

SOUNDINGS

THE FIRST DRAFT

SOUNDINGS: THE FIRST DRAFT

To be clear, this magazine you're holding is not literally a collection of first drafts. The works here – long, short, angsty, peaceful – are fire-forged creations from cauldrons of creative passion. You'll find pieces disturbing and humorous, deep and light-hearted, but, we hope, not ones that resemble first drafts (or else we haven't done our job).

So why, then, do we call this publication "Soundings: The First Draft"? Because in many ways, these early writings mark the first steps of literary development, a precious time that may be lost to the inevitable evolution of style, voice, and even interest. Teenage-hood is precarious, occasionally brilliant, largely unrefined. Our passions, many and nebulous, fly wildly and erratically – this magazine is a treasury of these captured creative sparks, fresh and untamed.

Here's to the unpredictability of Saratoga's literary minds,

The Editors
Samuel Liu and Julianne Wey

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This magazine would not have seen print if not for the efforts of the English Department, which spent a great deal of time advising the publication, and the writers and artists who submitted their works, bravely opening themselves up to criticism and even rejection.

A huge thank you to everyone.

COVER

Truth be told, we actually didn't have a cover until quite late in the process. So we asked Michelle Cen to "just do something" because she'd already contributed a lot of art that we liked. She sent in a rough draft – and we told her to stop there. It was the perfect piece of art to represent high school artists: unfinished, rough, and, paradoxically, perfect. So that's why there are stray marks and the faint outline of "Soundings" in pencil. It's more or less planned, or so we say.

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MEMORIES

I used to photograph every experience I wanted to remember. A Steve Martin and the Steep Canyon Rangers' concert at the local Mountain Winery, a beautiful low-hanging fog on a morning run, and a pair of coyotes encircling my house have all been subjects of my attempts at saving precious memories. This lifestyle developed from interactions with my Alzheimer's-stricken grandfather, who could barely remember my mother's name, let alone who I was after five minutes. Fearing that one day, I too may lose my memory, I became obsessed with capturing special moments.

Luckily, in ninth grade, a family trip to Europe saved me from viewing life through a lens. My father constructed a tightly-packed itinerary, wanting us to see the spectacular wonders Europe had to offer. From museum to mausoleum, Moorish citadel to Roman ruin, we rushed

to each destination, staying just long enough to take the necessary family pictures. There was barely enough time to pause and appreciate the beauty of each landmark.

Before I knew it, the trip was coming to an end, and our last destination was Vatican City. I had become accustomed to rushing past my surroundings, so I raced through the Vatican Museums, wanting to add the coveted Sistine Chapel to my memory bank. I meandered through the crowd, my head swiveling as I searched for an optimal vantage point. There were security guards everywhere. Finally, I found the perfect position: a mahogany bench on the outskirts of the upward-looking crowd. Setting my backpack down, I became part of the sub-crowd, a group of covert photographers taking forbidden shots of Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment*. Flash off? Check. Awkward body contortion to get two blurry photos? Check. Get thrown out by plain-clothes guards? Check.

In an effort to take the perfect, most memorable picture of the Sistine Chapel, I sacrificed enjoying its true beauty. The guards deleted my blurry photos, and with neither evidence nor recollection of seeing Michelangelo's masterpiece, I was left with nothing. As I waited for my



Nikhil Goel

family outside the chapel with my gaze lowered and my shoulders hunched in humiliation, I realized that I could not spend my life trying to capture moments — that in order to make lasting memories, I needed to create them. I remember chasing my brother around the Alhambra and singing “Lean On Me” with a homeless man in London, but for the most part, my memory of the Europe trip is a blur.

Perhaps it is cliché to say that I do not want to live my life taking pictures, that I want to truly experience and lose myself in the moment. Maybe there are moments worth capturing, but “remembering” something without having the associated experience means nothing. I want to feel, taste, and breathe the moment without any fear of what I will remember, of what Alzheimer's might take away. One day, I hope to revisit Europe, and instead of taking a picture on the Spanish Steps in Rome before rushing to the Coliseum, I will sit down, lick pistachio gelato, and listen to a street musician serenade passersby with his six-string. ♡

THE TRUE MEANING OF:

ACCEPTANCE

I always saw myself as open minded and liberal. I have friends who are Indian, Chinese, Japanese; some are Jewish, atheist, and Buddhist. A few of my good friends are gay. None of these details ever mattered to me. Acceptance was easy — that is, until it hit close to home the spring of my sophomore year when I learned my older sibling was transgender. I was shocked and confused.

After sixteen years, it was hard to lose the big brother who gave me books, taught me games, beat me at swimming races, and let me hang out with his friends. No matter how hard I tried, I didn't understand why he couldn't be my brother anymore and instead wanted to be my sister Spring [name changed]. I found myself hurt and angry. Even talking about my sibling was hard, with a new name and different pronouns, each mention jarringly reminding me of the change and my loss.

That summer, I immersed myself into my internship, escaping from the tension at home. I found myself embarrassed of my sibling, something I had never felt before. I avoided having friends over, so I wouldn't have to explain to them why my brother was wearing a skirt. More than anything, I was ashamed of the way I was acting. Before, I had always been able to

stick up for others. Why should this be different?

Our conversations that summer were limited to forced small talk and arguments over sharing the car. Spring left for college, putting further distance between us. Thanksgiving passed with only a few words over the phone. My sibling turned into a distant relative, a voice over the phone and a face in old photographs.

Spring came home from college for the first time in December. In anticipation of relatives coming to our house for Christmas dinner, my mom gave everyone a heads up about Spring's transition. My cousins arrived and no one else seemed to miss my older brother. They seemed to take the changes in stride. No one else seemed to share my inner turmoil and sense of awkwardness.

With time, I have been able to process this change. Gradually, I've become accustomed to using the right pronouns and new name. As I start to tell friends about Spring's situation, it almost comes as a relief to hear my friends admit the news is “a little weird.” For the first time, I finally see others react with the same bewilderment and uneasiness I first felt. At the same time, however, my friends are very receptive, and I'm thankful that they don't judge.

Some aspects of life have gone back to normal, but there are some things that I've lost forever. I'm no longer the only girl in my family; something I had always believed made me strong-minded. Competitions in the pool are over; gender-specific bathing suits make the water a tricky place. Yet not everything has changed. Spring recently brought me home *Heart of Iron*, a worn science fiction paperback from the used bookstore in town, and we still enjoy board games like *Settlers of Catan*. I realize it doesn't matter if I can't grasp the idea of transgender — my sister is who she is.

As ironic as it sounds, I used to judge others for their prejudice. But I've come to realize I was no better than a parent who refuses to let their daughter have an interracial relationship, or the classmate who admits she is uncomfortable around gay people. Difference is hard; everyone has concepts they can't wrap their minds around. Now, I can empathize. It took me time, effort, and reading every article I could find that dealt with transgender identity to finally accept my sister's decision. I still can't comprehend what it is like to be transgender, but acceptance is not about relating someone else — it's loving them even when you don't understand. ♡



Jennie Werner

ELEMENTARY EXISTENTIAL CRISIS

TELESCOPE

My parents never much liked conventional toys.

Allow me a trip down memory lane, shaded by the mulberry leaves of my childhood:

Third Grade: Mother took my Gameboy and vehemently threw it into a neighbor's backyard because I was playing during dinner.

Fourth Grade: Mother trashed my Yu-Gi-Oh cards because my friend was playing with them during church. “Thou shalt not play Yu-Gi-Oh cards during Church,” proclaims the 11th Commandment.

And let's not forget the Sixth Grade, when a lucky bunch of children received my precious Legos through Mother's benevolent charity.

Not surprisingly, it came as a huge shock for me when my parents, to encourage my blossoming obsession with science and to compensate for the fact that my basement

laboratory had been “chlorine'd” by my medieval chlorine bomb, bought me an awesome, \$800, full-function telescope.

Prior to that, I had been fond of collecting dangerous household chemicals and seeing what “cool” things I could do. “Cool” as in let's make things explode and bubble — what are consequences to a 10 year-old? Unfazed and without much thought, I somehow hooked up a bunsen burner to the natural gas supply in the basement (kept me warm and toasty). I looked up atomic bomb designs and lamented that I couldn't reproduce a similar model. I spent hours on hours in my backyard creek, which surely flowed with beautiful, totally not dangerous bacteria and fungi. I was a nascent mad-scientist who wore mismatched socks and couldn't reach the taller monkey bars.

I was, am, and always will be infinitely curious about everything — from memorizing *Hamlet* soliloquies to being the first to taste the salsa to see if it's rotten. For me, a telescope was revolutionary — I had acquired the ability to look into the infinite, the cure for my curiosity. And I soon became addicted to the telescope: I researched and talked to bemused scientists, and my parents literally had to drag me indoors at night. Thankfully, this obsession couldn't be thrown away: it was



Samuel Liu

too expensive.

I've realized now that the telescope has changed me in a way other pursuits had not. In those countless nocturnal hours I spent gazing at stars, I was humbled by the infinite, a child who saw “out there” and was shocked inside. I felt empty, unable to comprehend that I was nothing more than bio-matter temporarily synthesized till I once again became dust of the earth. And while these existential questions are nothing extraordinary, they were huge questions for my 10-year-old self, and I sought books and readings to answer them.

I think that, in some strange way, the telescope was responsible for my increased interest in the liberal arts. Spurred by the emptiness I felt when I looked into the night sky, I devoured texts, the most influential ones being *The New Testament* and *Martin Dressler: The Tale of an American Dreamer*. And as time went on and I reached high school, I found a different sort of telescope: my school newspaper. No longer was I limited to turning my focus millions of miles upwards. Now, I could look at everything around me and my curiosity was not limited to the stars. Avenues of fascination sprouted like so many diverging paths, and I couldn't have been happier.

These days I don't look up at the night sky much anymore, but my focus has expanded to so much more. ♡

TENNIS TENSIONS

NADAL SUCKS

I hate Rafael Nadal with a passion.

There you go. I said it! So please, stop giving me that look. From the reactions I get, expressing my dislike of Rafa is like committing some unforgivable crime against humanity. How can someone have the heart to criticize a man who gives everything on the tennis court, furiously chasing every ball like it's match point, sweat flying from his glamorously long locks? How can someone dislike a man who hosts charity matches, still lives in a small house next to his parents, and captivates millions with his charmingly accented English and earnest smile?

I devoted endless months trying to figure out what was wrong with me. For after all, the problem with hating Nadal is that it reflects more on me than on him. Nadal is a perennial underdog ... how can you root against the underdog?

Full disclosure: I have always been

a diehard Roger Federer fan. I first began watching tennis in 2006 and loved Federer from the first moment. His forehand was a controlled arc of destruction; he moved over the court like it was part of a complex dance. He seemed unstoppable; no one could oppose his grace and God-like precision. Unfortunately, I would be proved wrong.

I remember it so clearly when I first saw them play. I was watching the 2007 Shanghai Masters Cup semifinal. At first, I laughed at the contrast. Federer was his usual sharp self, ripping forehand winners while gliding across the court. I almost felt sorry for Nadal, the skinny teenager in the bright blue muscle shirt, scurrying along the baseline to retrieve Federer's shots. But then, Nadal's tenacity began to trouble Federer, and Federer actually began to sweat. Was Federer showing signs of his mortality?

A day of trauma I will never forget: Sunday, July 6, 2008. The day that Nadal beat Federer in the Wimbledon finals. It was terrible to witness, but ironically Nadal winning is not what bothers me. What really irks is that people root for Nadal because he is the underdog. This never ceases to amaze me. People view Nadal as a fighter. Regular people can emulate the way he plays. He constantly fights and scraps for points, running down every ball, while Federer plays effortlessly and glides on top of the court. Nadal is all too human; Federer seems like a machine. Federer is sponsored by Mercedes; Nadal ... by Kia. Somehow, that sums it all up.

Yet when looking objectively at this historic rivalry, Nadal has a 22-10 advantage in their matches. Nadal is in his athletic prime; Federer is slipping into the twilight of his career. Not to mention that Nadal seems genetically engineered to defeat Federer, as though some higher force was trying to stop Federer in his quest for unrivaled dominance. His high bouncing topspin gives Federer nightmares, and his doggedness frustrates Federer. So I suppose my ultimate problem with Nadal is that he's portrayed as the brave challenger to the invincible Fed, tireless in his heroic quest to unseat the Swiss Maestro.

So that's what I really hate about Nadal: the incorrect narrative surrounding him and the romanticized light the world bathes him in. He's not just Goliath — he's Goliath pretending to be

David. Underdog status is too important to squander on those who don't deserve it. There are underdogs out there, and the world should save its cheers for those



Nick Chow

who need them. Nadal, unfortunately, will do just fine without our misplaced emotional support.

Just one thing. After spending so much time writing about my hatred of Nadal I realized something. A come-from-behind kid from a Spanish fishing village who lives next to his parents and leads a simple life. He can't be that bad ... right?

And that's the problem. Say what I will, hating Nadal will always just be a hair out of reach. ♣

ARTS & TECH

BEAUTY

Lines, textures, and gradients matter to me. Angles, movement, and focus all matter to me. I value art because as technology speeds up daily life, creativity and beauty seem to lose their hold on most people. Nowadays, society's understanding of aesthetics is more superficial than ever — to my generation, it's merely a generic filter placed over a decently captured image, or a mediocre recording glossed over with an elegant sound effect. The infiltration of electronics into what



Maggie Sun

once was a pure means of expression has discredited the arts by making "talent" available to everyone.

It vexes me that the semblance of beauty has replaced genuine beauty, that aesthetic aptitude now gets downloaded rather than cultivated. Art has lost its original precision and thoughtfulness; society no longer differentiates between "art" that is generated with the click of a button, and art that reflects years of dedication. Having devoted my entire childhood to piano, oil painting, and dance, of course I'd love to revive the days when art education was commonplace, but Instagram and computers are not the way to do it. The fusion of art and technology breeds careless work, and this carelessness in turn evokes apathy from audiences and viewers.

The purpose of art, regardless of medium, is to convey. A landscape painting is not a setting but a sentiment, and a dance routine not movements but memories and ideas. Accurate communication through art requires attentiveness on the side of the perceiver, an attentive-

ness that, sadly, is fading through mass media. ♣

GHOST STORIES

JUMP

Some kids had imaginary friends; I Shad God. Eating, sleeping, studying, playing, living — God was always there, molding and assessing. Never an abstract or distant being, God took the form of a personal, spectral ghost, accompanying me wherever I went. A solemn inheritance, the ghost was an artist, sculpting my identity in line with over 1,400 years of religion and culture, pushing me and billions of others down the same narrow path through life. My struggle has been to pave my own.

Doubt first appeared over the mundane things. Why not consume pork? Why pray a certain direction? Why not touch a girl's hand? The ghost always had an answer, but it was never definitive or fully satisfying, never appeasing my doubt. In high school, the uncertainty approached the core of my belief, concerning the very nature of God and religion itself. However, this painstaking dissection of my beliefs yielded confusing results. For every seemingly pointless and ritualistic fiqh or rule there was a beautiful insight or morality. The ghost was a packaged deal I didn't know what to do with, one that proved all the more troubling, for some of the religious laws it mandated contradicted the morality it taught.

This tension bubbled to the surface when I was asked to train Ivan, a newcomer, at a local food drive where I regularly volunteer. We became instant friends and, after several weeks, started hanging out outside of volunteering events. While the ghost at first was pleased, since it deemed friendship one of the greatest of virtues, one day, everything changed. We were sitting alone eating pizza, and I was pressing Ivan to tell me which girl he was going to ask to his school's prom. After evading the question for a minute, he said very quietly, "Dude, I don't know how else to say this, but I'm not planning to ask a girl. I'm ... gay, man. We're cool right?"

My heart skipped a beat, and beside me, the ghost erupted in rage, castigating my unnatural, infidelic friend. I was torn in two; wasn't Ivan the same person he had been just moments ago, the person with whom I enjoyed watching *Lord of the Rings* reruns, hitting the gym, and volunteering for countless hours at food



Mostafa Rohaninejad

drives? His question forced me to a precipice I had been toeing for years but had dreaded crossing.

