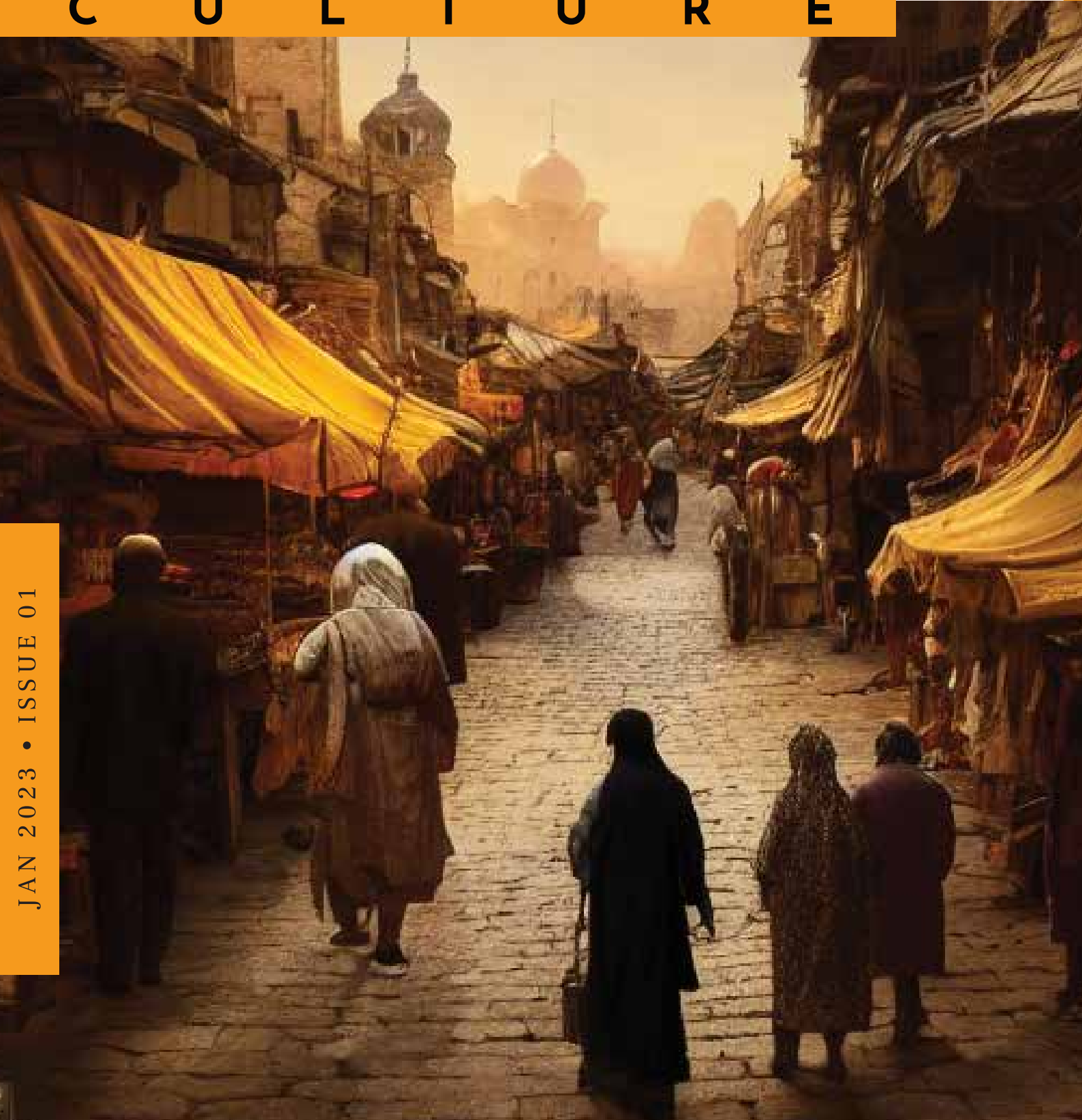


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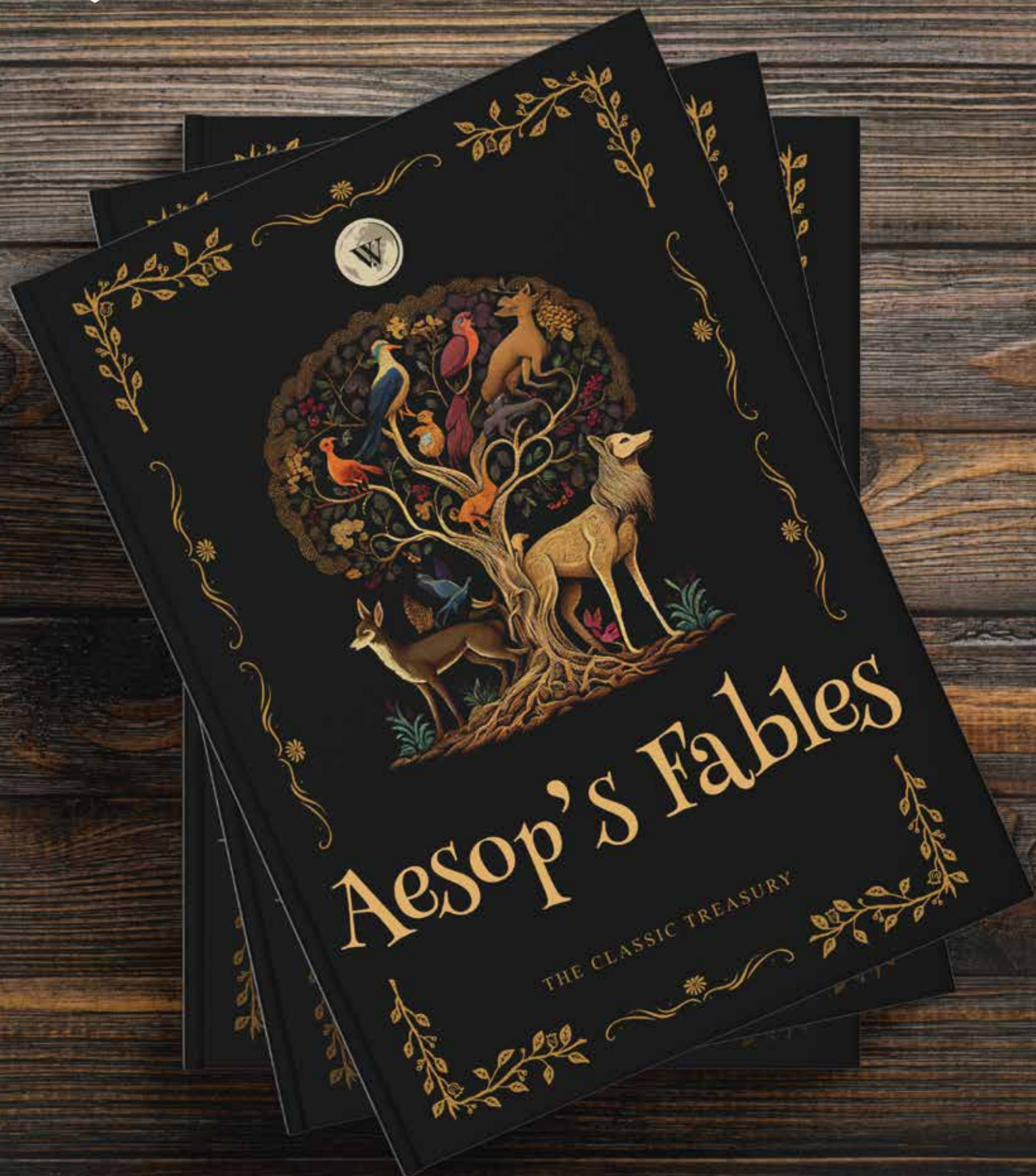


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ONE WORD AFTER ANOTHER



The first book I ever read outside of school, if memory serves, was 'Adventures of the Wishing-Chair' by Enid Blyton. It was an old copy, slightly battered, lent to me by my uncle.

And ... it was like nothing I have ever experienced, before or since. I could not believe such creatures and characters could exist. Never imagined such worlds could be brought to life with a few, well-chosen words. The possibilities which now lay before me were endless—the places I could go, the people I could meet, the adventures I could have.

Soon, I was reading everything I could lay my hands on, and there was no more room on my shelves for any toys or games.

It occurred to me then, it was possible for me to create worlds of my own instead of simply visiting those sprung forth from the imagination of other writers. I could bring life to all the creatures running around inside my mind, and give stories to each character. I now possessed a power I had never felt or imagined before.

Once I knew I could create, it wasn't just stories I wanted to tell. I dabbled in world-building, sketching and drawing, graphic design, website design ... and I wanted to create a magazine of mine own. Here it is now, and my hope is it helps bring a little light and a sprinkling of culture through history, literature, art, and music into a world increasingly devoid of both in these stricken, modern times.

UMAIR MIRXA

**FOUNDER & EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
WORLD EMBER**

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MOUND OF THE DEAD MEN



Folks, gather ye round. Come. Sit around the fire.

Remember always, the fate of Arash.

– Baba Ghulam Fakher Al-Gheru

Honour and duty called upon him, and the vast renown he had once earned. Prayers and the desperate supplication of an entire people too urged him, to stand forth and deliver them if he could, of the nightmare which had so long haunted their existence. There was no choice before him. None at all.

Brave, and reckless perhaps, he marched therefore, steady toward his fate—the greatest hunter to have ever lived, not once but twice upon the Earth.

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AN INTRODUCTION TO

ANCIENT MYTHOLOGY

THE REALM OF HEROES, GODS & MONSTERS

UMAIR MIRXA

Today, we call them myth and legend. A few millennia ago—in some cases, even two or three centuries earlier—the stories we now consider mythology represented integral parts of the religious beliefs of different cultures, various peoples, and entire nations nearly everywhere around the world.

Indeed, some modern scholars refuse to use the word ‘myth’—and prefer ‘sacred history’ or simply ‘history’ instead—for believers in such stories object to them being characterized as myth and/or legend, and because every culture interprets its own ‘holy story’ in a manner relatively different to all others. Other scholars, however, use ‘myth’ to describe all religious narratives so they do not offend the followers of any one religion.



OF MYTH AND MYTHOLOGY

Myths are most often sacred tales which seek to understand and explain the world and the universe—and within them, all known natural phenomena.

They speak of how the universe was created and the world within it; the origin of gods, angels and demons, humans and all living things; the meaning of life and death; why we love and hate, and laugh and cry; the reasons for war; the cycles of harvest; and perhaps most importantly: the afterlife, and how one might be judged once they depart the mortal realm for the everlasting ones. Nearly every culture also, of course, speaks of the end of the world, and how it shall be rendered.

A collection of such stories—or their study and interpretation—is known as **mythology**: from the Greek ‘mythos’ for story of the people, and ‘logos’ for word or speech. Mythology then is the spoken story of a people: all their beliefs, values, and their own unique interpretation of their place within the cosmos. Every culture across history and all the nations of the world, bar none, have their own treasure of myths and legends.

