



Vertigo

2019-2020 | Vol. 31



aisling:



(n) for dream or vision

There's familiarity to it all.

Each person knows to have a dream. Each person the little girl meets has one. They are expected to have one, just as they are expected to grow old and grow up.

A dream, the little girl learns, is different from the kinds of dreams that gather at her eyelashes at night, surrounded by inky darkness and the slivers of light that slip through her curtains. A dream is something to chase after. A dream is something she wants. A dream is that little flicker of light, that little fairy hidden in the depths of her reality. A dream makes her supple, translucent, loose like candle wax: as if a single spark could make and unmake everything.

Here, she dreams and sleeps in thoughts and feelings that hold onto her like hands, reaching out to keep her here. Her path is drawn by luminescent footsteps, each one as precise as the other, as if expecting her to follow perfectly. There is no earth and sky, no land and water. There is nothing except her, floating in this space that is so tight and so clenched and so firm that she has reach out and imagine something, dream something—

The striking of a piano key, the pull of a thread and needle, the twirling of ribbons, the crunching of chips, the making of a new friend, the reunion of two old ones.

A dream is whatever you want it to be.

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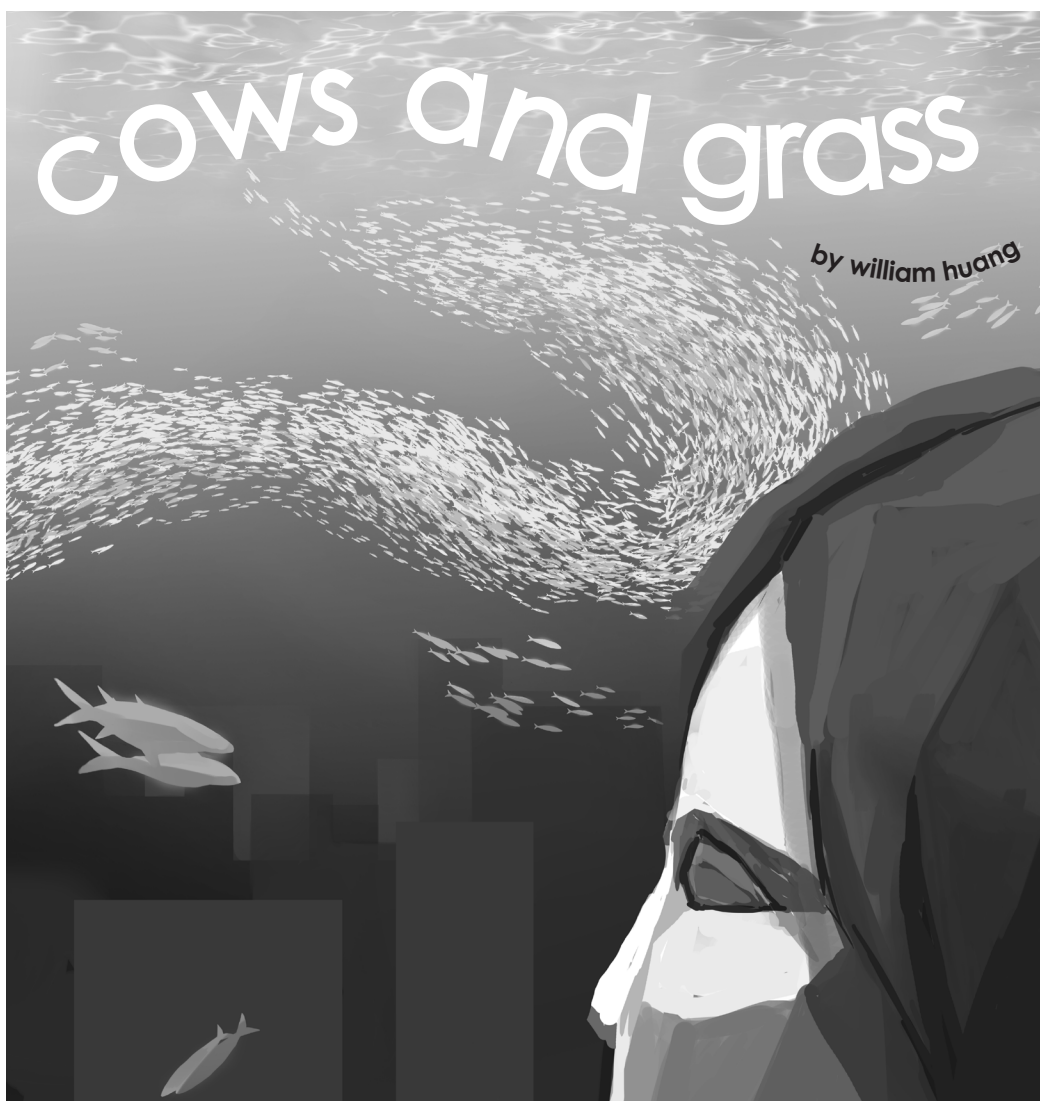
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His father had told him about the breeze that would gently roll over a meadow of fresh, green grass, each row yielding to the steady movement of the air. The sun would slowly droop from its apex, gifting its viewers with dazzling, majestic splashes of rose red and ember orange filling the sky. His father mentioned once that feeling the wind upon his face made him feel alive.

Of course, when his father mentioned "grass," he had to ask what that was. "Grass," he said, with a smile upon his face. "Grass is a plant, quite like seaweed, except there were whole fields of tiny blades, billowing this way

and that in the wind!" his father grinned.

"There were many animals like us that could walk on the surface, like cows and horses, that would spend their time enjoying the meadows and munching on the grass. The cows, they weren't like fish; they had legs just like us, but with big fat bellies..."

He would giggle. Cows, what a ridiculous thought. He imagined a fish with black and white splotches, with a big, fat belly. From there, he imagined the fins being replaced with legs, with flat hooves at the end of them. There was no way such a mythical beast could exist, surviving off of miniature blades of seaweed

"Imagination is everything. It is the preview of life's coming attractions." — Albert Einstein

that grew on the surface. And a sun? A fiery, yellow ball that ignited the surface with its brilliance? His father definitely had quite the imagination.

Unlike his father, who had captivated his imagination and let it run wild, he often struggled to keep up with his children's imaginations. At the ripe old age of thirty-two, all he could think about was how on Earth he would answer all of their questions, despite having gained wisdom from thirty-two years full of memorable, meaningful experiences.

"Why can't we swim to the surface, Dad?" his daughter asked.

"Honey, we just can't. I couldn't when I was five and now you can't either."

"Why not, Dad?"

"Because—" he paused. "That's a silly question. I just answered it."

"What's on the surface, Dad?"

For a moment, he thought of the gentle, white-and-black beast, roaming around a sunny meadow.

"It's a dangerous world up there. It's unsafe, it will kill you, don't ever go there."

"Having said that, once upon a time . . . You know, my father told me a little secret that I'll pass on to you. Once upon a time, our ancestors lived up there. We lived very happy lives—"

"Dad, stop lying to us! Mama told us that story was a lie!" his daughter grinned.

"No, no, I'm serious. There were these blades of grass—"

"Grass, grrrrrrassssssss," his daughter marvelled at the new combination of letters.

"—and these blades of grass, they were like little seaweed, and they would bend this way and that, and then they would get eaten by these creatures called cows—"

"Cow, ow, cowwwwwwww."

"—but don't be getting any ideas, going up there. It's dangerous."

"I know, Dad," his daughter pondered for a moment. "Cows and grass, cowwww, graaas-

sssssss." She trailed off, lost in thought.

He went out for a swim to feel the nice cool water on his skin, thinking it would clear his mind of extraneous thoughts. With coordination, his muscles tensed and relaxed, causing the familiar sensation of swimming. Then, standing on the ocean floor, he oriented himself to feel the water coursing by his face, perhaps hoping to feel alive. The water trickled by dully.

Far to his left was a patch of lackluster seaweed, in some places wavy but otherwise featureless. Squinting, he could barely make out the line two adjacent leaves of seaweed. Moments later, the lines dissolved into monotonous gray.

At parental counseling, he offered some of his frustration. "I just feel I don't have enough of the skills that parents need. Like my dad, he always knew how to answer my questions. I just don't feel like I have the knowledge."

"Yeah, I totally get it. It's very common for first-time parents to struggle with this. But I'm sure you'll do fine; even your father did not have all the answers. It's an incredible journey for both you and your kids, and after a while you'll get the hang of it."

But that wasn't it. There was definitely something his father had that he didn't. Something that made the blurry, gray line sharpen into clarity.

"Do you think we will be back there someday? Will we ever go back to the surface?" he had once asked.

His father sighed. "Son, the surface is too dangerous. You know that."

"That's right. But will we ever go back?"

"Someday, we might," his father had said in a strange, cryptic manner. "Right now, we aren't ready. But one day we might be able to frolic with the cows in those sunny, grass-filled meadows."

His father looked up. Following suit, he thought he saw a glimmer of sunlight. With a blink, it shimmered out of existence.

Dixie On The Hill

by alisha bose



It was only when the trees were black shadows and the stars hadn't come out yet that she wanted to play. During the day, she'd be locked up in the little thatched cottage on the top of the hill, the wall of barely blooming honeysuckle separating her from the rest of the world. No one else's plants would grow—tomatoes, flowers, even cacti would all shrivel up before they had grown to be bigger than a ping pong ball. If one tried to salvage it, it would fall apart. The Island bloomed for nobody, except her.

The other kids wouldn't speak to her either. The time to themselves was limited, and one would hardly waste it mooning over a mystery.

When school started, the time to themselves became even more scarce. On an island where danger lurked in one's very own house, curiosity was discouraged. Dixie, however, couldn't shake off his interest in the little girl in that lonesome house.

Their cottage was far off on the hill. It was hidden in a little nook between the trees and well apart from the rest of the village. Her windows hadn't been painted over. Dixie's, and everyone else's were completely black, to protect themselves from the Island, but one could see everything inside the house.

When he felt brave, he would climb a tree

"The beauty and power of the dark is where conception, death, and rebirth begin." — Steven Cuoco

near the house and try to look through the window. She was never there, but an easel and a blank canvas was, against an eerily white wall. In a few weeks, images started to form on the canvas, strange slashes of color that didn't seem to work together well; yellows with dull greens, splashed over with oranges. The finished product was a bizarre myriad of shapes that formed an ugly portrait of a young boy. The next canvas was simple—five letters of violent magenta—hello.

For a while after that, he didn't come back. He stayed with the other kids, played hopscotch far from the woods, and never lingered too much at the edge when the sun started to set. It was one thing to treat her like an invisible artist, but after sunset, she became more sinister; less human and someone Dixie didn't want to mess with.

Children were never supposed to be outside after dark. Adults could stay, if absolutely necessary, but had to head back immediately if they couldn't see the Moon at any point. The Island was kind when the Sun watched over, but the Moon was too weak to protect them when the Clouds took over.

He tried to stay true to his promise, but the Island listened to no one. It had been a working day, and there'd been a more difficult batch of tourists than usual. They'd fussed, tried to take pictures of the Island folk, gotten into their houses, and had overall been a nuisance. Despite the last ferry back being at four, they'd somehow stayed till five. The Mainland folks were oblivious of the dangers of the Island, and it was reflected in their stupid grins and foolish faces.

But because of the hold-up, the dogs hadn't been taken out all day. When Bear started whining, Dixie knew they needed to go out.

"Let them go in a cup," Maman said brusquely. Night scared everyone except Maman, who would simply tuck him in with a sad smile on

her face. "It's curfew, Dixie. And you need to take your medicine."

He nodded, but Dixie never liked the way the house smelled after using the cup. The smell would waft through for days after. A sliver of the Sun was still out, and the dogs were old enough that no one would miss them if they were Taken, so Dixie slipped out of bed.

It was through that tiny crack in the door that he saw the light, shining all the way from the hill. If he squinted, he could just make out the tiny lantern. It moved quickly around the house, held up by some sort of invisible ghost.

The dogs weren't done yet, so he looked on with reckless abandon, straining to see the owner of the mysterious light. He watched as they made their way down the hill, using a path he didn't even know existed. For a moment, they stopped at the crest of the hill, as if

waiting for someone.

It was too dark and silent. With a start, Dixie realized that the Moon had been taken by the Clouds.

"Get back in!" he hissed at the dogs, who whimpered. Dixie almost closed the door on their tails, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

Right before the light had gone out, where the hard glint of the soulless stars was the only thing illuminating the tips of the trees, he could have sworn that he had seen something shining; a glint of lonesome blonde hair.

He leaned against the door, trembling and trying not to wake Maman. There was no other plausible explanation—she must have come out. She had come out in the night, when there was no Moon.

So, the next day, he hiked up the long way to the house. It was just to see if she was okay, he reminded himself. If she had been Taken, it was customary to put a red circle on their door. He was there to check their door, nothing else.

But once he'd reached the top, he couldn't re-

"They watched each other for a few seconds, green eyes on gold each challenging the other to make the first move."

sist going to his old spot in the pine tree in the back of the house. To see if she was okay. The door didn't have a circle on it, but perhaps it was because the house was so odd. She wasn't alone, he was certain of that. No child could stay alone on the Island and live to see the days pass.

He carefully made his way up the branches, climbing a little higher than her window so he could have a better view. He parted the leaves with one hand, grasped onto the branch with the other, looked and—

There she was.

There was no doubt about it. Her hair was the same blonde he had seen that night, long and wispy, nearly up to her thighs. She was in an extremely loose, white gown, and her eyes were startlingly pale—like large, gold plates looking straight into one's soul.

They watched each other for a few seconds, green eyes on gold each challenging the other to make the first move.

As so it happened, it was Dixie who lost.

His foot slipped from its hold below, and he was forced to break eye contact and grab onto another branch. She smiled a little, emboldening Dixie.

"I'm Dixie," he said. The wind rustled the dead leaves on the ground, harshly raking them against each other.

She paused, then moved closer to the windowsill. "Clover."

Her voice was dry and raspy, extremely unlike any other little girl Dixie had ever heard. It was low, too, completely different from the high-pitched sounds the schoolgirls usually made. Still, he wanted to hear more.

"What're you doing up here all alone?"

She kept staring at him, almost like she was scared he would disappear if she blinked. "I'm not alone. I have Eve."

"Is Eve your Maman?" Dixie asked curiously. Every child had a Maman in some shape and form, someone who tried to protect them from the Night. Sometimes they failed. Sometimes they didn't.

"I don't have a mama," Clover whispered.

"Eve is just Eve." She stuck both hands out of the window, towards Dixie.

"Why don't you come to school with us?" Dixie moved closer. He could almost touch her veiny, white hands with his own if he leaned down.

"I 'spect Eve won't let me. I never talk to no one."

Dixie frowned as he slid forward on the branch. "That's not right. It's anyone, not no one. You'd know that if you came to school with us. We have an empty seat, right next to me."