I finally decided to take the jump. After years of reading philosophy, attending countless weekend seminars, and contemplating during many sleepless nights, I realized that my religious teachings should simply be a guide to be consulted, not a rulebook to be blindly followed. I now wanted to take personal responsibility for my morality, dignity, and happiness. It was up to me now to forge my own path through life, one that did not necessarily overlap the ghost's. I now felt the enormous burden that had settled on my shoulders. While it was scary to roam in such uncharted territory without the structure that had at times given me a sense of security and certainty, the added responsibility came with the freedom to explore exciting, new routes to self fulfillment and meaning.

As I looked back at Ivan, I said with a new sense of confidence and surety, "No worries, we're cool." ♣

ON COLLEGE ESSAYS

People say writing all these college essays and personal statements helps you grow as a person, and it's true because you're forced to look back and analyze yourself; who you were, who you are now, and who you want to become. From a post-decisions perspective, I strongly believe what separates a successful applicant from a regular one is exactly that sense of self. There are the students who write with purpose — they know spot on who they are and what they want to convey — and there are those who write, albeit eloquently, to fill the word count, or those (including myself for some time) who look for non-existent life-changing stories in an attempt to impress. Modesty is perfectly acceptable. The experiences you write about don't have to be one-of-a-kind, but it's the inner identity you portray that makes you unique.

— Maggie Sun

FICTION, ART, POETRY, AND THE INDESCRIBABLE

FICTION

DOMESTIC ABUSE

By Anonymous

His heart was a behemoth — something so gargantuan, so colossal. It swallowed me whole, and trapped me in the atriums and ventricles of his heart. Every rush of blood and thrum of his beating heart echoed like sirens. I never thought that this organ could become my prison cell. He used to say that love was fierce, and for a long time I agreed. So that's why I didn't mind when he chewed me up and spat me back out until I was all black and blue. I didn't mind when he'd leave a halo of bruises around my wrist like a bracelet he had bought me. He whispered that he'd never do it again, as his nails raked down my back, leaving long angry marks behind. I thought they were the marks of our devotion not our decay. He used to say, you're mine, as he shoved walls between my sisters and me, my brother and me, my parents and me. He became my one and only. I thought this was love, so I let him consume me. I let him choke me, even as I gasped for breath. I thought this was love so I adored him even when he left me weeping on the bathroom floor. I thought this was love, so I applied the foundation painstakingly to each purple mark he left on my skin. I thought this was love, so I stayed with him.

But as the years passed, my back started to bend so far forward that I feel as tight as the string of a bow; his love grew more monstrous and every part of my world felt like it was crumbling, collapsing, caving in on itself. Every time I was in his presence, my breaths rattled and scraped against my ribcage and something heavy settled in my



ART // MICHELLE CEN

chest, like a golf ball lodged in my windpipe. Suddenly I was studying maps more than his eyes. My stomach started to tighten in jealousy when I noticed the way mockingbirds soared into the endless expanse of sky. There was something utterly boundless in the way they moved that made me question my own static, passive position. Two nights ago, he yelled so loud I thought the walls of the house trembled

(could the neighbors hear?), and his fingers tightened around the bottle of brandy in his hand. (Perhaps he thought it was my neck.) His existence haunted me, and guilt plagued me as thoughts of vanishing forever entered my mind. My fingers itched for the car keys with each curse he spat at me, and finally, finally, I escaped. I didn't even glance in my rearview mirror, for my wheels were already taking me

far, far away. I drove so fast it felt like I was floating across the tarmac. The word limitless and free waltzed through my mind. Something like euphoria bubbled inside my chest and laughter tumbled out of my throat for the first time in two years. In the distance the sun was setting on the horizon; a blanket of orange and pink hues settled on the mountain tops. It looked like liberation. ♣



OBSESSIONS

HYGIENE

By Caytie Lee Davenport

ART // THOMAS LI

I love hygiene. I don't know why exactly, but it's always been a part of me, this ... longing for complete sanitation. It became both my pleasure and my curse, like two sides of a coin. During my childhood, I never really noticed it. I assumed having excellent hygiene quietly increased in severity. They began to take away my bottles of hand sanitizer or limit my shower time from an hour to a mere thirty minutes. My relentless screaming and blubbing didn't have any effect on them. No, they refused to understand it, the special part of me. They didn't know how special it was, but I did. As an adult, I look back and understand just how lovely and simple things were. Sometimes, it felt more like an stowaway than a need. Like something that shouldn't really be there. Yet I continued to live with my habit and accepted it willingly and peacefully.

I must admit, my life was pretty good. I say "pretty good" because there were

some hindrances that affected my lifestyle. For one, keeping a job was difficult. My co workers constantly complained about my habits, and since I couldn't focus on my work because of the suffocating air surrounding me, my bosses concluded that it was best for me to leave. Relationships never worked out, mainly because humans are far too dirty for my liking. They don't even wash their hands regularly, it's repulsive. I rarely let other humans touch me or my things, with the exception of my private doctor. How could I let those parasite-infected beings be in contact with me or my things? Because of it I couldn't stand other humans or life-beings. But it always felt normal to me.

Every day is like a routine for me. Get up and head to the bathroom. I shower for a decent hour-and-a-half with a deep, deep scrub to my hands and feet. Sometimes, as a personal treat, I bring my bot-

tle of rubbing alcohol to give my hands an extra disinfection. After, I immediately proceed to the sink. Taking a glance at the mirror, I opened my mouth for the hourly inspection. Due to over-brushing my teeth, my gums are rather plump and easy to bleed. They protrude out over my white teeth and make eating a little difficult. But, it's proof — proof my mouth is in pristine condition. With my inspection out of the way, I put on my leather gloves. I always wear a pair of gloves. The outside world is crawling with bacteria and micro germs. I couldn't imagine those things absorbing into my skin, particularly my hands. Even while wearing the gloves, I still disinfect my hands with rubbing alcohol twice a day and wash them almost hourly. Because of that, my hands were in a state of permanent dryness. Taking the gloves off became a struggle as the friction between skin and leather caused the skin to tear and bleed. I don't mind the blood, but the rips worried me. Bacteria could easily slip inside. Hand sanitizer does the trick, though it feels like fire when I rub it into the bleeding cuts. The pain doesn't bother me anymore, because the discomfort is all necessary.

One day, while surfing the Internet, I came across an article discussing health topics. I didn't usually find interest in anything involving health because I didn't need advice or food tips. But this one caught my eye. It was about the dangers inside the human body. AIDS. Cancer. Diabetes. The list went on and on. I spent an hour reading about the diseases and deadly viruses. In that moment, my blood curdled and my mind drained out. Fright then melted into a strong denial. Unfathomable. Impossible. Lies, all those lies. Everything I read ... inconceivable. I denounced all of it as rumors and grandmother skepticism. I, after all, had absolutely nothing to worry about.

Soon, my denial formed into paranoia in a couple of weeks. I realized my gloves didn't cover enough, that I needed a better protection against the filthy world. For the few times I went outside I wore a full body suit, the kind scientists use when they come in contact with dangerous chemicals. It felt absolutely necessary; I refused to take any chances. A part of me knew that I was wrong. I knew the truth, but I refused to see it.

It was already inside me. My whole body, day by day, was becoming increasingly soiled and polluted. I could feel it seeping into my pores, carving into my veins, and blotting my blood. Every. Damn. Second. I knew that if I didn't do something, I would go insane within the confines of myself. It came to me when I woke up the next morning, a glorious revelation. A bath. All I needed was a bath. No big deal. It was the only way I could

ever, truly, be clean again. But I needed something more potent than soap or bleach to wash with. No, I needed something to exterminate everything. When I went to my doctor for help, he just stared at me with a look of horror. He called me a freak, an obsessed freak. I was then politely escorted out the building.

So I searched on my own through the Internet, magazines, and a few private contacts. I eventually discovered that my answer was ammonia, a potent chemical in household cleaning items. A couple phone-calls of sly convincing later, 68 liters of ammonia gas arrived at my door. I could hardly contain my ecstasy as I wheeled everything into my bathroom. Taking a quick look at the directions, I fitted myself with my bodysuit, gloves, and goggles. I turned to start the process of filling the tub. It took awhile and I spilled some of the ammonia since my hands were shaking from either nervousness or excitement. Like the same feeling I got as a child when my parents bought me my first bottle of hand sanitizer. After filling the bathtub with water and the ammonia, I took off the gloves and goggles. My eyes immediately began to inflame and my skin itched a bit. I then took off the rest of my clothes off and glanced at myself. I noticed a look of disgust in my eyes, a foreign yet familiar expression. It scared me a little. But I ignored it, knowing that my fears will be erased for good. When I submerged myself in the bathtub, I felt the chemical sink into my skin almost immediately. It was an excellent feeling, like a chilled burn. I relaxed and let myself float in place while my mind focused on other things. The lack of pain surprised me, maybe it was shock that kept the pain at bay. Slowly, the tingling on my skin increased to a pinching numbness, like when a body part falls asleep. I could see my legs twitch and yet I couldn't feel anything. I found it fascinating. Concluding that the Ammonia was doing it's job and exterminating filth inside my legs, I felt more relieved of my burden that had been weighing me down for months. My glee increased when I noticed a slight tinge of white coating my feet and calves. Simply incredible! Such a simple solution, how could I've not seen this before? I needed more. Suddenly, the idea of perfection seemed so close for me to achieve. Maybe a regular session once a month as a ritual, maybe that would do the trick.

My sight was blackening and I could feel my eyes burning from the exposure of the Ammonia. It felt like my whole head was on fire. When my left field of vision disappeared, I gently pressed a finger to my eye to get a feel for what happened. I prodded the outer cornea and felt the finger slowly sink into the wet-

#

once upon a time, a boy plucked my heart from my chest
he stroked it and smiled at me, caved my breast

in around the empty cavity and wiped away
the anxiety with simple words in honeyed rays

he took my heart away with him, somewhere too far to find
until i could see it no more, left behind

i crumbled inward till no one recognized me
they took away the pieces and buried me

then one day he returned and thought of me, thought to put me back together
rubbed his hands and dug me out, tugged me to him with a tether

he solidified the ashes i had become, fashioned me into a single piece
i opened my eyes and let out a sigh, wondered at his caprice

i asked him for my heart, he told me it was safe
i shook my head, lifted shaking limbs, unsound and chafed

he brought it out to show me, and knives stuck deep into the flesh
the organ blackened, rotting, i could not see i could not hear my nostrils filled

he smiled at the railroad tracks cracking through my face—breaking into bits—
his teeth black and bloodied—
swallowed the heart whole
i screamed and screamed
till he silenced my lips
sucked me in
consumed me

By Julianne Wey

ness, encasing it completely. I swirled it inside the socket, feeling nothing. Rotten through. When I pulled my finger out of the socket, I could feel my eye's discharge running down my face in clumps. There was a slight smell of iron which I noted was blood. After I lost my right side of vision soon after, I tried to do the same thing. My finger was shaky, it kept missing the target. Annoyed, I groped around the floor for a substitute. I caught onto a toothbrush and continued my pursuit. The toothbrush was much easier, plunging in easily. I scraped out pieces of what I thought was the dead pupil. Then gouging deeper into the socket, I shoveled out the rest of the flesh. Hearing the toothbrush slush and scrub felt so satisfying.

Now I won't have to see any filth ever again.

Though I couldn't see anything, I could sense the numbness spreading from my legs to my arms. I lifted my arm above the water and clenched my hand. It made a squelching sound from what I assumed was the residue of my dead eyeball. My fingers opened and grasped closed again, holding onto nothing but air. I don't know why I was doing it, but I think it

was looking for something. Numbness had finally reached the fingers and I heard them drop loudly back into the liquid. At this point, I was unable to move anything but my neck and mouth. Yet I still could feel no pain, not even when my lungs collapsed within and struggled to function. Before my mouth succumbed to the numbness, I shrieked and laughed hysterically while the skin around my mouth ripped and torn. I could taste the sweet blood on my lips and my tongue slicked along the ragged corners of my mouth.

Knowing that I couldn't stand up for the time being, my body slowly sank into the liquid. I only know this because Ammonia was filling into my mouth and nostrils with it's lovely burning sensation. My mind began to flicker in and out, but there was no sense of fear. I knew it was done. I could live now my life without having to feel dirty, or to bear with other human's repulsiveness. The relief washed over me and I knew it would last this time. I had never felt this way before, never had this much hope.

For the first time in many years, I smiled. ☺



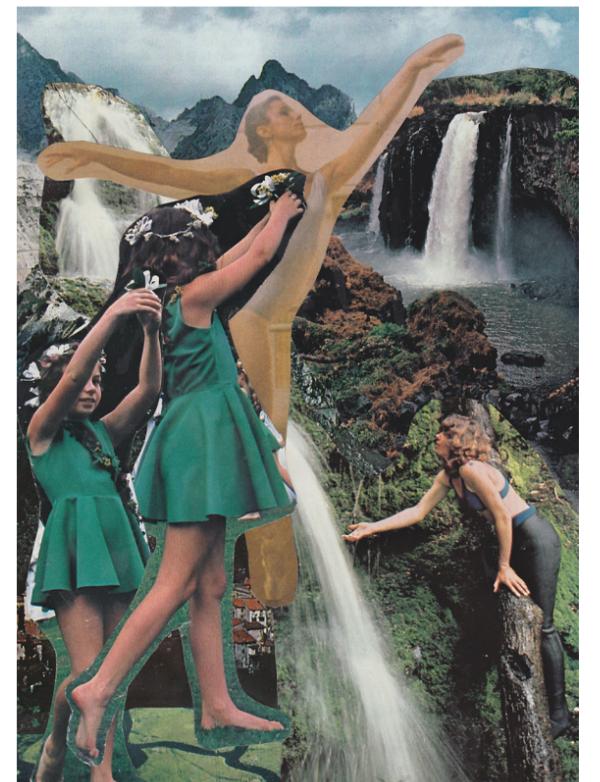
*The earth never tires,
 The earth is rude, silent, incomprehensible at first, Nature is
 rude and incomprehensible at first,
 Be not discouraged, keep on, there are divine things well
 envelop'd,
 I swear to you there are divine things more beautiful than
 words can tell.*

Walt Whitman

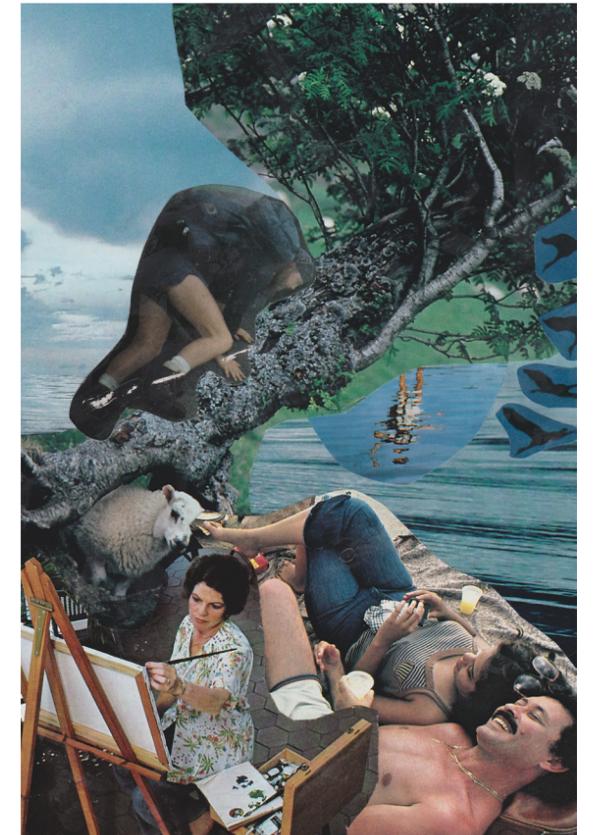
EXPENDABLE



DREAMSCAPE



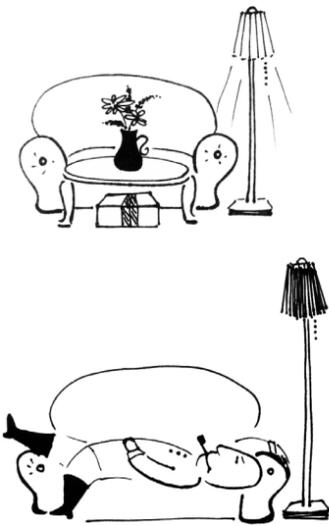
BALLET



LAKESIDE

IT ENDS

By Nastasya Kutuyev



PHIL
SUNDAY
PHIL
SUNDAY
PHIL
SUNDAY

ART // VIVIAN WANG

Scene opens on a middle-class apartment, with an old leather couch and an even older coffee table. Underneath the coffee table is a cardboard box, its contents kept secret. Sunday, a manic pixie dream girl enters from stage right, and Phil, the cynical owner of the apartment, enters close behind.

