The background is a painting of a tropical landscape. In the foreground, there is a body of water, possibly a lake or a wide river, with dark, swirling brushstrokes in shades of blue and purple. The middle ground shows a range of dark, silhouetted mountains under a sky filled with soft, white and light blue clouds. The scene is framed by lush green foliage and trees, with some leaves and branches visible in the upper corners and along the sides. The overall style is impressionistic and painterly.

CU WRITING IN
ENGLISH
Volume XIX/2020

Cu Writing
in English

Volume XIX / 2020

PREFACE (SHORT STORY SECTION)

It has been one hell of a year, literally. From frustrating political impasses to incessant waves of epidemic outbreaks, the past year has not been easy on any one of us. Helplessness in witnessing injustice around us, loneliness from social isolation, exhaustion in dealing with unfamiliar styles of life and work... We have gone through some of the most drastic ups and downs on the roller-coaster of life, and we all need a break once in a while. And stories provide us with just that.

You may have the experience of hiding behind books or scrolling through online fictions in search of a space to breathe, to rest, to forget, just for a while, the brutal reality. Or perhaps this is exactly what you are looking for right now, flipping through this booklet.

Other than providing a brief escape from real life, the comfort of reading also comes from knowledge. Every story, be it a realistic account of life or one of fantasy, reflects a piece of human thoughts and experience. In a story, we get a glimpse into lives that are beyond ourselves. In a story, we see the world through a window stained with a new shade of colour. In a story, we understand a bit of the author's mind, through which we learn a bit more of our own. Creative writing has not only become a temporary sanction in trying times, but also spectacles and megaphones to reflect, to express, and to make sense of the world, for both the readers and the writers.

In this edition, the writers have created a wide variety of stories while stuck at home, from engaging, heart-wrenching stories about family relationships to science fiction with imaginative plots and gripping details, as well as social commentaries through the whimsical note of magical realism. Each story leaves readers with compelling emotions and much to ponder. We had a blast reading each and every one of them, and we hope you find joy and resonance as you journey through the 2020 collection.

Suzanna Lam
Janice Lam
Yuki Ng

Editors

PREFACE (POETRY SECTION)

In the timeframe within which the poetry in this collection was written, a lot has happened that has percolated in the minds of these poets. This collection can be seen as a reckoning within each individual with not only the external changing environment – that demands attention be given to the weight of the written word – but also a deeper wrangling with the internal conflicts and emotions that persist during the sliver between youth and adulthood.

As editors, we have been thrilled, inspired and honoured to have had the opportunity to interact with and reflect on the work produced by our fellow students. This collection celebrates both the diversity in the approaches taken to universal sensations and the universal ideas that seep through diverse experiences.

In trying to organize the collection, we found there to be five ‘themes’ under which the poems could be categorized. We list them below in the hope that by reading, you may find a piece which pierces and/or gives you peace during these chaotic times.

ONE.

Moments/Movements

(describing the picture through its pixels)

TWO.

Thoughts in the Time of Corona

(trying to capture what no one wants to see)

THREE.

Youth and Yearning

(blurring the line between the two)

FOUR.

Identity: A Wound’s Landscape

(navigating the self)

FIVE.

Chicken Soup from the Poets

(a hearty serving for troubled hearts)

Emily Hedvig Olsson

Maheen Haider

Sophie Ip

Editors

CONTENT

SHORT STORY SECTION

“What Does a Butterfly Look Like in a Dog’s Eye?”	<i>Alyx Junbo Tong</i>	01
“Q1”	<i>Ryan Ma</i>	10
“From Water to Wine”	<i>Bianca Rose Tio Reyes</i>	30
“Mushrooms”	<i>Emilia Wong</i>	50
“A Little Victory”	<i>Jodie Lam</i>	62
“Railway Bunnies”	<i>Suzanna Lam</i>	70
“The Hearthholder”	<i>Kylie Leung</i>	78
“The Kidnapper”	<i>Ray Huang</i>	96
“The Price of Salmon”	<i>Emily Hedvig Olsson</i>	102
“The White Pine Door”	<i>William Sekkingstad</i>	114

POETRY SECTION

MOMENTS/MOVEMENT

Holding a Candle	<i>Emily H. Olsson</i>	119
Seasons	<i>Linus Lee</i>	121
Sleep to See My Wish	<i>Chong Yun Fong</i>	122
Caffeine Night	<i>Suzanna Lam</i>	123

THOUGHTS IN THE TIME OF CORONA

Rolls of Greed	<i>Evelyn Ma</i>	124
Zero	<i>Karen Liu</i>	126

YOUTH AND YEARNING

I'd Go Back	<i>Chan Sze Wan</i>	127
In Mrs Beaker's Class	<i>Stephanie Ho</i>	129
Unpacking	<i>Alyx Tong</i>	130
Old Friend	<i>Yuki Xia</i>	132
When We Were Younger	<i>Sophie Ip</i>	133

IDENTITY: A WOUND'S LANDSCAPE

Learning to Love Hong Kong	<i>Coco Tse</i>	134
I know you are tired	<i>Tamara Yustian</i>	136
Wanderer	<i>William Sekkingstad</i>	138
The Foreign Native	<i>Mabeen Haider</i>	139
The Sound	<i>Tse Tsz Pui Joey</i>	141
Monsters	<i>Charlotte Wong</i>	142

CHICKEN SOUP FROM THE POETS

Green	<i>Cheng Ming Chun Andre</i>	143
I Know You Hear Me	<i>Wong Cheuk Yiu</i>	146
Food and Mood	<i>Chan Kar Chun</i>	148
Home	<i>Cheung Sze Hang Gideon</i>	149

SHORT STORY SECTION





*Sunlight shined upon the flakes, and the whiteness blended with gold, forming a fabulous star.
Just then, my puppy, with all his power, jumped.*

WHAT DOES A BUTTERFLY LOOK LIKE IN A DOG'S EYE?

Alyx Junbo Tong

Life, death, parenthood, and responsibility are abstract concepts from which I have barely learned anything in the past eighteen years, now denote things with unprecedented profundity after a sobering winter in 2020. My grandfather, along with countless others, left us this past winter. When I hugged my father I saw the those scattered grey hairs atop the strong man's head, and I immediately envisioned images of me aging in the future, and parting with my strange, blurred-face loved ones. At the moment I tasted the bitterness and the dullness of death, and minuteness of life for the first time. Hence, this story carries a significant emotional complexity amongst my writings. Seph is a tribute to my father's childhood puppy Saibu (in Chinese, "like-tiger"), who died young; and who my father told tales about many times to me when I was a child. Also, I have grown paramount reverence for the cosmic, unalterable progression and cycle of life over this winter. I view this story as a philosophical reflection and expression of the conception of parenthood I now know and it is a legacy for my future self to inherit, as if the protagonist inherits the stick from Seph.

When I picked up my daughter from the elementary school this afternoon, she made a request that I, for the first time since Ivy passed away giving birth to her, felt particularly hard to satisfy.

"How's your day, little girl?"

"Daddy, I want a cat!" She yelled excitedly from the backseat.

I find this thing about children interesting, that when they desperately want something, they are too excited to tell you their wishes to focus on what you are saying in the first place.

Driving away from twilight, I saw sparkles of hope glittering in Claire's eyes from the backseat mirror. To have a cat is far from asking for the moon. I would probably also want to have one if I have enough time to take care of it. Plus, Claire has

always been a good girl. She's polite and sensible, with good grades in school. I know she would be a good owner. But, for whatever reason, I blurted out something I didn't really mean to say.

"Well, you have to be prepared to have a cat."

"I will take care of her, Dad, you know I will!"

"I know. I mean, she's gonna leave you someday, and you gotta be prepared for that."

Claire was going to say something, probably adding up her defense that she was prepared and would be looking after the cat. But my words blocked her words.

During the drive home, she was silently looking out the window without asking anything more about the cat. She was thinking something too serious for her age. I knew I should not have said that to her, but a part of me was glad that she is still young and innocent to actually give whatever problem on her mind a good think. A lot of us can't do that now. It's something only a child can do.

After we got home, I tried to do things to distract her just in case she was still trapped in her thoughts. I made curry for dinner, we played home golf together, and I read her an extra bedtime story before I tucked her in.

I turned off all the lights in the house, and went to sit downstairs in the living room. I looked at the family photos on top of the fireplace. There's one in which are Ivy and I, before Claire was born. Another one is a photo taken on Christmas Eve three years ago, when I flew back to my hometown with Claire to meet my father and brother. Their faces floated out of the frames, and smiled at me in the dim blaze from the fireplace.

What would you say to your kids when they ask you if they could have a pet? Dogs or cats or birds, what breed, what color, perhaps what name you would give them, and that's about it. Why would I ask a seven-year-old to be prepared for the distant death of her unreceived cat? Man, you're getting old.

I breathed out a stream of smoke, blurring their faces.

It's a parent thing I guess, to think of all the possible outcomes for your

children's decision.

I was thinking of the dog I used to have when I was Claire's age. And the stupidest line ever said to a child, that your cat is gonna die, popped out of my head when I thought of my dog.

I called him Seph. I hardly told anyone about Seph. He, and my memories with Ivy, are things that I have tried to drink myself into oblivion to erase. But the fact is their marks are on me forever, and the bravest thing I can do is to take them out only once in a while to reminisce about the faded but fresh happiness.

I was around six when I met Seph. Back then, my family lived in a town named Valentine, about two hundred miles west from the big city St Denis, and ten hundred miles west from Annesburg, where I live now.

Days in Valentine were simple. My father worked in the government office in the town, I am in school, and my brother, who dropped out of school not long after he got in, helped my mother with the farm work. One day, when my father was walking back home from work, he found a puppy wandering in our field. The old man went and grabbed the little thing and brought him back home. My brother, in his rebellious age, embarrassed to acknowledge his caring for any lovely thing in the world, transferred the custody to me. Really, he was just finding himself an excuse to play with Seph and not show the soft side of him.

My brother had been such a man, tough but was with implicit shyness of expressing his softness, for a long time until our mother passed away in my twenties. But that's another story.

Seph was a yellowish puppy, with short hair and floppy ears. He was round and small, and looked like a stretched ball when running with endless energy. Actually, when I later realized how vigorous Seph was I was surprised that father easily brought him back without, as the old man put in his troop way, "encountering resistance". Seph was a stray, and we knew nothing about him, his age or his breed. But apparently, he was as young as I was, and as small as I was. This strange age-body similarity was the first bond I shared with Seph. In my eyes, Seph was good company, a real friend, not a thing that I owned.

WHAT DOES A BUTTERFLY LOOK LIKE IN A DOG'S EYE?

I knew Seph was different from other dogs the first time I met him. Rural dogs were fierce; dogs in the neighborhood were already hunting rabbits even at Seph's age. But in Seph's eyes I didn't see that wildness. After father laid him down in the yard, he started strolling around, stretching his body to touch that purple morning glory that covered the short garden walls. Slowly, I padded up to him, stroked him from his head to his back. He butted me and licked my palm, and rubbed me with his fluffy neck. I held him with my arms. He was so warm, and his heartbeat was of vigor and felt so alive that you would mistake him as a young bear or tiger if you held him. He hopped on my shoulder and licked my face, and I heard the quick, successive gasp. That was the sound of life, that of the virginal blossom of an orchid, and a quiet sunrise after a night of storm.

My brother was responsible for picking me up from school every afternoon. After Seph joined the family, he would take Seph with him in the pickup. I remember walking out of the door of the school building, seeing the two of them standing by the school gate at a distance. Seph wagged his tail as my brother waved his hands. That figure of two warmed me every time I saw them. In my memory, the path from where I stand to the school gate was covered by the warm, golden afternoon sunrays, and all I needed to do was walk to immerse myself into that happiness.

Seph and I had a playground, a field at the rear of our village. It was once used to grow crops but had already been abandoned by the farmers when Seph and I occupied the space. There was a gravel pathway across the field, with wild grass growing and dandelion blossoming on either side of the path. Every summer, the morning breeze would wind up dandelions and lift them into the air. Seph, walking in front of me along the stone aisle, was hoping to chase and catch those summer snows. Sunlight shined upon the flakes, and the whiteness blended with gold, forming a fabulous star. Just then, my puppy, with all his power, jumped. Thirty years on, I see this moment as clear as I saw it on that morning in May.

The pathway led up to a grassy hill. There Seph and I played fetch for countless times. Seph was smart; he learned things beyond the mechanism of the game. One day, as soon as we mounted up the hill, he ran into the sea of greenness, and left me waiting in place, confused. Soon I saw him pacing back, wagging his tail and holding a small wood stick in his mouth. He put down the stick in front of me and pushed it, as if he had long prepared this gift and wanted me to have

it. As I bended down and picked up the stick, Seph ambushed me by bombarding my face with his tongue and his fur. Holding the stick, I walked up to a tree at the top of the hill. In the tree there was a hole just above the bottom of its root, looking like rabbit holes in cartoons, had a small, round entrance that led into a tiny cave of darkness, which really was a space inside the bottom of the tree. I stuffed the stick into that hidden hole, placing it steadily against the mud.

The dandelion field, the yard of our old house, and this nameless hill where Seph gave me that fragile, slim stick, were images constantly occurring in my dreams, where I lucidly wandered amidst them. It was many years later that I learned to appreciate these chaste, simple happiness and their value beyond all worldly pleasures and alcohols I transiently feasted on but soon lost in their vanity.

But there was one thing I knew for sure, that Seph and I knew these places better than anyone in the world, and with his gift I claimed the sovereignty of this land by secretly marking the tree with the stick. Someday, some guy will climb up and notice this hole, but they will also find this stick placed there. Before they can be happy about their witty discovery, they would know someone was here long before them. And the tales of the first owner of this hill would remain as a myth to all those late comers—at least this was what was in my mind at the time.

All these, my ties and stories with Seph, were my childhood fountain of happiness. They were hopes that empowered me to wake up early the next morning, reminders of the beauty of life, and reasons for my overwhelming pain when I learned of Seph's death.

My brother was the only one who showed up at the school gate that day. I walked up to him, and I saw that his face was dead white. He told me a car hit Seph just this afternoon.

I rushed home and in the yard I saw Seph, lying on the ground where I met him for the first time, and where I would see him rushing out from the house every time I came home.

I knelt down before Seph and put my hand on him. He was still alive, but barely breathing and his eyes were closed. I felt the rhythm of his breath, each one carried a piece of the remaining weight of his soul.

WHAT DOES A BUTTERFLY LOOK LIKE IN A DOG'S EYE?

For a split second I thought my brother was messing with me. It felt like Seph was only asleep.

But no. I couldn't feel his usual surge of energy. I knew he was about to die, slowly.

I didn't waste time listening to my brother's explanation of how this happened. I knew what happened. Seph was busy chasing a butterfly, then the car hit him. That was it. Nothing more needed to be known. He could not see the car coming. There was nothing he could do. His world was made up only of color and that butterfly until the next moment.

I wondered how that butterfly looked in his eyes.

Tears streamed down Seph's eyes. He wasn't crying. He wasn't even conscious anymore. It was just the pain.

His groaning was getting lower, then it became silent.

When twilight arrived Seph had passed. Father and I buried him in that dandelion field. I picked a corner and dug a small grave for him. I found a stone and planted it into the soil as his tombstone.

Thirty years have passed since then. Time has brought me many, but erased more. That Christmas trip home three years ago helped me recollect a few of what time has taken from me.

My brother picked me up at the airport. Driving past silver forests, nameless houses that have been built over these years, and a white sea of crop fields that had grown significantly larger, we were home, Valentine.

We pulled over at the gate of our yard, and the second I got out of the car, those lost things rushed into my nerves and woke a dead part of me as the cold winter wind of the homeland blasted and sobered me, and those lost things returned to my mind as I sensed the earthly coldness: a family camp night in a young summer when my brother almost got bitten by a snake, my first kiss with Ivy near the

WHAT DOES A BUTTERFLY LOOK LIKE IN A DOG'S EYE?

Demon Pub in the town, and Seph's shadowy figure, jumping and running at the yard. The catalyst of the sudden advent of these memories was the winter wind, which had etched my juvenile face for the first eighteen years of my life, and it now continued sharpening my mind by reminding me of the key, completing jigsaws to those loose ends.

By twilight I walked among the old fields. They were my old friends, this place and everything in it, and I was silently talking to them, by walking with them.

I walked past that dandelion field.

I saw the corner where Seph was buried. I clawed the overgrown weeds, snow and mud, and found the tombstone.

I walked up that hill where Seph gave me his gift. The tree at the top of the hill was still there, now taller and larger. I crouched down, brushed aside the snow covered at the bottom of the tree, and there I saw the rabbit hole. Inside I found a heritage, that from the owner of this hill, who meant for me to have it the day he placed it.

Holding the thin, dry, and worn stick that meant nothing to everyone else in the world, I then realized, after all these years, Seph hadn't left me.

Claire asked me if she could have a cat. I hesitated for a moment. Because parting is of so much pain, and I didn't want her to experience it so soon.

But the idea dissolved quickly. I remember that Christmas afternoon, the white, the cold wind, and the look of that stick after thirty years of waiting. I chased the snow that day back to a hot, lazy summer day, when Seph jumped into the glory to catch a flying dandelion. For a moment, I couldn't tell the difference between the two angelic flakes.

I'm almost forty now. I have lost some people in life forever. My old man passed away two months ago. My brother was the one to tell me that as well—just like how he told me about Seph's death.

I haven't seen my father since that Christmas party. I cried for my absence in his

WHAT DOES A BUTTERFLY LOOK LIKE IN A DOG'S EYE?

passing, that night, for a long time. But I accepted it eventually. I miss him, in the same way I miss Seph.

I know I will eventually leave Claire in the future. But no one knows how soon that future will be; just as Seph didn't know the car would hit him the next second. He was just playing, with only that butterfly in his eyes.

I know Claire, in a future yet to come, will be sad for our parting, just like I was for Ivy, and for my father. But I hope she'll be ready by that time. At least, Orange will help her prepare for this.

Right, Orange?



Stephanie couldn't stop her knees from shaking as she stumbled through the back alleys, trying to focus over the horrible screams echoing throughout the ruined husks of buildings.

01

Ryan Ma

Growing up, I had no TV to entertain me (still don't have one now), only books. As such, I aspired to become an author since primary school, and I have written numerous stories to that end ever since. The story published here is one of the longest ones I have written so far, based on my own views and then-recent events at the time of writing the story.

01 derives its name from the binary code that is the foundation of our digital world, and was inspired by my own personal experience of being hacked and losing all my data, only on a far larger scale, set in a future where humanity is even more reliant on technology than the present day. Many people are unaware of the true threat of cyberattacks, believing that numbers without physical form could at most cause some financial loss, but nothing truly damaging to a society. Even more alarming is the fact that even with the introduction of the first self-driving cars and “smart” households, many are still oblivious to what a true large-scale cyberattack could mean.

