

# ECHO



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Echo  
A Journal of Creative Nonfiction

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# Echo

## A Journal of Creative Nonfiction

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## About Echo

According to the National Institution of Health, a heart echo test, or an echocardiograph, is a painless test that examines the structure and function of the heart. This test sometimes involves the injection of saline or another dye into the patient's vein to showcase the heart.

We chose the name Echo for our journal of creative nonfiction because we expect the work we publish in our monthly issues to come from the heart. In our issues, we aim to publish the best creative nonfiction pieces that we can find.

We accept submissions for Echo year round, and we would love to read some of your work!



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# Bibliophilic Serendipity - - - - -

Andy Betz

Last year, armed with a roll of quarters and twenty one-dollar bills, I began my search for all bargain related yard-sale merchandise.

I ushered in the sunrise standing as a sentinel to my coveted “first-in-line” spot at what was to be the best of the sales in my neighborhood. I watched as the owners brought box after box of undiscovered treasure, what I call books, to my altar of interest.

When the last of this trove arrived, I wasted no time. I made an offer of \$30 for the ten boxes, sight unseen.

The tired owner decided to become the wealthy former owner and I began my trek to my car with each box. I wanted to begin my search of the titles at home.

That did not happen for curiosity got the best of me.

The first three boxes contained paperback novels. Boxes four and five had home-improvement texts. Box six was destined for Good Will. Boxes seven and eight mirrored the first three.

Box nine was nothing but old magazines.

It is when I opened the tenth box and took out a hand assembled copy of “The North American Sylva” by Francois Andre Michaux that I struck pure gold. The date of this coffee table sized book was 1988. Inside was an ominous warning by the first owner to all future owners. It read:

Find the trees listed within  
Save a leaf as proof  
Plant another  
Then another  
While there are some left to plant.

I read the warning and carefully turned the pages. When found, a previous owner pressed a leaf in the corresponding pages and left a map of the location of the original tree and all of his subsequent planted trees.

It was my duty as the new owner to continue the tradition.

If you ever come to Atlanta, look me up. I can show you a few trees I found.

And a few I planted.

# Disability is Not an Inability - - - - -

## Yuliia Vereta

“Being disabled should not mean being disqualified from having access to every aspect of life.”

- Emma Thompson

“The only disability in life is a bad attitude.”

- Scott Hamilton

When Sudarshan Gautam told the people at the Everest base camp that he was planning to climb to the top of the highest mountain in the world, people laughed at him. Who in their right mind would go to this inhospitable mountain, the highest peak of the planet, without both arms? Indeed, it seemed incredible. Even the friends of Gautama did not believe that his dream was possible. However, at the end of May 2013, a few days before the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the first conquest of Everest, the impossible happened - Sudarshan Gautam stood at the top of the world.

Sudarshan Gautam is a Nepalese-born Canadian, who, despite the absence of both arms, managed to climb the mount Everest. He became the first man without arms and arm prostheses to climb highest peak of the planet.

Sudarshan was born in 1978 in a small village Bhauduri in the Ramechhap District of Nepal. When he was a child, his family moved to Kathmandu, soon after they moved happened an accident that deprived the boy of both arms. At the age of 14 Sudarshan was playing with the kite, which got tangled in the high-voltage wires. He decided to release it and his attempt resulted with the eleven-thousand-volt electric shock that led to the amputation of both arms.

When Gautam woke up in a hospital in Nepal and found out that both his arms had been amputated, he promised himself that this amputation would not be an obstacle on his way to the big mountains.

“After I lost both hands, I wanted to do something good for society and something good for the country, and I thought: if I want to climb Everest, I will do it,” Gautam said in Vancouver after returning from Everest.

Since the time of amputation Gautam got used to the life without arms. After some time he started using feet instead of his arms - because of this he goes barefoot. Over the years, Sudarshan has mastered all the necessary skills - he learned to eat, shave, write and even drive a motorcycle and a car with his feet.

However, the young Nepalese wanted more - he literally dreamed of mountains and refused to believe that the kite accident that happened to him in his childhood cut off for him the opportunity to climb the mountains. Later he moved to live in Canada, but constantly visited Nepal.

He started training, and in 2005, Gautam has climbed his first peaks -Mount Yala (5,732 m) and Mount Ramdung (5,925 m). However, Everest always remained Sudarshan's dream.