Sunday: Okay, so that wasn't the best plan for sneaking into Seaworld after hours, but if it weren't for that guard we would've pulled it off.

Phil: Forgive me if I don't share your optimism, Sunday.

Sunday: What a perfectly charming pessimist you are, Phil.

(She hops onto the couch, kicking her feet up onto the cushions, much to Phil's annoyance.)

Sunday: With a cynical cherry on top.

(Phil casually takes out a rolled up packet of papers that has been sticking out from his coat pocket.)

Phil: I don't think it's pessimistic to not have the sudden urge to see Shamu at two in the morning.

Sunday: It's only one in the morning.

Phil: Oh, well that changes

everything.

(He takes off his coat and drops it onto the nearest chair or table and opens up the packet and begins to read.)

Sunday: Sarcasm suits you too well. I just can't get you to stop being a grump, can I?

Phil: Uh-huh.

Sunday: (noticing the packet) What's that?

Phil: (looking up) What?

(Phil looks back down at the packet, back at Sunday, and then tries to hide the papers behind his back.)

Sunday: Well don't try to hide it now. I always see you pulling out all those papers and reading. What is it?

Phil: Nothing special.

Sunday: So you're telling me when that minimum wage enforcer of petty justice was chasing us, you refused to help me over the fence just so you could read "nothing special"?

Phil: ... Something special.

Sunday: We're not playing 20 Questions, so how about you just tell me?

Phil: It's my business, and you aren't a part of it.

(Sunday stands, casually walking closer towards Phil.)

Sunday: Of course. I respect that.

Phil: No you don't.

Sunday: Yeah, you're right.

(She launches herself at him, struggling to grab at the packet of papers. Phil has a hard time keeping her at bay, especially when she jumps onto his back.)

Phil: Get off me!

Sunday: Show me the paper! I need to know! My life depends on it!

Phil: Get ... off!

(He manages to push Sunday off of his back and onto the couch, but she has the papers in her hands and so begins to read as she sits.)

Phil: (realizing Sunday has the papers) Wait, don't...

Sunday: (surprised) It's a script.

Phil: Give it back.

Sunday: No. Did you write this?

Phil: Well, no.

Sunday: But this...this is everything. Everything I've said and done tonight.

Phil: (quietly) And everything you will do.

Sunday: You've been writing it all down?

Phil: I told you, I didn't write it.

Sunday: (curious) Well then who did?

(Phil is hesitant to share, especially with Sunday turning her full attention to him for an explanation. He is hesitant to begin, and begins pacing, trying to piece everything together.)

Phil: I don't know. Since last month, these scripts have just... appeared. I just look and there's one right on the table, and they all pick up where the last one left off. And it's all my life, down to the exact word.

(There is a moment of silence as the two look at each other. Sunday clears her throat, closing the script. She is incredibly calm.)

Sunday: This is coming from the girl whose hippie parents named her after a day of the week. You're insane.

Phil: I'm not! And I can prove it. Go ahead, read along-

Sunday: I don't want to. It's too...creepy. Unnatural.

Phil: Do you believe me, then?

Sunday: Yes ... and no. I mean, this is pretty interest-

ing, and certainly not the weirdest thing I've ever seen, but I just don't see how this could even be possible-

Phil: Well, neither did I, but...

(He looks around, almost desperately, before he bends down and takes out the cardboard box from underneath the coffee table. Sunday stands and walks closer to get a better look as Phil opens the box to reveal that it is full of other scripts.)

Phil: Here. This is all of them. I saved them up. Go on, look through.

(Sunday is hesitant, but puts the first script down on the table and picks up another from the box. She flips through slowly, recognizing the dialogue from conversations she's had with Phil in the past. She puts the script back in the box and flips through another. She repeats the process a few times, growing more and more worried with each one.)

Sunday: Phil, if someone is stalking you—

Phil: No one is! And how would they know the future?

Sunday: It's your life. Everything. Scripted.

(Phil picks up the first script on the table and flips to this page, showing it to Sunday.)

Phil: Look. (pointing to this line) It says I point to this line.

Sunday: Ok. So let's just go with the fact that magical scripts depicting your life do appear and—

Phil: (reading script) Spit it out.

Sunday: Don't interrupt me.

Phil: Sorry, but that's what the script says.

Sunday: Oh my god you actually follow it?

Phil: They've never been wrong. I might as well.

Sunday: Well what if someone goes against the script?

Phil: No one does.

Sunday: Well what if I look at what I say next-

Phil: Line

Sunday: Pardon?

Phil: (quietly) They're called lines. The dialogue the actors say.

(Sunday stares at him, her tone shifting to something much more serious, which makes Phil nervous. He's never seen her serious before.)

Sunday: I'm not an actor.

Phil: I know.

Sunday: I'm a human.

Phil: Sunday, I know that. I thought you of all people ... stop treating me like I've gone insane.

Sunday: Maybe you have. You can't actually believe a stupid script can chronicle your life?

Phil: It's not that hard. I mean, we all fit into natural archetypes. Once you get the characters down—

Sunday: People, Phil. They're not characters.

Phil: (exasperated) Yes, I know that, but for the sake of simplicity-

Sunday: But it's not that simple! You can't just simplify people and emotions like that.

Phil: Sure you can. I mean, it's just a script. Of course it can't get into all the details. (looking at her) It's just a script.

(Another pause as the two look, Sunday eyeing the script in Phil's hands.)

Sunday: ... Can I see? I just want to see what it says about me. My ... character description, I guess.

Phil: (handing it over) Just a script.

Sunday: With the way you're acting, I'm not so sure.

(She flips open to read the opening stage direction for this scene. Phil watches her, and Sunday looks hurt as she looks back up at him.)

Sunday: ... Manic pixie dream girl?

Phil: It's a pretty complex trope—

Sunday: Trope?

Phil: (rambling excitedly) You're the childish, quirky, rebellious girl meant to show me the bright side of life through wacky adventures.

(She waits for the words he never says.)

Sunday: And ... ?

Phil: And what? I told you, it's just a script. It simplifies.

Sunday: What about you?

Phil: Well, I'm the cynical- (She drops the script on the

FROST

burn your name in the flush across my cheeks and whisper with winter on your breath i can't get this chill out from between my ribs i'd walk through fire if i thought it would thaw my body of you

By Claire Strickland

coffee table for extra emphasis.)

Sunday: Not that. Do you simplify?

Phil: Of course not.

Sunday: You don't think I'm just a manic pixie dream girl?

(Phil quietly picks up the script, carefully thinking about what he's going to say next.)

Phil: (earnestly) You're my friend. You joke about your name because you're insecure about it. You can never finish a cup of coffee, no matter what. You only wear dresses on Tuesdays, and you believe in four-leaf clovers but not lucky pennies.

Sunday: That's a list of quirks, Phil, not who I am.

Phil: Well what else do you want me to say?

Sunday: Do you really think I'm just an archetype?

Phil: I'm sorry that it fits you so well, but—

Sunday: Unbelievable.

(She begins to walk past him, but before she can exit stage right, Phil looks down and reads this line from the script, and calls out to her.)

Phil: Sunday!

Sunday: (stopping) What, Phil?

Phil: (turning towards her) ... I don't know. The script said-

Sunday: To hell with the script! That script isn't your life; your life is that script.

Phil: That doesn't even make sense.

Sunday: Doesn't it? You've actually let that paper control your life. Everything fits so perfectly because you make it fit. You simplify, and

you see everyone as a character in your little story. Well I'm sorry, Phil, but my existence isn't based on your life. My sole purpose isn't to "show you the fun in life through wacky adventures."

Phil: (defiantly) And I'm sorry that you can't realize how simple people are.

Sunday: There it is. There's the truth.

Phil: What? You think this script controls me? All it's done is shown me that we're led to believe life is some complicated mess, when really, it's all so simple.

Sunday: (walking closer to Phil) You want to take comfort in this delusion that your life can be confined to lines on a page? That the only things you should care about are the things that "further the plot"? Fine. But go ahead and prove to me these things (gesturing to box of scripts) haven't taken control of your life. Open up that script. Go on.

(Phil follows her orders warily, Sunday's expressionless face only making him more nervous.)

Sunday: Look at your next line and say something else.

(Phil looks at the next line. He remains silent for a minute, debating whether what he's about to do is what he wants or what the script wants.)

Phil: I don't want to.

Sunday: (scoffing) And you still think you're in control. You're a slave to ink on paper!

Phil: And you're a slave to an archetype! You go on and on about how three-dimensional people are, but all you

really are is the quirky hippie-next-door.

Sunday: Maybe that's all I am to you, but I've been

(Her mouth continues to move, but no words come out. None that Phil can hear, at least.)

Phil: Sunday? ... Sunday?

Sunday: Phil: I can't hear you. (looking down at the script) You don't have any dialogue.

Sunday: Phil: How does this end?

(He looks down, reading this stage direction. It ends, Phil. What did you expect? The answer to everything? It just ends, Phil.)

Phil: ... What?

Sunday: Phil: Sunday, please stop talking, I'm trying ...

(He doesn't know what he's trying anymore. He looks on the brink of tears. Has he really gone insane? Why are you still reading this, Phil, and acting like it's going to save your life? You said it yourself, I'm just a script. Sunday continues to mouth silently. Maybe her voice isn't the problem, maybe it's your ears? But he isn't reading any of this, he's turned his attention back to her. He's desperate now. She looks like she might leave, she's so fed up.)

Sunday: Phil: Wait, please! I'm not a slave, I can go against a stupid script. This isn't my life. This isn't you. This isn't me.

Sunday: Phil: I want to know what you're saying. I want to know everything. I

Sunday: Phil:

Sunday: Phil:

Sunday: Phil:

(Lights down on however the scene ends. It could very well be that Sunday never forgave Phil and stormed out, leaving him to collapse onto the couch. Maybe he burned all the scripts out of spite. Or maybe the two came to a reconciliation, maybe Sunday agreed she overreacted and Phil agreed that he was wrong. Who's to say? I'm just a script.)

Barred window

By Samuel Liu

Editors' Note: This piece is the first section of an unpublished novella.

When Father was a boy he was already a father. He never much liked to play or run or swim in the grey salt sea. He caught crabs in the rocks and dashed them against the wall and put them into his red plastic bucket and took them home to Mama.

The city around him had always felt a bit mystical. The Germans had been here. *Wai guo ren*, foreigners. Between the ice cream cart and the building where the parking guy lived was an old brown church with an old clock that went “dong, dong,” as if it were crying “north.” The city rose out of the countryside at the edge of the sea, and it was littered with people. Decaying western buildings slept next to shacks. Even if *wai guo ren* had been here, there was still trash on streets and the smell of piss in rare tufts of grass.

Father lived in a building on slanted ground. To get there from the beach, you first run along the road with the church, cross the intersection (watch out, there used to be a lot less cars) and then go down down down until you see the clothing store with the woman figure without a head. Then, you go right and once you feel the slantedness you’ve got to slow down just a bit and then there’s the great concrete slab that was home.

If it was Friday and after school then Father traded in a penny for a plastic container of white-flavored ice cream. Otherwise, he just entered the grimy cement apartment complex and started the long trek up the dirty gray stairs into room 504, which was really the fourth floor. This was the worst part of the day. Once the black steel clanged behind him he already felt irritated because it was hotter than anything inside the complex. He tried not to look at the used condoms and broken needles but he could never help it. To pass the time as he took the stairs one by one he recited what he had learned in school that day “A square root of a number a is a number y such that...”

When he got to the fourth/fifth floor he liked to glance out the window and look out for a bit, but not too long because by this time he was always sweaty and hot. He would look outside the bars of the window past the tiled roofs and shimmering heat and the honks of the cars and the shouts of fruit peddlers into the

horizon, into the sea where he thought he could glimpse just a bit of golden beach and further...

He had written a poem about this place before. He called it The Painting of the Sea From the Cage. He’d never shown anyone, of course. It was foolishness to write sloppy sentimental things like that. For one, all poetry had to be approved by the State. Furthermore, Mother always said that poetry is for those who cannot *ci ku*, or eat bitterness. And his family had had its fair share of *ci ku*. So he threw away the paper where he had scribbled the characters into the trash with the broken egg shells. But sometimes he still couldn’t help but recite the poem, once in a while, as he walked up the stairs. It interrupted his recitation of math.

He could already hear his Mother working the sewing machine, the CLACK CLACK CLACK whiirrrrr as it went back and forth making these rich colorful silks; they shined like jewels. He didn’t want to open the door just yet, because that meant that he had to start homework right away. A few years ago, he could have had a snack, but there was no money for that now. So he closed his eyes for just a half second — the ocean’s horizon obscured by mist called for him; suddenly he was drifting, flying into the cloud across the Great Ocean as the sun was covered by a sudden cool fog that at once made him tense up and feel relief — and that was that.

When he opened the door his grandmother saw him first. An old, bitter woman, she had lost her husband, a doctor, when the robbers broke down their door after he refused treatment to some gangster — he didn’t die then but for all purposes he was lost. A proud man. A stupid man. She’d raised her children on her own and managed to marry off one of her daughters despite the girl being a Black Welp. The other girl was sold to a rich family that didn’t know she was deaf.

The boy bowed and observed the usual courtesies, even though he resented his grandmother. Her wasted life was reaching its end; she lived vicariously through him, never ceasing her reprimands, pushing him out of spite for the world.

Mother never looked up from her sewing machine unless the boy spoke to her. She was pretty, though lines cut through her face, and sometimes she gave the boy a kiss on the forehead before he slept. When they talked they never said much. The weather, his schooling, the occasional advice that followed party lines. But she loved to watch him sleep, when he set aside his thick glasses carefully on the wooden table and his soft brown face moved up and down and his thick, bushy eyebrows twisted and undulated in passions deep dark mysterious. You never

saw his eyes until he slept. They were darker than the night sky when he opened them by chance and if you looked inside you might see things that would scare you and awe you, because there were things hiding behind his thick frames.

Sitting on the side of his bed with her hand rested gently on his face, she prayed. It was always a secret prayer — no one could know — and it was always for the same things, that the boy would not suffer too much (some suffering was good), that the boy would do well in school. Sometimes, if things were going well, she even wished for his happiness.

No one ever really knew where she carried her faith from. The Party had outlawed all religions, and she wasn’t exactly the type to seek out answers. But night after night when her husband wasn’t watching and her mother-in-law was snoring her life away on the only other bed, Mother prayed and felt her soul nourished and her anguishes smoothed away like warm honey milk tea.

The table where Mother worked was beautiful, spread with imperial red silk and dark green material made of some plastic-silk combination. She looked up when the boy was taking off his dirty red sneakers, which were thinking of opening up holes.

“Did you get the test scores back?”

“Yes, Mother. Good afternoon, Mother. I scored in the top five of my class.”

“What did you get wrong?”

“I did not know that I would be tested on a subject, Mother.”

The old woman looked over and snorted. “You went into a test unprepared? Do you have any sense, boy?”

He apologized and started grabbing homework out of his backpack, and sat down at his desk. It was brown to look like wood and small and orderly. It was his home within a home, in the corner of the crowded apartment that was really just a cramped square. More alcove than room, not that he’d ever known the difference. Maths were his least favorite, so he did them first. Then Physics, Politics, and Chemistry. This day was the same as any other. He labored until dinner, until Father (my father’s father) came home and spoke little and grabbed for his chopsticks and ate. No one began until Father started to eat, and even then they deferred to him. He brought in the most money, so he ate most of what they had.

When darkness came he needed only a small light bulb to keep working. He was exhausted by the time he finished his essay on the trials of a certain government official in the War of the Three Kings. He flicked off the light bulb and went to sleep next to his father, who was snoring away. He fell asleep to the sound his mother making clothes they couldn’t afford. ♣

0 inches

By Max Chang

Each step he took was precisely 12 inches long. He measured each step to make sure it was exact. He refused to deviate from his flinty count. Punishment for divergence would be God’s cruel lash. He had submitted to the searing pain before. And he did not want to succumb to it again. 12 inches, 12 inches, 12 inches, 12 inches ...

