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Low Entropy is headquartered in Kwikwetlem First Nation Territory of the Coast Salish people, and in the shared territory of the sə́lilwətaʔt̓ təməxʷ, xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Stz'uminus, Qayqayt and S'ólh Téméxw nations.

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About Low Entropy: Founded in 2015, the Low Entropy Foundation is home to free programs and events that focus on personal and community growth through empowerment, authenticity and meaningful interpersonal connections.

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Foreword

I hate to be a downer, but . . .

Optimism can be in short supply sometimes, despite the messaging of those (relentless ones) who always seem to have a smile ready for broadcast. It's pressure, and it's annoying, but good for them. Good for them.

For the rest of us, lurking in the shadows, things can sometimes (most of the time? I'm so sorry) be a bit of a slog. A drag. A chore. We plow through and we get there, and we don't want to seem ungrateful, because we are, we swear — one must be vigilant in recognition and remembrance of those who have it worse; what are you, some kind of monster? — and you're right, of course, why complain about things we can't control . . . but please, just give me one more second to pretend to be ok . . .

I lied. I don't actually hate being a downer at all.

Negativity exists, life sucks sometimes, and it is a fool's errand to attempt to juke or dodge a foggy haze. Our writers for this issue of *Likeness* have been within it, and when they tell tales of having choked down its bitter mist and survived, it becomes clear that sometimes you just squint your eyes, grit your teeth, trudge on through and see what happens next. And if wallowing in the bad means I get to hear your story as you rest your weary bones on the other side, then what's a sad song between friends?

Beautiful, is what it is.

Thank you for being here.



Editor, Low Entropy

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KATHY
WOUDZIA

Kathy Woudzia is a writer and mother of four children, the eldest one deceased. She is nana to three grandchildren. She has a background in both white-collar and blue-collar work, and is now self-employed. She considers herself a graduate from the School of Hard Knocks and wants to make the world a better place.

Out of the mouths of babes - gratitude for honesty

Kathy Woudzia

This is a story about an unforgettable experience I shared with my six-year-old granddaughter this past summer. Since my late teens, I have been a fitness enthusiast and long-distance running was my first foray into what would become a lifelong obsession with working out.

It was the beginning of grade 12 and I felt overwhelmed by my academic course load. In an effort to rid myself of an academic course, I got myself into what at first seemed like a big mistake, and something that helped me cope with the undiagnosed ADHD that I had been living with till just recently — the power of using daily high-intensity exercise.

I decided I would drop French 12 and take PE 12 instead — easy. Mr. Boyd, a tall, good looking, fit man walked into the room with a stern look on his face to give us a rundown of what we could expect from the class. He made a point of warning us the instant we were all seated and said, “For all of you who are taking this course because you think it’s going to be an ‘easy’ class, think again. We are going to be distance running every single day and our first run is going to be up the mountain behind the school.”

That was my cue to drop that class, and fast. I had enjoyed water sports, snow skiing and basketball, but I couldn’t stand track and field because I was slow at running. I hightailed it to my counsellor’s office to get back into French, but it was too late. The French teacher said I had missed too much material, but really, it was a perfect excuse to get rid of me and there was no way she was taking me back. With no options left, I showed up for my first class prepared for the worst.

When you prepare for the worst, what you’re doing is lowering your expectations down to zero.

For me, there was a zero percent chance I would enjoy running.

The first long run, up that steep incline at the beginning, was gruelling to say the least, but into the run things got a little easier. What I quickly came to realize was that the greatest thing about distance running is that it is slow and steady, not quick and explosive. That suited my body best. Because I had lowered my expectations to zero,

and was actually enjoying some aspects of running, the run didn’t seem as bad as I thought it would be.

The icing on the cake came at the end, when I felt a feeling of euphoria that must have lasted hours afterward. What I was feeling was the dopamine

I so desperately needed in my body

in order to function at a level commensurate with “normal” people. I was finally feeling something I had never felt before — balance.

Running didn’t stop when I left high school. In fact, that’s when it became deeply rooted as something that would carry me through many years going forward.

I ran throughout my first marriage to a man who was suffering from alcohol abuse and three kids. Just like clockwork, at 6:00 a.m. every morning, I would go for a 10 km run before waking the kids up for breakfast and school, and then going to work.

My running took me through my divorce when I was 31 years old. Day after day, week after week, month after month, I ran. I didn’t know it then, but it was one of the few positive ways I was choosing to cope.

At the age of 35, I decided to run a marathon — 26.2 miles — which was on my bucket list. Once I registered, I was committed. I would run longer and harder each and every day to the point where I was beginning to develop a minor stress fracture on one of my toes. The doctor strongly recommended I cancel the run. The fact that this marathon was a no-refund registration made his advice go in one ear and out the other. I finished the race fitter than I had ever been, and NEVER looked better in my entire life.

As a reward, I thought I would have a series of boudoir photos taken — another item on my bucket list. In the photos, you could see the muscle in my legs, my face radiant from the excitement of finishing the marathon. I am very proud of those photos.

Fast-forward to August 2022, when my six-year-old granddaughter was visiting with me for a week. She came across the two sided album, which contained four 5”x7” photos, and asked me who was in the photos. For fun I said it was someone she didn’t know. What I really wanted was her honest opinion about them. I asked her, “What do you think of the pictures?” Her response was blunt and to the point.



Photo
by Yuris
Alhu-
maydy

“They’re ugly.”

I was in shock, but also laughed so hard I nearly peed myself. Here, I thought I had looked my best ever, and she didn’t like a single photo.

So, I made a game of it. I said that someone at the mall gives these albums to parents who are supposed to ask their kids what’s wrong with them. The winner is the one who comes up with the best responses. We went through each one with a fine-toothed comb.