01 is my take on such a scenario, a brief glimpse into a fallen empire, now turned into a living hell—and what would happen if the government of a nation was incapable of responding, just as a certain superpower has failed to respond to the ongoing pandemic. There are a few ends left open for a possible sequel, but until then, I hope you enjoy!

Unknown Location, 1800 Hours, 2nd May 2042

Zeros and Ones. So simple, so elegant, yet so dangerous. The Man in Gray mused idly while he waited for the time to arrive. *And the true beauty of it all? Almost nobody realizes just how deadly they can be, not even those starched-collar “experts”.* Flashes on his monitor snapped him out of his trance. “Execute command?” the display read. His hand reached mechanically for the keypad, then stopped. For a while, the room was devoid of sound, save for his own rhythmic breathing and the whir of the drive units.

Whether the world realized it or not, in his hands was the fate of 300 million souls. At his fingertips was the power to topple the sole superpower on Gaia, the power to break an empire that had stood above all others for over 90 years. In his hands was the power to slaughter a good part of those 300 million individuals, directly or indirectly, and though his heart had long turned dark with hatred, the

last traces of humanity in him still compelled him to hold back. Had anyone else been in the room, they would not have seen the ruthless father-turned-terrorist, but instead a sad, lonely man, hesitation in his eyes and hands balled into fists.

But the next instant, the iron mask was back up, and twin orbs of hazel fire blazed bright. *I've come too far for this*, the Man mused. *No sense in letting all my hard work go to waste.* With a few keystrokes, he released his creation out into the greater world. A sigh escaped the man's lips as he leaned back in the only chair in the room. It was done. Even if someone were to kill him or destroy the machine now, it would change nothing. His child would continue his work endlessly, until it had completed its holy mission. For the first time in decades, the Man in Gray's lips curled upward ever so slightly, smiling for the country he despised.

Just Zeros and Ones. Here's to you, Columbia. Enjoy the last few moments of life as you know it. A sigh escaped his lips.

And here's to you, my dearest family. When our revenge is complete, I'll be joining you.

United Electric Powerplant, Eastern Columbia, 1810 Hours, 2nd May 2042

One.

Frank yawned as he waited for his shift to end. 20 minutes. Just 20 minutes more, then he could go home and watch Webflick and eat pizza. No more checking equipment, no more boring manuals, just him and his buddies relaxing. He closed his eyes and began to drift off.

Then he practically hit the ceiling as an error message blared red on his control panel. Muttering curses, he hauled himself closer to the desk and squinted at the reports. Then he froze. A wall of reports filled up his screen, each one ominously red. He didn't know where to even begin to fix this. In desperation, he executed every preset safety protocol available, then ran out to call for his superiors— but he would never make it.

Unbeknownst to Frank, the powerplant was facing the human equivalent of

an existential crisis. Something had bypassed the firewalls and sent one simple command to every function of the plant— On. Every single protocol and command kicked in at once, competing with each other to fulfill their missions. One instant, the plant would be operating at full power, the next it would go into reset mode, then the next it would restart the motors, the next, it would engage the emergency brakes...

The plant had no emotions, nor an AI to regulate it, for it was deemed unnecessary and expensive to put an AI to work in a relatively simple powerplant. Thus, it faithfully carried out the task to which it had been assigned, whatever that may be, and regardless of the physical strain on the components themselves. Components that were now literally starting to crack under the chaotic fluctuation in stress and temperature.

The turbine casings rattled ominously as the delicate fan blades began to warp, not by much by human standards, but enough to cause minor fluctuations. Unfortunately, minor fluctuations in a turbine fan spinning at thousands of rounds per minute and subjected to superheated gas burning at thousands of degrees were already enough.

There was a loud, shrill whistle as the escaping gas screamed through the gaps between the turbine casings, then a monstrous “BAM!” as the turbines flew apart in all directions. In an instant, Frank and everyone else inside the complex were torn into bloody little pieces, shredded by thousands of metal shards flying outward like a giant fragmentation bomb. With the main generators gone, everything went dark, and a deathly silence descended upon what was now a mass tomb.

And across Columbia, in every powerplant, the same scene unfolded over and over again, leaving blood and bone in their wake.

Main Street, The District, 1820 Hours, 2nd May 2042

Zero.

Linda groaned as she saw the congested lanes ahead. Traffic here was still as

bad as ever, even ten years after the nationwide AI road network came online together with the explosion in smart cars. The politicians had claimed that the new and expensive network would rival its counterpart in Huaxia, the greatest enemy of Columbia; in practice it shaved barely a few minutes off the travel time due to its slower processors. Hence why she was stuck here in traffic, no better off than before.

She was jolted back into reality as everything outside went dark. In rapid succession, the lights of the city blocks, then the traffic lights, then the street lights all shut down. Bewildered and not a little frightened, she frantically scanned her dashboard only to find the words “CONNECTION LOST” written in big, bold red letters on the screen. She jumped as a new message popped up. “SWITCHING TO AUTOPILOT”, read the dashboard.

“What?!” She hadn’t given the command to switch control to the onboard AI! What was going on?

Then the noises came.

Ahead of her, tires squealed and people screamed. Car after car ploughed itself into the nearest wall, or drove straight into each other in a horrible cacophony of metal. In sheer horror, Lindatried to open the doors. Locked. She tried the brake pedal and the manual handbrake. Nothing. She tried the sunroof. Nothing. Then the dashboard lit up as her car sped up to full throttle.

Her last scream was cut short as the wall rushed up to meet her head on.

Central Government Offices, The District, 1830 Hours, 2nd May 2042

Zero.

Sharpe’s head hit the desk. At last, he could rest from the mountains of paperwork generated daily by the bloated, gargantuan bureaucracy that was the Columbian government, at least for a while. As the tabletop melded into his forehead, he conducted his scheduled ritual to maintain his sanity, just like every other day—

cursing the magnates, corporations and political groups that held the true power in Columbia. Blasted snobs. Who died and made them king? Shaking his head to clear the clouds of discontent gathering in his mind, Sharpe sighed and reached for his cup of coffee. It was going to be another long, boring night spent in overti—

Everything went dark.

Sharpe shot to his feet as his lights, plasma TV screen and computer all shut down.

“What in God’s name...”

He was no stranger to blackouts, having grown up in a rural area in the South, but this was a far cry from his old farmhouse. These were the central government offices in the District, the head of all Columbia. Power never ran out here, not unless someone blew up all the generators along the Eastern Shore, and even then there was a backup generator, always ready to go.

Speaking of the backup generator, what was taking the blasted thing so long to switch on? And why was the entire street pitch-black?

His head whipped to the window at the sound of a loud crash outside, followed by another. And another. The crashes kept rolling in, intermingled with the warble of car alarms, honking horns and screams. His bewilderment deepened further for a moment, then his eyes snapped wide open. *Don't tell me that the AI road network is out! Millions of people are on the roads right now!* Sharpe stood in mute horror as the crashes kept coming from below. After the longest thirty seconds of his life, he reached for his phone, instinctively calling his wife to check if she was alright. Then he paused. His phone was completely dead, even though he had charged it just an hour ago.

“What the...”

Columbian Armed Forces Cyber Division HQ, 1840 Hours, 2nd May 2042

Deep below the surface in an armoured bunker, the mania unfolding on the streets was mirrored on every serviceman and woman's face. None of them could believe what they were seeing— their network defences were being swept aside like playthings, and their cyber teams, long touted to be the best of their kind on Gaia, were being completely outmatched by this unknown assailant. And while the Cyber Division struggled to bypass the intrusion, thousands upon thousands were dying on the streets above, unable to do anything else but watch as they hurtled towards their doom.

The Division's commander, General Waller, was busy screaming at his subordinates.

"I don't care what you have to do, just get the grid back online! People are dying out there! Fix it now, or so God help me I'll have you court-martialled!"

Waller was at the end of his rope. His base was only barely functioning due to the emergency military generators buried underground nearby, intended as a last resort in case of nuclear war, the only saving grace in this catastrophe.

The nightmare didn't end with the roads, however. Without power, the nation's Air Traffic Control network couldn't function, and even if they had power, their computers would have been fried by the cyber attack. To top it all off, at the same time that the national power grid went dark, all aircraft mysteriously cut all transmissions and flew full throttle straight ahead, regardless of where that may be. The result was planes falling out of the sky, crashing into mountains, plains or the ocean surface with each passing minute, despite the best efforts of some of the brightest minds on the planet.

Then there were the hospitals.

The instant the backup generators failed to respond, Waller knew that every patient on life support was on a one way trip to see his maker. Those in critical condition would likely follow suit, and the mere thought of the scale of the disaster made Waller's stomach turn. What made it even worse was that he knew he was powerless to stop all of it, that for all his political power and military achievements, he was outmatched here, and he hated it. It would actually have been better

if it were an invasion by a foreign enemy— at least he could shoot back. This, however, was something else entirely.

“My God...”

Waller turned to snarl at the operative who had just spoken.

“What is it now?!”

“Sir, Browns is going critical! So is Bryon! We’re getting critical errors across the board!”

For a while, the names failed to register, then Waller went white. This was no longer a disaster. It was an apocalypse.

Bryon Nuclear Power Plant, Central Columbia, 1845 Hours, 2nd May 2042

One.

Unlike the conventional power plants of United Electric, one of the first things the Columbian Government did when the AIs came online was to install one in every single nuclear reactor across the nation. Expense or not, they were far too dangerous to be left unguarded. Yet the AI in Bryon was now facing its biggest assault since it came online, and it was overwhelmed.

Dozens of contradictory commands came in every millisecond, each flagged as the highest priority. Not even the Bryon AI processors could hope to sort through the deluge of commands coming its way, much less respond to them, and then the AI sealed the reactor’s fate. It determined that there was an error in the system mainframe, and promptly went into reboot mode. Now it was up to the human staff to salvage the mess— but humans could not hope to succeed where the AI had failed.

The technicians could not handle the unfolding catastrophe. Not even their nightmare training scenarios could have prepared them for the total shutdown of the

Bryon AI and the reactor going critical all at once. Some of the more experienced personnel tried to engage the safety rods that would crash-stop the reactors, but they were too late. The attacker had shut down the coolant pipes the instant Bryon's AI had gone offline, and the fuel rods began to melt.

The casing of the reactors was not capable of withstanding the heat and steam pressure. No material save for a single, giant block of diamond could hope to contain the radioactive nightmare brewing inside, and the superheated steam began to crack the outer casing. The melted uranium rods bubbled at thousands of degrees, melting first the housings that held them in place, then the bottom of the reactor casing, and the control rods were already too late to stop the meltdown.

Reactor 4 was the first to go in a hiss of melting metal and escaping steam. The white-hot toxic fuel dropped onto the concrete below, which promptly began to crack and pop. Invisible radioactive beams flashed outward, permeating everything and everyone still inside the complex. Yet Reactor 4 was comparatively lucky, for many of the the remaining reactors either had their turbines explode under the strain and heat, or had their casings blown apart in a catastrophic buildup of steam unseen since that fateful incident in Ruthenia in 1986.

Debris shot skyward from the shattered buildings, coalescing into a deadly mist. The radiological nightmare was already fifty times worse than the 1986 incident, a truly global nightmare, yet it was not over by far. Columbian nuclear reactors across the nation began to mimic the Bryon disaster, each contributing to the deadly stormclouds gathering above.

Air Command One, Above Columbia, 2000 Hours, 2nd May 2042

President Johnson buried his head in his hands as report after report came in. Why did all of this have to happen during his presidency? All he wanted was to get reelected and get his name on the big screen!

And his cabinet members were no help either.

Through the teleconference, General Adams was continuing his tirade.

“This has to be an attack— a dastardly act of mass murder by Huaxia! Who else has the capability to conduct such an attack on our beautiful home? We have to defend our land of liberty...” Johnson straightened up and cut him off with a wave of his hand.

“Enough, general. We have enough problems as it is, the last thing we need is to start a Third World War, especially since we have no proof!”

He swept his gaze across the projector table. Many shrunk from his gaze, save for a few hawks who stared back with equal intent. Finally he turned to the National Security Advisor, Admiral Brooks.

“How are our troops doing?”

Brooks visibly swallowed.

“Mr President... things are grim. Aside from the Cyber Division, all branches are reporting critical malfunctions. The army is the least affected of them— at least their rifles still work— but everything heavier than a portable radio is down. They’ve got no radar, no central control, no AI support, and nearly all of the vehicles have their drive units fried. The air force is grounded for the same reason, and all our naval units in port on the mainland have gone completely dark.”

Total silence fell upon the conference. Everyone here knew exactly what that implied for the security of Columbia. If any of Columbia’s enemies attacked now...

“What about our nuclear arsenal?”

That was the burning question on everyone’s mind.

“We’ve lost all contact with our silos, as well as most of the storage complexes housing our mobile units. The ones that we do have contact with have trouble opening the vault doors, never mind checking in on the arsenal.”

For what seemed like a lifetime, the only sound that could be heard was the hum of the refitted 797's engines. Nobody moved. Nobody breathed— or at least that was what it seemed like. Columbia was defenceless. Her conventional as well as nuclear forces had been dealt a crippling blow in mere minutes, her citizens were being massacred, and her image had been forever tarnished. Even if she miraculously recovered the next day, the myth of Columbian invincibility would never again shine.

And that was before factoring in the massive radioactive clouds floating over Columbia.

An orderly rushed in and whispered something in Admiral Brooks' ear. Brooks' frown turned into pale shock as the orderly finished his report and scurried out, leaving behind a room in trepidation.

“Admiral?” Johnson had a bad feeling.

“Mr. President, we've just received a distress call from an automated buoy. It's coming from the last reported location of the Dwight Carrier Battlegroup.” Before Johnson had a chance to open his mouth, General Adams jumped in.

“We can't let this go on. Even if we must practice restraint, we have to at least warn Ruthenia and Huaxia not to try anything, or we'll retaliate.”

“With what?” Brooks shot back. “All our forces are crippled, and our nukes are inoperable!”

“We'll have to hope that they don't know that as well.” Adams' mouth curled into an ironic, bitter smile. “Besides, they know how the game is played. They won't dare act unless they have absolute certainty of the damage caused to us.” Johnson nodded. This was a game he had experience in.

All eyes turned to him as he rose from his seat.

“Tell the press to start pointing fingers at them, and send a diplomatic protest in the strongest possible language. The last thing we need now is for the people

to panic.” Here his eyes turned deadly. “And find out who is responsible for all of this-”

Johnson was nearly thrown to the floor as Air Command One lurched underneath him, lights and electric-ware sputtering. Before he could enquire, two men of the Presidential bodyguard burst through the doors and dragged Johnson by the arms.

“Mr. President, Air Command One has been compromised. We need to get you out of here, now!”

As Johnson felt his stomach float from the downward spiral Air Command One was now in, the two bodyguards all but hurled him through the one-man escape pod built into the converted airliner’s rear, slamming the door shut and sending Johnson and pod back towards Gaia, 30,000 feet below.

Unfortunately for Johnson, there would be no respite for him, or anyone else on Columbian soil, already starting to turn black from the toxic particles seeping through its veins.

New Amsterdam, Eastern Shore of Columbia, 0700 Hours, 3rd May 2042

The morning sun revealed a scene straight from the depths of hell in what was once the shining jewel of all Columbia.

Fires were still burning in the ground-level shops and stores after a night of chaotic looting, intermixed with splotches of red on the streets, on the walls of buildings, and running all along the pavement. In contrast to the horrible symphony of gunshots, screams and shattering glass and metal of the night before, New Amsterdam was encased in silence, broken only by distant screams and the sounds of struggle.

The once gray streets were now coloured with red and green, a grotesque parody of the coming of the Saviour. Even after the manic terror and robberies through-

out the night, green dollar bills ejected from malfunctioning ATMs could still be seen scattered like patches of greenery all along the sidewalks, often browned with dried blood or covering the many corpses left to lie where they had fallen. In the face of disaster, all the talk about human rights and charity evaporated, replaced by the most basic, barbaric instinct: Survive.

Martin crawled out of his hiding spot in the alley. He had been one of the luckier ones, managing to hide in a dusty old cabinet someone had thrown out. As his eyes struggled to adjust to the sudden light, he let out a rattling cough. That cabinet had been dusty, and a night spent with the cobwebs had been rather unpleasant to say the least. As he glanced around, he could not help but wrinkle his nose at the stench of drying corpses and spilt wares along the street. “I gotta get out of here,” Martin mumbled to himself. Patting his pockets for his wallet, he nearly fell over as a sudden wave of dizziness hit him. What was going on?

He struggled to his feet as the nausea washed over him. *Probably just the smell*, he mused. Keeping an eye out for any more thugs or gangsters roaming the streets, he darted from cover to cover, grabbing dollar bills as he went along, stuffing them into his pockets. He was just about to commandeer a motorbike when he was suddenly hurled through the air by an unstoppable force.

Martin crashed to the street so hard he saw stars. Barely able to move, he turned his head to see three burly men sneering down at him.

“Well whaddaya know, boys, ‘ere’s another pasty white rich boy who got lost.” Martin shrunk back. One of them picked him up by his collar. “Now fork it all over, or I’ll—”

Martin fell back onto the floor with a thud as the arm grasping his collar loosened. Bewildered, he looked up only to see the thug who grabbed him moments before clawing at his own throat, coughing and choking his lungs out on some invisible threat. His two partners in crime were cautiously backing away from him, as was Martin. As Martin stared on in horror, blood began pouring out of the man’s mouth, staining the street on which he knelt. The man only had time to extend an arm in the classic “I’m Choking!” position before falling over dead on the asphalt.

Now consumed by mad panic, Martin clambered away on all fours, trying to escape whatever grim fate that had taken the thug before his eyes. He almost made it down the length of the street when the dizziness returned to him, as did the cough from before, robbing him of the ability to move. The entire world spun around him, and all sound disappeared save for his own hacking coughs.

He wondered why his mouth and neck felt wet.

Then there was nothing.

Deserte City, Central Columbia, 0930 Hours, 9th May 2042

The city was red.

Red on the ground, the walls, the roofs, the fields, everywhere there was red. And white. And green.

Stephanie couldn't stop her knees from shaking as she stumbled through the back alleys, trying to focus over the horrible screams echoing throughout the ruined husks of buildings. Ever since the black rains came, people had begun to fall over in the streets, their life force sucked from them along with their blood and brain matter, gushing out of every orifice from the eyes to the ears and even out their rears.

And then there was the laughter.

She still couldn't help but whimper every time she heard those demonic, maniacal cackles of twisted mirth erupt from once devout followers of the Deserte Church, now turned completely insane by the hell that, in one short day, had descended upon them all. In the days following Zero Day— that was what people were calling the day the black rains first fell— the lunatics, ranging from the common members to full-on Arch-Deacons, had armed themselves with the Church's vast supply of firearms and tools. They broke into houses, dragging out screaming families, torching their homes behind them. Hundreds went missing just on Day One.