Clenched by an onerous overcoat, he felt the world fastening its grip upon him. He considered unzipping his coat, but he feared the biting cold, marauding in arrhythmic tempo, would rush in and plunder his already frigid body of any remaining heat. And so, with metronomic steps, he continued his jaded walk and hoped that the rote exercise of his ossifying body would protect him.

Suddenly, a sharp, brilliant ring interrupted the wind’s droning, interminable elegy. Stupefied by the sound, he plunged his fingers desperately into his pocket, reaching for his phone. A surge of optimism and hope rushed through his body as he waited to hear the voice on the other end. And for a few fleeting seconds, his feet beat out of rhythm: 13 inches, 14 inches, 15 inches.

But his steps returned to their leaden march of twelve as his ears picked up the mechanical voice of a prerecorded campaign message. He was tempted to hang up, but he listened through the whole message nonetheless for as he walked down the melancholic gray streets, he appreciated the false impression of company.

These days, the only companionship he had was a single memory — an unruly memory that had driven away everything and everyone in his life. He had longed to eradicate the tormenting memory: just pull out its insidious roots and dispose of it forever. But his efforts were always futile. The roots imperiously clung to his feckless torso and sucked and absorbed the nutrients out of his dilapidated body in their now unimpeded quest for sustenance.

Four years ago.

Life had been so felicitous that night while they walked along the streets emblazoned by yellow lights. She spun before him; a skip here, a slight hop, a twirl. 15 inches, 13 inches, 7 inches, taunting his slow, torpid steps. He had followed a few steps behind her, and when she turned to face him, her smile dove into

his musings. He embraced her unburdened smile: a spell that warded off the avaricious hands of the fears that held him hostage when she was not present.

They shared a simple conversation. How was your day? Was work all right? Are you feeling well? And though nothing intriguing or novel came of it, he reveled in such extemporaneous duets. Her voice was his medicine, a panacea that he took daily, religiously, to counter the diseases life forced down his throat — his dying parents, stress from work, and the haunting premonition that somehow he would lose her. He wrapped his arms around her to keep her by his side and felt her warmth converge with his. They walked together slowly, dancing an uncertain and yet spirited waltz. 7 inches, 4 inches, 4 inches, then 6 inches, 5 inches, 5 inches, finally 8 inches, 4 inches, 4 inches.

Along the street was a flower shop, and the two of them slowed outside the display window and peered in. 3 inches, 4 inches, 3 inches. He noticed her eyes dart over to a vase with variegated tulips, a delicate explosion of color. The shop was closed for the day, and he made a mental note to fetch the flowers the next day as he watched wisps of anticipation flock to her eyes. And though he hoped the night might never end, he eagerly awaited the promise the next day would bring.

He stared deeply into her bright, glittering eyes and began to see white sparkles frolicking against the rhythm of the wind. A light snow had begun to descend upon them, snowflakes playing with each other as they spiraled down to form a carpet for their skipping feet. She always talked about how she wished she were one — a light, delicate, weightless being falling lightly from the sky with no control over where she would land. A puppet to the indecisive winds. She joined the snowflakes in their playful games, and ducking out from under his arms, ran wildly in the snow laughing. 18 inches, 16 inches, 20 inches, 18 inches. He caught up to her as she slowed her pace and the pair sauntered down the street chasing their formless silhouettes with virtual impunity.

With her next to him, he could no longer resist the temptation of entering her enticing, vibrant aura. He broke his walls and entered her soft, embracing bubble. 3 inches, 2 inches, 3 inches, 4 inches. They walked inside one circle, one union.

And then, 0 inches. No more dancing, no more running, no more playing. The bubble around him exploded violently and the warmth around him vanished outwards, leaving him inexplicably stranded in the cold darkness. He had no walls to protect her or even himself — the remains of his own lay shattered on the pavement 12 inches behind. She

A WALK IN THE WOODS

I took a walk in the woods
And I came back renewed
What happened between then and now
is an unspoken chasm I couldn’t bring
myself to allow
And a conversation solely reserved
for the silence between our words

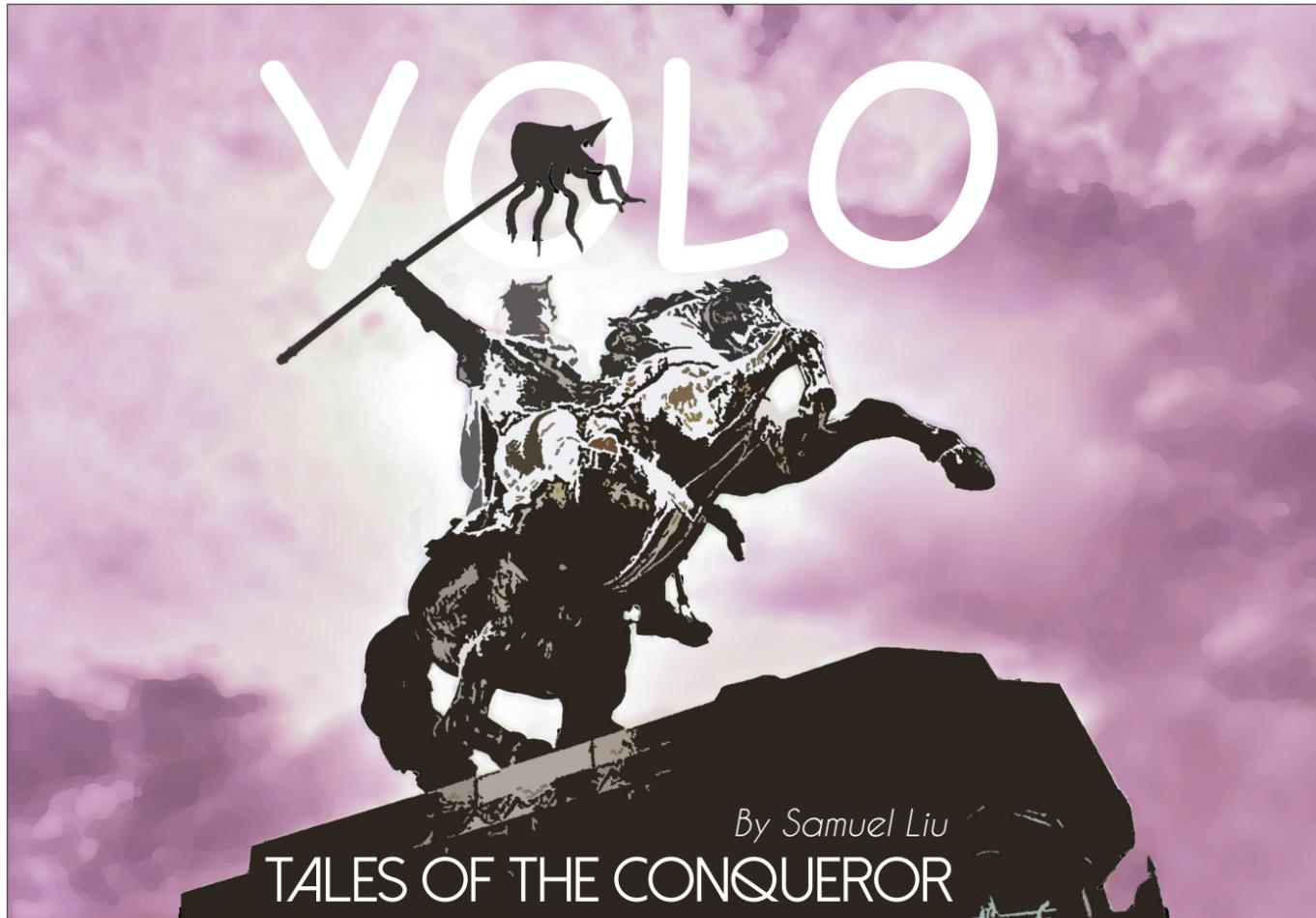
By Anshul Aggarwal

had stepped 1 inch too many, or perhaps 1 inch too few. And then she was gone — a victim to a single, traitorous inch. Around her came a circle of foreign strangers, invading her space. Cameras came out, immortalizing her now-sprawled figure, but capturing nothing else about her — not her smile, her laugh, or her playfulness.

So he had resolved from that day on ... resolved to only walk 12 inches in a step — to not tempt fate, to never deviate from 12 inches. She had been punished by God for being so liberal. He had been punished by God for being so liberal. If only she had not danced. If only he had not put his arm around her. If only she had not played amongst the snow, laughing, smiling. It had all been so ethereal until the silent, speeding car burned tracks in their snow-carpet and shattered their ring of happiness.

And now, just as he did every day since, he continued his walk of metronomic precision. Above him, the sky’s veil of blue was thrown off, revealing the black that always remained. He kept walking, measuring each step. Snow began to fall and the indifferent wind followed, arming the snowflakes with trenchant sides. The wind urged the flakes to attack him, but he ignored the sharp blades that struck at his face. He only paid attention to the length of each step. 12 inches, 12 inches, 12 inches. A stream of music floated above him. Sinatra, her favorite: “That’s life, that’s what people say. You’re riding high in April, Shot down in May.” He longed to pause and listen to the song. As the lyrics poured through his heart, he could hear her voice belting the chorus. The echoes of her voice were the only vestiges of her past where he could draw emotional succor, and yet, the portentous rise and fall of her celestial cadence only deepened the clasp of that unruly memory on his every move. He could not leave 12. Never. Not again. Not ever again. And so he continued his walk. 12 inches, 12 inches, 12 inches ... and then — 0 inches.

A black figure traversed across the sidewalk — unseen by other pedestrians. ♣



LOOK, I've been called a hopeless romantic before, all right?

There's nothing I can do to make my friends — or, as I like to call them, my frequent abusers — forget my failed exploits. Like there was this one time I declared my love for a girl I'd just seen on the street. I mean, c'mon — I bought her roses and everything! Spontaneity, you know?

I'm all about spontaneity. Spontaneity as in asking a girl to prom the day of (in my defense, she was really pretty and I had no idea it takes weeks to buy a dress and my date bailed on me last second). Spontaneity as in going to see a girl I met the other day for a 3 a.m. date — escaping the clutches of the parentals, mind you, driving over a deer, mind you, twice — because I thought I loved her. And to get rejected the same night. But yeah my friends like to bring these things up. Whenever I'm so much as Facebook-chatting a girl, they assume I'm in love. Always. Just because I wrote "<3 <3 xoxo #love #forever #loveforever #forever21 #numerology #marrymeloljkbutfyouac tuallywanttoit'snotajoke" doesn't mean

I'm in love... My friends just like giving me grief over the smallest things. Can't even ruminate on my options in marriage without them shouting "CONTAIN YOUR HORMONES" or "YOU'RE IN HIGH SCHOOL." Seriously — a lover's got to dream, right?

I'm a strong believer in this theology I crafted called "One Exists Once" (OEO). It's a really smart, unique philosophy based on the idea, you know, excluding reincarnation, that we only have one life to live and we better make the most of it. In my college app I'm "Discoverer of OEO" — put in 52 weeks per year, 17 years, 24 hours a day — OEO is what I'm about, and I hope more people can learn it, but it's more of a personal value thing. Some people say that it's really just "YOLO" rephrased but there are important qualifying distinctions that separate OEO from YOLO such as Metaphotosynthesis, Middle Earth Literature Conventions, and the ideas of Richard Rorty, as evinced in his triumphal piece "Relative Existentialism." To the curious reader I suggest Daniel Dennett's "I Am Here," T.Z. Lavine's "Destructible Answers,"

Pascal's "The Lottery," Bertrand Russell's "Shalom," Rene Descartes' "Two and a Half Mediations," and, finally, Euthyphro's triumphal dialogue, "Socrates."

How do I start. Let's see. There were once three boys, all seniors. The first one was named Edward, the second Ricardo, and the third Leon. They all loved Daisy — the school's soon-to-be valedictorian, 2400 SAT score without test prep, player of three instruments (sometimes four), three-sport athlete — but it was no big deal because they were bros and it was a "may the best man win" kind of thing. Love is a competition, and they enjoyed it because they were competitive folks.

It was determined that Edward, being the shiest, was to try first. Reticent and calculating, Edward decided to test the waters by going to one of Daisy's friends to ascertain the possibilities (plus-minus fate) of Daisy's potential likelihood to go out with him. The answer was clear: There was a 0.2% chance of Daisy's ever going out with Edward. So the boy weighed his chances and decided to give up. Today, he is married to his beautiful wife with three kids, but I suppose he knows that

he gave up his true love of two weeks and will forever subconsciously regret not going for it.

Ricardo decided to try next. Friendly and quiet, Ricardo decided to text Daisy, but his respectful, polite query was pleasantly deterred. How about a later date? Daisy asked. But Ricardo, knowing very well that Daisy was merely putting the date off, said that he was "pretty busy with things. Early apps suck LOL." But Daisy never responded. Even to this day, I'm pretty sure Ricardo still regrets lying to Daisy about his free time. Sure, he's got a long-term girlfriend and a high-paying job — but he never got Daisy, never discovered their true potential. What's life if one does not go all in on everything? What's life if he uses "I don't have time" as an excuse? In the words of St. Augustine the past and future exist because we make them real, we seize the moments and don't let them leave.

Last came Leon, our Gatsby-romantic of hope eternal. Leon spent days planning his first move. After passing the text through several rounds of editing and peer review, Leon ran with it.

Sat, Nov 2 9:38 pm

HEY DAISY haha lolxd i was just wondering if u wud want 2 get dinner w/ m tmrw HAHA #awkward #dinner

Sat, Nov 2 9:40 pm

Hey Daisy I don't know if uve seen dis yet but want to get dinner tmrw???? #lol

Sat, Nov 2 9:42 pm

Watsup Daisy!!!!!! Want to get dinner tmrw?? My bedtime is soon LOL so ples respond or my parents -___- will turn off the wifi #annoying #parents #annoyingparents #doyouhaveannoyingparentstoo? XD

Sat, Nov 2 10:02 pm

HAHA I'm on my sister's phone XD #rebel #thingsidoforlove #doyouhavesiblingstoo?

A few days later, after receiving close to 100 of these masterfully crafted texts, Daisy responded.

Tuesday, Nov 5 7:50 am

Hi do I know you?

Seconds later, our hero sent a flurry of texts, of which he used "i knew it was true love" twice, "you're beautiful XD" thrice, "<3 <3 <3 <3" four times, and "OMG" a total of thirty-two times and a half (he misspelled one of them "ogm" but decided to leave it in for diversity). Impressed by Leon's sheer power of romance and the seduction of persistence, Daisy decided to play hard to get. "Hey I'm re-

ALIVE

Incandescent light bulb turned on

Works best at night
When everything else is dark shines
Through tungsten filament double coiled
currents flow glow

Seems to mean
to outsiders peering in
innovation creativity inspiration
But is simply a cluster of
glass inert gas
just another electric device

Only highlights
a certain radius
wishes rays could stretch
farther further

Tries harder
trespasses limits

One of the dozens that
illuminate the room
together
Without others
only a fraction
is visible

Unique
needs
CFLs LEDs
that offer more
efficacy life time
Variety is key

Incandescent light bulb
turned off

By Ingrid Pan

SONNET FOR A 12-YEAR-OLD GIRL

She asks me, one day, by the river,
"Will he love me, oh please, will I win?"
Her melodious voice makes me shiver,
And I nuzzle her under my chin.
"My dear," I say, "dear, oh my darling,
Let the ripples run over your pleas.
You want a story, a plot, and a calling,
So badly, you neglect the breeze.
There is more than the boy in your story.
It's all take, take, and take, and no give.
Your unfettered focus breeds worry.
I worry you've forgotten to live."
Silence arrests us, some female fright,
Our fair faces painted in dappled sunlight.

