

Creators of Justice Awards 2021

ESSAY

HONORABLE MENTION

Harshit Pratap (India): *A Substandard Autobiographical
Sketch in Three Chapters*

Cole Williams (USA-MN): *The Godwin Essay*

Katharine Valentino (USA-OR): *Equality*

A Substandard Autobiographical

By Harshit Pratap

Sketch in Three Chapters

“All men (not women, note that) are born equal”. One must have heard this at some point or the other in their lives. I’d leave the concerns regarding its veracity to wiser people than I. For my part, I only know that I was born a Dalit Hindu male. And I have been told that even though men are usually the smarter sex, Dalits lack merit to be able to critically analyze anything, let alone a popular quote. So, don’t be surprised if the next few pages turn out to be a sub-standard incoherent narrative.

Chapter 1: An Incompetent Child is Born

The story starts with a name – a name that I was given, a name that betrayed my true “identity”. Actually, the story starts with my parents. My father, along with his parents and six siblings, used to live at the outskirts of a remote village. He was (and is) quite aware of his caste identity, and the “upper caste” people who set fire to his house ensured that he stayed aware. Thankfully, no one was harmed in that incident. He managed to get a small job in the government after finishing his matriculation. His younger brother ended up as a vegetable vendor, and I am a witness to how that has affected the education of my cousins. But that’s a tale for another time. My mother is from a relatively well-off Dalit family, and consequently, she holds a B.A. and a B.Ed. degree. But the neighborhood auntyji, who asked her to take the prashaad (religious offering to eat) in her dupatta so that my mother doesn’t end up “polluting” her bowl, didn’t care about those degrees. My mother is a homemaker; she has been one for all her married life. So, more degrees can’t guarantee you a job, and definitely can’t guarantee you respect. But what would I know since I lack merit!

Growing up in a society obsessed with caste, and even more obsessed with discriminating against some castes, my parents were willing to go to any length to protect me and my siblings from caste discrimination. And so, I was named Harshit “Pratap Singh”. They bestowed upon me a privilege that wasn’t mine to begin with. At that time, we lived in a 350 square-foot single-storey house in a relatively developed locality of a town called Farrukhabad. Farrukhabad had a handful of schools, all of a poor quality. My parents believed that good education is the key to escape the trenches of deprivation and discrimination that they had been in for most of their lives. To their benefit, their kids were slightly intelligent by conventional standards. My brother and I cleared the exam (and interview) for getting admitted to the prestigious Rashtriya Military Schools. However, a friend of my father will be too quick to point out a few years

after that: “Aree.. but aap logon ko vo reservation bhi toh milta hai!” (Oh, but ‘you’

people get reservation also no!). Escaping Farrukhabad didn't mean escaping our (perceived) incompetence. But that friend must know better than I, for I lack merit.

Chapter 2: The Impo(r)tence of Education

That was how a 10-year-old kid ended up at a boarding school 700 kms away from his home. The boarding school was a different universe in itself. To understand the complexities of that environment would require almost a book-length of ink. It is a school where seniors have the authority to beat you with belts, clubs, hockey sticks – all in the name of discipline. As for the batchmates, the bullies never missed a chance of picking on a meek thin boy who wasn't even boyish enough. The administration (all army folks) cared only for decorum and discipline, and the teachers didn't have any jurisdiction beyond the classroom. Since it was a Military School, it worked exactly like a military institution. We were not allowed to question any orders or rules, we weren't allowed to leave the campus without due permission, we weren't allowed to even have any hairstyle other than the 'military cut'. The list is endless. But all that was the cost of a good education. It was in that school that my intellect and extra-curricular capabilities were developed and honed. I was already quite good in academics, but there, I learned music, became an exceptional orator, took part in inter school and national level competitions, and understood the workings of the world.