Then crucifixes began to line the sides of the roads. Hundreds of men and women, still screaming in agony, were nailed to iron crosses as the mad Deacons of the Church preached the Scriptures to anyone who would listen. Then came hundreds more. And hundreds more.

And then one day, the survivors of Deserte woke up to different screams. Younger screams. When they rushed out to the streets, they found more crucifixes.

Child-sized.

The sound of shoes on the pavement sent icicles spearing through Stephanie's veins. The death squads were coming, with their shotguns and flamethrowers. She half scampered, half crawled behind a pile of fallen goods from a supermarket, unable to stop herself from trembling in terror. As the footsteps grew quieter, she hesitantly peeked out from the gaps in between the goods for any sign of the squad. Nothing. Cautiously looking around her for any more psychopaths, she slowly trotted away from her hiding place and out the back door to the abandoned store.

She never saw the rifle stock that clubbed her unconscious.

She awoke to the sounds of sobs and cries hours later. Struggling to fight the massive ache emanating from the back of her head, she squinted to get a clearer picture of everything around her.

Then her eyes snapped open as she realised where she was, the fog in her mind chased away instantly by sheer panic. She was in one of the large cathedrals of the Deserte Church, on top of a stone altar with dozens more alongside her. In front of her were a line of infants, all trussed up and naked, wailing in vain. And in front of them was a Deacon, raving nearly incoherently to a small assembly. She tried to struggle, but it was no use—her arms and legs were tied solidly, and her mouth was firmly gagged.

The Deacon's words came into focus as he turned to the altar.

“All ye who hear the Word of the Creator, it is with joyous hearts that we send the pure, sinless children to our Almighty Creator, who cares for all his children,

his good and faithful children.”

Stephanie, along with all those bound on the altar like her, could only watch in mute horror as the Deacon drew a large pistol from his robes, to point at the screaming toddlers lined up right before her eyes.

“And now we free them from this world of pain and suffering.”

BAM.

Red, white and green splattered all over the altar and the captives. Stephanie involuntarily retched at the sight, the mess dribbling disgustingly down her body, but it hardly registered.

BAM.

Stephanie couldn't bring herself to look away, even as her mind and soul screamed. She couldn't move. She couldn't even blink.

BAM. BAM. BAM. BAM. BAM.

Her face was covered in blood, brain matter and shattered bone, but she didn't so much as flinch, paralysed as she was. Dimly, her brain registered the chanting of the crowd below, rising and falling as the atrocity played out. The Deacon was speaking to the crowd again.

“And now, to purge the world of sin and vice,” he turned back to the altar, this time staring directly at the helpless captives, “We offer to you, Oh Mighty One Above, the sacrificial lambs. Take away our pain, O Creator, and free us!” “Free us! Free us!”

The crowd echoed.

The Deacon picked up a large can full of an unknown liquid, proceeding to pour its foul-smelling contents over the captives. Stephanie caught a glimpse of the Deacon's eyes for a brief moment—two bright orbs filled with an infernal light, wildly sparking with blood-fueled energy. Then her brain recognised the smell.

Gasoline.

“Hear us, O Lord,” roared the Deacon, “as we now offer up our lambs just like Ibrahim did Isak. Hear our prayer, and spare your rod upon the Faithful!”

“Hear us! Hear us! Hear us!” chanted the crowd.

Stephanie struggled in vain as the Deacon lit a match and threw it. Then the world dissolved into red and pain and screams.

Long Isle Harbour, Eastern Shore of Columbia, 1700 Hours, 12th May 2042

It was chaos on the port.

As families rushed to the borders, hoping to get out of the living hell that Columbia had become, they found them locked down by armed guards, and in many cases armoured vehicles. Those lucky few who managed to cross were immediately placed into quarantine camps, to await specialists to arrive and decontaminate them. The remainder were turned away, sometimes by gunpoint, for the simple reason that there simply weren't enough radiological specialists or equipment to diagnose every single evacuee in time, much less get them to a clinic and treat them. Not to mention the fact that Columbia's neighbours were also busy trying to deal with the toxic clouds encroaching on their borders.

None of which was any comfort to the families still stuck in Columbia, of course.

Among the evacuees was Sharpe and his wife, Mary. Both had escaped the death-traps of the cities, a feat few could lay claim to. The two huddled close together among the sea of people clamouring to get on the boats, trampling over dropped possessions, coins and leaflets, past the armed guards at the gangway, and finally securing a deck spot on the overcrowded freighter. As more and more people piled on board, the dockyard PA system switched on. *“This is a public broadcast by the Columbian government. Due to deteriorating conditions following the May 2nd attack, martial law is in effect. All citizens are placed under curfew and must remain in their homes...”*

Nobody so much as looked up. Everyone had heard the old song and dance routine thousands of times by now. Even the military had begun to flee in places, much less the civilians. All that mattered now was getting out of the country by all means necessary, no matter what kind of promises, threats or pleas the Columbian government made.

Sharpe swept his gaze over the people below. An invisible weight pressed down on their shoulders, with every man and woman hunching his or her shoulders, trudging along to the gangways. In every person's eyes was a cold, hollow void, their spirits long gone, replaced by a near mindless drive to flee. And heavy in the air, practically visible in the twilight, was one word: defeat.

Sharpe's heart sank. Columbia was finished, both as a nation, and very likely as a people as well. Their national spirit had been shattered completely, and no amount of bluster or propaganda could fix that. He jumped as the ship's horn rang and the armed guards boarded the ship, retracting the gangway behind them. With a rumble of machinery, the old freighter began to pull away, leaving behind a crowd of men, women and children.

There was no chaos, not like the first few days when people tried to climb up the sides of the ships with grappling hooks or rush the gangways to crowd onboard— several rifle bullets and dead bodies had taught them the futility of that act. Instead, those left behind simply stared at the departing ships, their eyes devoid of any emotion. Sharpe couldn't bring himself to turn away, scathing as their gazes may be.

As Long Isle shrank further and further to the distance, silhouetted by the setting sun, Sharpe felt his stomach twist in shame. That was his once-beautiful country falling away behind him, and the people which he had sworn to serve. Now he was fleeing from it, leaving his countrymen to die, and neither his sobbing wife nor the knowledge that thousands more were like him gave him any comfort.

Had anyone been staring at Sharpe, they would have noticed a single tear ran numbly down his cheek, before a dangerous gleam shone through those hazy orbs of arctic blue.

Unknown Location, 1750 Hours, 7th May 2042

The doors blew open with a crash.

A squad of armed men burst into the small, dark room, rifles at the ready, their helmet visors and body armour making them look like demons. Checking each corner, their collective gazes soon converged upon the man in the center of the room, sitting in a chair. Muscles tightened, rifles went up and limbs trembled as they fought the urge to rip the man apart from limb to limb.

The man simply sat there, motionless, a small smile on his face.

For a moment, all was still. Then, before the Special Forces commander could speak, the Man in Gray slowly spoke.

“At last,” he began, “I was wondering whether you would find my clues. I’m so happy you’re here to witness it.”

“Witness what?” growled the commander. His finger tightened around the trigger. Yet the man simply looked straight into his eyes and smiled wider. The commander instinctively recoiled at the ghoulish grin now adorning the man’s visage.

“Why, Commander Thorn. The grand finale, of course. The final act.”

“You’re going to undo what you’ve done, and then you will pay for...”

The Man chuckled.

“No, no, Commander Thorn. You don’t seem to understand.”

He pointed at the corner of the room. Thorn turned to see a mangled mess of machinery and computer circuits, now rendered completely irreparable.

“Nobody can help you, or your country. Not even I can stop it now. It’s grown beyond you or me, or any human for that matter.” His eyes blazed with brim-

stone. “It’s beautiful.”

The Man in Gray leaned back in his chair, his eyes clouding over.

“Too bad I won’t be here to see it fulfill its destiny.”

Before Thorn could react, the Man in Gray crunched down on something between his teeth, and he dropped to the floor. As the squad’s medical officer rushed over, nobody noticed as the last rays of red and gold slipped beneath the horizon.

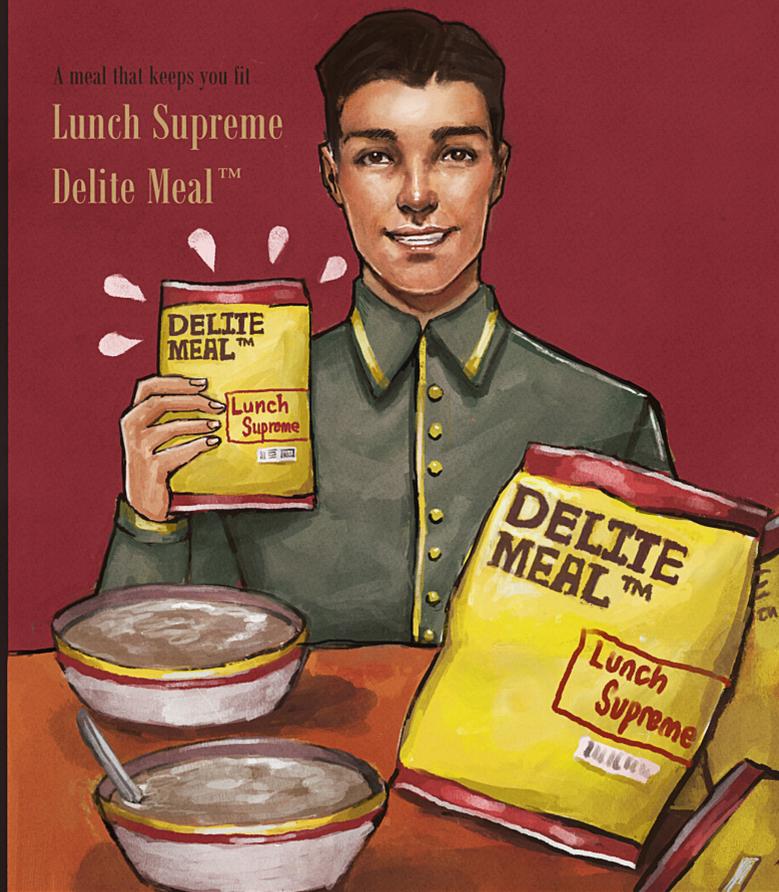
DELITE MEAL

● INGESTION OVER INDULGENCE ●

A meal that keeps you fit

Lunch Supreme

Delite Meal™



I staggered back, afraid of what my friend had become. Afraid of what I had almost become.

FROM WATER TO WINE

Bianca Rose Tio Reyes

Hello everyone! My name is Bianca Reyes. I am an incoming year 3 student studying Law at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. I am half Chinese and half Filipino and I am also currently pursuing a minor in either English or Creative Writing. In the past, I had only composed poems so writing longer narratives seemed a bit unfamiliar to me. I also had a lot of difficulty in coming up with what I wanted to write about, so of course I resorted to the Internet! There were a lot of short story prompts and the one that I chose was titled “there is no more natural farming.” With that idea in mind, I decided to envisage a world where the government controls what the population eats and what an ordinary person would do if they had a chance to experience something new and forbidden.

I remember my first day of work at the factory. I woke up early in the morning and stared up at the ceiling. I knew I had to get up but I couldn't bring my limbs to move. My eyes locked onto the smooth white ceiling fan above me. It slowly rotated, its blades barely creating any breeze. The room was silent except for a small ticking noise coming from the fan. Although it could hardly be said to be the least bit stimulating, I couldn't look away.

It wasn't until I heard “Honey, come down,” that I snapped my focus away from the perpetually spinning fan and looked over to the other side of my bed. Whilst I woke up at 7am, it seemed that my wife had woken up earlier. Mustering all my will-power, I trudged out of bed and made my way down to the kitchen. What awaited me was Susie, and on the kitchen counter— breakfast. There sitting on the table, staring back up at me was my future. A chipped white ceramic bowl filled with a light-grey sludge littered with small black speckles.

I smiled wearily. “Thanks, honey.” I said as I dug my spoon into the Delite Meal. I scooped up a spoonful and watched as its viscous body clung onto every inch of the metal base, even dripping off of the bottom of the spoon, holding on to what it could. I popped the spoon in my mouth and felt the warm slime slowly ooze off the utensil and coat my tongue. It had a slightly salty taste to it and despite the black speckles, it was completely smooth.

When I was younger, I thought it would be fun to let the Meal sit in my mouth and see how long I could leave it in there for. I didn’t know what I was expecting. Maybe if I left it in long enough it would taste saltier or maybe it would taste less salty. Perhaps it would lose its taste? Tastelessness would still taste different, right? Or so I thought. After multiple tries, my five-year-old self would discover that as soon as you put the Meal in your mouth, it slides down your throat if you don’t swallow immediately. I would try endlessly, surrounded by multiple Delite Meal packets in a futile attempt to experiment for a different result. Just any result. But it wouldn’t be long before my mum would come in and smack me on the upside of my head for wasting so many Meals, and I would be forced to begrudgingly collect the bright neon yellow packaging and stuff my hopes of any new discovery down the trash.

“Ingestion over indulgence,” she would remind me.

Those who couldn’t establish themselves with their own business or stable job seven years after graduation were required to hang up their coat and go work in the Meal factory. I looked at Susie as she ate her breakfast. She was reading the newspaper with her blonde hair tucked behind both ears. Her reading glasses slid ever so slightly down the bridge of her nose but she didn’t seem to notice. All the while, she seemed perfectly content reading whilst slurping down the Delite Meal we had every morning. I must have been staring at her for too long because she looked up at me and furrowed her brow.

“What’s wrong, honey? Is something on my face?” She asked me and giggled. I let out a cursory smile and thought to myself— what is wrong? I opened my mouth

and then promptly shut it, sucking my lips in. Nothing. Nothing is wrong. So that's what I told her.

"Nothing is wrong," I smiled. She frowned, clearly unsatisfied with my answer. As I was about to finish my meal, Susie's hand made her way on top of mine.

"Hey," she then placed her hand on my chin and tilted it upwards so she knew she had my full attention, "It will be different from your old job at the pottery studio but maybe you'll enjoy it more." Her eyes glistened with warm sincerity, as I nodded my head. I looked over to the framed photos Susie hung on the wall the other day. Situated next to a picture of Susie's father was a photo of myself on the day I first opened my pottery business.

I sighed. "Maybe," I replied. I checked my watch— it was time for me to get ready for my first day.

Many of those who don't come from rich backgrounds end up working here. I was assigned to the factory in my district with around fifteen other people and was introduced by a slim, cheerful lady in her mid-thirties. "Good morning everyone, my name is Gwen," she introduced herself and led us into the factory to start our tour. "As you all know, this is where we create the government mandated Delite Meals," she smiled and gestured to a line of gigantic vats of grey sludge, each with its own giant metal whisk.

Despite the bright coloured advertisements and logos plastered on the outside of the factory and all over the city, the inside was as vibrant as the Delite Meal itself. After a quick tour of the workplace, the new recruits and I were sat down in an office and made to watch an introductory video. It wasn't unlike the videos we were shown during middle school or high school. Soft piano music started playing and flashes of the Feasting Times were shown— bright shots of 'fast-food chains' and extinct creatures like cows and chickens grazing on animal-feed. The music started to crescendo, as I lightly tapped my foot alongside the rising beat. More shots of processed meat and fried food on sticks. Edible leaves doused in white creamy sauce; my tapping was speeding up and so were the flashing images. Obese people. Oily fingers. Cream on cones. I could feel the escalating

music pulse through the room. As soon as I knew it, I clapped my foot down as the soundtrack hit the climax. Right on cue— the video transitioned to a slow pan of decimated farmland. Pictures of people trapped within their own bodies, unable to move yet unable to stop stuffing their mouths. I took my eyes off the screen and glanced around the room. All the other workers seemed bored, twiddling their thumbs. It made sense, everyone practically had this video memorized by now. I knew the video was coming to an end when the 78th president Sheila Twigg popped on the screen and started her speech.

I heard some giggling from behind me and I saw two men quietly voicing the speech alongside President Twigg— “I know this is a stark change. But because of our failure to tackle obesity in the early 2020s and the subsequent irreversible damage our export and manufacturing of food placed on the Earth’s climate, we are unable to sustain natural farming. People are dying and the extinction of all edible creatures rendered our resources scarce.” I chuckled at their imitation. They got all the words spot on.

The rest of the video was pretty standard. Ms. Twigg introduced the mandatory consumption of the Delite Meal and the rest was history. The video ended with the Delite Meal slogan: Ingestion over indulgence.

Gwen shut the projector off, “Sorry about the shoddy cameras, we all know what they were like back in the early 2030s. Now, do we have any questions?” The room was silent until a voice at the back of the room asked if the ingredients of the Delite Meal would be disclosed to us. All of a sudden, I was extremely intrigued. Growing up surrounded by a neighbourhood who did not dare to question the legitimacy of the Delite Meals, it never occurred to me that we could ask about its contents.

Gwen let out a hearty laugh, “You know, we always get one or two people who ask about the ingredients.” Oh, I thought.

“Believe me, if I knew then I’d tell you,” she continued. It looked as if Gwen had something more to say but she suddenly paused and pursed her lips, “Although I would advise against going around asking any more of these types of questions. People in higher places will not be happy.” There was a short silence in the room.

As if nothing happened, Gwen smiled at us again and said, “As you may know, it’s Delite’s 100th birthday tomorrow and we would really love maximum production output today.” I sighed. “So get to work.”

I was assigned to what the workers delightfully called the “glop shop.” That basically entailed me pushing a button which would squirt the Delite Meals into their highlighter yellow packaging for hours on end. We worked for around five hours before we got our first break.

During our break, I opened my packet of Lunch Supreme Delite Meal™, and sat around the table with a few of the new recruits including the gigglers. I met some men who had been working at the factory for years— Paul and Gerald, and some new recruits like me. Paul was a short guy; he had a brown moustache and spoke with a southern accent. Gerald, however, was a bigger and taller guy. He was slightly muscular and had a stubble around his chin. Handsome. I wondered how many Delite Meals he had to consume to maintain his size. Gerald was the one who invited me to sit with the men during lunch. He was a nice guy. Outgoing and cheerful. We all sat down at the table and had a Meal.

“I can’t believe that after one hundred years, Delite still can’t work out automated machines. Y’know how hard it is to really get all the gunk out of the Delite processor? It takes ages,” Paul said as we sat down, wiping his brow.

The men at the table nodded in agreement. “I know what you mean, Paul,” Gerald started. “But hey, just be glad the nation’s resources are still down after all those years, or else they’d put all their money into making automatic machines and you’d be out of a job. Although, it would be nice to not hear your darn complaining every five minutes.” We all laughed and continued eating our Meal, and I was happy to have made some new friends.