Clover smiled. "That'd be nice, Dixie. I hate being alone with my books and Eve. She don't talk to me either. No one does."

"No one?"

"No one."

Dixie precariously hopped onto a lower branch, scratching his uncovered shin. "Well, you can sing, Clover. That's what I do when I'm sad."

"Sing?"

Dixie landed on the branch right outside her window and took her hand. He'd never seen anyone with such frail hands. "Sure, we can sing anything we want to."

He tipped his hand back and sang the first thing that came to his mind. "Little silver bells, ringing in their shells, ten o'clock, eleven o'clock, and here flies the hawk!"

"I like it," Clover said. "I like the rhyme."

"We learned it just yesterday," Dixie informed her importantly. "It's our very newest song. Do you do anything else here?"

She smiles thinly. "I like drawing. Did you see mine drawing? I knew you was coming around, so I drew a drawing."

"The drawing?" Dixie thought back to the ugly portrait. "Was that for me?"

Clover nodded eagerly. "Did you like it?"

Dixie shrugged. The Sun was beginning to fall back. "I should probably be going, Clover."

She looked visibly disappointed. "Oh, but can't you come again tomorrow?"

Dixie considered that. He never had much to do after school, and this little mystery at the

top of the hill was more interesting than any of his books. Still, the little cottage was so far apart from everyone else, and it took a long time to get to it.

Clover seemed to sense his hesitation. "There's a shortcut!" Clover notified him in excitement. "Eve uses it. I seen her going down and I use it when it's dark. See right there? It's right there."

Dixie twisted, and through the foliage he could just make out the beginnings of a small, barely used path. It would make his journeys up to the hill much easier and faster.

He mulled it over for a second, and looking into her hopeful, golden eyes, he conceded. "Okay," Dixie said. "I'll come back tomorrow."

And so he did. It became a daily tradition, the hike up to the hill and climbing the tree. Clover took out new canvases for them to paint on, and Dixie taught her the songs that they learned during school. He never saw Eve, but Clover would often share the goodies that Eve had gotten her with him.

Maman never brought him candy or Jell-O, but Eve did. One day, he even took the dogs up the hill, and let Clover wave at them. She had never seen a dog before, but had said that she quite liked the look of their floppy ears. Their little rendezvous continued for quite a while—until one day, Clover wasn't in her room when he arrived.

"Clover?" he called. "Clover, where are you? We learned a new song today in class. It's called Rosy Rosy Was A Little Nosy. It's really funny. I wanna draw her. The teacher said Rosy has the reddest cheeks in the whole wide world! Redder than mine!"

He jumped the short distance from the tree to her room and stared. Her paintings had all been stacked up, and the room was even more bare than normal.

"Clover, we just painted that!" he cried, look-

ing at the canvas with a sloppily painted house on it. "It's not dry yet!" He moved it, wincing a little when the paint smeared, ruining it.

"Dixie!" a faint voice called.

"Clover?" he glanced around, then out of the window. "Clover, is that you?" He poked his head out of the window, and tried his best to see through the thick foliage. But the fruits had started growing and he couldn't even see the shortcut that he had taken. He could've sworn that he had heard the voice from there, though, so he hastily put his foot on the windowsill.

In his haste, he forgot to grab the branch. His foot slipped, his hand just grazed the leaves—and then all was black.

⊙

"Dixie!? Dixie, what happened? Can you hear me?"

"Don't worry, he just slipped a little. He looks completely fine."

Dixie blinks once, twice, then opened his eyes fully. He is lying on Clover's bed, looking up at the dirty ceiling.

"Don't scare me like that!" a calloused hand takes his roughly. "I've been looking for you for ages!"

Dixie turns to face her. "Maman?"

"He calls you Maman?" Eve asks.

Maman sighs. "Yeah, he was so young and overwhelmed on the first night... I let him do it. He's so alone already." She glances around at the room, her eyes lingering on the bright red canvases precariously set on the easel.

Eve threw Clover's pillows into a basket marked For Laundry. "What's he in for?"

Maman brushes a curly strand of hair behind Dixie's ear. "It's almost time for another round of chemo," she responds as a way of answering. "You feeling up to it, bud?"

Eve shakes her head. "Heartbreaking. What was it this time? Deadbeat dad?"

"That, and the mother. Barely lasted these few years with him before they were put in jail and Dixie was, well, put in here."

"She had never seen a dog before, but had said that she quite liked the look of their floppy ears."

"Shame," Eve clicks her tongue. "Some people should just not be allowed to be parents."

Maman nodded her agreement, then turned her focus to Dixie again. She grazed his head carefully, pressing on the bump slightly. "Dixie, c'mon."

"I don't wanna go," Dixie says stubbornly. "Where's Clover? I thought I heard her, but now I don't know where she is."

The two nurses exchange a wary glance.

"How do you know Clover?" Maman interjects. "Have you been sneaking out during playtime?"

"Yeah. I taught her how to sing and she showed me how to paint. I took Bear too see her and —"

"—you took a therapy dog here!?" Eve asked.

"—and she said hi to him and I showed her some of my lessons because she didn't know them and the Island was kind to her but —"

Eve puts up a hand to stop him. "The Island?"

"He has a very vivid imagination. I think this whole vision thing he has going is a coping mechanism. I've tried taking him to see a therapist, but... you know the kids. Bear works best for them, not an actual human," Maman murmurs to Eve.

"Maman!" Dixie shouts, trying to get her attention back. "I came in here tonight and she wasn't here! Maman, what happened to Clover? Why isn't she here anymore? Do you think the Island took her!? Maybe—" he doubles over on the bed, coughing. Maman rushes to him.

"Dixie, we really need to get you back."

"No! Where'd she go?" Dixie hacks out an-

other cough. "Where is Clover?"

Maman exchanges yet another glance with Eve. With a sigh, she sits down next to Dixie. The bed creaks in protest as she shifts her weight.

"Dixie," she begins very softly. "Clover... has moved away. She moved to another Island. She didn't want to tell you because, well, because she didn't want you to be sad. But she's happy and safe."

"Really?" Dixie perks up. "What's this Island like?"

Maman puts a hand around him. "It's—it's really pretty. Her own Maman is there, too. And she can paint and sing all the time if she wants to."

"No school?"

Maman's smile doesn't reach her eyes. "No school."

"And can I write to her? All the time?"

"Sure, Dixie. Of course you can."

"And you'll send it to her? With a stamp and everything?"

"Yes, Dixie."

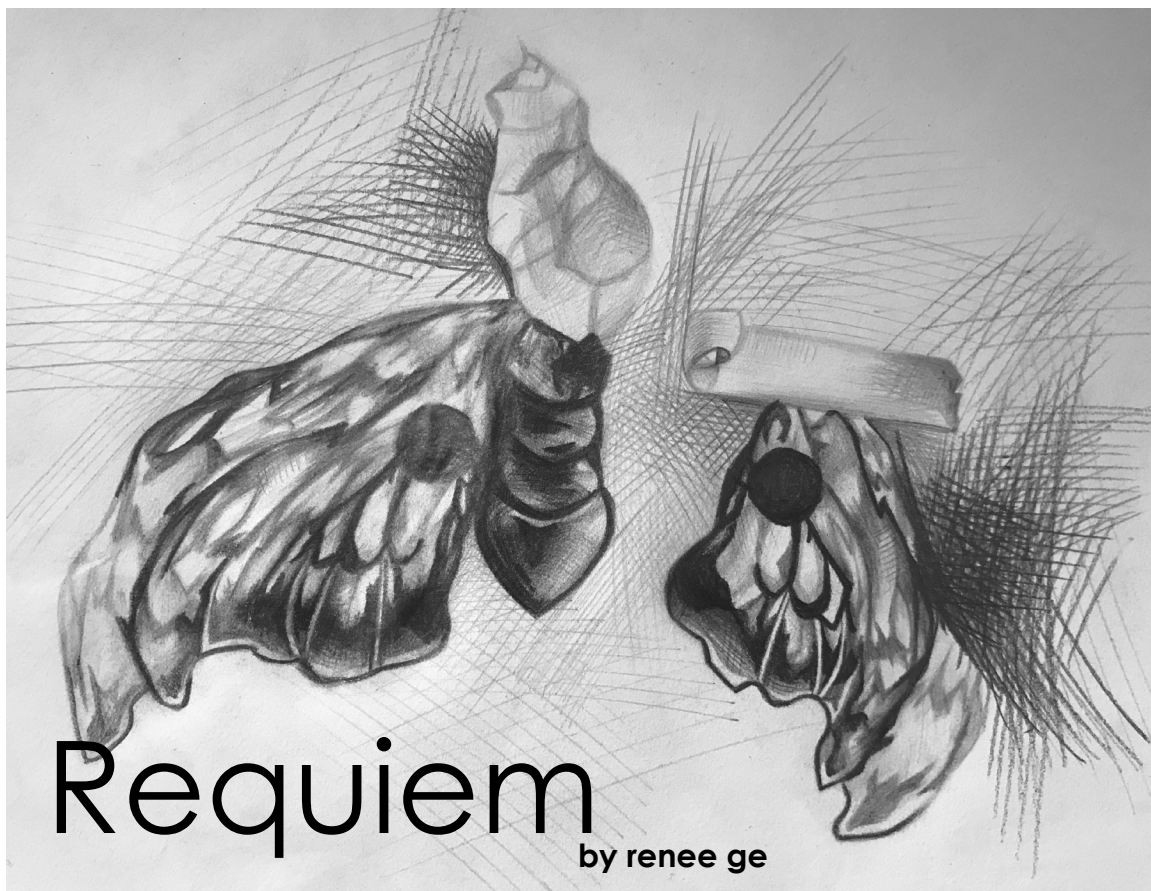
Dixie flung himself against Maman and hugged her. "Thank you, Maman!"

She regards him sadly for a second before extending her hand. Dixie takes it. "Let's go, Dixie."

She leads him out the door and down the hallway. And as the door swings shut, a sign with a red circle flutters down to the ground, the words printed sad and haunting.

Vacant.

the end



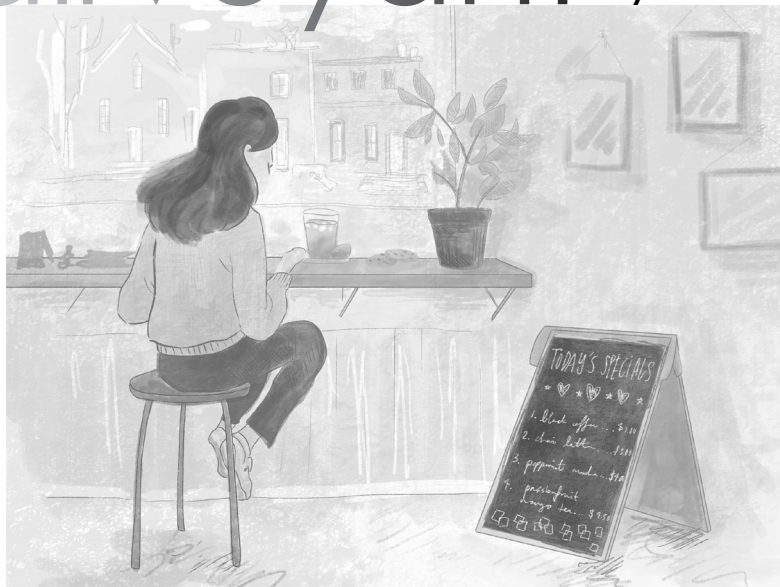
Requiem

by renee ge

Get up. Watch the boy
 peek into the shoebox. See him twitch his head side to side.
 Notice the electric lights, stealing from the dying sun and
 carving out the ridges of his face. Here's a silly thought: reach out and check
 if the dark side of his cheek is solid or not.
 You shouldn't be here. You should be outside,
 playing tag in the fields, climbing up the slide to watch the sun set.
 There's a place a few blocks from your house—you went there when you were very young—
 you had lost your shoe in the rain, and the street lights had streaked across the puddles,
 you had found it beside a great red tree with soft bark you could tear off and
 the boy will reach inside and pull out the cocoon. He will tear into it. Pretend you don't
 see it dripping off his hands. The half-moth will crawl
 along the bottom of the shoebox. Look away as the wing comes off. When the boy
 scotch-tapes the wing back to the twitching body, laugh.

Clairvoyant

by ethan lin



how about saying that i'm not interested in going to the party. Claire blinks.

She sees a flurry of events yet to come. A disappointed “Oh, uh, alright then” as Alice goes back to work on the physics lab. The puddle of eraser scraps growing as the words and numbers on Claire’s lab sheet refuse to line up. Kaden doing that thing again, where he stretches his finger across the bustling room to turn off the lights and snickers to himself. The ensuing chorus of groans. The intercom delivering that last, relieving chime of the day. The teacher’s whiskers waving up and down as he wishes a good weekend to the class that is already out the door. Alice muttering something about her mom picking her up, as she turns away from Claire, from the path they had taken to walk home every day. The casual “Ahaha, okay, see ya” barely masking the hitch in her voice, a black constrictor wrapping around Claire’s heart.

okay, so i'm definitely not going with that. it has

to be perfect. how about saying i have a dentist appointment so i can't go. Claire blinks again.

Another flurry. “Again? Ah, don’t worry about it, it’s okay.” A fake smile. A swelling sea of black dust.

A flick, a snicker. A “Goddammit, Kaden.” A chime. A “Have a good — oh, they left already.”

An excuse. A chest crushed.

no no no, dammit, what else, how about —

“Claire? Yo, are you there? Never mind, just forget it.” Alice turns away.

Claire’s guts collapse and fold, tumbling and twisting. not again. She puts her head in her hands, wishing with all her heart that she could have just said “yes.” Back then, it would have been a no-brainer. Back before her superpower manifested. Some people got cat ears, fire breath, or even the ability to control gravity.

Claire got crippling anxiety.

* * *

The chalkboard menu of the little coffee place

“Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.” —Søren Kierkegaard

screams “hipster,” with its artsy flourishes and distinct aura of pretentiousness. The various items written in cursive swim across the dark-green sea, drawing Claire’s gaze. Dozens of options, written with smooth, white lines and all equally tempting. They reach out at her, invisible tendrils extended, each promising that they will be exactly what she needs. A tired “Next” drifts from the barista with eyes ringed by dark circles and round glasses and the line shuffles forward.

Claire bites her lip, eyes darting between the choices.

black coffee? Blink. *mmm, no.* The white tentacle connected to that item is severed, and dissipates.

chai latte? Blink. *eugh, who drinks this crap?* Another tendril shrivels into nothingness.

peppermint mocha? *it’s, like, april, what the hell?* Blink. *okay, it’s not bad, but no.* The tendril retracts, disappearing into the chalkboard.

passionfruit mango tea? Blink. *yes, this is it.* Every other tendril is now gone, the victor dancing across the chalkboard, making its victory lap.

