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**Art Club x CWC**  
**2022**  
*Vol. 2*

*Cover by Carmen Ng*

This anthology is a testament to the flourishing talent of our Nossal Creative Writing Club.

In 2022, the Club has gone from strength to strength, inspired by the passionate leadership of Lola Sargasso, Jashan Suran, Sophie Lan and Zeana Cole. The leaders have fostered a supportive, inclusive and dynamic community which has nurtured the confidence and craft of Nossal's writers. The weekly writing prompts have induced members to continually hone their skills and have elicited wonderful contributions from all year levels, and the regular meetings have provided a welcome opportunity to share the joy of writing collaboratively. A new generation of Year 9 students have found their authorial voices through the Club, encouraged by their older peers - the future of creative writing at Nossal looks very bright!

The Club Leaders are grateful to Minuki Satharasinghe and members of the Nossal Art Club for generously giving their time to produce the beautiful illustrations for this book. They are also thankful to Ms Kalpana Lal for the use of the IRC as a regular meeting space.

Please enjoy immersing yourself in these pages!

Ms Sue Lee-Ack

Creative Writing Club Teacher Representative

This book is dedicated to those who sleep restless. To those with insatiable hunger. To those who crave for more. You are the people of the future, and your craft within this book is a beautiful addition to humanity.

I can officially say this is the first book my team and I have spent indefatigable preciseness creating and publishing. This anthology includes the mesmerising handiwork of twenty-eight writers and nine artists across the school, producing around fifty raw, emotive poetry and prose pieces. They have embroidered, with the best threads, a tapestry Nossal High School is inevitable to keepsake forever. Without their commitment, this project would have been out of reach.

Many thanks to Carmen who has been my partner-in-crime - the countless hours I have nagged you to boredom will always be appreciated, and your patience throughout the course has been so wonderful. I want to also thank to the co-leaders of both clubs (who have worked behind the scenes to get everything perfect!)

The 2022 CWC x Art Club Book is establishment of what is yet to come.  
Legacy is what we create.

Jashandeep Suran

Creative Writing Club Co-Leader

First, I'd like to credit Sanuji Bopitiya for being the person keeping us on track, maintaining our spreadsheets and proofreading all my words (including this foreword).

This anthology is a tribute to the worlds we roll around in our heads, the stories we bleed to tell and the works we craft ourselves to create. As Jashan and I's first project for either of our clubs, I am marvelled by the people we work with. It has been our honour to put your works to the eyes and hands of the wider school community, and I thank you for your trust in us. To Jashan, thank you for making everything run smoothly and being a joy to work with.

This wouldn't have been the same without you!

The artists in 2022's collaboration with the CWC have strived to encapsulate their writers' stories (in exam season no less!). The countless hours they spend maturing as creatives is a journey this anthology has the honour of being a part of, and as we grow, the world is ours to seize.

I ask you to only expect more.

Carmen Ng

Art Club Co-Leader

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YEAR NINE

## Arthur

By Devmika Bogahapitiya Lekamalage

Up on that green hill near the Browns cottage was a massive oak tree. Its trunk showed the signs of wear, yet it still stood solitarily on its own. It towered right into the sky and its colossal boughs spread far and wide. Birds called this behemoth home. It sheltered them through the sweltering heat and frigid cold. It was also my refuge.

I was evacuated to the English countryside during the World War. My parents were still in London, with my dad, a doctor, helping the injured soldiers and my mum, a nurse in the same hospital, taking care of the injured soldiers. It was their duty to care for those fighting for our country. It was an unpredictable time and with my parents both working, it was best for me to go live in the countryside with some distant relatives that I never met.

I remember the tear-jerking scene at the train station, as I watched my mother look at me with tears in her eyes. She waved me goodbye as I clambered to the window to see for the final time in what would be a while. The rest of the trip was sombre. The only thing that kept me sane was the books that were hidden away in my suitcase. Five of the most gripping and special books that I have ever read locked away. I longed for the moment where I could open my suitcase and be transported away to the magical world that is hidden inside those books. I fell asleep dreaming about them.

The distant relatives were a couple called Mr and Mrs Brown. They lived on their own in a quaint little cottage by a stream in the countryside. They warmly welcomed me into their home and treated me like their own son. The house was tidy and neat though there was a feeling that I can't put into words. It felt dull and desolate. Even though Mr and Mrs Browns personality was a generally happy one, there was something in their eyes that said otherwise. The twinkle had gone and was replaced by a sorrowful look. I left the cottage to explore and saw a great big oak on a hill close to the cottage. I ran up the hill and sat down on the stone bench that was in front it. Both tree and bench alike were old, and the signs of their age were showing. The bark on the tree had the signs of wear and tear while the stone on the bench looked worn. A soft gale started to blow. It slowly passed and when I turned around, I saw a boy about my age waving to me. I nearly fell off the bench in fright. He had a smile on his face which showed a dimple. His clothes were not of the modern period but rather old. I talked to him,

"What is your name?"

"Arthur" he replied.

His voice was very whispery and melancholy as he was talking. It was so soft as well. We ran around the tree for a while before I decided it was time to go so, I ran down the hill. The next day I ran up the hill at that same time and saw Arthur sitting on the old stone bench. This time I had a couple of my books tucked under my arm. Arthur and I sat under the great oak and read them. Then we played around with my ball that I brought over. I had



a fun time and my thoughts about my parents disappeared. or the next couple of days Arthur and I played with each other, and I really bonded with him. One day when I ran up to the hill, I saw Arthur looking down at the Browns cottage with a distant look on his face. His expression turned into sorrow and anguish, and he started crying. The he disappeared.

Over the next couple of days, I saw that Arthur wasn't there in his usual spot. So, I went to Mr Brown and asked him about it. He looked sad but led me up the hill to a spot behind the oak that had a gravestone on it.

"Arthur died from leukemia when he was your age."

Mr Brown said fighting back tears. We turned around and went back down the hill. As we reached the bottom I turned around and saw Arthur waving with a smile on his face.

## **My People**

By Devmika Bogahapitiya Lekamalage

I sit in utmost peace and tranquillity, as the cool breeze flaps overhead, and the cool crystal-clear water laps near my feet. The land works in harmony to create a secret gem, where no one has ever been before. The hot sun shines down, reflecting of the hue water. I slowly nod off to sleep, but as I do I hear a noise coming from behind the small water-hole I am sat in. I climb over and see them in the distance. A whole army of them marches towards this part of the bush...

The dusty dirt kicks up behind them as they move at a startling pace. They hack their way through the bush, like they know it at the back of their hand. I watch in awe as they perform their craft. A man throws, the sleek long spear across the small plain, where it pierces a kangaroo. As the day turns into night, the campfire is lit and the nomads roast pieces of kangaroo to warm charcoal pieces. I smell the meat being roasted from here, as well as different fruits from the bush, like tjantju and ili. They share stories with each other and are at peace with everyone there. Now humanity have lost that sense of peacefulness amongst the people of one's tribe, but the bond between this tribe is so strong even I can feel it radiating onto me. As the last embers of the campfire go to bed, the nomads sleep under the stars, strengthening their connection to the land, water and nature, on which they rely on greatly.

The tribe moves on the next day, towards the big red rock situated behind the dense bush. They find their way through the dense bush, before making it to the big rock, that we now know as Uluru. They start to create their civilisation after months of traversing over this vast and colossal land. Huts are built with nature's own building materials, while livestock are killed to feed the tribe. Young children run about around the big rock and venture into the waterhole that I am at. They pick out arnguli and eat it while playing about in the water. Men take spears out and go hunting out in the wild looking for more food for the tribe to eat. This country is their lifeblood, and they nourished it to help the land produce more and thrive.

The elderly tribesmen gather up all the boys and take them into the opening of a cave. I watch them as they etch drawings of their culture up on the wall, and as they bless this cave with the stories of the dreamtime. I see the young people look in awe as the cave drawings come to life, in the stories that were told by the elders. Their culture being infused into them as they learn more about themselves every single day. The elders teach the boys about the importance of finally becoming a man. They teach the children how to hunt, fight and survive travelling over this country. The skills they need to build a stronger connection with the land that they grew up on and will stay on until they move into the afterlife.

I witness this society grow and grow over the many years, with the same boys becoming the elders that taught them about surviving in the bush, teaching the next generation the same thing. As I wake up from my deep slumber something makes me look up at Uluru. I see my cousins playing and my aunties cooking. I see my people.

# **The God Complex**

By Anna Cho

Ash's palms sweated. Weeks ago, he set out to rescue the Princess of the East, heir to the throne. His father had said that she was the only other descendent of the Eastern Kings, and he had to save her to defeat the evil Emperor and restore the Kingdom.

The boy had already completed the first half of the hero's journey; his father's dying wish gave him the call to adventure, he had received supernatural aid from a wise sage, crossed the mountains into the unknown Empire territory and overcome many challenges and temptations. He now approached the climax of his journey, the castle holding the Princess.

The castle seemed impregnable, but luckily for Ash, it was a Kingdom fort before it fell to the Empire. He approached the wall, and pushed a particular brick. Instantaneously, sections of the wall slid back to reveal a narrow passageway. After navigating the pitch-black tunnel, he arrived at a wooden door. The hero steadied himself, drew his sword, and kicked the door off its hinges.

"I am the last prince of the Eastern Kings, rightful heir to the throne. Release the Princess immediately!"

The cloaked figure leaned back on his throne, sword in hand. Beside him was a young girl, bound to the wall. A dozen guards raised their weapons and charged the boy, but the valiant hero slew them one by one. Drenched in blood, the boy lunged at the figure, but he was too slow. The evil Emperor drove his blade into the hero's gut. All went dark.

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Ash awoke in a white place.

"Hello Ashley. I am Deus Ex Machina, but you can call me Deus for short."

Ash rubbed his eyes.

"Am I dead?"

"Not yet. Welcome, to the God Complex."

"The 'God Complex'?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Well, who do you think created you?"

"My father."

"And who created him?"

"His father, I suppose."

“So, if I were to continue to ask you this question, you would answer as such?”

He nodded. “I am the last prince of the Eastern Kings, rightful heir to the throne.”

“...Right. So before you, endless generations have passed. But if there were an uncountable number of years before your birth, how did we ever arrive in the present?”

Ashley was silent. After a moment, I continued, “There must be a first generation, an uncaused cause for your existence. The world does not rest on an infinite regression of turtles, and neither does your existence. I am the primordial being of this Universe. I created you.”

“What!? How is that possible?”

I grabbed a thick yellow folder from a nearby table and flicked through the contents. “Let me prove it to you. Try to remember the name of your father. You’ve lived almost every day of your life with him. Surely you know your own father’s name?”

I kept my eyes glued to the folder, now scrutinising the “T” section. I didn’t want to watch him as it happened.

“De- Deus?”

“Yes, Ashley?” I found the documents I was looking for and pulled them out. “I’m- I’m not...” his voice croaked. “I’m not real. I’m not real, am I?”

I turned to my friend and handed him a few sheets of paper. “When I let you go, you won’t remember that.”

Tears welled in his eyes as he read the pages. “This is about me...” He let a page fall to the ground. “...It’s about my quest to save the Princess...” another page fell.

“That’s right Ashley. This is your story. Notice how it only uses ‘father’? Notice how you cannot remember his name? It’s because I didn’t give him a name. It wasn’t important to the story. I’m sorry.”

Slowly, more and more pages covered the floor. Finally, Ashley held just one page. “It ends here... in the God Complex.”

He looked up to me. “Why do this to me? Create me and then tell me my entire existence is a lie? I am worth nothing, Deus. I am not real.”

“You’re worth something, to me. And to your father. And to her.”

His face contorted with fury. “She is a lie. Don’t talk to me about the Princess, I hate her, and I hate you too!”

“I created you because I loved you.”

“Loved me enough to bind my destiny, carved in immortal ink on pages of stone?”

“I am Deus Ex Machina. I come to heroes in desperate need. Look, the story does not end here.”

Sure enough, words continued to scrawl themselves on the page, documenting their dialogue and occasionally adding helpful descriptions.

“You’re a brave boy, Prince Ashley. Now, it’s your turn to write your destiny. Go on, read it.”

The boy lifted the page, and began to read,

“This is the story of Prince Ashley. And this, is how it ends...”

**Comrade**  
By Alisha Gupta

Not because of the screeches of my friends, but because of my enemies, does war pierce through me like a speared fish.

I think of all of my fellow soldiers as friends, and the men on the other end all of the same motivation and pride as me.

It is that, if I had just been born into a different family,

If I had been standing opposite my mates,

Me and my enemies could have made the best of friends.

These are the thoughts which circle in my head as I shoot a man dressed in green dead.

## Summer Oranges

By Alisha Gupta

You hate oranges.

No, that's probably an exaggeration. After all, you can't hate something you've never tried.

You explain to me that, yes you can hate something you've never tried when they are squishy and sour smelling and rarely ripe.

I tell you to wait another ten months, because you'll see when summer comes.

You still hate oranges.

This time when you tell me this, I say that it's definitely an exaggeration, because I can see your nimble fingers eagerly picking up piece after piece of the fruit and popping it into your mouth, a smile threatening to brighten your face.

When you say that it's not an exaggeration at all, I tell you to wait another seven months, for when summer comes.

You think that oranges are okay enough.

You say this begrudgingly, and make sure that I understand that you're only saying this because that orange cake we baked was decent.

I smile, whether in a sense of achievement or affection I'm not sure, and tell you that there is only another four months until summer comes.

You like oranges.

No correction, you really like oranges. You like oranges so much that it scares you. I tell you that it's okay, because we can love oranges together.

When you say that you will decide just how much you like oranges and whether or not you want to eat them in the summer, I'm the happiest I've ever been and I think you are too. There's only one month until summer comes.

You hate oranges.

You're not exaggerating and I know this, perhaps even better than you do.

No matter what you think or what you want to feel, you hate oranges, you cannot stand oranges.

And I am left with no choice but to peel the oranges by myself. When I try one, it is juicy and ripe and just the right balance between sweet and sharp. Even though summer came, and these were the summer oranges we had waited so long and patiently for, I know that you would never like them.

Now I sometimes think that if love is the equivalent of oranges, then all of my memories of you must have just been me

Dreaming with my eyes open.

## **Various Stories**

By Alisha Gupta

Stories with happy endings,  
Give us the sense of fulfilment we need.  
We search for action in films to feel the thrill of adventure.  
Stories based on true events?  
They show us the heroic deeds of ideals we should strive to be.  
And the reason we long for sad films,  
Is to remind us what should be valued most.



## **Gala of the Lights**

By Lavanya Jyothis

The colours gushed onto the pavement. A slow violin began singing, and they danced across the grey floor as gracefully as swans, their steps a magnificent, harmonious chaos. Then the real music commenced. It was the intelligent kind, reading the dancers, reconstructing itself to complement the flavour of each of their moods. Magenta led Lemon in an exuberant swing, while Teal found a match in the tall, brooding Violet, entwining her caramel arm in his chocolate embrace, as their shy inception evolved into a gainly ballet duet across the coarse floor. As the dancers picked up speed, so did the zealous spirit of the event. Like a rich fragrance spreading through a room, the electricity, enigmatic by nature, disseminated effervescence throughout their hearts. The first to receive it was Pink, who intrinsically commanded the spotlight, her ivory skin flushing as Lime spun her. Gold strode through the crowd to reach Lime, her voluptuous figure clad in a striking gold and mocha ensemble. Sapphire trailed around the room in a gown that transitioned from the watery blue of dawn to the magnificent shade of the deep ocean, a dress she designed herself. Her alluring smile had Emerald enchanted as they bantered throughout their Kathak dance duet. In the meantime, Charcoal led Dove in a slow, ambling waltz around the other guests as Amber and Saffron hid their lovely faces behind Crimson's gown. Their father, Lemon, chatted to Cherry and Wine. Cherry's deep, eloquent voice, mellifluous to any ear, supplemented her entrancing visage and dark waterfall of locks that cascaded down her pale shoulder. As she spoke, she lightly fingered a slender ring. The one Wine wore matched. Their exchange ended, and Cherry glided off with Wine, his arm assuredly around her willowy waist. Despite his composed exterior, tongues of ruby and sparks of gold perpetually danced in Wine's soulful eyes and only grew more piquant in Cherry's presence.

# **Atalanta**

By Megan Phoon

Illustrated by Emily Zhang

The weathered callouses on the soles of her feet burst once more, as the ripened peach splits when it falls and strikes the ground. She paid the sting no mind, her reddened face turned toward the sun. Such inconsequential pains could do naught to slow her stride. As her shoulders bounced, her finery dragged through the mud.

Her swift sprints reduced her form to but a blur to the average bystander. Although her beads of sweat watered the yet barren ground, and although her cheeks were marred with sunburns, her effortless bounds were endless and graceful. Her raven plait succeeded her, flying behind her much like a banner waving through the breeze. Her crown was lopsided, and no God or man held more power than her in this instant.

The boy lagging behind her was a purebred, royal sort. His beauty was untarnished by the marks of the world outside of his gilded palace; the refined words that spun from his lips betrayed the silver spoon so evidently placed upon them. It seemed a waste of good looks, that he had only until Atalanta reached the finish line to show off that unperishable youth.