After a few months had passed, I was glad to have established a steady routine; wake up, breakfast with Susie, go to work and come home. So today, after a few hours of good ol’ hard work pressing the same red button over and over, I sat

myself down with the boys to eat Lunch again. It became part of our work day to sit down at the lunch table with a few work friends and relax for a bit. Paul started droning on about his wife as usual, I tried to down some mush when suddenly Gerald reached across the table and snapped his fingers in front of my face. Startled, I looked up at him.

“Simon, I know no one wants to hear about Paul’s wife again but at least give him the courtesy of pretending to listen,” Gerald joked. Everyone laughed and I let a small chuckle past my lips.

Paul nudged me, “Hey, there he is. Who knew this guy was capable of laughin’, huh?”

I could feel my chest relax as I waved my hand, gesturing everyone to calm down. “Yea, yea, I’m listening. No need to spit out your Delite Meals at me,” I laughed.

I was about to go in for another bite when Gerald asked, “Yea, but what’s wrong with you, buddy? Something bothering you?”

I looked up from my meal and saw the eyes of concerned friends. I put down my bowl and opened my mouth. “Couldn’t sleep well last night.” I said. The boys shifted glances at each other and egged me on. I pursed my lips, pondering whether or not I should continue.

There was a short silence until Gerald interrupted laughing, “Hey Simon, you don’t gotta say it if you don’t wanna. We’re not gonna force you.” The ends of my lips curled up to a small smile. I sighed, for the first time in relief.

We sat there for a few seconds in unfamiliar sentimentality until Gerald cleared his throat and leaned into the table. “You guys ever heard of Juji Berries?” he asked. Since our youth, we were taught the most basic foods that were popular during the Feasting Times— fruits, vegetables, junk food, and the likes. I tried to familiarize myself with more of the exotic foods as well... But Juji Berries? Never heard of them. It seems I wasn’t the only one as everyone else shook their heads. Gerald looked around the lunchroom, scanning for any sight of Gwen.

After he was sure she wasn't there, Gerald spoke with a hushed voice, "David Hingerman. An old friend of mine. Went off a few years back to the forest to end himself. Couldn't take any more of this Delite crap." Gerald looked up to scan the room again before continuing. "What he found instead were some plants. Real plants. On those plants — some dozen red Juji Berries."

I narrowed my eyes, skeptical. "You sure it's not some old fake plants the government planted to recreate the rainforests and gardens?" Tom, who was sitting next to Paul, questioned.

Gerald shook his head, "He swore to me. Real berries. They were the size of small marbles. But you could eat them." A murmur arose within the group. I was astounded. Since kindergarten, we were told that mankind wiped out natural foods with our toxic wastelands. It didn't seem possible.

"Should we even be talking about this?" Jose asked from the far side of the table. That was a good question, I thought. Ever since Delite Meals became the standard, talking about extinct foods, apart from the propaganda sense, was frowned upon. Maybe even slightly illegal. I wasn't too sure.

"Calm down, Jose. No one here's a snitch, right?" Gerald asked the group, to which everyone replied with a nod.

"What were they like?" someone asked. I didn't look to see who.

In practically a whisper, Gerald smirked and replied "delicious." More murmurs. "They were juicy, popped in your mouth when you bit into it. Then some sweet berry water would come out." Gerald leaned back and crossed his arms, proud of the attention his story garnered.

"Like a pimple?" Paul asked. The men snickered at Paul's remark.

Gerald rolled his eyes, "Not like a pimple, you moron. Hingerman said it was like a soft balloon filled with sweet water. Then inside there were some crunchy bits like sand granules. He told me he finally understood what 'sweet' meant. Eh, he tried to explain it to me but I didn't really get it." I tried to picture what these

elusive Juji Berries would look like or feel like. I tried to imagine myself plucking one off a small plant by a river and rolling it in between my fingers, examining what the exotic texture would feel like on my skin.

“Hey look, seems like Simon enjoyed my berry story better than hearing you yap on about your wife, Paul. Look at him, his jaw has almost hit the floor,” Gerald said. There was an eruption of laughter replacing what intrigue was left from Gerald’s story.

“Good one,” I replied, “But what happened to Hingerman?” Gerald’s smile tightened, as his eyes wandered to the floor.

“Now that, I’m not too sure,” he replied, “After he was spreading the Juji Berry story around, some government officials came at his door and took him. Brought to some crazy house for crazy people, apparently. No one has tried to look for them Juji Berries since.” My shoulders sunk. And with that, our break was over.

After another couple hours of work, we were finally able to pack up and go home. I slung my backpack over my shoulder and waved goodbye to my friends. I stepped out of the factory and made my way back home on foot. My house was not too far from the factory site and I cherished the silent moments I had on my journey back. I was finally able to be alone, far from the constant mechanical whistling and churning that surrounded me in the factory. As I was walking, I noticed a small narrow path that curved left, away from my path home. I stopped and turned to see what the path led to. Peeking beyond the curved pavement were a couple of tall leafy plants. Without moving from my spot, I leaned into the direction of the path— trying to see what was further. What I saw were various green trees and flowers, with the trail extending further into the expanse of greenery.

No doubt this was one of the artificially created forests or gardenscapes the government made in order to preserve that time in history where we had real plants and flowers. I contemplated whether or not I should go in and see where it would lead to. There was a part of me that wondered if there was something inside that greenscape which was real and natural, hiding beyond the artificial encl-

sure. Something with raw, earthy fragrance. I wondered whether or not I would smell something other than a faint hint of plastic if I sniffed a purple flower, or if the plants would turn away if I tried to pick them. Alas, I knew that was all a waste of time. Unless I wanted to get my hopes up for them to be dramatically crushed, I knew it was best for me to keep walking home. I was about to start walking again until I heard a faint shout. Wondering what it was, I turned around and saw Gerald jogging up to me from afar, waving.

“Hey, Simon!” He continued to shout as he caught up to me, “You going back home?” He had his work bag in one hand, as he lightly panted from his short run up to me.

“Yea, I was just about to head home,” I replied, pointing in the direction of the path ahead of me.

“Oh, alright,” Gerald said after catching his breath, “I just wanted to let you know there’s a low-key poker game with the boys later tonight, if you’d like to join.” I was pleasantly surprised by his invitation, as I didn’t usually meet with my friends much after work.

I nodded, “Yea, that sounds like fun. I’ve got to tell the wife though. I was going to have dinner with her.”

Gerald laughed, “One night with the boys ain’t gonna hurt. Let Susie know you’ll make it up to her after winning big bucks from our game.” I smiled. Maybe one night with a couple of friends would be fun. Gerald put his arm around my shoulder and said quietly, “Look, I saw you have a gander at that little forest path there. Come to the game tonight and I’ll tell you more about what that path has to do with the Juji Berries.” I looked at Gerald, eyebrows raised. Juji Berries. Even the sound of that name seemed so delectable. It sparked a feeling of excitement and taboo that stirred deep inside my chest. I chuckled again. Gerald always had a way to get people to do what he wanted and he knew it.

“Deal.” I said, shaking Gerald’s hand. Gerald pumped his fist and gave me a slap on the back.

“Great,” he replied, “I’ll text you the location in a bit.” He waved goodbye as we parted ways, and I continued on my walk home.

“What’s the matter, honey?” Susie asked me as she sat down on the seat beside me. It had been a few hours since my work shift was over. I was sitting at the kitchen counter, sipping a glass of warm water and staring at this one particular chip in the paint coat on the side of the counter. She caressed my cheek, trying to coax the answer out of me no doubt. I opened my mouth to answer her but promptly shut it. I clicked my tongue and feigned a smile.

“It’s nothing,” I replied, “I’m going to have to skip out on dinner tonight, though. Poker with the guys from work.”

She raised her eyebrows slightly and replied, “That sounds fun. Bring back some good coin while you’re at it.” She stood up and walked towards the bedroom before saying in a strangely raised voice, “I’ll make you your favourite dinner for when you come home.” I quietly grunted to myself. Doesn’t she know by now that they all taste the same? I checked my phone for the time. 7:00. I better get going.

I arrived at Gerald’s house and rang the doorbell. Gerald also didn’t live too far from the factory. While I would turn right to journey home after work, he would turn left. I examined the outside of his one story house. Despite the house being quite old, the walls had a fresh coat of white paint. I was about to ring the doorbell again until the door swung open and revealed a chuckling Gerald. He was always laughing.

“Simon!” He shouted. “Look everyone, it’s Simon!” I heard a very faint flurry of hellos as I stepped onto the wooden floor of his house. The interior was immaculately decorated with modern paintings and statues littered all over. Despite the animated greetings, there was no one in sight. Confused, I looked around. Gerald shut the door behind us and said “They’re all downstairs.” He stepped in front of me and waved his hand for me to follow him. We climbed down a staircase that was hidden behind a wall away from my sight, and there everyone was sitting around the poker table. Huh, I thought, I guess it wasn’t a one story house.

“Come on, you’re the last to arrive,” Gerald said as he sat down and gestured to an empty chair designated for me. I sat down and was dealt into the game. Despite what I thought would be a low-key night, everyone seemed particularly jovial. There was a lot of laughter, Paul’s southern twang was especially twangy and everybody was particularly boisterous. I thought that would bother me after a while but it became quite enjoyable. After a round or so, I even found myself having fun. I think it was after round two or three, when Paul ran out of bills to wager in.

We all poked fun at him for losing his money so early on in the game, as he fished his pocket to find any worthy substitute. What he took out his pocket next would change my life as I knew it. In between his chubby index and middle finger, rested a small white paper packet. Paul shook the packet gently, which elicited a soft sound of what seemed like fine sediment bouncing off the paper which contained it. The men around the table oohed as Paul lightly placed it onto the middle of the table. I stared at it, confused by the reaction it elicited. And there, under the small lightbulb situated above the table, was the slightly blurred black text of “SUGAR.”

I exhaled in disbelief, looking around at the others in dumbfounded shock and awe. The men looked at me and smiled, excited for what was about to happen next.

“Simon, don’t tell me you never tried this before?” One of the boys asked. I shook my head profusely. I didn’t know whether it was in fear or excitement or an amalgamation of the two.

Were they going to let me try it? I clenched my fist. Did I want to try it? Then, almost simultaneously, my friends each took out a paper packet from their pocket and showed it to me. My mind was racing. How accessible were these things? What situation did I put myself into? I started to breathe heavily, scared of what I was being confronted with. That was until a hand was placed heavily on my shoulder. I looked up and saw Gerald. I must not have seen him get out of his seat. He patted my back gently and reassured me that I didn’t need to do anything I didn’t want to do. The men nodded in agreement.

He explained that in order for him to make more money, he distributes these “harmless, little packets,” as he described them. He then continued saying that the boys sometimes come over to have a little fun and that they trusted me not to say anything. Then, Gerald stuffed his hand in his pocket for the last time and offered me a small white packet of my own. He told me not to ask where they came from but assured me it was edible, “just like they had it in the old days.” I stared at the modest envelope situated in the middle of his large palm. I squinted my eyes at the label then looked back up at Gerald’s consistently cheery face and plucked the packet from his hand.

I felt the smooth thin paper beneath my fingers, barely veiling my skin from the hard crumbs of contraband I could feel under it. I heard about Sugar in the past. I heard about how it makes you sick. About how it changes your brain. How it makes you crazy. How it kills you. I gently caressed the paper wrapper, wondering if this very packet were one of the few manufactured a century ago, right before President Twigg’s ban on foods shortly after the introduction of the Delite Meals. Gerald sat back in his seat, as everyone ripped open the corner of their packet. I was still unsure whether I wanted to do this or not, but it seems like my body had decided for me. I tore open the delicate corner of the packet, revealing an airy, delightful smell. The odor was so faint, that if you were passing by you might just miss it. But here, sitting and basking in its aroma, with its magical scent wafting through the air; it was unlike any other. I gulped.

My friends lifted their individual packet in the air and cheered “Indulgence over ingestion,” before tipping the open corner past their lips. I watched as small granules of white rock fell from the envelope and into their mouths. I decided to do the same. Tiny bits of Sugar fell in my mouth as I stuck my tongue out in crippling anticipation. I could feel each individual grain of Sugar sit on the top of my tongue, as it melted into a sickly tangy liquid I was unable to describe. I watched as the others munched on their Sugar, as Paul instructed me to chew. The movement was alien to me. With the Delite Meals, the nasty goop would just find its way down your throat, but here you had to work for it. Here, you were involved. You were in control. Biting down on each Sugar rock sent vibrations throughout my whole body. The sound was deafening, yet I found myself yearning for more of the crackling noise whenever I was in between chews. The Sugar, I couldn’t

even begin to explain. It was incredible. It wasn't salty like the Delite Meal, it was the opposite. Was this what "sweet" was? I laughed. Not chuckled, smirked or giggled, I howled. They howled. We all roared in pure delectable ecstasy. After that hit, the poker game went by fast. My left leg and arms shook in a new uncontained boost of energy, as we continued to place our bets. I believe it was an hour or so later where the high plateaued, and we were back to old grey life. I smiled at my new brothers. Amazing. But we all knew the night was over. Everyone went upstairs and was set to leave but I stayed behind a few moments longer to recover from my first hit.

Gerald and I sat down on the couch as he looked at me and said, "As promised, the Berry story." I sat up in curiosity, begging for my mind to slow for a second in order to process Gerald's next words. He told me, "David Hingerman. He set foot in that very path you were staring at. That's because that greenscape extends further into a full blown man-made rainforest. He worked in the factory with me a few years ago and on many occasions he told me he was sick of it. All of it. He told me he would go up to the forest to starve."

My brain was slowly adjusting back to normal as Gerald continued. "He told me not to try to save him and that he wasn't going to answer his phone so I shouldn't bother contacting him. True enough, he disappeared for six or seven days. That was until I received a text message. Hingerman told me that he found something new—the Juji Berries. Those Juji Berries, they were filled with this..." He paused. "... this heavenly sweet red sugar water that would stain your teeth. He said it was called 'Juice.' Best thing he's ever tasted."

My head was still spinning slightly. "He told me you could only find them if you were on the brink of starvation." But the next few words would snap me back to the cold sober reality in an instance. "I'm going to find them."

I coughed. "What?" was the only word I could muster. Gerald told me that he was tired of eating Sugar and that he wanted more. He wanted to be able to taste the Juji Berries for himself, or sell them if there were plenty. He wanted me to come with him.

"I know you, Simon," Gerald started, "You hate the Delite Meals." Which was

true. “I know you’ll get tired of the Sugar eventually, and trust me I tried to find any other Sugar-type things, and there are none.” I shook my head, I couldn’t go. I couldn’t. Right?

“The other boys think it’s bullshit. That Hingerman was just crazy.” He stared at me in a face of concrete sincerity I had never seen from him before. “But I’m going to find them,” he said, “I’m going tomorrow. Now you don’t have to come with me but don’t tell anyone. I don’t want to end up in jail or a crazy house like Hingerman.” I nodded.

“It’s about time we were allowed one moment of indulgence, right?” I didn’t respond. In the end, I promised him I would keep his secret. He reassured me that he would bring his phone and that if the hunger was too much for him then he would turn back. Satisfied with his plan, I left Gerald’s house and ran home. I did not sleep soundly that night. It was almost as if the evening went on painfully slow, as I listened to my ceiling fan clicking in the darkness. Susie was fast asleep, lightly snoring as she slowly breathed in and out. Meanwhile, I couldn’t stop thinking about the forest, the Sugar, the Berries and Gerald. I was uncomfortable with my power to choose whether to go with him or not. Would it be my fault he gets hurt if I’m not there? What if he starves to death before finding the Berries? But, what if he finds the Berries? What if I find the Berries? As if the ceiling fan was a hive, a swarm of what-ifs surrounded my brain, as my eyes were fearfully fixated on the spinning propeller. Then at that moment, Susie rolled over in her sleep and placed an arm around my torso, fastening me in a light embrace. It was then I decided, and then when I could fall asleep.

The next few days at work were pretty standard. Work for a few hours, then a break, then back to work. However, Gerald’s absence at the lunch table did not go unmissed. Many questions and theories sprung up revolving around Gerald’s disappearance. From being on sick leave to wooing the next new girlfriend. I kept my mouth shut. Although, after a while these passing remarks turned from innocent queries to concerned discussions. It was almost the end of the work day. I checked my phone - eight days since Gerald left for the forest. My hands started to sweat, as I hastily texted him a message asking whether or not he was okay.

I had texted him everyday by now. Everyday a new message and everyday no response. Once our shift was over, I waved a hurried goodbye to Paul and the others and quickly made my way back home. As soon as I arrived, I dropped my backpack to the ground and started frantically pacing the house, eyes scanning the floor for any sign of what I should do. I must have been pacing the floor for a while, as I only stopped once Susie returned home from her night out with friends. I looked out the window and it was dark, only a few lamp posts illuminated the neighbourhood outside.

“Hey, honey. What’s the matter with you?” She asked, concerned. I momentarily looked up at her face and saw her furrowed blonde brows and curious expression. I opened my mouth.

“Don’t you dare tell me it’s nothing,” she said. I closed my mouth and sat down at the kitchen counter. Silently, she sat down next to me and I contemplated on whether or not I should tell Susie. One part of me could already predict her disapproval but more than that— I found a small part of me wanting this secret for myself. I was enjoying the exclusive nature of Gerald’s secret, as if I was some “chosen one” burdened with the secret of a mission that could change society as we knew it. But the thought of Gerald’s safety and the illustrious Berries was too much to carry on my own. So, I decided to tell her everything. I told her about Hingerman and the Berries, the Sugar, Gerald’s plan— all of it.

She stared at me. Her eyes were wide with concern and confusion, as her hands balled up into fists— her knuckles frighteningly white. Then in the calmest tone I’ve ever heard her use she told me to take a shower so that I could get ready for dinner and get an early rest. I looked at her.

“But what about Gerald?” I asked her.

To which she replied, “What about him?” She stood up from the counter and made her way to the refrigerator and pulled out a Delite Meal.

“He’s my friend. I’m worried about him. Don’t you even care?” I asked angrily.

“Well, what are you planning to do? Go after him?” She asked.

“Maybe...” I replied.

“You’re not serious, are you?” Susie said.

“I am,” I replied with conviction. “I am going after him.”

“No, you’re not,” she said slowly as she cut open the Meal packet with the kitchen scissors.

I raised my brow, “What? I can do what I want.” I closed my eyes and shook my head. I could feel my irritation prick at my skin. “I knew you weren’t going to be supportive. I knew it.”

“You want me to support this? This— this...” she stuttered, “This suicide mission? You don’t think I hear these types of stories being tossed around? Don’t you think out of everyone I would be the one know the repercussions if you get caught? It’s against the law, Simon. The government puts these things in place for a reason.” Now she was shouting, her voice scraping against the inside of my ear. “You can’t always be the hero.”