Claire orders, a self-satisfied gleam in her eyes as she takes a sip, this time for real.

perfect.

* * *

Claire’s eraser rubs against her now-worn lab sheet again, purging a slightly misshapen number from existence.

Being able to predict the outcomes of her actions with a blink of an eye was a blessing at first. Helped her find the perfect drink to get, gave her the perfect words to say when she wanted to ask that guy out. The Claire without her superpower was only good enough. Good enough wasn’t enough.

Another imperfect word disappears into

black dust.

But the awkward pauses before answers to simple questions dragged longer and longer, the blinking faster and faster, as she flipped through potential actions like a dinner menu as a waiter approaches. It became obvious. People pointed, people laughed. Each blink showing her another futile choice as well as holding back the welling tears. But she couldn’t stop, she had to be perfect. And if she couldn’t be perfect when others were around, then she avoided being around others.

Her eraser is gone now, the vast ocean of scraps on the table is all that remains.

The lights fade, the *deja vu* sets in.

The snicker, the groans.

The same groans that erupted from her friends when they missed the bus again because she always spent too much time figuring out what to have for break-

fast. She doesn’t want to lose any more friends.

The chime, the unheard farewell.

The same unheard farewell that she had given the last time her friends left for a party. The last party they had invited her to.

The excuse.

The same excuse she had heard so many times before, the bitter end to so many friendships before. The barrage of memories pound against her skull, a dull drumbeat. If this is the cost of perfection, she doesn’t want to be perfect anymore. She takes a deep breath, and turns to face Alice’s disappearing figure.

“Alice, wait.” Claire watches as she stops. “I... I’m sorry. I want to go to the party.”

Alice turns around, a familiar warmth in her eye, and they share their first smile in a long time.

Good enough.

“But the awkward pauses before answers to simple questions dragged longer and longer, the blinking faster and faster, as she flipped through potential actions like a dinner menu as a waiter approaches.”

something different

by akshara taraniganty

The room is about half-full when she arrives. Her eyes naturally drift to the unoccupied desk in the corner, but she forces herself to sit in the center of the room. Students are beginning to file in around her, and the room grows louder and louder with the sounds of gossip and laughter and conversation that she wants to be a part of.

She quickly realizes, however, that teenagers do not love change. All eight seats around her are occupied, and almost everyone is turned away from her. This isn't easy even when everyone's nice, she thinks. And nobody's nice here.

She'd planned this. She doesn't want this to be like before. This is the last chance she has to be accepted somewhere. Several articles on social skills had told her everything about forming friendships, but it's hard for her to believe them right now.

Her plan was simple. First, she'd wait for someone to talk to her, and she'd start a conversation. She'd joke about her old school and act like everything was perfect, trying to ignore every time she tried to say something and the words wouldn't come. The silent, judgemental looks and whispers that always seemed to be about her. The lunch periods where everybody laughed and joked while she sat alone. Every time that she ran away and took comfort in the bathroom, sobbing uncontrollably until she calmed down. Her record of unexcused absences because school was sometimes just too much and the bathroom was the only safe place. She'd ignore everything, and maybe then she could forget.

After she started this conversation, she'd imply that she was new and lonely and needed a friend group. If the person didn't pick up on it, she'd ask to join them. Either way, she'd find herself with a new group. Then, she'd joke with

them, adapt to their sense of humor, and work toward being fully accepted.

When she made friends, she'd expand her horizons, maybe join clubs or try out for the softball team. She'd keep her head up high, finally feeling confident. Then she would've finally beaten the monster that ran through her head. Then she could be the person she'd always wanted to be: strong, confident, and someone.

She takes a deep breath. It's not that hard, she thinks. Smile. Be friendly. She exhales, and smiles at the girl to her right. The girl's eyes meet hers, but as she prepares to say "Hi," the other girl turns to somebody behind her and starts an animated conversation.

Another opportunity wasted. What if the rest of the day continues like this? The plan will fail. Of course it will. She's not friendly enough, not interesting enough, not approachable enough. It's not even worth trying. And although she tries to hold them inside, the tears start to come.

Not now, not today, she tells herself. It's okay. It's okay.

But it's not okay. It won't be.

Calm down, she tells herself. She breathes in, out. In, out. But it doesn't seem to be doing anything.

The bell rings, and the class quiets down. She forces herself to stop crying, but she can't bring herself to listen as the teacher starts to talk.

The girl to her right doesn't turn back to look at her when class ends. Dejected, she picks up her bag and walks with her head down. Tears silently stream down her cheeks as she scolds herself for even crying in the first place.

As she tries to find her next class, she notices the girls' bathroom. Relief floods through her. A safe place, she thinks as she speedwalks inside.

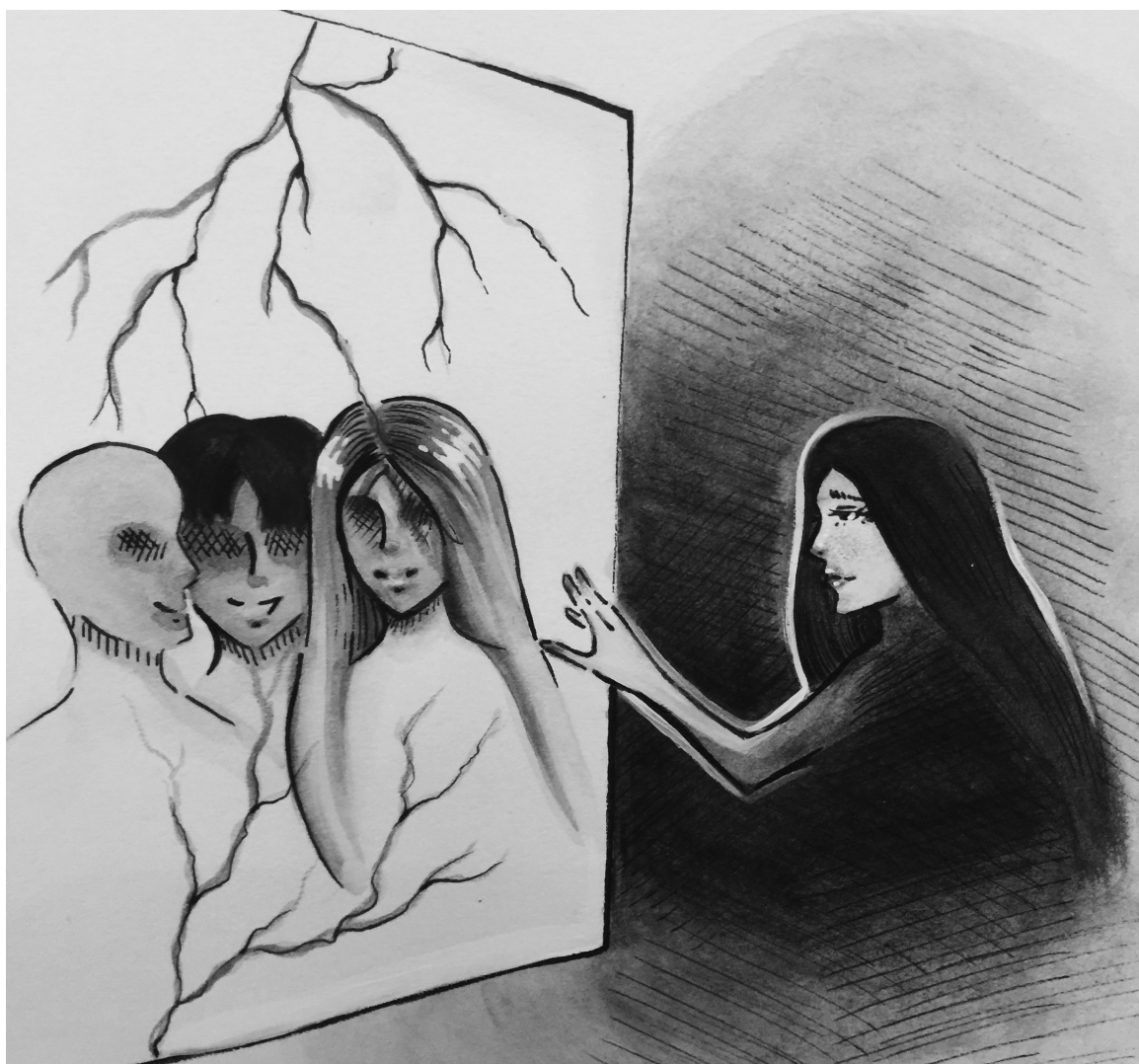
As soon as she closes the door, a sob escapes

from her. It feels good to cry after an hour of holding it in. It feels good to worry without having to hide it.

She lifts her head up, looking at her reflection in the mirror as she wipes off her tears. It's okay, she tells herself. You're safe now. Her heartbeat starts to slow, and her tears stop. She has an urge to stay in the bathroom for the entire day, avoiding every possible interaction possible. It'll be so easy, she thinks. To stay. To do what she's always done best—blend in. Vanish.

But as she starts to calm down, her chest aches for something different. A part of her, a part that was never there before, wants her vision to come true. For as long as she tries, she may never find friends. She may never be the person she wants to be. But there's no use staying here in the bathroom, preventing her dream from ever coming true. Maybe this time, it's worth a try.

She breathes in and out once more and heads to her next class.



Mirages

by flora huang

Mirages are the dreams of
an earthly wanderer, who journeys
through time and space alone,
appearing only when the sun has set for the day.

The wanderer chases this vision, undeterred
by its elusive nature,
guided solely through the
illusions ahead.

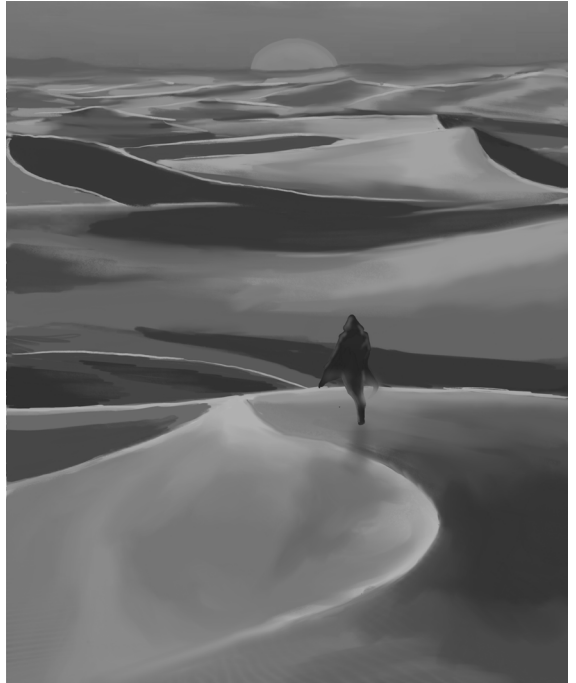
Through the overcast night the wanderer
journeys on, grasping
the imaginary rays of light
in this dream.

Wistfully absent from reality,
you follow the
horizon, longing for a
final destination, one fanciful and
never attainable.

You reach for the
edge of the world, where the
overcasting clouds of
your paths begin from misty
distortions of reality.

The images dissipate
under your touch
edging away, sifting through
mortal fingers, drifting
back towards the skyline.

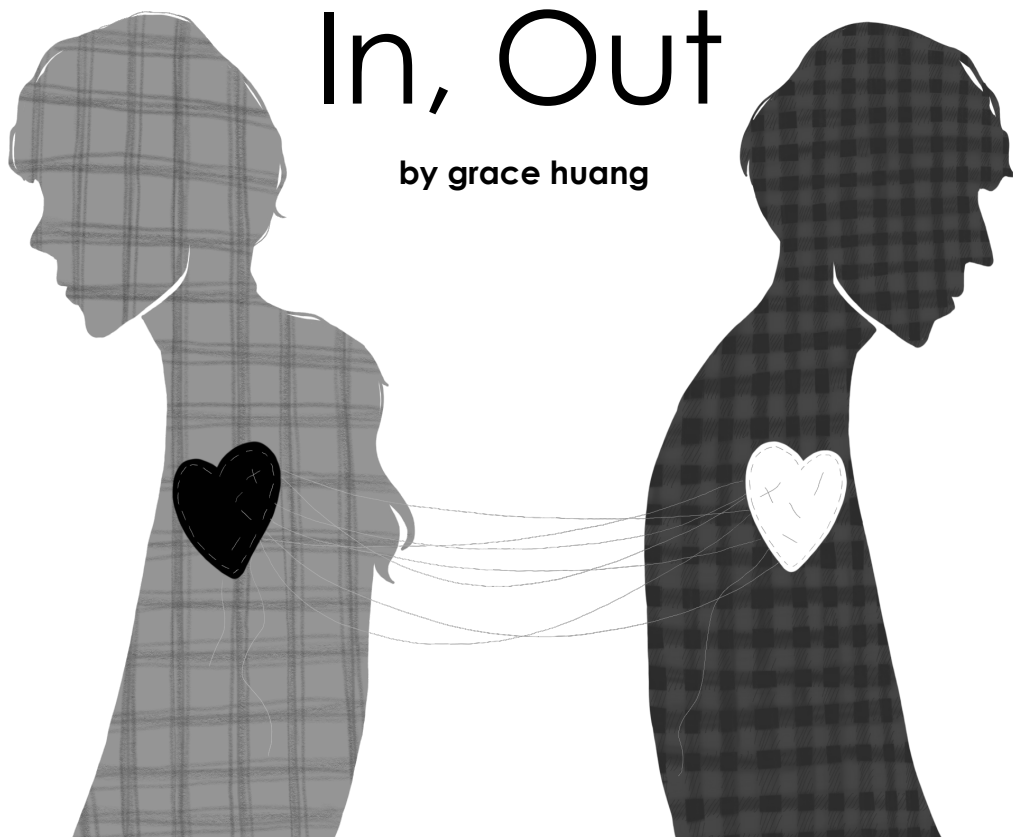
As wanderers ourselves, we realize
the horizon is
a mirage, ephemeral and cursory
in the face of the journey of
our lives



"Who cares if we don't see the sun shine ever again? I want you more than any blue sky."—Morishima Hodaka

In, Out

by grace huang



She never knew what to say when it came to him.

Yes, they had been family friends as children. Yes, they had gone to the same schools all their lives—from preschool all the way to high school. Yes, they had met every summer at Marianne’s house for their parents to spend all night dealing cards. Yes, they had known each other for a long, long time.

But what could she, of all people, say about him?

* * *

The conversation in seventh grade had started with her mom asking, “I haven’t heard from Clarion in a while. What’s he been up to?”

Marianne, in turn, had responded, “I don’t know. I don’t talk to him.”

“What? You don’t? I thought you guys were friends. I was talking to his mom the other day.

She said Clarion told her you guys see each other at school all the time.”