While I was at home, I was kept protected from the notion of caste. I was told, "If anyone asks what your caste is, tell them that you don't know. Tell them that your name is Harshit Pratap Singh. If they still insist, tell them that you belong to the SC category". That was my game plan. I can't count the times I have been asked my full name (or surname) – by my teachers, by classmates, by elders, practically anyone who asked my name. And if I had a dollar for every time someone said to me, "If you are a 'pratap singh', how come you are in the SC category", I'd be rich beyond my imagination. Why anyone wanted to know my surname or what happened after they got to know my category (caste) were beyond the comprehension capabilities of a 12-year-old. My parents were obviously trying to protect me, but the false surname brought me nothing more than embarrassment. While my classmates were busy showing excessive pride for being Jats and Rajpoots and Pandits and Brahmins, and were using that entitlement to establish their supremacy over other students, I focused on trying to escape the paradox of my name. By keeping me apolitical, my parents only kept me ignorant – a phenomenon I would witness during my graduation in an apolitical institute. But before moving on to my college, an incident about my school life would be worth mentioning. When I was admitted to Military School, we were all sorted into one of the four houses. The list that had my name had the letters SC scribbled in front of many names. I thought that it was because all the candidates from the SC category were in one house. I found it strange but I didn't question it. I should have, even though I later realized that SC stood for Subhash Chandra (one of the houses). I should have questioned it nonetheless. 11 years later, I will be grabbing the collar of a fellow classmate for using

the word ‘chamaar’ for my friend. Most of that growth of mine happened in college. But I am not qualified enough to categorize it as growth or decline. Because I lack merit.

Chapter 3: The Quest for Dignity

“Yes. I do lack merit.” That’s what I told a friend of mine who happened to be from an upper caste. She was telling me how unfair it is to her that even after scoring certain amount of marks, she couldn’t make it to a good medical college. In response, I told her that reservation sucked. The morality about fair and unfair for me back then was pretty straightforward. I appeared for a lot of college entrance exams. I didn’t find it problematic that the entrance exam fee for Common Law Admission Test was a whopping Rs. 3500 (for reserved category candidates). I didn’t find it strange that the “aptitude tests” for design colleges asked questions which basically tested what Bourdieu called “Cultural Capital”. I didn’t mind calling myself incompetent or incapable for not being able to clear entrance exams which had too many candidates for too few seats.

Despite all that ignorance, I managed to get a place in Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay through the Undergraduate Common Entrance Exam for Design. Thanks to reservation, of course! I was the top ranker in my category list; but category lists are just proofs of inequality. Nobody cares about those. All people care about is if you wear the same clothes too frequently – which is what a classmate of mine pointed out a mere few weeks after I had joined IIT. He laughed and said, “Don’t you take bath, because I find you wearing the same clothes every other day!” I went to my room and cried. I didn’t cry because I was insulted, but because I felt helpless about not being able to afford more clothes. Since then, I made it a point to prioritize spending on clothes over food and books.

That college transformed me. The professors, the learnings, and the experiences made me aware of the existence of a world I had been unable to see. I realized that I had the capacity to question, the capacity to recognize inequalities, and the capacity to raise my voice against those inequalities. I diverted all my projects towards understanding caste, class, gender, sexuality, etc. I didn’t score well, but I guessed that it must be because I belonged to the reserved category – I was simply not good enough. This time though, I was wise enough to question that why did most of my classmates who scored less were from poor socio-economic backgrounds? Why were those same group of students so bad at speaking in English and at articulation? Why were few group projects (which were presented well) praised regardless of their not-so-good quality?

To seek those answers, I decided to pursue an M.A. in Education at Tata Institute of Social Sciences. This time, I got selected in the general category. I even scored a perfect 100 in one of my interviews (for a different programme) at that college. But all that must be a coincidence. Because I lack merit, right?

Harshit Pratap is currently a student pursuing his Postgraduate Degree in Education, who writes poems, short stories and non-fiction pieces in his free time. His poem won a commendable mention in Wingword Poetry Competition 2020, and one of his stories was published by Gutenberg Publications in the collection “Breaking the Canons”.