I started grinding my teeth in frustration. “You think you know everything,” I muttered.

Susie put the scissors down. “Have you any idea of what Gerald could have dragged you into? That could have been YOU missing for days!” Her words were shrill and ear-piercing. “Ever since your pottery business closed down, you keep searching for something more. Why can’t you be satisfied with the things you have now, Simon?” I’m the one looking out for you, not that friend of yours,” she shouted, jabbing her chest with her finger. “If he’s dead then he’s dead. What are you going to do about it?” She scoffed at me, eyes narrowed in blinding frustration and rage.

“You are vile,” I spat out at her.

Then suddenly, before I could even think twice, the words I knew never to say to Susie slipped out between my lips, “Is this whole thing about your father’s disap-

pearance?” Susie froze. By this time it was too late. Now I was shouting. “Susie, for the last goddamn time, the government did not take your father away. He was an anti-government reporter— sure, okay. But hasn’t it crossed your mind that maybe he just left?”

With her back still turned to me, she slammed down a Delite Meal pack next to the kitchen sink. Its contents exploded everywhere. She turned around slowly, her face red in fury, unphased by the splatter of grey sludge that now coated the kitchen wall. I inhaled sharply. I had never seen her like this.

Susie then immediately spun around and jerked her palm on the counter top in front of me; and in doing so she knocked over the white ceramic bowl that was on the counter. The kitchen erupted in an orchestra of violent shattering, as the bowl crashed onto the floor and erupted into a multitude of tiny shards. She leaned in close and stared at me with pure fury in her eyes and a single tear streaming down her cheek. Through her gritted teeth, I could feel the hot friction of each word she said next, “Then, go.”

She made her way to the bathroom and slammed the bathroom door, as I threw my fist into the kitchen wall. “He is my friend and I’m going to find him,” I shouted towards the direction of the toilet. I knew I hurt Susie but I had no time to feel sorry. At that moment I knew what I had to do; and who knows— maybe I’d find the Berries along the way.

I swiftly picked up my work backpack and emptied its contents onto the floor. Without a moment’s hesitation, I collected all the tools I thought would prove useful — a torch, a knife, three Delite Meals, water and a change of clothes. As I was about to head out the front door, armed with steely eyed determination, my journey was cut short by a crowd gathered just beyond the neighbourhood’s path towards the factory. Sirens were blaring and strobes of red and blue illuminated a small, limping figure emerging from the paved street that led to the forest path. As the figure grew closer to the mob of concerned neighbours, I pushed my way through the crowd. Once I came to the front of the pack, there he was. He staggered slowly towards me, cradling something he was holding onto so preciously. His clothes were torn, and his once muscular physique was reduced to a straggly, skinny shape.

“Simon!” He shouted out in a hoarse voice. “Simon!!” He continued with more vigour. I froze in my spot, paralysed in fear. The blue and red lights from the ambulance and police cars revealed inch by inch, a scrawny and disheveled Gerald. He was just inches away from me and I could see right there in his bony arms, small marble sized rocks and pebbles. He showed them to me, his bloodshot eyes were wider than ever, inviting me to examine his collection. Some of the rocks were covered in a small blanket of grime, but the others were bright red.

“Juji Berries,” he said. He shakily took one from his pile and placed it in my hand. The surface was rough and hard. “Juji Berries,” he repeated. But I was more horrified when the rock’s red pigment would drip off of its surface and dribble a cold, thick liquid onto the palm of my hand. Gerald then opened his mouth to laugh, his decimated body convulsing as his jaw swung wide open. And there in the light of the streetlamp above us, I saw shards of broken teeth. His mouth was filled with blisters of dried blood, dirt and sediment. Gerald then promptly took a grey rock from his arms, and threw it in his mouth, chomping down hard with whatever teeth he had remaining. He laughed maniacally as each bite he took increased in force. He spat out the rock, leaving it stained red. Gerald’s mouth was now dripping, oozing fresh crimson blood. He gulped. Gerald then bared his trickling gums at me and whispered “Hingerman was right. The juice is delicious”.

I staggered back, afraid of what my friend had become. Afraid of what I had almost become. My stomach churned in disgust and I turned away from him as the police dragged him away. Pulling his arms apart, the officers tried to bring him to the ambulance. Gerald screamed as he dropped his assortment of rocks and pebbles. They clattered and rolled around on the floor, leaving a streak of burgundy on the gravel pavement. As he was forced to abandon his “Juji Berries,” he thrust and trembled in agony and anger, screaming in a rancid mental break.

I ran back to my house, not even fifteen steps away. Susie was there, watching from the front door. Her face— detached from emotion, not a single reaction even when one of Gerald’s red berries slowly rolled to the foot of our door. I dropped my backpack to the floor and scrubbed my hands furiously. Then I lumbered out of the bathroom and fell into the embrace of my bed, hearing the sirens along with Gerald’s screams as they disappeared into the distance.

My eyes fixated again on the spinning white fan above me. I could feel my heart-beat in my ears, as I tried to calm the adrenaline coursing through my blood by taking deep shaky breaths. I closed my eyes, listening to the unbroken and uninterrupted ticking noise. It was funny how I thought there could be more. That there was more to life somewhere out there, waiting to be discovered. I should've stopped looking for it the moment my mum smacked me on the head all those years ago. I should have known that I was being greedy. I realise that now. I've never been more thankful for the Feasting Times to be over. Now I finally understood. Ingestion over indulgence.



Underneath the textiles and mushrooms was her docile body, weak and soft like the mushrooms themselves.

MUSHROOMS

Emilia Wong

What are a girl's best friends? Microaggression. Sexual harassment. Neglect. Confinement— they are a girl's best friends who never leave her side. Basing this story on my old school and family, I wanted to write something that is half reality and half fantasy, something sensual and disconcerting. I have always wanted to experiment with magical realism, and I am glad that this coming-of-age story with a twist is born from the attempt at it. I hope this story is going to terrify and haunt you in a good way, and may you be reminded of this story every time you have mushrooms in your meal.

If you like sinister writing and nuanced symbolism, you will probably like my Instagram page: @paper_caged_birds where I post my poems, illustrations, and daily ramblings.

I am Emilia, a girl who is good at nothing yet aches to be everything.

This day was simply like any other day, and Loi Dai's trek to school had always begun with the same ritual. After Loi Dai had put on her white canvas shoes, she stood at the door and waited for her mother, who would always come hurriedly from her old sewing machine. Her mother examined her uniform almost too carefully, and pulled up her skirt to reveal the safety pants underneath. "Good, good. Now, put on your school sweater, Dai. This white shirt is too revealing— it is too thin and the sleeves aren't remotely long enough!"

"But it's April now and it's hot outside—"

"There's no 'but', Dai. It's to protect you."

"— whatever," Dai draped the sweater over her shoulders and said, "if this makes you feel better." Even though her feet had yet to set on the ground

outside, she could already feel sweat swimming down her back. The smell of her father's Kombucha lingered on her sweater; a smell of humidity and acidity, refusing to leave.

She jumped onto her bicycle and left her neighbourhood behind.

Soon as she cycled around the corner, she pulled off her sweater and stuck it inside the bicycle basket. She would take off her safety pants in the restroom too, once she was back at school and had walked past the penetrating eyes of the discipline teachers; not a single sane mind could handle being confined like this.

As much as she hoped to get to school quickly, it was not like she was particularly fond of school. The humid air inside the classrooms was barely tolerable, but at least it was better than home, with four people squeezed in a 200 square feet apartment. Layers and layers she had to put on underneath her uniform to keep people from seeing through it— why couldn't they just redesign the uniform with a thicker material? Sweat glided down her thighs, and she cycled even faster.

She parked her bike two turns away from school, and ran through the school gates barely before the bell rang, evading the eyes of the speculative teachers standing at the gate, checking the lengths of their skirts.

Before she turned around at the corner and ran towards her classroom, she looked back at the slowly closing gates, and the bars collided behind her.

Dai ran to her classroom, and pulled out her worn-out biology textbook.

If there was a poll on which teacher was the most popular in St. Peter's, it had to be Mr. Cheng. He wasn't particularly good at teaching Biology, or good looking in a general sense, but then it was easy for any male teacher to gain popularity in a girls' school, as long as he was a somewhat decent man. And if anything, Mr. Cheng sure knew how to make his students feel special.

Praises, chocolate, and the secret extra two points if you were struggling to pass Biology. That made Mr. Cheng the subject of affection among the herd

of adolescent girls, always surrounded by eager students who wished for improvement in Biology. And perhaps they tried to gain Mr. Cheng's attention in some other ways as well, in a childish, unthreatening manner. How the girls acted was almost adorable, that one could easily gain the innocent affection and admiration from these blooming young ladies, and the bar was surprisingly low in this garden of youth.

Neither was Dai able to escape that charm. There was something about Mr. Cheng that gave her a sense of closeness which she never felt with her father— if anything, her father existed like a fog that loomed above her in her life, distant but suffocating. She could barely remember how his eyes looked— she didn't think she had seen them facing her direction since her brother's birth. Yet his presence in the house was undeniable, that it's almost smothering in the apartment as you take in the fog with every single breath. His beer bottles, his newspaper piles, his obsessive collection of health products, and the jars of fungi, developing silently on the pool of tea, their arms spread and occupying the space.

Oh, her father and his Kombucha! It was honestly senseless, to believe drinking those tea with developed fungi would grant you vigorous health. For Dai, they were nothing more than moss, and she could not picture how they could benefit her father's declining body. If anything was going to save him, she doubted that it would be his alcohol and his enormous collection of health supplements. Dai had always seen her father with a sense of repulse, despising his favoritism towards her brother, his late-night drunk episodes, and his habit of ordering her around ferociously.

But Mr. Cheng was different. It was easy to be drawn to him, with his unaggressive presence and gentle voice. He felt like a soft umbrella when he said "it's alright," to her failed test.

Being in Mr. Cheng's biology class felt easier than so many other things in her life, and so the hand that patted her lower back occasionally, and the fingers that brushed across her hand when he walked past her desk, were also easier to ignore. Deep down somewhere, she knew it was not right. But she swallowed the unsettling thought, like every other thing that was eating away at her.

But if she was being honest, Dai found comfort in that warmth which her father had never given her. Her heart fluttered, as much as she would like to deny it. And if the image of him pops up in Dai's head occasionally when she played the love songs on her cassette player... Nobody really needed to know about that.

She liked to sing, but it never was something that she could entertain herself with. Her father had never shied away from expressing his irritation towards her voice, so she had to conceal it under the sound of water droplets in the shower. She would sing silently inside the washroom, until the hot water ran out.

Tell me why, I cannot be a good girl now... Dai hummed to herself as she stepped into the shower at night. The second thing that she discovered, after the new mould in the shower cube, was a tiny mushroom stemming from her left toes. Balancing on her right leg, Dai raised her left foot and examined it.

It was a soft, flimsy mushroom growing between the creek of her toes, barely noticeable under the dim incandescent light. It looked like those mushrooms on the sidewalks during this humid month they were in, overlooked by every passer-by, but still growing ardently towards the sun. Young boys would step on them and crush them under their sandals after rain, but soon they would bud again like tiny bubbles.

Dai touched the mushroom. It reminded her of the jars of Kombucha her father had lying around the apartment: the fungi floating on the deep red liquid, white and spongy, unimpressed by anything around it.

Where did the mushroom come from? Dai did not dwell on it long before she tore it from her foot, and threw it out of the window. This should not concern her any more than the bruises on her knees.

She was proven wrong the next morning.

MUSHROOMS

When she woke up and stepped into the washroom she realized more mushrooms had grown between her toes, and under her arms. Those places felt uncomfortably damp and stuffy, and Dai tried to pull them off her body again. She cursed silently so that her family would not take notice of that, and she tugged at the roots of the mushrooms. They came off with little resistance, and Dai threw them into the rubbish bin, wrapped in tissue papers.

But the feeling of moss still lingered on her skin. They were moist, hot and soft, clinging onto her body.

Dai tried to not think too much about it. After all, maintaining a sense of normalcy was important when dealing with anything abnormal, like you would try to maintain a regular routine of waking up at seven in order to stay sane, even if you are jailed all alone in a dark room.

Dai took a bit too long to get back to school that day.

“I think you will have to stay after school to make up for the missed homework, Loi Dai.” Mr. Cheng said with the unfilled worksheets in his hand, and Dai nodded along absently. She did not take off her safety pants this time, and she was soaked inside out. The dampness was torturing, and it made her think of the mushrooms, bubbling up from the dirt after rain had taken the earth. The wet mould developed in strange flowery patterns, tracing the curves of her legs and going up her body.

“You heard that?” Dai shook away her thoughts, and upon seeing Mr. Cheng’s doubtful reaction she quickly nodded, “Yes. I am really sorry.”

When they finally sat in the empty classroom after school, Dai had finally ditched the feeling of suffocation. She had gotten used to the tight briefs hugging her form, strangling her underneath her uniform. To stay behind even made her feel better, although it was supposed to be a punishment; at least they were in a classroom where the windows were open. The air felt less humid for her, with the spring breeze pouring in.

Dai wrote in her homework book silently, her pencil crooked and short. Mr. Cheng sat across the table, reading an English book that Dai could not

understand.

“What is that book that you are reading?”

Mr. Cheng laughed, “It is not something that girls should read.”

“How so?”

“Well... Perhaps, when you are a bit older, you will get to understand it,”

“Am I not old enough, if I have already grown enough to work? I am 16 now.” Dai said this with a peculiar sense of pride; she knew she was young, yet she was convinced that she was different, like how every 16 year-old would think.

Mr. Cheng set down the book on the table, and looked at Dai, “Indeed. You have grown quite a lot...” He laughed carelessly, “You look more like an adult now, compared to the first year I taught you. Much prettier, with great physique.”

Dai regretted pushing on the topic of the book. She blushed. Her pencil moved faster and she decided not to say anything more.

The two fell into silence again, and Dai finished her biology homework, as late as it was.

“I see that you are done with your work now...” Mr. Cheng stood and walked behind her seat, bent over her to check on her work. His arms enclosed around her, and Dai was paralyzed. He flipped through the pages, “Well done, Loi Dai. I think you got them alright.” He rested his right hand on her back again, “If you keep this up, I think you will do well in the exam.”

Dai could feel the mushrooms again, budding in her veins; it was as if they were about to burst out of every inch of her skin the next instant, yearning for the kiss of rain.

She used her greatest strength to suppress her scream, and jerked out of the chair once Cheng stepped back. She scrambled to pour her stationaries in her

bag, and ran out of the classroom with the pathetic excuse of being late for dinner, which they both knew was not the hour yet.

Dai ran relentlessly, and almost forgot about her bike. Sweats dripped down her hair, sticky and damp.

Caught in a moment of nauseating rush, she panted and leaned on the wall of a convenience store. Beneath her white shoes, tiny mushrooms grew happily on the sidewalk, although no one knew what they were feeding off.

The next day, Dai wore even more than usual, desperate to hide her skin.

“My dear, you look so fine today,” Dai’s mother said to her at the doorstep, “Finally you have put on some leggings... They protect you much more than the pants! Just the thought of you on a bicycle with those short pants under your skirt makes me worried every single day.” She put on a scandalized expression, then smiled again, “But now that you finally would listen to your mother and be a good girl.”

Dai pulled her sweater tighter around her, albeit the hot April’s morning, and walked out of her home. She wanted to call in sick, but she figured it was better to go to school and pretend nothing had happened, than to spend time with her father under the same roof, who saw her only function to be chores. Spending time with her over-protective mother was too risky as well— she was too inquisitive about her being.

What Dai’s mother did not need to know was that every inch of her skin underneath the thick fabric had already been covered by fungi, large and small, and Dai could no longer tug them off. They seemed to have rooted in her skin, as if they had decided that her body was the best spot to colonize and terrorize in the world, instead of an ordinary piece of unanimated log, where a normal fungus should be.

The only thing that Dai could do, was to cover herself up against the scalding gaze of others. What if one of them found out? How could she explain

to people that her body had become the breeding ground of peculiar mushrooms? What would people think?

She decided to walk instead, acutely aware of the glance of others. She tightened her sweater again. The soft fabric became the only shield that she had against the world, which wordlessly looked back at her.

That day Cheng asked her to stay again. A shiver shot through Dai's spine; she did not know what she should expect, but the mushrooms were screaming their warning at her, voicelessly through her veins.

No, no, no!

Her instinct was to run away, but her legs gave in and betrayed her. She sat in her chair motionlessly, the chair already too short for her half-grown legs.

Cheng sat at the teacher's desk, organizing his notes. He did not seem to be impatient in any way, if anything he seemed unusually calm and slow, like a lioness waiting for her prey.

He waited for everyone else to have left the room, and closed the window, one by one. The air inside froze almost instantly; Dai could feel the drowning sensation again, inside the cube of this classroom. She swallowed hard.

And finally Cheng walked towards her, "You are in extra clothes today— what happened? Are you feeling unwell?"

Dai shook her head.

"You know, it is always welcomed, if you wish to find someone to talk about your problems... I will be here with you and support you, Dai." Cheng sat on her table, and touched her hair. Almost instantly, Dai flinched away from the touch.

Cheng called out her name again.

Loi Dai, *son's arrival*. She hated it when people called her by her name, because

it did not belong to her. This is the name her father chose to curse her with, so that she would live for her younger brother forever. Her birth was inferior— she would never lead a life of her own, but only to serve as a premise of her brother's life. How pathetic was that.

“Poor girl, you look like you are having a heat stroke. Look at all the sweat!” Cheng exclaimed, and took out a handkerchief from his front pocket. He softly wiped off the droplets on her face. “Why are you wearing so much after all? It cannot be good for you.”

But no, Dai thought. Every inch of her skin felt like it was soaked and marinated; underneath the textiles and mushrooms was her docile body, weak and soft like the mushrooms themselves. She wanted to take off her clothes, and was secretly thrilled by the situation; but inside her, a voice said, *no. This is abhorrent. Predatory.*

She could not bring herself to move.

“You know, I have always thought you were interested... You never said no.” Cheng laughed, “But I suppose not daring to say no is not that different.” He pulled her up from her chair, and she was forced to stand up against the wall. He caressed her cheek, and put his hand in between her legs.

Still paralyzed, Dai could only feel his hand move up into the shadow of her uniform skirt, and she was not even sure about what she was afraid about; was she scared of what would be done to her, or what would be discovered on her? She heard the mushrooms on her skin screamed again. *So many of us! So many—*

A terrific shriek tore apart the almost empty classroom, and even Dai could not tell if that was the mushrooms' or her own voice. She struggled against Cheng's grip, and ran out of the classroom, then stumbled towards the female washroom.

Run! Run! The mushrooms chanted for her.