The dream became the goal when his ascent sponsors have allocated several thousands of dollars for the implementation of his plan. After the financial problem was resolved, Gautama, who at that time lived in Calgary (Canada), returned to Nepal, the country he left in 2007, and began his ascent on the 1st of May 2013.

Then he finally joined the group that was going to climb the highest mountain in the world. When Sudarshan's group was already at the base camp, climbers from other groups shrugged their shoulders - what did a man without arms do here? And when they were told about the daring plan of Sudarshan, many of them began to openly laugh.

“The most difficult moment of my ascent was when I reached the Everest base camp, where most



people were skeptical about my idea, constantly telling me that I would not be able to climb the Everest. I remember these people, and I remember what I said to myself then: “I will not give up. I must go up!” said Gautam while telling people his story after he managed to climb the peak.

For his record ascent Sudarshan had to train seriously. He was helped a lot by his friends-climbers, and during these trainings he climbed the vertical walls of buildings. It should be said that it is incredibly difficult to believe that this persistent young man has no arms – he performs tricks that an ordinary man is hardly able to perform with both arms.

“If we want to do something – disability is not a hindrance,” says Sudarshan.

With his personal motto, “Disability is not an inability”, he had reached the many more peaks showing the world that what some people think is impossible can still come true.

# Let It Burn - - - - -

## Robert Vaughn

Dear Whoever This Is,

Mankind fucked up, one last time.

This isn't some cautionary tale about what we should have done, or a recipe for what we should do next. Too late for that. It's just a story about how our final, fatal mistake started, what happened, and where it will end.

How did it start? With a small fire in the Amazon rainforest, near Manaus. It was a relatively dry year — thank you, climate change — so it soon got out of control. Who knows what ignited it, lightning or a flicked cigarette butt? Doesn't matter. It took two-and-a-half months before the fires burnt the entire forest to the ground. No global coalition formed to put out the fire. No one cared enough. A smoldering wasteland remained, and from its ashes rose the phoenix of corporate greed at its finest.

Companies from across the world came to South America and built factories on those ashes. They paid government officials to look the other way when it came to safety and environmental standards. The result of these less-than-ethical practices was that the entire region experienced a great economic boom. People called it the South American Economic Renaissance. Then the leaders of the South American countries pulled their now-considerable resources together to form the largest nation in the world, the South American Union, or SAU for short. It became the world's newest superpower.

With a superpower that cared nothing for the environment, rivers that watered the entire continent were clogged with ash and debris, and the polar ice caps were soon melting even faster; water levels were rising and becoming more acidic, because the SAU spewed huge amounts of carbon dioxide into the biosphere. The world's lungs became the world's heater. This fact divided the world. Half wanted the SAU to change its ways for the future benefit of the Earth. Half didn't, because of their greed or apathy. There were even mixed opinions amongst the SAU's own citizens.

A US-led collation issued an ultimatum to the SAU: rethink your manufacturing and environmental policies, or face heavy economic sanctions. Ironic, right? But sanctions from America weren't a concern of the SAU.

So what happened? The SAU president responded by saying that for far too long, the US had been the world's biggest hypocrite. "America has told the world what other counties should and shouldn't do environmentally," he said, "but for years, places like Flint, Michigan went without clean water. They say we need to take care of our people, but if an American goes to the hospital, they can face bankruptcy because of high medical bills."

The SAU's president made an offer to American citizens: If they wanted to have affordable and quality healthcare, not go into debt for higher education, live in a country that made economic decisions based on logic and not feelings, have elected officials working for the people and not for the lobbyists... "My country welcomes you with open arms! The American dream is dead, and America killed it."

The SAU's president was right.

While they bickered, things got worse. The ice caps continued to melt at an alarming rate. The weather became more extreme. Each hurricane season became more devastating. In 2025, hurricane Trevor hit Florida — by far the most destructive hurricane in US history. Between 8,000 and 16,000 people lost their lives, and it caused over \$400 billion in damage. The SAU decided to win the hearts and minds of the people, and donated a large sum of money to Florida to help them rebuild. They said, "Despite what our leaders may think of each other, people need help. The people of Florida are in the hearts, minds, and prayers of the SAU."

Outwardly, the American government was thankful; but on the inside, where it mattered, they hated the gesture. They hated the fact that a country that had just spoken harsh truths was lending a helping hand. They hated it even more because the American people appreciated the SAU's help. America was supposed to

help other countries, not the other way around.