The Godwin Essay

By Cole Williams

STILL

In the photo, a woman clutches
her clothes together
she has been caught in a state

of undress, beyond her
in the black and white image
is a mountain of ruin

she shields her head
from stones, her ears
from torment

FEB

Winter is punishing us,
it has become a game—keep three chickens alive
one of which is clearly testing survival

of the fittest, I am an enabler.
She tweets me every morning pleading

for her life and I oblige.

Negative 35 wind chill, negative 14 overnight,
one cannot compare negatives
everything is below zero

it all feels like pain, dryness, evacuating
breath, when I see life, mid-February, outside my window
Natural life, unimpeded life, not like the thin chicken

I assist she is nameless
I find myself watching perplexed.
How do the small woodpecker's legs not freeze
to the metal cage we store .99 cent

blocks of millet in? This is new,
buying bird feed. I prefer to watch my nature
tested, sharp, working their resources.

My husband prefers them close, cared for,
extended family, our resident eastern blues,
our resident eagle pair, the eaglet

we all hatched together. Early morning
I prepare hot oats, cover every inch of skin
and deliver meal one to the chickens

stored behind wood, insulation panels

and a tarp, I peel back each layer,
looking for the layers that aren't laying.

They need all the food they can get to stay alive.
I pour grains, blueberries, oatmeal
and chicken electrolytes down the tube

hoping we will make it. The sun this morning
is pale yellow, pastel like Easter
it gives me a nostalgia
that tastes like Nyquil, like waiting.

I don't want to, but I close my eyes,
with negative 19 I don't have much time I hear
birds nearby and in the distance.

The bird I call spring bird is alive,
Woodpeckers tap hollowed trees,

like a drum core, and chirps too, they defy

my sense of life and survival, they are in fact,
more resilient and survive better than I do.
They sing despite the punishment.

ANTARTICA

When I walk in the snow it sounds
like I'm walking on boxes of Styrofoam
peanuts or layers of Styrofoam packing panels.

It's a reflexive sound, and unnatural,
I want it to stop,
but despite myself, it sounds natural.

With a moderate inhale, a cough expels
Desert-dry air, colder than ice,
my bronchial tubes prefer anoxia to translating

air to life. I dare only small sips.
Like hot soup, the air deserves tender
application, intrepid interrogation.

This is not the relationship one
wants with air. We should want to selfishly
drink it up, look all around,

we have enough. I believe my mother
wept when President Donald Trump
left office. I believe she grew

despondent, and on the day the election
was called, she called me

on accident and left no message.

I called back.

She sounded like she sounds
after a grand mal has stolen her life

force, she sounded like she was in a tunnel.

She was waiting for her husband to return
from work. The feeling you get when someone
has been crying, precipitation lingers

on their words, who can hide it well,
I knew it would crush her to mention
the obvious, so I didn't, is this grace?

The largest desert on Earth is the Antarctic.
5.5 million square miles. The earth doesn't cry
on deserts, extreme environments (almost) prevent crying.

Some think of Antarctica as barren, windswept,
voiceless, mind-bendingly cold. Ann Bancroft said
she felt alive and felt empty

nearing the Arctic Pole—her first exposure
to the explorer career. Bancroft is from Minnesota,
so am I. Maybe I'm tougher than I realize.

It was the children that made Antarctica—
with all its solid, all its windy dryness,
palatable for Ann, she carried 250,000

children with her through radio waves.
The Antarctic ice sheet is 98% ice.
The frozen river in front of me

looks like images of Antarctica.
Wind sweeps across ice, dusting
deer tracks, forming mounds like waves

and when the sun really hits, with blue
skies finally emerging,
the river will be at its coldest.

Bancroft says talking about winter
is often pejorative, that when we
engage in the environment around

us, we become advocates. To me
the opposite of engagement
is hiding.

HIDDEN

My mother kept her love
affair with MAGA a secret
from me,

only revealing her exuberance
through a wide-eyed grin
in a rally photo,

a red cap loose and off-kilter
atop her head, like a cut-out
at a make-believe ranch.