“I mean, we do. We just... don’t really talk.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing. We’re not really... friends.”

“Who said you guys aren’t friends?”

“Both of us.”

And then that conversation had ended, and Marianne had been left staring at her hands with a piercing pain in her stomach that was deeply uncomfortable.

* * *

Her hands twitched. She buried them deeper into her jacket pockets. They itched for something to hold, for something to do.

In, out. Back, forth. Push, pull.

She closed her eyes and let her fingers move

to the rhythm of the imaginary needle in her head.

Someone tugged at the top of Marianne's beanie. Marianne flinched away violently, eyes wide, and Aria started. "Whoa. Sorry."

"...It's fine," Marianne muttered, reaching a hand upwards and patting around where she felt Aria's fingers had latched on. "What were you trying to do?"

"There's a stray thread of yarn on top of your beanie. Didn't you say you just bought this?"

Marianne had finished knitting the beanie early this morning, had fallen asleep to the sound of an audience clapping and singing along while she cradled the beanie to her chest—her creation.

"Yeah... it came yesterday."

"It seems kind of low-quality, don't you think?"

Aria didn't know. Aria didn't know what she did. Aria didn't know what she made. Aria didn't know just how successful her work was.

Aria didn't know anything. There was a reason why Aria didn't know anything; there was a reason Marianne hadn't told her anything.

Marianne shrugged; when she opened her mouth to respond, she couldn't find her voice. In the end, she just shoved her hands behind her back and wove her fingers together.

(Lest they begin to push and pull again—piercing in and out.)

* * *

She knew where he liked to hang out, and who he liked to socialize with. Those yearly dinner parties with his parents reminded her more and more of it all—he was the one who humbly denied the extent of his accomplishments. He was the one who spoke words to inspire others. He was the one who enveloped others in hugs.

There was a reason they avoided each other any other time of the year. They were not two people who knew each other like the backs of their hands; they were not two people as perfect together as the sun and the moon.

She was just lucky she hadn't had to speak to

him all this time.

* * *

From the beginning, though, luck had never been on her side. Clarion ran into her three months before graduation—literally.

"Watch where you're going, will you, Mari?" She saw the way his eyes widened when he realized what he'd just called her, and her own heart beat harder in response.

"I'm sorry." Her gaze flickered to the tennis ball in his hands before it returned to his face. When had he grown so tall? Had he really grown that much in six months? Or had she just not noticed during those dinner parties, spent weaving in and out of her room for fabrics rather than food?

Clarion sighed. "Sorry. I didn't mean to sound so rude."

"...Don't worry about it," she murmured. She clutched her phone closer to her heart and walked around him. Even when she rounded the corner of the building, she could still feel his gaze on her—piercing her very soul.

He always had understood her the best.

* * *

"You know," Aria began one day in a tone that Marianne couldn't identify but knew she didn't like, "we haven't had a card game night in a while."

"I'm free on Friday night," Marianne offered after a moment of musing—of wondering if she really wanted to. Even speaking to her like this made Marianne weary. She never could pinpoint what it was. Just being with Aria was so... so—

"Ooh, maybe we should invite someone else. I know Harmony's free. Should we invite her? Or maybe... hm..."

Marianne tried not to flinch or wince. The already-frayed seams holding their friendship together seemed to tear apart even more.

* * *

Her fingers threaded through the loose

"In the end, you always go back to the people who were there in the beginning."—anonymous

strands of her hair to no avail. She stared at herself in the mirror and heaved out a sigh.

The door to the lounge opened. She glanced over her shoulder, and found herself meeting Clarion's inquisitive gaze. She turned her eyes away instinctively. There was something about his gaze that made her feel like she both belonged and didn't at the same time.

Like the loose thread at the end of a knot.

"...Can I help you?" Clarion asked in a soft voice. Marianne let her hands drop from her head and nodded wordlessly; she tried her best not to flinch when his fingers threaded through her hair. Despite her best efforts, she did. Clarion withdrew his hands, glancing down at her worriedly. "Sorry. Are you okay?"

"I'm okay... it's not your fault. You can keep going."

She watched on in silence; her gaze remained glued to the way Clarion's fingers wove through her hair effortlessly in a way she knew under a completely different context.

Over, under. Pull through. Over, under. Pull through.

"...Thanks," she murmured when he had finished, running a hand along the plait. She could still feel his deft fingers, pulling her hair together in a way she knew she never could. "I'm... bad at braiding my own hair."

"I know." He smiled. "You've always been." She stared at his hands, hovering over her shoulders, and didn't so much as flinch when he rested them there.

"...Maybe," she whispered under her breath, and found that she missed the warmth of his hands when he left.

* * *

Her door creaked open. She started up from where she was sitting on the floor, surrounded by fabric and ribbons, and scrambled to clean

it all up.

"It's just me," Clarion murmured, and she felt her hands still instinctively. Her heart still pricked with uncertainty. Still, she made no move to stop him as he navigated around her room before finally ending up beside her bed. "Can I...?"

"...Mhm." She continued to watch him, letting her hands fall into her lap. He laid back on her covers, staring up at the ceiling. "...Too much for you to handle?"

"They've been playing cards since we finished dinner. You know how my mom gets."

She did. Even here, tucked away in the furthest crevice of the house, she could still hear the howling laughter of their parents and the distant chattering of Clarion's siblings—especially his mother's hysterical screams and her father's boisterous laughs.

"I didn't mean to distract you. You can go back to... doing whatever you were doing."

"...It's fine," she murmured. "I wasn't doing much anyways." It wasn't a lie.

"You sure?" He turned to look at her. "I could—"

"No. It's fine."

Clarion kept his gaze on her for a moment before flopping back onto her bed. She watched him, an uncertain feeling bubbling in the bottom of her stomach. Finally, she found the strength to move her hands. She turned away and took up a random piece of fabric; pulling a piece of thread through a new needle, she began to sew.

Up and down, under and over.

Clarion sighed and rolled onto his side. Swallowing, she pushed the needle into the fabric—stopping it in its aimless track—and met his gaze.

"Stay in touch, okay?"

"...Okay," she murmured.

In, out. Back, forth. Push, pull.

The Counsel: A Conversation

by sophie guan

"Mr. Moreau? Are you with me?"

The long, slender fingers drumming the soft leather armrest paused, but only briefly, as the dark eyes snapped to focus. Opposite to him, the therapist sank into her armchair. A little farther behind her stood a wall, blank except for a plaque with her name—Mary Dubois—and her therapist certification. Lights bounced off the rims of her gold-framed optics as she adjusted them.

"If you don't mind," Ms. Dubois said, "I'm going to ask you some questions. Feel free to interrupt me at any time and navigate the conversation to where you need it to go." In her notebook, she started a new page. "So, Mr. Moreau, what brings you here today?"

"Counseling."

The fingers drumming the armrest stopped. A pregnant pause accompanied but it soon dissolved when the silence prolonged. She nodded, accepted the brevity, and gave him a quick glimpse of her white teeth behind a courteous smile. "Have you seen any other therapists before?" When he shook his head, she made a small note on her paper.

"You mentioned you are a lawyer." Her voice rang throughout the room like the solid toll of a church bell.

"Yes, but I'm not here as one. I'm here as a patient with an inquiry."

"Of course." She smiled pleasantly. "What seems to be the problem?"

The fingers picked up the rhythm again. Two floor lamps, one by each armchair, illuminated the faces of the room's two occupants. The thin veil of the curtain over the large glass window still left much of the nightscape visible. Beyond the window, the faint honking of the cars on the

roads far down weaved in and out of the interlude of the two occupants' conversation.

"I've been hearing things," replied Moreau. He turned from the window. "My dead mother's voice."

Amid making another note on her paper, she stopped and looked at him. "What does she say?"

"She asks me why she's dead."

"If you don't mind me asking, how did she pass?"

"Beaten to death by my drunk father."

Her face, for a brief moment, contorted and she flinched. To cover it up, she searched his face but found nothing. "When did you start hearing her?"

Moreau closed his eyes for a moment, collecting his memories even though he needed no recollection. A chill crept up his body and slowly dragged his curved lips downwards until they were straight lines again. Footsteps in the hallway outside the closed door penetrated the wood. Muffled voices like the murmured prayers of the churchgoers seeped into the room—then they recoiled, jerked back when Moreau opened his eyes.

"Last friday when I took on my latest case."

"Tell me more, Mr. Moreau, if that's alright with you."

When Moreau blinked, his dark lashes drew curtains over his dark eyes and their brief movements gave birth to flickering shadows across his smooth features. The hand on the armrest moved, and the arm went along with it. Its owner settled it on his lap and laced his fingers together. The movement drew a response from Ms. Dubois as she too sat back in her armchair. The light rescinded from her face. She stayed

where the soft glow of the lamp did not fully reach her eyes and waited for the man's quiet voice to resume.

"My client is a young woman charged with the murder of her father," Moreau began, his voice expanding the dim, quiet room. "When I first met her, all parts of her exposed body—her neck, arms, face, her feet, the bottom of her feet—were streaked with dirt and blood. She claimed she was forced to live in a cave-like basement by her father whom she described as a habitually abusive drunk. However, her statement differed drastically from the glowing commentaries of her father's colleagues and friends. The police searched her and her father's house but did not find anything resembling a basement.

"At the station, the woman claimed self-defense and ripped up her shirt to show cigarette burns on her arms and welts on her back. Her display made everyone uncomfortable, except for the chief and me."

Ms. Dubois asked, "Why were you not uncomfortable?"

"I'm a lawyer, Ms. Dubois. I have seen a lot of things." Softly, Moreau breathed out. "The disorganized marks on her back stood out to me: there is no order; there's just chaos—chaos unfitting of the neat, remarkably well-acquainted businessman her father was.

"I have my doubts, but you must know that it was her story, and not her appearance, that had me agreeing to this case. So while I have doubts, I also admire her—my own father was very much like hers in all aspects: strict, smart, well-polished, a people's man, and a liar. His smiles were so charming that my mother had once described herself as the luckiest woman alive."

At that moment of quick pause, Ms. Dubois

entered. "You said you admire her. Why?"

"I admire her boldness; patricide is not something a person wakes up and decides to do. It must've taken her an unimaginable amount of courage."

"Why do you consider patricide a courageous act, Mr. Moreau?"

The man smiled a little at the disguised disapproval and tentatively lifted a finger. "Perhaps you associate courage with a certain degree of heroics or righteousness, Ms. Dubois, but, to me, it's merely confrontations despite fear."

The woman made a note on her paper. "That's an interesting take on the word, Mr. Moreau."

"Not more interesting than traditional," he replied. "May I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"Would you drown your husband?"

Ms. Dubois narrowed her eyes and her pen didn't move on the paper. Moreau watched her

thumb moving slowly toward her ring finger, caressing the silver vow gently. "It is unimaginable—but let's turn back to you, Mr. Moreau. Why do you admire her courage? Have you considered...patricide?"

"Many times, Ms. Dubois, ever since my mother's death. But, outside this room, I'm a lawyer; I'm supposed to abide by the laws." Moreau smiled and shrugged his stiff shoulders.

Then, he continued. "Given the resemblance between her and my father, I naturally have quite the empathy for my client. She did not believe me. After all, she has only seen me as an adult in suits and not a young child in rags. But she was more willing when I showed her my father's reminders on my arms. I told her I would clear her name but I know I should not have made any promises."



"Why not?"

"Because it gives her power over me."

"Do you prefer to be the one in control, Mr. Moreau?"

"I'd like to be in control of myself. Nothing more, nothing less." Moreau glanced at his hands briefly. He clenched them before letting go, the crescent moons in his palm lingered like an aftertaste. "The problem with this case is that there's no evidence against her father besides her claim—but nobody trusts a delusional woman who spends most of her time castigating her father. She insists that there is a basement but all the blueprints of the mansion indicate that, besides the wine cellar, there's nothing else matching her descriptions.

"I went to investigate the mansion because I needed to make my own observations. Out of curiosity, I went into the woods behind the mansion, as many of the officers had done. But what was different was that I went farther. Half a mile from the mansion, I found an abandoned shack filled with empty beer cans and wine bottles—the police, even as we speak, haven't found the place yet. There were cigarettes scattered everywhere. At the corner, there was a small statue of Christ." A small chuckle escaped Moreau. "Imagine my surprise, Ms. Dubois, to find religion at such a sacrilegious place. There was also a whip coiled around the statue; it was matted with dry blood. A quick look around the shack confirmed much of my client's descriptions. But there was one thing that puzzled me."

"...What?" Ms. Dubois asked but found her voice coming out more like a hoarse whisper in the hollow chamber.

"Besides my intrusion, there's only one set of footprints in and out. One pair of boots, one tattered coat. A feminine touch to the place. Everything is shorter than her father's eye level. You must imagine my surprise when I realized that. It makes sense; the early people considered whipping themselves as a way of purging sins."

A pause. "Are you saying she did...everything to herself?"

"Not everything. People like her, people like

me, we don't let things go that easily. To get what we deserve, some people take control of it themselves but some people, like her, lose control and become trapped."

"So she thought—"

"No, it wasn't just a hallucination; it was a flashback, a revisit. She was trapped in a cycle of her childhood nightmares. The alcohol and cigarettes found in the house would all point to her as the indulger." Moreau leaned his arm back atop the armrest. The rhythm of his fingers' drumming fell apart in discord.

"This will prove her guilty of her father's murder."

"Indeed."

"So what did you do?"

"I rearranged the shack," Moreau said as if it was logical. "I made everything taller to match the height of her father; I burned the bottles and dropped a few cigarettes from her father's ashtray that was in his bedroom; I laid pieces of his garments where necessary. I had an advantage, because I knew clients and people like him. It was easy to recreate my client's *cauchemar*."

"After I'd done what was necessary to the shack, I had some time to think. And it was then I heard my mother's voice again, saying why she is dead." He paused, breathed, and Ms. Dubois caught the quick glint of excitement before his blink washed it away. "That was when I understood my mother's statement."

His gaze roamed the dim room and settled on the still curtains. Her eyes followed in seek of his quiet answer. In the background, the clock ticked. The honking of the cars broke through the glass windows and drowned out the ticking clock. He turned to watch the blinking eyes and smiled.

"May I ask you a question?"

All sounds went out in a deafening silence. The cars didn't honk; the wind didn't whisper; the lamp stayed still. Then, tap—tap—tap, went the fingers on the leather armrest. Soft, innate thuds rushed by both of their ears and became the interlude.

"What does my mother want from me?"

"We have all a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person can be." —Jane Austen

Scrapbook Dreams

by lillian fu

Sometimes, I will take a breath of clean air
and be reminded of open plains
and fair-haired earth, a sky Demeter painted
while thinking about a nest of robin eggs,
how I waded through tall grass swaying
and walked to the horizon.