She looked at each one in detail and oddly ended up naming things she liked about them rather than things she didn’t like, finally concluding that the first three photos were actually very beautiful. Nice surprise. When we got to the last photo, she also pointed out the nice shoes and nice outfit, but with one negative. In the first three photos my hair was up, and in the last photo, it was down. To her, it looked messy. In her opinion, that’s what made the entire boudoir album ugly at first.

Ouch. Double shock.

This would have been a perfect segue into how she keeps her long hair — tangled and uncombed, most

of the time — but I decided to leave that for another time. I finally revealed that the photos were of me. By that time I don’t think she was surprised and she could see the resemblance, but she once again surprised me almost immediately afterwards. More truths to come.

She wanted to look at more photos and saw one of my ex (her grampa), who is five years older than me, and myself together. I foolishly asked, “Grampa looks older than nana in this photo, right?” She said, “No, you do, nana.” So I went into the bathroom, double-cleaned the wax out of my ears and asked her a couple more times with increasingly diminished hopes and lowered expectations. Same, no BS answer. “No, grampa looks younger.”

This was especially difficult to hear because, just earlier that day, she had spotted what looked like an 80-year-old man walking past us, and exclaimed, “Nana, that man looks just like grampa.” What? Do I look over 80 now? I’m only 60 for crying out loud. Either her dad needs to get her vision checked or I need to take a long, hard look in the mirror and make a 180° turn in my personal hygiene.

And yet, when we are together at the park, kids her age and parents continually ask me if I am her mom, which can only lead to two conclusions. Either my

granddaughter really does have vision problems — not likely — or my ex actually does look younger — good for him. I can only hope she’s erring on the side of youth, where I look like I could be her mom and her grampa looks like he could be her older brother!

I love hearing the truth because it helps me to be a better person in the long run. I will try even harder to look and feel my best, because that is whom I try to surround myself with. It is important to ask for the truth, because often people won’t give it to you. If I’m walking around with food visibly stuck in my teeth, I’d like someone to let me know to avoid embarrassment. How can you hope to improve if you’re only getting one perspective — yours?

Ask and you shall receive. Dig for the truth. It will set you free, and is a gift.

NEEMA EJERCITO Neema Ejercito is a professional writer, director and creative writing mentor. Her 3D edutainment series for beginning readers, *AlphaBesties*, is showing in YouTube Japan and Prairie Kids. When she's not writing or mentoring, she manages her household with her very supportive husband and three children.

I Like the Sound of Rain Falling Lightly

Neema Ejercito



Photo by Rodnae Productions

Like a lover lost in the sheets
looking for your navel
Like perfect-temperature congee on a nose-congested day
Like a snug spooning with your lover
getting lost in each other’s warmth

The way your daughter’s long lashes graze against your skin as her pouty lips
Kiss
you on the cheek — gentle and unexpected

Is it the gentle patter that comforts?
The soft grey dullness of the world?
The way light rain quiets some of the world’s noise but not all
because it’s still important to hear its lies

And then the rain crescendos, but ever so lightly
still
not the way the world announces itself like a blaring horn, painful to the soul

I tell you, even the crescendo of lightly falling rain is perfect
Just like nature, beating her own drum
Devil may care, she doesn’t give a damn

She
is
what
she is.

CRISTINA CRESCENZO I am just an aspiring writer who hopes her words impact someone in some way, and Low Entropy is a great place where I can use my voice!

The Search for Gratitude

Cristina Crescenzo

Photo by Jay R Alvare

I have always been a glass-half-empty kind of person, constantly searching for that other half to fill up my glass so it overflows over the rim. I think a huge reason why it has never happened is that I have never really appreciated what I have, as sad as it is to admit. I believe that many of the people in my life have known this for a long time, because they have heard me scream at the world trying to make sense of my circumstances, even though they know and I know I will never receive answers back. If there is one thing I want to make perfectly clear now to anybody who could be reading this, it's that I love the people in my life now. They are the ones who don't abandon me no matter how loud the screams get. Thus, I want them to know that I am learning to be grateful for them, it's just myself for whom I am worried I will never be grateful, because of who I am at my very core.



The funny thing is that I also know you can't change the cards you've been dealt in this world, so what is the point of screaming? Or curling up into a ball, waiting for the world to end because, though humans are prone to mistakes, being who you were meant to be isn't one of them? If I don't want to give up, I have to start searching within myself for the things that make me grateful to be who I am. A couple of years ago, my therapist made me write down the things I loved about myself to combat my insecurities, so I left my mindset and tried to become unbiased. The following is what I came up with, and these words are directly from my journal.

The date reads May 18th, 2019.

"I take pride in my empathetic heart even if that means taking on the misfortune of others, I appreciate my child-like wonder despite technically being an adult."

I go on further, stating, "I hold on to the whimsical and magical beliefs a child keeps safe inside the sparkle of their eyes, I always want to relish in those fantasies because I know that is the type of happiness that you should always hope to feel up until you are old and grey."

The last little bit of the journal entry says, "if there is one physical feature I like about myself it would be my smile because even on my worst days it finds a way to defy me and my eyes somehow follow suit and smile too

that's how I know its genuine. I can't say that there is a lot that makes up who I am but I am grateful for every piece and one day I hope to find more."

To see this three years later is kind of jarring, because now I know for certain that if I take a second and think objectively I am able to find gratitude, not just for others for who they are and what they have done for me, but also because I am Cristina Crescenzo and no one else. However, this is only the surface. There is more to discover, but I guess I will have to save that for another journal entry.

Gratitude

Cassandra Di Lalla

I am grateful
Because I am breathing
Are you grateful?
Because your heart is beating

Oxygen in
Inhalation
Carbon dioxide out
Exhalation

I feel calm
I am zen
I feel grounded
I am whole

It's powerful
To love someone
It's impactful
To be loved by the same one

Like the blood in my veins
My creativity flows
Bigger than fiery flames
My inspiration grows

I am gratified
I have a safe haven
I am satisfied
I live in a brave nation

I am grateful
Because I am alive
Is the world grateful?
Because we will all thrive

CASSANDRA DI LALLA Cassandra Di Lalla lives life purposefully. She enjoys reading, writing and mental health initiatives. She's an animal lover for life and an innovative individual always finding new ways to create.