Dai locked herself in one of the stalls, and sat on the stool. She gasped rap-

MUSHROOMS

idly for air, and felt herself buried in soft, wet dirt.

Her clothes, her clothes, her constraints. They were too suffocating!

She took off her sweater, and kicked off her shoes. Almost tearing the seams of her leggings, she threw them on the tiled floor.

She finally felt that she could breathe— she could feel something new yet familiar rising inside her, growing inside her. Like a fresh leaf rising to sunshine, something was struggling to be born and be granted new life in the face of danger.

Adjusting her breath, Dai saw a bump slowly rising on her lap, beneath the damp darkness of the skirt.

She pulled up her skirt and peeked under it, and almost immediately she fell onto her knees, and started vomiting.

Between her legs, warm and moist, new mushrooms had made their nest, and a monstrous brown fungus erected distinctively there, its presence unignorable, like a monument for the casualties in a rotten warfare.

She threw up every drop of burning acid inside her stomach, but she kept on retching in her fetal position. Inside her such monstrosity was born! And all the other mushrooms on her skin chanted and echoed to themselves, in an overwhelming passion.

Dai tried to steady her breath. The chanting beside her ears did not cease to bang against her eardrums, paining her head.

This atrocity should not be hers; it should have belonged to a man. It should have belonged to their hairy bodies, their intrusive cologne, and their senseless aggression.

But no. That was her ladywood, blooming inside her. She had once mistaken it as an intruder, but it was undeniably hers, and hers alone. In bad faith she believed that it would go away if she denied it enough, but it had been there

MUSHROOMS

all along. She was ashamed and embarrassed—it all changed however, when she realized they were one all along.

She was told to cover her skin in front of others already, long before the mushrooms appeared. But there was no use rejecting it, rejecting her own body. Her body, her senses, her desire, all hers.

And above all, she had the power to choose. She needed not to allow Cheng, or any other people, to step on her, to use her body, in exchange for those little pleasures for herself. The discovery of the phallus granted her strength in an odd manner, and she felt aggressive suddenly. She felt powerful.

The screaming of the mushrooms slowly subsided into quiet, supportive murmurs.

She could hear Cheng's footsteps approaching, cooing for her to come back out, like he was pacifying an infant child.

Slowly, Dai stood back up inside the tiny cubicle, her breath smoother than ever. The hushed chanting inside her gave her a reborn strength.

She spotted a crowbar lying beside the toilet.

She picked it up. Her foot was at the door, and she walked towards that footstep.



To have put a pause to life, and press play again.

A LITTLE VICTORY

Jodie Lam

The girl at 18 might have thought death was the utmost pain one can experience.

The girl at 19 knew that agony was when life intertwines with death.

This girl at 20 knows now that death is a but a reminder of life.

“It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live, remember that.” — Albus Dumbledore

May you find the solace you yearn in this story.

I staggered across the same road three years ago. My parents park the car opposite to the grand, beige, clean and polished building. For a historical building, it sure looks new. Five words in Chinese. Where the dead get their respect. White lips. Fire. Two winters ago. Appalling rain stormed onto our umbrellas as if we had not had enough tears down our faces. Strange ladies cleaning. Priest singing. Bowing and bowing and bowing. Following the coffin out of the building. Car. Gone. Yeh-yeh.

The door creaks as it opens.

A coldness overcomes me. I don't remember this place being so chilly, like I have never been to this place. But of course I have. Its strange temperature, its strange decoration. The empty lobby welcomes one like a stranded home. It creeps slowly upon me and makes me stick closely to my parents. I don't recall it being this

brightly lit and I don't recall the old ladies sweeping the floor and chattering. We get into the dim elevator and stride out on the second floor. On the right, an old man dressed in white stands behind the counter of one peculiar open area. The man who knows all about this place, what to do and what to wear. Behind him fronts some wooden cabinets that align at the back of the wall. They line one by one in silence, as if awaiting to be opened. Examined. Used. Only to be shut close again. On the left, rooms align one by one. If you look from afar, all you see is a cluster of black, white and green. We scurry along the corridor with muffled chants. Chants of wooden instruments hitting against each other, unwittingly sounding like tick-tock, tick-tock. Occasionally to my left, faces of unfamiliar men sweep past my eyes, like hastened car drivers on the highway at midnight. Orchids, chrysanthemums of white, and lilies. I hold my mother's forearm with a little grip. One always wants to hold onto her mother at a place like this.

"Hurry up." she says. We find the fifth room and turn facing it. A picture of a woman whom I don't recall knowing hangs at the centre of the wall, facing the entrance. We stride towards her and stop several feet in front. Three bows. My mother hugs a lady in white cotton attire and we find a seat at a front roll close to the entrance. The room grows on me like an old, unwanted friend but I somehow can't tell his name. Its crispy coldness makes my fingers find refuge in my palms. My upper body hunches as I wrap my arms around myself.

The way I wrapped them around myself somewhere near this very spot. Burning— sizzling— feverish— the inbuilt furnace at the back of the chilly room, almost hidden from the rest of the visitors. It was where I had cracked my skin from dehydration.

The fragile, almost transparent piece of paper. They call it 'the money for the dead'. My sister and I sat side by side with stacks of paper neatly piled beside. I held a piece and reached my forearm slightly into the furnace, careful to not burn my arm. I watched it fly into the fire like a free, fearless kite roaming against the fervent wind. And falling— falling— falling into the crackling, devouring, bright orange fire. Hisses and sizzles. The fire whirled in all directions as though hungry for the paper. It ate the corner until the thin paper curled unwillingly. It didn't stop. It ate— until there was nothing but black, partial ashes. Like ashes from his burning hot body in its last moment on Earth. A press on the button by the oldest son. Our muffled yells and cries and screams against the mechan-

ical belt sending his body into a big furnace. The fire ate his body, until there was nothing but ashes.

Nothing but ashes.

I gaze at the corner of the inbuilt furnace in this room. I don't see or smell it from where I sit. But I know it always sits at its corner, creeping and swallowing whoever sitting in front of it. Always burning and never ceasing.

The room is a mixture of tiny whispers and sniffs. All condone under a respectful silence. The only person not sitting still, almost not sitting at all, is the little girl sitting right opposite of me. Her tiny feet hang in the air, frolicking front and back and back and front. Next to her is a woman. Her head dangles and her back crunches. Her slender legs pin down onto the ground, motionless, solemn. The little girl reaches her chubby arm across her lap. She fiddles the woman's finger one by one, caresses her heavy palm. I watch them for a while. When the little girl cannot settle herself on the seat, the woman pulls her plumb arm towards herself with such vigour of a mother. She whispers something into her shaking head. The woman points at the girl with a finger until she composes herself still on the chair. She fights this pressure that pushes her into the chair. Her head shifts right to left, then back and forth. Her little momentum doesn't sit well with the stern group around her. Her tiny, chubby cherub figure, hair pins, baubles attached to her hair tie and a sleek pair of leather mary janes, dancing in mid-air...

My baby cousin.

My little cousin who couldn't walk on her own back then. My uncle carried her and strode towards Yeh-yeh's picture. Her chubby legs wiggled too. Yeh-yeh was smiling, as though waiting for one last embrace from his youngest grandchild.

"Say bye bye to Yeh-yeh la."

She waved one arm in the air, shook her hand and said "Bye bye." He still smiled. She hugged her father. Her smile like the one she still has when she hugs her plush bunny.

She didn't know what the goodbye is for.

My goodbye bade farewell to the coarse, sweaty palm that always held out for my grip. A little girl needs her grandfather's grip as she crosses the road. The tightness wrapping around my hand on the murky days and the sunny days. The tightness hugging my tiny body on birthdays. The same tightness tugging my throat in our last phone call. The tightness between my hand and the telephone as one realises the time might have come. The same tightness hammering 10 people's hearts knowing there would no longer be 11 people on family portraits. The tightness of one's veins as they are about to fail. The tightness of one's last breath as one scrimmages against death's lingering paws, ready to take one away with one last, tight grip.

The moment his world stopped, the moment my world paused.

A string of recitation flows into the room, word by word, accompanied by an instrument that creates the sound of two wooden hollow things hitting each other. The crisp and momentary sounds galloping around the place. I try to make sense of the words as the Taoist priest chants. Word by word, word by word, word by word...

In this sea of unresting waves, I drowned. My father attended all the businesses the oldest son had to care for. He stayed so upright and tall, as though telling the visitors, his father remained respected. My mother held her eyes shut most of the time, occasionally telling my sister and I to take care of our aunt. She spoke most of the time as though she needn't be cared for. Her weary, dry eyelids drooped as she shivered and shook standing in front of Yeh-yeh's grave. Helpless and solitude. My grandmother who said "we must all die," while our hands tightly clutched, unwilling to let go. The night my sister spent an hour in the shower. I leaned closely to the bathroom door— the suppressed whimpers and wails together with the splattering showers of water, unusually loud, unusually painful.

Something about the Taoist priest's passion tells me that the stronger the better for the dead. The louder, the better. Meanwhile, the little girl's legs are still hanging mid-air and wagging like the tail of a dog when he's playing fetch. Her mother puts her arm around her, as if to make sure she doesn't fall off the chair. Next to me, my mother is whispering to my father. My father has always stayed solemn and tall, only the last time he was standing instead of sitting. My mother with her

usual lipstick, her hair tied tightly in a bun, her necklace dangling from her neck. Her face carefully a mixture of respectfulness and nonchalance.

The little girl is again struggling to stay composed on a chair that is clearly too tall for her. Oh, my baby cousin whose passion for life never faltered for a second. Nothing meant more than taking away her plush bunny. No misery, no hate, no pain, no anger. While I have for months, felt as though it was all an unfunny joke. Cursing God for being unkind to kind people. Seeing Yeh-yeh in my dreams only to wake up and see that it's a dream. Only to have it fill me up like a balloon, inflating and inflating and inflating... Most nights I am bursting.

Ever since 10 chairs were pulled together instead of 11, it had been like waiting for a doorbell that had not rung yet. But somehow we managed to feast on, as we always do when someone is running late. On the celebratory birthdays. On the father's days. On the little cousin's 4th birthday, and her 5th. At our last family dinner to celebrate Ma-ma's 70th birthday, I showed my little cousin a photo of Yeh-yeh and asked,

"Who is he?"

"Yeh-yeh."

"You remember Yeh-yeh?"

She nodded.

"Do you miss Yeh-yeh?"

She shook her head, "No."

Her quick dismissal of the topic, of whom she was unfamiliar with— a big slap of wave. His death, now like a reminder of life. She hasn't been here, in fact she hasn't been around most of the time. She hasn't had Yeh-yeh holding her hand to cross the road from three years old till eighteen years old. She hasn't had phone calls from Yeh-yeh after school. She hasn't had Yeh-yeh cooking her favourite dish. Well, she was too little to have a favourite dish. She was too little to walk alongside Yeh-yeh on her own. She hasn't wept in this very place. She has not

A LITTLE VICTORY

noticed the unused chopsticks at dinner. She has not had Yeh-yeh engraved in her heart, vividly, vibrantly, the valiant hero of a little granddaughter.

Like a reminder on living. The endless nights hovering above my eyes like a brewing storm as I stared into the ceiling, finding it so unusually silent. The doorbell never rang. For how many days? 500? 632? The calendar, much less cruel than the clock. The doorbell still never rings, but the dinner goes on. Our dinner table and chairs sit quietly at the back of my head. Chopsticks and spoons clattering, faint dialogues, cheerful laughs at the baby cousin's mischief. One less chair is reserved. The table, stationary, still, same.

And the nights I find, the balloon doesn't really burst. It keeps filling up, but somehow, miraculously, it doesn't burst.

"Stand up." My mother pulls my arm. We are called to stand and listen to the Taoist priest as he chants and instructs us. At last, we bow and sit again.

The funeral has lasted shorter than I recall. The stairs, the escalators, the changing into white attire and a huge pointed hood covering my head, the patrol around the coffin, the tiny room at the back for close family members of the deceased... All of which I was sure had taken forever to get past. But it's already ended. In a blink of an eye, in my wandered mind that flew to Yeh-yeh once again. A 'good-bye' and 'take care' to my mother's friend and his family.

Goodbye. Goodbye.

I step out of the room but manage to catch a glimpse of the little girl for the last time. She has fallen asleep in her mother's hug. Her arms wrap around her mother's neck, and her legs fix on the sides of her mother's waist. The woman pats the back of the little girl, her arms also tightly bound around her tiny body. Like a koala bear hugging onto the tree trunk. The tree which bears life, and without a doubt, they hold onto it. Like my baby cousin holding onto my uncle's body. Like him holding onto my baby cousin's body. A blessed moment for the little girls. A blessed moment. Their happiness, their little victory.

We stride towards the car across the funeral parlour and prepare to go home. I get into the right seat and give the building one last look. The car window sits

A LITTLE VICTORY

like a glass wall between us. The building now looks like a muffle of dull beige and mist, much less polished and much less clean. I watch the building becoming fainter and fainter until it can hardly be seen. Until it is out of sight. The funeral parlour that sits unbothered in the middle of Hung Hom, shoots up from the ground like a cavernous gravestone. Like his gravestone. Sometimes out of sight, but never out of the mind, the heart. The roads of Hung Hom, now clear and tranquil. We stop occasionally at red lights and wait. My parents pick some music and hit 'play'.

To have put a pause to life, and press play again. My little victory.

When the green lights are on again, we drive on and on and on. On to the family dinners, on to the teenage cousin's birthdays, on to the adult cousin's birthdays.



Alone in the dark tunnel, he saw the creature scurry away into the darkness.

RAILWAY BUNNIES

Suzanna Lam Hio Lam

Imagine yourself on a routined way to home, craving for comfort food as you remind yourself of the uncertainties ahead of you when you get home. Then, you realize that you are stuck in a tunnel, forced to choose between the light and the dark, with nowhere to go. The only thing you can do is to pursue what is in front of you. Will you follow the bunnies into the darkness?

I came up with this scenario one day while I was taking the MTR alone, contemplating upon the turbulent year of 2020. I hope that this story would resonate not only to Hong Kongers, but to you as well. Hope you enjoy my story, and the illustrations I made in this journal!

Currently, I am working on a computer game related to this short story. If you would like to check it out along with my illustrations and writings, feel free to visit @suzannadraws on Instagram.

The announcement woke the student up. He rubbed his eyes, a crumpled tie dangled awkwardly around his neck—he fixed it. His knuckles paled as fingers gripped tightly around the straps of his old school bag. Yawning, the young man looked around, with his half-opened and teary eyes, expecting a crowd in the cart, especially since it was rush hour. To his surprise, the once crowded train cart was now eerily empty. It was pitch dark outside the window, with only dim lights illuminating the interior of the rumbling train. Staring at the ceiling, the bright red dot on the digital map flickered. He realized that he had just missed his station. *Missing a station or two should be no big deal, all I have to do is get off at the next station, then switch metro lines. I should get home in no time,* he thought to himself, processing what had just happened as the train freight rumbled, heading fast to the terminal of the line. But to him, the college entry exam was soon approaching, and there was no time to spare, not even for an hour. The more he thought about the time he had wasted, the more he fretted. *I should have been more attentive to things around*

me. How could I be so stupid? He blamed himself for falling asleep.

Time fled by; anxious, he took out his phone and checked his WhatsApp. “Ah B, what time are you coming home?” There appeared the message his mother had sent him, attached with a picture of his favourite dish, soy chicken. Even in pictures, he could smell the homemade meal. It warmed his heart. He couldn’t wait to get home. As much as he wanted to relax, the notes he took during the tutorial class were sitting patiently in his bag, guilt tripping him to start reading. Just as his mind was unable to wait to go home for dinner, he could not ignore the fact that he should start reading. He sighed and gave in. Grabbing his notes, he started revising.

By the time he got to the second page, the train stopped without notice. The sudden halt caused a momentum that launched him forward. He lost his grip, and the notes scattered all over the ground. The platform doors opened, and screeched, with no announcement of arrival. Silence. Something was off. The student scrambled to his feet and anxiously peeked outside of the window with his tired eyes. A pillar without a station plaque. Not a single soul was underneath the flickering lights. This was not the station he expected. Frightened, he hurriedly stuffed his notes back into the school bag. “It’s okay, it’s okay. Perhaps I took the wrong metro line to start with,” he muttered, frantically looking at the map for confirmation. The red indication light died out right in front of his eyes. Frozen in place, he had no idea where the train had stopped. Curious to know where he was, he stepped out of the train freight. Unsurprisingly, just like the train cart, the station was dead empty. Some lights were out of order, leaving the station dimly lit. A musty smell was in the air, and water was crawling down the wall. This place was old, damp, and silent, oppressively so. “Hello??” the student yelled, only to be greeted with the echoes of his own voice. The doors closed behind him. He realized this and panicked. “Hey! Come back!” He sprinted after the train, waving frantically as he ran along the platform. He was quickly met with a dead end at the end of the platform, his throat dried from crying out. The train roared as it disappeared into the darkness.

With the train gone, all he could do was wait for the next ride. He found a seat near the nameless pillar. He sighed, pulled out some tissues, wiped the wet seats clean, then finally, collapsed onto the bench. Alone in this ghastly station, nausea set in. He wanted to vomit. As he tried to hold it in, he blamed himself for being

so careless. *Try to be positive.* He convinced himself that the station could be a surprisingly pleasant place for studying, despite the humidity and all. Unlike his cramped, suffocating room at home, the station was spacious, and the temperature was quite comfortable. There were no siblings tugging on his shirt, begging him to play. There were no piercing screams from the rebellious teen next door, nor the out-of-tune racket of karaoke singing upstairs. There was not even the buzz of a fly, or a mosquito that would disturb him here. With so little time left until the final exam, this was the golden opportunity for him to digest all these exam strategies he learnt during the three-hour slog of a class earlier today. Perhaps this wasn't wasted time at all. So he pulled out his notebooks, and started studying. Flipping through the pages in his book, he traced his fingers along the lines, navigating through dense walls of texts. Normally he would have difficulty even concentrating at home, but he managed to go through his notes like a breeze here in the abandoned station. His line of thought was suddenly interrupted by a greyish speck that suddenly invaded his sight, descending from the ceiling like a snowflake. Then there was another, and another followed after. Flakes covered his page and urged him to look up. The water-damaged wall paint of the ceiling expanded, bubbling like boiling water, then it popped. Its bursting remains fell on his forehead. He wiped his face and the notebook clean. Not even the station would let him study in peace. Annoyed, the student picked up his belongings and relocated to another seat nearby. He squeezed his eyes, trying to concentrate, picking up where he left off. Tapping on the notes, he tried to cram everything into his head. Suddenly, water began to fall from the ceiling, hitting the words on the page, shattering his focus. Drip. Drip. Drip. The text bled, spreading like an infection, eating up the words quickly with its insatiable appetite. He quickly closed his notebook, but it was too late. It all became an unreadable mess. These few pages of precious notes, written with a cheap ink pen during the class today, were completely ruined. Frustration welled up in his chest as he slammed his fist against his thighs. When will the train arrive? He felt completely helpless. It has been over half an hour, and there was not a single train that passed. There was nothing he could do except to wait. With his current state of mind, it was impossible for him to study. He stood up, pacing back and forth, trying to calm down. Patience is power, he chanted. Patience is power. His mother had always taught him that "patience is power," that one must endure to succeed. Kicking the puddles on the cement floor, he reminded himself that these were all just petty concerns. It was just some dust, just a few drops of water. It really was no big deal. After all, was it not the same back home? Forcing a smile on his face

he found another seat, wiped it dry, and started to study again.