He must have been arrogant, she thought, if he ever thought he could beat me, knowing the price of his failure. Thus, she felt justified in accelerating past the cheering crowds and towards the end of the race.

As she stepped over the line, a servant handed her an apple. In her periphery, the prince fell to his knees in exhaustion, just as a myriad of her other suitors had before him. As she grasped the fruit, one of her personal guards sighed and drew his bow. She bit in, and an arrow flew past- yet another noble met his end to her contest. The juices of the apple ran down her chin. It tasted of wildness, of her upbringing in the wilderness.

Few memories of her childhood remained, her past painted over by the strokes of recent luxury. She remembers the claws of her would-be-mother cradling the side of her tiny body, and the softness of her fur as she rode along her back. If she strained, a few images of spearing fish and raiding the honeycomb from beehives alongside her guardian appear, but she could not recall them well enough to discern how real they were. More vividly is the echo of her true mother being speared by her father's men as Atalanta was swept away to the nearby city to be treated to endless feasts other would hunt for her, elegant gowns tailored for her scarred skin and riches one could drown a man in.

If she squinted, she could reminisce of events further in the past. She remembered her birth mother's screams of anguish as Atalanta's father discarded his daughter on a mountain. By the time her hunting had made a name for herself, and her father had decided that her newfound prestige and desirability made her equal to a son, her birth mother had passed. Some say that her grief consumed her until she fell victim to death's embrace, and still more say that her subsequent miscarriages took a toll on her health.

She would slow for none, no matter how kind they may seem. She had learned, anyway, that the niceties of men were often akin to the disguised tangles of rope and wire she used to place along the ground- traps for prey.

She had always been the hunter, not the bounty- and so she would not allow herself to be ensnared by the simpering of charming men.

The nymphs of the mountains, her sisters, the spirits of her mothers who yet wandered the earth in silent, unwavering grief- she vowed to carry their voices. Perhaps, one woman could not achieve what she wished to- but she was a legion of scorned women personified. When she screamed, the voices of dozens wailed alongside her. The souls of every woman felled to the hubris of a man coursed through her blood, their collective power coursing through her invulnerable veins. She- they- were a monolith, and were glorious in their fury.

She hid in the grass, awaiting her venomous strike. It was not vengeance- it was justice. Her father's life, and the lives of these blue-blooded braggarts would propitiate those of the wounded women whose hunger for retribution Atalanta had adopted.

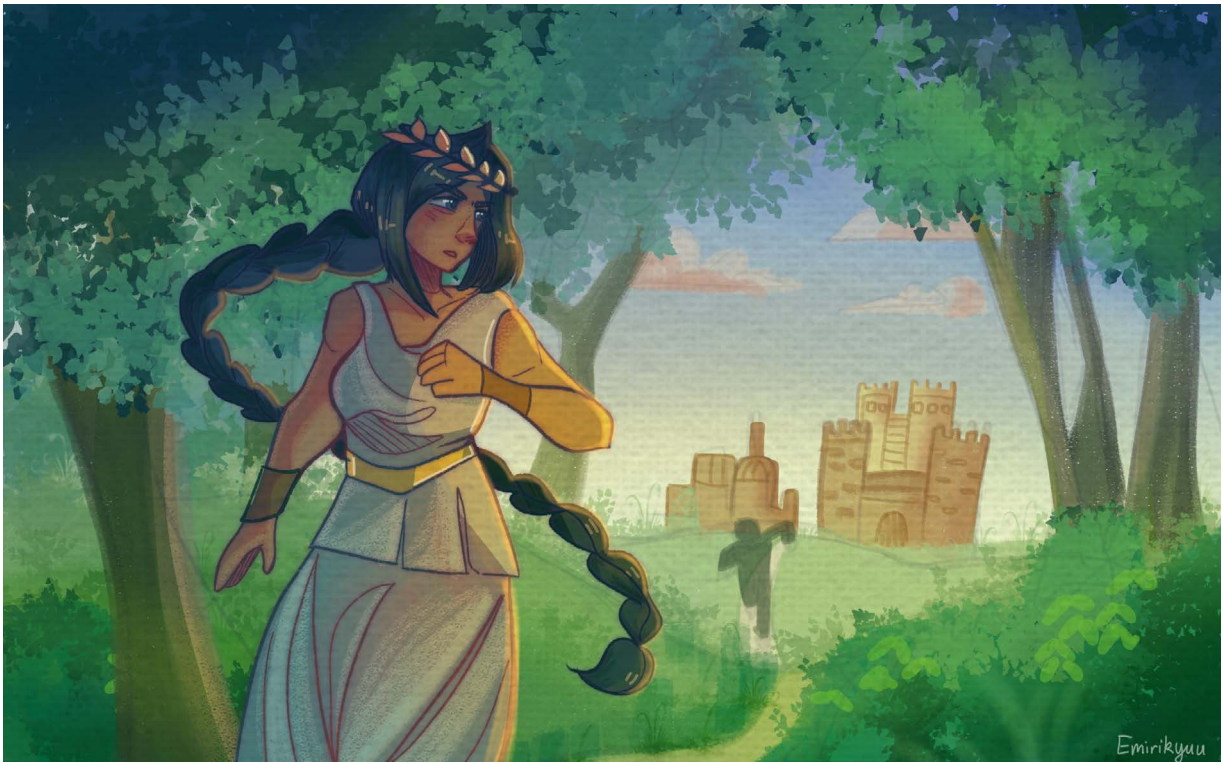
Hell hath no fury, after all.

She consumed the apple whole, and spat out the seeds.

"Who's next?" She rolled her shoulders back, her grin wolfish.

The next suitor emerged from the crowd, his face hopeful, and she smiled.

Easy prey.



Emily Zhang

## **Amidst Amazon Jungle**

By Sanjana Shankar  
Illustrated by Sanjana Shankar

The hallway has as much persona as the rest of the hospital. The floor is grey, and the walls dove. Above the ceiling is made from those polystyrene squares set on a grid-like frame. The light was too jarring for my eyes. After being in the obscuring gloom, that is my room; It was abrasive enough to bring my migraines back. This place certainly isn't run by risk-takers, and I guess I should find comfort in that. Above every door I pass is a large plastic sign, dark with white lettering- no fancy or calligraphic fonts, all just bold and capitalized. It's so new and pristine, I feel like the whole building must have just gotten beamed here from some-place dirt is outlawed.

All my days begin with how it was the one before. I don't want to get up. I don't want to move. And in that moment, it takes everything in my strength as I must make a good choice, to reach for an oxygen tank and take a breath. It didn't seem like it was worth the effort. When your parents are constantly fighting, and you have only yourself for company, nothing was expedient. The ending of life is expected, we all live in this mortal plane. What I resent is that death being longer and more afflictive than it needs to be. My body will self-destruct, day by day. The tumour will grow, spread, consume, squash the very organs that work to sustain it. I've had a pretty good life. Better than most. I don't need to hang on as a living ghoul; an "exit" pill would be kinder than all the attention from the hospice staff that lies ahead.

Jayla enters the room without slowing her stride at all. One moment she was in the corridor, bringing the food for today and the next second, she was grabbing my hand to take a pulse. Nurse Jayla was an uncommon gift to this hospital. She never became impatient or belittled me during my pains. Unlike other nurses, she spoke like we were still people, people who mattered, not just withered old bones too stubborn to die any faster. As her gaze fell on me, it held the warmth of a mother's eyes, and her voice was deep yet honeyed.

"So, Ethan, how have you been today?" she asked, concerned.

"Not great. Why take medicines when you're going to die anyway?" I groaned in desolation. "When every bit of your life is falling apart, what is all this for?"

"These pills, these help you, Ethan. They give you the strength you need," she assured. "If your parachute seems like it won't make it, you know what you should do?" she asked.

I shook my head.

"Take the leap of faith; trust the magic of new beginnings. Try something new. Talk to people, make new friends. Draw, read, paint, sleep. Do whatever you feel like. You only have one life," she smiled. "Sweetie, sometimes our lives have to be completely shaken up, changed and rearranged to relocate to the place we're meant to be."

Her speech had a liberal dose of terms of endearment. When she spoke to all of us like that, those that were battling for our lives, it made you feel special. But what she said, those words echoed in my head...

From what I've learned in the past few years of my journey in cancer, it is to fly solo, and fly to new heights and see new views. And when your plane is stricken and struggling to make it, force it to fly. Take the jump. Even if it means landing in the middle of the Amazon Jungle by yourself. When one can admire tranquillity and accept the quiet day as much they do a blank canvas, the room before you can be as the sky to a bird. Even though, it is much nicer, to soar in hands of good company, to sing together and spark joy in one another, if this forlorn road is the way towards the descends, I'm okay. I looked up, to the side of my room. A blank canvas rested on an easel. "a gift from dad" I muttered. A box of paint and oil pastel lay next to it, wrapped in a bright, red bow.

"This is how I stay alive." I thought to myself. "This is how the universe reaches me and tells me good things are coming."



Sanjana Shankar

YEAR TEN



## **Rhythmic Games**

By Anonymous

The rhythmic thudding went on and on in my head. Each thud getting louder than the one before.

tha-dum, tha-dum, THA-DUM, THA-DUM, **THA-DUM!**

Soon all I could hear was that dreaded noise. I had no idea why it wouldn't go away. Actually no I did. My brain notoriously liked to torture me, not just a few minutes but often for days on end. Why? Just cos, it's our fun little game apparently. Regardless I just needed to find a way to sleep, before the next day arrives.

# **The Demon That Lives in My Head**

By Anonymous

She knows my weaknesses that are hidden in me

So well hidden that I don't even see

Hidden in every crevice and crack

Something that I wish could send back

Back to the place where it belongs

Back to the place where it came from

Under and over the valleys so far

Over the hills and oceans and not by car

Never I want to hear them again

Never I want to fear them again

Never I want to cry again because of the demon that lives inside my head

I plea and beg for her to stop

Only to be met by even more on top

The dreadful sound of her shouting and screaming

"You're a dumb, idiotic, lazy dreamer

Who only deserves nothing

Nothing but creamer on the coffee

The coffee you drink to stay awake

To make sure to pass the classes you take"

I know she lies, like she always does

She just wants to see me buzz

Buzz with fear and terror of her voice

The voice that torments me without a choice  
I need to take control of the situation  
I recite my mantra three times just so I can  
Never hear them again  
Never fear them again  
Never cry again because of the demon that lives inside my head

“Into your brain every moment  
I scream, I scream the truth  
The truth that you know that runs this show  
I am you and you are me  
All your pain is manifested as me  
Until you die I will be here  
To cause more tears  
As you take your last breaths I will scream  
See, you are just as pathetic as you seem”  
I shout at myself to just shut up  
To make sure that I don't wind up  
In the same spot years ago  
With a plan ready to go  
I repeat my mantra that I say everyday  
To send the evil thoughts away  
Why? because  
Never I want to hear them again  
Never I want to fear them again

Never I want to cry again because of the demon that lives inside my head

I try to shut her out, I really do

But what can one do, when you feel like a zoo

Filled with animals screaming near and far

How horrible of a person you are

Just for feeling and wanting to be heard

“What a selfish person!” yells a red bird

Is this the demon I have been scared of before

The one that is now a red bird not more?

No it can't be, it isn't, couldn't possibly be

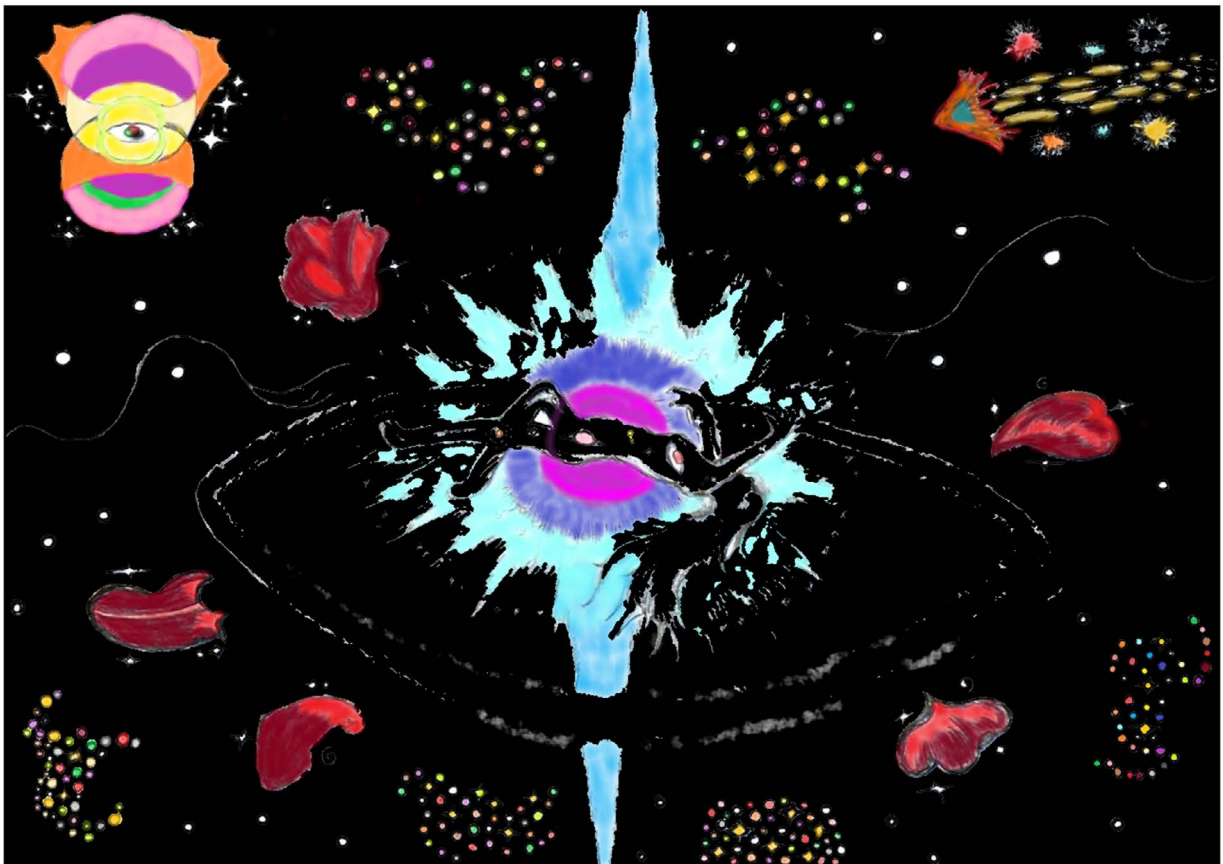
Why? Cos the demon is me.

## **Aether**

By Zeana Cole

Illustrated by Winston Wijaya

She had floated amongst the silence for eons. Drifted past the shimmering, ever-cheerful nebulas, who waved as she passed them by. Chased the playful comets, who had always loved to tease, streaking away from her, trailed by their dazzling tails. Turned herself away from the alluring call of the black holes, wishing she was brave enough to let herself fall in, to fall and fall and fall until the end of time. Watched a supernova blossom like a beautiful flower made of light, its glowing petals unfurling and sending waves of destruction through the galaxies. Stared at the stars and tried to see past them to the other side. For on the other side was the maker, silently weaving the strings of life, love and death into a great tapestry. The maker, painting moments onto the canvass of the universe. An invisible weaver, an unseen artist, a conductor of a silent symphony. But just as all are woven together, old strings fray and colours fade. Her eternity was one built up of memories, of passing moments, echoing through the void of space and time. Now, the thread of her life is growing thin and worn, the colours of her portraits fading; soon a new string will be tied in to continue the pattern, a fresh layer of paint begun. There is a snip, a breath, a beat of a heart. She closes her starlit eyes for the last time, lost within the vast black of her home. And she smiles.



Winston Wijaya

## **In the absence of courage**

By Zeana Cole

I look out into a sea of empty eyes, their hollow stares burning through the fragile walls around my pounding heart. It feels as if an age has passed since I rose and took my place before this ghostly jury, the journey draining every vital word from my mind and stealing the breath from my lungs. Some vengeful beast is trying to claw its way out of my chest, and rivers of fire run through my veins instead of blood. I begin to tremble; cards of white flutter to the ground, and with them the remaining sliver of my courage. I cannot do this, and that realisation threatens to send me plummeting into the abyss that yawns beneath my feet. Frantic thoughts echo inside my mind; a primal sense of fear overriding reason, and though I long to flee I see now it would be impossible. This eerie court has begun to change, warping and twisting, and I watch as the vacant forms of my accusers morph into those of hideous demons, with cheshire grins and laughing eyes. The demons grow in size, rising up and swarming forwards, long talons reaching for my throat. Time slows as I wait for the cold hand of death to rest upon my shoulder, and I am tempted to give in, to surrender to the abyss. Its soothing voice is calling me, welcoming me, promising to shield me from the stares. The stares. Their eyes, they follow me; their gazes crawl through the chasms in my mind and drag my terror into the light. I can hear them now, their cackles sending shivers down my spine and fuelling a kind of rage within my soul. I want to scream, shout, anything; stop looking at me. Stop looking at me! DON'T LOOK AT ME! Don't look at me... The abyss will protect me, will keep them away. Yes. Safe. Good. I lean, reach out, let myself fall into the warm arms of the black. Don't look... at me... Don't... look.