I am assigning a story
to this image, I decide her husband
has placed it on her head

as a silly photo opp. Then I imagine
the hat in her home, stored guardedly
in waiting, I have never seen

the red hat in person.
Therefore it's hardly real to me.
Only this photo is.

And the idea of my mom
at a rally yelling words,
hand raising, pantomiming

like she used to at church. I remember
the precise way her hand swayed
when it was in service to god, it was open.

How it waved palm up, side to side
like a radio receptor looking for

a signal; she combed

the air seeking Jesus's word.

It bothered me.

The waving was too much.

I recall the cupule hand, ready to receive.

I recall the gold ring with rubies,

the wrinkles that formed only from this shape.

The sequence is always half-lived

in my imagination,

the misalignment of this reverence

A harsh stop to my unbelievable.

I don't know what words, in what order,

created her grin.

Something I would

see myself doing only if Sia

asked me to hang in London.

It is worth wondering about, is it not?

What does one risk in

the shadows, where one hides a love affair.

The hat frightened me not for what it said

or where it went, for the silence, clandestine

beliefs not shared behind closed doors.

The photo was not for my eyes,

but not hidden either,

I saw it online.

DRY

There has been no rain or snow

in the Dry Valley for 14 million years.

As far as we are concerned

we can say never, there never

has been rain or snow in
the Dry Valley.

We cannot fathom this extremity,

rather, what it would mean for our survival.
Lately, my nose has been hardening

from the inside out. We try different
devices to bring the moisture back.
Neti pots, head over steam, a bath every night.

Before a nose bleed begins, we boil water
on the stove, we buy a mini humidifier,
I add oil to it. It breaks.

I know this feeling—craving water.
Watering my hands under the faucet
so I can write.

Dry hands failing.
My body an ice field
in its own right.

How shadows form in a place
rumbling with hard cracks and the pressure
pressure of (ice) melting below.

From my office,
I hear ice cracking
below the surface of the river

There, shadows hold onto nothing

but hide everything, air
sequestered into tiny hard bubbles.

When the frozen river relents
it sounds like the interior
of earth speaking.

Like the earth wants to break
something, end something, it sounds
ominous, foreboding, like an omen.

I will consider us lucky here,
we get to thaw out,
we will smell mud again.
BOOM

There are many feeble ways to trick
myself into thinking it's not as cold
as the thermometer says.

Basil in pots from the grocery
crumple in one week, despite
the jet engine humidifier

leaking all over the carpet.
A mini palm tree, cacti overwatered
turning to mush.

Gone are the sadistic orchid years
where I tried to convince an orchid
to produce petals in my mini arctic.

Every orchid turned in on itself
and disappeared. A stick with a lavender
pot and an embarrassing price tag.

Trying to prove something
by defying nature's laws.
As if, conquering nature

Allows another kind
of conquering. When I fail
at orchids, does that mean stay off

the internet? The woman killed,
in the Capitol riots
was Ashli E. Babbitt.

Ashli stormed the Capitol building.
She was an Air Force veteran.
She was shot by an officer.
Under the headlines
there is an image of Ashli
wearing a red MAGA hat.

In most coverage, Babbitt's
career with the Air Force is outlined,
like shadowed question

marks after each accomplishment.
I too, arrive at her story searching for
something I won't find.

This story will fade quickly.
Before it does, I want to know
what words were said to her.

What words she heard.

My mother used to say
Satan would return as a charismatic
world leader, the people would

love him and no one would see
the rouse. I don't remember who
the world leaders were back then.

we were hitting Revelations hard,
maybe Gorbachev, Thatcher, Bhutto,
Hussein, Kohl, John Paul II, Bush.

Identifying the devil
at any particular time

is daunting.

This leads me to consider
the devil may not be wholly
in one person,

but within each of us at any time.
When it will rear its ugly
head to do devil work, depends.