SUJANA JEGANTHAS I am a student in university struggling with mental health issues. I self-reflect on my own experiences often, as I try to figure out my own identity. A lot of days can be difficult, but I always attempt to make small steps towards my goals.

Small Steps Matter

Sujana Jeganthas

Please note that this article discusses suicide and self-harm.

I move two steps forwards and three steps back. I can have the most amazing day for an hour and then feel the need to put myself out of my misery. There are times where I'll be able to manage my days, while other ones can feel like the end of the world. It is a constant battle with my mind and it is coping the best way it knows how.

I am diagnosed with borderline personality disorder (BPD) and generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). BPD makes it difficult for me to regulate the duration and intensity of my emotions. I feel chronic emptiness, extreme anger or other emotions that are intensified. Each day feels like two weeks, and I can't seem to understand what my body is feeling. Daily tasks that seem easy to others are a hindrance for me and I require therapy sessions to manage these symptoms. People have always stigmatized my mental illness, telling me that I should hide my emotions

or that I'm using them as an excuse.

What people don't realize is that it is not a choice, it is something that is happening, and I now need to find a treatment for this diagnosis. Mental illnesses are often, but not always, rooted in more than one

cause, including genetics, upbringing, culture and other factors.

GAD causes me to worry, even when I have no reason to feel on edge or tense. I typically have irrational thoughts and trouble sleeping. These thoughts tend to spiral and make it difficult for me to perform well in school. I excessively study, and even a grade that seems above average to my family is not enough for me. There's always a voice playing devil's advocate,

constantly telling me I'm not enough.

I remember seeing a social worker for the first time in grade 8. She asked me if I read about the anxiety disorder online and started imitating the symptoms. This is a common myth that many people believe to be true. You can certainly be influenced into believing you have it, but you wouldn't qualify for a diagnosis.

I have attempted suicide four times throughout my life; I didn't think I would make it past high school graduation, and I am now well on my way into university. I am alive today because of my support system, but there are many struggles that I am still learning to overcome. I didn't think I would write

“one of the hardest parts about living with this disorder is the constant criticism in my head”

about my adversities, but I realized that there are people who may not have the courage to talk about their own journey. So, for those who may not have the voice to speak, I am writing in hope that you will find the strength to ask for what you need to heal. Whether that's asking for space from negative people in your life or saying no to things that conflict with your own self-care needs, do not be afraid to put yourself ahead of others.

I feel like one of the hardest parts about living with this disorder is the constant criticism that lives in my head after even the simplest of mistakes. I always feel the need to point out my own flaws whenever I get the chance. A second challenge I am struggling with are behaviours and thoughts related to self-harm and/or suicide. Some days I can hate myself so much that I feel the need to hurt my own body. Other days are easier, but these intrusive thoughts are always in the back of my head. It can be painful, but I force myself to push forward even when I don't want to. If I can keep waiting 24 hours before self-harming, I will experience something new that will motivate me to keep going.

Days pass by and I still can't seem to figure out what I am most interested in. It feels like an endless maze that has no exit. I try to survive some days, and on other days I feel like I have a little bit of energy to find something I like to do. And that is always okay. Be proud of yourself for getting out of bed this morning or eating a bite of food.

Healing is not linear, but you will grow and evolve despite what your inner voice may tell you.

I am glad that you chose to be here, even though you have every urge to leave this world. Take pride in the choices that will lead you to a healthy and flourishing life. Once you start with yourself, everything will eventually fall into place. Self-love is a process that can take years of practice, so be patient until you learn to love.

TAJPREET GREWAL Taj is an aspiring writer who has recently begun to share his passion and knowledge of yoga with others. He has worked in the medical field for the past several years but is now hoping to bring those experiences and lessons into his new position with Low Entropy and beyond.

Cruising Through Life

Tajpreet Grewal

I used to be a guy who would cruise through life
Never too high nor ever too low
Some would call it mediocrity
I call it a life of silent desperation

Never had a silver spoon given to me since birth
Nor have I had the harsh traumas that deeply scar
Only felt a constant state of being eternally bland

Was I even conscious of it?

I could put on a smile for others but never for myself
Often the self-talk was negative
Yet I exhibited a demeanor of never-ending joy for others
With a never-ending loop of toxicity for myself

I feared if I spoke my truth no one would understand
So I kept to myself, stuck in a void of my own creation
I tried to fill it with superficial distractions
Those only helped to hide it deeper
I would fantasize about the life I wanted
Never once did I try to truly achieve it

Until one day when I got so low
So low that I felt like I could go no more!

I asked myself why tonight do I feel so low?
When it was just yet a week ago
I was cruising through life, not a worry in sight

I had to look within
So very deep within
Then I saw it!

I can fly, so very high
That I can touch the sky

It was only then I began to do what I needed
In this newfound self the fantasy was becoming a reality

Now I soar through life
Seeing all the beauty that it provides

So you may ask me how?
How does one push past these negative thoughts?
I can tell you that I still also get low but now I know
It's not forever

You must find discipline, balance, serenity but
Most importantly you must find
The love for yourself

ANNA MAL-
LIKARJU-
NAN

I have been writing creative and technical articles and stories for several years. My writing is inspired by nature, my own personal journey, and the teachings of great sages and teachers. Originally from South India, I have lived in Europe and the U.S. Montreal, Canada has been home for the past 19 years.