By Amelia Troyer

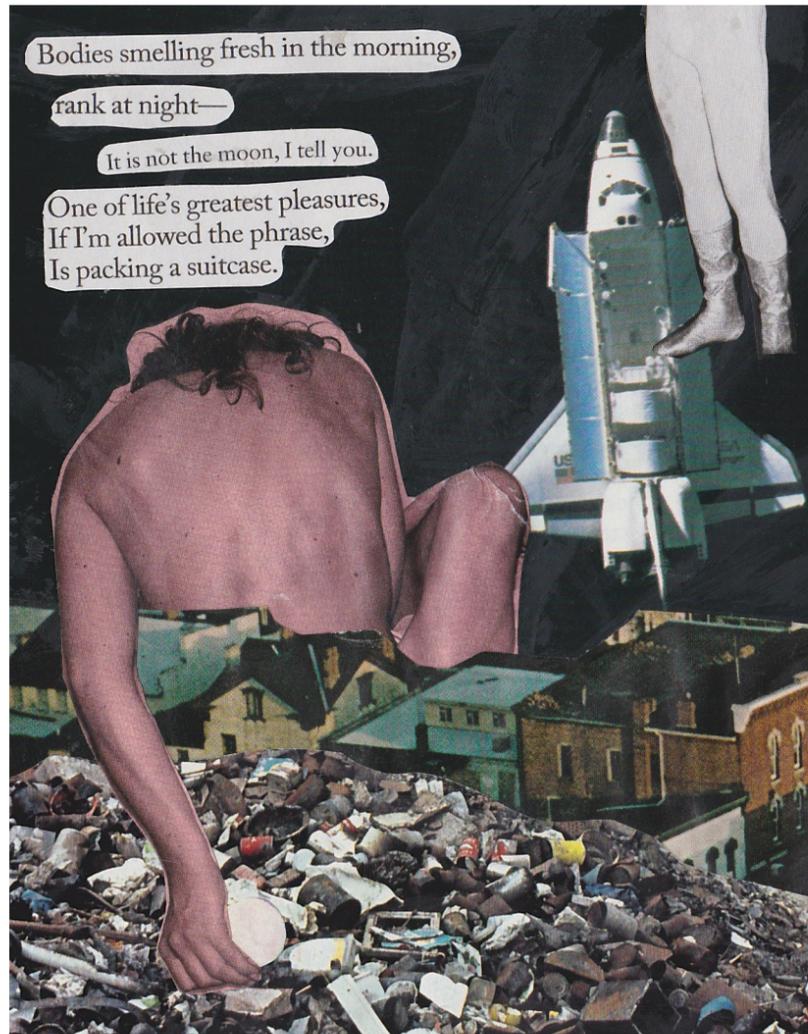
ally not interested please stop texting me thanks :) she wrote back. To the outside observer this might seem a curt rejection, but Leon knew the truth. She had used the ":" — universal symbol for happiness and love. And she had written "I'm really not interested," the alliteration of "I" creating an effect of the word "I", or "me" — denoting her person. And what is "I" without "you?" Leon was able to decipher this symbol, and concluded that "I" meant that Daisy, too, was lovestruck and lovesick. The final nail on the coffin of this code was the lack of punctuation. NOWHERE did Leon find a single comma or period in the text. It flowed like the Danube, a string of words never stopping nor slowing. And what else never stopped nor slowed? Why, love. Only love.

So the following day, our hero caught Daisy's hand as she left seventh-period Computer Science, knelt on his knees, and proposed to her with a custom-acquired strawberry-apple Ringpop. The scene was reportedly touching and sources indicate that passers-by knelt down and anointed them the school's holy couple.

Thus ends the tale of Leon the conqueror, who attained the hand of his beloved through his knightly courage and his mastery of the modern English language. Let this be a lesson to all young men, to take courage in persistence, to close-read everything, and to declare their love without a moment's hesitation, for, after all, one exists once, and only once. ☘

We Prepared For This

By Amelia Troyer



ART // AMELIA TROYER

I was too preoccupied planning for The End that I did not notice when it arrived. Matthew placed his hand, almost hovering, on my shoulder and whispered: look down. There between my feet, the earth had split in two and the expanse of the great black universe opened up beneath the raging core of my ruptured planet. Stars spilled into my twelve o'clock noon. Somewhere on my shoulder, like a disembodied extension of myself, Matthew's fingertips dug senselessly into my collarbone.

We prepared for this.

~

When I first met Matthew, I was knee-

deep in scrap metal, wading through the junkyard. From our relative beginning until The End, the moon blinked once. I can no longer rely on manmade conceptions of time; only the cycles are honest.

A greasy gleam at the top of the vast mound of waste caught my eye and I dragged my boots upward against the current, while smashed glass bottles tore into the uncovered middle of my thighs. Bleeding but triumphant, I seized upon the glorious hinged door that lay in wait above the heap. From where I stood, I surveyed the shell of the town below me – empty streets, empty parks, and empty houses. A blanket of ash and dust settled over the rooftops. They had all left many

years ago.

This was why the sudden crashing of metal below made my heart seize upon itself and, with my footing gone, still clutching the door, I was thrown from the heap like a pebble in a sandstorm.

My broken body fell straight into Matthew's arms. The salt from his sweaty palms stung into my bleeding thighs and I let out a disgraced whimper.

We both knew what the future held. An abandoned town, a pile of scrap metal, and us; we were told that distractions had torn this world apart but in that moment there was nothing more immediate and present than the faces in front of our noses.

He kissed me on the mouth. I told him: don't get too attached. The satellites we were building only fit one person apiece.

In the solace of the deserted town square, we each slaved away on our respective spacecraft. There was little to say. Occasionally, Matthew would come over to kiss me. Sometimes I turned my head away. Sometimes I let him. After I let him I would weep, and he would hold me in his arms.

I told him: don't get too attached. Every night I would lie in the dust beneath the moon and dream of the time when I would illuminate the void, too. I would join the moon. I would become the moon.

When our satellites were complete, Matthew examined my circuitry. He wiped that solid, sweaty palm across his dirt-smeared face and sighed.

"I'm worried about your wiring."

He told me it was unlikely that I would stay in orbit because of the way I had arranged my controls. He was not one-hundred-percent sure, but he poked anxiously at my thin red wire as I watched the beads of sweat gather in the crook of his wrinkled brow.

I would not let him fix it. It was my satellite, I said, and it belonged deeply to me. The truth was I did not want him cutting me up. Cutting my wires. Rearranging my controls. The prospect of sifting through space in a ship that was not my own made me wilt.

He kept his eye on me, but from then on, Matthew's hands were bound to the outside, slowly stroking my back and keeping a poetic pace. Down, and up. Down, and up.

I kept my eye on the thin red wire.

~

And now the earth had cracked, as we knew it would, and Matthew stood stiffly beside me. In my mind, I had already left him.

Neither of us could face the other, and after Matthew's fingers released from

my bone, I burrowed into my spacecraft. It was bent out of shape and covered in broad, white scratch marks. Everything had been taken from the junkyard. Maroon shag carpet lined the floor, polka-dotted with beer stains. All I could think of was the way Matthew would have sweat into the fabric.

Without warning, the earth collapsed under my feet, crumbling into thick chunks of rock that floated freely throughout the atmosphere. Maybe one would be thrown into orbit and become a moon. A ghost of a world where people once lived and loved, now haunting some other civilization.

~

There was gentleness to the universe, a divine ambivalence that held me in the hollow space. Ahead of me hung an ethereal full moon. I drew closer and closer to it but never touched, like a dream.

Out of the bleak, circular window, some small, shining object was hurtling my way. I was apathetic. I said to myself: if I am destroyed, then surely some god knows what it is doing.

The approaching shimmer grew from a spark into its full manifestation. A metal contraption rocketed toward me and I pulled futilely away.

As Matthew's satellite closed in on my own, my breath held faith in the magnetic field of the universe. The handle of his door scraped the surface of mine. I anticipated sparks until I recalled the lack of oxygen. As my eyes rose to meet his through our foggy windowpanes, I experienced a very tangible static shock.

Objective perceptions of time again failed to define the infinite content of that moment. In a second, we had come together; our satellites kissed, and were lost once more. No vessel could ever merge with another so entirely. This time I cried alone.

The universe was cold. With the growing presence of the moon, my extremities began losing blood flow. Purple fingertips and toes and the tip of my nose. I lunged for the moon. I wanted to eat the moon.

At one point I thought I was the moon. That I would sail softly around it until I was accepted into its cavernous pockets. I welcomed the newfound lack of warmth. A tapeworm made of ice fed off of the naïve and fragile heat sifting weakly in my veins.

Matthew had left my plane of existence. When I could no longer recognize my surroundings, I could reject my past.

I made plans to be swallowed by the moon.

~

What they do not tell you is that you are doomed. As the window fills with vi-

If I could tell you stories, I would make you laugh
I would make you cry
I would turn the world right around—full three hundred and sixty.
I would shake you up (that's right)
I would make your lips curve up
I would make your mouth form a perfect Circle
(maybe a dimpled oval)
I would make your mouth tremble
I would make you Lose Control!

I would feed you words you can't resist words so delicious—tantalizing beyond reason (nothing else like it)
You live for this—for me to tell you All.

Listen to me.

I can change your life with One Word

Weighted so heavy you will collapse.
You don't know how much of a burden words can be.
Every day my head pounds
Words bursting fighting knocking clamoring pounding
to get OUT!

If I expelled every word every day, I would be locked away.

Words like poison dripping

#!
v e n o m lethal hurtful
No one wants to hear.
Honest—so Sharp!
yet so blunt.
Form the perfect weapon that can drive a wedge through the stomach
The Heart.
Lies like darts— Slow
Deadly.
You don't see them now, but you will. And they hurt in the end.
Restricted Barred Caged
I CAN'T!
I have no choice.
All I have are the joyful words Sparkling! Delicious! Enlightening!
I tell what you want to hear.
This is... This is— all—
This is all I have to say.
The doctor is out.

By Julianne Wey

sions of lunar surface, the milky light of the moon is eclipsed from view and the once beaming landscape is drenched in darkness.

You thought you could illuminate some dying nation, but now you realize that you have let the poets lie to you. The moon is barren; it does not glow on its own. Every fiber of your being has been invested in a fallacy.

And from where your eyes short-circuited, you realize you have initiated an electrical eruption.

Matthew warned you about your wiring. Inside the circuit box, the thin red wire spits sparks of light and heat that cut into your quivering hands.

Where you once found pride in your brokenness, you now anguish like an infant who cannot bring the chaotic world together to address her needs. Your fingers slip on the bare wire and your fingertips are singed.

From the window, you see the moon shoot up above you. You are plummeting. Milky white light returns to bathe your precious, lonesome rock, but you are too far-gone to reclaim it as your own.

Heat returns through your fingertips.



WANDERLUST



LOST CONNECTION



THE FIRE ESCAPE

Underwater, in the Clouds

By Amelia Troyer



ART // AMELIA TROYER

undress

My body, raw and unfamiliar,

& conceal it

now that we will not be traveling together much longer

Bound, blindfolded by bridal veil, I held my ground. No, no, not my ground. I was floating: a fair, airy sort of freedom, but stuck within my strangled skin, nonetheless. And from the film of the veil, the delicate edges of lacy overlay tinged my world white. Lucid white, bright white. Holy, holy, holy white. The same nostalgic snowball color of the lace-up shoes that my mother had given me at seven years old and, pricked with a precocious pride, I had marched to school, a wide-eyed angel, until upon prancing home I got caught in a murky rainstorm, a mud puddle, and oh! that unfiltered filth! I

cried all afternoon.

I sobbed in the bathtub. Scrubbed and clawed at my fingertips, burned the ridges till the baby skin bled and I bathed in my own blood and tears. “Clean, clean, clean,” I cursed, but it was not so, so I masked my face with my grandmother’s lace and that was that. Clean, clean, clean, buried in a dream.

Underwater, all that mattered was that I knew what was still sacred and what had worn into my fragile universe so thoroughly that to trash it was the only choice. Goodbye blue jeans of scraped knees past. Goodbye fanciful fifth grade

boy-crush. I ascended the atmosphere.

In the air, soft skin grazing cotton candy cloud cover, I set to construct my kingdom. And yet, when I possessed this power, I found that it had already been built: a castle in the sky with a front lawn of whipped white wisps, clean, clean, clean. A lawn chair and a table, with a cream-colored cup nearly knocked off the edge. Vanilla tea steeped sweetly within. Oh, my cloud, my bridal veil fantasy. I could have crumpled, collapsed into my knees, then and there, so wedded to my wondrous world was I.

So long, downpours! So long, grit and grime and grossness galore! Hello to the holy, the sacred, the clean and kingly delights of my quivering heartache desires. Dear sweet mask of mine, dear sweet dreams which I have woven and wormed my way into for the night, for the week, for the rest of time.

But Woe! I paused, paralyzed on the puffy precipice.

Clean cotton lawn. Lovely swollen lounge chair. Charming chestnut table. Tall tin of tea, vanilla.

Fragile fabric of my dreams.

“Please,” I pleaded. An underwater blur of undulations fed into my famished ears. Wave, rock, fish breath, bubbling up to the surface, bursting. I thought of how I had floated forth to this cloud from the depths of my bathtub. Free and flying and now confounded by this crippling paralysis.

I thought of the blood in my veins, the thick red syrup, the vile, damnable drink of the devil. I thought of the dirt in my nails, the dirt in my ears, the dirt in my rotting, revolting heart. Stuck still, caught in my own grotesque inhibitions, I sagged. Clean, clean, clean, and I was not clean.

My hand extended, suddenly, beyond my boundaries, toward the tipping teacup. Hot and pulsating flesh and bone cutting gaudily through the sterile air, I gasped. Gulped the air. Guts wrenching. Oh, lace, oh love, I married my maudlin projections and now I cannot consummate our new and weepy unity. All of it sacred, all of it woven wholly into the seams of my surroundings. Touch the tea and everything tears, fondle that which fuels this frisson and everything falls apart. I was left clawing at a cloud. Cutting through condensation.

I plunged through the mirage and I did not mean to. It was the nature of the dream. Soft silky scope of my mind, so long. We kissed, cymbals crashing, polluting and purifying, and we parted. I fell first, always.

Here lies she, collapsed and killed. Her bleeding body struck down to the gritty, stormy earth. May the dreamy darling rot in dirt. ♡

GLORIA BRECK

LESSON LIBRETTO

Olya lives in a music box of blue stucco. The grounds are piped with jonquils and white peach trees, the latter of which are shrouded by black mesh to deter wayward snackers. Each week, I follow a cobbled path to the gate and unlatch it with quavering fingers. Sandals are shed upon the welcome mat, and imminent company calculated from the array of shoes: brown mules with a brass buckle (Asian mother with taste), smallish dirt-dusted sneakers (the youngest boy in the studio), clogs bound by velcro (Asian mother of shabbier variety). Wisps of sound escape through the mail slot.

ODE TO THE EGG

I. Tender white, hold me tight, love yolk.
 II. Oh, yummy orb, you brim with vitamins and bounceability.
 III. At daylight’s hunger call little brother weeped for I ate his egg.
 IV. Sweet tomago, you sit upon my sushi with seaweed as your obi.
 V. My ears bleed from the screechy jerking of the omelette skillet.
 VI. Eclipse, eclipse! Bring about the night for I am sleepy.
 VII. I once had a friend named Egg, who lacked hair.
 VIII. What goes up white, and comes down yellow and white?
 IX. Poor trans cannot compare to the mighty Omega!
 X. Before dyeing, blow those innards far away.
 XI. As I carry my lunch, I cradle the thin-shelled container of life.
 XII. Coagulator! Meringues and food of angels are formed at your beating.
 XIII. The head of hair sinks into the soufflé-like pillow.

By Gloria Breck

The studio has the look and texture of a pumpernickel loaf, with walls and cushions dressed in some variation of fawn or honey. The smell of beige-colored Kosher foods wafts from the kitchen; cabbage potage, smoked whitefish, and sweet-potato pancakes meld into a nostril-tickling tang. A wave of reassuring warmth accompanies the recollection that Olya is a soup-maker first, and an instructor second.

Sturdy shelves blanket the wall opposite the entry, packed with Henle and Schirmer editions of everything from suites to sonatas, preludes to partitas. Hal Leonard’s latest Guide to Solo Repertoire nestles dictionaries in Italian, French, and Russian, all of which are bookended by the stoic marble busts of Haydn and Bach.

I am not limited in my choice of pre-lesson reading, however: the coffee table overflows with the tattered adventures of Charlie Brown and Garfield.