Later that year, two massive terrorist attacks took place in the SAU, one at a major factory and another at a mall. Massive explosions ended the lives of over a thousand people. Shortly after, a video surfaced on the Internet, where a group claiming to be backed by the US government took responsibility for the attacks. The group claimed it took matters into its own hands to save the environment, to send a message to the SAU to change its ways.

Unofficial reports and conspiracy theorists claimed the SAU actually orchestrated the attacks itself, then fed false intel to the intelligence community to make it appear the US did it. There were many conflicting reports thereafter. Of course, the US denied having anything to do with the attacks. At the end of the day, half the world saw the SAU as victims of an American terrorist group, while the other half believed America was falsely accused. Soon after the attacks, the SAU cut all diplomatic ties with the US and declared war. Half the world sided with the US, the other half with the SAU.

And just like that, World War III happened.

Conflicts broke out worldwide; conventional warfare, for the most part. Despite saber-rattling from both sides, no one wanted to push "The Button" and cause nuclear winter... but that all changed in 2030 in Mexico. Both sides had troops on either border of Mexico, ready to pass through and invade the other side. The only problem was, Mexico wanted nothing to do with the war. The US issued a warning to Mexican leaders: if they allowed SAU troops to travel through Mexico, the US would view it as an act of aggression. Despite the warnings, Mexico caved under SAU pressure and allowed SAU troops and their allies to travel through Mexico in exchange for economic resources to boost its sagging economy. The US issued another warning, this time to both the SAU and Mexico: SAU troops had 24 hours to leave Mexico or face severe repercussions. The warnings were disregarded, and on February 8th, 2030, the world that I knew ended.

The US launched a successful nuclear attack on Mexico City, the Mexican capital. Eight million people gone in the blink of an H-bomb. Men, women, children, soldiers: all vaporized in an instant. A million others were sickened and later died due to radiation poisoning from the fallout. When I heard the news that America had pushed The Button, I knew it was only a matter of time before the world as I knew it would change forever. Mutual Assured Destruction went out the window at that point.

I live in the middle of Bumfuck, Nowhere USA, far from the Mexican border. I thought I was pretty far away from any worthwhile target, but World War III had just gone nuclear, so anything was fair game now.

I was in my living room, glued to the TV and my cell phone, absorbing any information being broadcasted, when the hair on my neck stood straight up at the sound of the Emergency Alert System howling from both, alerting the public to prepare for an honest-to-God nuclear attack. Turns out the SAU has nukes after all. Seeing as how I live in Tornado Alley, I have a basement full of food, bottled water, emergency supplies, hell, even a solar generator; but I'm equipped for bad weather, not World War III. I don't know if I'll be around for five more minutes or five more days.

I guess this is the part where I'm supposed to hand out pearls of wisdom, like how we should have saved the Amazon and the rest of the environment. Or how everyone should have been more diplomatic. Well, there's no happy ending, no words of wisdom to impart. We, humanity, have supremely fucked up.

If I'm around for a bit longer, maybe I'll write something else. If not, oh well.

Sincerely,

Jessie Morgan Baker

# You Have Dysentery - - - - -

## Leah Baker

I walk out of the hospital into the hot Indian night. A few blocks east, I come to the alley I've been directed to — at the long end of the dark corridor, I see the light of an ATM machine glowing blue. I need cash to pay a hospital bill, and this is the only pathway. I start to take steps. Cows line the shadowy passage, chewing noisily on trash. Their large bodies move slowly, a faint white glow reflecting off their hides in the dimness. A snarling stray dog erupts out of the darkness and I leap back, screaming. It is not aiming for me; it is aiming for one of the cows. They battle over a scrap or a plastic bag; I can't see which. I want to flee, but I have to get to that ATM.



I am in Varanasi, India. It is the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world, and considered one of the holiest sites in the country. The city was built around the Ganges River. To bathe in the water of this river is a sacred act. Thousands of people gather daily along the 84 “ghats” of Varanasi — these are stone steps along the river bank. When a Hindu person dies, it is an honor for them to be cremated on the ghats and pushed into the river, covered carefully in white cloths and laid with Marigold blooms the sacred color of saffron orange.

Here, the living can also be ferried out onto the water by a boatman to witness the incineration of corpses. Here, you may pay a child in exchange for a paper boat with a single candle in it, to be immolated in flames as you set it out on the water as a symbolic prayer. Here, you may watch as India's roaming cattle and stray dogs feast at the riverbank on the piles of leftover bones of those who have passed.