In a Garden

Anna Mallikarjunan

Photo by
Milton
Wiklund

I t is a winter's afternoon in Montreal, the trees are bare, the temperature is well below freezing, but the sun is shining, soft clouds float leisurely across blue skies and there is a light wind in the air. The sun casts shadows on tree trunks and you can see so clearly the striations along their dark barks. You forget the season, yourself, and the world. That one living, breathing tree captivates your senses and your attention. Every movement of the twigs hanging off ends of branches catches your eye and captures your heart. You are able to look without any worry, without any thought, to suspend oneself so to speak, so that

something primordial in you can see.

Miracles then become common. Every sunset, which draws a day into itself, brings forth a new world and rejuvenates your being. There is enchantment in the night sky, even if all you see is the moon and a few stars. Simply to realize that you are a part of something so immense and magical and that your independent existence is but a fleeting, unsure, even tiresome thing, is the beginning of a miracle. There is wisdom in forgetting oneself and surrendering to the beauty of the natural world, for in nature is an unmistakable order and sanity.

Along the lane of memories of pre-COVID years lie many blessed hours spent at the Jardin botanique de Montréal. Birds of many feathers arrive in spring to make their homes in the garden until the cold weather sets in. They share the space with sever-

al other species that stay through the year, braving harsh winters. In this sanctuary, I once listened to the song of a whistling thrush as it sat alone on a branch of a pine, looking at its skies above. I witnessed the migratory departure of over 50 geese as they lifted off in groups, in beautiful orchestration. I watched a blue heron fish, its stalking movements resembling the enchainements of a graceful dancer. I have been mesmerized by the scent of lilacs and peonies, by the bloom of roses and the pristine beauty of water lilies and lotuses. The garden is also home to a family of foxes. To come upon fox cubs playing together in an afternoon, as they pester their mother for affection and attention, is truly



endearing. Then there have been a few special encounters that merit anecdotal evidence.

It was an evening in spring, lilacs were in bloom, their scent filling the air. Foliage was of the characteristic young green of spring. Dusk was approaching and the light was starting to fade, but there were still a few visitors around. A mother mallard, with her four ducklings, was settling herself on a rock along the banks of one of the ponds. Not surprisingly, the sight attracted some children who wanted to go near them. The mother couldn't relax, you could see that she was debating constantly whether to return to the water or stay on the shore. I sat with a friend on a bench not far from her. A few minutes later, she got up decisively and walked towards us with her little ones. She settled herself and them in the space on the ground between us, just under the bench. Soon, they were asleep. It was as if

she had entrusted her little ones and herself in our care

so they could rest. The children retreated politely. We stayed with the mallards until all the remaining visitors had left the vicinity. As we walked away from the sight of them alone under the bench, you could sense that an invisible net of protection had descended on them.

Nestled between the First Nations Garden and the Alpine Garden is a small grove of trees. A narrow, gurgling stream runs through it. It is well hidden, surrounded by pine and other tall leafy trees. Frequented mainly by a few bird enthusiasts, this grove is home to several species during the year — chickadees, robins, nuthatches, finches, cardinals and once every so often the blue jay. In this alcove, birds are less coy, more expressive. One can feed chickadees and nuthatches with seeds and nuts, watch robins having their baths in the waters of the stream, and be wistful about squirrels and birds competing for nourishment. Chickadees and the boisterous, red-breasted nuthatch will often perch on your head and shoulders as they wait their turn impatiently for a place on your palm.

It was early one spring and most of the regular bird enthusiasts were yet to begin their sojourns. As usual, I fed several chickadees and a white-breasted nuthatch. A cardinal couple was flitting about, adding a splash of beautiful red to the just emerging foliage of the grove. The northern cardinal, I have found, is a genteel bird, resembling royalty, particularly the male, which never accepts seeds

while you are in his view. If you throw some seeds on the ground and then walk away, he'll wait a respectable interval, and once he senses you are not nearby, hop by to take a few seeds. The female is a little less fussy and willing to approach you at a safe distance. Only this day, quite unexpectedly, a male flew onto a branch very close to where I was standing, less than an arm's distance. I had never seen a cardinal so up close; it was remarkable. Tentatively, I put out my hand and asked politely if he'd like what I had to offer. To my amazement, he accepted my invitation. He flew onto my hand and slowly, deliberately, ate a few seeds, looked around, and then flew away. That such trust was built in such a short time was a cherished blessing.

The Arboretum at the botanical garden is truly an oasis in the city. It is just as intimately precious to me as a temple would be to an ardent devotee, or the banks of a holy river to a pilgrim. Its enclave of maples provides protective shade in the summer and a brilliant canopy of colours in the autumn. The pines bring the forest to the town and hawks perch high on their branches, chattering, reminiscing perhaps with the trees about their times in the wild. The Arboretum begins just north of the rhododendron garden. This grove of lindens is usually swarming with squirrels. They dot the entire landscape with their characteristic hops and leaps, scampering gleefully. But over two summers, it played host to a small group of very special guests, who had travelled to the city all the way from the meadows of the Laurentian Mountains. It was a fine summer afternoon when I came upon a flock of seven sheep — one ram, three ewes and three lambs. On that very first day, one of the ewes approached me and let me pet and hug her, while she nuzzled and sniffed in turn. She then sat down beside me and ruminated quietly. Over subsequent visits, we became quite familiar with each other. And on some occasions, if I was sitting next to her, she would put her head on my lap, a gesture which brought an

indescribable safety and joy.

The entire flock endeared themselves to visitors in a very short time, providing abundant affection effortlessly. It seemed in their very nature to bring a sense of calm and joy around. A pair of the lambs were twins, a brother and sister. They were gentle, docile and naïve, but the ram developed formidable horns as the two of them grew. Their mother still fed them and oh, how patient she was. For although the youngster's horns injured her hind leg badly, she

Photo by
Unsplash



continued to provide for them. The shepherds had a schedule planned for the flock each day, but the flock had their own laws about where and when to graze. They were mostly encouraged to eat the grass, but naturally they preferred the plants and low-hanging leaves of trees, which were, for one reason or another, forbidden fruit! They dictated their nap times and were clear in their demands for treats of vitamins and leafy greens. They protested passionately at being cleaned and groomed. Sometimes it was a

battle of wits between them and the shepherds, but you could not fail to notice a strong prevailing bond of mutual love and understanding. Each interaction with these woolly friends left a deep imprint in my heart and mind. Their sanity, warmth and childlike innocence never fail to tug at the heartstrings.

