropped her apples and asked whether it was true the plants whispered.

“They do not whisper,” she snapped.

They did, though. Sometimes at night, when the wind was nowhere outside, the leaves inside made a hushed rubbing sound like skirts passing in a corridor. Sometimes Eleanor woke certain that someone had just spoken her name from the landing.

She considered leaving.

She could sell the place, perhaps. Move into one of those brisk little flats in town where nothing old could lurk. There were women she knew who had done this after widowhood, trading staircases and attics for elevators and beige. They spoke of liberation with expressions so strained they resembled indigestion.

Eleanor pictured herself there. A kettle. A narrow bed. Walls no one had loved badly enough to haunt. The image felt less like freedom than erasure.

Instead she fetched Martin’s old ledger from the study and began to keep a record.

March 21: first stem observed in dining room wall.

March 24: flowering in Thomas’s watch.

March 26: significant spread to upper landing. Structural damage worsening. Smell not unpleasant.

The ledger gave shape to things. A lady might drown in mystery, but she could at least itemize the water.
As she wrote, memories began to intrude with the force of weeds through cracks.

Not only Thomas. Martin, too, though she had tried since his death to hold him in a neat frame: respectable solicitor, good provider, difficult man. But grief, once loosened, has poor table manners. It drags in all the uninvited details.

Martin at twenty-two, blue-suited and bright-eyed at the end of the aisle, looking as though astonishment and luck were the same thing.

Martin at thirty, dazzling and tender, reading poems in bed.

Martin at forty, silver beginning at the temples, still a charmer, still deft enough to mend a hinge, carry coal, coax the boiler through winter.

Martin at forty-eight, insisting Thomas take the car in the rain because “a boy must learn.”

Martin afterward, silent for months except when angry.

Martin grew harder with age, as if grief had calcified inside him and sharpened every edge.

Martin standing in the doorway of Thomas's room one winter evening, saying, "We cannot preserve a mausoleum forever, Eleanor," and Eleanor saying, with a violence that surprised them both, "Watch me."

So they had. For twenty-six years the room remained nearly untouched.

Now, on the twenty-seventh of March, Eleanor climbed the stairs and opened Thomas's door.

The vines had found it already.

They spilled across the threshold in a slow green tide. Leaves climbed the bedposts. Moss furred the windowsill. The model airplanes hanging from the ceiling tilted in a forested gloom. Beneath it all lingered the old impossible smell of that room: dust, paper, the ghost of teenage soap, the airlessness of time sealed shut.

At the desk, a root had pushed open the top drawer. Inside lay the things she had left undisturbed for decades: ticket stubs, a fountain pen, two smooth stones, a folded note. Eleanor recognized her own handwriting on the outside.

For later, it said.

She sat down on the bed and opened it.

The letter was one she had written to Thomas three months after his death and never buried, burned, or mailed into whatever impossible postbox mothers imagine the dead might have. In it she apologized for the last argument, the ordinary stupid one about wet towels and university applications and his habit of driving too fast even when he laughed and promised not to. She told him the house was too quiet. She told him his father had been going strange with grief. She told him she was afraid that memory was a room with no windows and she had locked herself inside.

At the bottom, in a line shakier than the rest, she had written: I do not know how to continue being your mother when you are nowhere I can reach.

Eleanor lowered the paper.

Around her, leaves moved softly against one another.

It came to her then, not as logic but as recognition, that the house was not infected, not cursed, not even haunted in the theatrical sense. It was answering something. Not a wish, exactly. An accumulation. A pressure. Twenty-six years of sealed doors, unsaid things, grief compacted into plaster and floor joists and wallpaper glue until the structure itself could no longer bear remaining unchanged.

People spoke often of bottling emotion, of storing it away. They never admitted the bottle must be kept somewhere.

The house, apparently, had been keeping it.

Eleanor laughed once, a short broken sound.

"Well," she said to the room, "that is inconvenient."

The first true catastrophe occurred two days later.

She was in the kitchen, trimming away a snarl of vine from the stove, a gunshot cracked through the hall. The front parlor wall split from dado rail to ceiling. Plaster exploded outward. Dust filled the air. Eleanor staggered back coughing as a trunk, thick as her thigh and barked like a small tree, forced itself through the wall and kept growing.