Myths and mythology are described by the scholars Jerome Fried and Maria Leach as follows:

“[A myth is] a story, presented as having actually occurred in a previous age, explaining the cosmological and supernatural traditions of a people, their gods, heroes, cultural traits, religious beliefs, etc. The purpose of myth is to explain, and, as Sir G.L. Gomme said, myths explain matters in ‘the science of a pre-scientific age.’ Thus, myths tell of the creation of man, of animals, of landmarks; they tell why a certain animal has its characteristics (e.g. why the bat is blind or flies only at night), why or how certain natural phenomena came to be (e.g. why the rainbow appears or how the constellation Orion got into the sky), how and why rituals and ceremonies began and why they continue.”

So, why have so many disparate cultures around the world felt the singular need to create such elaborate, fantastical stories? Why did they not simply pass down, in oral and written form, the factual historical record?

THE NEED FOR MYTHOLOGY

The earliest myths on record, from ancient Egypt, date to c. 4000 BCE. However, they are not the oldest myths. Not by far. The people of ancient Sumer and Akkad had their own gods and mythology, long before they had established the world’s first cities in Mesopotamia.

So too did the people of the Huang He (Yellow River) Valley, the birthplace of Chinese civilization. The legends they told have been handed down in oral form or recorded literature, and constitute part of the folk religion in the Greater China region even today. We have not yet deciphered the writings of the Indus Valley Civilization (in modern day Pakistan) but we know they had their own gods, and thus one feels certain, their very own mythology.

For the people who first imagined them, these stories served as divine sources of comfort. Each tale is an attempt to seek order in chaos—to give account of where they come from, their purpose in this world, and how their civilization was forged by their gods and ancestors—or to find meaning in random destruction, wrought either by such natural disasters as floods and earthquakes or at the hands of fellow men in senseless wars.

Myths also play a role as the historical record for cultures and civilization—even if somewhat fantasized or glorified for the most part—and tell tale of heroes, villains, sacrifice, and revenge, often including such supernatural beings as dragons, elves, dwarves, werewolves, fairies, and mermaids.

Carl Jung, the famous twentieth century psychiatrist, describes myth as essential to the human psyche:

“The psyche, as a reflection of the world and man, is a thing of such infinite complexity that it can be observed and studied from a great many sides. It faces us with the same problem that the world does: because a systematic study of the world is beyond our powers, we have to content ourselves with mere rules of thumb and with aspects that particularly interest us. Everyone makes for himself his own segment of world and constructs his own private system, often with air-tight compartments, so that after a time it seems to him that he has grasped the meaning and structure of the whole. But the finite will never be able to grasp the infinite.”



Mythological stories make attempt to explain the human condition: love and hate, good and evil, war and peace—or such natural events as the moon’s cycle, sunset and sunrise, the changing seasons, rain and thunder, crop harvests, and childbirth. The origins of human suffering, traits such as wisdom, courage, beauty, and curiosity, and unique cultural values and traditions can also be found within the tales put forth in mythology.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF MYTH

No matter how varied the stories or the distinct cultures which first imagined them, there are nonetheless several common themes, morals, and characters to be found in diverse mythologies—and a similar underlying purpose—regardless of where, when or by whom they were produced.

Myths are, therefore, generally grouped into three different types:

Etiological Myths

From the Greek ‘aition’, meaning reason, etiological myths attempt to explain the origins of people and things—how they come to exist, and for what purpose—and the nature of the world itself, and everything contained inside. Most, if not all, creation myths can be therefore be listed in this category.

The tale of Pandora’s Box is one example, which speaks of how evil was first introduced into the world, and why humans were made to suffer.

“What is the secret of the timeless vision? From what profundity of the mind does it derive? Why is mythology everywhere the same, beneath its varieties of costume? And what does it teach?”

– Joseph Campbell, author of ‘*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*’

THE EARLIEST MYTHS ON RECORD, FROM ANCIENT EGYPT, DATE TO C. 4000 BCE. HOWEVER, THEY ARE NOT THE OLDEST MYTHS. NOT BY FAR. THE PEOPLE OF ANCIENT SUMER AND AKKAD HAD THEIR OWN GODS AND MYTHOLOGY, LONG BEFORE THEY HAD ESTABLISHED THE WORLD’S FIRST CITIES IN MESOPOTAMIA.



Historical Myths

The primary purpose of historical myths is to not only narrate actual [in most cases], historical events but to then enhance and embellish them, so they are elevated far beyond the ordinary and the mundane—and thus become tales of inspiration and caution which serve as examples of how one must lead their lives: with honour, wisdom, and courage; and how to deal with people, events, obstacles, and the myriad trials and tribulations of life.

Examples of historical myth include the legendary Norse sagas, the Fall of Troy, and the Founding of Rome by the twin brothers, Remus and Romulus.

Psychological Myths

The most famous example of psychological myth is the tale of Oedipus, in which the prince attempts to escape his fate but all his efforts are ultimately proven futile in the face of destiny and the will of the gods.

Stories placed in this category usually represent a character's journey toward self-awareness—the discovery of one's own true identity—and often contain within them lessons of virtue and/or cultural value.

'The Epic of Gilgamesh' is another famous psychological myth, where the gods seek to teach the historical king of Uruk a lesson in humility. Gilgamesh thereafter embarks upon a journey to search for the meaning of life, and in failing to attain immortality, returns to his people a better and wiser king.

IT IS THE IDEA OF SOMETHING GREATER THAN ONE'S OWN SELF, AN ENTITY UPON WHOM ONE CAN RELY FOR PROTECTION AND DIRECTION, WHICH GIVES BIRTH TO A VAST MAJORITY OF MYTHS.

A MODERN PLACE FOR MYTHOLOGY

It is the idea of something greater than one's own self, an entity upon whom one can rely for protection and direction, which gives birth to a vast majority of myths. The tales so told have, in turn, allowed humans throughout history to find such meaning in human existence as they feel necessary in their lives.

For what we know now as mythology, it must be remembered, was once religion to the ancients—and the religions of today might someday be known by people in the future as our mythology.

Myths then serve the same purpose in this day and age as they ever did: to help explain and make sense of an uncertain, volatile world; to comfort and offer hope in difficult times; and to bring people together through a sense of unity, community, and shared culture and beliefs.

The famous scholar and author, Joseph Campbell, writes:

"Throughout the inhabited world, in all times and under every circumstance, the myths of men have flourished; and they have been the living inspiration of whatever else may have appeared out of the activities of the human body and mind. It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation. Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth."

In modern culture, the myths of ancient peoples—Egyptian, Greek, and Germanic/Scandinavian in particular—have become especially popular. They are near incessantly portrayed, adapted, and incorporated in books, songs, theatre, film and television, and video games. All great superheroes too have been inspired from mythological characters, gods and heroes themselves—and in some cases, adapted directly for comic books.

Look close enough, in fact, and you will find the essence of myth everywhere. From the morals and virtues which guide us daily in our lives to the literature, art, music, media, food, and fashion we produce, consume, and enjoy every day.





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*It was his own voice ... but also the voice of the addict inside,
cunning and relentless. And yet ... he'd been a year clean ...*

THE VOICES WITHIN

SOHAIB ALI KHAN

He sat on the couch in the darkness, all the voices in his head clamoring for attention.

Samra had gone to sleep, exhausted from the fighting. They were out of money for this month's electricity, and the electric company was going to show up tomorrow to cut his supply.

His clients hadn't come through.

It was a familiar story, one which hadn't changed in the year they had been married. He would make promises, believing he'd get paid but the payments would be delayed ... and then they'd have to borrow. Again. They'd stall and placate the people from whom they had already borrowed. Yet, the landlord couldn't be appeased any longer, and they certainly couldn't stall electricity, gas, and water.

And so the unforgiving weight of survival dragged on their spirits, draining in its constancy.

He fantasized about showing up at his clients' homes with guns. Have them cower at his feet, vowing never again to be late in paying him.

He had grown far too tired of the constant cajoling and "accommodating".



It was the first rule in the industry.

Music producers were supposed to be inherently accommodating. Or they didn't get any work.

He hated the people working in the industry for this very reason. The people who bent over backwards to get work from whoever would hire them. Granted, there were a few who were trying to form a union of musicians but he knew those efforts were in vain. The industry was too horribly skewed. There were too many musicians who lived in abject poverty. Why would they rally under the banner of those musicians who were living comfortable lives? And that's why producers like him had to suffer. For every producer who demanded a contract, there were probably a hundred others who were willing to work without one. Willing to live with uncertain payment cycles.

"It's going to come through at some point," they'd always say.

He had gone to the bank in the morning, hoping against hope that the cheque in his hand would clear. The near instant frown on the teller's face told Shahzeb that it would not.

Frustrated, he called Idris at the advertising agency, only to be told the same story that he'd been hearing for the last three weeks. The cheque they had given him had been put on hold.

The agency couldn't afford to pay him because the company which had hired them hadn't paid up. Another story that refused to change ... and yelling at Idris proved to be no help at all.

He was tired of making music for spoilt rich brats like Zaid who believed they could do anything if they threw enough money around. Especially music. Did not matter if they had never touched an instrument all their lives. They could always simply hire music producers. It was a hard thing to get used to, given his own prodigious level of skill. And yet ... he did it because he needed to. Zaid had promised an advance which he had hoped would come through this night. Rich kids like him were easy enough to convince but they just didn't live in a world where survival was a constant battle. To top all that off, their brains were usually fried because of one drug addiction or another.

In Zaid's case, the drug of choice was cocaine. Paying his music producer on time was barely on his list of priorities.

Shahzeb's thoughts flashed back to earlier in the evening when he and Samra had enjoyed a few hours of peace. They had shared a smoke, and talked about their respective days. Her boss had been an asshole to her, and she'd been stressed about it. He'd calmed her down, told her she was too valuable to the team for them to let her go.

She'd listened to him talk about his day, got angry at Idris, an ad director called Wamiq, and the music industry in general. They'd talked about whether Shahzeb should quit, and start thinking about a new line of work.

It was a topic which came up daily in conversation between them.

Shahzeb had picked up his acoustic guitar, and played Samra's favorite song: 'Dream a Little Dream of Me'. They had laughed then, and decided there was no way he could quit.

It was another one of their daily rituals, and he yearned for such times to be their routine.

He loved his wife dearly. The thought of her had always been enough to give him strength to endure, adapt to life, and just keep going. It was a hard realization, the strain put on their marriage by their circumstances.

Zaid had not paid the advance. Shahzeb had called him again and again but had been unable to connect. He'd been relying on this payment to clear the electricity bill. Heart sinking, he had steeled himself against the inevitable, and told Samra. She had cried and screamed. He had yelled back, and then felt like an asshole angry at his own guilt.

Eventually, Samra had gone to sleep.

Shahzeb lit another cigarette, walked over to the balcony, and pulled up a chair to sit staring out at the night. The moon was full, and the balcony was bathed in its light. He closed his eyes, and exhaled slowly as a gentle breeze helped soothe his mood. He loved nights like these. He felt he could actually hear the sounds around him, unmuffled by the constant drone of his thoughts. Insects chirped, cars went by in the distance—all part of the city's hum.