What I learn repeatedly from time in nature is
how much I depend on it at every level of existence.

The fact that it is the earth which feeds, nourishes and protects us is easily forgotten. As city dwellers, our lives are at a distance from it, shrouded from it by many layers of physical and mental structures. But there is something else you notice in the presence of creatures that live in the wild. Theirs is a real life, they have not lost their fundamental connection to the earth, and perhaps they know intuitively the danger of violating the laws of nature.

In the yearning for peace, clarity and happiness, we try so many things. All systems, traditions, distractions and practices may quieten the mind temporarily, but in the long run make us dull. In the words of the sage and teacher, J. Krishnamurti:

“The more you know yourself, the more clarity there is. Self-knowledge has no end — you don’t come to an achievement, you don’t come to a conclusion. It is an endless river. And as one studies it, as one goes into it more and more, one finds peace. Only when the mind is tranquil — through self-knowledge and not through imposed self-discipline — only then, in that tranquility, in that silence, can reality come into being. It is only then that there can be bliss, that there can be creative action.”

Before the mirror

Success Oseahumen



Standing before the mirror,
All I could see was me only.
Trying to get it right,
Still can’t see clearly.

Now encamped in the room,
Dark and filled with emptiness.
Trying to seek help,
Only to get an echo of the previous.

Like corpses in the yard,
With stiffness and silence.
Motionless and without emotions
I became a captive of my own self.

A war in the mind I can’t seem to help.
Moving clockwise and anticlockwise,
Like a confused bird hovering in the air.
Oh yes! A hawk I have become.

Still before the mirror, I began to ask;
What, when, where, why and how come?
That which became a burden to me.
My thoughts became that movie waiting to be launched.

A closer look at the mirror,
I thought of how,how,how . . .
How I grabbed my phone one morning,
Searching for that very book.
I thought of how I scrolled down my timeline.
I thought of how I saw that very request;
I couldn’t help but stare . . .

SUCCESS OSEAHUMEN I am Success Oseahumen, popularly known as Sucisung. I am a beauty queen, breast cancer awareness ambassador, fashion model, script writer, songwriter, poet and vocalist. I am a Nigerian.

Like a fire alarm system, my heart began to race.
A thief, I began to peep through.
A second glance, I thought of that precious stone.
“This could be that precious stone”, I said to myself.
Like a miner, I grabbed that which I called “my Precious.”

Seconds crept into minutes, minutes into hours waiting for my Precious.
Looking left and right, like a child learning to cross the road.
A buzz from my Precious seemed like a three-course meal,
With so much anxiety I waited patiently for my Precious daily.

A friendly look at the mirror, I thought of . . .
I thought of my dark and gray days my Precious turned into laughter,
Those blazing trails and landmarks of ancient returns.
A memory of inevitable value.

The ice water I was like unto,
Sitting beside the distant river.
With so much hurt and pain growling in my heart.
Where is my Precious? A question I couldn’t answer.

My heart heavy like that Romanian block.
“My Precious!” I would cry out loudly, but to no avail.
Those questions kept ringing in my head,
I became a synonym for depression.

My mirror became blurred. “Mirror, mirror on the wall!” I cried out.
Shutting my eyes for a minute, I began to calm my nerves.
Isn’t that my Precious coming from afar? I thought to myself.
Like the prodigal father, I leaped for joy.

Graciously looking at my mirror,
I began to think of how I almost gave up on my Precious.
Soon my mind began to format those memories.
“My Precious, oh my Precious,” I sang and smiled along.

Now looking confidently at the mirror,
With a heart of gratitude I say to my Precious;
“Thanks for in-depth conversation
That stimulates my brain;
For silly times we laugh and cried together;
For those things I can’t explain;
For looking past my flaws and faults;
For always reminding me of my self-worth;
For taking me down memory lane.
Thank you for all that you do,
My irreplaceable Precious

GURLEEN KAUR BAJWA Both a prolific reader and writer, Gurleen likes living inside exciting stories. She’s working on making her own the most exciting of all.

Spring Snow

Gurleen Kaur Bajwa

“Can I get a photo?”

A slow-spreading Cheshire cat grin crept across Beckham’s visage, both arrogant and self-satisfied. Three minutes ago, he had made a wager with Leo, drummer of quickly diminishing rock band SKY, on the likelihood of supermodel Mia Donovan approaching their table. By the time he’d turned away from Leo (who muttered something rude under his breath) Beckham’s smile had morphed into a kinder, friendlier one for Miss Donovan.

“Hey — are we going to get more drinks?” Hudson asked once their female company had disappeared, the actor throwing back his head for his (sixth? Seventh?) shot of the night.

“I thought you’d never ask,” Leo said excitedly, flagging down the waiter who had been circling the rented-out floor. “Anyone else down for another round? It’s on Beckham’s tab.”

Beckham tuned them out, leaning over the VIP floor’s railing to peek at the masses haphazardly dancing and stumbling to the club’s loud pounding music under flashing neon lights. The recent title



Photo by Troy T

track from Beckham’s album, in whose honor tonight’s party was happening in the first place, had started playing. At this point Beckham was hoping he would never have to hear the irritatingly catchy tune again in his life.

“HEY!” Nile, lead guitarist of SKY, clapped a hand on his shoulder, appearing out of seemingly nowhere. Beckham had to strain to make him out over the music, even as he shouted directly into his ear. “WANNA SKI?”

Beckham turned to look at him, Nile’s grin infectious as he jerked his head slightly toward the bathrooms.