Sometimes, I will stare out the kitchen window
and remember curtains of viridian willow boughs
hiding crumbling stone steps, steeping
with thousand-year roots in Guanyin's tea kettle,
how I climbed that stair to the willow's trunk
and faced the phoenix's soft sun.

Once, I woke on top of a mountain capped with snow,
and all before me was light, an overexposed
photo of the world above the clouds
captured through eyes stinging with cold wind.
I raised my arms up like a pirate ship's figurehead
and became my own stolen breath.

Once, I met a girl with lips folded from peach blossoms,
and she smiled in a way that squeezed cherries
against the bulbs of her cheeks, heat in mine,
her dark eyes two sea-smoothed stones.
I let her take me by the hand and lead me to the bay,
where she laughs, kisses me, and evaporates.

Always, I sink into waking as slowly as I can,
and cherish the lingering moments
that find home in the pockets of my soul.



(Borrowed Love)

by william zong

I.
[The surge [returns by
[the darkness of dime-
store sun, my lost mind
swallowed by the waves.]

My mouth adjourns; with
[the gatekeeper gone,
the fireflies [arrive
on monologue trains.

So I [thief faded
paper and light from
the moon, [the black ink
bewitching the sun.

The moon is my mind's
master;] I turn off
and on, [cursing my
volume of the tides.]

II.
I'm hiding under the table
wishing

that I'd step out but I don't.
The warm water keeps rising
and
I'm starting to drown — — I'll
never; I won't

step down from my
mind's cathedral. []
Take your time
to grab me by the throat.
]

III.
Just like the seed I wait to
grow, moistened
in the cold darkness of dew.

How much I want to live
and love like
every day is my
last. [Yet to
live there must be something
left to love.]

Open the gate;
I could care for you.

IV.
My arms are open
for you now,
waiting for the river to turn.
[Anywhere

it goes, I will come
too] — — There is nothing
of concern
in this world of adaptation.

Open my mind and let me
learn.

V.
Who would've known
that the World had a
magical sensibility? You'll
amaze yourself [half-awake

half-asleep]
discovering
me. Like a spool

of thread I unravel to be lost.
You're no God;
I am but a fool.

VI.

To me here in my chest
the fly calls run [endless
above winter's wonder laid,
hidden] in a hidden place.

There lies the sensibility,
[deserts of vast eternity.
No fate, world can turn it dark
] when nature sings in lark.

I look at you;
you look at me.

We laughcry until our eyes
fill the ocean around our love.

[How small paradise is to be
enough.
]

VII.

Darling,

[be the closest we
can get, sole to sole
boko-maru style,
better than any]

love.

VIII.

Follow me to the line,
hand in hand, to claim
every field, every
mountain, every river, every
wandering [every]

soul — — Each and every
being
[united in peace]
shall be saved.

My life becomes my reverie.

IX.

But [reverie be blessed,
a dream cannot self-
sustain in harsh reality.]
our world is dying

[that much is true]
and you and I are
all dying too. [The grass is
brown and the seas are
bloodred.]

Can you hear its cries?
[They fill

my mind

every day and night.]

Our world is dying.
[Then, now for eternity
's sake we shall join our
hands one last time and

enter the gate inside.]

X.

Let me live in your eyes,
[unbiased

by desire] basked in a beauty
greater than Life:
the key to every
open door. I'm so

lonely
to be this full
and so lost to be this whole.
Take I for eye;
undo me to me.

XI.
You promised
I was the one who was crazy, [
every number tallied for
a score, every body

you ran over
for a game]
—I swear that you swore
to never
leave me in the dark alone

I'll listen to you
just once more.

XII.
Commit
to making me happy and we
can be stronger
than ever.

[I know you
loved before I met you
but forget.] Pull the lever
to open an old lover's chest.

You had it before;
but I never.

MAHAKUMBH

by pranav mishra

Do you believe in God, Ma asks me, her oars peeling the surface of the Sangam
As though it were a custard apple; our boat suspended in the frothy August heat

Like a jeweled pot of butter from a temple's ceiling. Do you believe in God;
She says, tracing the henna on my fingertips. The 5 a.m. fishermen heave seven nets,
Seven perfect teardrops, swollen with dying life: thrashing, throbbing, thrashing;
Perhaps I should tell them I'm vegetarian? The sun inflates, the sky is awash

With curd and sugar and molasses. Do you believe in God; she says
Watching wordlessly as I search the brackish cesspool for my father, his ashes

In orbit about the vessel. The people arrive, the drums, the beggars, the priests:
Their noise baffles the water, boat swooning like a violin. They cluster
At the banks, an algal bloom of silken clothes, and I sigh at their stench.

Some wade naked into the water and shriek for God,
Some drink the ashen water, and weep for God,
Some lower crimson lanterns into the water, heavenly spheres,
For God, for God, for God, they say. Somewhere, on the shore they startle a peacock;

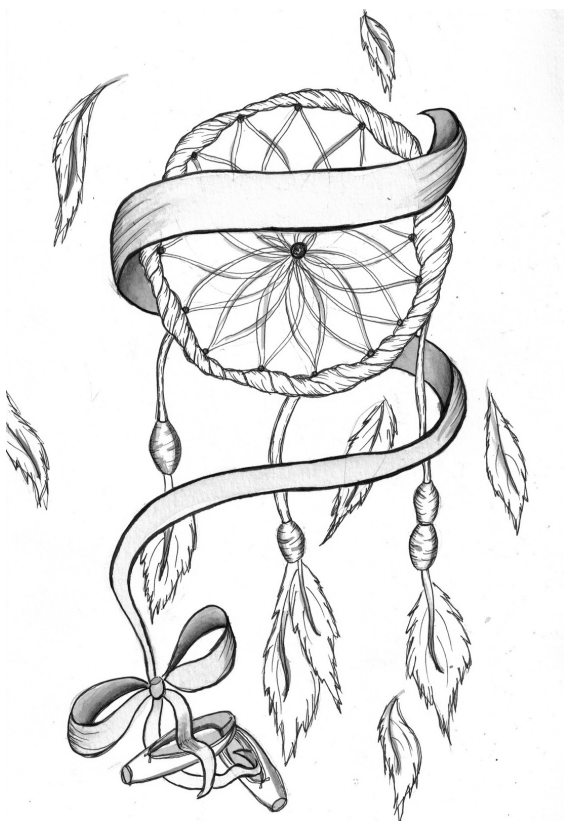
He burgeons and swells like a prayer, a dewy unripe lotus. Then the seagulls, like
Envious, lesser cousins take furious flight, raining vomit and feces upon the water. I taste

My mother's unrelenting gaze from beneath her dupatta veil, fourteen eyes,
The henna glows like blood on my fingertips.



The Dream-catcher

by kaylia mai



Spin. Thrust. A midnight-blue ribbon flares out above the pond. Jump. Extend the arms. Land with bent legs, and remember not to lose balance. Fly with the ribbons. Whirl them fast so the sun will reflect off the water to throw dancing lights across them.

Watch out for the parent! The parent is the noose. The parent is watching, scowling. The mother's voice cuts the dance.

"Say it again. x squared — plus y squared —"

Respond. Reject. Quickly.

"I don't remember."

"Oh, put those strips of bedsheet down, Lua. How are you learning when your waving your

arms like a lunatic —"

With a huff, Lua drops the cloth on the sand, walks to the mother by the porch, and stumbles over the wrong formula. She stands beneath her judgement, and her mother's disappointed gaze is distinctly familiar from long tutoring sessions with an open textbook and an empty sheet of paper. Lua knows the truth. Disappointment is just the travelling cloak for grief.

Another painful hour passes. Her mind works no quicker, and it ends the same way every lesson does.

"We should stop for today. Maybe try again tomorrow."

The sky is dark. The sun has passed its last messages over the sky, and the stars have risen to carry the light. Water splashes and retreats against the sand, eternally repeating. The free sky plants whimsy in Lua's heart.

"Could you read me a story?"

Lua picks up one of the books from the stack on the porch, and hands it to the mother.

"I've read you this before — you won't learn from it."

Lua insists knowing the mother is too exhausted to argue further, so the mother takes the book, and settles onto the porch.

Here is the legend of the sorcerer Solis:

The monarch was furious upon discovering the walls of his kingdom splattered with an array of black, yellow, and blue, for it made the kingdom less intimidating to foreigners. He sent troops to search the kingdom, and found the paint-splattered culprit in the town square.

"You have been found with the paint of the crime! I decree you guilty, and sentence you to a lifetime in the dungeons." the monarch cried gleefully.

"You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one." — John Lennon

Solis disagreed, for the painting was incomplete. Yet they knew that the monarch was prideful and loved subservience, so they cried, "Oh great Lord, please! I have been so foolish! Kill me if you must, but first allow me to scrub the paint from the walls."

The monarch was pleased, and sent Solis to the wall with cleaning supplies and a few armed guards.

Solis whispered a few words in an incomprehensible tongue, reached into themselves and scooped out a piece of their mind. They then folded it tightly into the paint, hidden from the world. The guards saw Solis' inexplicable actions, restrained him, and threw him into the dungeons.

That would have been the end of the story, if not for the beauty of the painting. The townspeople saw the painting, with paint that the monarch cannot erase no matter how hard anyone scrubbed, and in the secret, illegal portion of their hearts they loved it. They whispered their own desires to it in the dark of night, and imagined their lives as yellow candles encompassed by beautiful strokes of blue and purple.

The mind in the painting listened. It listened and imagined, until the people and painting became one.

The monarch saw this and was outraged, for the people's wild thinking had become difficult to control. He sent for Solis, and demanded that they undo the spell that makes the paint permanent.

"I will show you." Solis declared.

They go to the wall, and Solis ripped the paint off. Then they casted it into the sky, and the yellow globes and blue rivers cover the world with stories.

Solis laughed, "Now you see you cannot win, -"

"-for the dreams are immortal, and that can never be washed away. I am only the catcher that builds dreams." Lua says.

"Don't be foolish." mother says, "I've read you your story, now go to bed. You'll learn math again early tomorrow."

"Solis laughed, 'Now you see you cannot win,

-for the dreams are immortal, and that can never be washed away. I am only the catcher that builds dreams.' Luna says."

Lua nods, heads into the house, and settles into bed while her mother turns off the lights and leaves. Abruptly, she realizes her ribbons are missing, and, looking out the window, spots them lying by the pond. She quietly scuttles out of bed, out the window, and scurries to the pond to pick them up.

The water shivers, circles expanding from where the ribbon had lain, growing larger the further it travels from the shore. The stars reflected in the water dance as each ripple passes over it, and Lua watches, mesmerized. A song

of colors engulf her heart, and her dress flows in the wind like a kite pulling against its string. Lua walks in the water, and Solis walks in the air above her. They are lighter than air, lighter than the magic of an old tale, and Earth is larger than either can see. It stretches before them and around them, in the smooth ripples of the water and the empty night,

spilling out its tendrils of fate, but they stand in the eye of the storm. Untouchable.

In a burst of sudden elation, Lua cries to the night, "I don't want to do math. I want to be a dancer, the best dancer ever."

The night listens. The stars whisper a never-ending song of pain and exhilaration, and all the past and future is still. The stars shine directly into the eye of the storm and through it rebounds the echoing call of a once-legacy, knowing that Solis is listening and knowing.

But the sharp call of the mother is louder.

Lua drops her ribbons and walks away from the pond. The night is silent again. The current carries the ribbons into the depths of the lake, where Solis's reflection is waiting, waiting for a dreamer to find them again.

Corporate by michelle hui Gods

Click-clack. Click-clack. As she brushed past towards the glass-walled cubicles, her high cheekbones, ruby lipstick, and noir heels made my hot Cheeto stained sweatpants look pitiful. Was her perfume the smell of being a self-made CEO? Was that Herme Birkin that she swung so nonchalantly the accolades of a woman who had conquered the corporate world?

Ripping me back into my side of the bank,

the teller spoke with as voice as monotone as his bank glaze, "Ma'am— Excuse me, Ma'am—" He slid the flimsy, gray plastic across his desk, "— Here's your new credit card. Just remember to deposit money before you start wasting it on clothes and shoes."

I blinked myself out of my haze and took a look around. My side of the bank was not filled with Keurig coffee machines and sophisticated



"There are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy and the tired." — F. Scott Fitzgerald

women. Rather the smell of watered-down coffee permeated my bank teller's office; archaic black long-socks (the ones that businessmen bought en masse to avoid the dreadfully inefficient task of matching socks) stretched too far above his pasty-white ankles; and most abominable of all, thin black-rimmed glasses rested on his sinking face. He looked as if the slug monster from Monsters Inc. had a long-lost twin brother.

But, this dreary corporate dealing left no dent on my dreams of adulthood. A new checking account. A new job. A new self. I could not control the impish smile that spread across my face.

Grabbing my newly minted card, I practically skipped past the windows of sunken, grey bank tellers and out the confines of the faceless bank. I stole a last glance at the ruby-lipsticked woman before crossing the threshold towards my journey of becoming a self-made woman.

* * *

With my first step onto the glossed tiled floors, from red tarts, sweet pea croissants, to hand-pressed orange juice, I take in the overpriced array of pastries. The sounds of foaming lattes are melodious. At this trendy cafe, I take my second leap into freedom.

"Hi— I'm the— the new hire. Where should I put my stuff down?"

"Oh! I'm supposed to train you. My name's Hana. Follow me!" She stumbles her way towards me and guides me behind the bread ovens. Hidden behind the counters churning out glossy cakes is the cramped corner for us minimum wage employees. Lining the walls are cheap plastic hooks for us to hang our stained uniforms and torn bags.

"Who's leaving the door open," Snaps one

of the managers, "And who isn't sweeping the crumbled macarons? Our rat problem keeps getting worse and worse!"

Suddenly, my eyes catch on the mildewing rat traps hidden under the metal sinks. I secretly breathed a sigh of relief when I saw that the rat traps remained undisturbed. Despite their naked, grotesque tails, I felt a comradeship with these rats. They were like vigilantes, crawling through walls and antagonizing the entity called corporate. "Go! Go! Go! Escape into those walls!" I mentally cheer on my little friends before I am whipped away by Hana to the self-serve coffee table.

"It's time for you to change the coffee. It's gotta happen every two hours."

"But it's still full. No one has drank from it yet. Isn't it kind of a waste?"

"It's just the rules. It's just something we make the trainees do."

Feelings of absurdity wash over me. But nonetheless, I must get paid. Steam radiates as the warm chocolate-colored coffee vanishes into the abyss of the drains. I brew another three-gallon batch, indistinguishable from the piping-hot one that I had just poured out.

I am bombarded with work. Go to the back and scrub these grills. We used to have janitors, but corporate wants us to mop and clean the bathroom now too. No one ever buys the soup, just pour it into the trash. Can you rinse the containers? And repeat it with the other two. This shipment macarons hardened in the freezer— can you throw them out?