He thought of Ali, another musician and one of the few close friends left to him. Ali, however, taught music too, and had been rather successful at it. One delayed payment had been enough for him to stop wasting his time as a music producer, and devote his energies toward building a teaching career.

Shahzeb only wished he had followed suit.

He picked up his phone, and called Ali. They talked as friends do, picking up on past conversations exactly where they'd left them. Ali offered to help, as he had before, but Shahzeb made it a point to never borrow from friends. And Ali never insisted.

They reminisced about old times for a bit, made promises to meet soon, and hung up.

It happened then.

The vision came first, him snorting a line. And then the voice. Insistent and insidious, telling him how good it would feel. It flashed across his mind, again and again, an unholy sentient projector determined never to switch off.

Shahzeb recited the serenity prayer, over and over again, trying to drown out the damned voice.

It was his own voice ... but also the voice of the addict inside, cunning and relentless. And yet ... he'd been a year clean.



He took several deep breaths to calm himself down, and tried to call his sponsor but there was no response. The few other people he knew from the meetings did not answer their phones either.

I just need to distract myself, he thought.

He found his guitar, and started to play softly, desperately clinging on to each note in his mind. But each note felt as if it had hit a wall around his heart. His playing became more frantic, and he tried everything to fill his soul. Nothing, however, seemed to quell the yawning emptiness intimately familiar to any addict.

Shahzeb's thoughts started to spiral out of control. A phone conversation he'd had with Wamiq, the ad director for a Snazz campaign, started to play in his head.

"Your music is too basic and contrived, Shahzeb," said Wamiq's voice.

The company didn't get it. He didn't get it. It just isn't working out. Shahzeb tried his best to squeeze another day out of him. He completely understood what Wamiq needed, and needed just one more goddamned day to fix it. Wamiq would not listen though. He kept saying it wasn't working out, and they needed to find someone else. And then he hung up. Shahzeb had tried calling him back several times. He left text messages. He even made some adjustments to his project, and sent it over. No response. An hour later, he got a message telling him his services were no longer required. They had signed another producer.

The fight with Samra started to replay in his head, and he thought of all the ways it could've gone differently had he just kept his cool. *How could he have said the things he did to his own beloved wife?*

He thought of his mother, living alone. She kept asking him to come over but chasing his own dreams and survival, he hadn't found the time. He had failed her far too often, and felt now he could never repay all she had done for him.

And perhaps he was beating himself up needlessly but his mind was unrelenting in its pursuit of guilt.

The phone beeped. He had received a voice note from Zaid. Heart racing, hoping against hope, he listened.

"Hey, man! (Sniff) Sorry, I'd gotten really busy with something, Couldn't answer your calls. Listen, man. About the album ... I just got in touch with (sniff) Haider Ali. You know him, right? So the thing is, he's agreed to do this and I think he's really like ... (sniff) legit, man. Like, I'm not saying he's better than you but I really like the stuff he's produced. So, erm ... I'm going to (sniff) hand over the album to him. I'm really sorry, man but we won't be working together. It was really nice ..."

The message went on for another minute but the rest was barely even noise to Shahzeb. He put the phone down slowly, and felt if Zaid had been in front of him, he might have killed him on the spot. He took a deep breath, and called Zaid. No answer. He tried a dozen times. No response.

Never trust a fucking junkie, he thought.

Shahzeb sat there, numb ... the voices in his head screaming condemnation. He no longer knew what to do. The last vestiges of his sanity were starting to buckle. And then one hateful voice came back with a vengeance.

Just a line, it said. To take the edge off. You deserve it! How can you possibly deal with all the voices? Or life, for that matter? Wouldn't it be nice to shut those voices up? Just for a bit. Just for a short, well deserved break.

The serenity prayer did not help. Nothing helped. Not anymore. There was only the voice.

I'm on your side here, Shahzeb! You need this break. I'm the one who cares for you. Only me.

Shahzeb picked up his phone. He was not the one in control now. The Uber arrived, and he took the ride in silence. He heard himself greet an old friend. Cold. Matter of fact. Saw himself sitting on the battered old couch.

Just before he snorted the line, he heard the screams within being snuffed out.

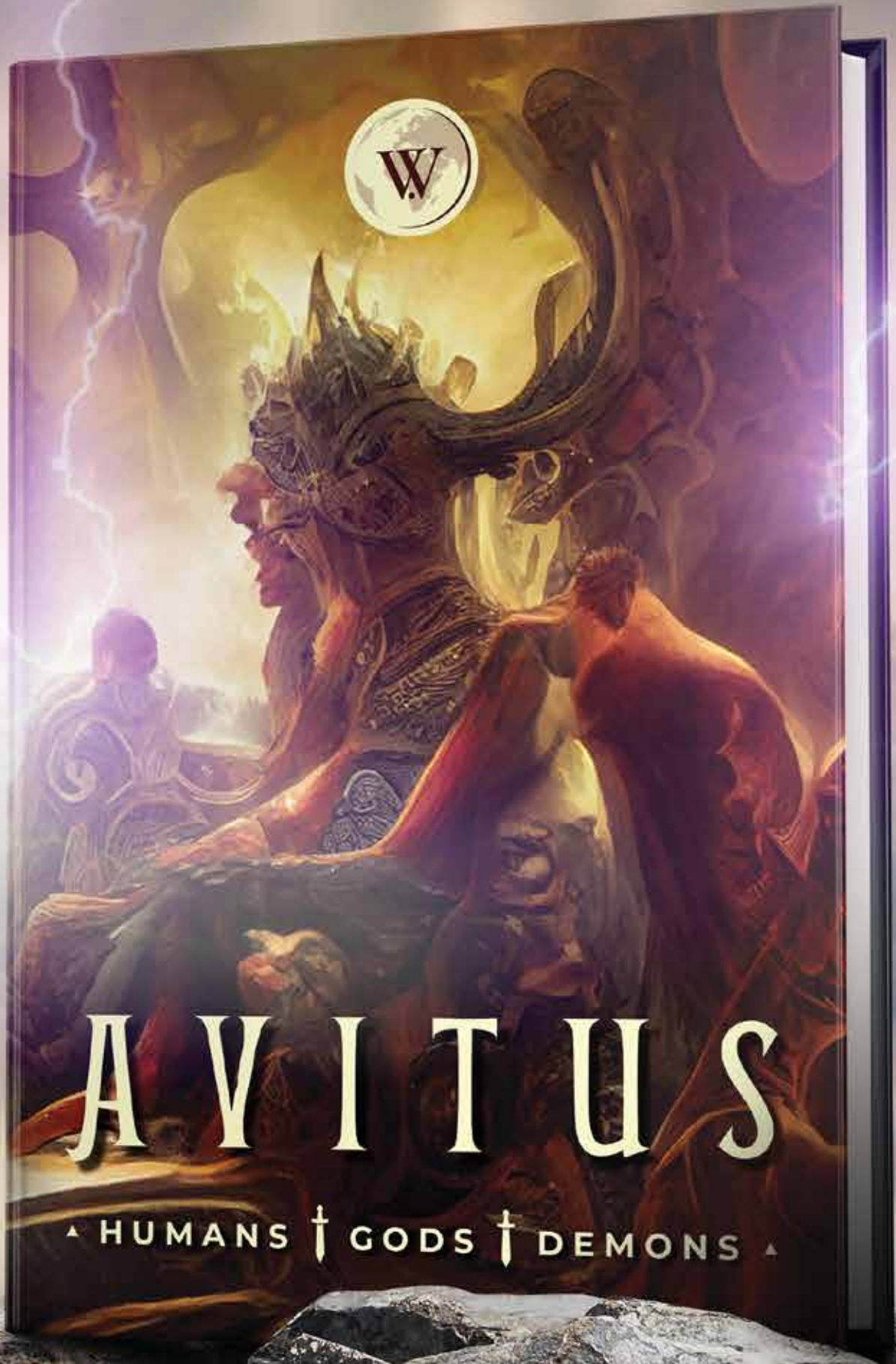
At least now, I'll hear one voice in my head instead of the many, thought Shahzeb.





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LEONARDO DA VINCI



The quintessential 'Renaissance Man', Leonardo di ser Piero da Vinci was an Italian polymath born during the Renaissance era—April 15th 1452, in Vinci, a small Tuscan hill town in the Republic of Florence.

One of the greatest painters of all time, he is most famous for works such as 'The Last Supper', 'Mona Lisa', and 'Vitruvian Man', and considered by most historians and scholars to be the prime exemplar of the 'Universal Genius.'

QUICK FACTS

FULL NAME

Leonardo di ser Piero da Vinci

DATE OF BIRTH

15th April, 1452

PLACE OF BIRTH

Vinci, Republic of Florence

PARENTS

Piero Fruosino di Antonio da Vinci
Caterina di Meo Lippi

TEACHER

Andrea del Verrocchio

DATE OF DEATH

2nd May, 1519

PLACE OF DEATH

Amboise, Kingdom of France

Leonardo da Vinci's NOTABLE ARTWORKS

"It had long since come to my attention that people of accomplishment rarely sat back and let things happen to them. They went out and happened to things."