Beckham returned the sentiment with a wider grin. But he didn't get far.

"Where are you going?"

The voice and grip on his arm were both much too familiar to mistake. The effect of Jun's presence was almost immediate as Beckham could feel the mood sour, the small thrill of happiness that had started slowly dissipated to annoyance. He turned to face him.

"You have an early morning recording tomorrow."

Jun looked out of place and severely mis-dressed for the scene, and he spoke in probably the most smug and degrading tone Beckham had ever heard — humiliating in a way only Jun could make him feel. He could see the rest of the group watching them over sips of vodka and faltering small talk, even though they acted disinterested. It was remarkable how silent it could feel with the music still blasting at a hearing-loss level.

"You're free to leave," Beckham said, his voice light. "Seeing as you weren't invited in the first place."

Jun's expression was unreadable, which was strange because it had never been unreadable.

"This 'afterparty' of yours was supposed to end three hours ago."

"Only you believed that."

"Beck—"

"Push the recording."

Jun grit his teeth, visibly struggling to not explode on him.

"You know that's not an option."

"Make it an option then."

Jun met his gaze for a long second, almost looking like he was in disbelief, before his grip slackened, and he turned away in silence with a shake of his head. Not exactly storming off, since it was hard to hear his footfalls in the club, he didn't look back either.

Beckham knew it shouldn't have . . . but it got to him. In a strange, unexplainable way, a prickling, irritable

sensation under his skin whispered to him to punch Jun straight in the face.

"Your babysitter seems a little pissed," Nile drawled. Other voices surrounding him echoed their agreement.

"What is with his inferiority complex?"

"Honestly, he's been petty and jealous since I met him."

"I'll be back," Beckham heard himself say. The others must have said something back, but he didn't hear with the blood boiling loudly in his ears.

"Hey!" he shouted, as the backdoor slammed behind him and Jun barely steps in front. His voice came out much louder than it needed to on the abandoned street.

"What?" was Jun's response.

The rain picked up slightly, until Beckham had to blink it out of its eyes. With all the alcohol flowing through his blood, Beckham would have very little recollection of how the conversation escalated from there into a shouting match, their voices echoing off the walls around them, wrapped in old accusations that had never meant anything, and hypotheticals that would never happen.

"Those guys? In there?" Jun snorted, forcing a laugh that was the furthest thing from genuine. "Wake up Beck! Please! They don't care about you. They don't even know you!"

"They know me a lot more than you do!"

Jun scoffed, hair laid damp down on his forehead.

"Do you even know you?" he asked sadistically. "You reinvent yourself every two days to become whatever anyone wants you to be. You're a chronic people pleaser and they know it, the label knows it, and I know it. **"You're pathetic."**

Beckham flinched.

"Pathetic," he echoed. The anger bubbled over into every word he never would have said.

"Pathetic. Okay. You know what's *pathetic*? The highlight of your career is singing on my demo tracks."

Jun's response died in his throat and his body went rigid. The sharpness and defiance leaked out of his eyes. Stripped off its complexity, the statement sounded vulgar and pitiful. That was the thing about knowing someone for much too long — they knew the places that hurt the most.

"It is not my fault you failed." Beckham's voice was lowered to barely above a whisper, as if aware himself on some level that the words weren't meant to be said out loud. The silence after that stretched impossibly long.

"You know what," Jun exhaled, his breath hanging in the cold winter air. He shook his head, looking exhausted.

A part of Beckham cowered from that emotion.

What was he exhausted with? Him?

"I'm done. I'm so done. I'm done chasing after you at 3 a.m. parties, waking you up out of hangovers, covering for you when you mess up — I'm just *done*."

"I'm the one who's done with you," Beckham sneered, even as if he felt like he'd dissociated from his body, floating further and further away from the conversation on autopilot. Jun was walking away, and he had to shout the last few words in a desperation to reach him. "Go get your clout from somewhere else — WE'RE OVER!"

By the time Beckham was back inside the club, the noise flowing over him like a rushing river, the liquid courage had disappeared. In a darkened hallway alone, his finger hovered over Jun's contact, a childhood picture smiling back up at him. The screen timed out on him, going dark, leaving him staring back at himself.

It was an action he grew an addiction to over the next few days, resisting but then repeating anyways. When the weeks turned into months it became an impulsive habit he hardly noticed anymore. The anger had molded itself into regret, but by the time his ego had wilted enough to allow him to go any further, the number had been disconnected.

The memories returned too — they were cruel that way. The more time that passed, the more vividly he remembered them, curling around his eyes and ears

like poison ivy, suffocating and invading his dreams and nightmares alike. The months melted into years and even the despair and desperation numbered to the point of indifference. But then he'd think, just for a moment, that he saw him across the street, at the studio, in the crowd of shuffling faces at a concert, and he would be right back to where he started — Jun smiling up at him, strumming the guitar on top of the high school cafeteria table kindly, always so kindly. Laughing at his nonsensical lyrics. The days when Beckham had sworn up and down that no one had a voice like Jun — that the boy was destined for greatness.

"You're the star, Beck," Jun had always said, resting his cheek on his hand. "Not me."

Beckham thought about the years that would come. When everyone had moved on from him — the world, the friends, the spotlight. He thought about when he'd be left all alone. It would be into that world, the one that had forgotten all about Beckham, that Jun would walk back into, sit down across him randomly one day at a coffee shop in Paris, in a coincidence that only the deities above could have arranged, with the same shimmering smile that Beckham had (almost) forgotten. And they'd talk and joke about their future, their past and everything in between.

But Jun didn't come back. The realization eventually came to Beckham that he wasn't going to, either.

