

ISSUE SIX: MONEY



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THEOLOGY OF EXACT CHANGE

SUSHANTH SHYAMSUNDAR

The priests could bless whatever we supplied;
the grocer's fruit returned as sanctified.
A coin left me; grey ash came in its place.
I wore the bargain lightly on my face.
They rang the bell and raised the camphor flame,
then spoke to gods as though they knew each name.
The sacred thread lay bright across each chest.
The adults trusted them to do the rest.
Before the god, a mango changed its state.
Outside, its brothers waited in a crate.
As every chant grew solemn, long, and dense,
I calculated value, cost, expense.
At dinner, I could order any fare
if I had stood obediently in prayer.
Thus heaven taught me early how to trade:
the gods got coins; I got my lemonade.

Sushanth Shyamsundar is a Chennai-based Indian poet, writer, and spoken-word performer. His work explores grief, queerness, family, pop culture, memory, and the strange emotional charge of ordinary life. He performs as Rakshasan and is the founder of Rakshasan Media.



I saw it coming. A hurricane doesn't sneak onto land; meteorologists had carefully tracked the growing storm and predicted its arrival. Businesses, hospitals, and schools had closed, residents ordered to evacuate the danger area.

I had every warning I needed and should have prepared myself for approaching disaster. And yet, it caught me. I discovered the hard way it's not just weather systems that bring danger. What really destroy you are the emotional storms. When mine arrived, I was trapped in my home with no place to escape to and no way to deflect its force. I felt like a windsock, puffed larger and larger before it tore free from its pole and was lost for good.

As a married woman I'd felt safe; I felt anchored. With Travis by my side I'd finally beaten the odds.

I thought we would be together forever. But, on the day before the hurricane hit, I came home to a silent house. Travis was gone and a sealed envelope lay on the kitchen counter. I had a feeling of foreboding as I opened it, but I still didn't know.

Travis had scribbled the message in a hurry. "*Those men came back. You promised you'd stop gambling, but you didn't. You lied. You never stop lying,*" his note said. "*I'm done, Sheila, can you understand? The hurricane might take the house. One way or another, either this storm or your gambling could get you killed, and I can't watch. I'm gone, and you need to go too. Run, before it's too late.*" And just like that, like the ponies I bet on that hadn't played out, my life went off track. How did I miss the signs that Travis was leaving me?

The hurricane arrived the next morning when I was re-reading his letter. Rain gusted across the yard and spattered the house. The storm grew, lashing the windowpanes in waves. While a Category Five hurricane battered my city, I stayed hunched over the documents I had spread out on the table. The answers to what had gone wrong were in them somewhere.

My black notebook. The lists started in clear handwriting, but the final pages were terrible scrawled columns of numbers. Legal papers, including a divorce petition (yet another surprise; I didn't even know Travis had a lawyer). And a notice from our bank, informing me that my loving husband had removed his name from our joint account. Funds transferred; Travis had quietly removed his share of the money while I was preoccupied with not getting hurt.

A predicted major storm is a comfort if you only know continuing random disasters. I assure you, the howl of the winds was a comfort. The storm's rhythm was oddly calming. The Universe was blowing in and out, in and out.

I looked up from my reading and cocked my head. The winds screeched. Rain hammered on the roof tiles. Like a signal from another planet, my cell phone rang.

Unknown caller: probably the loan sharks. Just you wait till the storm's over, I imagined them telling me.

I let it ring ten times before I picked up. "Hello?"

"Sheila?"

"Travis!" In a spate of anger last night, I'd removed his name from my list of contacts. I was instantly hopeful again. We gamblers are compulsive optimists.

"Is that rain I hear?"

"Yeah, I'm at the house. Maybe you forgot I've got documents to sign."

"You're still there? Get out! The hurricane's coming!"

"It's already here." I held out my free palm and was pleased to see my hand didn't tremble. "It's already here," I repeated. "You left me quite the disaster." And with a last, abrupt whoop, the winds died.

My husband's voice in my ear was suddenly loud. "Sheila? What just happened? Why'd it just get so quiet?"

"The eye of the storm might be right overhead, I think."

"You fool, now there's no way out! You'll be caught right in the middle of it!"

"Oh, Travis. No. No, no, no. I'm caught in the middle of our living room."

I looked around, trying to see the room in detail. I noticed only what was missing: my husband. "I told you. I'm going through legal papers. Hey, I locked all the doors and even filled the tub last night. You should fill receptacles with water if you're stuck in a natural disaster. Isn't that funny? A hundred to one odds this storm brings more water than I'll ever drink."