--- Leonardo da Vinci

C. 1474-1480
Ginevra de'Benci

C. 1472-1476
The Annunciation

C. 1478-1481
Benois Madonna

C. 1476-1478
The Baptism of Christ
[with Andrea del Verrocchio]

C. 1483-1490
Virgin of the Rocks

C. 1480-1482
The Adoration of the Magi

C. 1495-1498
The Last Supper

C. 1489-1490
Lady with an Ermine

C. 1501-1519
Virgin and Child with St. Anne

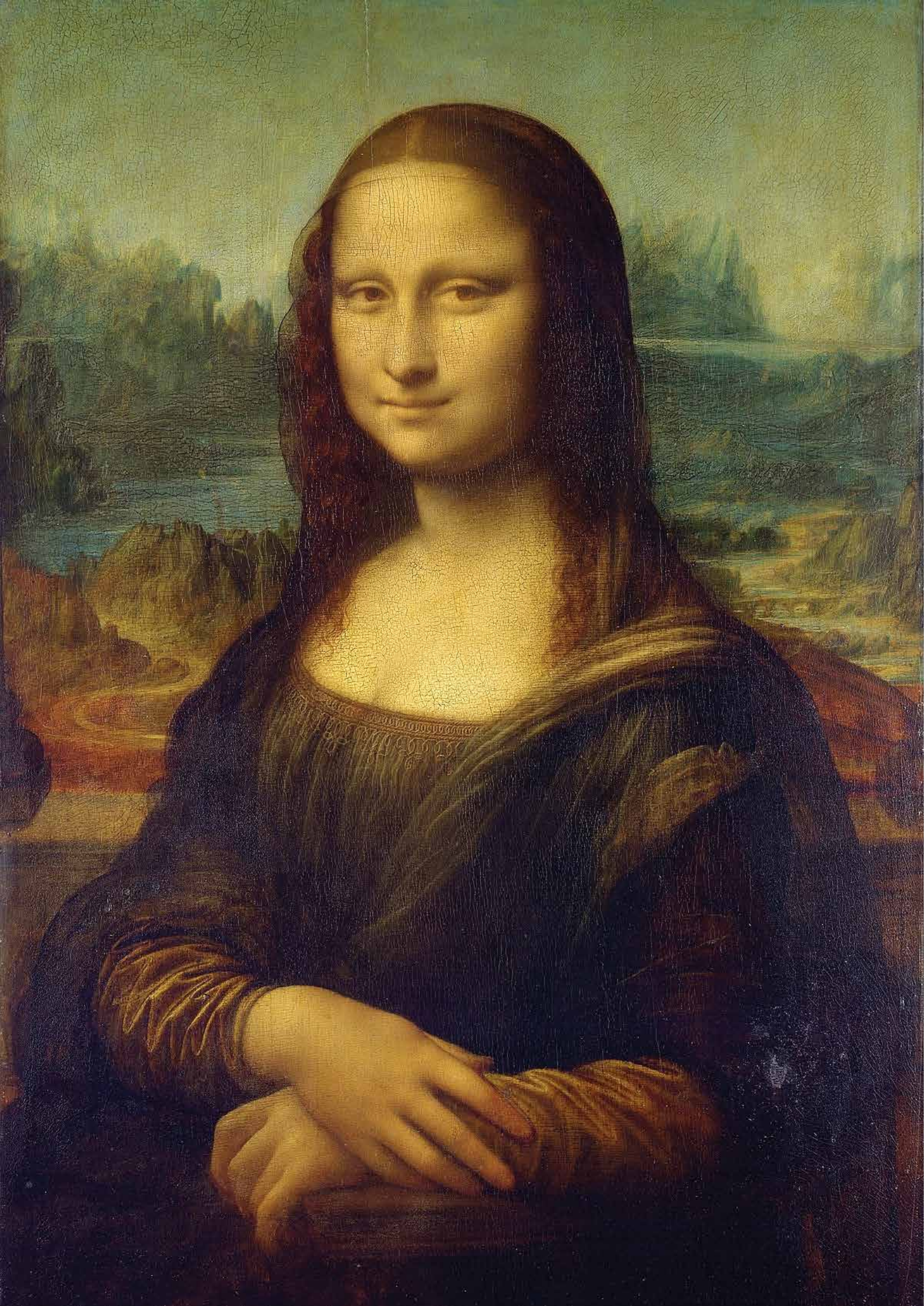
C. 1499-1507
Salvator Mundi

C. 1508-1516
St. John the Baptist

C. 1502-1516
Mona Lisa







THE LYRIC CORNER.

ROBERT BEVERIDGE

Robert Beveridge (he/him) makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry in Akron, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in Monterey Poetry Review, Creatrix, and Redheaded Stepchild, among others.

JOHN GREY

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in Sheepshead Review, Stand, Washington Square Review and Floyd County Moonshine. Latest books, "Covert" "Memory Outside The Head" and "Guest Of Myself" are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in the McNeese Review, Santa Fe Literary Review and Open Ceilings.



THE WHEATFIELDS



The road straightens at the insistence
of the wheatfields on either side.
Each golden stalk is adamant
that I be overwhelmed
by the sheer number of themselves,
spreading out in all directions.
The road is a concession.
An act needs an audience
so a cut-through has been provided.
I'm meant to be awestruck,
But, in fact, I'm somewhat bored.
And I've nothing to look forward to
but endless miles of like scenery.
But the wheatfields are not apprised of this.
They mistake my cruise control for applause.

JOHN GREY

INJECTING TIME INTO FISH



three trees and the last time jazz
was heard in the basement
of a fraternity house

[if fish are atemporal do they have no subconscious]

we cut the planks this afternoon
charred them against the foot
of a clay oven

[do trees swim upstream or is this just an urban
legend]

we are still unsure what the fish is
but the guests sit at the table and wait
so we take up the knife

ROBERT

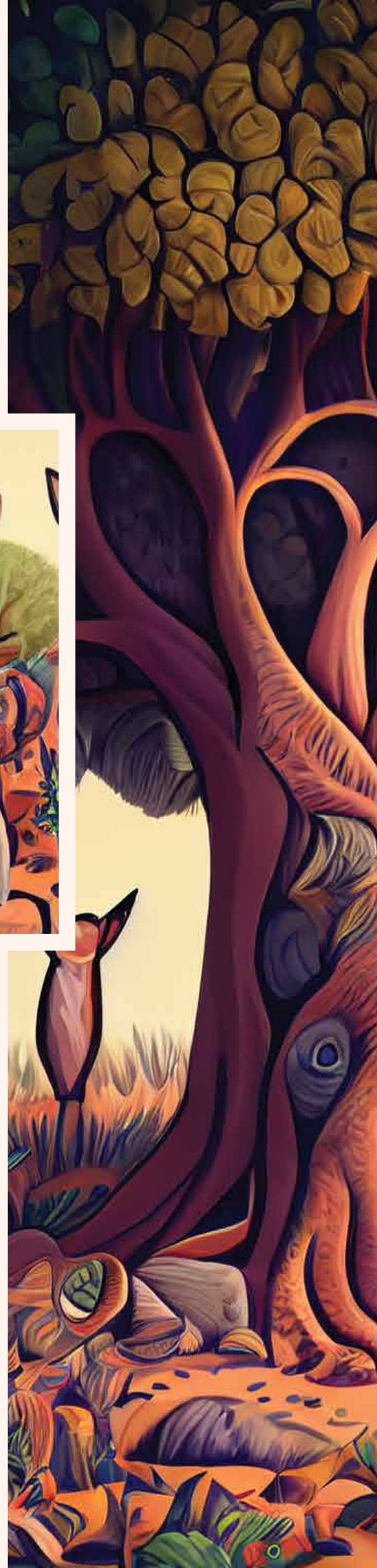
BEVERIDGE

WELL, NOW I HAVE



Tales told around campfires and water coolers pale when matched against those you hear at the track bar. Necks narrow to noses, closers gain more lengths in mad rushes with every iteration. Our memories only as short as our capacity for tales.

Consider the 12th race at Churchill Downs on May 7, 2016. The year after a Triple Crown winner, talk has already begun. And who better to land on than the nag whose name itself is one of these tales, who stalks close, lets the story build before the far turn detonation, the grindstone against the leaders, the whittler of neck to nose? Everyone loves an Exaggerator.



THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE ON WOMEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN GJIROKASTRA

ORIADA DAJKO

Women and girls may not have played a dominant role in what is considered “official” history. Certainly not in events of national and global impact, and yet in many societies around the world, they remain the main transmitters of intangible cultural heritage.

One wonders, however, if they are even aware themselves of the role they play in preserving this form of cultural heritage?

Often enough, this role is not appreciated by the women who play it. They simply take it for granted that they must produce, transmit, and preserve different forms of intangible heritage while they remain unaware of the values and possibilities they carry in themselves.

They rarely use cultural heritage for their professional growth, economic independence, or for empowering their position in society. In most cases, forms of intangible cultural heritage, mainly handicrafts, serve as a form of survival against minimal payment.

In Albania, as in other countries, most producers of handicrafts are women. However, having long being influenced by many other factors, they have not had the opportunity for direct contact with their clientele. In most cases, they are not even part of the decision-making process for pricing or marketing or the sale of their products. And even though they are creators of magnificent artistic works with both cultural and historical value, the authorship of their craft has often remained anonymous.





In this article, we share the story of not only **Eli** and **Lubi**, two women who have seen their handicrafts as an opportunity for economic development by setting up their own businesses and becoming promoters of handicrafts in Gjirokastra but also of the work of other women without the opportunity to have their own businesses.

Contrary to what anyone looking at Eli's handicrafts at the **Pirpiri Shop** might think today, she confesses that in her childhood she never showed any interest in handicrafts. This despite growing up in a large family, the members of which on both sides were closely associated, in one form or another, with cultural heritage.

The first time Eli was called upon to deal with artisanal works was when she had to prepare her dowry in anticipation of her marriage. Even then, others took on the responsibility for her.

"My engagement lasted nine months, and for nine months I started and did not finish a tablecloth," said Eli, laughing. "I had 5 aunts and 4 aunts, and all of them worked for the dowry. They made the nine months of engagement for me feel like my honeymoon. On the day of the wedding, everyone was surprised by my dowry. Even my husband felt proud of me for having done such beautiful work in such a short time."

It was not until after the birth of her first child that Eli discovered her connection to, and her desire for, handmade crafts.

"I remembered all the things I had seen and had not seen. Everything I had unwittingly fixed in my mind during my childhood years. I made and fed clothes for my son because the craft is learnt by making mistakes, You don't learn something from the first moment. That's how the years went by, trying and producing until the 90's, until they changed the system. Suddenly then, my husband and I both went out of work on the same day. I have been making only the suit for twenty [20] years. Today, I am successful, and my work is increasing every day as are the requests for my work. There are three words that I repeat to myself every day. To do a job, you need love, dedication, and patience. If all possible diplomas and higher education were put before me, I would still choose this too."

Globalisation and Its Impact on Preserving Cultural Heritage

Even though Gjirokastra enjoys the distinction of having its old town listed as a [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#), which fosters interest from foreign visitors, the city has faced an exodus of residents and the same lack of economic development that is common to many historic cities around the world.

In the 1990s, after the fall of the communist regime, Albanians had the opportunity once again to establish contact with other cultures and countries, an opportunity forbidden (but also very much dreamed of) during the years of dictatorship in the country. Therefore, during the 1990s and 2000s, the inhabitants of Gjirokastra began to stop using their traditional elements in handicraft, and began to incorporate foreign elements considered more “contemporary” and “modern”. These, however, often proved to be incompatible with the traditions of the city.

Acknowledging that constant change and evolution is a law of life, we raise the question: is there anything wrong with using elements of a culture to which a person or community does not belong?

The phenomenon can be explained in various ways, wherein we may also include the influence of the disproportionate success of some cultures around the world in terms of how they are imitated by other countries and the inclusion of which is considered to be a form of development. Another aspect to be mentioned is the continuous confrontation between cultural heritage and globalisation—a battle which often has a unifying influence on the tastes for artistic and cultural works without giving due value to local cultures.

Therefore, while it would be the negative effects of globalization which would drive the inhabitants of Gjirokastra away from tradition in the early 90’s, it would be the advantages that globalization brings in the promotion of local cultures which would help bring the local community back to tradition. The listing of Gjirokastra as part of UNESCO’s World Heritage would increase the number of visitors to the city and they, in turn, would highlight the elements of tradition as values to treasure.

The appreciation of local tradition by foreign visitors influenced the residents of Gjirokastra to once again return to their own identity as they realized that culture and tradition are the products of a people’s way of life. The subsequent efforts they made to adapt to the challenges of living in their environment thus helped distinguish them from the rest of the world.

Where Eli made a rather personal confession of her professional journey, it would be Lubi who would use facts and figures to tell her side of the story.