As nine p.m. hits, us workers beeline to lock doors and excitedly anticipate returning to the comforts of our corporate-free homes. I watch a gape as the other three begin to move through their practiced motions of pulling out the trash and sweeping trays upon trays of bread into the abyss. Amber croissants, hand-tossed salads, sunrise egg salads— none are spared. Every

color vanishes across the horizon into the black-hole.

"Wait— wait. Can't we take it home? I feel so guilty."

Without missing a beat from their nightly bread massacre, "Don't worry. We all felt bad when we first started, but it's just corporate rules," they chime in unison. Corporate fired three people last week for taking bread home.

You don't have to feel bad, the homeless come to the trash and pick it out later anyway."

* * *

My body hurts. My legs ache. At least my wallet is half full. It's finally payday — maybe my wallet will make it to seventy-five percent full today. I wishfully check my bank account hoping for a couple of extra dollars misplaced by the banker.

Yelling to no one except my cracked apartment walls and cockroach roommates, "Wait, why is my balance even lower than before? Where did my five hours of arduous scrubbing go!"

On my bank history it lists:

Credit Card Annual Fee: -\$90.00

A hefty hidden fee for this flimsy grey card? How am I supposed to pay for gas now? That's more than I make in a day. Another fine print on the terms and conditions that no one

reads. But if I call in and complain, it's going to be my fault for not reading carefully.

I'm stuck in the running wheels of earning and spending. How do you scamper your way out of the indifferent devil's jaws? You can't fight corporate beasts that have no face. And among the corporate Gods was the ruby-lip-sticked woman— born with a key to the other side of the glass divide at that bank.

Suddenly I could only recall the color of her red lip-stick as bloody. The echo of her clacking resonated over the broken backs of her laboring workers. The ten-thousand dollar cowhide bag that she swung so carelessly morphed in a sack woven with rat pelt. That was our skin that she used for her handbag; we were con-

demned by the Gods to scavenge for pennies or worse, be skinned by hungry these beasts for their excess.

"Bzzzzz. Bzzzzz." My alarm shakes me from my thoughts. It's time to drive to work with the gas tank that is almost as empty as my bank account. In the molding hallway of the cafe, I don my stained uniform and prepare for another day consumed by facades.

Hana approaches me behind the glass counters, "Can you wash the soup tins again? Do you remember how to do that from yesterday?"

"Yeah of course. It's brainless motions. I just have to rinse and repeat this every day. "

"I'm stuck in the running wheels of earning and spending. How do you scamper your way out of the indifferent devil's jaws?"

Starterpack

by lauren ho

"I would like to know," asked her friend, "why you don't like looking at my starter pack account—its follower count really does speak for itself and it's even been accredited with a checkmark!" The pair was sitting together in the ninth floor cafeteria high above the rest of Jamaica. While their two-seater table was less than ideal with it being so far away from the double door entrance and food line, the location did afford them one luxury: a floor-to-ceiling frosted window comprising twelve mini panes, one of which was broken. When one of them pressed their warm cheek against the cool glass on the window pane just left to the broken one—careful to avoid a protruding, jagged edge—they were able to see the outside world and beyond.

She wished he would stop talking; she was beginning to get incredibly irritable from both the lack of air conditioning in their ancient performing arts school and his idle campaigning.

"So, I really do think you should follow my account, Esther," he said while reaching down into the front pocket of his fraying gray bag. "Let me search up your account—what is it again? @EstherinQueens?"

Esther sighed at his mention of her account—she really wished that she had gone ahead and deleted her account last night. She knew, oh she absolutely knew last night that she would regret her decision by lunch, and yet, here she was.

Turning her head to the window, she closed her left eye and tilted her chin down: she wanted

to try and see if she could see outside from the angle. She wanted to look out the window and let her thoughts be carried by the gentle breeze which ruffled the petals on the cherry blossoms along the Avenue. Oh, what she would give to be on Jamaica Ave. at the very moment with headphones in and passion fruit gum in mouth. If she couldn't be there now, well, at the very least she could let her mind wander to the next possible scenario even more unseemly.

"I would like to know," her friend began again, this time with an undertone of annoyance, "what your instagram @ is because you still have not told me, Esther!"

"Her friend would hound her about not following his microcosm of a fever dream while she would miserably try to look out the broken window pane from an awkward angle to dream about the very place she wished to be..."

At this, Esther rolled her eyes. This was just typical, all in a day's lunch. Her friend would hound her about not following his microcosm of a fever dream while she would miserably try to look out the broken window pane from an awkward angle to dream about the very place she wished to be all the way down Jamaica Ave. Following the gray cement road is what would lead her eyes, and mind, to the Jamaican Estates.

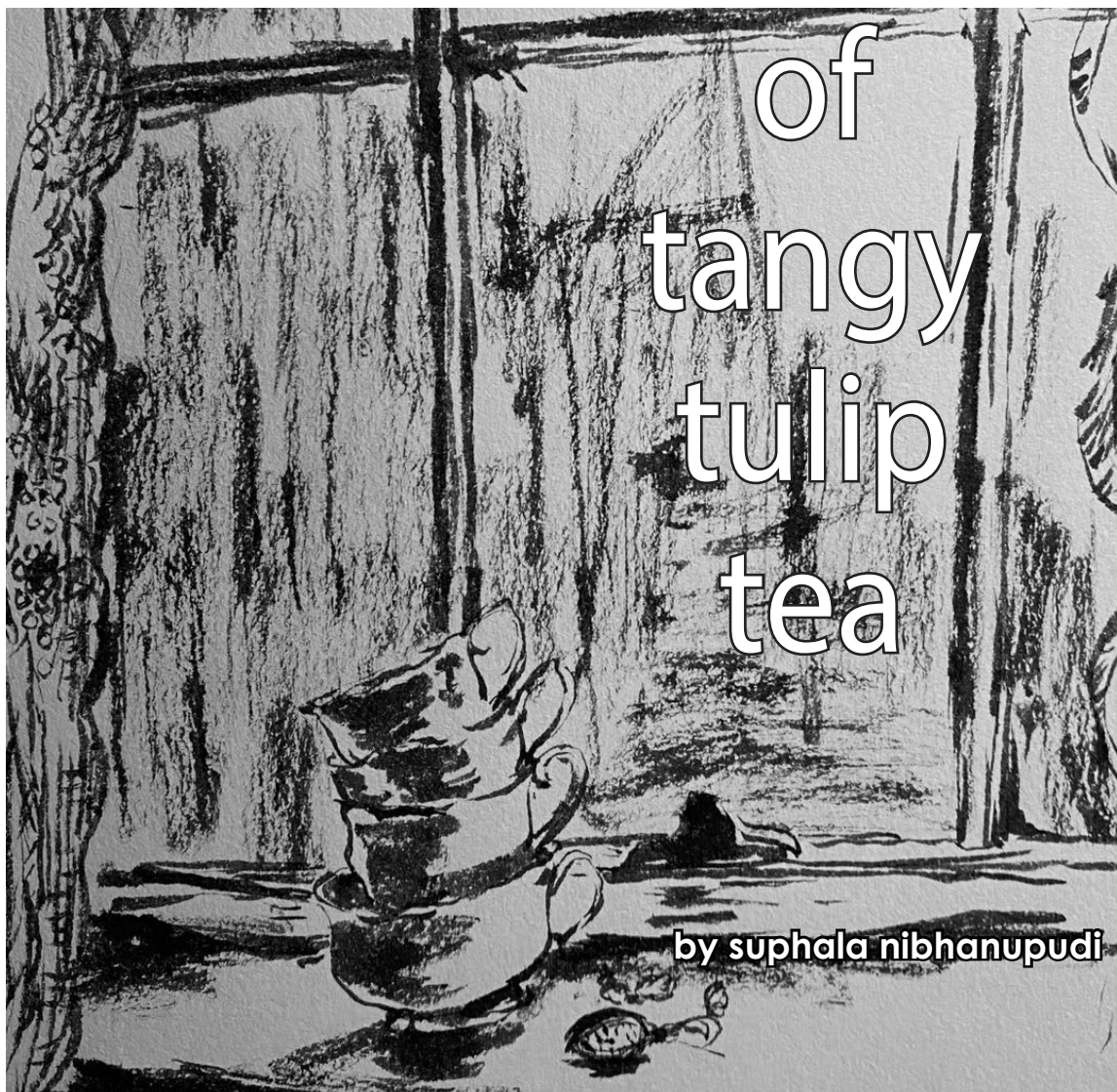
She really couldn't wait to get out of here; her performing arts school had lost its shiny luster quite a while ago but luckily the commute to get here wasn't too bad, she only had to walk three blocks from 88th which, in total, took four minutes (if she ran, and this was deducting the time it took if she were to stop and buy a lukewarm coffee just outside the Queens Public Library).

Esther really felt his eyes on her now. She knew that his brain was suspended in time due to never receiving an answer, or really, never getting that knowing notification from his phone that he had a follower request.

She stood up abruptly, the rubber ends on wooden chair legs screeching against the linoleum tile to mark the beginning of her departure, and walked toward the aperture to get a better picture of what she really wanted to see: the Jamaican Estates. She was almost ashamed to admit it, but her vantage point of the Estates at this height afforded her a richer luxury than she had ever dreamed; the neighborhood's handsome Tudor-style houses with their monochrome crimson tile roofs and neatly pruned sidewalk hedges stood out from the tight packing of the rest of the city.

Once, Esther and her Aunt took a self-led walking tour around the Jamaican Estates. She enjoyed her surroundings and atmosphere thoroughly in the brief two hours of a summer day they were there. The lack of gum that stuck to the sidewalks and the quiet, battery-powered cars—Nissans and Audis—that didn't bother anyone who was trying to create Instagram starter packs.

From behind her back she heard a voice say, "It's an aspiration, Esther. You can dream or you can pair together tidbits of the life you wished you lived together."



She frequented the old man upstairs, the one that fed her dreams of her husband in cups of green tea. He crushed herbs better acquainted in witches' stews and nursed the kettle as it sputtered on the stove. The steam billowed into his crumpled face. He'd place the cold stone glass in her hands, and watch her sip slowly for a couple of moments, before returning to the stove to fill a glass of his own.

She knew not how she found him. Perhaps the scent snaked through her air vents and snatched her up. Maybe she had mistaken his

door for someone else's. Those memories had faded into the recesses of her mind. People on the floors below spun legends about him. Every tenant visited his apartment at one point or another. Those who did remembered little. Only his sour tea, and his clouded eyes that saw more than they should.

"I'm trying an old favorite of mine. Special occasion tea." He teetered towards her and presented her cold stone cup. She sank into the battered couch. "I make it for all my guests eventually. Clears your sinuses among other things."

"It tastes... nice." She stuck her tongue into the tea and swirled it around. It tasted too strong for her palate; some new flavor was biting her tongue. "Did you add... what is this, cypress?"

"I usually have cypress. Today I used white tulips. I enjoy their..." He mumbled, his eyes glazing over as they were prone to do. "Tanginess."

With a robotic, tired hand, she lifted the stone cup to her mouth, and let the liquid slide into her mouth, waiting for the visions that would usually follow. Of her husband, sobbing and quaking on the slick driveway, seconds before he left. She would sip on the tea until the stone cup was sucked dry, her mind swirling with stale, blurry memories, drowning in the concoction. Then, head woozy, she would stagger out of the apartment as the old man sank into his recliner, where he would be when she came eagerly the next day.

Today, the tea didn't sit right in her stomach. This tanginess was not agreeing with her. She couldn't see her husband on the driveway, only...

A little boy, fidgeting with the buttons of his polo shirt, dropped down on her right. A quiet, confused little boy, with his father's cheekbones and his mother's nose, but his own eyes.

"What's wrong?" The old man asked innocently.

"...Nothing. I'm alright."

The little boy was spinning a scuffed wooden pencil. He tipped his head towards the sunset as it flushed the sky in pink. On his lap wobbled a clipboard with a stack of forms on it. The first one read "ADMISSION TO HOPETOWN HOTEL AND ELEMENTARY SCHOOL."

"Use a pen, Cole. You don't fill out applications with a pencil."

She shuddered at the sound of her own voice, clipped and cold. The little boy looked past her, at someone else perched far away from him. "Yes, Ma."

"And hurry it up. I don't want to wait here for an hour for you to fill your name."

"Yes, Ma."

The little boy produced a pen from his shirt pocket, and hunched over the forms, slowly signing his name in botched cursive. His face was on the verge of crumbling. The sky deepened into a dusky orange.

The woman on the couch sipped her tea again, her fingers stiff from the cold stone cup. She watched the little boy pause, and look past her again, his eyes dense and wet. She felt the strange, foreign urge to wipe his face and pat his head, vision or not.

"Do I have to go? Can't I just stay with you for a couple more years?"

She dared to look to her left. The vision was clothed in all black, save the little tulip in her lapel pocket. Her finger was swiping rapidly on her phone. Her cold eyes glazing over the bright screen. Her son quiet and still. The woman sipping the tea could feel the chill of a sudden breeze, the emptiness of the bench, as she sat between a mother and a son. The sun slipping away. The sunset dissolving into the hills behind them, the pink eaten up by the orange and black.

"You haven't finished your tea."

The vision evaporated. She glanced up at the old man. He leaned forward in interest.

"I understand if you don't care for the tea. It's a hard brew to swallow. Very tangy, not as bitter as you like it. But I made sure not to make it too sweet."

She nodded in apology. "I'm not that thirsty today." The cup swiveled in her hands.

"Would you prefer your regular?" The clouds in the old man's eyes parted briefly, and he observed her keenly.

Her fingernail scraped the cup. A moment later, it clicked against the coffee table.

"Have a nice day."

The old man smiled. "I believe the school is closed at the moment. You could try again tomorrow. Goodbye"

So she made her way out of the complex and out to the road, as the sky flushed pink above her. She tipped her head back to watch it, before crossing the street.

Serving Size: 15 chips

by elizabeth cheng

Lay's Chips. A scrumptious treat to enjoy while watching a movie, sports game, or having a conversation. The classic bright yellow bag is a birthday party staple, bringing happiness to whoever may be the consumer. Crispy, salty, and greasy. Each chip delivers the perfect crunch in your mouth, the salt dissolves into your taste buds, the flavor reaches every corner of your body. It's the original chip, the perfect, all-American snack, lifting the mood and bringing everyone together. It just feels *so good*.

But then, it also doesn't. You aren't at a party. You're not with a friend, having a conversation. You are alone in your room, doing absolutely nothing as each second ticks by faster and faster. Each minute the guilt seeps in further and further, like oil soaking up every inch of your body. The mushy feeling in your stomach forces your arms to hug the cramp harder and harder, even though it just continues to tighten. There's simply too much food that wants to come back up, but it can't. As you turn the bag around and stare at the words on the label, your jaw tightens and your fingers immediately start to pick at the delicate skin around your nails. You try to take a deep breath, but it comes out short and raspy instead. The panic rises, because you already did it. Again. And you can't go back.