"Sheila." His voice was quiet. "Do something for me, okay? Get the flashlight and take your cell phone. This storm is incredibly dangerous. You need to go down in the cellar."

So, I did what I always do when he makes a suggestion: the exact opposite. I opened the front door and stepped out onto the porch. Water dripped and drained, but the yard was still. "Travis, it's totally peaceful. Clear blue skies! Not a cloud in sight!" A patch of the skies directly above my head made a cloudless, clear hole. It was like standing in the middle of the planet's largest stadium. The eyewall of the storm was a funnel with mile-high sides constructed from gray cloud banks. They spiraled counterclockwise and massed in the heavens as far as I could see. Moist, heated air twisted up and up and up and up.

"It's hot here," I said absently. My skin was damp, not just from stress and the water drenching everything, but because it was so warm.

I took a step and stumbled, then grabbed for a porch post as my vision blurred. "Woah. I feel dizzy."

"In the storm eye, barometric pressure drops. It's messing with your blood pressure. For God's sake, get in the cellar."

All at once I was more frightened than I'd ever been in my life. "I'm going to the cellar now. Keep talking, okay?" I hung on to the sound of his voice and went back indoors. It was hard to navigate the cellar steps, but I managed it by gripping the railing.

"You're in the cellar?"

"Yeah, I'm in it. Dead center." I turned on the lights. "Or is it that I'm in the center, dead? Katrina, Irma, Harvey, and now this one. None of the others can match it. Hurricane Travis, Category Off the Charts." I hung up. I stood without moving a muscle. When my head finally felt clear, I climbed the cellar stairs to fetch what I would need.

I screamed when I caught sight of the harridan in the hallway mirror. The hair that framed my reflection stood on end, strands radiating out in a demonic halo. "Static electricity," I said aloud, and for luck I repeated the phrase. I shook my head at the apparition and, not wanting to see her, went back to the cellar. Ceremoniously I placed candles, matches, booze, gallon jugs of water, cans and a can opener on the cellar work bench.

The other side of the cellar came into focus. *Warm clothes*, I reminded myself, and fetched my sweatshirts from the top of the dryer. I made another trip upstairs for pillows and blankets. Rain started lashing the windowpanes again.

I took a final trip up those stairs for the documents. I ignored the rising moan of the wind and took my burdens with me. The seriousness of my situation returned, cold and heavy as gravity. I fancied I could see the electrons of dust motes swirling in the cellar air. But I was more alert, and when my cell phone buzzed I answered on the first ring.

"Travis?"

"No, this is the people you owe a lot of money, Mrs. Green. You'll be seeing us sooner than you think."

I started to laugh; I couldn't help myself. "In the middle of a Category Five storm? Are you people for real? Come and get me." I hung up. The storm became more violent and twenty minutes later something banged insistent on the walls, then the door. Was it the hurricane or a visitor? I heard glass shatter as the windows in a room upstairs imploded.

Ah, the Wheel of Fortune spins and whirls. At its center is a cosmic eye that sees all, knows all, and weighs all.

It measures our flaws, our misguided belief in second chances, and third chances, and fourth chances, and winning streaks, and races that aren't rigged. A storm had swallowed me whole. I had gone through its monster belly, and it was about to spit me back out.

God's fists renewed their banging and I listened as the roof tiles stripped, broke, and flew away. The door at the top of the cellar stairs blew open as the lights went out.

I stayed in the chair despite my heart's wild thumping. I lit the candles; I made a bet with myself about how many minutes it would take before my hands really began to tremble. I took a last, deep breath.

"Come on down," I said.

Jadi Campbell is a Best American Essays nominee. Her work has appeared in Still Point Arts Quarterly, MAYDAY, Hindsight, THEMA, and International Human Rights Art Movement Magazine. Her most recent awards were as Winner of the 2023 San Francisco Book Festival in General Fiction for The Trail Back Out, and longlisted for Greece's 2025 Eyelands Short Story Award. Her books are available on Amazon.



THE WISDOM

MARK LAMONDA

My mother had a belly full of pennies.

Everyone tossed in their wishes --
a penny for the wisdom.

People shimmied and skipped out our home,
but she grew heavier and heavier.

In the end, she couldn't get out of her chair,
said everything tasted like metal.

In the end, she told everyone the same –

You can't out run misery dear,
you got to stop, turn, and face it.

Born in Worcester, Massachusetts, Mark LaMonda is an artist and writer who currently lives in Santa Clarita California. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in Painted Bride Quarterly, Tough Poets Review, San Pedro River Review, Rat's Ass Review and Blue Unicorn.