After the fall of the communist regime, nearly 80% of all handicraft shops in [Gjirokastra’s Old Bazaar](#) were abandoned. In 2010, Lubi and Eli were among the first women to open workshops and craft shops, and theirs remain part of the sixty shops active today.

Lubi says she has often been prejudiced by the community for her creativity and courage. One example is when, with some other ladies, she helped introduce the experience of drinking coffee in the alleys. Today, it is a characteristic of the bars in the Gjirokastra Bazaar.

Eli and Lubi are not limited to their works but they have long been, and still remain, an essential part of the Gjirokastra Bazaar—sharing with visitors various forms of intangible heritage. Furthermore, as part of the [GjiroArt](#) and the [Gjirokastra Foundation](#), they help promote artisans who do not have the opportunity to run their own stores in the Gjirokastra Market, supporting them through the challenges and difficulties which they encountered when opening their own businesses.






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MOUND OF THE DEAD MEN

UMAIR MIRXA

Folks, gather ye round. Come. Sit around the fire.

*Hear ye legend speak of Azhi Dahaka, demon child of all falsehood and corruption
spawned forth off the tongue of Angra Mainyu.*

Remember always, the fate of Arash.

Hear ye mine voice tremble, humble tongue quiver to speak tell of his final hunt.

- Baba Ghulam Fakher Al-Gheru

Arash raised his bow, arrow nocked and ready to release. He felt certain there was another presence near him, around him—vile and sinister, terrible far beyond any wild beast in the forest. The moonlit path before him, cracked and overgrown, appeared however to be entirely deserted.

He wiped the sweat from his brow, and set off once more toward the ruined city. The ancient limestone crumbled beneath his feet, and helped muffle the sound of his passing but he kept his senses sharp, having learned long ago at great personal cost how painfully appearances could deceive the arrogant.

It defied belief to think he was upon the path at all—from the temple where he had awoken to the once magnificent city, of which the grand bazaars and festivals he could yet remember, and which had now stood silent for ages.

He did not understand how they had done it, and perhaps it did not matter.

For what would such knowledge gain? If he were to learn the dark intricacies of the ritual which had returned him to life, would he not still walk this path?

Honour and duty called upon him, and the vast renown he had once earned. Prayers and the desperate supplication of an entire people too urged him, to stand forth and deliver them if he could, of the nightmare which had so long haunted their existence. There was no choice before him. None at all.

Brave, and reckless perhaps, he marched therefore, steady toward his fate—the greatest hunter to have ever lived, not once but twice upon the Earth.

Arash awoke in the cavernous, dim lit chamber, and through the oculus far above him, watched the full moon reach its apex behind stormy clouds. He made slow, painful attempts to move his limbs, one after another, and found the task nigh impossible—they felt stiff and heavy, and he was far too weak.

Breathe, he told himself. Be patient. Endure, and survive. Breathe.

He knew not where he was nor who had brought him there, and for what purpose. Nor yet how long he had been unconscious.

When you face an enemy unknown, be patient. Learn, and survive. Breathe.

He lay there, and waited in patience for his strength to return to him—and through the oculus far above, he watched the light and the night chase each other across the sky, over and again. Often, he heard faint chants whisper to him, and the aroma of various herbs wafted through the chamber.

In moments of peace, gather your strength. Prepare, and survive. Breathe.

He fell asleep, and came awake. The chants were louder now, the scent of myrrh and frankincense all around him—and two dozen robed figures.

Breathe, he told himself. In battle, fight to kill if you must, and survive. Attack!

Arash sprang to his feet, and came to stand in one fluid movement on the stone slab upon which he had been placed—his knees bent, fists clenched, and stance ready for battle. The enemy perhaps were legion, and he might not know their identity, but Arash had never yet shrunk from any challenge.

The men in robes however, every single one of them, fell to their knees and bowed their heads—hands thrown up to prove themselves unarmed.

“My lord Arash,” said one, his voice mere whisper upon the air. “How do you feel? We were not certain the ritual would prove successful.”

“How do I ...?” began Arash, taken by surprise at the turn of events. “Where am I? Who are you, and why have you brought me here?”

“Humble servants, lord. We have desperate need of your help. Without it, we shall certainly perish. It is why we have brought you back.”



Arash relaxed his stance, and climbed down off the slab. He had known such men before—fakirs who roamed the lands near River Indus, wise mystics who offered both wisdom and spirituality to the valley’s people. They were no threat to him but he remained wary yet, unaware of their true intent.

“Explain yourself,” he said quietly. “Or step out of my way. Where am I?”

“In one of our temples, lord. Near the famed city we now call Mohenjo-daro, though you may have known it by another name, in your time.”

“Why have you brought me here? What do you mean ... in my time?”

Palpable and nervous excitement permeated the chamber at his words, and the lead fakir quailed under the intense stare levelled upon him by Arash.

“My lord, forgive me but you were, erm ... dead. For more than six hundred years. We searched long and hard for you, across the entire breadth of Persia, and great indeed was our praise for the Lord when at last we found you. For days and weeks turned into months we have celebrated your return, prayed and begged, and offered sacrifice to Ahura Mazda—and here you now stand, alive and mighty once more, and we may perhaps dare to hope again.”

Wrecked gates—tall as two ogres full-grown, and stood one upon the other’s shoulders—loomed before him, and beckoned him into the abandoned city. He nocked an arrow onto his bowstring, took one long, steadying breath, and stepped across the threshold to meet, what legend told, was ever his destiny.

Mound of the Dead Men, thought Arash. The name was well chosen.

For weeks, he had trained and slowly regained his strength of old, his reflexes sharp, and the endurance he had forged in the desert and the mountains. He felt himself become fierce and powerful, and yet never less prepared for any hunt he had ever undertaken in his life than the one which now awaited him.

The task he had been presented was simple enough, in the telling of it. To accomplish it was an entirely different matter, and now it was close at hand. Retreat was no longer an option, if indeed it ever had been, and failure would only result in further devastation, yet far more terrible in its vengeance.

Arash walked out into the first courtyard, and felt the earth beneath his feet heave and groan in protest of his presence. He swayed upon it, and planted his feet firm to keep his balance. Resolute, he marched onward, and the dark pressed all around him—the night silent and waiting, holding its breath.

Here, he remembered, in the second courtyard, he had once stood under the coarse awning of a vendor’s stall, and kissed one of the local girls. He could yet remember the warmth of her touch, the gleam of her eyes, and the gentle music of her laugh—and wished he was there with her again, blissful in their youth absent fear or concern. Still, he felt glad she, at least, had been spared the nightmares which had since been wrought upon her people and her city.

A shadow, vast as it was dreadful, now fell upon him, and enveloped the city in its dark embrace. Thunder roared, and lightning split the heavens asunder. A crack. A brief vision in the heavy black. Skeletons, thousands of them, lay around him, broken and bent, mangled beyond the limits of human form.





The primal howl, when it came, cleaved the night and tore through its gloom. Vile it was, thick with doom, and born not of this world but borne forth from the darkest abyss—wretched spawn of perverse desires bred within the rotten heart and corrupt essence of Angra Mainyu. Over and again, it rent the air, and lent cold beyond natural to the harsh winter chill. It pervaded through the dead city, and seeped into the very Earth itself.

Terror crept into Arash's heart, and despair laid claim upon it. Together, they stole his breath away, and left him quaking in his boots until he felt ready to drop his bow where he stood, and flee into the night.

For how could he ever hope to succeed where legions had already failed?

The greatest hunter of his age, the fakirs had called him. Tonight, he might discover, if he survived, whether had ever been worthy of the acclaim.

Arash cowered against the creature's call. It clawed at his skin, and when he could bear it no more, he roared back at it—his scream born of dread, out of sheer agony—and felt his throat tear from the effort. He gasped for breath, down on his knees, and tears unbidden flowed into his beard.

Silence, then. The world stood still, and the stars no longer shone. Even the moon, it seemed, had hidden herself away for fear of what she might witness.

Azhi Dahaka fell out of the sky, majestic in its descent, and larger, far more terrible than the worst horrors Arash might ever have imagined. The dead city trembled at its approach, and the earth splintered from its touch when it alighted upon the ground, not twelve feet from where the hunter knelt.

Regal in its disdain, it surveyed slowly what lay around with its three, great heads. Triumphant and proud at the desolation it had wrought, Azhi Dahaka deigned at last to turn its six fiery eyes upon Arash, all at once. They held him there, transfixed, and contemplated him with scorn and contempt.

"It is you they have sent now, is it?" the monster growled. "How many, we wonder, must perish by our claws before they realize it is futile to resist?"

"Y-yes, it is I," said Arash, his voice low and hoarse.

"And pray tell, who are you?"

"I am Arash," he said, louder now. He rose to his feet, for some measure of courage had returned to him—and he felt himself strong again, alive in the face of near certain death. Defiant. "Son of Karsasp, the Karnak slayer. No more must perish. Not by your will, foul creature. Now, begone!"

"Surrender would, of course, be simpler," said Azhi Dahaka. "Easier by far too, for we grow weary of this tedium. Must we slay you, as well?"

Arash raised his bow, drew back the bowstring, measured his breath, and aimed his arrow at one of the monster's eyes. He watched them grow large with surprise, perhaps at his impudence, before the creature turned his head, and the arrow glanced harmlessly off one of its cheeks.

Azhi Dahaka stared down at the hunter—eyes narrow slits now, wrathful and curious—and then burst into laughter, long and loud.

Its mirth echoed through the city, resonated across the forest, and became mere whisper upon the wind through the desert beyond. At break of dawn, it reached at last the ears of those who waited for Arash to return. And they fell into despair, and tore at their hair and their clothes.

Baba Ghulam Fakher Al-Gheru sat cross-legged upon the threadbare rug laid down outside his tent, and poked gently at the fire with the end of his staff.

“Hear ye now, children,” he growled, and coughed. “Before ye retire. For no other word of Arash did ever come from the accursed city. Nor yet it will. Not for another thousand years, when he shall arise again at his father’s side to witness at the hands of Karsasp the slaying of the mighty Azhi Dahaka.”

- THE END -









ANCIENT CRADLES OF CIVILIZATION

Our universe is 13.7 billion years old. The Earth, our little blue planet, is estimated to be 4.54 billion years old. Modern humans, however, have only been around for 300,000 years, and even our earliest ancestors showed up six million years or so ago. In short, we have not been around for too long.

Human civilization is far younger still: we developed agriculture and settled into communities between 10 to 12,000 years ago—a period of time which represents barely more than a speck across the breadth of human history.

Once we did settle, progress followed quick upon the heel, and there sprang forth at least four great cradles of civilization to whom we owe much of modern society. These were Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus Valley, and the Yellow River [Huang He] civilization.



MESOPOTAMIA

Mesopotamia was the ancient civilization historically situated between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers in the Fertile Crescent region.