8 servings per container. That's two families. But you had it all to yourself, in one sitting. *Serving Size: About 15 chips (28g).* Why couldn't you just stop? *Calories: 160.* That's the same as running six miles. Are you going to get your lazy self out there and do it? Take two hours to reverse something you sabotaged yourself with in a few minutes? *Total Fat: 10g.* Are you stupid, or are you dumb? Both? Sometimes, indulgence simply isn't worth it. Have

you learned your lesson yet?

One month later, you see them at a potluck. So, you turn around and walk the other way, not with strength, but in horrible fear. Fear of the label on the back. Fear of those numbers.

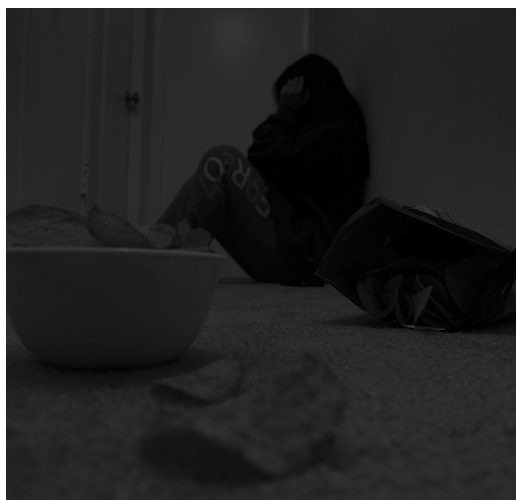
Two months later, they present themselves to you in a goodie bag. They stay in your hands for a while, before you toss them in the trash.

It's been four months and six days without Lay's Chips. Good job! You did it! The instant gratification but horrible aftertaste has been avoided with success. The grease in your stomach is gone, and your body is back to normal. Those healthy habits you've worked so hard on are finally paying off!

But the chips will always be there.

Suddenly, your fingers are covered in salt, your lips coated in grease, as the chips keep coming, you keep chewing, and the swallowing won't stop, until there is nothing left.

Back to square one, I guess.



The background of the page is a black and white painting. It depicts a hand reaching up from a dark, rippling body of water. The hand is positioned in the center of the lower half of the image. Above the water, there is a dark, silhouetted horizon line. The sky is filled with large, expressive, dark clouds, with a patch of lighter clouds behind the title text.

Waterborne

by helina li

The water licks my toes,
hungry and cold: luring me
to the serpent river
slithering to the ocean
so crowded with little dots,
little human figures that I
know
some might never rise
again.

The water licks my toes
again I step back, cautious.
I don't want to
drown with them.

The sky crackles, the water levels
rise, expand, the snake shifting
a heavy up, a thunderous down,
carrying its humanoid figures
laughing, shouting, diving
forward, forward, forward —

the river carries them forward.

A head upstream swings
over bare shoulder,
a million dead stars
in her eyes, the water around her
an opaque, alluring dress:
for a second, perhaps she is
a water spirit, a goddess.

But her mouth opens,
her lips stretch, straining
around an empty cavern.
Wind rushes in, forcing
its way down her throat.
Her shortened tongue
thrash, forming words
learned long ago—
words still
unforgotten.

I step forward
to hear those words but
wind keeps rushing
in my ears, her mouth—

wind takes everything.

Water around her rises again;
she sinks beneath her dress,
eyes wide open, lips still moving—

not even bubbles rise.

My body lurches forward:
Don't go! Please don't—
Words tear out, die
on the sandy shore;
too weak, too clumsy

too far away.

I almost fall to my knees
when she appears again:
features even smoother,
dress darker, tighter,

twining around her torso,
a harness.

She gives me one more wave
a speck against gray sky;
her mouth forms one more word.
Come.

I take one more step—
the sand slides out
underneath me—
the current shoves me
forward with a roar

so cold that it steals my breath,
so strong that my eyes shut
my limbs start struggling,
go up, go forward, move,
don't stay or I'll *drown*,
breathe, swim, breathe,
kick, kick, kick—

My head breaks the sur-
face,
a small mop of hair
in the middle of the river,
another piece of debris
it has picked up.

My wet clothes drag me down;
I shrug them off, letting waves
curl around me, give me
the same dress—skin—body—face
as the girl.

My legs become a tail
and I don't hesitate;
I start kicking forward.

*"I don't hesitate;
I start kicking forward."*

the dream he composed

by alisa lu

The child slaved away at the piano, sweat dripping from his forehead. He looked towards the crowd for comfort, for validation. He searched for the only face he knew, the only one that mattered, and a quiet gaze met his own. And after everybody stood up for applause, after he bowed and the clapping grew and faltered, he sighed and went home.

He changed into his pajamas, crawled into bed, and tucked himself in, surrounding himself in a familiar softness, relieved to be away from the stage. Then, he closed his eyes in one world, and opened them in another.

Blades of tall grass tickled his legs and cheeks as he smiled in response. He looked towards the dark sky in all its vastness, with hazy clouds shifting and changing from one form to another. Quietly, a moth landed on his cheek, and he let it rest there before it flew away.

As he watched the flutter of its wings disappear, a subtle note filled the air.

He winced. *C sharp, but a quarter flat.*

He walked towards the noise, eager to find

out what it was, to fix it. His eyes traced the sound to a blinding light in the distance. It reflected a plethora of colors into the air, a contrast to the normally black and white landscape. He trudged towards the now increasingly pandemonic sounds, his eyes glued on his feet to avoid the stinging brightness of the light.

As he approached closer and closer, the dissonance faded beneath his footsteps, until finally he looked up and saw the gentle colors and light fluttering about a crystal piano.

He heard a whisper. *Play.*

* * *

The boy saw himself, several years younger, wailing and crying. He was clinging onto his father's legs, attempting to pull him away from the music hall and towards home. His father gently lifted him up and carried him into the building, where children gathered in a well-lit, almost blinding room, each eager to get their hands on the keys. With dried tears on his face, the boy learned to curl his fingers, to keep his

back straight, to clack out a rhythm with wooden sticks, and to always, always take a deep breath before starting to play. After the lesson, his teacher called him in and gave him a special sticker to award his diligence. To foster his light.

The boy watched as he went home, proudly displaying the sticker that he had plastered on the back of his hand. He smiled at his father, and his father smiled back.

The landscape around the boy began to fade. He stood alone in the darkness, with only the image of his smiling father left in his mind. Panicked, he jerked awake from his bed and looked around his dark room. Realizing he was safe, he laid back down into bed and closed his eyes once again.

This time, he was in the dark, empty desert. He heard the faint sounds of crickets, and the quiet rustling of leaves. His mind began to wander, and he, along with it, began to drift away.

He floated towards the familiar crystal glow, the same quarter-flat C-sharp that had bothered him so much before.

Once again, he stopped at the feet of the glittering piano. He held out his hand and watched curiously as the lighted colors danced about against his fingers. This time, they seemed dimmer, yet more forceful. *Play.*

* * *

The boy saw himself smiling brightly at his father again. He had just finished a lesson, and his teacher was telling him about his good work. The three of them stood in the muted darkness outside the music school building. Moths gathered around the street lamps as the child placed another sticker on his hand. He and his father waved goodbye, and they went home.

The child, tired from a long lesson, put on his pajamas, crawled into his bed, and tucked himself in, surrounding himself in a familiar softness. He was about to close his eyes, when his father entered the room.

He crossed his arms firmly across his chest when he saw the child resting in bed. "What are you doing? I want you to be successful. You should be practicing."

"Go, play."

* * *

Several cracks began to rupture across the glass, fracturing the boy's reflection within the surface. Fearful that the piano would soon shatter, the child forced himself awake.

Seeing that the sun outside his window had yet to rise, he closed his eyes, one last time.

He awoke in a performance hall shrouded in a dense darkness. A deadly silence hung still in the air. He walked slowly towards the shining fragmented glass, his fingers brushing against the cracked surface of the keys. He hesitated, seeing the image of his father's gentle smile, of his arms crossed firmly against his chest. His fingers placed gently on the keys, he took a deep breath and closed his eyes. *Always, always, before*

you play.

The boy frowned. He stood up, stepped away from the piano, and walked the other direction. Away from the shining light of the crystal piano, away from the dancing colors.

He headed towards the familiar darkness. In a blur, through city lights, across deserts, past grass fields. He laid down onto a patch of weeds, his face to the dark night sky, looking toward the changing hazy clouds. He giggled softly, and as if in reaction to hearing his own voice, he stood up and took a big breath. And he began to caper and play.

A flurry of moths flew by and danced about the frolicking boy. In the darkness, in the chambers of his own world, he played within the dream that he composed. A moth landed on his cheek; he caught it in his hands, and let it go. And when the light flooded into his room once again, he opened his eyes for the first time.

a butterfly

by melissa chen

The sun is going to set soon. I'm running under the rosy sky, my hair whistling in the wind. I feel the tug of the kite in my hands, the grass rustling under my feet. I spread my arms like wings and follow an invisible path up the slope, running toward the edge of the sky.

I don't feel the climb. Break the crest of the hill and finally look back. The kite is soaring. I wish I could ride it.

The wind rushes cool in my lungs and whips past me, but my feet are still planted firmly, like the roots of the grass around me.

Dad is charging up the hill, running fast but not quite looking slow because he's so solidly

built and moves heavily. He's strong because he used to play rugby in college and now tennis with his friends.

"That's great!" he calls out, breathlessly. "Amazing!"

I smile, and plop down, watching him finish the last stretch. His cheeks, which are normally very pale like mine, are pink. Mine must be too. Dad treads up and sits down beside me. He has his work-trousers on; I don't think Mum would be very pleased with the grass stains or Dad. He leans back on his hands. We tilt our heads up and watch the kite for a while.

It starts to falter, though the wind still blows



"What if I fall?" Oh, but my darling, what if you fly?" — Erin Hanson

through the grass.

Quickly, I pass Dad the string.

He does some wonderful movement starting with his wrist and ending at his shoulder, and the kite swings up again. I tuck up my knees to my chest and feel the cool cotton of my sweater against my flushed face. I brush the softness of the sleeve over my lips.

"It's a good kite, huh?"

Dad says. He looks at me, carefully.

I nod, and smile again.

"And school? How is that?" He's talking normally, but his voice seems to fill the space around us.

I shrug.

The words are blowing away but now the silence is expanding.

"The teacher had only good things to say about you," Dad says.

I glance at him.

He bumps me gently on the shoulder. "Well-behaved, kind, curious, a good listener."

The space waits for me, not quivering with expectation but patiently. "She's nice," I say.

He pauses, then claps me softly on the shoulder, pulls me into not-quite-a-hug but a just-holding-me.

The kite has fallen without a sound. It's laying on the grass.

Dad runs down and picks it up. He turns

around with a big grin, and waves at me. I sit and watch him try to launch it again.

I stretch myself over the grass, still a little warm from the day, but cooling from the wind. The sky is clear but I do wish it was blue. I close my eyes and listen to my breathing. It's almost the same sound as the wind. I feel my lashes flutter, carried by it. One time, last summer, we drove to a huge wooded hill with

an observatory on top that we had to climb up to. We went all the way up a winding trail, and the view of the rolling hills all around us looked different along every step of the way. Dad started carrying Willy in the middle and offered me a perch on his shoulders, but I wasn't tired at all. In the observatory, they had big displays that no one read, and one said everything in the whole universe is made out of stardust.

Lying here I can feel myself melting away, combed by the wind, particles of stardust drifting off somewhere. Maybe if I fell asleep here for a year there would be nothing left. It would be a peaceful way to become nothing.

I sit up at that thought. It's just me getting a "little dreamy", like Mum says.

Dad is chasing the little red kite, running up and down the hills. The wind must have ripped it away. I run. A butterfly flaps its wings.

"I spread my arms like wings and follow an invisible path up the slope, running toward the edge of the sky."

The Parable of the King

by william zong

*Once upon a time, in a kingdom
not-so-faraway, a king found himself
knee-deep in controversy.*

He was a good king and had reigned for about a score, but questions about his legitimacy began to plague his rule. With the death of his mother, the former queen, it was unearthed by the priest that his family may not have been the direct descendants the First King. Who was he to rule if he had not the royal bloodline?

Having developed a plan, the king told his advisor in order to get a second opinion.

"I wish to acknowledge my illegitimacy as king to the people, and in doing so, gain their trust and respect to stay in power."

"A righteous and sound plan, my king."

"Then, that I shall do."

Yet secretly, the king's advisor knew his plan was fallacious. Once having acknowledged his illegitimacy, the king would lose all credibility in the public's eye, and would be quickly overthrown.

The advisor decided that he would attempt to secure the throne for himself, all the while feigning unwavering allegiance to the king. So, when the speech and the predicted public outcry had began, the advisor quickly set his own plan into motion.

In the presence of the king, the advisor made comments such as: "Our kingdom has prospered ever since he came to power" and "A good

and respectable king will never lie, even when his own legitimacy is in question; and a king who never lies is what this kingdom needs." But later, in the streets of town, the advisor spread propaganda like wildfire, obliterating the king's image while bolstering his own reputation.

* * *

In the end, the people overthrew the king as predicted. Democratically, they elected one of their own ranks to be the new ruler. Once the new ruler came into power, the former king and his advisor were brought to court, their fates having been determined.

"The former king did not choose to be illegitimate, nor did he deny the fact once it was revealed; these are virtuous qualities. He may continue life as a common man."

"The advisor, in trying to maintain his virtue while securing the throne for himself—an unattainable goal by all means—created conflicting public images. He shall be executed."

* * *

The moral of this story is two-fold. First, the alloy of iron ambition and pyrite consciousness is very brittle indeed. Second, a king is a king is a king.



rise and fall

by ria chaudhary

hi, it's me again. i know you missed me.
last night I had the strangest dream. it was about this person, my favorite person
(it's
you!) you were so beautiful—much prettier than right now—
i'm kidding! i'm kidding—but seriously, it was incredible.
they say distance makes the heart grow fonder,
and all i've been doing is falling deeper.
cloud nine is you and me, and believe me,
we were floating, you were talking, and i should have been listening, i know
but it was so much to take in, and loving you comes easier than thinking—you
know me.
and your hand was warm in mine.
much warmer than now—i know, you can't do anything
about how cold and dark the night is—
but you lit me up from inside.
we rose together.
i held on tight so i wouldn't fall,
just like our first date under the bleachers
or on top of mission peak
or when you asked me if i loved you.
i could never say no to you.
even now,
you lift me up from below
last night you asked me to stay with you, but i was already drifting awake—
drifting away—
so i gripped onto your hand—
i fought so hard to stay with you, i promise—
but i'm here.
awake,
with you again.



so i bought you these flowers,
so you can know i love you still.
quiet and far away
(i know, i know)
i love you still
and i'll do anything to stay by your side.

dreams come true with you.
i told you,
(hidden under bleachers)
when we were fourteen
(hidden under my feet)
that if i was there you'd never be alone.
(six feet is too far.)
lift me up again—

you know i missed you.
you were always right—
i'm the only one who can turn dreams into reality.
no more drifting,
no more falling.

today i'm floating.

i'll see you tonight?

it's a date.

rêveuse



by michelle zhu

The red string hung loosely.