## **It was a dark and stormy night**

By Zeana Cole

It was a dark and stormy night. And the skipper said to the mate, “mate, tell me a story.”  
And this is the story that he told.

It was a dark and stormy night. And the skipper said to the mate, “mate, tell me a story.”  
And this is the story that he told.

It was a dark and stormy night, and the skipper said to the mate, “best to get this mess off the deck, ‘fore we come to shore”. “Yes, that’d be best”, the mate agreed, and got the mess off the deck.

It was a dark and stormy night, and the skipper said to the mate, “best to get this mess off the deck, ‘fore we come to shore”. “I suppose t’would be best”, the mate conceded, and got the mess off the deck.

It was a dark and stormy night, and the skipper said to the mate, “best to get this mess off the deck, ‘fore we come to shore”. “As you wish”, the mate replied, and got the mess off the deck.

It was a dark and stormy night, and the skipper said to the mate, “hurry up and get this mess off the deck, man, ‘fore we come to shore”. And the mate got the mess off the deck.

It was a dark and stormy night, and the mate left the mess on the deck.

It was a bright and cloudless morning, and the dockmaster cried “Lord have mercy!”, as he stared at the mess on the deck.

It was a bright and cloudless morning, and the crew were taken in chains. Their mess had been left on the deck; it rippled and glistened and gleamed.

It was a dull and dreary day, and thirty men hung in the square. A young boy said to his father, “Papa, what had they done?”. “They left their mess on the deck, lad, and their left-overs down below”.

It was a dull and dreary day, and a foul stench wafted over the docks. For a mess had been left on a deck, and the bodies been left down below.



## Ode to Chaos

By Zeana Cole

Humanity dreams of Order  
Is what they say –  
That we need peace and calm and  
*quiet*

Pride is not allowed  
And any selfish acts are carved  
From our hearts and offered to the  
**law**

But I think they are wrong  
We all need a little Chaos –  
Some colour in our  
black and white

A little **blood** spilled never hurt  
anyone  
And besides  
isn't it so much more  
**fun?**

## **Poppies**

By Zeana Cole

I rise with the setting of the sun, and reach out, as I always do, to touch the last of its shimmering rays; the last of the light; and remember for a moment the life I had before. Then the light fades, and as the darkness creeps across the fields, I turn to greet my comrades. Each night we dance beneath the moon, and we tell great tales; legends of good and evil, of mighty heroes and fearsome villains, and of those who were somewhere in-between. We sing, and we laugh, and we remember joy; but sometimes I begin to remember too much, and I see the ragged clothes of my brothers, the flesh torn apart by fear and hate, the empty eyes and quiet hearts. And then I forget again, and all is well. Sometimes people come to visit us; they cry over the stakes others plunged into the soil long ago, and crush our souls beneath their feet. We are tied to this place, and are always able to return, but can never leave. Our eternity is long, and always much the same, but we are free of our pasts, for which we are grateful; who we were before matters not. As morning nears once again, I sense a young child standing nearby. She seems entranced by my soul, crouching down to admire it; she is so innocent; she should not be here. Just as the first light of the sun rises over the horizon, she leans down and pulls me from the ground. As I feel myself begin to fade, I thank her for giving me a glimpse of the bright world above, even if it is only for a moment. She smiles down at me, and though I know she has no idea what she holds in her hands, as she caresses the soft petals of my heart, I find myself smiling back, up at the lone figure in the sea of red.

## Why Do We Try

By Nikini Perera

I pushed through the sweeping curtains and stepping into the room, to my horror, the cauldron that had been haunting my nightmares stood under a lifeless light. Was this another nightmare? Had the words taken me back to this hellish world? The thunder rumbled, signalling a pending storm outside the family manor. The darkness crept along her room's perimeter, stalking ... watching ... planning. Will I meet my faith? They cannot take me now; I have done nothing wrong!

NO! You cannot think of such a thing! What if they are still watching ... planning? I tentatively take a step forward. The weight of my secrets drags me down. I feel my body sag. With every step, I feel my soul being sucked down into the abyss. They are coming for me. I have run this far, but how far can I go until I meet the end? Damn this castle! Damn the spirits that torment every waking moment! I was doing their bidding! Must I be punished so mercilessly for my devotion? Pain ... pain ... PAIN! I cannot take any more. I crawl with the little power I have left and haul myself up to the cauldron's edge. My skin tingles. I know my secrets have been buried for long, but the truth will emerge, and it will undoubtedly end with my demise. The pungent odour of my wrongdoings swirl in the sickening green liquid of my life. I gaze into the dark depths, and I see it. I see her. She who initiated the domino effect. Like in my previous nightmares, it came from nowhere, the harrowing screeches from the last moments of her life.

"Help me, brother! Help me! Why can you not do so?! Do it!" I claw at my ears, the words tangling in my brain, resonating in every minuscule crevice. I cannot get them out! I drop to the ground, the words ripping through my skin and shredding my soul. Entering, bright and sharp, exiting jagged and bloody. The taste of copper blood fills my mouth. I am drowning. It's too much! I want to scream my lungs out, but what if it happens again? Oh, my dear sister! This was not my intention! They did not reveal the entire truth; how was I supposed to know that my efforts would end in disaster? He did not tell me! The ground beneath my writhing body begins to crack. One spindly line into two, into four. This must indeed be the end. They have finished stalking, watching, planning. Without a moment to spare, they emerge. They surge towards me, talons yearning for my flesh, blood, bones, soul. I try to cover my face, but it's no use. They shred my skin layer upon layer. I roll feverishly in a pool of blood, the pain intensifying. Her cries crescendo. When the shrill vibrations reach a fortissimo, the ceiling-length doors fly open with a deafening boom. The Calvary has arrived. The darkness hurtles out with more ferocity than before. There is no more to my life. I know I have failed her, and my inner darkness has finally disposed of its master. I fall.

Light filters through my fluttering eyes. I feel weightless. I am gradually descending. They guide me on my way. I am bathed in darkness. I am hoisted like a rag doll but by my own accord. My master must have a new assignment for me.

## Reflection

By Elena Sarandeva

I stepped into the room, and to my horror, it was still there. Unmoved. I told Mark. I clearly remember telling my lovely, yet slow husband to move the damn thing out of here weeks ago. I asked him many times. He replied: Yes, dear. I will. Just not now. I'm busy. Just let me finish this form, this paper, this phone call! There was always something. And that's not all. The last time I brought it up, he said: Why do you want it removed anyway? It's just a mirror. I have to work, dear. Just a mirror? If he only knew.

Now, as I sit back into my soft lilac armchair, I lean back and realise that I might have been a bit of a hassle to my dear Mark. I mean, him constantly working is annoying but necessary. And really, I cannot complain. I get to live in this beautiful house with tall ceilings held up by robust golden arches. Each room meticulously designed to please even the Queen. Except for my attic. It has one small window peering over the front gate that I keep closed with these cute, little, grey blinds. In the middle is a big round red carpet that Mark thought ugly, but I thought unique. The walls are covered in this fabulous, mythic, maroon wallpaper with white figures dancing along it. Everything was perfect. Except for that travesty in the middle. The frame was old. It had these mesmerising patterns that ran all along it. Put in place to distract you from your mission. The legs were small, dark brown and strong enough to support it. The back was humbler and more reserved. One's not supposed to look in the back of the mirror, so a simple black coat suffices.

Oh, how it glared. I would have thrown it out myself if I could, but it was so ridiculously heavy that it took five men to carry it when we first moved here. Mark doesn't believe that sometimes, I see more than my reflection as I look into the mirror. More so, I see a distorted version. The job of the mirror is to show the truth. Nevertheless, this one was lying. It played tricks with my mind. I'm not crazy. I know it! The people we had taken it from had a daughter that ended up dead, from unfortunate circumstances! I thought the mirror was enticing back then, unaware of its dark powers. The girl gave into it, but I wasn't going to let it win.

Mark doesn't like being disturbed, and I did not want to get in the way of the servants, so I stayed here occasionally. Sometimes I heard it whisper. Often, I would see things, reflections of objects that weren't there. Shadows! Human shadows lurked around the attic's darker corners, and as I turned around, they were gone. The dancing figures on the wallpaper will move from their stable positions in synchronised movements to taunt me. I tried to show Mark. But the mirror was too smart, and my husband was never the one for being open-minded. It wasn't only me and the shadows it distorted, but everything. My cute grey curtains were dreary and torn. My beautiful red-carpet, provoking. My walls: bleak and disquieting, and worst of all, my lilac armchair - colourless and dry.

I didn't know what to do but confront the devil straight in the face. I took a deep breath and admired its dark exterior for the dozenth time. The most important part a mirror is the actual glass. As I looked closer, I saw how the light that peaked from the curtains would travel towards it and break on the surface. Not immediately, but more like a ripple. It would glimmer and then hold still. It was so beautiful. If only I could touch the

surface, I would know what to do. The whispers in the background drilled their way into my head. They spread through the room and focused on where I was. I needed to know why the reflection was so broken. I saw the mirror reach its arm forward as I did. Slowly, I moved in closer. I tilted my head forward and looked at the other me. My head moved. Her's didn't. Why didn't it? I tried to pull away, but it was as if my legs were glued to the floor. I needed to know the truth, but I wasn't going to let it win. I felt a throbbing pain in the front of my skull and screamed. I pulled away. I had come so close to giving in. But I didn't. I had won. For now.

Days passed before I had another chance to investigate. Mark had this big merger in his company, so I had to deal with the parties and the guests. There was a lot of pointless banter and workplace jokes, and I couldn't wait to get upstairs and finish my mission . I told everyone I was feeling ill and made my way upstairs. I was going to finish this once and for all.

As my hand touched the cold knob of the door, I knew I had to make a plan. Ha! If I approach the mirror from behind, it might not see me, giving me the time to destroy it. The back of the mirror faced the door, so there was no reason it would know I was there. I had a plan. Silently, I open the door, take the chair beside it, and make my way across the room. If only it knew its impending fate. Part of me wondered how I had never thought of this before, but it wasn't the time to ponder such things. I raise the chair and lunge. I felt a tingling sensation spreading through me. It was as if every emotion of the human mind attacked me at once. I blinked momentarily, and the mirror was gone. Had I done it? Then I looked forwards and saw the chair on its side, placed neatly in front of me. She stared back at me, seemingly unaware that I had defeated her. Didn't she know that I had won? Had I? It didn't feel like it. I reach forward to grab and wrestle the monster to the ground. But a loud thump stops me. I look down and see my arms stationary, unable to move forward. They are pressing against thin air in front of my chest. A dark chill spread through my body, and as I look up, I see her gazing into my eyes, smiling.

## **Tell me, who are you?**

By Elena Sarandeva

Illustrated by Ria Gupta

Tell me, who are you?  
Tell me of your hopes and dreams,  
And what you aspire.  
Tell me where you come from,  
And where you are going.  
Tell me of your lies and secrets,  
Of what keeps you awake.  
What is it that makes you you,  
In a sea of grains of sand?  
What is it that makes you different,  
Stand out from the crowd?  
Is it the way you walk or talk,  
Or the way you dress and play around?  
Is it the way you learn and work,  
Or the way you care and comfort?  
Or is it the skeletons in your closet,  
And the secrets you keep locked away?  
Is it the battles you've faced,  
Or how you overcame them?  
Is it what gets you excited, angry,  
Scared, hopeful or stressed.  
Is it the people around you,  
Is it what they say?  
What is it that makes you different?  
What makes you you?  
Tell me.  
Tell me, who are you?



Ria Gupta

## **Elegy from your dead enemy**

By Audrey Wiseno

Illustrated by Dulansa Rodrigo

Sorry, solace is not heard by the ghosts  
No ears to spare, no grief you play, is heard  
Damn any pity for your large kind words  
Just said to make you feel and look better

Those flowers you put on my grave last morn'  
Do me as much good as your contempt, hid  
-A cheap sacrifice to fool the blind gods  
Entertainment, while hiding your piles ' sins,  
Shading rats looking for heaven in a trashcan

We'll cry at your goveling, for your hatred of life  
Makes our previous lives look less hellish  
Not like German fairytales, all brutish,  
But more like pathetic throw away lines  
Of a comedian's- more truth than those  
Pageant animals from your horrid lips





Dulansa Rodrigo

## **Fragmented Ae Freislighe**

By Audrey Wiseno

Few days ago on travel,  
I saw particular cats  
With long tails that unravel  
Wearing, no, hailing, hats!

Last Tuesday had storms of hail  
To think I saw turtles  
Is quite absurd; perhaps sail  
Brought these desert fish (purple)

On topic, Thursday was weird-  
Outside the house: a vulture!  
Hear now that it had a beard.  
Reminds me: aquaculture.

Out at the fish farm, I saw  
Ten tigers resting on pews  
Perhaps there's a country law  
That allows animals' sue.

## **Ode to Our Mess**

By Audrey Wiseno

I want to hide in these arms, cuddle up in this hair,  
Not give a damn if you're here,  
Watching me swallow my grief  
Because when I wake up  
Search with small broken wails  
I know that you're there,  
Watching when nobody should care.

Test these walls, tainted nails  
Are they mine,  
or is that too unfair?  
See the papers soar up  
But trust that they'll be there  
Floating back to the floor  
For you to pick up  
Let's save it for later,  
And go for chips and, ketchup

Dance in these new ivories  
Prefer the dresses outside  
To shop windows, wearing cool overalls  
Down the cobblestone walls, here we'll sit  
Drown it all

I'm tired, I'm scared,  
This bottle's not enough  
Sure, there'll be more  
But is it ever enough  
I'm spinning, repeating,  
See the signs that are pleading  
One day I'll see them but for now I'll  
Believe them.

YEAR ELEVEN

**brother i sorry**  
By Farhan Andalib

I write  
Because I haven't written lately  
And you live on in these lines  
Otherwise my memories  
They whisper me lies.

I write because  
I struggle a lot  
Often battling my own thoughts  
My worst enemy  
Wouldn't be here  
Unless I learnt to  
Forgive me  
A thousand times.

I write to process what happened  
Tell me is it the same for you?  
Its been the same  
For me, many days now  
Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow  
But tomorrow never comes.  
Tell me do you live in tomorrow as it  
Turns to today  
And today is torture  
Tomorrow is a day  
I never got to see.

I write to attain Peace  
Godly status, complexes, material successes  
Never did appeal to me.  
Yet I knell  
To any that are Happy  
Or attain Peace  
These are Things I know little about

I write because that's what  
My counsellor told me to do  
To process my trauma  
She has an aura  
Of Calmness and Tranquility  
I wish to attain  
I write because its what keeps me from insanity  
Seated on the edge of Sanity  
Looking out on the sea of grief

I write because it passes the time  
They told me  
That time heals all wounds  
So I've been waiting patiently  
Bleeding steadily  
Perhaps  
Tomorrow it'll stop.

I write to rhyme  
Call it poetry  
Call it rap  
Call it a bundle of lies  
A lid to the bottle that's pain.  
Brother, I write  
Cause I'm sorry  
I wish I was better  
I wish things turned out differently  
Call you one last time  
Tell you, I loved you dearly  
Just didn't know it then.  
Brother, I'm sorry  
I haven't written lately, because every time I write  
You come alive.

I write because  
No one did believe in me  
Somehow you saw something  
And told me to keep it alive within me  
Ingenuity  
I made a promise  
Inspired by your Eulogy  
I'll keep going for you  
Even if the light at the end of the tunnel I cannot see.

# **NOTHINGLEFT**

By Farhan Andalib

Illustrated by Jazlyn Yap

WHEN WILL I SEE YOU?  
IT'S BEEN TOO LONG  
TRYING TO MANIFEST  
TOOK AWAY SOMETHING THAT SEEMED GRANTED  
TELL ME  
WHY AM I STILL HERE  
WHEN YOU AREN'T

TO CALL THIS HELL ON EARTH  
WOULD BE AN UNDERSTATEMENT  
WHEN I CLOSE MY EYES  
I TELL MYSELF  
THIS'LL BE THE LAST TIME  
AND MAYBE I'LL SEE YOU AGAIN

TO THINK OF YOU ALIVE IS SO MUCH WORSE  
THAN BURIED AND DEAD  
ALL THESE WOES  
WHAT DOES IT MATTER ANYMORE  
IN THE DAYLIGHT WON'T SHOW  
ALL THESE TEARS SHED  
TELL ME  
NOW DO YOU ONLY EXIST IN MY HEAD?