PERIOD: 4000 BCE to 539 BCE

LOCATION: Fertile Crescent, Modern-day Iraq

MAJOR CITIES: Uruk, Nippur, Nineveh, Assur, Babylon

KNOWN FOR: Astronomy, Agriculture, Literacy, Law, Mathematics, and Architecture

The area is considered the birthplace of civilization, and its inhabitants developed some of the world's earliest cities, writing systems, and empires.

"MESOPOTAMIA IS THE EARLIEST URBAN LITERATE CIVILIZATION ON THE GLOBE—AND THE SUMERIANS, WHO ESTABLISHED THE CIVILIZATION, ESTABLISHED THE GROUND RULES. THOSE WHO KNOW HOW TO RESEARCH AND WRITE RUN THE CIVILIZATION AND EVERYONE [ELSE] DOES THE GRUNT WORK."

- KENNETH HARL

The history of Mesopotamian civilization is generally divided into three main periods:

Sumerian [4500-2350 BCE], **Akkadian** [2334-2154 BCE], and **Babylonian** [1894-1595 BCE].

The Sumerian period saw the development of cuneiform, a form of writing which was used to record a wide range of texts such as mathematical and astronomical observations, religious hymns, and epic tales. Complex irrigation systems were also built which helped the Mesopotamians cultivate crops and sustain large population numbers.

In this period, the Sumerians were overthrown by a people who had long been the junior partners in their civilization building enterprise: the Akkadians. The dynasty established here by Sargon the Great flourished for nearly two centuries, and reached its zenith under Naram-Sin.

The Akkadians were conquered by the Babylonian king Hammurabi—his code of laws first laid out the rights and responsibilities of individuals in society, and established penalties for crimes. The Babylonian empire became one of the dominant political and cultural forces in the ancient Near East, and made significant contributions to astronomy, mathematics, and literature. They are best known for the creation of the '*Epic of Gilgamesh*'.



EGYPT

Ancient Egypt is known for its rich cultural heritage, their writing and artwork, and such impressive architectural achievements as the pyramids and the Sphinx.

PERIOD: 3500 BCE to 332 BCE

LOCATION: Nile River Valley, Modern-day Egypt

MAJOR CITIES: Memphis, Thebes, Amarna, Abydos

KNOWN FOR: Pyramids, Mummification, Architecture, Agriculture, Medicine, Sculpture, Writing, Mathematics

Famous for the emphasis they placed on grandeur, the ancient Egyptians were master builders of tombs, temples, and monuments which stand even today as testament to the civilization's great achievements.

THE EFFECT OR REMEMBRANCE OF WHAT EGYPT ACCOMPLISHED AT THE VERY DAWN OF HISTORY HAS INFLUENCE IN EVERY NATION AND EVERY AGE ... WE SHALL DO WELL TO EQUAL IT.

- WILL DURANT

Ancient Egypt was divided into a number of dynasties—of which the Old Kingdom [c. 2686-2181 BCE] is considered to be one of the most important.

The **Great Pyramid of Giza**, built during the reign of Pharaoh Khufu, is one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World and is still one of the largest and most impressive structures in the world.

Another significant period in ancient Egyptian history was the New Kingdom [c. 1570-1069 BCE], during which Egypt became a dominant power in the ancient Near East. The pharaohs of this time built grand temples and monuments, such as the **Temple of Karnak** and the **Valley of the Kings**, where the pharaohs were buried.

The ancient Egyptians are known for their advancements in writing, mathematics, and medicine. They developed a writing system called hieroglyphics, and created a vast body of religious, scientific, and literary texts. Furthermore, they made important contributions to our understanding of anatomy and the treatment of illnesses.

Their cultural heritage continues to be studied and admired by people around the world today, and the structures they built and left behind remain some of the most impressive examples of skill and fortitude across history.



INDUS VALLEY

The Indus Valley Civilization was a Bronze Age civilization that existed in the northwestern region of the Indian subcontinent, including what is now modern-day Pakistan and western India.

PERIOD: 4000 BCE to 600 BCE

LOCATION: Indus River Valley, Modern-day Pakistan

MAJOR CITIES: Harappa, Mohenjo-daro,

KNOWN FOR: Urban Planning, Public Structures, Drainage Systems, Baths, Wells

Located along the Indus River and its tributaries, it was one of the largest ancient civilizations in the world, covering an area of over 1 million square kilometers.

"OUR OVERWHELMING IMPRESSION IS OF CULTURAL UNIFORMITY, BOTH THROUGHOUT THE SEVERAL CENTURIES DURING WHICH THE HARAPPAN CIVILIZATION FLOURISHED, AND OVER THE VAST AREA IT OCCUPIED."

- JOHN KEAY

Of the four famous ancient cradles of civilization, Indus Valley is the one about which we know the least.

It is, however, known for its advanced urban planning, sophisticated drainage systems, and impressive public structures. The largest city, [Mohenjo-daro](#), was a planned city with well-laid streets, multi-story brick buildings, and a sophisticated system of wells and baths.

One of the unique features of the Indus Valley Civilization was the use of a script which remains undeciphered to this day. Despite this, scholars have been able to piece together aspects of the civilization's culture and religious practices from artifacts such as seals and pottery.

The people of the Indus Valley Civilization worshiped a diverse pantheon of gods and goddesses, and some of their religious symbols, such as the [Pashupati Seal](#), have become iconic representations of the civilization.

The Indus Valley Civilization began to decline around 1900 BCE, and its cities were eventually abandoned nearly completely by around 600 BCE. The reasons for this decline are not fully understood but factors such as environmental changes, invasions by nomadic tribes, and changes in trade routes are all considered to have played a role.



HUANG HE

The Huang He [or Yellow River] Civilization emerged in ancient China across the Yellow River basin. The region is known as the birthplace of Chinese civilization, and therefore, is also often called 'Mother River'.

PERIOD: 5000 BCE to Present Day

LOCATION: Yellow River Basin, Modern-day China

MAJOR CITIES: Unknown

KNOWN FOR: Agriculture, Oracle Bone Scripts, Abacus, Sundial, Decimal System

The civilization developed around the same time as other ancient cradles in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Indus Valley, and is characterized by a number of important cultural and technological innovations.

"THE LEGENDARY YU THE GREAT ... WORKED RELENTLESSLY FOR 13 YEARS TO CONTROL THE FLOODING OF THE YELLOW RIVER WHICH ROUTINELY DESTROYED THE FARMER'S CROPS."

- JOSHUA J. MARK

The Huang He Civilization is home to **twenty World Heritage sites**, and more than 300,000 cultural relics.

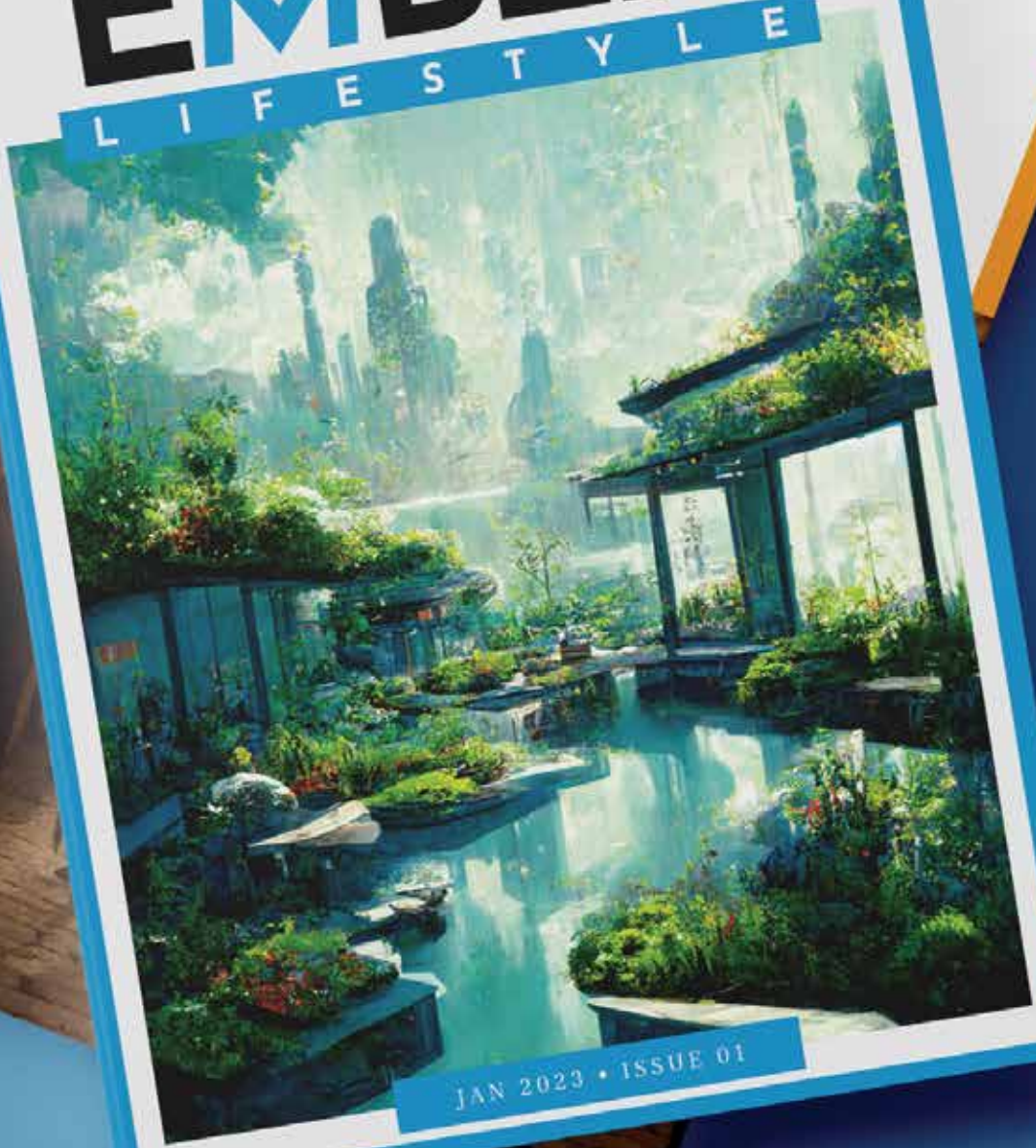
Its people are known to have developed a distinct system of writing, bronze metallurgy, and agricultural techniques advanced enough [including large-scale irrigation systems] to allow for the growth of large urban centers and to provide for huge population numbers. They also developed a sophisticated system of governance, with a centralized monarchy and a well-developed bureaucracy.

The civilization is also known for its artistic achievements, including pottery, bronze sculpture, and jade carving. Its people's religious beliefs and practices, which included ancestor worship and a reverence for natural forces, have also had a profound impact on the development of later Chinese culture and religion, even to the present day.

Huang He was home to several early dynasties, including the **Xia**, **Shang**, and **Zhou** dynasties. The legacy of these people greatly influenced later Chinese generations—their innovations in agriculture, metallurgy, and writing laid the foundation for the development of later dynasties—and much of it can still be found alive in the art, literature, and philosophy of modern-day China.