The string was the color of autumn sunrises and sunsets.

An emotional connection, fueled by the Gods. A long piece of string, winding down summer roads and cutting through thick winter woods. The intangible string always stuck with her, acting almost as a beacon of light.

A red so powerful it sent her on prolonged afternoon daydreams and brief evening nightmares.

Train tracks. Her feet stepped one in front of the other, and lying ahead still stood a million feet of string. A tug on her heart, and she looked up.

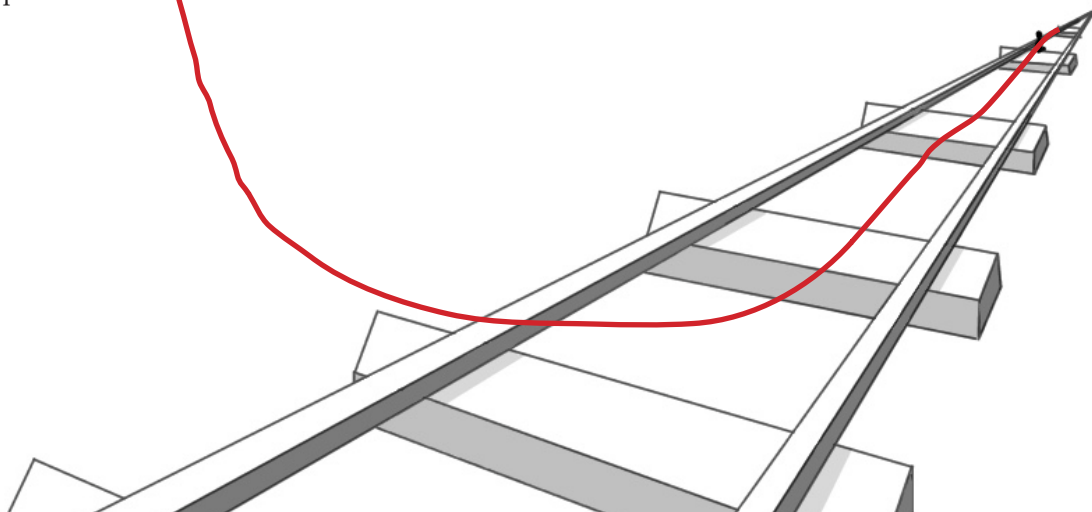
The sky looked awfully dreary, the clouds blooming later than usual without the birds' morning melodies. She could taste the pills, feel the sterile injections, and see the white-walled rooms.

She could feel the Fates playing cat's cradle. Clothos set up the game, holding the string between her two hands. She felt the tugs, the pulls, and the laughter of the three women above her.

They would lift one side, and thread it through the other.

Atropos's fingers slipped.

The spring fields. The summer road. The autumn tracks. The winter woods.



"The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, But in ourselves, that we are underlings." — Julius Caesar

No To Wings Fly

by matthew lu

You said, "Let's see how far we can go today!"

You always told me to test my limits. Our twelve-year old selves both wanted to explore. We went to discover meadows and gardens and beaches together; but only you would go search the caves, the volcanoes, or the creaky old house. That's why everyone said you shined brightly. I wanted to shine just as brightly, but I was too scared. That's why everyone said I lived only in your shadows.

We finally reached the top of the mountain. We had come here so many times; the ocean breeze would gently blow on our faces as we stood on the edge of the cliff. We stayed here for hours every time, listening to the song of the seagulls. I rested here, in this fairy dream, thinking that one day I might become better than you.

Blue—it meant so much to you. Every time, you would lay down, feeling the tiny blades of grass tickle the sides of your ears. The sun was always shining for you; its warm rays would gently beat on your face. You looked up to see the sky. You told me that you wanted to play on the fluffy clouds. The sky told you there were many things in the world, some unimaginable. And you wanted to go discover those things.

Blue—was something else to me. It was the color of water, the color of tears; it reminded me of all the times I cried in the corner when you were praised. You thought we were so similar, yet I couldn't help but start to notice our little

differences. Obviously, you wouldn't see things the same way I did, since you never got the short end of the stick.

Every time at the mountaintop, you looked up at the sky. However, I always looked down at the ocean. I stood up feeling the breeze, but you always laid down. From so high up on the cliff, I looked down. I wanted to go down to the depths of the sea. I wanted to see my reflection on the flowing water, but there was no reflection to be seen. How much closer do I have to be to see myself?

"Do you think we could fly?" You looked at me with your determined eyes. "I want to be carried by the sea breeze." You picked up a daisy and plucked the petals. You dropped them one by one, watching them dance in the air. Analyzing each movement, you told me you wanted to be a flower like that.

Before I could respond, you jumped off the cliff. I thought you were falling at first, but then I saw you fly. Flying through the air. You seemed to be having the time of your life, flying and singing with the seagulls. I wanted to join you, but could I do it?

You yelled, "Come fly with me!" I tried to move closer to the edge, but I couldn't. Only one thought filled my head: "If your friend jumped off a cliff, would you follow them?"

I wanted to be like you, but I could never jump off too. I'd followed you everywhere, so why

couldn't I jump off with you?

Well, I didn't think I could fly.

* * *

I still don't think I could fly.

But I want to fly too. Tonight during dinner everyone was talking about how you flew today.

I want to be like you. I wanted to be talked about, to be praised. It's about midnight now, and I haven't stopped thinking for a moment about how much everyone loves you. We could've been the two that flew together. Instead, you were the only one.

I want to do something amazing, something outstanding, something that will make everyone want to talk about me. Now, I'm going to fly higher than you ever did. You said the sky's the limit, but I have to go past the sky and to the sun.

I wanted you to come, but would you take all the fame again? All the praise again? That's right, I have to do this alone. Without you.

I walk outside of my room, fully hidden in the darkness. No one sees me escape, so I run to the top of the mountain and stand by the cliff. The breeze is especially strong tonight, stronger than I've ever felt it. It's pushing me with more force, and I find it hard just to stand without moving.

I move closer to the edge and look down at the ocean. It's a deeper hue of blue, but that's probably because there's no light. Oddly enough, I like it more this way.

I'm going to fly like you did.

I close my eyes.

I jump.

But I'm falling.



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?

"Icarus should have waited for nightfall, the moon would have never let him go." — Nina Mouawad



a 4-part [journey in] harmony

by nathaniel satriya

in pectore

"You have 24 hours a day, and 24 ribs to break."
(Unlimited are your possibilities.)

The imagination of a dialogue:

"I am empty."

"I'm empty too!"

"Wouldn't you like to be empty together?"

"Only so long as it pleases you!"

You have 33 years to crucify,
And 33 vertebrae free to pry.

"I gave you my heart."

"I'll give you my lungs!"

"Isn't it nice to be so enamored?"

"Only before we've cut out our tongues!"

You have 22 cycles to take and employ,
And 22 bones in your skull to destroy.

"I promised you love."

"You promised me hell!"

"Didn't you say that we'd be forever?"

"Only until the night's final bell!"

in Situ

"In the backyard there is"
a garden.

It reeks of
garlic-wreathed rosaries.

&

lupine-saturated lavender &

It feels like comfort
like home
like thistles and nettles.

-a pincushion of pines &

I will find myself

reconstructed &

reconstructed within the (vines.

(mushrooms with a bit of

belladonna-

blue-spruce mixed) under)

satin halos of a storm-

grey sky.

I will bind my soul &

keep it guard in

you (are my

guardian &

)

.

in vivo

"en vision"

I see colors
 and fairytale lights.
[They are not what I expected
 from my dreams.]
I see pinwheels-
 imperfectly turning-
 the cogs of a
 (broken) mechanism.
 [Lucidity declares itself a lie.]
I see lines, clothed in shadows;
 shapes, draped in fire;
 volumes. in-tersecting.
 [Points of dizzying sight.]
I see black, fluttering alive,
 under semi-translucent red.
 [Flesh becomes alive, despite the sedative.]
I see NOTHINGworld
 (switch
 NOTHING
 switch)
 world &
 [
I lurch up & forwards.
 (So does the chyme.)
[The chime that sings heartbreak:] repeat.
 the end.]

in personam

"AN/ESTHESIA"

the sensation of nonsense
blind clarity in reticence
neither decadence nor indulgence
in the offerings of incense

I AM CONSCIOUS OF MYSELF.
I FEEL AWAKE AND PERCEPTIVE.
I CREATE A BLISSFUL PEACE.
I LIVE IN THE SMOKE OF GLORY. the nonsense OF MYSELF
 I AWAKE blind AND in reticence.
 I CREATE neither BLISS nor PEACE
 in THE SMOKE OF the offerings.

[(can you say in your mind that you hope for the best)

WAKING A NEW DAY DAWN.
i am unsure of the consequences
WAKING the consequences.
i am unsure of A NEW DAWN

(IF ALL THAT YOU WANT IS THE END OF THE WORST?)]

the DAWN of a NEW SELF [(can you hope)
I FEEL the consequences of clarity. (THAT YOU say)
WAKING a BLISSFUL indulgence (that your mind)
in the unsure GLORY I offer. (IS THE END?)]

art credits

cows and grass	joy song	1
Dixie on the Hill	angela sun	3
Requiem	katherine cui	8
Clairvoyant	caroline wang	9
something different	alice lu	11
Mirages	catherine li	13
In, Out	christy yu	14
The Counsel: A Conversation	megan xu	17
Scrapbook Dreams	grace lu	20
MAHAKUMBH	allison li	24
The Dream-catcher	elizabeth cheng	25
Corporate Gods	joy song	27
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Serving Size: 15 chips	audrey wong	34
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Traditionally, our spring issue is printed and distributed to the Lynbrook High School student body for free. On that day, we celebrate our hard work. Our spring issue is often our crowning achievement of the year. As the end of second semester draws near, we have our final meeting where senior gifts and cords are handed out, and members have their last official meeting together as a staff.

But that is all tradition.

This year, 2020, is all about breaking tradition, it seems.

The novel coronavirus, better known as COVID-19, forced the closure of Lynbrook High School on Friday, March 13. Eventually, it was announced that school would be closed for the rest of the school year.

In the midst of our spring issue, we were forced to stop and figure out what to do. Without a student body to distribute to, we didn't know what to do. It feels like a bitter end to our year as a staff, and especially to the senior members—both writers and artists.

But we will always be here. Even as senior members—no. Rather, especially as senior members, our legacies will live on the pieces that we wrote. Our legacies will live in the art we drew.

OUR LEGACIES WILL CONTINUE
TO LIVE ON, NO MATTER WHAT.

As bittersweet as it may be, we know that our legacies will always live on. As heartbroken as we may be, unable to celebrate our last few months of Vertigo—and school—in person, we know that we will always be remembered.

Here's to more years of Vertigo, although hopefully not in quarantine.

With remembrance,
Grace Huang, Editor-in-Chief (school years 2018–2020)

2019-2020 Vertigo Seniors

Allison L

Amanda Zhu

Caroline Wang

Diya Mirji

Frank Zuo

Lauren Ho

Grace Huang

Michelle Hui

Megan Xu

Pranav Mishra

William Zong

C Caroline Wang

Artist

Attending: University of California, Los Angeles

Favorite Literature: Les Misérables

Fun Fact: I have a cat called Mimi!

M Megan Xu

Artist

Attending: Carnegie Mellon

Other Clubs: Aletheia, Web Dev, Public Art Club

Favorite Artwork: Winged Victory of Samothrace

Fun Fact: My favorite mediums are digital, oil paint, and watercolor! :0

"Color is the place where our brain and the universe meet" — Paul Klee

Grace Huang

Writer, Editor-in-Chief

Attending: Smith College

Favorite Literature: “I Go Back to May 1937” by Sharon Olds

Fun Fact: “I stress-bake a lot.”

*Look out for each other
and take care of your-
selves. I love you all very
much, children :>*

Lauren Ho

Writer, Prose Editor

Favorite Literature: Audre Lorde “Poetry is not a Luxury”; Charles Dickens “Great Expectations”; Zadie Smith “Now More Than Ever”

Fun Fact: “I completely bombed (and I mean BOMBED) my Vertigo officer interview, but look where I am today!”

*“In my opinion, candor,
punctuality & clear prose
will take you very far in
life. If nothing is within
reach, try to be equidis-
tant from both candor
and clear prose since
time will never be by
your side.” ~Lauren Ho
(yes, I did quote myself)*

Michelle Hui

Writer

Attending: University of California, San Diego

Other Clubs: CSE, JUMP

Favorite Literature: Waiting: True Confessions of a Waitress

Fun Fact: I've memorized the Taco Bell menu!

My advice to fellow writers, artists, and readers is to not be pressured into pursuing STEM and really think about what would make you happy! I had spent a lot of my time thinking I wanted to be a doctor but as college approached, I realized I love spending time with people, doing art, and working in media. Now, I am pursuing a communications major (hopefully a visual arts/media minor) and hope to work in media in the future. But also be practical so I am going to do double major in a science/business, which would definitely supplement my main major choice.

Embrace your inner artist and truly ponder where you can see yourself and do it early. My biggest regret during high school was not realizing what I wanted to do sooner and not having pursued art/design fully until senior year. I felt like I stumbled around through research and STEM summer programs but should have done art competitions and grown my design skills.

Also, don't worry too much about grades or stats because those things don't really matter to your future or to college (within reason of course, there is a certain GPA threshold you have to meet in order to be considered). I would say focus on enjoying your extracurriculars and making memories with your friends because these are still four years of your life you are never going to get back! For example, the current 2020 who had planned to live it up SSS after 4 years of hard work and now can't anymore so just enjoy the present :/

Also if you read to the end, I'd be happy to chat about anything. Find me on IG or fb!

William Zong

Writer

Attending: University of Pennsylvania

Favorite Literature: East of Eden (steinbeck) Xaipe (E.E.Cummings) Saturn Devouring His Son (Goya) L'étoile de Mer (Man Ray)

Fun Fact: William Zong mi ekipunlin esan pana-ka uta-ni Vertigo-ni sanelian.

Explore! Have fun with form. Poetry is a medium for anyone, shaped at your will; and a dada philosophy definitely helps.

We love our seniors!

*Thank you for your wisdom,
your energy, and for all the good
times!*

*with love,
Vertigo*