I'M SLEEPING DEEPER INTO THE NIGHT  
KEPT IN THIS LIFE BY SOME UNKNOWN FORCE  
ETERNAL WEEPING, AND WITHIN ME HATRED SEETHING.  
ALL I'VE KNOWN IS REMORSE  
THE ENDLESS WAKING NIGHTMARE I'M FLEETING  
FROM MY WRISTS BLOOD STEADY SEEPING

WHEN WILL I SEE YOU?  
IT'S BEEN TOO LONG  
TRYING TO MANIFEST  
TOOK AWAY SOMETHING THAT SEEMED GRANTED  
TELL ME  
WHY AM I STILL HERE  
WHEN YOU AREN'T

I KNOW YOU'D WANT ME TO MOVE ON AND DO BETTER  
BUT I CAN'T DO THAT WITHOUT YOU  
YOU WERE THE BETTER HALF  
PEACE ETERNALLY EVANESCENT  
STARING AT THE WALL

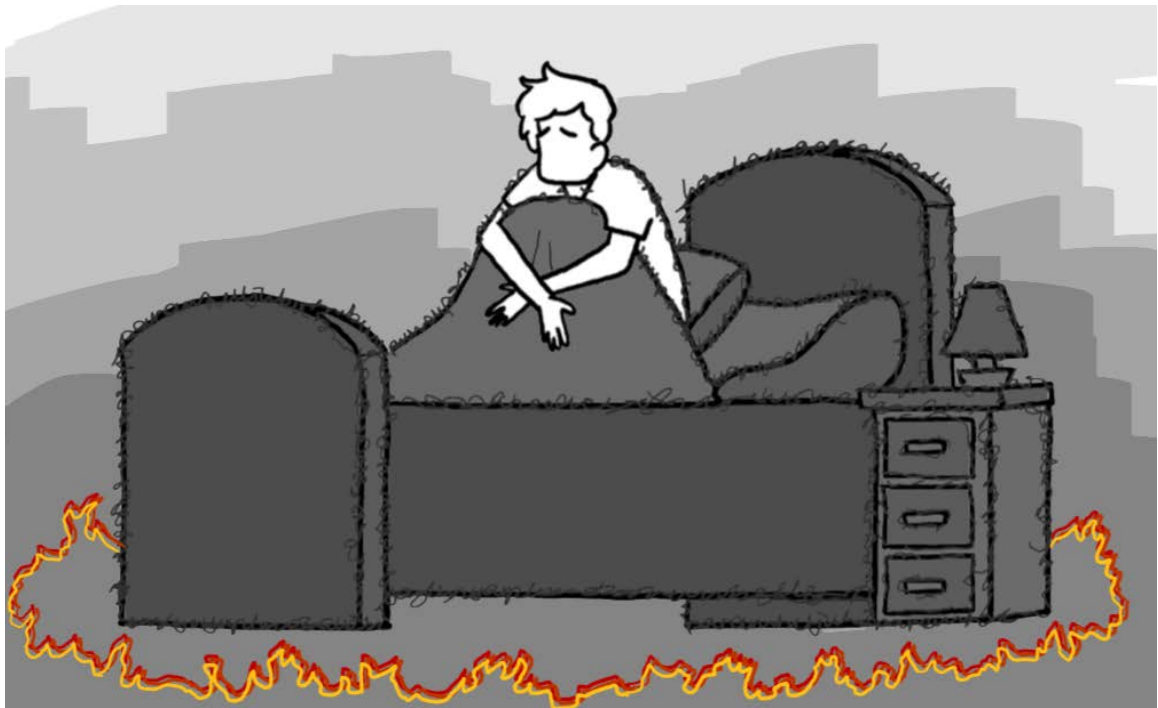
THINKING OF BETTER TIMES  
NOTHING HAS MEANING NO MORE

LIFE FEEL LIKE THIS TUNNEL I'M WALKING DOWN  
AT THE END OF WHICH  
THERE IS NO LIGHT  
THROUGH THE DARKEST OF NIGHTS  
I SCREAM AND YELL  
MY PLIGHT  
FOR YOU ARE MY DREAMS AND MY DREAMS ARE YOU

WHEN WILL I SEE YOU?  
IT'S BEEN TOO LONG  
TRYING TO MANIFEST  
TOOK AWAY SOMETHING THAT SEEMED GRANTED  
TELL ME  
WHY AM I STILL HERE  
WHEN YOU AREN'T?

NOTHINGLEFTNOTHINGLEFTNOTHINGLEFTNOTHINGLEFTNOTHINGLEFT-  
NOTHINGLEFTNOTHINGLEFTNOTHINGLEFTNOTHINGLEFTNOTHINGLEFT-  
NOTHINGLEFTNOTHINGLEFTNOTHINGLEFTNOTHINGLEFTNOTHINGLEFT-  
NOTHINGLEFTNOTHINGLEFTNOTHINGLEFT





Jazlyn Yap

## **The Dark Wood: After**

By Cassandra Arden De Leon

Angela knew that relationships were going to be hard, and Brendan would be no exception. Nevertheless, she'd find herself bracing for it, for him, and soon its intoxicating high would have her several feet off the ground in utter bliss. Well, it didn't have her today, and certainly not after her shift as she walked out of the patient's room. A young woman with grief swimming in her eyes stood as she exited into the hallway. For a moment, they held stares, the other prying at Angela's face with her eyes for answers. It was a futile attempt.

She submitted to a trained practice; a warm and consoling smile was all she could do to grace the trembling countenance of Mrs. Bridge's daughter before making her way down the corridor. With her head bent, Angela was able to deafen the wails as the elevator doors closed behind her.

The cool night air kissed her awake as she walked into the carpark. It's probably around 1, she thought as she felt for her car keys. The idea of coming to a quiet, desolate home was what spurred her on. Although the deep hours of the night brought death, a quiet road loomed in the distance, a whisper of the small reward she could relish. This is why Angela liked her job. There was always compensation. It was costly, but there was always something waiting for her at the end.

Unlike men. Unfortunately for the woman, she was gullible enough to believe that this principle could exist anywhere outside of her profession, yet each hard-won relationship she tried to blossom would only wither in her own hands. Such cold, clammy hands. In the passenger seat, her handbag vibrated, breaking the peace and quiet. At first, she paid it no heed, turning on the engine as she turned out of the hospital. It's just Brendan, the minute voice in her head persisted. He'll give up after three rings.

A second ring came, and then a third. The fourth ring pulled an exasperated groan out of her throat, as she threw the bag an irritated look. She mentally scolded her former self, the lovesick, naïve persona that held the reigns so ever loosely before, as she strained to find good reason for his presence in her life. To put it bluntly, he was rather clingy, and a distraction, as they all. And yet here she remained, scrambling to preserve their relationship as it fell right through her hands.

"Brendan, it's late," Angela said as she let her foot's weight press against the accelerator, speeding down an empty highway. The streetlamps shone their feeble light, pinpricks in the heavy sky.

"Why do you never pick up on the first ring? It's almost like you don't want to call, Angela."

The side of her mouth inched upwards ever so slightly. "Honey," she started, fatigue settling on her eyelids as it sought to pull them downwards. "It's been a rough night, and I'm tired." The nonchalance was unmistakable, but they both knew each other well enough than to play at half-truths. "Look, can you call me at another time? I'm still driving."

“Ok, sure. I’m just worried about you, ok? You’ve been doing a lot of late nights lately, I’m worried...” His voice trailed off, and Angela could almost hear his thoughts. She’s heard it many times over. I’m worried about us, let’s fix this. We can do it, just you and I.

“Alright I’ll call soon or something. Did you wanna sleep at-”

“My place,” she said hurriedly. Red light illuminated the street as she slowed to a stop. The dashboard read 6 degrees outside, yet the heater remained closed. It’s better this way, Angela believed. Even with the heater on, it was only a temporary warmth, and soon she’d have to turn it off. The car was cold, it would stay cold and always be cold, no matter what she did. It was the inevitable, and she respected that.

Brendan wasn’t subtle in hiding his disappointment. It’s as if she could almost picture him on the couch, fingers perched on the bridge of his nose as his eyes glanced towards the door. He knew she wouldn’t come. They both did, a long time ago.

“Right, right. Well uh, get some sleep ok? Do you want dinner? I have leftovers if you’re hungry.”

“I’m not hungry, but thank you. I just really need the sleep.”

“Right, uh all good. Ok, have a good night, love you.”

“Yeah, you too,” Angela threw her phone in the bag as she turned into the driveway. As if it had never left, the silence seeped through the windows, its honey coating Angela in a warm and sticky embrace. For a moment she lay there, her posture slacking as she sank into the worn leather seat.

It was Beatrice that kept her mind awake. The mere weeks that kept them apart would sometimes meld into one, and that was when Angela couldn’t stop the tremors.

“Are you afraid of being alone?” Her voice would tap the car window tentatively. A sub-conscious hand drew up to her face, drifting across her cheek. As she used up the final dregs of her life, Mrs. Grossetti was able to leave her mark; a faint streak branding Angela’s face to appear like a delicate flush. It was far from delicate.

The sweetness of silence turned sour, and the smell of rotting tomatoes invaded her nasal cavity, drowning her in its grip. It settled in her flared nostrils and stained her memory. In the solitary quiet of the night, Angela felt like a child, open and bare and weak.

She woke up screaming and sobbing on the quilts, her head throbbing as it pushed Beatrice and her tomatoes deeper in her mind. Strong arms appeared on either side, engulfing Angela in the humid warmth of a human hug.

“What am I, this isn’t...” Angela slurred as awkward hands smoothed her hair back. His eyes were large and concerned, and they held her with such care that she felt soft and pure for the first time.

Brendan's voice was distant and strange. "You ended up driving here," he said. Slowly, the absence which grew too long between them melted into the bed and Angela began to relax against an old familiarity. "Actually, this has been the first in months," he gave a watery laugh. The ceiling fan that peered at them from above seemed to turn and turn endlessly, feeding the heat of their own breath back to them. It was a hot and sweaty, silence. A new silence. But it was sweet, nevertheless.

They lay there, an entanglement of limbs in blankets. "Are we ok?" Angela couldn't look him in the eye. Not after everything she did.

"Yeah. we're ok."

## **Colour Theory, Red.**

By Bernice Choo

She sits at the table in the corner of the room, shifting in her seat. In her hand, she holds a glass of red wine, although the wine isn't really red, rather, crimson. It matches her dress, floor length with the thigh slit, high enough so that she could complete her mission, but low enough she could hide a thigh holster within.

Her gaze meets that of another from across the room and for a moment, their eyes lock, blue mixing with green, making teal. He raises his crimson wine glass at her, and she raises hers back, taking a sip in response. He smiles, getting up and making his way over to her. His white suit and his blonde hair, his blue eyes, and the twinkle in his eye when he smiled. He introduces himself, as she nods, and he takes a seat opposite of her.

She reaches for her weapon under the crimson folds of her dress, holding it against his leg under the table. He feels the cold metal though the fabric of his polyester suit, holding his breath. He knows that blood is crimson, and any cut would stain his pristine white suit red.

"What do you want?" He demands quietly, careful to not attract stares around them, as he sips his wine.

She rolls her eyes, holding the knife steady, "You know what I want. And I know you have it. I want you to give it to me."

He shakes his head. "You are mistaken love, I don't have what you want, but I know someone who has it and will give it to you."

She glares at him, driving the knife closer to his thigh. She gets up, moves around him, snaking her arm seductively around his neck, the glass of wine in her hand. She 'accidentally' spills the glass on him, making a show to try to clean the crimson off his white suit, but it's stained beyond repair. As she does so, her hands search his pockets, until her fingers close around a small flash drive.

"Liar," She whispers, holding the knife to his throat. "Lie to me again, and your fate will be worse than a stained white suit."

He swallows hard, definitely stating, "You're not going to get away with this."

"Try me," she whispers, walking away from the scene, handing her wine glass to a waiter on the way out.

She spots her getaway car driver and scrambles for the car, getting into the backseat. A pair of brown eyes meet hers from the rear-view mirror, as she holds up the flash drive. The driver nods and she takes the signal to tuck it into the side of her holster.

"Drive," she commands as she spots the stained white suit figure run out of the venue, glancing around. The engine of the black car sputters before he drives off into the dark of the night, the blue night sky masking the crimson of their crime.

## **The Dark Side of The Force**

By Bernice Choo

“Tell me, who are you?” She yells across the hallway into the darkness.

The sinister shadowy figure turns, not giving her a reply, but cackling in response. The cackle, loud and echoey, causes her to stumble back. The shadow disappears. She needs to know, she needs to find out what it is, she needs answers. And so, she follows the shadow, running through the dark hallway, chasing the figure.

The question is simple really, who is the shadow that taunts her in sweet dreams and haunts her in waking nightmares? Who are you? she figures that in order to ask that she would have to figure it out herself to begin with.

So, she asks herself, who is she? And she doesn't have an answer for that. She's still figuring that one out, like most other people, but it's simple really, she's who they made her. The circumstances that she had been put in. she was a person shaped by bad circumstances, who adapted, grew around it, closed off, so she would never get hurt again. And that lead to the shadow that haunted her, the growing pang of darkness in her that was ever so ready to burst out from within her.

Maybe she should have told someone else of her struggles, instead of keeping everything a secret. Secrets would destroy her one day, she knew that, but she kept her secrets close to her, as people around her continued to disappoint her time and time again, hurt her, wound her, tear her down. She had to learn to build up a façade, to hide the pain, hide the scars, smile through the pain.

People often remarked on her smile. They say a smile tells a story. Hers was no different. It was small, sweet, subtle, a reflection of her inner struggle while hiding away in secret, everything that she did was ever so secretive.

So, who are you? that was the question she needed to answer. The question that she needed an answer too. And really it wasn't that hard because it hit her. The shadow, the darkness, the sinister nature of the figure, that was all her. Who are you? I am you.

“Run,” the voice whispers. It's the last time she hears his voice, his comforting, condescending, but calming voice. The voice of an angel, fallen away into the darkness. She runs, into the alley way, up onto the building, until her head begins to spin. She sees the light, the swirling bright lights all around her before they disappear into nothing but a darkness, as she feels her body fall over the edge. Shit.

As her body falls towards the ground, an unmistakable force stops it from happening from afar, gently lowering her to the ground instead, till she is safe and comfortable. Then with a grunt, he turns, and his eyes revert back to their dreadful yellow as the night engulfs him into the distance.

She lays in the spot, heart beating faster and faster, she feels two heartbeats, for the first time ever since the bond she shared with him had been broken off. The salty tang of blood plays on her tongue and she swallows hard, realising she was swallowing nothing

at all. She calls his name out, still dazed and hazy “Luke,” and her world comes crashing down in waves, echoing against the drumming, and ringing in her ears.

She stumbles out of bed, like a drunken hungover person might, and checks the time, it's too late to go back to sleep, but too early to get up, the hour in the middle of the night that is supposed to mean something but means nothing at all to her now. She hears her name being called from the distance. Leia. And the voice is unmistakably his, perhaps the bond has not been broken after all. She runs through the hallways, the shadows crawling after her, reaching out to pull her back, her world is spinning, in a whirlwind of confusion. One moment she's back in that green meadow, looking back at those blue eyes, the next she's balancing precariously on a rock in the middle of red lava, looking at his eyes, now yellow, and the next she's back in the hallway, running as fast as her legs could carry her. Running from her past, her present, her everything.

His eyes that once sparkled so bright and blue were now a sickening yellow colour. And she knew what this meant, she had seen the signs, read up all about it, the sinking feeling in her gut crept in as she admitted to herself that her brother had turned to the dark side. The love, admiration, adoration, and respect she once had for him all gone, replaced only with fear and terror.

Into the dark of the night he flees, the light leaving him, drawing in all the darkness. The darkness sucks away all the light as he flees into the night. He flees away from the light, further into the dark. Further and further, down the deep dark spiral of a rabbit hole, never to get out again. Out with the light, in with the darkness. Embrace the darkness, discard the light.

He's trapped by his own emotion, his powers consuming him and blinding his morality. She's trapped in an endless cycle, of everyone leaving her for the dark side, Leia was sick of everyone going grey, falling over the edge into the dark, breaking her heart, never to return the same, like some sick twisted game. Her head swirls and she feels the giddy spell coming up again, rising from the balls of her feet, lifting her from above as she falls towards the great below, again and again, over and over, after all that time.

Time. She never had enough time. She needed more time. She begged for more time. She was never given more time. She needed more time. She wanted to scream at him to fight it, to not go gently into the darkness of the night, but rather rage against the dying light. But the light had long died out in him, she could sense it. The bond ensured that, there was little to no light left, but with a little hope, the light might shine again. He might bring light into her life again, he was the light, she was the darkness, he had fallen into the darkness, she stayed in the light.

Leia screams, as the building collapses around her and she finds herself once again in the dark hallway, facing the dark shadow in front of her. The dark shadow turns, and she locks eyes with his sparkling bright blue pair of eyes once again. “Take my hand Leia, stop fighting it, embrace the darkness.” Leia looks up, his eyes are no longer blue, they're yellow.

She could no longer deny that one thing she had been denying for so long, so muttering under her breath, Leia admits to herself, “I am the chosen one. I was supposed to bring balance to the force. But everything inside of me is just, darkness.”

## **The Seasons**

By Bernice Choo

The Major General gestures for her to take a seat, still on the phone with another. She takes a seat as instructed, crossing her legs as she glances around.

A moment later, James Barnes appears in the doorway, and the Major General signals the same. Madeleine shifts in her seat, as James takes the seat next to hers, but as far away from her as possible. He glares over at her, as she looks down and picks at her nails.

The Major General wraps up his phone call and upon setting down the phone, looks between the two Sergeants in front of him. He clears his throat, side eyeing the two before beginning. "I presume the two of you know why you are here?" The pair shake their head in response. "I'll be honest, this relationship, whatever this is, is none of my business. But it is now, because the two of you work very well together. Your tactics together could stop an entire war. So, I need you to put aside whatever differences you have and whatever is going on between you, and work together on this mission."