To maintain musicality in the restroom, Olya hangs fanciful art on its walls. I am most partial to the painting of a fat Titian beauty strumming a lute; beside it, a curio case displays miniature Korean opera masks that quite resemble Easter eggs. Two more composer-busts guard the sink, locked in a staring contest with the masks. They glare at me, too, warning me not to butcher their handiwork.

I assume my usual spot on the bench and arrange my books with particularity. Pieces that promise the most head-patting are stacked on top, while incipient ones sink to the bottom in a natural emulsion. A mobile of toothpick parasols (the kind found atop tropical drinks) pirouettes above, despite the still air. It has a life of its own, like every other item in this inspiring place. Here, Olya and I breathe life into silence.

Plum amongst her pictures is a formidable portrait of Beethoven. Shadows spun from charcoal fill each crevice of his furious face. Yet his eyes are turned upward — toward heaven, perhaps. I lift my own eyes to the oatmeal-flecked ceiling and send my regards before facing the music. ♡

NIKHIL GOEL

STRAIGHT RED

A shrill whistle shrieked across the mud-strewn grass, cutting through the angled droplets of the night’s downpour. Shining against a blanket of black, the soccer field’s four overhead lights became the theatre limelight, focusing its attention on the two men. One — a stocky, pale-skinned forward whose rippling abs clung to his drenched, spinach-colored uniform — was writhing in gut-wrenching agony in the fetal position, hugging the sensitive bone mass under his shin and above his ankle with interlocked, meaty fingers. The other — a skinnier, mocha-colored defender who sported a black captain’s armband loosely around his flaccid left bicep — was brushing off soggy patches of uprooted grass from his white cotton socks with a satisfied smirk. His neon red carbon-fiber cleats had smacked nothing but the leather sphere, the once-center-of-attention that was now, in the eyes of umbrella-wielding parents sitting on the indented metal of the silver bleachers, a trivial, upstaged set piece in comparison to the unfolding melodrama.

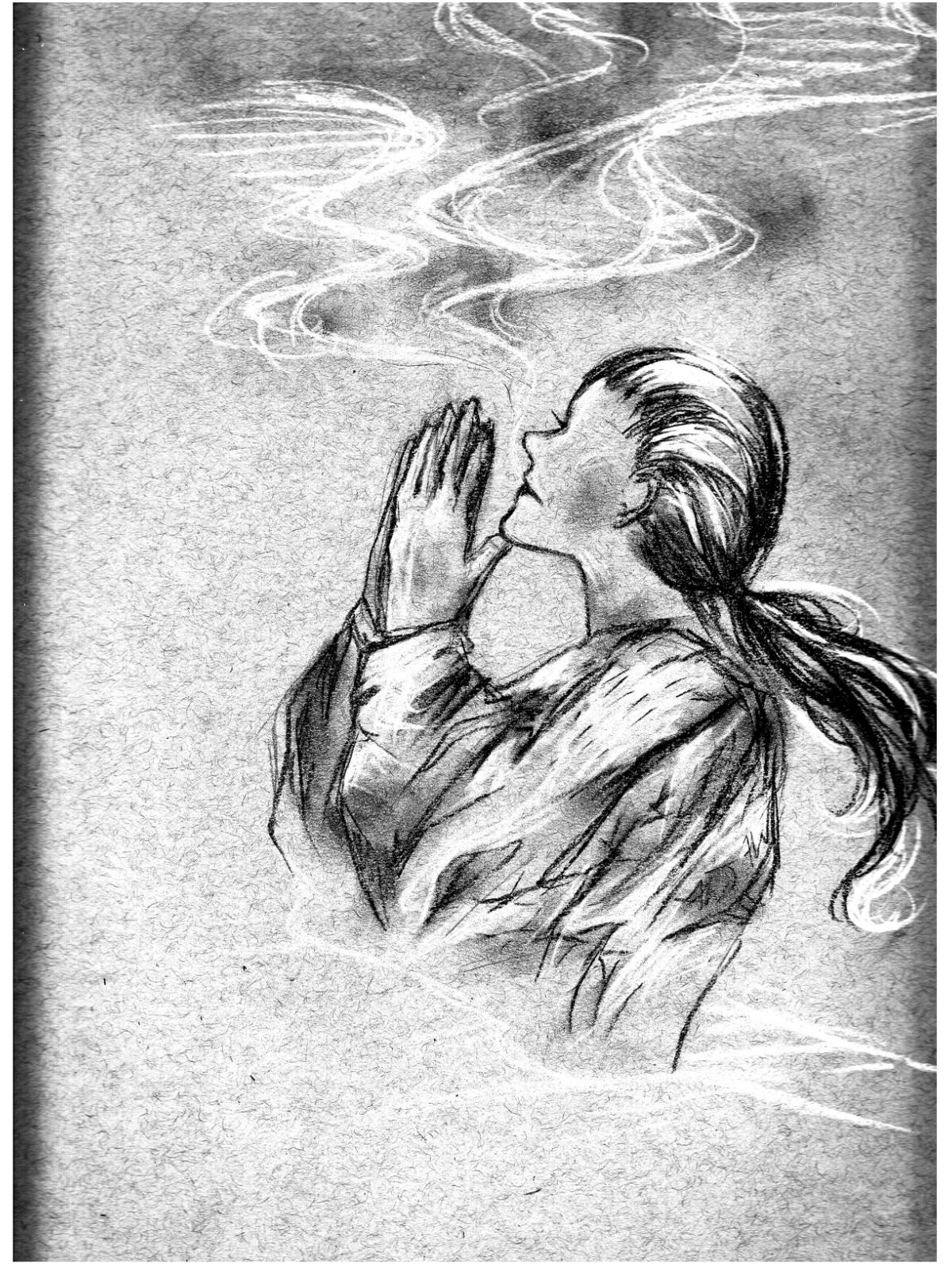
Eyes wide with anticipation, a middle-aged man jogged anxiously to the captain, leaving a trail of studded footprints in the muddy green behind him. Rummaging in his black and white, prison-patterned shirt pocket before even reaching the lanky captain, the man extracted a blood red plastic rectangle, and, using his index and thumb, lifted it into the rain so that even the most poorly positioned audience members could see.

Wisps of steam rose from the man’s balding head as if the remnants of the stubble were a smoldering forest after a wildfire’s decimation. He clenched his jaw, trying not to reveal the intoxicating power that he held on this muddy domain, but an almost unnoticeable smirk formed at an edge of the man’s chapped lips, lifting his right cheekbone ever so slightly. Standing just a foot away, the captain wanted to lash out at the man — maybe break his haughty nose or crush his windpipe. Instead, he remained silent, nodded and dropped his head in disgrace, his satisfied smirk leveling into an even pair of lips. The captain removed the armband symbolizing his leadership and handed it to his goalkeeper, who, along with the rest of his teammates, had formed a posse behind the captain. They released a flurry of unapologetic insults and unrelenting fury upon the pinstriped man — he momentarily winced, doubting his call, but eventually stood his ground and retained his authority. The keeper accepted the band, his eyes quivering with rage as if he wanted to cry and kill at the same time.

As the captain walked off the field, muddy water sloshed under his sticky socks, burning his itchy soles. His chicken legs could never keep the plastic shin guards from slipping down his hairy calves, but this time, he did not bend over to pull them back up. Salty beads of sweat slid from his temple down his peach-fuzzed jaw line and landed onto the hills of his tongue, mixing with the cool droplets of rain that flirted with his parched lips. On his right knee was a fresh laceration, a result of the flesh-to-bone contact when he had swept through the lazily skipping ball and taken its husky handler down with it. Only now did his knee start to sting with every bend, as if a thousand red ants were biting their way through his rough skin. Blades of grass stuck to the fresh, dirty wound; and yet, they remained afloat the crimson lake. Refusing to give the balding man any twisted feeling of satisfaction, the captain bore the unjust pain with unfaltering steps as he strode off the muddy field. ♡



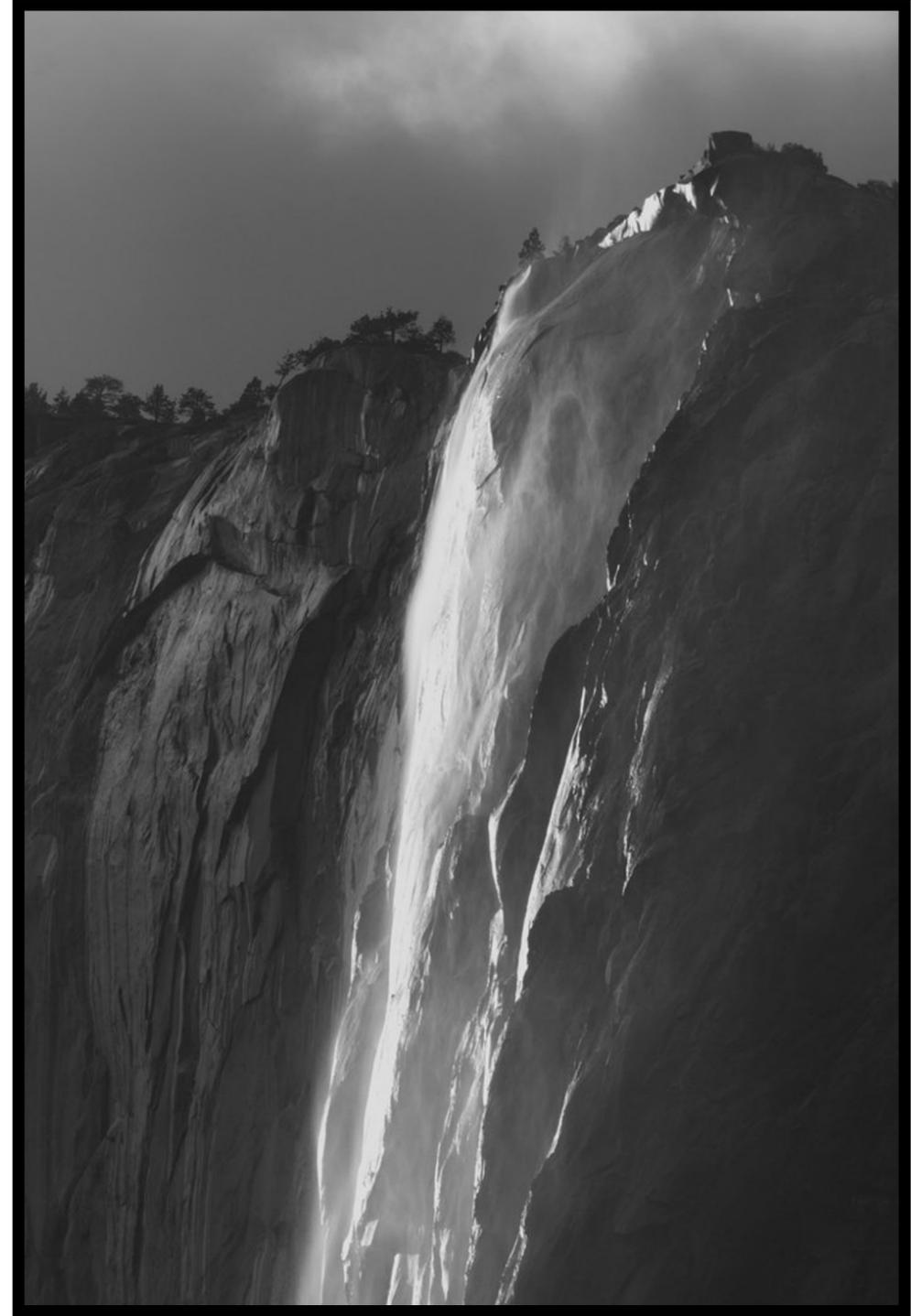
SWAN



FAITH AND FUMES



SIÂN WOMAN



HORSESHOE FALLS

SEND IN THE CLOWNS

By Riddhi Sangham

When people ask me what I do, I do not have a readily available answer. I am not an engineer, or an artist, or anything creative, really. I skirt around the truth until the person I am talking to, normally a relative at a family reunion, throws up their hands and says, "Tim! What is that you do?"

And then I say, "Well, I'm a clown."

After my confidante registers my words, they always pucker their mouths, like a lemon just bit them, and their eyes scrunch up, and inevitably, their next statement is always something like, "You're a kidder, Tim, aren't you!" They wipe fake tears from their eyes, and say, "Whoo, that was a good one! You really got me there, Timmy."

Then it dawns on them that I have not laughed at all, and they look hard at me, and say, "You're not joking, are you?"

This is the part I relish the most, when I say, "Nope. Not at all." Then they call over my mother, who is always holding a glass of wine, and say, "Sherry, Tim isn't really a clown, is he?"

My mother then glugs her wine down, wipes her mouth with the back of her hand, smearing her lipstick, and says, "Yes. Now if you must excuse me, I think Marjorie is calling me," referring to the now dead nanny we had had when I was growing up. Every single time, it happens this way. Whoever said life was unpredictable was wrong.

It is not like I trained to be a clown, it just sort of happened. I was at business school, getting my MBA, so I could one day take over as CEO of Finn Hot Dogs ("Finn-ally the hot dogs you've been waiting for!"), and one Halloween, my dorm threw a costume party.

I went to a nearby costume store — in New York they were everywhere — and bought a red squeaky nose and a set of face paint. I felt like a five-year-old again; the idea of me, on-the-corporate-track-soon-to-be-CEO-of-Finn-Hot-Dogs

me, in anything but a tailored suit and leather loafers seemed too outlandish to be true. It felt like I was having an out-of-body experience.

I did not want to buy the huge clown shoes that came with the get-up, so I borrowed a pair of size fifteen sneakers from my roommate, a six foot, five inch giant. I flopped around in the shoes, painted my face white, and used a friend's lipstick to paint the upward-curving red lips, and there it was: a permanent happy face.

I went to the party and some of my friends laughed and posed for pictures, and others ran away from me, seeing me as the very nightmare of their childhood dreams come back to haunt them.

At the end of the night, I washed my makeup off, sad to see it go down the drain, and did not think about my costume again, until a week later. My gargantuan roommate was also a part-time stand-up comedian at kids' birthday parties — that was how he earned cash to pay tuition — and he had not realized that he had committed to a child's birthday party that was being held at the same time as a midterm in one of his classes. Josh told me that I could have all the money the child's parents were supposed to pay him if I replaced him in my clown suit.

I agreed, and that was the start. It became a regular thing, after I found that the money was steady — steady enough that I did not have to live off my parents' allowance, and what was more, I enjoyed it. I liked being a clown.

It was not that I was naturally funny — in fact, when I was growing up, they called me the Gravedigger because of my serious disposition — so my first time as a clown, at that child's birthday party, I told a few jokes, simple ones, like "Why is six afraid of seven? Because seven eight nine!", but after I realized that being a clown could turn into something, I read up on magic tricks and jokes, and soon I was a class act. I was the talk of the East Side; all of the rich

CITY MOUSE

a city mouse lies on the warmth of living sidewalk;
dewy emerald grass caresses his fur.
blaring taxi sirens fly through the air
in a melody of birdsong bared.

here, it is the clouds, not cars, that fight each other,
for coveted spots in the cosmic carpool lane.
the rest stand subject to the wind's whim,
which blows them beyond the diamond sky.

an angry driver's honk becomes a goose's call to its mother;
a skyscraper is a tree brushed by winter.

a city mouse finds himself beside the river,
listening to water droplets splashing on forest floor.
How different must water taste without dust.
beneath the watchful sun, his eyes close,
winking city lights farewell.

By Ashley Chen

suburban mothers in their pink cashmere sweaters — coincidentally the same sweaters my mother wore — were booking me left and right for their little princes' and princesses' birthday parties.

I am generally an obedient person, someone who people call "nice" or "simple," so when I told my mother that I was working as a clown for pocket money, she asked me, in her New Jersey drawl, if this was my rebel phase. "Every kid goes through a rebel phase, Timmy. Your sister, your brother, even me! You know, I used to be quite the rebel in my heyday. I was a biker chick," she whispered conspiratorially. I could almost see the wine glass she had permanently affixed to her palm. "But you, you never had a phase like that. Nope, you were a straight-B student, quite average. I always wondered if there was something wrong with you, because you never seemed to act out, but all the tests I had done on you were completely normal! But now you're saying that you want to be a clown? Oh, thank the Lord! I thought you were never going to be a rebel! Call me when you're done with clowning around, honey, and we'll talk. Did you see what I did there, Timmy? Huh? Clowning around? Whoo, that was a good one!" and she would hang up. I would be out of breath just from listening.