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A photograph of a moss-covered tree branch in a forest. The moss is a vibrant green, contrasting with the darker, blurred background of trees and foliage. The lighting is soft, creating a serene and natural atmosphere.

Annie Spratt

ECHOES OF THE WILD

I'm Annie, a mother living in the New Forest in the South of England. Part of the Unsplash team, I spend my life helping to build community and curating the thousands of photographs that are submitted daily to the photography platform.

When I first dipped my feet into the world of photography I sought advice from my peers. The response I received wasn't encouraging, both as a new photographer and a woman. 'Advice' varied from "if you don't learn film photography first you'll never be a proper photographer" and "you can't call yourself a photographer unless you first shoot in black and white" to "just because you take photos it doesn't make you a photographer". At the time I felt discouraged, but ultimately defiant.

I have been sharing my photography for free for a few years now and these days everything I shoot I share with others because, like one of my wonderful team mates Bruno, I believe that when you share with others you directly enrich other peoples lives. I don't want a career where I am employed to take the photos that other people want. I want to take the photos that I want, my way, when I want to. For me, this keeps the joy of photography pure and pressure free.





“

“When I'm not working, I can be found driving around the New Forest in 'Jude', my 1968 VW Beetle. Usually with a camera on back seat, on a mission to take photos or shoot some film.”







BETSY, LIZZY, BETH

MAGGIE NERZ IRIBARNE

"It's no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then."

- Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

Betsy Bell, the Storytime Lady for the Gaston Public Library, checked her costume and makeup in the bathroom. Her gingerbread woman suit, sewed by her own hand out of brown felt, fit comfortably. Her round face, painted with white pretend icing, poked out of an upper hole. She peaked into a tote bag for the doll, Lizzy, her partner in crime and old friend, and made her way to the children's section, where twenty or so kids sat in a large circle, waiting to hear her read. The silence hung like thick clouds of expectation before Betsy broke it open, her pleasant voice raining down.

"Run, run as fast as you can. You can't catch me, I'm the Gingerbread Man!" she said, bending to touch the children's outstretched hands. She envisioned butterflies bursting from her mouth, from the walls and windows, orange monarchs flapping and flitting around and in-between the children and the shelves of books. Storytelling had always made Betsy feel powerful, magical, and strong.



“Hello!” Betsy said to the well-known doll. “How are you today, Lizzy?”

“I’m quite well, dear,” Betsy shifted her voice into Lizzy’s shy elfin tone. “What will we read today?” asked Lizzy.

“The Gingerbread Man! Have you ever had a gingerbread man cookie?”

“Betsy, I’m a doll! I don’t eat [laughter]. But I bet some of the children here have had one!”

The children talked about gingerbread cookies for a while before Betsy’s face grew serious, and she began to clap her hands and sing the story song. All the children joined in:

It’s story time

It’s story time

Gather round!

Betsy held her right pointer finger to her lips.

Shhh!

She sat Lizzy down in the tiny reading chair on a shelf behind her, and began.

After the diagnosis, Gregory retired and moved back to the first place, the one town where he’d found a little happiness. He’d been an adjunct English teacher—mostly at two year and community colleges—moving from school to school, never serving his full contract. Typically, his lackluster evaluations prompted a polite goodbye from the department chair, and he’d pile his books in his trunk and move on.

Driving into this familiar place, he enjoyed a kind of comfort in the pretty lights shining through the ample trees, the families walking dogs along brick sidewalks, and the old fashioned street lamps lining the main road. Inside his new rental, he unpacked his meagre boxes, and took out the picture of the little girl with long blond hair in the golden frame. He positioned it on the living room coffee table, feeling he’d brought her home too, in a way. When he pictured the girl’s future—married, working or maybe even alone like him—he slammed the brakes on his wandering thoughts. He liked to keep her as she appeared in the photo: a little girl who needed him.

Most nights, he skipped dinner to watch television coverage of some violent crime, then took his medications, and went to bed early. He lay there, in his spare cell-like bedroom, like every other night since his diagnosis, trying to quell his many fears. Headlights from passing cars flitted across his bedroom, streaking across the bed, keeping him awake and imprisoned with his sad thoughts.

One day, a knock at the door frightened him. He rushed to throw on presentable clothes, and opened the door with caution. A large, slightly familiar woman with a wide, chubby face and a big smile stood before him.

She looks like Aunt Terry, Gregory thought, or maybe Mrs. Farnsworth, his old neighbor back in Cobleskill.

"I'm Betsy Bell, the storyteller at the library. I heard you weren't well. I made you some breakfast muffins. Would you like me to read to you?"

She entered the house without invitation, immediately moving toward the girl's photo in the golden frame.

"Ah! You have a daughter!" she said, watching Gregory expectantly.

"Oh, no. Just a ... friend," he said.

"Well, she's beautiful," said Betsy, and gently returned the frame to its place.

Gregory's face flushed as he tamped down embarrassed nerves while Betsy moved to the kitchen. He noticed that she carried a basket—cloth placemats and napkins, muffins, hot coffee with cream, and even autumnal-themed mugs. He sat down in disbelief. She was like a tidal wave, a force of nature, overwhelming the room with severe changes in energy. He almost cried in appreciation ... but he didn't.

"I think you could use a good story, and I've got a real humdinger—"Hatchet" by Gary Paulson. Now, mind you. It's a young person's story but it's about survival. I think you will like it."

Betsy read. Gregory ate and drank. Her soft voice, calm and expressive, loosened his crowding thoughts, like scraping paint from a peeling step. Even the purposeful way she turned the pages helped soothe him. She finished a few chapters, and inserted a bookmark where she had stopped.

"You could also use some regular housekeeping around here," she said, walking to the sink as she spoke.

"No, not—"

In minutes, she had tidied and straightened up the place, all the way to the door.

"I'll be back," she said, leaving as quickly as she came.

Weeks passed before Betsy returned to Gregory's home. She entered his apartment in the same purposeful way she had the first time, carrying several grocery bags. Standing before him in the kitchen, her large body blocking the fading afternoon light, she presented Gregory with three special surprises.

The first—much to his delight—was a proper Sunday dinner with a roast, gravy, mashed potatoes, and Yorkshire pudding. He'd lost several pounds over the weeks since she first introduced herself but he found himself feeling hungry and appreciative at the suggestion of home-cooked food.

Next, Betsy told Gregory she had an important friend she wanted him to meet. She pulled a tattered rag doll with a calico dress and navy button eyes from her bag. Gregory felt his smile falter and retract. Betsy told Gregory that Lizzy was her companion, that they lived together, and that she helped Betsy perform at the library.

"You're kidding, right?" Gregory swallowed, still hoping for the aforementioned dinner to appear.

"No, I'm serious."

"I hope the third surprise is better."

Betsy's face reddened.

"I'm going to tell you a true story. Right now. One I know by heart," she said.

She placed Lizzy beside her in the little chair, and took a deep breath before she began.

One summer long ago, there was a little girl with golden hair named Beth and a man named Mr. Carroll. They were neighbors.

Gregory's lips fastened in a straight line, and his body became incredibly still.

Mr. Carroll was a young, somewhat handsome man with brown curly hair. He often sat on his porch and watched Beth sitting on her own. Beth was usually crying because her sister Aggie had died in the spring. One day, Mr. Carroll called Beth over, and invited her to sit beside him. He told her stories about his life, about how he was sad because his mother had died. He was very lonely. Beth told Mr. Carroll all about Aggie, and he told Beth all about his mother. Beth felt so much better for having Mr. Carroll to talk to and confide in that she disobeyed her mother and came over many days that summer to sit beside him on his porch. He told her about famous books, like 'Jane Eyre' and 'Anne of Green Gables'. He even gave her a present: a rag doll with a calico dress and navy button eyes. Beth named her Lizzy.

Gregory drummed his fingers on the table nervously.

In return, Beth gave Mr. Carroll her class photo in a gold frame. He told Beth she was a beautiful little girl, and he loved that he was not just her neighbor but also her friend. Beth had never had a friend before, so this meant the world to her. She went home that evening with a smile on her face, and in the darkness of her bedroom, she whispered to her dead sister, Aggie.

"Don't worry about me. I'll be alright. I have a friend to help me."

But then one August day, Beth saw Mr. Carroll's porch had been cleared of its comforting rocking chairs. She went to the door and knocked but Mr. Carroll did not come out.

Betsy paused again in her story, glanced at Lizzy—the doll's eyes glistened and her grin remained locked.

Beth waited for Mr. Carroll to send her a letter or for the phone to ring so she might hear his voice. She searched for him outside the shops downtown or in the diner where her parents took her for breakfast on Sundays. She asked everyone she met if they knew what happened to Mr. Carroll but no one remembered him at all. He had vanished.

It was as though he never existed or Beth had invented him—a story created in her mind. She cried every day again, just as she had when Aggie first died, and avoided even the tiniest peek at Mr. Carroll’s porch the same way she avoided her sister’s empty room.

Gregory positioned his feet flat on the floor, ready to push up and bolt in his slippers.

Beth kept Lizzy with her always. She told Lizzy all the stories that helped quiet down her restless brain—the stories which cheered her up and got her through the long nights. Lizzy never left her and loyally listened to every word she said. And when they were grown up, even after Mommy and Daddy died, they stayed in the old town they loved—waiting, hoping, and wishing for Mr. Carroll to return to them one day.

The End

Betsy sat expressionless, her eyes fixed on Gregory.

His mouth opened but no words came out. The hour hand on the clock shifted to the next slot. The sun had set, and narrow cones of car light now passed across the room.

“Now you know what it feels like to be hurt by someone you trusted. Someone you needed,” said Betsy.

“What can I say? I had to go,” muttered Gregory, examining his hands, “I wasn’t the main character in your story. I was peripheral, at best.”

Betsy allowed the silence between them to stretch. Gregory gripped the table’s edge—knuckles white, knee bouncing outside of his control.

“I needed to take control here. Of this,” she said, trying to stifle the anger out of her voice. Lizzy hated that!

“But no one is the worst thing they’ve done. Everyone makes mistakes,” Gregory said quietly.

“Maybe in your version,” Betsy said, standing to gather Lizzy and the grocery bags. “Maybe that’s why you were such a failure as an English professor. I absolutely cannot accept a weak ending.”

Gregory sat stunned, alone in the dark and without the dinner he had been promised, once Betsy had shut off the light on her way out and closed the front door behind her.

The hunger he had felt had dissipated, in any case. He did not have to look to know she had taken the framed photo of the little girl with her.

A few days later, as expected—as deserved, thought Betsy—Mr. Gregory Carroll passed away, all alone.

Betsy read the brief notice of death in the local paper with satisfaction—a few factual lines without any exposition, turning points or achievements. No list of beloved family, friends or even pets to mourn him. And no peace.

Betsy had made sure of the last herself. She smiled at Lizzy, and held her close. The doll’s legs dangled in the air, her navy eyes shining.

“It was a perfect ending though, wasn’t it? Wasn’t it, dear Lizzy?” Betsy said.