The great Ganges is therefore filled with death. Ashes of cremated bodies, sewage both human and animal, and the soil from the thousands of bodies that bathe in the river daily are what comprise this body of holy water.

I arrive in Varanasi on a train with my traveling partner, Brian. The rail system is its own startling entity. We fight against a bustling line of hundreds for our tickets on the railway. We take an overnight rail. Brian is sick on the train already. In India, when you defecate in the train's squat-toilet bathroom, the waste is released onto the tracks below, contributing to India's unique smell of incense, burned plastic, pollution, urine, and raw sewage.



We wake to the sound of the Chai Wallah calling out his familiar mantra, “chai-ii, chai-ii, garum chai-ii” as he passes through the crowded, narrow rows of sleeper

beds serving up his special sugary tea.

Brian is sick in the railway bathroom when we arrive. He takes a course of Cipro – an antibiotic that most travelers in developing countries keep on hand in case of an intestinal infection – and we wait to see if it will cure his ailment. It doesn't. He is sick all night in the tiny room we rent. He is losing fluid fast. I steal bottles of water out of the boxes in the guesthouse lobby – no one is there to take my rupees at that hour. His temperature soars. He sweats. He hallucinates.

I decide in the morning that we must go to a hospital. We take a rickshaw across town but have to walk the rest of the way when the driver realizes how sick Brian is. Rickshaw drivers have a superstition that if someone dies in their rickshaw, they have to purchase a new carriage. So we are dumped out to walk along the street, though Brian can barely walk. He leans on me for support. He is a ghost of thread and wire. We have to stop often. People laugh and point upon seeing this tall, sick foreigner being led around by a woman. We stand out in the crowd because I am white, blue-eyed, and blonde – an obvious fact despite the scarf covering my hair. Brian is not white, but he is also not Indian – clearly a foreigner, and also deathly pale in his illness. Someone asks, "Is he sick?" as Brian leans over and heaves. "Yes," I say. The stranger exclaims and laughs – "HA!"

The hospital is old. Crowded. Dirty. But it is a hospital, and I am grateful. Entire families lay in packed rows outside the hospital, the entrance, and inside the waiting room – mostly on the floor. Because we can pay for it, we only have to wait a few hours to be admitted into the emergency section, which is a small, windowless room filled with hard cots inhabited by patients sicker than Brian. Like much of my time traveling through this country, I feel my own privilege with stark embarrassment as it spreads across my cheeks hotly.

Once Brian is admitted, I fight to receive service from every counter at the hospital. I am volleyed back and forth between counters. When I visit the service counter for the third or fourth time to demand that Brian receive a laboratory test, the woman at the counter slaps my hand, which is resting on the desk. It isn't the first time I have been slapped on the hand here. The other time was in an airport, when I asked what time our delayed flight would arrive. But I know I have to continue to be courageous. My voice has never sounded so loud and so sure, and yet I feel so small and so unsure. I have to take a rickshaw to a pharmacy across town to purchase IV bags. I have to deliver Brian's stool sample to the laboratory for testing – a sample so watery that it is mistaken as a urine sample. None of the doctors wash their hands between patients. They also don't wear gloves. I ask one of the doctors to wash his hands before inserting an IV, but I notice there is no soap at the small, dirty, metal sink.

Some of the people in this room are dying.

At perhaps one or two in the morning, we are asked to leave the hospital to make room for more patients. First, we must pay for the services. The hospital accepts only cash. There is an ATM down the street, says the woman at the counter.

—

When I reach the ATM, I see immediately that it is defunct. Wires hang out where buttons used to be, and the screen flickers. A man on a motorcycle drives up to use the ATM. His face looks as disappointed as mine does. I ask him if he knows of another ATM nearby. He does, but it is far. He gestures to behind him and tell me to get on. The little girl in me remembers a book my mother read me called "Don't Talk to Strangers," which featured cute illustrated monsters with insidious motives. The woman in me remembers that I am a warrior. I climb onto the back of this stranger's motorcycle. Death, angry dogs, cows, alleyways, strange men on motorcycles. When we arrive, I expect him to rob me. He doesn't. He smiles and I try to tip him profusely for the ride, but he refuses any money.