Scanning through the lines on the damp paper, he vaguely heard some tapping noises. He continued to read, dismissing the sound. Staring at the text, he tried not to let distractions bother him again. He dug into his pockets, grabbed his earphones, and secured them on his ears. Turning on his mp3 player, jazz music muffled the annoyance. Soon, the tapping turned into knocking. This utterly broke his concentration. Irritated, he dug his earphones deeper, trying to silence the sound. The knocking got louder and louder, penetrating through the dissonance. Pulling his hair, he threw his notebook aside, and started searching for the source of the sound. The sound came from a distance, behind the platform doors. On the empty railway, there stood a faint, dark figure. The student approached with caution. Squinting his eyes, he saw it pounding against the glass panel. He could vaguely see its features. It bounced up and down, hitting the glass again and again with its head. Out of curiosity he squeezed his face against the glass, and the vibrations hit his face. It was a weird sensation. Staring at the bouncing shadow, for a moment, his anxiousness was gone. He remembered how he would visit the pet shop every Sunday, and stared through the glass adoringly in the same manner. He loved animals, especially bunnies. In front of him, he could see his hopes and dreams slowly manifested. His vision blurred, the shadows split, overlapped, then split again into two, four, six, eight copies of itself... Their bodies banging against the door in unison. The noise was nauseating, so loud that it was buzzing. Now he could see their silhouettes. Short, with pointy, long ears. They yelled and kicked, their voice muffled, desperately trying to convey something. It was hard to make out what they were saying behind the thick layer of the glass. Yet he knew that behind the barrier between them, these creatures were taunting him with their calls, telling him to come and get them now.

The desire to catch the creature had overridden him, flooding his mind. His dreams were so close, yet so far. It's just a panel of glass between them. Watching how they bruised themselves just to reach him, the least he could do was to catch one of them. Using his bare hands he seized the edge of the door, forced his scrawny fingers between the narrow gaps, and desperately tried to pry it open. The doors refused to budge, and he then pulled harder. In frustration he kicked the door. The creatures scattered and started running away from the station. Seeing this, he pulled with all his might; his fingers hurt but he did not care. He pulled and pulled until his fingers bled, nails about to be torn away from their

beds. Realizing this was not going to work, he ran searching for tools. He hastily dismantled the fire extinguisher from a nearby pillar, lifted it and smashed it against the glass hard. Fueled with adrenaline, he rammed the fire extinguisher into the glass repeatedly, drilling into the barrier. The glass shattered, revealing a passage to the dark tunnel below. Hearing the footsteps getting weaker, he jumped down onto the railway, holding his trusty fire extinguisher. He then immediately gave chase to the nearest silhouette. The shadow stumbled on the railway tracks and tripped over. He easily caught up with the little creature. Grabbing by its ears, he held it up, smiling victorious. Finally, he got his prize that he always deserved. He observed his prey with feverish eyes as he slowly rotated the creature under the flickering lights. Its features were revealed to him clearly. It possessed the body of a regular rabbit, but with a thick layer of human skin covering its face. Touching the fleshy surface, he was in total disbelief. The faceless creature silently judged him. An unspeakable feeling rushed through him. Sweat rolling down his face, his vision blurred. With trembling hands, he held the creature up. Its face started twitching, quickly losing its form, spinning into a wheel of a blurred mess. The sense of victory that he had just attained was quickly lost in the spiral that was spinning out of control. He froze in place. All he could do was to blink, desperately trying to clear his mind, to stop the madness in front of him. Spinning, it kept spinning. Dizziness overwhelmed him as the spiral seemed to suck his very soul out of his body. The image of its face flooded his sight, taking the shape of a distant past. He could see a boy wishing in front of a glowing candle on a small swiss roll cake. He told his mother that he hoped for a pet bunny. She embraced him, and whispered conditions and promises into his ears. The boy nodded with glistening eyes as he blew out the candles. Soon after, the determined boy dedicated his life running after the prize. Everyday he woke up at six, sprinting from class to class, from school to tutorial class, from the metro station to his damp little apartment, where he spent his time memorizing textbooks after textbooks. The boy persisted, test after test, quiz after quiz, not allowing himself any room to breathe. Like a rabbit chasing after a carrot, he ran towards that shining light at the end of the tunnel. His hard work paid off in the end. He got into the band one secondary school that his mother always wanted him to attend. But in return, his mother regrettably told him that their family did not have the money, space nor time to take care of one. It would be too much of a responsibility, she said. Perhaps next year they could get one, when their financial situation improves. Despite his effort, he received no reward. The shining light at the end of the tunnel started flickering, becoming dimmer and dimmer. Eventually, he stopped asking for the pet bunny. Yet,

there was still a faint spark. He believed that something better must be at the end of the tunnel. He could see beyond the pet bunny. He envisioned himself getting better grades next semester. Maybe he could get an award, a scholarship. Maybe nailing the DSE exam will get him into a good university. Then, naturally he would get a decent job with an annual salary raise. He might be able to afford an apartment, a house, a villa even. And finally, he could have a pet. Every night he held up his mobile phone, examining his college choices on the JUPAS website. He wondered if he could ever get to the end of the tunnel, whether his life would be stable one day. He hoped for an answer, but the spiraling madness in front of him refused to stop. His fears were realized in front of his eyes, he could not fixate on anything. Things could go south. The world could collapse. The city might die. There was no telling what would happen. Nothing was certain. There may not be a future outside of the tunnel, even if he tried.

The world was spinning around him, slowly forming something comprehensible. Soon, the stirring stopped, and the spiral solidified into a face. A familiar face that mirrored his. Its expression was exactly like his, the resting face gave no direction, and certainly no answer to his question. Those beady eyes reflected his face. He was at a loss. What does this all mean? A sense of despair hit him. He tried to scream, but nothing came out of his mouth. He got what he wanted. He is supposed to be happy, supposed to be satisfied, supposed to feel secure. Fear and insecurity clouded his mind. He felt a crippling sense of uncertainty snuffing out the dying spark in him, right in front of his eyes.

His arm felt comfortable, and too familiar, then his fingers slipped, dropping the creature onto the cold, wet ground. The student dropped to his knees. Alone in the dark tunnel, he saw the creature scurry away into the darkness. He was alone. Now what? He thought to himself. He could hear the footsteps of the creature and its duplicates running afar, running wild as they passed through the metro tunnels. Then they stopped, and soon the scurried clanking resumed. The creatures were spreading through the metro system. I should go after them. He thought to himself His legs felt like lead, busted and retired for the day. He didn't feel like doing anything. The announcement blasted through the speakers as the rumbling train passed by behind him at the opposite platform. He froze there on the railway, motionless, staring at the train slowly stopping. He looked blankly at the platform doors, its yellow strips metal casings. He felt his feet touching the pebbles on the railway. He tried to get up, but he could not bring himself to do it.

RAILWAY BUNNIES

He saw the doors close. Square, square, square, his eyes followed the train as it slowly went on its way. The announcement lingered within the station, echoing in the darkness. He had missed the last train to get home.

He looked to his left. A tunnel obscured by the endless darkness beyond. There was no way out except walking through it. Maybe walking wasn't a bad choice after all.



The girl didn't seem concerned with the row of dead hearts on her shelf. "I would like you to take my heart away."

THE HEARTHOLDER

Kylie Leung

The inspiration for The Hearthholder came to me after something made me so upset that I wished I was “heartless”. Hence, I imagined a character called the Heartholder, who would hold my heart and all the pain in it until I was ready to carry it.

But then, I remembered a girl who told me how she had tried to kill herself as if she was just talking about the weather, as if she could no longer feel. I was horrified, and wondered if that was what it was like to have one’s heart replaced by emptiness.

That night, I researched on how to help suicidal people. However, we had only chatted that one time and I never bumped into her again. Yet sometimes, my mind would wander back to her. I do not think one can forget the people who bare their hearts to us, thus the Hearthholder will forever be haunted by those who came to her. More memories and thoughts came to mind, eventually giving birth to this story.

However, please feel free to interpret my story however you want. I love the different interpretations I have heard of it. Perhaps the characters remind you of someone you know. I think how you read a story can sometimes reflect the person you are and your experiences. This to me is the greatest joy of reading- finding yourself within the pages.

There came a knock on her door. A soft, hesitant knock. “Are you the Hearthholder?”

Her fingers halted their work, hands staying still above her worktable. Hearthholder. This was what people greeted her with, called her with. Hearthholder. This had become her official name. She clutched her fingers, then released them. Clutched. Released.

Inhale. Exhale.

Inhale. Exhale.

“Come in.”

THE HEARTHOLDER

The door opened and shut behind her. The Hearthholder took another deep breath before turning around to face whoever had entered.

The girl had her arms wrapped around herself. She looked to be in her late twenties, though she was probably younger than she looked. They all were, all of them forced to grow up too quickly that they all looked old beyond their years.

“How can I help you? What are you looking for?” asked the Hearthholder, even though she already knew. They had all only ever wanted one thing from her.

“I don’t want my heart. Can you take my heart away?”

“I do not take anyone’s hearts away from anyone.”

The girl peered at her from under her eyelashes. “But you are the Hearthholder.”

“I receive payment to hold people’s hearts, usually when their weights are too much to bear.” She took a deep breath, determined not to look at the drumming hearts behind her. They were so loud. Always so loud. She blocked them out. “What I do is simply hold your heart for a while, until you come back and reclaim it. I don’t take anyone’s hearts away. Your heart remains yours until the moment you die, a library of all that you have ever felt. If it’s still here when you die,” she gestured to the shelf beside her, where under the few red, pulsing hearts, a row of darkened hearts sat. “That’s what happens.”

The girl didn’t seem concerned with the row of dead hearts on her shelf. “I would like you to take my heart away.”

The Hearthholder fought hard not to look at the darkened, dead shapes on her shelf. *Why didn’t I ever throw them away?* She caught herself asking again. She wanted too, yet she couldn’t. Somehow, she couldn’t.

She looked at the girl. She wanted to ask the girl for her name, but the question got caught in her throat. But no. Better she remained nameless. Better they met as strangers and parted as strangers.

“Do your parents know you are here?” That was the question that sprang out of

her lips instead. “After all, the sun hasn’t even risen yet.”

A slight shake of her head. “No.”

“Do your parents know you plan to do this?”

“No.”

“Won’t they be angry if they find out?”

“She won’t find out,” said the girl, her gaze downcast. “She never does.”

“She? What about your father?”

Silence. The girl wrapped her arms even tighter around her chest and stared at the ground.

“Well, but, if your mother does find out, won’t she be angry?”

“She won’t find out.”

“But even if she won’t, wouldn’t it better to discuss this—”

“Even if she does, she won’t care. I am paying this with my own money. She only cares if I— She won’t care.”

“But you’re—“

“How much is it anyway, to have you take my heart away?”

The Hearthholder named her price. *I really should be charging more*, she thought, not for the first time. The enchantment to take one’s heart out was in no way easy, and to have her hold the heart...

The girl blinked. “It only costs that much.”

I really should raise the price, thought the Hearthholder, but she nodded.

The girl fished the money out of her purse, placed it on the worktable, and pushed it towards the Hearthholder. Her arms wrapped themselves around her once more, enfolding her.

The Hearthholder stared at the money on the table. Her hands stayed by her side, unmoving. She moved her gaze upwards until it was fixed on the girl again.

“Does anyone know you are here?”

“How is this relevant?”

“Is there?”

“I guess my neighbour might have seen me. But he hasn’t cared about me since his wife died.”

“Why?”

“His wife paid attention to me. She would sometimes scold me and often nagged at me. He would pay some attention to me whenever she did that.”

“I am guessing your neighbour’s late wife wasn’t a very charming person,” said the Hearthholder, if only just to keep the small talk going.

“No! She is— was really nice. Really nice. I liked displeasing her and disappointing her just so I could watch her scold me and I would intentionally forget things just so she could have something to nag at me about. I liked her a lot. She was really nice. She... really was really nice.”

The Hearthholder blinked and stared at the girl. There was something different in the girl’s eyes when she talked about her neighbour’s wife, but it faded as soon as it came. The girl stared back at her.

They stared at each other, in silence.

“Aren’t you going to take the money?” the girl asked.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” asked the Hearthholder. “There are other options to... make yourself feel better. Say... a potion to make you feel happy. I can brew that.”

“I don’t want anything like that. Believe me, I’ve tried. I’ve tried. I’ve tried everything.”

“But have you tried—”

“Can I just have my heart taken away? Please.”

The Hearthholder looked at the girl. She looked at the girl straight in the eyes. Those eyes looked old. The Hearthholder looked at them and looked at the heaviness in those eyes and she wondered what the girl had seen and what she had experienced and what she had felt. The world had robbed the girl of her innocence and happiness, making her bear too heavy a load that she had no way of discarding until now.

“Are you sure you want to do this? That this would make you feel better?”

The girl gave a single nod. “Please.”

The Hearthholder took a deep breath, and exhaled. She scooped up the money on the worktable, and without as much a glance at them, dumped them unceremoniously into a small box.

And so began the ritual she had done for exactly sixteen times. A drop of her own blood on the black tattooed eye on her forehead had the inked eye coming to life. It blinked, colours began blooming at the black of the pupil, spreading outwards and colouring the iris with a bluish purple. The inked eye moved, and fixed its gaze on the chest of the girl, at her heart, examining the swirling threads of energy extending out of the heart, connecting it to its owner and extending to the world outside.

THE HEARTHOLDER

Threads of energy from the Hearthholder reached for the girl's heart, and recoiled as it brushed with the energy coming out from the girl, as sadness and pain burned its way from the girl's heart to the Hearthholder's own.

She hated this part. She had always hated this part. But to cut the heart out meant tightening her hand on those threads and severing their bond between the heart and its owner. Her own heart bled, and she slammed her eyes shut to stop the tears from spilling as the girl's pain touched her and became her own. That only strengthened the Hearthholder's resolve.

The Hearthholder didn't have much of a tragic story of her own, just her own loneliness left undealt with which manifested into depression. She remembered those times when her heart was heavy and laced with pain. She remembered when her own suffering had drowned and suffocated her that she had been unable to do anything but lie on her bed for weeks. She had gotten better and healed herself, but the phantom pain lingered.

If her own pain could hurt and paralyze her so much, how hurt could those people be to be willing to part with happiness in order to escape their pain? How much suffering was the girl going through? Too much. The Hearthholder tightened her hold on the threads connecting to the heart to its owner and pulled.

The severing of bonds took two hours, and the inked eye turned black once again. Then it was merely reaching in and taking the heart out. Merely. Not merely. This might technically might be the simplest part of the enchantment, but to hold another person's hearts, their feelings and hopes and dreams and fears, and to bear that burden on yourself... The Hearthholder hesitated, but made herself reach for the heart.

The Hearthholder held the girl's heart in her hands. She kept her face from showing any emotions. Her face was calm, but her hands were shaking, so slightly that she only noticed because those hands belonged to her.

Inhale. Exhale.

"Thank you," said the girl. She now had her arms by her side.

THE HEARTHOLDER

Arms straining, hands trembling, the Hearthholder gingerly placed the heart down on the table. She wanted to cover herself, or hide, or in any way she could shield herself away from that thing on the table. “You can take it back any time you want. It is still yours. I am just holding it for you for the time being. It is still yours.”

“I am not coming back to collect it.”

That was hardly surprising. Still, the Hearthholder felt her heart sink. She wanted to run and hide and curl up on her bed. She closed her eyes and breathed. Inhale. Exhale. She opened her eyes again, her gaze avoiding the worktable.

The Hearthholder examined the girl. The heaviness in her eyes was gone, replaced by something else.

“Are you feeling better now?”

“Yes. I am feeling better now.”

“What do you feel?”

“I feel nothing. Not even fear.”

And then the girl turned and left.

She stared at the heart on her worktable, pulsing with life. Every beat a loud, deep drumming in her ears.

The heart was not big, about the size of her fist. But it was heavy. She expected it to be, but somehow, it always surprised her how heavy the hearts were. Always heavier than she thought they would be.

She reached forward, and held it in her trembling hands.

The emotions came to her, at first slowly, like water seeping through the cracks, a dull aching. Then they became a wave, rushing in all at once, suffocating, drowning. And then there were tears rushing out of her, pouring out of her eyes, running down her cheeks and she was crying so hard she collapsed onto the floor, the heart in her hands. The heart, why was the heart so heavy, how could such a small young person carry so heavy a heart, how could anyone stand it with so much weight inside of them? She didn't know why she was crying but she knew why she was crying. Why was the world so cruel and unfair and so brutal that such endless depression and despair and darkness could grow in a person's heart? She was so small and insignificant and helpless against all these pain and hurt and suffering in this world because she couldn't fight the world and she couldn't heal all the hurt she so badly wanted to heal and all she could do was to hold people's heart when the weight became too much for them to bear and they asked her to and they begged her to and how could she refuse and how the hell could she refuse but at what cost, at what cost?

She clutched the heart and tried to swallow it all in, tried to let it all rush over her. Tears were still running down her cheeks. She tried to breathe. She had to breathe.

Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale.

She didn't know how long she had been a sobbing mess crumbled on the floor. But once she had a grip of herself, she stood up, and placed the heart alongside the other hearts on her shelf.

Somebody had to feel all that, she told herself, staring at the heart, but not seeing.

She should have gotten used to all that, feeling all those emotions stored in those people's hearts. Their hearts might be sitting on her shelf, but the emotions stored in them, they never disappeared. They may become dormant, or stuffed and locked inside, or discarded in a corner, but had they never been felt thoroughly, they would still exist, haunting. They never disappeared, unless their owner died. But even then, she knew, it was not always the case.

And the hearts on her shelf were always unleashing emotions. So loud. Always so loud with whatever emotions they were giving off.

She should have gotten used to this, to all this, by now. She could have. But she couldn't. It didn't feel right to.

Something in the room was different. She could sense it. A weight in the air had changed.