Madeleine looks over at James, who gives her a small shrug. He might be stubborn, but he was terrified of authority and would follow whatever was thrown at him by a superior. Madeleine has no choice but to relent, "Fine."

The Major General nods, "Good." He hands them both a case file. "I'm sending the two of you to France, to scope out a potential terrorist."

"Terrorist?" James says, skimming over the contents of the file while Madeleine meticulously reads every page.

"Read the file James," Madeleine scoffs, not looking up from the file, memorising the contents on the page.

The Major General sighs, "we were following the son of the French General who had committed war crimes, and for a while we knew where he was, but he appears to have gone into hiding. I need you to find him, make sure he's not doing anything that breaks our treaty. If he is, you will need to bring him in quietly. We cannot risk breaking our treaty so I'm sending the two of you, no backup, no extraction, no troops, or tanks or whatsoever. It's risky, and the two of you are my best Sergeants. Can you work together to do that?"

Madeleine looks up at James, who shifts restlessly in his seat. "Yes."

The Major General nods and dismisses them from his office. Madeleine walks down the hallway to her office, knowing that he would be following her.

"You're really just going to go on this when we're not even ready to talk to each other?" James asks, running up behind her, until his stride matches hers.

Madeleine looks over at her partner, "We don't have to like one another, we just have to act the part."



James sighs. "Should we start over?"

"Again?" Madeleine rolls her eyes.

Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter. Seasons of love. The beginning, the peak, the rise, the fall. There's a reason everyone falls in love in summer, there's a reason why there's a rush and a high and a feeling that will never go away. But there's also a reason why it stops in winter, only to begin again in spring. The fall of autumn can be described as the single most tragic event in the history of romance. Madeleine can only agree.

The spring of 1967 was when Madeleine reunited with James Barnes again, the summer they dated being their peak, arguments followed in autumn, and by winter they were done for again. It was a vicious cycle, they went around in circles, with the rise and fall of the relationship.

Perhaps it was the clash in personalities, the way they both claimed to hate one another but yet had a burning passion for one another. It was an unsteady balance of falling for one another over and over, and yet their stubbornness blindsided them from seeing when they fell too hard. They got up before they crashed, took a break, started over, only to fall again.

Married in everything but name, acted like a married couple, was what everyone deemed such behaviours. Both parties claimed they couldn't stand one another yet went crawling back to one another time and time again. They were drawn to one another like magnets, and they broke the laws of attraction. Like poles never attract, but they were simply different that way.

The number of times their conversations they had which went like, "I'm sorry," "I'm sorry too," "I want you back," "I want you too," "let's start over," were simply too many to count. It wasn't that they fell out of love, they simply got bored, had to take a break, and start over. They were people who were easily bored of one another, yet they brought sparks to one another's lives, couldn't live without the other, hearts beating in some twisted synch. Their lives were too much in parallels and contrasts to work out, yet they always made it work until it didn't.

## **Mind Lost, I Descend Into Darkness**

By Stephanie Chhua

I think I have quite lost my mind.  
Heaving frantically, I lunge ahead.  
The tunnel's light twinkles mockingly in kind.

Choking on smog, eyes burnt blind.  
Toppling backwards, lungs guilt with dread.  
I think I have quite lost my mind.

Shouting soundlessly, words confined.  
Thoughts muddied and left unsaid.  
The tunnel's light twinkles mockingly in kind.

Head struck 'til dazed stars misalign.  
Body bled 'til smog flows red.  
I think I have quite lost my mind.

Choice long discarded, left behind.  
Its once blessing now an agony shed.  
The tunnel's light twinkles mockingly in kind.

Around itself my sanity twines,  
winding into shreds. And distantly I muse inside my head:  
I think I have quite lost my mind.  
The tunnel's light twinkles mockingly in kind.

## **Time Passes, Like Droplets From a Dripping Bathtub Faucet**

By Stephanie Chhua

When she was younger, she lamented how sluggishly the days would pass. She would buzz impatiently, staring holes into the clock while she waited for Christmas. For her friend to come over. For the school trip to the city tomorrow.

The minutes seemed to pass slowly, like the little drips from the bathtub tap when she didn't twist the knobs tight enough. Her mum scolded her for not closing them properly. Said that it wasted water. She didn't understand how a couple drips could be 'wasting'. She liked watching them patter onto the bottom of the tub, after she drained the water.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

...It was graduation. She was a bit sad about leaving behind primary school. She'll miss the classrooms, her classmates, her teachers. She and some of her friends are going to the high school a bit further down the road. She already went there during commencement. Each subject had a different teacher! There were periods like in those high school movies! So cool!!

She was a bit sad about leaving, but she'd be lying if she said she wasn't really excited about going to high school next year. It sounded so fun and different! She can't wait!

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

...Gahh she knew she should've worked on her research assignment instead of playing video games all day. The game was really fun though... But gahhhh it could've waited until after finishing the assignment.

'2:12 AM' seemed to laugh at her from the corner of the screen.

It's fine! This was a good lesson! She'd just remember not to do it again and maybe start working on it straight away next time!

She was halfway through. She could get it done by 4.

...Tomorrow was going to be hell, wasn't it.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

## **The Ten-Dollar Bell**

By Harvey Lam

Writing at the trash and treasure market,  
Saturday afternoon, Claire in tow. She  
stops us at a curious table, of  
metal trinkets labelled "\$5 or less", and  
points at a dull, bowl-shaped thing.

"Man, the sight of that schoolbell, it  
brings me back," she waffles, "to the  
days of scribbling aimlessly on  
lined paper and wooden desks, lolling in a stiff  
chair in the back of a classroom cluttered  
with yo-yos and paper planes."

Stall lady flashes an ominous wink in  
my direction, gesturing to Claire.

"Ms Cook's words fell on deaf ears, but the  
bell I never disobeyed," says Claire, handing  
five crumpled dollars to the lady.

"Ten dollars for that one, dear," says she,  
smiling. "You can't simply expect Ms  
Cook to have forgotten about you."

## **A Cure for Medicine**

By Jue-Lyas Law

Doctor Angela Carson struggled greatly, broken from head to toe. She was supposed to help lonely Beatrice. Her work instead harmed her. Angela's entire body was tortured under a hand accursed, wracked by the resentful poison from Beatrice's malevolent sticky web. She tossed and turned in futility. The poison seeped through her joints, freezing everything painfully. She convulsed and was seized by pure agony, gripping the steering wheel with all her strength. Trying to defy the knowledge of her failure. Her brain had melted into a constellation of bright sparks. She writhed like Heracles. This spear that had hit her would never be wrenched out. She had lost something. Something vital to her now perhaps, but trivial all in the end.

Her malaise was incurable. Some chronic disease unknown to modern institutions of medicine, but rampant within her. She was sick. Yet as a doctor, her job was to cure people. Help them. (pause) She could only continue with her job. Pretend like nothing happened. However, the deafening cries from the stricken woman penetrated her skull and entered every shadowy crevice of her mind. The voices shrieked in piercing dissonance, "I see the bones behind your face". Her pain had ceased, but the cries cut cleanly through her senses, a turbulent sea rushing from her empty heart. There was no escape.

Screaming in agony. And pure terror. She fumbled for the keys like a drunk and managed to turn on the engine. The red MG sputtered for a few seconds and hummed to life, its hazy yellow light illuminating the dark parking-lot. Her mind was racing. In panic her feet slammed the pedal and she reversed violently out of her parked spot. Of course her driving helped. It had to be so. She swerved around a lifeless car and peered apprehensively from the entrance of the ramp. For the first time, she was shocked at how dangerous the journey was. Oncoming traffic swam like angler-sharks trying to reach the same destination. Although she was naturally strong, able to swim against the current and weave around obstacles. Her frail body was telling her no. But it had to be the same. The pain was sure to stop when she hit the road. The closest cluster of cars passed, and seeing an opening, she dove head first into the pool.

However, as she lurched forward into the first lane, fear inundated her, the ice freezing her veins, unable to move or evade as she collided with a trumpeted angel's beam of swelling radiance. Her mind and body were frozen in place as she watched herself collide, her ship swaying violently on the waves, its boards creaking and groaning. For the first time she was out of control and she didn't remember why. The utter disbelief that it was going to end like this. No, she clenched her eyes, and calamity shook her like a ragdoll.

Angela remained shut for what felt like an eternity. Until the sharp and overpowering fumes of disinfected equipment and rooms brought her back to reality. The hospital. She peered around dazedly, her mind swaying back and forth turbulently in the pitch black. Firstly, she was back at the hospital, glancing at the fluorescent green and red hospital bed buttons. Secondly, she was lying down. Angela craned down to look at herself and could see nothing, the darkness smothering her perception. She couldn't move. Angela was restrained by cuffs chained to the bed rails.

What happened? What time is it? She thought as she searched her brain for recollection. Nothing.

Angela called out for the night nurse, but nobody came. She was concerned, but it wasn't necessarily terrible. (pause). She bailed out repeatedly. No answer. Sighing, she dropped her torso down to meet the silky pillows. What is happening? She thought, wracked with indignation and confusion. She had to get back to her slick apartment to rest.

The blood thumped in her head, as the oppressive darkness covered everything. A long pronounced rattle shook within the darkness. Angela sat up stiffly in memory of the great pain that besieged her. She listened acutely. The rattle repeated itself, its pattern similar to the tremor of an old lady's hand. She strained her ears. The rattle was subtly replaced with a long quivering breath. The sound emanated everywhere around her. No distinct source. It continued for what felt like forever, until. Silence.

Suddenly, shrill cackles rose from the darkness. Angela screamed in utter terror as Beatrice's web retightened around her. Out of the darkness, a bony hand grasped her foot. The lights beamed on, and she opened her mouth but no sound came out. At the foot of her bed, Beatrice's ravaged body gripped her foot and from her gaping mouth, out of the shadowiness, a poisonous cackle reverberated and pierced her mind. The wicked body remarked "Shall I bring a priest? It's easy just let go now." Angela was frozen and could not move. Her eyes tried to escape from her body. Suddenly Beatrice pronounced a sweet tomato. Angela ardently wanted to be home. Back where she knew what was going. Not where she was going to die lonely. No, no no.

## **Plugged In**

By Rehan Qaium

I was a shadow. I found comfort feeling invisible to the outside world. Maybe somewhere, someone wondered where I was. Or maybe someone was looking for me. They would have to save me, because I couldn't save myself, that's for sure. I didn't know who I was anymore, nor did I notice the motor starting, my soul was being slowly sucked out of my tired body.

With a snap of my fingers, I would be so far gone that nothing could get me.

Well, other than the minitrons, with their soft whirring blades ebbing and flowing with every beat of my drum. I was unstoppable for a few moments, but then the circuit boards would catch me. Out of control and out of my body. I became a new person slowly purging all of my built up motivation.

Falling asleep was such a relief. Waking up was not nearly as fun. My heavy head being shaken by alien hands.

My mouth felt dry today, as if it was lined with sandpaper. The first thing my exhausted eyes found was his worried face. His brown eyes staring at me from the distance, scared to approach my body, I couldn't blame him, I was a power-board to all these treatments. He suddenly starts yelling at me. He's not angry, but all he keeps repeating is my pitiful name, 'Are you crazy Angelica? What have you done Angelica? You know I still love you, Angelica? Angelica, are you listening? Angelica!' I don't want any of this. I shut my heavy, waterlogged eyelids. I want anything but, this. I wanted a new escape, a new adventure, away from normal people, away from the metalheads and copperwires, away from people like my dad. I wanted a do-over. I wanted this race to end. I don't want to fight anymore. Being conscious is too much work.

### **The next Day,**

My fragile body lay slumped against the cream wall, I was snuggled in my 'My Little Pony' bed, but of course the metal backrest had been removed. It was conductive and would attract the circuits.

My pinkie could almost touch the sour smelling, sanitised, tiled floor. Does he actually love me, is he trying to save me? I don't want to die like this, I was never supposed to die like this. When I was a little girl running through the meadows, I always thought pain was only temporary, only a little scratch, a slight update on your departure time. I always thought you were supposed to lay in your bed smiling, while your family sobbed around you, wishing their goodbyes. My cold fingers were shaking. The tiles felt icy, I had always liked the snow. I tried to keep in contact with my pinkie, but I had to eventually let go, to grip my now sweat stained blanket. I'll try again tomorrow.

### **6 hours Later,**

"Open your eyes, Angelica. Look at me." His voice was so persuading. My supposed saviour, was a roughly shaved, 65 year old man, in an oversized, grey hoodie. "Keep breathing," he said, "in through your nose and out through your mouth."

“You need to do this. Keep on pushing just like you did at the start.”

“Like you would know the start, you were never there when the little beeping gizmos were injected into my body, You were always busy.”

I manage to lift my skull and lean it back on the cream wall. My mouth is shuddering, my tongue suddenly felt too big for my mouth. I wanted to tell him that I was sorry; I’m really, really sorry. But those words couldn’t seem to fit around the boulder in my throat. I needed to keep my eyes open and breathe.

This is too much. I can’t. There was no reason to. Why should I try so hard to stay alive if I am just going to die?

They are plugging me in again, into mainframe. The water was so cold on my chest and now it’s covering my face. I wake up again. I’m still here but everything felt blurred, like I was looking through window onto my own life. It was the same place where I was dancing, just a few weeks ago. Jeremy, my crush had just asked me out to our formal, I was so ecstatic, I had reached my peak. I wanted to be alive then, I was in paradise, but I fell, and I kept on falling.

## **2 Hours later**

He used the same towel we always tucked under the door handle to wipe the gushing puddles of sweat, that were dripping down my face. I’m angry now. My makeup must be smeared, and my soaked hair was probably clinging to my chubby shoulders in uneven clumps. I’m so ugly. I don’t want to die ugly.

My senses are gone. I can’t control my body. It isn’t moving, no matter how hard I try. This body, it isn’t mine. I just happened to be in the passenger seat and the controls aren’t responding anymore. I can’t move its limbs or remember how to make it breathe. So, this is how it feels to be paralysed.

There must be a way out of this, right?

I just have to try harder, right?

Give it my all, right?

“No, it’s too hard, I can’t, I can’t be bothered” I whimper.

I watch him run out of my room; I don’t think he could take it anymore. The home telephone was in his left hand, its curly wires snaking underneath the door and down the stairs. “If you pass out again, I’m calling an ambulance. Breathe Angelica, breathe”. Can’t he just let me be? It was about time, time for me to experience the endless peace.

He came back.



The endless beeping stops, the red and black wires snake out, the monitors are unplugged,  
I see my dad's overjoyed face, the robots finally leave.

The hospital door opens as my eyes close.

## **Flower Language**

By Annie Ruja

Illustrated by Lois Pal

Staring in the mirror no longer excites me as it used to, or so I think. Memory, a fickle thing, has betrayed me. Although I do not remember, I know things. I know the way the sun used to feel like pure delight on my skin, the way rain invigorated my being and the way flowers and their scent brought pure delight to me.

Yet I do not remember how I know.

This knowledge begins to haunt me. If I do not remember, why do I know these things? My mind feels like a train station at late nights. Dim. Empty. Staring into the mirror only further vexes me.

For what reason am I here? How did I end up here?

A shock from a night terror wakes me. I cannot breathe, Gasping for air, I need what is missing from me, but it does not come. My throat constricts and as my oxygen levels fall, the alarms begin.

“Hypoxemia! Nurse, go get an oxygen tan-“

My eyes shutter closed and I am left to the nothingness again. There is nothing here. Again I ask myself, for what reason am I here? What is missing from me? Why does my own mind elude me? What memory could be so dreadful that it shuts everything away? Then I see it.

A daffodil. *Narcissus pseudonarcissus*.

Hope...? It throws my mind into swirls of colour. The vivid yellow lures me further and I reach out to touch it.

Then I wake up.

“Adelia! Are you alright?”

A man enters the hospital room, holding a bouquet of snapdragons. *Antirrhinum majus*. Deceit.

Immediately I am put on edge. “There’s no one in here called Adelia. Please leave before I call security.” A wave of disbelief and irritation flashes in his eyes and instinctively, my hands pull my blanket closer to me. “Oh but Adelia, it’s me, your fiancée, how could you not know me?” A charming smile appears on his face, like a snake. “Well... the doctors did tell me you didn’t remember anything but I still hoped.” He pauses for a moment as he sees me shiver of fear. “Adelia, my sweet, are you skittish?” A discordant laugh escaping his lips. “For what reason?” The man takes a step forward and my hand reaches towards the call button. “Alright I understand, I’ll just introduce myself and go.” My eyes

man has brought about such an instinctual terror to me. The chills from his eyes permeate my bones. "Well this is kind of awkward but," he pauses to laugh, and deposits the snapdragons onto a nearby cabinet, "I am Jason, and I suppose I'll leave for now, you need rest, especially considering what happened recently..."

Slam.

The door is shut and I exhale as my heart begins to slow and my tremors begin to pacify. Frazzled and weary, I lean back on the hospital bed. When will I be free? Of what will I be free?