SEVERANCE

ERICA W. WEEMS

“The worst employees get axed,” the man said, staring limply at his sandwich.

“You’re not the worst employee,” responded the woman sitting opposite him.

“As in, bottom sixty percent.”

“Bottom?! That’s not the bottom. That’s over half the employees. What kind of business model is this?”

The man shook his head, and the tears came before he even began to eat our sandwich, the one made with avocados that grew in the orchards beyond our suburban diner. We could guess what company he’d been working for. It wasn’t the first time we’d seen something like this at the Lazy Dog. He looked as if the life had been sucked out of him, the tears and droplets from his nose wringing out his anguish. His companion sat awkwardly across from him, rooting around in her bag for tissues. Its contents rustled, and as she pulled out a packet, a couple of candy wrappers cracked onto the table.

“I’m in the fifty-ninth percentile. The list came out this afternoon. Severance pay, but that’s it. I should have cleaned out everything today, but I had to leave.”

A wet drop rolled off his nose, falling onto a lettuce leaf that wilted over the edge of his plate, and his companion grimaced as she handed him a tissue, barely containing her look of repulsion. We wondered if we should restock their napkin rack.

“Our team worked overtime to create those systems,” sighed the man.

“To automate everything – ” She cut her own words short, her eyes lifting quickly to his, which brimmed over with more tears. Her face reddened. The air between them trembled, and a heavy silence hung between them, buffering the buzz of our diner.

Erica W. Weems writes technical documents, miscellaneous articles, and fiction. She is also on staff at a theatre. She volunteers at a museum, enjoys dancing, and explores botanic gardens. Her fiction appears in BlazeVOX, abducted cow, Superpresent, The Razor, Foofaraw, Roi fainéant, Lunae, and Brain Candy.



THE STORE IS SAFE

FEM_MARX

I was very scared before CVS had armed guards. It was getting really bad; I saw scumbags taking toilet paper and baby formula and just walking out. What if a goon took the last KitKat? I really need that.

Now, whoever steals from the store will be gunned down. I feel safer. I see more products behind the glass cases. The intercom repeats and repeats, I ring for assistance again and again.

I lost EBT, life is hard. But you don't see me stealing. There are rules. And I never break the rules.

The cashier thanks me for shopping and I thank security for keeping me safe. He demands to see my receipt. He is screaming. I thank him twice, for doublechecking.

God bless our country. God bless this company. This mint-julep KitKat is shit.

fem_marx is another poet in America. Their work is meant to be humors against, and telling of, our times. They self publish their own zines of work. They believe poetry is the strongest home of radical literature.

MY RUIN

Sabrina L. Reitia

Northwoods is listed for two point three million dollars and, if renovated, could be brought back to its former splendor! When I see the red stone stretch of the manor, I laugh. There is no universe that could have resurrected my family's legacy from this ruin. Even if we restored the east wing blackened by the fire, even if we tore down the moldy sheetrock that creeps black along the crowns of the ceiling, set up big fans to dry out the wet rot, even if we repoured the foundations of our fate, this house would still be a ruin. It had always been on loan to us. By the providence of business, by the ephemerality of my great-grandfather's fortune, by the squandering of his son, through my mother's cannibalizing of it, disassembling what was left stone by stone. Foreclosed by the bank, second and third mortgages taken to revive this waterlogged work of a finance giant.

Fallen into a plague of greed, my dad used to say. He didn't understand, he grew up as blue as blue on the inside of the city.

But maybe I should have listened. Because even now, the memory of what was once an old family ringed by wealth crumbles me into a sorry state. Hidden behind serpentine roads that led to a golden coast. Flanked by sprawling acreage. Dripping in the crystal gleam of Baccarat. Bullet-shaped rare cars in stables-turned-garages. Envied by all desperate to pass the wrought iron estate gates.

I remember.

Music playing, champagne popping, afternoons spent in the humid haze of a Long Island summer. Fenced by cloudy puffs of hydrangeas that bloomed for me wild, wild fantasies. Now, there are no more white flowers. No more water in the pool. No cooking in the kitchen. No servants in the wings. The fireplaces are stuffed with bird nests. I grieve with the house. When I walk through her tumbling arches, I feel her sigh with me. I wind up the tumbled stairs and head to the northernmost bedroom that is dusted by the absence of furniture. I see shadows.