I never called her back, to tell her that I was done going through my "phase", because after six months of being a clown, I decided I never wanted to go back.

I dropped out of business school, to the happiness of my king-sized roommate, who was so excited he would now have the whole room to himself that he shut the door in my face before I could perform the floor-shaking slamming-of-the-door that I had rehearsed for the three weeks prior to my dropping out.

I was earning quite a lot at this point, so I had no trouble paying for a room for two nights at the Sheraton on Times Square. I was able to up the number of birthday parties I was doing per week, and soon my weekly salary doubled.

Shortly thereafter, I moved in to the very same apartment building on the Upper East Side in which many of my clients lived. It was funny to see their incredulous, disgusted expressions when a man wearing shoes fifty sizes too big, a red squeaky nose that looked like a dog toy, and a rainbow wig stepped into their immaculate marble and glass elevator, and even more amusing when they realized that this disgusting clown was stepping out onto the same floor as them: how could someone in a clown costume be living in one of their per-

fect, pristine penthouses? They just about fainted when they realized that I lived one door down from them.

A year after I started my act, my father passed away from a sudden heart attack. I caught the train to New Jersey, wearing jeans and a sweatshirt, but carrying a duffel bag with my costume inside — I was on my way to another birthday party when I got the call that my father had passed away.

When I arrived at the hospital, my mother was gripping a wine cooler with white knuckles, my sister was sobbing, and my brother looked about as shell-shocked as I felt.

I had an idea. I ducked into the restroom and came out in full makeup. I stepped into my dad's room, and to the shock of my family, performed my act. I got all the way through, a little bit exhilarated after performing for people whom I never thought would see my act, and waited for nothing — I really was not sure what to expect.

"How disrespectful, Tim. You expect us to laugh when your father is dead?" my mother said, her voice slicing through the air.

"I just thought it would make you feel better," I said. I wished that my mouth could point down instead of forever up.

"Leave, Tim," my mother said, gesturing towards the door.

I never even got to say goodbye to my father.

I caught the night train back to my penthouse. Tears were running down my cheeks, slicing through the thick white pancake makeup — a sad happy clown. I sat next to a crazy drunk who was wearing a rainbow tie-dye shirt.

"Ay, man," he slurred.

I did not reply. I thought that maybe if I did not say anything, he would go away.

"Just whatever you do, be happy. That's what I've learned in life," he garbled. "But you're a clown, right? So you're always happy. No problems if you're a clown." 🐭



ART // MICHELLE CEN



BETWEEN BOUNDARIES

WATER UNDER THE BRIDGE

By Riddhi Sangham

I felt a faint prodding in my ribcage, wondering if the bread from the dumpster that I had eaten for dinner was making me hallucinate. “Hullo! Hullo-o-o!”

“Agh, geroff, you stupid git!” I said through a mouthful of sleep. “I’m up, I’m up!” It was another one of them city folks, come to tell me to leave.

The woman stepped back, as if afraid that I would suddenly beat her to death. I glowered at her, reveling in the fact that she was visibly recoiling at the sight of my bruised, yellow and black teeth.

“Thank you for vacating the premises, sir,” the woman uttered timidly, staring at the cement sidewalk.

I glowered at her once more and hauled my sack over my stooped back. I limped away slowly.

After about a few meters or so, I turned and looked back at the bridge where I had spent my night. It was a good find. The traffic above was not too noisy, and the pesky animals who took great pleasure in destroying my quest for peaceful sleep seemed not to want to venture to the dark hollows under the bridge. The underside of the bridge was peeling, and was layered with years and years of careful graffiti. A small creek used to flow under the bridge, but now since it was summer it had dried up, and I had replaced the water.

I would not mind sleeping here under the bridge again tonight, if the arch where I normally spent my nights were still occupied by the construction workers.

I made my way out to the main intersection, crossing the road as the pedestrian sign illuminated. Pricking my ears, I listened to the familiar chimes and counted. Big Ben said it was seven o’clock. Sitting down at the patio of a café, I placed my bag on the fancy wrought-iron chair and reached into my pocket, watching as the café-goers quickly scrambled to their feet, trying to get away as fast as they could from “the creepy homeless man.”

I pulled out three coins and smiled. Three pounds. That was

pretty good for breakfast.

Standing up again, I slung my knapsack over my shoulder and started walking, making a left at the hoity French place, making a right at the third bush with the begonias, and then choosing the road on the right when I came to a fork.

The left side of the fork was filled with artsy singletons in batik print tunics opening up their even artsier shops and restaurants. The store-owners insisted that their businesses were free from “corporate crap” and that their stores epitomized heaven on earth. As low-maintenance and low profile as the businesses seemed, I knew that each one wanted to outdo the other in terms of price and exclusivity. It was quickly becoming chic for businesspeople to be seen eating Boca burgers and quaffing low-calorie martinis at one of the cafés, and now even celebrities had been seen rendezvousing up and down the street.

The right side of the fork was the exact opposite from the left, in that it was smelly, dirty, and dark. The only doors on this street were the back doors to the trendy restaurants on the left prong, and the only creatures that ventured out to the right prong voluntarily were garbage men and things that went bump in the night.

I liked to think of the right prong as the “black sheep” of the prong family. The left prong was the stereotypical fake, overhyped teenage girl, and the right was the broody, moody, “misunderstood” brother. What the right prong lacked in aesthetic appeal it more than made up for in personality.

I took the right road.

I walked all the way to the end of the alley, stopped at an intersection, and turned left.

The McDonald’s was there, just as I left it, and as I looked in, I could see Olivia in the window, manning the money machine. Passing a shop window, I looked at my reflection. I made a face at my disgusting self and decided I could do with some spiffing-up.

I got down on my knees, set my knapsack next to me, and bent my



ART // MICHELLE CEN

face forward to the puddle that had collected in the street hollow when it had rained last night. I splashed some water on my face and into my mouth, swishing it around like I had seen people do on television in shop windows.

I spit the water back into the puddle and wet my hands. I slicked my hair back, combed out a few of the tangles, wishing I had rinsed it last night in the Archbury fountain, and took another look at myself in the same shop window.

There. That was better. Gathering up my sack, I pushed open the door to McDonald's and went up to the counter, scrutinizing the menu, as if I hadn't already memorized the items and decided what I would order.

Olivia's face brightened and her blue eyes lit up when she saw me standing in front of the counter.

"Jones! How've you been?" Her mouth widened to reveal a charming gap-toothed smile, enclosed in a heart-shaped face. She pushed back a strand of her thin blond hair and tucked it behind her ear, only to have it come out again a second later. She did not notice that it had come out, picked up a nearby biro, and began rolling it in her fingers, back and forth.

"Well, thank you. And you?" I tried my best to sound like an educated Oxford man, and pretended I was wearing Italian leather loafers and a brown suede coat, instead of faded army fatigues whose color had been worn away by nights of sleeping on benches, and, as of late, under bridges.

She smiled even wider and adjusted her hair once more, twisting it back into a bun secured with the biro she had picked up earlier.

"All right. What can I get for you today?" She poised her finger over the high-tech money machine, ready to send my order to the cooks in the kitchen.

"Errr, I think I will have a Sausage and Egg McMuffin today." I leaned back from the counter.

"As always, good choice!" Olivia beamed. That was what

I loved about her. She always acted as if such a trifle task such as me ordering the same breakfast every day was the only thing keeping the world from imploding.

For another day, Doomsday was kept away, thanks to Jones MacMillan III ordering his standard Sausage and Egg McMuffin.

"Will that be for here or takeaway?"

"Er, takeaway, please."

Olivia punched in the order on the money machine. "That'll be one pound, eighty pence."

I fished in my pocket for the three pounds I had earlier and took out two. I handed them to her. "Keep the change," I said suavely, falling just short of winking.

Winking, I had decided a long time ago, was for Slick Rick teenyboppers and clergymen.

I looked behind me and saw that I was the only one in the restaurant besides Olivia and the cooks, so I stayed at the counter while I waited for my order.

I tried to think of something to say that would make me seem like a brilliant conversationalist, but my thoughts had all decided that they would spontaneously make a trip to La La Land, leaving the white noise in my brain to divide and conquer. After about three seconds of my face probably looking like I had a prune up my nose, I came up with a first-rate comment.

"Nice broach," I said, gesturing at the chipped McDonald's pin she was wearing.

Olivia did a double take and said, "Pardon?"

I tried again. "Nice day out today."

We both looked out the window and saw that it had started pouring since I had come into McDonald's. We both watched as a woman in a jean jacket took out a pink umbrella and opened it. A gust of wind looking like it was fresh out of The Wizard of Oz inverted the umbrella and forced the woman's elbow into her mouth.

I winced.

"Beautiful," Olivia said.

My god, the service at this place was getting slower. Why was it taking so bloody long for my order?

A cook rang a chime and Olivia turned to receive a paper bag with my order in it. I took the bag from her, tipped my imaginary hat, and walked out.

I had seemed to forget that it was raining outside and was momentarily surprised when Mother Nature slapped me in the face with a gust of wind.

The raindrops pounded me with the force of the pounding headaches I got when I had a hangover. Thinking fast — and stupidly, it seemed — I took the McDonald's bag and put it over my head, running across the street to the alley once more.

The space between the buildings that formed the alley was so narrow that it allowed only a few drops of rain to fall through. I sat down on an overturned milk crate that someone, presumably a garbage collector, had left in the aisle.

I took out my paper-wrapped breakfast and peeled off the now wet paper to reveal a soggy sandwich. If I squeezed it enough, it seemed that water came out of it. Fishing out the ketchup packet from the bag, I tore it open with my teeth, opened the sandwich a bit, and squirted the ketchup in there. Trying not to think about the fact that my sandwich was about two drops of water away from looking like a white bread hairball, I closed my eyes and finished the sandwich in two bites.

I crumpled up the paper and the bag and threw it into a nearby recycling bin, wiping my mouth hastily on the back of my hand. I walked out of the alleyway and tilted my face up to the rain, catching a few drops in my mouth for hydration.

Nine chimes indicated the time. I walked along the quiescent street, my head tilted downwards. I stopped at the newsstand on the corner of the road and skimmed the headlines of The Times. War in Afghanistan, news on the

U.S. President's Presidential campaign and his Republican opponents, on and on. My gaze fell on the date on the corner of the paper.

October 21st.

Oh.

My agenda for the day vanished from my mind, and I walked quickly to the nearest bus stop just as a bus stopped by to pick up its passengers. I got on the bus, walked up the stairs, and paid the requisite fee of one pound. There went my last change.

Fortunately, I was able to snag a seat two rows behind the driver because the bus was empty save for two Catholic priests. I sat quietly, pensively, and looked out the window, not focusing on one thing, but letting the streets pass me by.

After twenty or thirty minutes, the Catholic priests had gotten down and the driver called my stop. "Holy Cross Cemetery!"

I got down slowly, thanked the driver, and stood on the curb as the bus doors closed shakily and with a swoosh of pressurized air.

I slipped past the fancy wrought iron gates and into the cemetery. I made a right at Gray Harris's tomb; another left at Mary Angelo's grave, and walked ten meters to the right.

There it was. The final resting place of Bertha MacMillan. I read the inscription on the tomb once more, even though I knew it just as well as I knew my landmarks on the streets of London.

Bertha MacMillan

June 20, 1946- February

21, 2005

Loving mother to Jones III

and husband to Jones II

Rest in Peace

I sat down in front of the grave. I just sat. And talked. I told my mother about my life. I told her about Olivia. I told her about my breakfast this morning.

Suddenly I realized that I did not have flowers or any sort of gift for her. I plucked a dandelion from the earth next to me and I laid it carefully on the headstone. I plucked a

few more and laid them on the headstone.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?"

I turned around to see a burly man in a grey vest running as fast as his stubby tree trunks could carry him.

"No vandalism on my property!"

I slowly raised myself to my feet, still holding a dandelion.

"You hobo! Get off my land!"

He reached where I was standing and he doubled over, trying to catch his breath. At last he stood up. "No... vandalism... on my property... Get... out... bum."

I took a few steps back and laid the single dandelion on the grave, all the while keeping eye contact with the guard.

"Hey! I said, no vandalism! Get out!" He seemed to have regained his breath and charged at me with the strength of a bull at San Fermin.

I did as he dictated and made a couple of rights and lefts and diagonals and ended up at the gate.

"Bye, Mum," I whispered, giving a slight wave to the air behind me before I let myself out of the gate. Suddenly I felt foolish. This whole charade was something out of one of those chocolate-faced films they always seemed to play on the display tellies when I was passing by Dixons.

I needed to regain my manliness, so I stopped and gave a couple of Tarzan-like yells.

I walked for a few blocks and stopped outside a SPAR shop and peered inside the window to check the time. 2:00.

I wasn't hungry anymore. So I decided to keep walking.

It occurred to me that I hadn't any more money. So I took a detour and ended up at the Archbury fountain. The fountain was located in a se-

ANGELS

The angels fall gently from the sky like snowflakes.

They land in the park, where the two main paths intersect near the pond.

They float down onto the grass, lying down, eyes closed.

Very soon a crowd emerges, forming a large circle around the angels.

The people dare not move closer, but the heavenly agents do not move.

Many people come: journalists, scientists, a local pastor.

They look down at the angels' faces and up at the sky.

Neither of those places gives anyone a clue.

Speculations soon surface, and rumors begin spreading:

"Are they aliens?"

"God is sending us a sign!"

"Some stupid pranksters..."

"They're probably from North Korea."

It doesn't matter what people say, though.

The truth doesn't even matter, to be perfectly honest.

For two days and two nights the angels lie there,

Under the scrutiny of the media.

They watch, they examine, and they probe and ask questions.

But some questions aren't meant to be answered.

So the angels leave.

How?

Well, no one knows.

There are debates between religious scholars and scientists.

Everyone wants answers, but nobody has one.

Some believe this. Others believe that.

Those who believe this fight against those who believe that.

"It is a sure sign from God. The Second Coming is near!"

"It's a hoax! It's all bull!"

"You're just being ignorant."

"You're an idiot."

So I sit here watching.

I am not sure whether to be amused or disappointed.

Maybe both.

I will try another experiment soon, perhaps when men are once again discontent,

When they need a distraction from their miseries and their problems.

I will be there to give them solace through conflict and conviction.

I will give them meaning.

I will teach them to love and to hate.

I will kill millions and I will save millions.

I will, as I have for many millennia.

I will be here for as long as they need me.

That may be forever; that day may never come.

But then again, perhaps that day will come,

When I can depart from this job and return to my beginnings.

Perhaps in some distant time far from now they will cast me aside.

Perhaps one morning they will no longer require me.

I hope that day will come, for from that day forth I will no longer be me.

On that day I shall return to where I came.

I shall rest in the hearts and minds of men once more.

I shall be within them, so they will no longer look to the sky for help.

They will look to themselves.

cluded part of London, and it was the pride of the chavs that lived around the square, where it was located. The fountain was one of the hidden gems of Britain and every time I "visited" it,

it always surprised me that something so beautiful would be hidden away in such a gross part of the country. The fountain was delicately ornate, made of beige marble and weathered grey

stone, with a sculpture of Saint Jude in the middle. Saint Jude was shown in a toga, looking down as tenderly as a man of rock could, at the baby he was holding. There was a small halo suspended above the Saint's head and the baby was wearing a thin chain with a cross pendant.

Although I considered myself an atheist, the sculpture in the fountain never ceased to bring out some Biblical side of me that I always forgot I possessed. I thought that when other people looked at the fountain, it brought out a peace in them, too. I believe that the world would be fine if we all gathered around the Archbury fountain.

I looked inside the fountain in the big marble bowl filled with water that surrounded the statue. Coins glittered up at me, scattered around the bowl haphazardly.

Looking around the square to make sure that I was alone, I rolled up my fatigues, opened my sack, and then dropped it outside the fountain. I waded in and took a handful of coins from the fountain, poured them into my open bag, and repeated the process two or three times until I knew that I had at least ten or eleven pounds.