When I exit the hospital with Brian at 2 or 3 AM, I break into a sweat in the humid night heat of India, and he breaks into a fit of cold shivering. I have never witnessed shaking like this before. His chest and neck are speckled with what looks like rashy hives, and I sit him down on the dirty pavement. He convulses. His teeth chatter violently. Perhaps it is a reaction to the cold fluid running through his veins after having been hooked to the IV, or perhaps it was his fever breaking. I am terrified. My heart leaves my body. I can do nothing but trust that he will live. I know I have done everything I can.



We pass hundreds of sleeping bodies along the darkened riverside ghat on the slow walk back to the guesthouse. They are thin, impoverished bodies. It is one of the eeriest experiences of my life. I am not sure if I believe in ghosts, but if I did, then I cannot comprehend the number of spirits that have been released here in this long-standing cremation ground. The only waking person is a man in a boat out on the Ganges, who hollers obscenities at us vehemently. I again feel the sharp embarrassment of my obscene privilege on this long walk – here I am, a healthy woman walking with a man who just had his life saved at a hospital because we could afford it. Meanwhile, the ghats are filled with the hungry bodies of homeless people sleeping on the hard ground.

The next day, I call the hospital repeatedly to receive the lab results.

“Dysentery.”

When I was a girl, I used to play the computer game Oregon Trail on one of those Macintosh PCs with the small, square, black screens. When a character in the game got dysentery, the words “YOU HAVE DYSENTERY” would appear in pixelated white text on the screen. Nine times out of ten, that character would die.

Brian gets dysentery and doesn’t die. His new medication begins working within the next 48 hours, and although it takes him months to finally recover, he lives to rescue me from a monkey attack later that week, to rescue me a month later when it’s my turn to fall ill during a trek in the isolated, moonscaped Himalayan region of Ladakh – and this time, there is no hospital. There are no roads. We are trekking at elevations higher than the summit of my state’s local Mount Hood. Brian carries my pack when we cross the highest pass, because I am buckling under its weight. The wind whips across my face and feels like a slap on my cheeks. I have to stop and catch my breath between every step because the air is so thin. We are surrounded by snow, wandering yaks, donkeys, Ladakhi shepherds, and Buddhist Stupas (prayer structures) at which I pray that I do not die.

When I return to the states after my time abroad, I am hardened. I’ve been away for more than a year. My body is different. I have left a partnership that has failed miserably, and my heart aches. I go to see healers. I stay in an apartment that is empty except for an air mattress and my bicycle. One of my colleagues remarks loudly that I “look a little damaged.”



I don’t think breaking experiences such as this damage us. I feel fuller, more grateful, more mature, and more courageous than when I left. While Brian recovered in our guesthouse in the week that followed our trip to the hospital, I took many silent walks along that river of death and came across a mural of the goddess Akhilandeshvara on a large column. Her name means “One Who Is Never Not Broken,” and she rides a crocodile like a bold and daring Hindu cowgirl.

Maybe the experience of breaking open can fill us with light, much like the broken angles of prisms that explode with the refractions of rainbows.

# Meet the Authors - - - - -

**Andy Betz** has tutored and taught in excess of 30 years. He lives in 1974, has been married for 27 years, and collects occupations (the current tally is 100). His works are found everywhere a search engine operates.

**Yuliia Vereta** is a young writer from Ukraine, traveling the world and getting inspiration from other cultures to write short stories, poetry, creative non-fiction, and whatever else that can comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable. Her other works were published in print and online in 2019 in Litro Magazine (UK, Genre: urban arts (USA), Penultimate Peanut Magazine (USA), the Valley Voices (USA), and the McGruffin (USA). She received that 2018 City of Rockingham Short Story Award (Australia) and became the finalist in 2019 Poetry Matters Project (USA) as well as 2019 Hessler Poetry Contest (USA).

**Robert Vaughn** was born and raised in Houston, Texas. In 2009, he graduated from Stephen F. Austin State University with a degree in Television and Radio Broadcasting. When he is not educating himself on the latest political news or writing, he is normally in the gym or being a total nerd with video games, tabletop role-playing games or something sci-fi related.

**Leah Baker** is an English teacher at a public high school, and works regularly with her students to develop, refine, and submit their own writing for publishing. As for herself, she has had her pieces featured in Pointed Circle, Voice Catcher, and For Women Who Roar. She is a feminist, gardener, yogi, sound healer, and world traveler. You can find more about her at [www.OpalMoonAttunement.com](http://www.OpalMoonAttunement.com).