Shadows of band posters from my teenage years, the dark outline of where a twin bed used to be, the tattered remains of blue striped curtains, a window that blurs my vision. The green twinkle of Connecticut's lights across the sound no longer comforts me as it used to. Now, I think about burning down that bright city. Kingdoms against kingdoms. And it occurs to me that my father's theory of the plague has infected me, too.

Sabrina Q. Reitia grew up on a fire escape in Queens and now lives on Long Island with her two daughters and husband. She studied Screenwriting and Film at Brooklyn College. Follow her at substack.com/@sabrinaqreitia



DU FU WROTE, “THE STATE’S IN RUINS, BUT RIVERS AND MOUNTAINS PERSIST.”

PULKITA ANAD

People travel distant roads but never reach
My name is losing letters in the distant letters
I tried to write. I emptied my head.
The seeds of immigrants are unsettled.
Ruins have nothing new. Made and unmade.
Though the past’s rest tracks traces
History has ruins & memory
Everything transformed with time
Except that pain remains untranslatable
Where did the budget for weaponry go?
Unfathomable is the shallow still water
In the meantime, grief and sorrow are easily available on loan
Corrupted souls were surrendered to the lucifers in this drama
This poem has no semblance to reality in the meantime
The characters are learning their roles in the system of looting
Du Fu, lying at the riverbed, let me unlearn this learning

Pulkita Anand is an avid reader of poetry. Author of two children’s e-books, her recent eco-poetry collections are 'we were not born to be erased' and 'What's left Icarus?'. Various publications include: short stories kids, New Verse News, Green Verse: An anthology of poems for our planet (Saraband Publication), Comparative Women, Origami Press, Asiatic, Inanna Publication, Bronze Bird Books, SAGE Magazine, and elsewhere.



THE FIVE OF *pentacles*

BRENDON MCLEOD

It is winter. This is a small town, but a bustling fair, with local, regional, and national craftspeople, hatters, weavers, gem-merchants, people selling colourful clothing. There is a jazz band playing a hip-hop groove on Well You Needn't by Thelonious Monk and a man riding a unicycle juggling machetes, with a little girl standing dangerously near, underneath the arcs of the blades. The sky is grey. It has been threatening snow. The grey cloud shines light and golden, and the wind is bitterly cold, and feels wet. There is a simple, small, white tent. The sign, a blackboard, bordered by vines and flowers in colourful chalk, reads:

ESOTERIC CONSULTATION

AURA READING = \$20

TAROT READING = \$50

ASTROLOGY

BIRTH CHART = \$70

HOROSCOPE = \$80

NATAL SYNASTRY = \$100

Inside it is plain, but made to look like an eastern bazaar; there is much a few borrowed dragon figurines, LED lights and colourful prayer flags can do. There is a space heater. The cunning woman, who is in her fifties, is named Joan. The querent, a beautiful, though directionless, and somewhat vapid young woman in her mid-twenties, a brunette with big brown watery soulful bovine eyes, is a Taurus named Annabelle. She introduced herself to Joan as a Taurus named Annabelle. She wants to know the answer to two questions: what is in the stars for whether the boy she is interested in will ever ask her out, and will she ever pay off her student loans. As the question was phrased in terms of stars Joan asks if she would be amenable to finding out what the planetary archetypes influencing her held. Annabelle feels a curious anticipation, mingled with fear. She consents. Joan tells her to think about her question and soon she will know how the planets feel about her. She shuffles the cards.

She places the deck face up on the table and tells her to cut them. Annabelle asks what that means. Joan demonstrates, cutting the deck. Joan asks Annabelle to do it again, herself. Annabelle objects, asking: if she cut it again, wouldn't the cards be back to where they started? The space heater moans. Joan says the cards have their own will. Annabelle nods knowingly and Joan indulges her. Joan makes a triune cut and rejoins them out of order. Now, she says, cut. Annabelle does so. Joan turns up the first card, and says: this is the Sun. The card is Death. *And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him.* Annabelle whimpers a forceful, dramatic, oh...! and begins hyperventilating. Calm down, calm down, Joan says, this card signifies change, and transition. It is rarely, if ever, a literal, bodily death. This seems to soothe Annabelle mostly, so Joan turns the next card and says: this is the Moon. The card that turns up next, lo and behold, is The Devil. Great. Annabelle starts crying. I knew it. She says. I knew as soon as I came in here that I was going to die. To die and to go to hell. Calm down, says Joan. You're not going to die. To die and to go to hell. Calm down, says Joan. You're not going to die. Look: if Death is in the Sun, that means each day is a new day, and if The Devil is in the Moon, that just means...