And then Beckham's darkened, mournful memories dazzled brightly, fonder and lit with a whimsical tone, soundtracked with sparkling laughter and excited shouting. Days in playgrounds, libraries and recording booths. Beckham sat in that cafe in Paris, sipping on a warm drink and watched the snow fall outside the windows. He recalled that one winter day just like this one, decades ago, when a 10-year-old boy with a kind smile had first met him. Beckham felt grateful for that day, even if the boy had eventually faded with the melting winter snow, making way for spring.



Photo by Matheus Cenali

PRISCILLA
WIREDU

I am a 20-something individual who has a craft in writing. I am currently writing a horror novel and have had some of my works read at the Canadian Writers Summit. This is an unpublished work that was written as part of a university assignment.

Look for the Helpers

Priscilla Wiredu

She was 21, fresh out of university. With a bachelor’s degree in social science, she was hoping to at least find a job suitable for what she had learned. She had gotten a summer job at Canada’s Wonderland, working as a retail salesperson in the KidZville area.

It was a hot June day, and people were hustling and bustling about. She was speaking with her supervisor, getting rid of some garbage when it happened.

She looked up and saw everyone in the immediate area frozen, staring at something. She walked over to her supervisor, who was talking on a walkie-talkie.

Her supervisor was alerting emergency services. Someone had fallen and had suffered a grand mal seizure.

Not understanding why everyone was just staring, she asked the supervisor if she could assist, since she was certified in CPR and first aid. She was given the go-ahead.

She ran over and saw two individuals — a nurse and a doctor — already tending to the man. He had hit his head hard, and had a bloody gap on his forehead.

She carefully positioned the man’s head so he wouldn’t swallow his tongue or bite it off. He was breathing now, but in giant gasps. Someone offered a baby wipe for his head. She took it and carefully dabbed at the wound, but the blood had coagulated already and there was not much else to do but make sure he didn’t injure himself further.

EMS arrived and he’d regained consciousness. They told him he’d had a seizure. A park manager observing the whole thing asked her for her name and praised her for her bravery, which she attributed to common sense and quick action.

She smiled lopsidedly.

“Priscilla.”

Her bravery did not go unnoticed that day. Later on, as she was taking a break, she noticed a little girl looking at her. She smiled, and the girl smiled slightly back, in awe.

Priscilla remembered what Mr. Rogers said about times of trouble: “Look for the helpers.”

Gratitude

Alexis King

Photo by
Patrick
Tomasso

Sometimes having gratitude can be hard because of life's twists and turns. It can be harder than we think, and being grateful isn't always the easiest thing to do. Many of us know what having gratitude is, but oftentimes get confused. I just learned what gratitude is not. Gratitude is not

- Forcing positive emotions (aka toxic positivity) or
- Telling ourselves that others have it worse.

These are two things that I always do in trying to make myself feel better, but in the long run, doesn't work as well as I think it will. The twists and turns in life and the bad things that happen to us cloud our minds, creating dark days that make us forget that no matter what is happening, there is always something for which to feel gratitude.

What am I grateful for? I am grateful for many things, but the things I'm most grateful for have always been the small things in life, like the roof over my head, the food I can eat, my family and, most importantly, just being able. Being able to walk, run, sit, go for walks, speak, drive, listen, smell and hear is such a blessing.

What abilities do I have that I'm grateful for?

1. One of my abilities is the ability to never give up. Giving up doesn't come easy for me and honestly, it should. Having that ability to continue fighting for something is one that I am proud of. There have been so many times when giving up felt like the right thing to do, but I kept at it, especially if it was a dream or a goal that I have or had. In most cases I've paid the price for it, but the reward for not giving up has always been better than the sacrifice I had to pay for it.
2. Listening. Now this one I'm still working on, but I like listening to other people. I want them to feel heard when they are talking to me and I am doing a whole lot better at it than I ever did before. I learned that I



was good at listening when I picked up books about things that had nothing to do with me or my specific upbringing, but I was willing to listen and read them anyway. Although I have a lot of work to do, I have learned that I am on a good path and that the journey ahead should be good, and for that I am grateful.

I am a very passionate person. When I think about three words to describe myself, I would use self-driven, authentic, and open-minded. Self-driven because I always push myself to start and finish something that I want, I'm never forced into it by others. I don't depend on others to give me a reason for doing, my motivation simply comes from within, from my interests, values and passions. I try not to let others project onto me what they think I should do.

What made me laugh or smile recently?

Recently I had a conversation with an older man about his hometown, New York City. He was a proud Puerto Rican from the Bronx. During our conversation, he shared information about Puerto Rican food and his life growing up in New York, and something that stood out to me was the story about his grandfather. His grandfather was a chef on a ship. He had never been on that ship with him, but he remembered the memories. It was at that moment

that I realized that food was very important to him and his family, and had a strong history with them. Throughout this conversation about food, rice and coconut milk were what stood out to me the most. I had never tried to cook rice with coconut milk, and the way he spoke about it, with the details that he used, made it sound so good and sold it to me. Now it's something that I have to try one of these days.

Through those memories, he also expressed the important roles of both of his grandmothers. Family sounded like the opening of flowers to him when he spoke proudly about those New York streets, how connected he was with his family and how proud he was of them. He explained how different people spoke different Spanish, like the Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and Colombians, and told me how to spot the differences between the tones of each of them.

This conversation lasted for about an hour, and I learned so much from it. I fell in love with culture a few years ago, so every chance I get I take the opportunity to learn, whether it's from a book, movie or directly from a person. At the end he taught me some more things, like how they flirt in New York and the difference between respectfully and disrespectfully flirting in Spanish, which has always been a sexy language. We wrapped up the last few minutes with him telling me how he has changed from when he first moved from New York to Minnesota, and how the state of Minnesota changed him, from not cursing anymore to how he doesn't even listen to hip hop because it always influences him the wrong way. The story started with him and his girl going into Walmart when he first came into town, and the conversation he had that day with an employee is what changed him.