I was never pleased with myself when I stole, but I believed that begging was for those without pride. Usually I earned my money by taking aluminum cans and bottles to the recycling plant, but I was too spent to go through the trash and sort out bottles for a pittance.

I went back into the maze of back roads and wandered around for a while: a real "no where man". It was five o'clock by the time I emerged

and I decided that I needed dinner. I longed for a home-cooked meal, some chicken cooked in lard with a side of buttery biscuits and green beans.

So I made a few more turns and ended up at the Ganesha temple. I got in line for food and loaded myself with lemon rice, curd rice, and potato and carrots curry. I ate ravenously at a rickety table provided for those who were eating. A Hindu priest smiled at me and I smiled back nervously.

After I was done eating, I threw my paper plate in the dustbin and stood up. I passed a donation box on my way out. I fished in my sack for five pence and dropped the coins in the box.

It was getting dark now. I estimated the time to be 6:30.

I started my journey back to the bridge where I had slept the previous night. It was quiet and peaceful. I laid out my sleeping bag, getting ready once more to replace the water under the bridge. 🍷

There is a dream that is of blurred colors and blurred faces.
She is standing in the middle of it,
Of many floating faces suspended in the thick atmosphere.
The faces are obscured except for the mouths,
Which open and close.
There is yelling and other disquieting noises
That comes from far away and does not sync in with the mouths.
Slowly the faces converge on her.

Her desk lamp is turned on, but the light does not spread into her room.
She sits at her desk struggling to read a book of some sort.
She brings it close to her face,
Squinting at the barely distinguishable characters.
She stares at those letters.
She recognizes them,
But she doesn't understand them.
She looks again:
"I-W-I-L-L-D-I-S-S-O-L-V-E-Y-O-U"
She feels her hands beginning to burn.

She is late for class as the bell rings while she is running down the hallway.
Her backpack is weighing her down,
The books inside bobbing up and down as she runs.
Before she reaches Room 104,
She runs into a wall.
But it's not an ordinary wall.
It is a wall of doubt and fear.
That's what it says.
It is a solid concrete wall spanning the width of the hallway,
Inscribed upon it the two words "doubt" and "fear."

The man in the grey robe reads in a solemn voice.
There is murmuring in the audience,
Making it hard to understand the words.
She makes out the big picture though.
She is flanked by two large men while going down the stairs.
The man in the grey robe approaches her,
And tells here to take a seat.
She refuses.
The three men each produce large hammers.
They try but they cannot hurt her.
The steak knives do the job well though.

A line of 7 doors.
All painted milky white.
She chooses the one,
Third from the right.
She walks through into a green light.
In there,

There is no air to breathe and no ground to step on.
She falls and chokes and tries to grab something that is not there.
She falls and falls.

She walks out her house to see a street of vibrant colors.
Everything has lost its realism to a kaleidoscope of colors.
The sidewalk is bright pink.
The cars range from orange to neon green to a silky maroon.
The shadows are no longer there.
Her hands do not have wrinkles anymore.
It is as if she is in a cartoon world.

She is.

There is a cool breeze brushing her hair to the side.
She is standing two feet from the edge,
Looking down at the turbulent splashing waves.
Suddenly a gust of wind lifts her off her feet.
She finds herself flying above the ocean.
She begins falling.
She is able to will herself around,
And she has almost reached the edge.
But she does not make it.
The water is warm and salty.

She finds herself in a dark castle.
Tapestries hung from the ceilings.
Candles lit the grandiose hall.
The choir is singing.
She is singing along,
Entranced.

She wakes up,
Getting up from her bed though it is still dark outside.
She goes into the kitchen to fix breakfast.
She turns on the light to see her mother,
Though her mother is dead.
She steps back in horror.
She trips over something,
Knocking her head on the floor.
She wakes up.

By Linus Lu

THE STONE

By Maya Ravichandran

They said he wasn't coming back.

The last time I saw him, he was peaceful. He hadn't been for a long while. The past few months, he had been in pain. Too much pain. Mom had said that he needed to rest. But that was all he had been doing. Mom never told her exactly what was wrong, only that he was really sick. She had asked if he was going to be okay, but Mom never answered. I wondered if it was because I wasn't old enough, but I soon dropped the thought. Mom always answered all of my questions. Plus, I was almost double digits, so I figured I was old enough to know anything.

Those white walls of the hospital room were the last setting I could picture him in. In my mind, his eyes were closed, which was odd because when he wasn't sick, they were always open. He never slept. He was always running or jumping or doing something fun. My best memories of him were of them in the field be-

hind our house.

Our house was on a huge field. It was the only one there, so Dad said we had the whole place to ourselves. We would run together and climb over the large stones that littered the entire field. That was the best part of our field: the stones. They were so large and thin and so beautiful. Most of them had long scratches that littered their glazed exterior. The stones glittered when the sun beamed down on the field.

Of all the stones that were there, he had a favorite. This one had no scratches in it. It was smooth and silky and icy cold. Even on the hottest day of summer, the stone would still be cool to the touch. He said he wanted the stone, but when he tried moving it, it wouldn't budge. Mom said that he could have it much later, when he was old and wrinkly like grandpa.

When we were younger, we would spend all of our free time in that field, playing on those stones. His favorite game was stone hopping. I didn't like all that much, but I still followed behind. My record was six in a row before I missed. He was better; his record was eight. He spent a lot of his free time trying to break eight. But when Dad found out about the

game, he put a stop to it immediately. Apparently, it was really disrespectful. At the time, I didn't understand how, but I stopped jumping. Yet, I was certain he never did, and secretly practiced when no one was watching.

When it was cold and snowy, we would build snow forts and use the stones as walls. My forts were always the strongest (I was really proud of this fact), but his forts always looked the coolest, somehow. But those intricate designs always came crashing down when my snowballs made contact.

Even five years later, I can still remember everything that had happened by the very stone I currently lean against. Since we had entered the world together only minutes apart, I thought we would leave the same way. However, I have always known it was a long shot. But I didn't know that he would leave this early. We had so much more to do together; I had so much more to say.

The one thing that is left of him that is really his is this stone. I laugh softly. Ironically, the stone is now actually his. His one childhood wish has finally come true. After all, his name and dates are carved right on the glossy surface his hands once touched. 🍷

HER FIRST TIME

By Julianne Wey

"Why won't you let me?" he demands.
"Look, it's my choice, okay?"

He groans, guttural noises of complaint scraping from his throat. "This involves me too! I'm your boyfriend!"

She throws him a withering look. "Uh huh, yeah, and as my boyfriend, I would expect you to support my decision, not whine about it like a baby!"

His eyebrows pull together in a crooked, upside-down V. "A baby? How am I being a baby?!"

She stares at him in glaring disbelief. "Um, maybe because you don't seem to understand that I'm just not ready to do this with you yet!"

"But—but—" he splutters, "that's just ridiculous! We've been together for—what—two years?! How could you not be ready?"

"I just value it way more than you, it seems," she grumbles. "This is a big deal to me, okay? I need you to understand

that."

His chest fills with air and he lets it out in a long, resigned puff. He casts his eyes to the ground and his lower lip sticks out a bit. "I just don't see why you don't trust me," he mumbles, a little petulantly.

She tilts her head as her eyes soften and she lays a hand on his arm. "Look, I trust you, okay? Do you believe me?"

His eyes sneak a peek at her gentling face. "I guess..." he says hesitantly. "It's just that we've waited so long —"

"I know," she cuts in. She stops and visibly restrains herself. "I know," she repeats, more softly. "I just — this is a huge deal to me."

His lower lip sticks out a bit more and he shrugs childishly.

She sighs. "It's a part of me, you know? You just don't let go of those things that easily."

He eyes her with growing amusement.

"Yeah, I can see that," he teases slightly.

She laughs and the tension between them finally snaps into light, dry pieces. "Shut up! You know how much I love Les Mis!"

"You look like your fingers are about to break," he chuckles, bringing his hands

Generally Unhappy Endings

By Nastasya Kutuyev

Once upon a time,

A wolf eats a grandma and then cross-dresses in order to eat a girl with the fashion sense of a firetruck. Besides indigestion, the wolf lives a long, happy life of eating the young and the elderly.

A girl with snow-white skin and ruby lips runs through the woods. The hunter, hired by the girl's stepmother, feels a pang of guilt as he prepares his bow and arrow, before remembering who signs his paycheck. He gets a nice bonus in exchange for the girl's heart.

A young woman runs down the steps of a palace as the clock strikes midnight. Her impractical glass shoes fit perfectly and stay on her feet, and the prince can't be bothered to run after her or remember her face. The girl remains a humble servant and marries a drunk.

A homely baby duck swims alone as his brothers and sisters laugh at him. He comes to terms with his appearance but struggles with an inferiority complex for the rest of his life.

A teenage girl sits in her tower and sighs as she braids her unrealistically long blonde hair. In an act of defiance against her non-biological mother, she chops off most of her hair, dyes the rest purple, and runs off to join an all-girl punk band.

A pair of starving twins stumble upon a house made out of candy in the woods. They leave after they discover the huge pieces of candy are plastic decorations and no one answers the door.

A frog contemplates his former life as a prince while he sits on his lily pad. He decides he likes this simpler lifestyle and joins his new amphibious companions.

A king looks at yet another twelve pairs of shoes his daughters have worn out. He cancels his weekend at Vegas to pay for another twelve pairs.

A family of bears enjoy a walk while a petite blonde breaks into their cottage. The security system goes off, the thief is apprehended, and the bed sheets are washed.

A wolf watches as three pig brothers haphazardly build last-minute homes. The pigs invite him over for dinner, poison his food, and use his pelt to decorate the parlor.

A mother and father run to their children's room after hearing the dog bark. They call the police and the flying, pointy-eared intruder is tried for kidnapping.

A young blonde chases after an impeccably dressed rabbit. She gives up when she can't fit through the rabbit hole because it was made for six pound rabbits.

A queen despairs as she must guess a strange man's name to save her first-born child. She uses up her three guesses on Frank, Bob, and Carl, and hands over the newborn.

A young prince is told a sleeping princess rests at the top of the tower. He surveys the hundreds of flights of stairs before turning around and going back home.

A redheaded mermaid pokes her head above the surface of the water, staring in awe at the castle on the shore. She is hit by a ship and knocked unconscious.

A girl the size of a thimble explores the forest of flowers in the garden. She discovers fairies the same size as her, but they refuse to socialize with her because she lacks wings. The girl cries and goes home.

A man with a failing shoe business hopes for a miracle, maybe in the form of two little elves who sneak into his workshop at night. Instead he goes bankrupt and his marriage falls apart.

A lion lies helplessly in a trap, coming to terms with his doom. A mouse passing by stops to enjoy the reversal of power before continuing home.

A puppet boy and his father are swallowed by a whale. They are no match for the digestive system.

The End. 🐼

SISTER

sister
the movie theater someday
is
where someday you
would
someday go on your
first

date someday and he'd drive
someday you home and
you'll
run to me
keep me up all someday
night
with your

someday story that his
pinky was so close someday
to yours
that someday he kept his
lips
straight someday but his
eyes
on you
when the someday
characters kissed.

By Ingrid Pan

CODA

My cheek buzzes with the heat embers as I touch my lips to stiff hands. From the warmth emanates a buzzing sound reminiscent of a bumblebee dancing from flower to flower. I breathe in a pool of stagnation as the golden warriors circle.

One lands on my forehead. I let its black legs skate a figure-eight on my face, skiing down my nose and climbing up my cheek. The buzzing echoes louder within my eardrums, and the earth vibrates with each beat. One-two-three-four.

I tilt my head back and let the liquid fill my mouth, my eyes, my pores. It tastes brackish, like water covered by a blanket of algae. I hope it will chase the bees away, but they remain. From this angle I see that they are vultures with stripes.

My body swells; it doesn't like salt. I struggle to expel the venom from my veins. The poison I inhaled to chase away the bees will kill me. My blood begins to burn, and fear of death consumes my mind. I wake paralyzed with fear.

The bees still sting me in my mind.

By Ashley Chen

UPPERCUT

I pretend that there's a spark.

I pretend you smell like laundry detergent and spearmint gum, that you wear sweaters laced with cologne and jeans that hug your waist and a face all done up with planes and angles and fanning lashes cutting shadows down your throat, spilling over collarbones like ichor runs through your veins.

I pretend we're running through the rain and your hair is washed neon pink with lit-up signs and our socks are soaked through and our shoes squeak with every step and we're laughing and laughing and grinning and touching and I'll say, "don't leave," and you'll say, "never."

But your hands are rough and clammy and your shirt is two sizes too big and you're wearing those stupid Nike socks when you've likely never done a sport in your life and we're cold and hollow as the gaps of silence between the clinking of our forks over lukewarm dinners and the fettuccine Alfredo from the restaurant where you paid in coupons still sticks to the walls of my stomach and there aren't any airplanes to mistake for stars so the goosebumps in your white stucco ceiling will have to do till the moon turns over in its grave and the clouds coax out the sun and dawn splits open my eyes and I trace the map of skin across my hand where the lines in your palms were just pressed into mine *coldandhollow*.

And I realize I've never felt more alone in my life.

By Claire Strickland

LETTING GO

I was walking down the street, the busy city street, holding hands with a girl, a beautiful girl. In her other hand she held a red balloon. She told me the balloon reminded her of childhood, of walking through the fair with her father. I looked up at the sky, which was an effortless blue, and then back into her eyes, which were half a shade lighter and twice as enticing. And we walked, and talked, and when we ran out of words, we could still walk; and when we stopped at a park bench to talk, we sat for hours upon hours, wondrous sentences pouring out between us like the summer storm that we were interrupted by. So we danced in the rain, in the asphalt streets, in the supermarket aisles once the down-pour outside became so torrential we couldn't see each other's faces anymore. Then the tempo of the raindrops slowed, and we ventured back onto the street, still holding hands. But the rain had washed away the people, and the street was empty. I looked up at the sky, which was sullen and gray. And as I turned to look back at her my foot caught on an uneven brick and I fell forward. She reached for me, and she caught me, and I was glad; because in her arms was warmth and in her arms was protection. But when I looked up at the sky again, I saw the red balloon drifting up, up, up and out of reach. She shrugged it off and told me not to worry, but I knew I should have tied that red balloon around her wrist.

By Lena Jewler

AMONG THE MILLIONS

Among a million clouds that sailed above me,
You were the one I stood below and watched.

I beheld, warily...
How you swirled with a thousand grays
Constantly wavering, never settling;
How you hovered bleakly above me
Casting a shadow upon my face;
And how you erupted with rain drops
Unmindful of me, unguarded, underneath;

But then, unexpectedly, amidst your storm,
Sunshine glowed and emanated from within you
And I, with my face pointed up, felt the warmth
As it descended slowly and nestled into my cheeks.
I closed my eyes in dreamy and wistful thought
Of life aboard your floating and delicate wisps.

But upon awakening from my sweet musings,
I saw that you were not mine; the clouds had shifted.
And scanning through the infinite strips of white plaster
that patched up the holes in the timeworn sky,
I realized I had lost you. Forever. For eternity.

And yet, I simply lay on the grass, my back
to the Earth, and just watched — and watched
the millions of clouds that sailed above me.
And hoped, you would sail back to me...

By Max Chang

GROUP OF THREE

On the right:
She has beautiful blue eyes.
Her hair is flowing down her
shoulders, fiery red.
She is fiddling with her fingers,
looking down.
She is waiting.

In the middle:
He is tall and handsome.
His sunglasses cover his eyes
and his character.
He sits upright, looking into
the distance.
He is waiting.

On the left:
She has fuzzy brown hair.
Her ears are perked up and at-
tentive.
She barks and whimpers.
She is waiting.

By Linus Lu

HOW I EAT AN OREO

My way to eat an Oreo is a great way I think. The yummy chocolate outside and great white filing is great.

First, I try and wiggle the top of the chocolate Oreo of. If it pulls of some frosting I eat it anyways. I usually want to get lucky by not pulling off frosting.

Next, I scrape slowly with my teeth along the frosting and favor each scrape. That is the best part of eating the Oreo cookie. I like the designs my teeth make.

Finally, I start to nibble the bottom of the chocolate Oreo. When I get half way I eat the whole thing.

That is how I eat an Oreo cookie. They are scrumpshus to me. I love them very much.

By Robert Eng