Well, I suppose that means you are having bad dreams. Are you having bad dreams? Yes... said Annabelle. Well we'll see what we can do about that, won't we darling. Annabelle liked when Joan called her darling. It comforted her, it felt motherly. Joan turned another card. This is Mercury. Thank The Almighty, the nine of cups. Ah, Joan said. This is a very auspicious card. It means opportunity. And in the Mercury position that means it could come through communication, or study, or creativity... Annabelle hums with interest. Joan turns another card. This is Venus. The three of swords. The swords piercing the heart. I think the goddess of love tells heartbreak for you. So that's the boy... Annabelle says dismissively, apparently forgetting her immediate oracular near-death experience, what about my student loans? Mars, Joan says, turning the next card. Queen of Wands. Hmm. Joan says. Why? What does that mean? Not sure. Please God Joan murmurs voicelessly, confident Annabelle is absolutely focussed on Colman-Smith's pictures. Jupiter, she says, and draws Strength. Thank God. Why? Is that good? Jupiter is the great king of the gods. The consensus maker. You get your strength from goodness. This is a good sign. Well, that put a puff in her feathers. The last card.

Saturn. The five of pentacles. A mendicant, disabled man and woman make their way through the snow at night, the glow of a church's stained-glass window above them. Hmmm. The five of pentacles. Why? What does that mean? In a sense, Saturn represents the limits, the outskirts. What was beyond Saturn was beyond our understanding. Before telescopes were invented, Saturn was the most distant, the dimmest star we could see. his card... symbolises money troubles... but it also... symbolises love... and... perseverance through hardship... So does that mean I will pay off my student loans? The cards, Joan says, tell only a vague, archetypal representation. In a sense it is appropriate that this card was drawn for Saturn, because it represents those on the outskirts of society. But, Annabelle argued... Death... and the Devil... The cards don't lie. Joan said. An egg-timer, shaped like a tomato, rang with a sudden dissonant bell, startling Annabelle.

It starts to snow soon after that. It gets dark quickly. Joan had had no customers before Annabelle and no customers after her. Once the fair is mostly abandoned Joan gathers her valuables, ties down the tent, and walks through the cold streets of the small town, huddling into her thinning cloak.

She walks to the pub, where her husband Charles, a fat (though malnourished) good-natured (though somewhat dottering) man in his seventies, had spent fifty dollars on two beers, a packet of salt and vinegar chips, and fifteen grams of rolling tobacco. Time to go? Charles asks. Time to go. Joan says. Charles says goodbye to the men he had been sitting with but not talking to, lowering the level in pints slower than erosion. The snow is beginning to settle. They wander over to a nearby church, where, in recognition of Christmas in July, they have put on a free feed for those in need. Beneath a shining stained-glass window of an angel holding a burning sword, a man is talking to a woman, trying to calm her down. The woman is rambling. No, no! They shouldn't be doing it, she says. It's blasphemy. Blasphemy! They shouldn't be celebrating the feast of the Saviour's birth at a time other than Christmas! The World is Turned Upside-Down; The Hemispheres are in Diabolical Disorder! You! She says, and points directly at Joan. If you go in there to that feast of Satan you will go directly to Hell! Joan sighs, immensely frustrated. She is overcome with a tightness in her brain and in her shoulders. She was hoping for a feed tonight. So was Charles. Come on, Charles. Joan says, we're going.

But I wanted a feed. He says in response. You've had a feed, at the pub. Come on. They walk down to the river, where their tent stands under a bridge. They get into their sleeping bags and huddle together for warmth. Joan doesn't know why she keeps him. She thinks she only keeps him around for protection, and that he's more trouble than he's worth. Then she remembers when they were married, twenty years ago. How happy and hopeful they were. That things had been bad, but they believed that things could be better. Joanie, Charles said. Hmm? Joan says. The silence finally broken now, he can speak what's on his mind. Do you think things are going to get better? He says. I don't know. She says. Nobody knows.

Brendon McLeod is an award-winning emerging writer. He is a PhD candidate in creative writing at The University of Sydney, and was awarded the Arthur Macquarie Travelling Scholarship. He won Indiana Review's 2026 Fiction Award. He was shortlisted for the 2023 Judith Wright Poetry Prize. He is the winner of two Varuna fellowships to The National Writers' House. His poems and short stories have been published or are forthcoming in Overland, Southerly, and Indiana Review, among others. He is a jazz musician, and often writes about his lived experience of mental illness. He lives and works on Wiradyuri country in regional New South Wales.