MICRO

-20 today. Sound travels better
when the air lies frozen with nothing
to obstruct it. I have no basis for this claim

besides a college core curriculum in physics
wavering in the files of my hippocampus.
When I type “where is knowledge stored

in the brain,” “where is knowledge stored
in the bible” comes up first. Where is the bible’s
hippocampus and how does it store memory?

If it stores memory like I do, religion
is in trouble. The path of jet planes

overhead sound like the landing strip moved

to my feet. My dog barking
sounds like admonishment. A stick breaks
in the forest dry and ready for kindling.

My fingers, wet with warm faucet water
freeze to the metal latch on the chicken coop,
when I don’t hear the soft gurgling bird

murmur, I worry I’m about to uncover
a scene of my negligence. I will be charged
with negligent homicide, a misdemeanor, and face

up to 7 years. I quickly rip my fingers away
and wrap them in the ends
of my coat to open the door.

They made it another night. I’m not elated

or disappointed, I exist somewhere in the middle—
thankful for a February task calculating

how many more days I will defrost
frozen chicken shit from frozen food bowls
in the laundry room sink.

GODWIN

Gina Carano was fired from her agency,
Disney and Lucasfilm. She said I am sending out
a message of hope to everyone living in fear

of cancellation
by the totalitarian
mob.

Gina turned to social media, TikTok,
for an analogy comparing American politics to Nazi Germany,
it was considered incendiary commentary.

What happens when a conversation
begins with Godwin's Law,
not ends with it?

Godwin's Law of Nazi analogies
asserts that as an online discussion grows longer
the probability of a comparison

to Nazis
or Hitler approaches, and will in turn
end the discussion.

I considered rhetoric. I did not consider
forums, chats, comment boxes, speeches or articles.

reductio ad Hitlerum

I did not have to consider card table jabs,
sibling jokes, bonfire stories, slapping spats
of disagreement or come on I'm just playing.

Godwin's Law is our extreme,
and therefore as a deflated termination,
a diversion. It can be called

upon when censorship arises, when Gina
likened American politics to Nazi Germany
she said she felt persecuted.

Censored. Gina wrote: "Jews were beaten
in the streets, not by Nazi soldiers,
but by their neighbors...even by children.

Because history is edited, most people
don't realize that to get to the point
where Nazi soldiers could easily round

up thousands of Jews, the government
first made their own neighbors hate them
simply for being Jews.

How is that any different
from hating someone

for their political views?"

#FireGinaCarano lit the Internet.
She found wealth and prosperity
with conservative stations.

My husband says writing about Carano
feels too trendy, consider removing
her story.

But that is the point. The transience.
It will fade into the heap
of stored internet data, the cloud—

a small town out west, a warehouse,
where the internet lives as a tangible thing.
Her story will be there with other stories for 14 million years,

But most likely new small stories
will bury it under.
The way they pop in and out, as if to rise

above a plane. Stories speed past our vision
like a movie reel set in fast-forward
our head moves right then left

in a small circle trying to catch up,
and decipher content. The smaller

stories in the stream

of collective consciousness,
represent an undercurrent.
Represent a thought process

stored in fiber optic cable,
and the noise of the rushing waterfalls
cover them almost instantly. Unless

STILL

of course they are frozen. Carano attaches
a still photo on Instagram,
a harrowing image of a woman in

underclothes and stockings,
being chased through rubble
by children with slurs and weapons.

Has history stored the details of where
this woman ran to, was she caught
by comforting arms or stones?

She, her image, represents a genocide
of culture, our lowest depredations as humans,

like Hitler was persecuting Carano.

pause.

Cole W. Williams is the author of *Hear the River Dammed: Poems from the Edge of the Mississippi* (Beaver's Pond Press, 2017) as well as several books for children. Her poems have appeared in forthcoming *FERAL*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Journal of Compressed Creative Arts*, *Intima: Journal of Narrative Medicine*, *Martin Lake Journal*, *Indolent Books* online, *Waxing & Waning*, *Harpy Hybrid Review*, and other journals, as well as in a number of anthologies. She recently attended Rockvale Writer's Colony and graduated from the MFA program at Augsburg University in Minneapolis.