All of this made me smile and feel happy because within that quick hour I realized something that actually made me happy was having a conversation about culture and different things that I don't know about. Meeting people from all different backgrounds and learning about their food, culture and how they love makes me not just externally happy, but internally happy. That day I found one of the things that makes me happy, and for that I am grateful!

What about my surroundings?

My surroundings have taught me that you don't deal your own cards in life, and that sometimes you have

to deal with the things that you are handed and get help when needed.

I'm grateful for my mother and her strong efforts of being a black woman in this country. All that she has had to deal with, and trying to take care of all four of her babies alone, is no easy feat. No matter what kind of obstacles were thrown her way, she always came through and took care of us when we needed to be taken care of. My neighborhood taught me that success can be all around you, it doesn't have to always be money and expensive things. Success can simply be your health and still having your parents around and healthy, having a warm home with heat and AC when you need it, and having a full tank in your car to get you from A to B to C. Success has different definitions for each person, and if I'm honest, I am already successful because I have all of that and more.

Who do I appreciate?

I appreciate my sisters. My oldest sister raised me and is 100% the reason why I am the young woman I am today. She helped me through school, with my hair and made sure I had fun at all my birthday parties, even if I wasn't really having fun, she made sure to still do things for me, and I hope one day she knows that I know, and that I saw EVERYTHING that she did for me.

As far as my little sister, when I look at her I see a different young woman (she's 20) than I was and I like that for her. She's smart, willing to work and loves working, and has a good head on her shoulders. I'm grateful that she is the baby of the family, because it shows the strength of my mother. My little sister has taught me that with the right mindset, anything can be done, and that when you want something, to go out there and get it and not to wait on anyone to come and hand it to you.

I am so grateful for all the things that I have mentioned above and I will never take them for granted, no matter how hard life gets.

Carol

Lynlee Tabia

Photo by
Aldi H.

Carol was admitted to the long-term care facility due to her progressing dementia. She was my neighbor for the longest time. We spent lots of time talking in her garden and she mostly shared her life experiences. She is the same age as my mother. Her daughter was about my age, so I am claiming that Carol was my second mother. Her family came to visit more frequently when her diagnosis was worsening.

Memories

Looking back one spring day, Carol knocked on my door. She brought with her a plant with a name glued to the vase. She gave it to me as a present. It was called “Pachira tree,” or commonly called the “good luck” or “money” tree. The plant was so beautiful, it had long, strappy green leaves. I was delighted and elated to re-



ceive the gift from my neighbor. I promised her that I would take good care of the plant.

Her house was surrounded with beautiful flowers and plants, all distinct and unique.

Another special gift I received from Carol was learning that she could play the piano. A lot of times, I could hear her playing a variety of songs, mostly lullabies.

So Carol was not just a plant lover, she also could play the piano flawlessly and the melody was perfect and heavenly.

Life was normal. Summer and fall passed and then came winter, but something was missing. I hadn’t heard from my neighbor for quite some time. One day, I was informed by her granddaughter that my lovely Carol had a bad fall that caused a hip fracture. Another horrific revelation was that Carol was diagnosed with dementia that was advancing quickly.

She could no longer identify her or the other members of the family.

One day, I went to visit Carol in the facility. She was sitting in the hallway together with the other residents. I was looking at her expression, it was like she was asking me, “Why am I here? I want to go home, can somebody tell me where my home is?” My heart broke with grief and despair.

“even though she could not remember my name, she remembered my face”

I was heading toward her in such a way that she could see me coming. I stole her attention, she was looking in my direction,

her expression was blank and empty.

I was looking straight into her eyes, giving her the chance to recall and recognize me, but it was a failed attempt. For the next few moments I just spent time sitting beside her, initiating conversation that might enable Carol to recall specific events. Some were successful, but mostly not.

On that same particular day, I witnessed another resident celebrating her birthday. To my surprise, they asked Carol to play the piano with a happy birthday song. How did they know that my Carol could play the piano? Oh well, when one is admitted to a long-term care facility, I guessed that all sorts of detailed information was collected.

There she was, she touched the piano keys smoothly, played the harmony and did it all effortlessly. Everybody clapped their hands, smiling and singing along. I was astonished by the performance of my lovely Carol. Despite her dementia, she could play the piano keys perfectly and sounded so heavenly that everyone fell quiet, so focused on listening. This was the harmony everyone needed to listen to. I was so proud of my Carol.

I did not realize the time spent with Carol would be the most rewarding feeling from that day. There

were old family photos on her room wall, she could recognize some of them, but mostly she gave me a blank stare. Giving her ample time to express her thoughts and emotions helped her regain some of her memories.

Realization

“Those with dementia are still people and they still have stories and they still have character and they are all individuals and they are all unique. And they just need to be interacted with on a human level.”
— Carey Mulligan

It is imperative for everyone to understand the disease called dementia. It is a regression of one’s memory. There are multiple factors that cause it. It can be hereditary or it can be caused by the environment, depression or cardiovascular disease.

I went home that day exhausted, but there was a smile in my heart. I saw my Carol and I was glad she had a little bit of memory of me. In a span of three hours, she asked my name nine times. But even though she could not remember my name, she remembered my face.

I pledged to myself to visit Carol as long as I was able.

May We Always

Neema Ejercito

May we always have just enough
Just enough food to savour each bite
Just enough water to find it sweet
Just enough to wear to enjoy the weather
Just enough house to take care of it all
Just enough work to know rest
Just enough rest to be productive
Just enough company to enjoy each moment
Just enough silence to listen

To the universe, to ourselves, to each other

Just enough noise to enjoy
Just enough peace to act
Just enough to do to remember why

Just enough sadness to move past it
Enough anger for injustice to do the right thing
Enough happiness to share it
Enough fear to rise above it
Enough doubt to trust it

May we always be enough
Be enough to know our worth
Be enough to go where we're needed
Be enough not to compare
Be enough to remember we matter, we count, we dare

May we make enough count.

Be.

Enough.