Books toppled. A lamp shattered. Another crack answered from upstairs. Then another. The house groaned all around her with the low sound of foundations renegotiating themselves.

She should have run.

Eleanor did take three steps toward the front door. Then she looked back.

The trunk in the parlor had burst directly through the cabinet where Martin kept the good crystal, the wedding silver, the deeds, the thick envelope of policies and guarantees and proofs. All the brittle apparatus of a life carefully managed. Around the wreckage the new bark gleamed wet and dark.

Another shudder passed through the floor.

Something in Eleanor, some final tether to tidiness, snapped.

"No," she said, but this time not to the growth.

To the years. To the silences. To the deathly museum the house had become under her stewardship.

She strode back into the parlor while plaster still drifted from the ceiling and seized the carved walnut cabinet with both hands. It was too heavy to lift, so she tipped it. Crystal screamed against crystal. Glass burst. Silver spilled across the rug. She pushed again until the cabinet crashed sideways and broke open like a ribcage.

There. Let it go.

She crossed to the mantel and swept down the framed wedding photograph: herself at twenty-two in satin and nerves, Martin handsome and already slightly remote. The glass shattered. She ripped the picture free, stared one strange second into those preserved faces, then fed the photograph to the split in the wall where roots writhed through lath and plaster.

More, something inside her demanded.

Upstairs she went, breathless and furious, into cupboards and drawers and locked boxes. She flung open Thomas's room and at last stripped the bed. She carried armfuls of old clothes to the landing and dropped them into the clutch of vines. She broke the sealed cartons of Martin's papers and let the pages scatter. Pension documents. Insurance forms. Receipts from years in which Thomas had still been alive. Letters Eleanor herself had sent and never seen again. The house took them all.

When finally she stopped, she stood in the center of the hall among leaf-shadow and debris, hair fallen loose, chest heaving.

The destruction was complete enough to be honest.

So was the relief.

Afterward came rain.

It drummed on the roof all night while inside the growth advanced with almost audible pleasure. By dawn the broken parlor had become a kind of indoor grove. Light filtered through fresh leaves where the wall had been. Moss covered the overturned cabinet. White flowers starred the roots. Water from a cracked pipe fed a thin runnel across the floorboards, and along it sprouted a procession of tiny ferns.

Eleanor made coffee on the one burner still functional and drank it standing barefoot on damp tile.

She expected panic, shame, perhaps the delayed arrival of sanity. Instead she felt stripped and oddly light, as if the house had broken open a part of her chest and improved the ventilation.

Her Neighbour arrived that afternoon with her nephew, who repaired roofs and owned, more valuably, a practical imagination.

He stopped in the front hall and removed his cap.

“Madre de Dios,” he said softly.

“It’s ugly in places,” Eleanor admitted.

He looked around, eyes wide not with horror but wonder. “It’s beautiful in places too.”

No one had said that yet.

Under her direction, they did not call demolition crews. They called a structural engineer from the next town, a woman with steel-gray braids and the calm of someone who had seen both fire and flood. She walked through the house for two hours, tapping beams, examining cracks, ducking beneath hanging vines. At last she stood in the parlor grove and said, “This is absurd, but not impossible.”

“Helpful,” Eleanor said.

“The new growth is acting as support in some places. Reinforcement, almost.”

“Houses cannot change load paths.”

The engineer gave her a sidelong look. “And yet.”

They shored up what needed shoring. They opened sections of roof to light. They removed truly dangerous debris and left the rest. Over the next month Eleanor’s home became a rumor, then an article in the regional paper, then a pilgrimage site for the tasteful and the foolish.

Her Neighbour began bringing cuttings and soup. Her nephew fixed windows in exchange for strong tea and permission to sit in the parlor grove with his sketchbook.

Children from the street asked if they might see the indoor tree, and Eleanor, who had once disliked sticky fingers and noise, found herself setting rules about shoes and no pulling leaves and yes, one biscuit each if you ask nicely.

Something in her life, long clenched, began to open.

Not into sweetness. She remained sharp-tongued, particular, often difficult. But difficulty with air in it is different from difficulty sealed shut. The house had taught her that. Rot comes from no circulation.