Equality

By Katharine Valentino

In 1952 when I was 9 years old, my father was stationed in Atlanta, Georgia. Soon after we moved into our house there, other officers' wives started suggested to my mother that she hire a Negro maid (when I was a child, "Negro" was the polite term for black people). For some weeks, my mother rejected these suggestions. She could certainly care for her own household and children. She changed her mind, however, when she found out she would only have to pay a dollar an hour for help. A small amount to her, \$8 a day might be all a Southern Negro family would have to live on. So, she hired a very nice black lady named Suzy to come clean our house twice a week.

Suzy's first day at our house was interesting. Come lunchtime, for example, Suzy informed us that she had to have a different set of dishes than those we used. My mother had to rummage around to find dishes with a different pattern than our dishes, so the dishes "fo dah coloreds," as Suzy said, could be kept separate from the dishes "fo dah white people" like us. What she found that was different was my brother's well-used plastic plate and cup. My brother, who until that day had not known he was white, would not be using his Lone Ranger dishes anymore.

That wasn't all: Suzy also had to have different kitchen and bathroom towels to dry her hands on, which we could no longer use. And she got to sit in the cheerful kitchen to have lunch, while we now had to sit in the dining room, where we always had to practice our manners.

My brother and I understood less than nothing about what the color of one's skin meant in those days. My mother, however, was learning how much damage slavery, poverty and racism had done to this woman who had come into our lives.

Over the next few weeks, my mother tried several times to treat Suzy as an equal, but each time she succeeded only in upsetting her. On these occasions, Suzy would say,

"Yes'm, but you don't understand. That's what it is." My mother realized she would have to go along with the status quo.

Then came a day my mother would always remember.

It rained that morning, and Suzy showed up with her uniform soaked and dripping. My mother asked her how she'd gotten to work and was shocked to learn that the trip from Suzy's home to hers was eight miles, only six of it by bus. This woman had walked two miles in 90-degree rainy weather and then stood on a steaming crowded bus for six miles. She would have to clean house, cook, do laundry and iron all day and then make the same exhausting trip back home. All for \$8.

At the end of the day, my mother didn't want to hear about any dat-be-what-is stuff and insisted upon driving Suzy home. When they arrived at Suzy's little house, they found her son in the front yard. Suzy introduced him: "Miz Senneville ma'am, dis my son, Larry. Larry, say hello to Miz Senneville."

Larry stood up very straight and said carefully, "How do you do, Miz Sent-Fill, ma'am."

My mother replied, "Very well, thank you, Larry." And how old are you?"

Still ramrod straight, Larry replied "I be 10."

Quick as a flash, Suzy reached out and slapped her son so hard he fell in the dust at my mother's feet. "I be 10, MAAM," she commanded. Larry scrambled to his feet, tears in his eyes, and repeated, "I be 10, ma'am."

My mother was mortified. She turned to Suzy and said, "Surely he doesn't have to say 'ma'am' to me."

"Yess'm," said Suzy, "but Miz Senneville ma'am, I know you don't understand how it be, but dis here Nigra boy, he learn to say ma'am to white womens or he wind up in jail or dead. He cannot forget, evah."

She was absolutely right. In the South of this country fifty years ago, that's what was. Martin Luther King would not have a dream for another 11 years.

Suzy cleaned our house for five years, until my father was stationed elsewhere. My mother picked her up every morning and took her home every evening that she worked for us. Because in my mother's house, in my mother's world, that was the way it was.

Katharine Valentino worked for 30 years at menial jobs before acquiring a BA degree in journalism. For the next 20 years, she worked at slightly more interesting jobs and occasionally was even allowed to write some technical thing or other. She retired in 2018 and now takes long walks with her canine companion, Silly Lilly; edits poetry and prose and builds websites for people who become friends; and works on her own life stories and essays. See her at <https://settingForth.pub/> and at <https://katharinevalentino.medium.com/>.