A doctor delicately opens the door and introduces herself. Immediately, questions are asked and I offer whatever answers I have, though I do not have many. A tender smile on the doctor's face leads me to have confidence in them.

"When can I leave?" I find myself asking.

"Whenever you become well."

Sitting on the windowsill has become my new norm. Watching. Wondering. What was so whimsical about the outside? About flowers? This knowledge perplexed me further. Someone began to gently knock on the door and they let themselves in. Not a word was spoken but tears began to flood their eyes as they couldn't bear to take their eyes off of me. Was I so riveting to stare at? I exulted in the knowledge that this woman was starstruck by me.

After a few moments, she had collected herself and said, "*Rosa hemisphaerica*."

A best friend? A dearest companion?

She began to speak, and did not stop for a time. Speaking of the past and how she wanted me to just run away and be free. She spoke of the flowers that gave me glee, the changing weather that I passionately loved and how I abhorred being inside while lacking a reason to be. "My dearest Adelia, you may not remember who I am, or who you are, or what forced you to be trapped inside of this hospital room, but I sincerely hope you find your liberation."

I thanked her and she left.

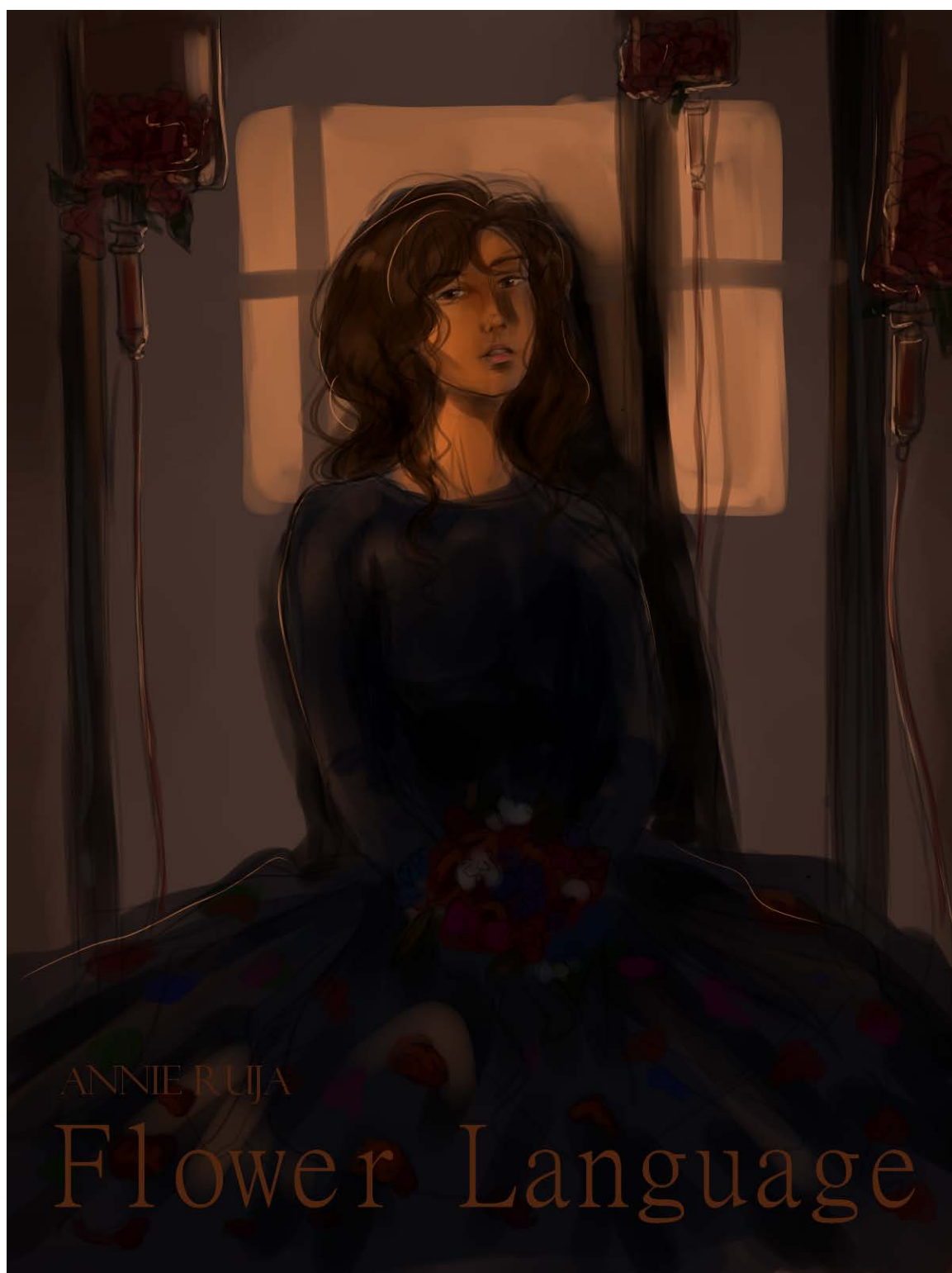
What had the doctor meant by me becoming well? I already consider myself well enough. I have no gaps in my knowledge, though my memory is lacking. Previously I must have had loved botany and that is seemingly enough for me.

Sitting on the windowsill, I caught a glimpse of *Xerophyllum tenax*, bear grass. Rebirth. The unknown memories and past that I have will no longer haunt me. Nor will anyone from my past.

I move towards the mirror. It is a time for rebirth. A stranger, someone I am just getting to know, stares back. This face, I think bravely, is an interesting face.

A time for old knowledge with new memories will begin now.

The door opened and I stepped outside into my new life.



Lois Pal

**All Cut Up**  
By Kuhu Sharma

Feathers, black, dust the ground

So hard to sit still,  
To slide back into your own skin.  
Hard enough that you're flyaway gone, castaway rough.  
Bumps and grazes, dragging your hands;  
Now you're all cut up.

School your face, scrunch it up,  
Squinty eyes, amused and tough.  
Purse those lips, anger has no sound,  
From around my little finger, I unwound.  
The rustle of the leaves  
Is the crackle of the fire,  
So quickly I tire  
When my secrets get told.  
Hark! Wait!  
Don't get burned.  
The twigs scratch your face,  
You slow your heart race,  
Now you're all cut up.

A murder of crows – murder indeed,  
I tear my lips with my teeth, make them bleed –  
Dips down below; snappy beaks and black eyes.  
Hold your breath, say your goodbyes.  
Now you're all cut up.

confidence in them.

## **Three Dreams**

By Kuhu Sharma

The grey girl sits  
In a huddle in the cold.  
She's a bundle,  
And a bunch of sticks.

Missshapen then not,  
The smooth ink  
Approaching a blot.

Something bothers her,  
And now  
She knows what it is.  
For all the hurting  
And resignation  
Has grown into  
A longing,  
Determination.

And the bother is the horse  
Who lives in her throat,  
Legs rearing, he neighs,  
Begging to be let out.

He will be large  
And he will be grand,  
But as of now  
She hasn't opened her mouth.

confidence in them.

## **Eve, Exiled**

By Jashandeep Suran

Today was warmer than usual, albeit it was night. The midnight sun was yellow no more, instead a pale, crème hue as the darkness dominated the sky. The crimson unwieldy curtains of the hall would resist its restricting drapery hooks, sighing happily as it let in the glistening hall the luminescence of the celestial full moon. It was night. Yet no one was asleep. No one would be, actually. The crowds in front of me were waves of hasty, “hi-how-are-you-how’s-little-Bradley-who-nearly-lit-his-school-on-fire-sadly-but-I’m-going-to-pretend-I-didn’t-know-that-I’m-in-the-middle-of-my-divorce-and-I-lost-my-job-and-obviously-your-feelings-aren’t-as-valid-as-mine-but-anyways-rant-about-your-little-cherubs, you girlboss.”

The darkness was bewitching as it lured the wedding guests in a state of incessant sleeplessness. The drapery breathed against my neck behind me.

I shivered.

A man, eyes blue, hair blond, walked past me and with a sly roguish smile whispered in my ear, “you from the motherland, huh?”

Cooktown was hot and steamy during the day, when the meadow fields shine in a landscape of solid gold, the birds chirping constantly, and the water would be soaking up the sun’s heat, ever so, ever so, thirsty. And when the sun dies, the cities freeze, icy wisps of air screaming into people’s lungs, the heartbroken and melancholic moans of the mid-night solstice as it carefully lulled each soul to sleep in pity.

It did not do me favour. I seethed.

“Uh, what do you mean?”

He cleared his throat, “you look exotic, mama.”

“Get away from me.”

The bride sat in the sparking throne alongside her groom. She looked so happy. Her face was illuminated by the phosphorescence of the light blue fountain beside her. Her husband-to-be whispered something in her ear. Her eyes scrunched up in blissful gaiety as she laughed, her curls falling back to the front of her face as she tried to tuck the strand behind her ear. Her gaze fell across the room, her sparkling eyes shimmering like diamonds. A family walked up to the platform the bride and groom were sitting on, the youngest, a child merely four years of age, looked at the bride obliviously, mouth slightly agape as he was picked up and perched on the arm of the bride’s throne. They smiled, all teeth. Except for the child, who, brought his left hand to the bride’s shoulder. She smiled at him.

She was so pretty and happy. My breath hitched. God, I could die.

“Can’t understand poetry,” she would say by way of explanation.

She was one who came feline and demand; blotting out the others; Dellis, who sat stonily bored through classes and never turned in homework and wrote nothing at all on test papers. There were detentions and earnest talks. Lesson after lesson the teachers would call her to stay back and I would walk out the door, watching her bored expression behind me.

I would sit down with her in the shadowy green maze of the canefield at the crepuscular dawn of twilight, jumping the fence of the mill residence, sneaking quietly in order to avoid getting caught. They’d tell my parents for sure.

“What do you want to do after high school?”

“Probably work in retail around here.”

The conversation would end there.

“Would you consider living anywhere out of Cooktown? I don’t know, say Europe or even Sydney or Melbourne.”

“I don’t know,” Dellis huffed. “I love those,” she changed the subject, pointing upwards where the startling crimson flaunted itself against the sky.

“Why?” I interrogated.

She was suddenly angry. “Why? You always want to know why. You’re so obsessed with me. You want to know every single part of my life that I don’t want to share with you. You’re one of the smartest students in Mr Johnson’s English class and I’m one of the dumbest. You know it. You pretend that you’re all humble but deep down, you’re a monster. You make me cry. I feel so daft and empty-headed and thick around you. I just like the sky, that is all. It’s orange and pretty. You spoil my life. I hate you.”

She doesn’t walk off. Me and her sit in silence for the next hour. She sighs and I breathe quietly. The twilight sky soon turns into an abyss of cosmic bodies. The moon seems brighter than usual.

“I’m leaving Cooktown soon,” I tremble, “For someplace else. After I finish high school. Some place with bewitching meadows and alluring flowers.”

“What do the meadow fields look like?” she sniffed. And then: “Do you imagine us running through them?” Dellis would turn her incongruously hazel eyes, watchful under the long silky lashes.

“All the time, Dellis,” I would tell her. I looked to her and went to intertwine my hands with hers, the way lovers connect in times of abysmal hardship or blissful euphoria, but then my heart failed me, and I then would walk back home, trying not to trample against the long reeds, whispering,



“Dellis, I love you.”

The voluminous burst of sounds in the wedding awoke me from my drowse, the music reverberating in my ears. Trudging out of the wedding hall, a streak of white lightning did a quick dance across the midnight sky. The thunder clapped almost soon after, chuckling. I hated these people. These were the kind who'll quote Rumi but not know the sacrifices he made for war, who'll fawn over Priyanka but turn their racial filters on, who'll take their politics with a latte when I take mine with tear gas. Love is a long limbed thing and in this world, it has difficulty breathing, and all partners do everyday is hold hands and practice CPR.

Eyelids heavy, I did not look back.

Today was warmer than usual, albeit it was night.

**[If solipsism is true, then you're the best thing that ever happened to me]**

By Jashandeep Suran

O flower in the sky;

In the midst of  
The drunken moon  
And the stars intoxicated  
Your eyes seem like December embers  
Why are you so distant?

O flower in the sky;

As you blur from the Earth  
I cannot help but be bewitched  
You are the evening sunlight that kisses the Earth  
I am obliged to bow my head in respect, for you feel so safe  
You are the rain that dances on the marble of fallen kingdoms  
The heavenly architecture of your beauty has me enthralled

O flower in the sky;

Your voice reverberates through the night abyss  
Everyone recoils  
Except me  
And almost inevitably - too early -  
I envelope within your warmth  
It is like heaven  
It is the soft light that beckons  
Like the laughter of the gods  
Like the language of my mother tongue  
And when everyone flinches  
I do not.  
And yet  
You disappear again.

O flower in the sky;

We'll reunite one day  
We'll be reminded why the storm was so necessary

to me]

[If solipsism is true, then you're the best thing that ever happened

## **motherland embers**

By Jashandeep Suran

there is something moon iridescent and fiery-flavoured of me  
when i speak the mother tongue of the cosmos the stars dream in concordance  
so when people ask me  
*“what are you? your melanin is beautiful and exotic,  
i wonder of your flavour, you know, you got that spice in you.”*  
i tell them,  
*“i’m punjabi.”*  
because the motherland i belong to is a cluster of divine empires  
the remnants of galaxies’ embers  
but how dare they mesmerise at the sight of my skin  
when it has seen horrors, acid rain and soulless eyes  
when my people have covered my mouth from yelling, when  
the same men who tell me sexism doesn’t exist, ask me to carry pepper spray?  
do not tell me what i taste like  
if you are unaware that my flavour is rebellion, red-pilled  
forever in mutiny.

## **Mama, I'm Going to Write a Revolution**

By Jashandeep Suran

In the land of five rivers, the majestic land of eternal kingdoms,  
My mother wore a veil over her head  
And marched to the Delhi border  
Unafraid.

In the land of ancient civilisations and wondrous mythology,  
My mother spent cold winter nights awake  
Calculating food portions for the next day  
Until the winter solstice would lull her to sleep  
In pity.

In the land of folklore and yellow mustard fields,  
My mother made me her little farmer  
And handed me a pen and wax paper  
I looked up to her and I gave the paper life.

In the land of folk dances and gurudwaras encrusted in gold,  
My mother wore a veil over her head  
And marched to the Delhi border  
Unafraid.

But the authorities only boasted their power,  
With tanks and machines.  
In the midst of the numbing winter,  
They called my mother a 'feminazi.'

I was furious, I was choking back tears, I was humiliated because  
If they associated my mother with them, they associated me with a group I never intended to be  
And I can guarantee, Mama,  
It silenced me  
But it did not censor the rage simmering in my soul  
The paper you once gave me, I turned it into a scroll  
Of emotive poetry and raw prose

Mama, listen! Do you think I'm a good farmer?  
Look, I've even adorned myself with your armour.  
You wait, mother, can you hear me yell your name?  
I wish you could see this; it's humorous, look at the audience I will inevitably tame.

## WRETCHED FOREVER

By Anupama Vijayakumar

They were mocking me. They always were; only now no one could see it.

“It’s natural to feel vulnerable after enduring such an event, Wendy. It our mind’s way of protecting itself”. Dr Simon’s visits never amounted to anything, it seemed that we were just stuck, going round and round in circles and never getting to the point. He was just sick of dealing with the three of us I suppose. Though he wasn’t really doing much work was he? Cilla was still in a coma and Christina would never be back. But it felt like she was. She was always visiting me, talking to me even.

I didn’t always see her fully. Some days it was just her face; with her eyes hollowed out yet gleaming, as if white-hot flames had consumed her insides and were threatening to spill out from every part of her.

But if it wasn’t Christina herself. I’d find other things. Sometimes it was a lock of her hair, black and sizzling at the edges as if tar were about to leak out from the tips. Sometimes it was a chunk at a time, or two; on my bed, or scattered across my clothes. It couldn’t have been anyone else’s, only Christina’s hair had been that shade of feathery blonde; falling down her shoulders with the texture of fresh cotton candy. But now all that was left was the burnt sugar; the stench causing my eyes to water

Sometimes I’d feel her hand grab my shoulder, and when I’d look back, I’d see it there with blood trickling down her wrist, but no body attached to it.

I’d see that damned bottle of starter fluid in my hand too; replacing the water cup I had just been holding. I’d see it as the milk in my cereal, or as the liquid in my iv, or in my bath water, even my own tears when I’d beg for it to stop. I could taste coal in all of my foods, like if the hospital had cooked every one of my meals on that same dingy grill as though they thought I had forgotten.

But the worst was Christina’s voice which would pierce through my ears during the quietest hours

“Why Wendy why, why did you do this to me? Do you think it’s fair? That you get to eat and sleep and heal while I’m forgotten? Or while Cilla stays unconscious ? Is it joke to you? That you’re the only one who got to wake up when it was you who put us to sleep forever?”

Nothing seemed real anymore, the days seemed to melt together will only Christina’s visits as a constant and I’d started to pray that Cilla wouldn’t never wake up. That she’d would never have to see what I’d done.

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“Cilla, I think you should see her. She’s in a stable condition now and believe it might be best for you to talk to one another. Victims of these sorts of things often feel alone and unseen when they are isolated from each other, you know,” Dr Simon told me in the same voice one might console an irrational preteen with. He’d always had to imitate ‘sympathy’ but never seemed to be able to muster up anything genuine. I suppose he was just waiting to discharge us and collect the bill.