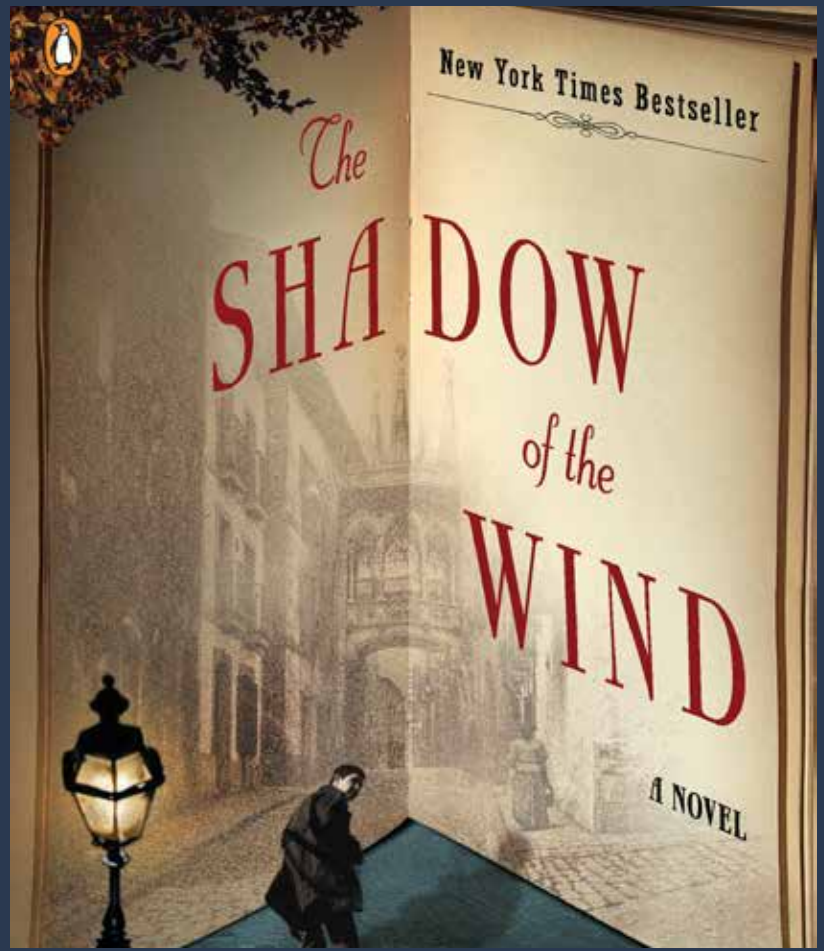
Lizzy smiled in agreement, as usual.

- THE END -



Maggie Nerz Iribarne is 53, living her writing dream in a yellow house in Syracuse, New York. She writes about teenagers, witches, the very old, bats, cats, priests/nuns, cleaning ladies, runaways, struggling teachers, and neighborhood ghosts, among many other things. She keeps a portfolio of her published work at www.maggienerziribarne.com

BOOK TO READ



THE SHADOW OF THE WIND

Carlos Ruiz Zafón - Planeta/Penguin Books

GOODREADS RATING: 4.3/5

The first book in 'The Cemetery of Forgotten Books' quartet by Carlos Ruiz Zafón, **The Shadow of the Wind**, takes place in Barcelona, 1945.

It is a story within a story—of a book within a book—and of **Daniel Sempere** who is taken to a secret library of forgotten books by his father on his eleventh birthday. There he finds the book which sets his entire life upon a new path—leading him to meet new people, visit unexpected places, and form strange and wonderful new relationships.

"Every book, every volume you see here, has a soul. The soul of the person who wrote it and of those who read it and lived and dreamed with it. Every time a book changes hands, every time someone runs his eyes down its pages, its spirit grows and strengthens."

It is a magnificent epic, masterfully rendered on paper, and has everything one might wish from a great story: young love, lust, torture and disfigurement, doom and gloom, an underlying mystery, the love of books and stories, an ancient library, crumbling ruins, and the glorious setting of Barcelona which makes everything simply picture perfect.



GOD OF WAR: RAGNAROK

Santa Monica Studio - Sony Interactive Entertainment

METACRITIC SCORE: 94/100

The God of War franchise has long had a reputation for producing and delivering high-quality action games with excellent combat, stunning visuals, and engaging storylines with great writing. Small wonder then that their latest offering, 'God of War: Ragnarok', delivers so completely and satisfyingly on the promise of its predecessor[s].

"There is no grand design. No script. Only the choices you make. That your choices are so predictable merely makes us seem prescient." – Urd of the Norns

It is a world begging to be explored—one full of exquisite detail, pristine visuals, breathtaking scale, and a combat system which is as brutal as it is gratifying.

The greatest achievement here, however, might just be the writing—which is worthy of a best-selling novel—and the storyline. Loss and love, dealing with grief, character growth, and defiance in the face of monstrous adversity are all beautifully written, directed, and explored here, and all emotion and the most poignant moments are dealt with expertly.

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MOVIES TO WATCH



PINOCCHIO

Guillermo del Toro's **Pinocchio** is not the Pinocchio of Walt Disney from 1940. Is it better? Rather difficult to say. Is it brilliant still? Definitely.

It is certainly more mature than its most famous predecessor.

A complete visual treat, this Pinocchio is still familiar enough for one to comfortably enjoy nostalgia while at the same time being different enough to every other version before it to warrant its own existence.

It is magical, dark, possessed of well-written wry humour, emotional, and breathtaking in equal measure. **Gregory Mann** [Pinocchio] and Ewan McGregor [Cricket] are excellent here, and well supported by the rest of the cast—and the music score by Alexandre Desplat is truly amazing.



BLACK PANTHER: WAKANDA FOREVER

Wakanda Forever does perfectly what it needed to do above everything else: it pays tribute to **Chadwick Boseman** in heartfelt, respectful, and worthy manner. Ryan Coogler, his team, and the movie's cast have pulled it off admirably, and fortunately without any silly MCU jokes [of which I had been afraid since I watched the travesty that was Thor: Love and Thunder].

It has its lighter moments where necessary but nowhere are comedy and humour overdone, and for the most part, the movie hits all the right notes. The direction, acting, cinematography, and writing are all excellent, and the film score is absolutely breathtaking.

Letitia Wright [Shuri] and Danai Gurira [Okoye] are exceptional here, and supported brilliantly by Angela Bassett [Queen Ramonda], Lupita Nyong'o [Nakia], Tenoch Huerta [Namor] and Winston Duke [M'Baku].



SERIES TO BINGE

THE WITCHER: BLOOD ORIGIN

The Witcher: Blood Origin is a monolithic (See what I did there? You'll see!) disappointment of a missed opportunity.

It has none of **The Witcher's** depth, grace, majesty, wonder or horror. The story isn't well-crafted but feels as if someone put together some plot points in a hurry [with bullet points], and then the showrunners have rushed through what little they did have.

None of it makes a lot of sense, if at all.

The show, the story are shallow. The writing is weak, dialogue amateurish and needlessly littered with filth. Most of the characters and their motivations make no sense, and some have been included because ... well, your guess is perhaps as good as mine.



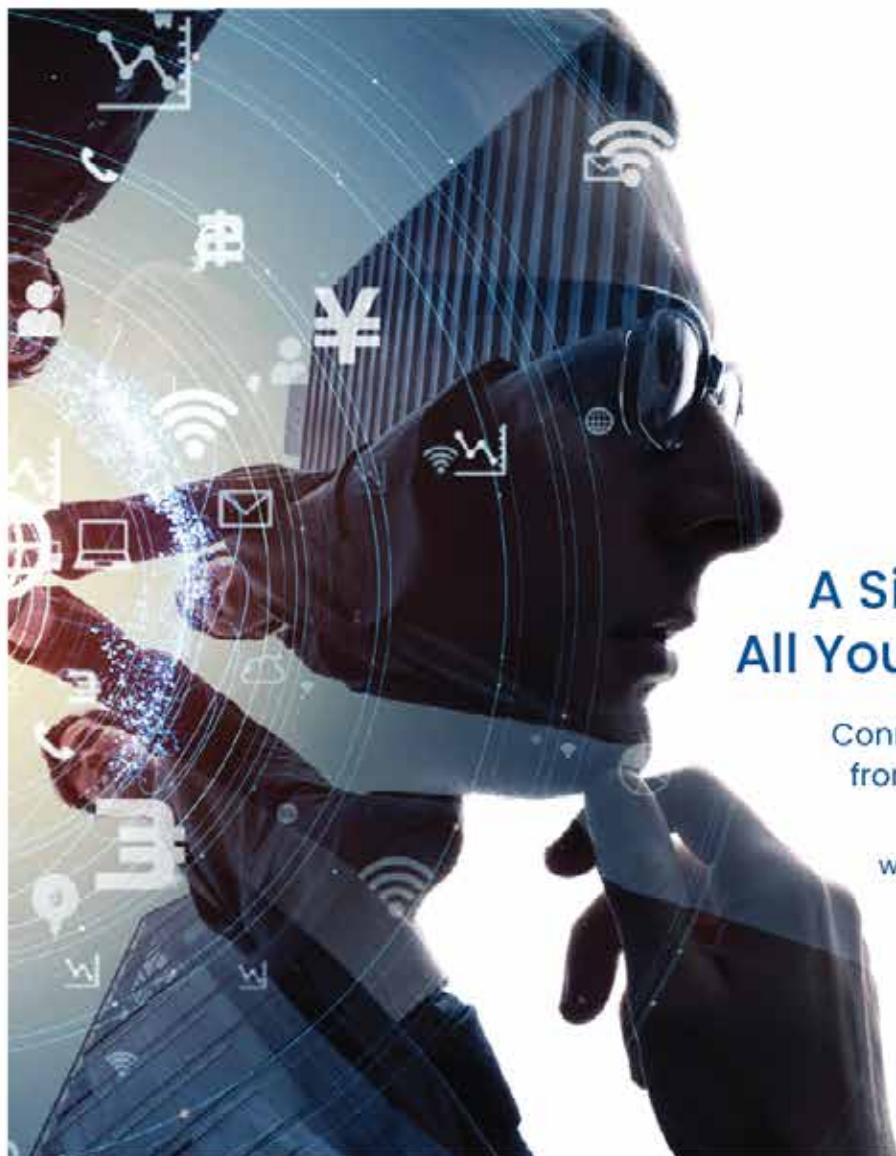
WEDNESDAY

Wednesday is a feel-good, breath-of-fresh-air, wonderful little delight which is entirely and absolutely, fantastically even, full of woe.

Jenna Ortega [Wednesday Addams] is a sullen-faced, anti-social, and witchily woeful treasure to whom they should simply hand over all the awards now, and she has been admirably supported by rest of the cast, including Hunter Doohan [Tyler], Emma Myers [Enid], Jamie McShane [Sheriff Galpin], Joy Sunday [Bianca], and the forever lovely Catherine Zeta-Jones [Morticia Addams].

The story, writing, direction, and cinematography are all excellent, and remarkably consistent across the eight-episode first season. Simply put, the wait for the second season to release will be long indeed!





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