By June the transformation was complete enough to name.

The dining room no longer existed as such. In its place stood a high green chamber roofed with branches that had thrust through rafters and found sun. The staircase was bordered by living walls of ivy and jasmine. Thomas’s room became the brightest room in the house, full of pale blossoms that opened only at dusk and smelled faintly of rain on stone. The parlor tree thickened, lifted the cracked ceiling, and sent roots down through the old Persian rug into the earth beneath the house, where, at last, inside and outside met.

Eleanor moved her chair there.

Visitors asked whether she was not sad to have lost so much.

“Yes,” she said.

Because she had. The old rooms were gone. The old shapes. Many objects. The pretense that she had preserved the past by refusing to touch it. Grief had not vanished, only changed species. It no longer sat on her chest like a stone. It grew around her like weather.

In late summer, on a heat-heavy evening, she took Thomas’s watch from the mantel, where it now rested in a nest of moss. Another flower had bloomed in its place. She opened the watch and found, beneath the hands frozen forever at 2:17, a network of roots fine as lace.

“Stubborn creature,” she murmured, though whether she meant the plant, the boy, or herself she could not have said.

For the first time in twenty-six years, she carried the watch outside.

The garden was a wreck in the old sense, neglected and uneven, but not dead. Seeds blown from the house had taken in the borders. Green things unfamiliar to Eleanor’s former schemes rose between the stones. The birdbath brimmed clean after rain. At the back fence the hydrangeas, once written off, had sent up fierce new shoots from old wood.

She stood there in the dusk, hearing the house behind her breathe through open windows.

All transformations, she thought, are ugly in the middle.

People preferred the before and after because those images sat politely side by side. They skipped the sealed dark where the body dissolves. They skipped the rot, the fact that to become something else, the old self must in some real way be ruined.

No wonder everyone feared change. They mistook it for failure while it was happening.

Eleanor pressed the cold case of the watch to her palm.

“I kept him wrong,” she said aloud.

She had kept Thomas as absence, as stoppage, as the last terrible night. She had built a shrine to interruption. Love, thinking itself faithful, had hardened into preservation fluid.

“I know better now,” she said.

The next morning she did a thing that would once have seemed betrayal.

She emptied Thomas’s room.

Not of memory. Of relics.

She opened drawers. She sorted papers. She laughed at terrible adolescent poems. She cried over a science prize certificate and a ticket stub from a concert she had forgotten driving him to. She made piles: keep, give away, burn, release. She carried boxes to the charity shop. Her Neighbour took clothes for her grandson. Eleanor burned old worksheets in a metal drum at the bottom of the garden and watched the ash rise like dark moths.

By evening the room was nearly bare except for the flowering vines, the desk, the bedframe, and the window.

Light poured in unhindered.

That night she slept there.

In the middle hours, half dreaming, she felt a breeze pass over her face and opened her eyes to moonlight spread across leaves. The room no longer smelled of stopped time. It smelled alive. Somewhere in the house wood creaked, roots shifted, blossoms opened in darkness.

She was not healed. She distrusted the word. It implied a clean closure, skin knitting over with no scar. This was not that. The dead remained dead. Martin remained complicated. Thomas remained unreachable except through memory.

But she was no longer entombed with them.

In the morning, she went downstairs and found a fresh shoot emerging through the kitchen table. She laughed, genuinely this time, and fetched a larger pot.

Years later, when journalists or curious graduate students asked Eleanor Vale when precisely the miracle had happened, she never gave the answer they wanted. They wanted the first leaf, the bursting wall, the astonishing tree in the parlor.

She would shake her head.

The real change, she told them, was not when the house began to grow. Houses, like people, are always changing. Most of the time we call it decay because we cannot yet see the shape of what is replacing us.

The real change came when she stopped trying to restore what had already ended.

Only then did the thing inside the walls become something other than ruin.

Only then did destruction learn how to bloom.

JHridoy Kundu is an undergraduate student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill studying Neuroscience and Psychology. His fiction often explores grief, memory, family, and the strange emotional lives of ordinary spaces. In his writing, he is drawn to characters caught between preservation and change, especially when loss refuses to stay quietly buried.

Link

See you in the Summer!