“Never thinking of what’s important are you, Wendy?”

Christina’s voice crept back to me, as if she were standing over my shoulder and whispering in my ear.

“Cilla’s awake now. But how will you convince her to forgive you? I was always on your side when you two would butt heads but now, even I can’t forgive you. But go on then, Wendy, plead your case”

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Cilla didn’t remember.

She barely even knew.

“I don’t think you should have cut your hair that short though”

Cilla told me; as if we were back in year 3 when I had just gotten ‘that wretched little bob’. As if I hadn’t almost been pulling my hair out from anguish while she just got to forget.

I never thought the hair looked bad, Wendy.

Christina had been sitting beside Cilla the entire time, but it seemed that even she couldn’t see her. Perhaps she had forgotten there was even a third one of us.

I had even said it looked cute. Cilla was never on your side was she Wendy? So, why’d you get rid of me and not her?

“So many things I never used to notice, like your jack rabbit eyes, Wen” Cilla continued as she watched my eyes dart back and forth from herself to Christina behind her. But as far as she knew, we were alone, and I was just being hysterical.

She always thought you were lost cause Wendy. Anxious, stupid, and a coward; as if you she were the one going to law school and not you. That’s why she made you do it Wendy. Don’t you remember? That’s why she told you to throw more in.

“Christina, Christina! Oh, what will we do?” the shrieks seem to cascade out of my mouth, the insomnia and anguish catching up to me as Christina’s hospital light eyes drilled further into mine. The familiar taste of bile rising up my throat.

It’s her fault just as much as it’s yours Wendy. You both killed me, so why are you the only one crying?

And it was true. As the nurse dragged me away, Cilla stayed silent, as if she wasn’t the reason, we were wretched. I liked her better unconscious

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But she came to her senses eventually. Perhaps Christina had paid her a visit, because soon I heard Cilla beg.

“Wendy, Wendy please don’t leave me!”

Silly girl, I would never leave her, not now. I’ll always be here to make sure she never forgot again, never forgot what we did. Christina would be with me forever and so we’ll stay. If I can never leave hell, then I’d rather you burn with me.

You used to mock me, you always did; but now we can be mocked together.

YEAR TWELVE



## Wandering - Lost

By Aaron Everard

In the mellow heat of the summer sun, the young boy wanders through the scattered leaves of the river red gums. The murmuring ground and the sound of the birds and the old invite him into the landscape. The primary school playground. It lies buried within the clusters of Eucalyptus, cradling its structure, the rays of sun filtering through the branches and casting the faintest shadow upon the deep dark wood. The boy smiles, this wandering now escalating into a slow job, now finally into the breathless rush of a sprint. Darting, leaping through the tree now, the air and its soft touch brushing past his skin, gliding through his lungs and kissing his cheek. His friend was chasing him, pacing surely behind. A game of tiggy and he was close to getting caught. With his head to the sky, the boy's foot hooked onto a branch and

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the man's eyes flinched open. The blunt metal of his chair was cold. Wet. Pinched by the frozen grip of the pouring rain. His head fended off the downpour with a grey raincoat, the droplets repelled by the slick plastic and onto the concrete below. He grimaced. The voices of the other men shrieked and grunted.

"Oi! Get up!"

He jolted from the slumber of his winter rest, or what seemed to be left of it. His work was grueling in August, with the days extending hopelessly, endlessly before his eyes. Daylight savings, a lie which refused to save him, as the winter shards of light now shorter yet harsher, honed into daggers. The sun fractured through the clouds. The smoke of them drew heavy with the coming onslaught of what could only be hail. As he dreaded the coming hour, and its unrelenting ice, he remembered

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the boy and his friend gaze out from the classroom, the glass fogging up with their winter breath. Their eyes wandering over the landscape, locking on the blanket of which extended beautifully, endlessly before them. Snow was unfamiliar to them and their area, so the hail and its icy aftermath satisfied them. Elated by the cloudless sky, the sun beaming down onto the ground, the boy's eyes overflowed with joy. As the school day came to a close, and the students were released from the halls of education and into the careful hold of the world, the boy fled back into the trees, now covered in white. The branches, now heavy with clusters of ice, melted down through the trees, droplets cascading down his hair and into the earth below. It left them awake, aware and ultimately a little more home. Home. The echoing voice of his mother drifting through the winter air and

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the man yelled out in reply:

"Whaddu want mate?"

His workmates gestured to the saw in his truck, its edges infected with rust, its blade dulled from years of grinding and slicing, its grip weathered from the might and the men. The man dragged it out from the truck, the grey piece of metal which thundered down the road, scraping, grazing the bitumen as smoke poured out from its pipes. In the pouring rain, he passed the saw to the other worker, who shook his hand with an iron grip and punched him in the side. His hands felt numb. Rough. The man followed his workmate past the new slab of concrete, he supposed the new primary school building. So much had changed at the place since

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the primary school disco, the final day of term three, year six almost running out. The night air bright, slivers of the moon shining through the atmosphere, its blue glow illuminating the trees. Walking now into the multipurpose room, noise flooding the boy's ears. Music. Dance. Little plastic cups littering the corners of his eyes, children lining up to have their drinks refilled with soft drink, sugar free. Glow-sticks, bright chemicals entrapped in a plastic tube, fluorescent in yellow, orange, purple, pink rings around the children's necks, their wrists. They didn't care. His friend lay in the corner, a halo of scattered wrappers and foil adorning the floor around him. The boy felt swept up in the rush of the music, the addicting glow of the fluros. The speakers boomed: "Its going down... I'm yelling:"

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"Timber!"

The workers shrieked through the fog of smoke and rain, as they approached the next tree. The swamp gum. The ancient tree towered over the men, its bark twisted into a forked frown, watching the man in disappointment. As a child, the man had watched the tree, wandered through its land, and the tree had watched him. The same playground, the same school, the same boy. Yet there he was, plastic adorning his skull, fluorescent glow wrapped over his chest, rough gloves entrapping his fingers. The machinery, smoking and rumbling, gathered over the land as the man stood and watched. It drove through the wood, the old bark ripped and torn from its gentle trunk, the birds once housed in its leaves left fleeing towards a new home. He has asked for this. He was paid for this. Profit. He kept this going. Yet still, in the depths of his heart he mourned

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that final day of primary school, the boy would be leaving this school forever. Even now, things had changed. From the moment the lights flinched on at the disco, the boy craved the flow of the fluoro, the overwhelming noise which seemed to flood his mind and leave him wanting more. The class party brought it all back. The wrappers, the cans, the glow-sticks. It was the final recess when he let his friend abandon his ring of glow-sticks hanging from a branch, when he draped his own plastic wrapping in the roots of an old tree, when he kicked a metal can into the dust. He didn't seem to care anymore. About the ground, the sky, the world. Just the glow, the dance, the noise. And yet

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as the man, older now but not quite wiser, watched that final tree tumble to the ground  
and

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that boy wandered past the first piece of machinery rumbling into the school ground

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both felt a piece of themselves fade away forever.

## **King's Rock**

By Minsandi Jayalath

### **POV GIRL: Sigiriya's garden to Mirror Wall**

Thata had told me many stories of Sigiriya. Of the king's ancient rock palace with its once sprawling gardens where wildflowers grew like rainbow freckles to mask the crocodiles. As a child, I was obsessed with the story of King Kipasha, allured by the madness of his life that diverged so rebelliously from the dry tales of Buddhism that it made everything lush and suspenseful. Now I'm standing in the very garden of those tales, waiting for the flora and fauna to whisper their stories. Yet nothing about the mundane clipped grass alludes to adventure. Though the rock cuts striking dusty lines across the serene blue sky, Sigiriya appears to be no more formidable than the Grampian ranges back home. The history of the place begins to feel like an intrusion of fevered fantasy into reality, making me yearn for Australia.

Dusty paths shift into metallic steps which wind like hypnotic rings to a door armed with guards. The twittering of the crowd filters into an oozing silence which drags as officers explain that we are entering Mirror Wall, solemnly prohibiting photographs. Unlike the rest of Sigiriya, which I'd seen timestamped in old pictures, Mirror Wall has always been an enigma barred behind a steel door, the same one now opened. Before I process anything beyond a rusting wall etched with graffiti in foreign languages, Thata murmurs in my ear.

"In Kipasha's days, the wall had a brilliant lustre, just by using organic beeswax, no chemical stuff Aussies think is paint."

The simple comment doesn't warrant the irritation which burns like a dimly lit candle in my stomach. But its pride like this which spurred the Rajapaksa government to declare the country an 100% organic farming nation. Banning inorganic imports in a call that continues to make hunger an ever-present liquid heat in Sri Lankan children's bellies. I turn away from Thata, stopping my words poised like arrows from shooting.

It's then that I see them, painted women looking like watercolour sketches breathed to life in fluid lines, adorned in traditional headpieces my English cannot name. The shadows of their eyes are heavy downstrokes. The cut of their chins are careful flicks of wrists. I'd heard of Sigiriya's frescoes, always writing them off as sensual images to appease a lustful king, but even naked they are about as earthly as light gleaming off the edges of broken glass. Lovely, but inhuman. Spirituality had long fizzled out of me, yet a glowing lantern spills warmth from my chest to the gold chain around my neck as I think about the disgraced king fleeing his kingdom, preserving centuries of tradition in these celestial women who continue to guard the rock.

### **POV THATA: Lion's Gate**

As a child, the sandy plains of Lion's Gate were a refuge for my feet, soothing blisters I'd developed from clambering sun-heated steps. I remember giggling at the lion's paws which protruded from the rock, hugging the staircase like a prized catch. 30 years have

passed, and nothing has changed, yet the trees above seem to take new meaning. Bending together like cautious whisperers in a fairytale, they reanimate the memories of my childhood, dropping buckets of light on the dark canvas of Australia which flutters in my eyes, until Sri Lanka's greenery obscures my vision entirely.

*Mula la ma saenaehi pul piyamun sey bear dit.*

*Like a bee seeing full-blown lotuses, my bewildered heart is consoled.*

The poetry from Mirror Wall still reverberates inside of me, a hymn to my soul. There is a musical quality to the Sinhalese inscription, a loving precision to the words coming on a tide of feeling that cannot be mimicked in translation. The words testify that Sri Lankan hands built this place, that our blood ruled this earth long before we latched onto foreign governments like beggars. As the line continues dousing me in fire, I see the paws of the lion begin to flex their claws. The beast's head, long eroded by the elements, suddenly rears from behind the rocks, howling a blood curdling roar which channels the spirit of Buddha's snakes. From its golden sound Sri Lanka is liberated, debts fading into shadow.

"Why lions, they're not native?"

My daughter's amused voice rouses me from the dream world. To reality where Lion's Gate is headless and unflinching. Beads of sweat I hadn't noticed gather on my face begin dripping down like tears. Rejuvenating me, however, are my daughter's eyes which glisten with the warmth of a hundred suns. Her irises, normally dark with secrets, lighten as she glances between her necklace and Lion's Gate: seeking a connection to our birthplace I feared was frayed forever.

### **POV Shopkeeper: Souvenir shop outside Sigiriya**

Since easter bombings hard it's been getting tourists. Since Russian-Ukrainian war, tourists rare like white-elephants.

A brown-skin Duwa walks in. Too much to be local girl, no, with that red frock?. Duwa's skin is soft like baby's, would bruise if breathed on too hard. Not like my lamai, they hands rough from woodchopping.

Her Thata follows her in, looks like he have different-different worries in his head swimming. Worries fly when he touches the clay monkeys and elephants, eyes fuzzy happy like hes gone to home.

Duwa asks from me something. I think she point at the Kapasha statue, where he sit on top Sygiriya in his stone throne. I don't like looking at it, makes me think of Mahina Rajapaksha sat in his chair, changing teledrama channels on TV while protesters cry for help on streets like small-small ants. But I keep statue anyway caus in rupees it will give 500, with that money I will buy kilo of rice, but in 2018 I could have bought 6 more kilos also.

I show Kipasha, but Duwa shakes head, asks from me the necklace behind me. Forgotten I had that it there! Decent woman not wear a naked Sigiriyan woman on neck,

too much! I had buyed foolishly, do not know how much rupees to sell it now for. I go to Mali to haggle price, but Duwa step in front of me also, gives me 1000 rupees from purse, not even ask from her Thata. It's enough for 30 bus trips to Colombo now-days, don't have to hold the door rail!

Duwa slides wood charm on her neck, ugly next to her other necklace of rich gold. But she kisses the cheap thing like kipasha would have kiss his crown, smiling like the women of Sigiriya.

## **I met Her on the way to Home -**

By Cecilia Liu

I met Her on the way to Home -  
A Glistening, so I'm told  
Or Rather - She met me -  
As She waited in the Cold

And May the Heavens - Pause - aghast -  
At a Maple brighter than -  
The morning Dew and the evening  
Dusk - and tremble - to its end -

For the Wind or Birds or Rain -  
Cannot - see - as my Eyes can - See -  
Pluck - Ringing note - flickering Gold -  
Softly - a Sigh - fled.

I met Her on the ripen Tune -  
A Glistening, so I'm told  
Or Rather - She met me -  
Before - end - could End -



# 桑树纸

By Cecilia Liu

Illustrated by Carmen Ng

Dedicated to my mum, who taught me how to write.

“Welcome, to China’s National Intangible Culture Heritage Museum. In the long rivers of Chinese history, we find, polish, store, and preserve fragments of culture past and present, those that once thrived and now fading. We tell stories of the faraway past to remember them for the faraway future. We wish you, a memorable stay.”

Dawn. The first streaks of the morning light have yet to peak from behind the mountainous horizons, but the teetering songs of 晨 birds already echo the forest-buried village. They whisper through the battered wooden-framed windows, and past the thin but persevering mulberry paper. The papermaker was already up. The cold, sharp, morning breeze was just the same as all the many mornings before this. But this morning was different, just a little. It’s the morning of the day she will make her last batch of 桑树纸.

Under her bed, there was one last bundle of crisp, 桑树 bark that she’ll have to use up today. They sleep quietly on the wooden floor, floor old and creaking with every step she takes, just like the bones in her body and the bones in her hands that could give up or give in any coming second of any coming day. Bending down, slowly, carefully, not disturbing the tenuous balance holding her body together, she reaches for the bundle of tree bark. The thin, dried bark curls onto itself, no longer holding a single drop of moisture.

She goes down to the well for the last time, fills up her pot with water for the last time, boils the tree bark for the last time. As the water 沸腾 and rolls with bubbles tumbling the tree bark, and the misty steam fills up the room for the last time, the papermaker opens a little drawer, and retrieves her last ingredient.

A small collection of letters, stored with gentle care, each little corner crease delicately straightened out. It’s tied together with 细红绳, the thin red string neatly orchestrated into a fleeting butterfly knot. She takes the package in her palms, her shaky fingers pulling the ends of the string. But her hands weren’t steady, not anymore, and as the string unravels, the paper, one by one, like a waterfall, pours onto the floor.

The ground, now covered with paper, blaringly white, chillingly white, falls back into her murky clear eyes. She’s a bit stunned, but recovers fast. And with the same precision and care as before, as always, she lowers herself onto the floor and starts to pick them up.

The first was from her son.

“Dear mum,” it said, “long time no see. Life is good in Guizhou. I’ve got a promotion lately, I’m earning more. I’ll be sending more money soon. Everything’s easier



here, new technology and what not. We recently got a new TV too, the image is very clear. You really should move to the city, the medical services and better here too, it'll be good for you.....”

She picks it up, throws it in the boiling water.

“朋友,” this one's from a friend, “how are you holding up recently la? Time flies by ho, can't believe so long since we last met le. Aiya, I can't buy your paper anymore! Hai, it's a shame, you always made the best paper, but the new types of paper are cheaper.....”

This one also goes in the pot.

“Dear mum, yes yes, I know you like your paper making and all, I understand. But don't be so stubborn about it, you know. At least consider. The country's moving fast, you can't stay in the village forever. Cities, technology, things are changing. It's time to move on.....”

“妈, ma, I know you're upset. I'm trying to do the best for the family, ma. You remember when I was young? Used to help you make all the paper. The mulberry trees, they were pretty, they really were, the leaves were lush and green and flowing. Come on, ma, you can make paper anywhere.....”

The paper swims up and down in the pot, tangled with the 树皮, rolling, fluttering, and dissolving

The last one is a bit different. It's red.

“DEMOLITION NOTICE

Sincerely, residents of 小黄村. This area will undergo demolition for the livelihood and wellbeing of the residents in the village. The details are as follows: One, residents.....”

The paper and the tree bark have now become one. She scoops them out in little balls with both her hands, and places them on the concrete floor. A 杵 mallet, used and worn so many times, for so many years, smashes down onto the bark, the paper, the everything. The pound thuds with hollowness, the brown fibres and the black words and the red, red paper merging into one. The force channeled with each pound, accumulated from so many papermaking mornings. Each time the mallet hits, water flies. Droplets, escaping from the wrath of the mallet then falling onto the concrete floor, leaving a platter of stains, likes petals falling from a 梅 flower, or leaves of a 枫 autumn tree. And the floor is a starry sky.

A tear rolls off her wrinkled face. It becomes a star.

The paste, after diluted with water, drained through a mesh, and dried out in the sun, becomes paper. It's tedious work, repetitive, but these dark, old hands have grown used to it. The tendons popped and the skin creases. Creases, every hold and every

callus were layers of history long gone. It was these hands that made her first batch of paper, when the village was still small and she was still a girl. It's still these hands, continuous hands, unchanging hands, that will make her last batch of paper. Somewhere in between, she grew old and the world changed. In the hundreds and thousands and millions of pieces of paper 故事 stories were told while others were lost. The water that pours from the tiny gaps in the mesh, flowing into the waterways then the streams then up into the sky makes up the world, and between the 天 skies and the 地 earth was Papermaker.

The 桑树纸 Papermaker. The last Papermaker.

It takes so long to make a sheet of paper, but only twenty minutes to dry. And as the last of the water vanish into the air, it disappears, forever, from this small, forest-buried Chinese village.



Carmen Ng

"桑树纸 (Mulberry paper)

From 小黄村 of the S.E. Qian Prefecture

Typically hand crafted by artisans, 桑树纸 is made from the bark of mulberry trees. It first saw recorded use in the Tang dynasty, however as technology advanced, it's now slowly faded from people's lives. Mulberry paper, along with 157 other Intangible Culture Heritage items makes up China's first National Level Intangible Culture Heritage List, the first of a series of lists made for the protection and preservation of Chinese culture."



## Rima

By Namira Rahman

The city of Dhaka was home to a miscellany of people. From grandmothers who stayed hidden in the darkness of cramped, candlelit apartments, to humble street vendors, and the occasional affluent family, basking in the freedom of their newfound wealth. In the outskirts of the city, the district of Savaar boasted an array of locally owned stalls, and an overcrowded masjid beating at its very heart. Hustling between the line of rickshaws stationed on the side of the main road, Rima limped past Masud's dokkan and slipped into a dimly lit backstreet. The sight of fresh jhalmuri and sickly sweet doodh cha had made her stomach grumble, but she pretended not to notice.

"Rima, what is happen your foot?" Masud asked. Packets of cheaply stacked Pilot cigarettes blocked his vision, but Masud had caught attention of the sombre woman through the cracks in the wooden paneling of his store.

5:12PM. Rima hesitated. The sun was setting and the adhan for maghrib prayer would soon be called. She knew her job didn't end when the school bell rang for the final time during the day; and her mother-in-law had made this clear.

***It is a woman's job to take care of the children, Rima. Poor Samir, he is doing for you instead? My son is so unlucky with wife like you.***

Masud sighed at the woman's silence. "Be careful, Rima. My son tell me Australia is big country, and plane sometime not fly very good. With foot pain, bigger accident can happen. Then, no flying for you."

Rima's lips upturned in the slighted curl, and for almost a complete second – she imagined her toes sinking into the warm sand, and watching her children dance in the midst of cool waves. She imagined a brighter future; shining like the golden threads weaved in her silk saree, and the shackles of her disciplined life gradually chipping away.

*Australia. Rima imagined the country she had seen in postcards and pamphlets; the country she would soon call her new home. Rima imagined Australia.*

Gripping onto the railing tightly with one hand and her glossy leather bag in the other, Rima stumbled up the stairs, until she was greeted with the peeling paint of her apartment door. Her husband, Samir, had promised he would cover up the cracks and chipped edges with paint himself; but she had told him not to worry; it wouldn't matter anymore after all.

Rima knocked on the door, before taking off her shoes. Sweeping a few pieces of chipped wood under the doormat with her feet, Rima wondered how much taka it would take to purchase a can of Berger Paint from a place like Bunnings. She had heard from Samir that only Berger was trusted for all the lavish skyrises in Dhaka; the sleek varnish coated 5-star hotels, and polished the ego for money hungry politicians and rich doctors.

"Assalamualaikum, Rima, you're home. Come in quietly, the children are sleeping."

Samir steadily creaked the door open, and beckoned for his wife to enter. Rima glanced at her husband as she clutched her purse closer to her chest, and slipped inside. Samir's jet-black hair brushed in all different directions, and the bags under his eyes only mirrored the slight hollows of his cheeks. His linen tie was undone; loosened at the knot, yet his pinstripe blazer still remain snug on his shoulders. Rima thought her husband looked disheveled, yet composed, like a Palashi dancer after the performance; flushed yet ever graceful.

***Rima, Samir looking sick?! I told you, moving to Australia not good idea. Too much stress for my son.***

"Wa'alaikumassalam," Rima replied, before hurrying to the kitchen, and swiftly turning her face away from Samir before he could question her any further about the throbbing pain from her swollen foot. Her feet stuck to the cold, damp tiles, and the loose threads of her cashmere shawl snatched on the corners of their glass cabinet. Rima turned on the stove, and poured mustard oil into a steel korai. 5:27PM; her wristwatch read. Samir would be leaving for work soon; and the onions had not been diced, the rice had not been washed; and the fish had not yet been fried.

***Rima, you should stay home. Samir need wife, not schoolteacher! You are creating so many problem in this house.***

Rima felt a stinging jolt of guilt spreading through her veins and muscles; twisted and turning like the trees she had heard of at Royal Botanical Gardens. Placing the fish and onions into the hot oil, Rima comforted herself with the life she envisioned for her family in Australia. She had decided that the children would stay at daycare, so that Samir wouldn't have to work nightshifts. Rima would not be expected to cook fish curry and bhortha for Samir either; because she had heard that in Coles, rice came in microwavable packets, and yellow powder turned into mashed potato with the simple addition of hot water.

Rima placed the rice in a small container, and the seared fish in the other. She sprinkled a handful of fresh parsley on top, and closed the lid. Packing the containers into a plastic bag, Rima placed it on the dining table, along with the rest of Samir's belongings. 5:42PM. She had made it. Rima felt satisfied; she had achieved her role, and the voice in the back of her head was pleased.

***Rima, dinner always on the table when Samir live with me; no wait.***

In the washroom, Samir was still making wudu for maghrib prayer. Rima could hear the water gushing from the sink; small droplets spraying onto the bathroom mirror, and soapy bubbles fizzing and popping in the basin. While she waited for her husband, Rima's eyes wondered to the slanted picture frame hanging next to the clock.

Rima stared at the photo. Samir's eyes glistened in the sunlight and his arms draped loosely over her shoulders. Her son's dimples were hidden in the folds of her emerald saree, and her daughter's arms wrapped tightly around her legs; just like a koala perched

on a eucalyptus tree. Rima closed her eyes and squeezed them tightly – for almost a complete second; she imagined leaving for work dressed in tailored pants, she imagined her son learning his ABC's and counting 1,2,3's; while her daughter watched Giggle and Hoot on the television. As Rima squeezed her eyes closed for a little longer and furrowed her pencil thin eyebrows, she could also imagine her children and her husband both at home together; occasionally swapping homecooked meals for Hungry Jacks.

***Stay here, Rima. Why are you taking my son away from me? He is happy, eh?***

5:56PM. The adhan for maghrib prayer had commenced. The imam's voice boomed through the city, but Rima refused to open her eyes.

She could escape. Rima imagined that she could escape. Yet most of all, she prayed that the heavy feeling; dragging, sinking, and ripping her alive would stop. She prayed that her life wouldn't be a race against the clock, ticking with her heartbeat and against her footsteps. She prayed that she wouldn't be a burden or an inconvenience; and that the scathing words of her mother-in-law would slowly, but gradually fade; until she could no longer hear it.

6:00PM. The imam was silent and the adhan had been called. Rima buried her face into her hands for the final time, and sunk down further into the tweed chair. Kajal smeared underneath her eyes and her lips were painted glossy in salty tears.

*Australia. Rima imagined Australia.*

## **Chanel, 2022**

By Lola Sargasso

Illustrated by Khushi Ganwari

I love your limbs. In fact,  
It could be true to say  
That I love all of you, here  
In this moment, in  
Your ersatz splendour.

Dear, as I unravel every  
Parcel the night crew has  
Left for us, can you feel  
My pulse quicken? Do  
You envy me my breath?

I must confess, my plastic  
Darling, I have cause to envy  
Every aspect of your  
Transformation. Love,  
They say, is blind, and yet

I am inclined to wonder  
If, when they open up  
Tomorrow and everyone,  
Every crude eye can  
See you, will they be

Swayed by this little  
Black dress and these  
Blue suede shoes I am  
Slipping onto your dainty  
Pointed feet? You coquette,

I can picture you simpering  
At their limp stares.  
Is that a blush I see  
On your cold, hard cheek?  
Let your other lovers

Speak amongst themselves of the  
Contours of your robe and your  
Streamlined silhouette, then  
Move on to the next implacable  
Figure. I'll wait

With a smile and a kiss for  
Three months, three aching months  
Until we close. The last



Snapshot postcard will be sold  
And my warm-blooded

Fingers will undo these buttons  
At your wrist that I tie  
Now. I'll press your hand,  
Feel for a heart-beat, then  
Back into storage – or the

Cold embrace of landfill.  
To be honest, love,  
I don't much care. Wait.  
One last feather out  
Of place, and there.



Khushi Ganwani

## Extremis

By Lola Sargasso

*It's the 2060's, and space is no longer the new frontier. This is a spaceship, but not a very expensive one. The environment is sparse, clean almost to the point of being sterile. The one exception to this is a desk, piled high with knitting needles, puzzle books and a fern in a clay pot. Lights rise on a woman sitting at stage centre in a stainless steel chair. She presses a button on some vaguely futuristic tape recorder sitting in her lap, and speaks.*

Journal entry, day 53. Grav fields-

*A pause. She takes a closer look at the recorder, sucks her teeth and presses a different button. A light goes on. Slightly faster this time.*

Journal entry, day 53. Grav fields are at 1.6 trillion g's and levels of Hawking radiation are stable. Apart from that, nothing really new or interesting to report. Ship's all fine, so I'm just sort of hanging in there. Taking some notes. Chilling.

*Beat. She spins around in her chair. Squirts the plant with a plastic mister.*

It's a bit of a grim assignment. I mean, somebody's gotta do it, but still. Just sitting here and staring into space for 300 more days. Takes me back to family dinners.

*She thinks on this for a bit, then snaps back.*

Should probably get back to it. It being more nothing. Corporal Bestua, signing off

*A change of day. The lighting shifts and Bestua moves in her chair, turns the recorder on again. She rushes past the first part.*

Journal entry, day 37. Grav fields constant at 1.6 trillion g's, Hawking radiation stable and still no visible sign of change. I had a bit of a scare this morning. Some of the sensors started going off at 5.32, and it took me nearly 4 hours to work out exactly what the hell had gone wrong. Turns out I'd pulled the wrong lever on the toilet yesterday night and everything'd floated out into space. I ended up having to head out there fully suited with – I kid you not – some old butterfly net looking thing to fish all the shit out of the air. Jesus.

*It's a repulsive image. She shakes her head, then starts again.*

But, no, apart from that fairly significant event it's all been quiet on the Western Front. Nothing going wrong in here and especially nothing happening out there. It's kind of weird, really. They spend all this money sending me out to space - Big mission! Be a man in the National Aeronautics and Space Administration! - and then it's just grunt work. Supervising the machines, correcting random errors, adjusting orbital patterns. I was hoping for something a bit more spacey.

*Beat.*

I've had to really get into the small stuff, y'know? Yesterday I finished what's now my second crossword book and put another row on my NASA scarf, and I've even been thinking of making the first interplanetary sourdough starter. Might set some kind of a record. God, listen to me. Barely an fifteenth into this and already I'm climbing up the walls. Mum's going to have to keep me on a leash for the first couple months, just to make sure I don't bite anyone back at home.

*Beat.*

It'll be strange, going home after this. Mum said I was a nutter, but she didn't understand that the world - the universe - is so much bigger now, so much more beautiful. Just watching the suns rising.

*She shakes it off.*

Ah well. Plenty of time for soliloquising when I'm back on the ground. In the meantime, this is Corporal Bestua, pissing right off.

*A different day.*

Journal entry, day 311. Gravity fields normal and Hawking radiation static. All's well.

*Another day. Bestua's taken her hair out of the bun, and has the schematics of the ship open on her desk.*

I don't understand any of this. Surely there's something else I could be doing. I'm studying a black hole, for Christ's sake! One of nature's inscrutable miracles! An observable spatial anomaly and I'm just sitting here fucking staring at it and scribbling figures!

*She picks up the recorder again, speaks into it, uses the documents on the desk to punctuate her arguments.*

You know, I've been doing a lot of research into black holes. After working my way through seventeen sudoku books and five balls of yarn, self-education seemed like the only possible thing left doing around here. I'm a bit of an expert now. Did you know they can stretch time? Einstein's got this whole theorem about it and some fuck called Bernardi thinks it could be possible to exist in perpetuity by using them as a time loop. There's even this one uber-Christian cunt who's claimed that he saw God through one back in '32. It's all absolute bullshit, anyway. Nobody knows what's going on with these things, least of all me. Can you even imagine being stuck in this intergalactic airport lounge forever? I'd go mad.

*A bit of time passes. Throughout the next piece of dialogue, Bestua picks leaves off of the fern on her desk and lets them fall to the floor.*

I think I am. Going mad, I mean. There's just- I can't- No. After this, I'm going to go

recheck the cadmium battery. After that, I'll do the maintenance checklist. That should carry me through to dinner.

*She takes a deep breath.*

Yeah. This was Corporal Bestua, day 167.

*She puts her head in her hands.*

100 more days.

*A different day.*

Journal entry, day 311. Gravity fields normal-

*She pauses, rubs her eyes.*

Wait. I've done this. Never mind.

*Another change in time. She's a lot calmer, sits static in her chair.*

Journal entry, day 201. Gravity fields recorded at a consistent 1.6 trillion g's. Hawking radiation also maintaining a stable rate of growth. Non-standard reading on Geiger-Muller detector recorded at 0300 hours but presumed to be machine fault. Subject remains static. Corporal Bestua, signing off.

*She turns off the recorder, breathes, violently stands up and throws her desk with everything on it to the floor. The fern smashes. She promptly stands it up again, replaces all the items and sweeps up the shards and dirt.*

Amendment - personal belonging of crew member destroyed in routine incident. Object is organic in nature, and will be disposed of in the incinerator. Signing off.

*Another day. Bestua is chirpy. She paces the stage with tape recorder in hand.*

Journal entry, day 3. The grav fields are constant at 1.6 trillion g's and the Hawking radiation's stable. Days into this thing and I'm already so excited I could die. God, everything's so new! I must've checked the rear thrusters on the ship at least five times today, just because I could. Actually, I might go check them again. Bye!

*Another shift in time. Throughout this, Bestua is knitting.*

Thought I saw my mum the other day. I was just walking through maintenance - one of the water pouches had split, again, and it'd drenched a whole bunch of my files - so I was rifling through all of the brooms and vacuums and stuff for a bit of a clean-up and there she was. I dunno how I knew it was her, really. All I could see was the back of her head and the top half of one of those scarves she's always wearing. Mum hates a clean-up. You know, that was the only thing she said she wouldn't miss when I left. All the cleaning up after me.

*This sits with her for a bit, until she shakes it off.*

Andromeda's still sitting there, presumably sucking in matter or whatever the fuck it is it does. Let's see, we ran out of potatoes yesterday but only because I refuse to live in a world where I can't have hash browns any time I want. Due to an unfortunate incident with the cadmium battery, the first interplanetary sourdough starter was burnt to a crisp but I'm working on a new one. Oh, I thought I saw another ship on the scanner, but it turned out to be a bit of hash brown stuck to the screen. All in all, fairly successful day. Corporal Bestua, wishing you the best.

*She turns it off, manages a couple more purls then turns it back on again.*

This was journal entry, day 121. Fuck. Grav levels consistent, Hawking radiation stable, all that stuff.

*A new day.*

Journal entry, day 311. Gravity fields normal and Hawking radiation static. I think-

*She realises again.*

Oh.

A pause as she realises that this is the third time.

Shit.

*Another shift in time.*

Journal entry, day 350. Gravity levels are holding at 1.6 trillion g's, Hawking radiation at stable levels. Today's my last day. I've got the cadmium battery to sort out and the final measurements to be catalogued, but after that it's over. No more checklists. Blank slate.

*A beat.*

I don't really know what I'm going to do now. There's like this wall in my head. Tomorrow's not going to be just like today, and it, it scares me.

*A beat.*

I miss my mum. I miss my fern. I am going to miss this place. This is Corporal Bestua, concluding her log.

*She walks off. It's silent on the stage. Klaxons blare and spotlights flicker. Turmoil is evident onstage. The lights shift, not to black but to something distinctly 'off'. A pause, then Bestua walks onstage and sits in the chair, whistling while she does so. She turns on the recorder.*

Corporal Bestua, day 1.

Sudden cut to black.

**there was in me an ocean**

By Milagros Vargas

*There was in me an ocean, it beat against my heart.  
The waves they tossed and turned my soul— my self— all torn apart.  
Before I drowned, I thought to scream, just one last desperate gasp—  
but water poured in with the air, the current choking hope.*

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[end]