Her eyes snapped up. She scanned the hearts on the shelf, eyes darting from one at the end of the row to the next to the next to the—

A needle pierced into her own heart, and her breath hitched. “No,” she gasped softly, half falling and half stumbling forward. “No, no, no...”

She grasped the darkening heart and held it close to her own heart, her two hands cradling it, as if she was holding a really small baby to her chest. Its beating, soft like the flutter of an old butterfly, became weaker and weaker. She closed her eyes, head bowing as if in prayer, “No, no.... please don't...”

But the beating gradually stopped. She looked down at her hands. Her palms and fingers were covered in ash-like grime, and the heart... The heart was pitch black.

She held the now dead heart to her chest once more, cradling it. Her feet swayed, and a whimper escaped her throat.

She had performed the enchantment for a lot of people, but she remembered each and every face that came to her, asking for her to hold their hearts. Though really, most were asking for her to take away their hearts. But she remembered every one of them. Each and every one of them. She didn't want to, but she did.

She stared at the darkened heart in her hands. That boy's eyes were in the prettiest blue she had ever seen, but they had a hopeless and scared look in them. He flinched when the wind slammed the door shut, and when she reached out for him to perform the enchantment. He apologized for everything: for leaving the door open, for coming when the sky was almost dark, for bothering her, for shrinking back when she made sudden movements, for apologizing so much...

She slowly placed the midnight black heart on the shelf. Not where it previ-

ously sat, but below it, where the dead hearts lie. She stared at it. Did he die with a necklace of rope around his neck? Or with pockets full of stones, head below water? Or with a knife, red lines on both wrists?

She would never know, would she? He was a stranger to her, a nameless face she had interacted for approximately two hours. Why would she care? Why did she care?

She looked at the newest heart on her shelf. The girl's parting words came to her: "I feel nothing. Not even fear." A sudden terror gripped her by the throat. Her legs felt weak and she fell and she gripped the shelf to prevent herself from falling. It was suddenly so hot. The air was growing thinner. There was an invisible hand squeezing her throat and she struggled to breathe and she couldn't breathe and she couldn't breathe.

Breathe. Inhale and exhale. Breathe, breathe, breathe. She had to breathe. She had to breathe.

A sudden realization hit her, accompanied by an image. And like a wave crashing down on her, it enveloped and swallowed her, drowning out everything else until all she could see was that image. It was the girl. The world lost its focus. And all she could see was that girl. Her eyes were wide opened but not seeing. She was sprayed on the ground with her arms and legs limped by her side, red sticking to her. But what jumped out to her most, but what her mind had painted with the most details was her eyes. Her eyes, wide and unseeing, just two empty orbs staring at her, two empty orbs, two empty orbs like those eyes, her eyes, that expression in her eyes when she turned and left, empty.

Empty.

Her grip on the shelf tightened, knuckles turning white, willing herself to just breathe, just breathe, just breathe.

She didn't know how much time had passed before she could breathe normally, before the world slowly came back to her. There were tears on her cheeks. She had been crying and there were still tears on her cheeks and she only just noticed that.

THE HEARTHOLDER

The girl's heart was right in front of her. Right in front of her eyes. It was staring at her. Looking right into her. It was drumming. A dull, quick sound. Drumming. Drumming. It kept drumming louder and louder and louder until it was beating her, until it became in her ears, screaming and screaming at her with a screech that somehow sounded to her like a battle cry, drumming and drumming with an intensity as if it was trying to hammer itself down onto the earth

No, no. She couldn't do this anymore. Now she saw she couldn't, couldn't do this anymore. With the heart on the shelf and the owner with an empty chest, she now saw that the girl was going to die. Without the weight of the heart anchoring her down onto the earth, what was going to stop her from drifting off into the unknown? Nothing. Nothing. Not even fear. She reached for the heart, fingers drawing it into her palms. She turned and began wrapping it with paper, but then changed her mind and began wrapping it in a piece of cloth instead. Wrapping until the whole heart was well protected.

She looked at the hearts still sitting on her shelf again. Oh, how she had doomed them all, she realized that now. She would return them all back to their owners, force them back into their owners' bodies if she could. But she couldn't do that now, could she? She saw their faces in her mind, one by one, all sixteen of them. They were all scattered to all over the world, the wind had blown them to goodness knew where. The only one she might be able to save now was the girl. With the girl she could at least try to remedy her mistake.

But what if it was too late? The heart in her hand pounded, as if in response. Cradling the heart as a mother would her baby, she flung the door open and rushed out.

The door remained open, swinging in the wind.

The Hearthholder held the girl's heart, her own heart thundering.

She looked around, but of course, the girl was long gone. There were only trees

around.

Where would the girl go? Back to the town, the road leading away, or out to the cliff extending out to the sky?

She looked down at the heart weighing down her hands. In her mind's eye she saw the girl, in the air, drifting away with the wind.

She would never know for sure where the girl had gone, but the Hearthholder tightened her hold on the heart and ran. Towards the cliff.

The girl was a white shadow amongst the darkness of the trees. Her long dress swirling as she moved with the wind. Floating, she was floating. Towards the cliff.

The Hearthholder picked up her speed. She was sprinting, at full speed, both hearts pounding. "Stop, stop!"

The girl gave no indication she heard. She kept gliding through the woods, slipping through the trees as if they were nothing but mist.

The Hearthholder ran, stumbling, branches whipping at her face as she neared the girl, as she finally reached her.

The girl didn't flinch, didn't even turn and look as a sudden hand shot out and grabbed her forearm. "Stop," breathed the Hearthholder.

The girl stopped walking. She kept staring straight ahead, her voice soft, like the breeze. "Let go of me."

The Hearthholder turned the girl around until they were facing each other. "Whatever you are about to do. Don't."

"Let go of me."

Fingers fumbling, the Hearthholder unwrapped the girl's heart until it laid bare,

pulsing. “You have to take it back.”

“No.”

There was nothing in the girl’s eyes. They were just two empty, hollow orbs.

“Please, please. You have to. I know it hurts, but— you have to. Please.”

“No. It was only weighing me down.”

“Please. You can’t just give up on it! Just— please, please.”

The girl turned away and began drifting towards the cliff again. The Hearthholder grabbed her before she could go too far. “Look, you can’t...” She drifted off. Despite the situation, she couldn’t say it. She had no idea how to say them. The words felt like a curse. She could almost believe that if she never said them it would never happen.

“You mean to say I can’t just go and try to kill myself,” the girl finished for her, her voice flat, emotionless. The Hearthholder’s breath hitched, startled despite herself, and with that, she momentarily loosened her hold on the girl’s arm.

The girl kept walking. “But why? Why not? There’s no meaning here, no reason to stay, and nothing to hold me back.”

The Hearthholder glanced at the heart in her hands. Her eyes grew wide and she scrambled to look for the words, not that she knew how or what to speak, but she had to tell the girl, she had to tell her... she had to tell her...

Not stopping her steady, unhurried feet, the girl began talking again, in that same soft voice, in that same monotone. “I tried to kill myself before. I climbed on to the highest tree I could find and I jumped. It didn’t work. I just broke my left arm. It hurt. I asked my mother for money to heal my arm after three days. She screamed at me and beat me with a rod. She said she wouldn’t let me waste her money to heal that arm. Helen, that neighbour’s wife I told you about, she scolded me, bandaged my arm and did her best to heal it. Then she died. I came to the cliff, and I tried to make myself jump. I wanted to jump but I couldn’t.

THE HEARTHOLDER

There was something holding me back. I hated it. Now there is nothing holding me back, there is not a reason why I shouldn't jump."

She said all that as if she was just talking about the weather.

The Hearthholder was rooted to the ground, frozen with muted horror. A horror that curled in her stomach like a worm, a horror that grew and grew until it reached her throat, leaving her nauseous with horror.

But the girl was drifting away, further and further away.

The Hearthholder took a deep breath and gulped down all the feelings welling up inside of her. This was not the time for her tears, nor the time for her to rage. For now, this was not about her, it was about the girl. For the girl, she had to get herself together. She had to move.

She forced her foot off the ground. One foot after another. And then she was running, she was sprinting. Branches crunching on the ground, wind whipping at her face, both hearts racing, stumbling and falling and then getting back on her feet again.

Her hand coiled around that of the girl, and she pulled the girl towards her, until she was wrapping the girl in her arms, in a tight embrace. "Don't you dare give up," she whispered in the girl's ears, and then she was easing the heart into the girl's empty chest, and before the girl herself realized what was happening, she was whispering enchantments.

Putting back the heart was a lot easier and quicker than taking it out. The heart belonged to the girl after all, it was only going back to its rightful place. With the last word of the spell, the heart sat back into the chest of the girl, bonded to the girl once again.

The girl pushed off and tried to run to the cliff once again. But she was no longer floating and drifting like a loose leaf in the wind. Her steps were heavier, slower. The Hearthholder tried to run after her, but with the exhaustion of casting two enchantments in a single afternoon and all the tears shed, all she could manage was a slow walk.

The girl arrived at the cliff. But instead of flinging herself into the valley below, she stopped. She stopped, trembling, taking in the height of the mountain she was standing on, the river snaking its way through the valley far, far down below, and the rocks which she would plunge onto if she jumped. The sharp, jagged rocks like a wild beast's teeth protruding upward towards her.

She took a step back, shaking. Shaking from fear. Heart pounding as she felt fear snaking up her spine, as waves of emotions washed all over her.

The Hearthholder finally walked up to the girl, who was cradling her left arm in her right, the thumb on her right hand caressing her left elbow.

“That was the arm you broke when you first tried to kill yourself, isn't it?” asked the Hearthholder. “The one your neighbour's wife Helen helped bandage and heal.”

The girl nodded. “I missed her,” she whispered. A tear began running down her face. “And I hate you.”

Because I condemned her to life, thought the Hearthholder, and life consists of pain and loneliness. But she only nodded. A sudden movement drew her attention to two birds flying above, singing a duet. Despite everything that had happened, but perhaps it was because of the depressing nature of everything that made her starve for beauty, the Hearthholder found herself watching the birds, listening to their birdsong. She couldn't remember the last time she had been out of her house, couldn't remember a time when she had been free from the pounding of hearts, free from other people's pain that had been dumped on her. Life wasn't just sadness and suffering.

The birds kept flying and singing, but the Hearthholder looked back at the girl, and after a moment's thought, opened her arms in silent invitation. She might not hold the girl's heart now, but still, the girl did not need to deal with her pain alone.

The girl hesitated, but eventually, she gave in.

They collapsed onto the ground. A sob finally broke out of the girl. And then

the girl was crying, tears streaming down her face. Carrying the weight of her own heart once more, every emotion, everything she had buried deep in her heart came spilling out, everything came spilling out into the world.

Fear, guilt, and uncertainty danced inside Althea. What should she do now? How should she help the girl without making it worse for her? What if she only hurt the girl even more? After all, she almost led to the girl's suicide. But she knew she couldn't leave the girl alone, not after all they had gone through. Perhaps they could find comfort in each other and face their suffering together.

"You can talk to me, you know that? You can talk to me about anything. Anytime you want. If you want to."

The girl didn't answer, didn't look up. She just pressed her head into the chest of that person that had saved and doomed her, weeping, vaguely feeling the warmth of the arms wrapped around her.

The Heartholder held the girl, as the stars dimmed, one by one; as the darkness slowly gave way to light, dawn creeping at the edges of night.

What happens now? The person whom they called the Heartholder wondered. Obviously, she couldn't keep "helping" people by holding their hearts. Perhaps the first thing she should do was to find every one of the people who had come through her door, and give them back their hearts. Perhaps then she shouldn't be called the Heartholder anymore, but who was she then?

"I am Althea," she whispered, then louder again to the girl. She was Althea, a girl whose good intentions went wrong, a girl who wanted to help people but did not know how, a girl who had tried to help people's emotional problems in a business-like manner: a two-hour enchantment, an exchange, then an emotionless person out of the door. But perhaps people's suffering could not be dealt with in a business-like manner. Althea held the girl tighter.

The girl kept on weeping, the sound loud in Althea's ears. But that was not the only sound surrounding them. The birds were singing, the wind was dancing in between the trees, leaving the leaves cackling in its wake.

THE HEARTHOLDER

Slowly the sobbing quieted, though there were still tears spilling out of the girl's eyes. The girl had her eyes closed, her head resting on Althea's chest. Perhaps she was listening to the birds singing as well.

"Senara. My name is Senara," the girl whispered. Althea held her tighter in response.

With heavy hearts beating and aching, Althea and Senara sat on the ground, holding onto each other as the sun rose behind them and a new day began.



"You'll never know how glad I am to be kidnapped! So, please don't send me back too early."

THE KIDNAPPER

Ray Huang

Before coming to Hong Kong, I lived in Taiwan, where I observed, and was upset by some profound socio-economic and educational issues; the helplessness I felt when facing these problems drove me to start a new life in Hong Kong, and after studying in Hong Kong for two years, I have never regretted coming to Hong Kong. Nevertheless, as I fall in love with Hong Kong, I also realise that the socio-economic issues are much more tricky in Hong Kong, and students from kindergarten to university in this city are surprisingly stressful.

As a student majoring in Law, I hope to alleviate negative impacts caused by these social issues with my knowledge, and as an English minor student, I wish to draw the world's attention to issues in society through writing. Although it is never easy to change the status quo, I am no longer helpless, for I know I can always invite people to care for victims of social problems through writing. "The Kidnapper" is a short story involving issues about elite education and economic inequality; who do you think in this story is the real kidnapper?

“Listen to me,” the man says. “I’m so sorry about this.”

The little boy replies, “This place is so shabby, and I’m hungry. What are we gonna have for dinner?”

“Umm...probably cup noodles,” the man scratches his head.

Should I really offer this little boy such luxurious food? That’s for celebration! The last time I ate cup noodles was four months ago, when I found a part-time job as a street cleaner.

“Cup noodles?” The boy asks with his eyes wide open. “I love cup noodles, but my parents hate them. They say cup noodles can turn me into a mummy.”

The man gives a wry smile, “Well...After all, they’re doctors.”

He loves cup noodles! Well then, why not show my apology by offering him cup noodles?

“Anyway, that’s great! Which flavour do you want?” He asks as he moves his body across the room filled up with rubbish, lunch boxes and smelly clothes. “Uhm... Sorry. Forget about that question, there’s only one flavour left,” the man apologises.

He then pours some hot water into two cup noodles, serving one to the little boy. They sit down face to face, eating cup noodles.

“You know my parents?”

“Yeah, kind of. At least I know they’re rich, I saw a Bentley in your garage.”

“Are you really a kidnapper?”

“Of course I am! You’re being kidnapped, you know what’s kidnapping?”

“I heard of it, but aren’t you afraid of getting arrested by the police?” the boy seems worried.

“Probably not,” the man sighs. “Life in a prison can be much better. I lost my job in a tech company when the factory moved overseas, and very soon I spent all my money, then I moved to this bloody shabby place. I’m forty and I can barely find a full-time job, nor does my physical condition allow me to labour too much... Over the past ten years, I’ve lived on part-time jobs. I could serve as a waiter or a dishwasher in restaurants when I was thirty, but I was dismissed before thirty-five; the managers explained to me that they’ve got younger part-time workers. Almost all of my applications were rejected, with the same reason that I was too old and I had no relevant experience... Thus, I drifted along the streets, picking

up, sorting, and selling rubbish. Sometimes, there were short-term street cleaner vacancies offered by the government, but the vacancies were so competitive that I only succeeded once. I wandered on the streets from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m. every day regardless of the weather, just to earn a thousand Hong Kong dollars per month, and as the living expenses got higher, from time to time I really could not afford a meal per day, I was forced to pick up the abandoned ingredients at the traditional market or even beg for money from pedestrians.”

“And one afternoon,” the man continues. “I saw a Bentley picking you up in front of the school, I... I was so jealous! Why can some people in the world live such a different life? I did nothing wrong; I’m a victim of the factory relocation, but why can another forty-year-old man lead such a successful life with a wonderful family? And you know what? Your dad is my high school classmate! We share such similar backgrounds, but we end up living such different lives! That’s not fair! I recalled his arrogant, disgusting smile of satisfaction every time the landlord was knocking my door, pressing for my rent. When I knelt down to collect the abandoned vegetables, fruits at the traditional market, or begged for change from pedestrians at the subway... I felt humiliated, and I was desperate... so...”

The man then takes a deep breath, trying to calm himself down. “Why am I telling you all these, you lucky child will never understand. But really, I am so sorry for involving you... Please wait for a little more while. After your dad pays me the ransom, I will drive you back to your school, I promise.”

“May I ask you a favour?” The little boy asks.

“Sure!” The man turns his face to the boy and nods.

“Please don’t send me back until tomorrow morning!” The boy pleads.

“Why?” The man says, surprised. “You said this is a shabby place... Don’t you miss home?”

“I don’t want to attend my math tutorial tonight...and my home is just like a prison,” the boy looks down and says in a low voice. “My parents are the real kidnappers, not you; you are my saver! I’m never happy at home. I receive nothing but books on birthdays and Christmases; I am forbidden to go out and play football with my friends; I am forced to study difficult math and science problems because I am supposed to attend medical school... Everything, everything is arranged by my parents! I have never been asked to make a choice, and you asked me to choose a flavour of the cup noodles!”

“Medical school? You just started primary school!” The man laughs, to his amazement. “But at least they can buy you what you want and take you to any restaurant you like, right? Don’t you think you are lucky enough?”

“Excuse me, did you say I am lucky?” The boy retorts. “They don’t even know what I want and which restaurant I like; I have been telling them that I wish to go to Disneyland, but they keep taking me to all sorts of boring museums and forcing me to memorise the information on the label of everything I see. Do you know what’s their reply when I ask them to take me to a restaurant? It’s always the same; they would say, ‘if you rank first in the next examination.’ Do you still think that I am a lucky boy?”

“I’ve been praying for a miracle, wishing that one day someone would help me escape from my parents; it came true today! You’ll never know how glad I am to be kidnapped!” The boy exclaims. “So, please don’t send me back too early.”

The man laughs again, much louder this time, as if he realises something. He then picks up the phone, patting the little boy on his head.

“I got a plan,” the man grins.

“I’m the kidnapper. Listen, I’m gonna modify my requests,” the man speaks to

THE KIDNAPPER

the phone. “Treat your son better! First, let him play out; second, cancel all those insane tutorials and pay attention to what he really wants, and third, never ask him to become a doctor! Remember? He’s really a lovely kid.”



"It's nice, Daddy," Abby said, "Only a little sour."

THE PRICE OF SALMON

Emily Hedvig Olsson

Familial love is powerful and haunting. It possesses the properties to inundate a person with strength but also simultaneously possesses the torrential capacity of ripping a person apart. Family is a gift, something to honor and treasure with all of one's heart, but familial bonds are not always easy or comfortable. They are not solely the gentle, calming waves of a sea at peace. Agitation can fester beneath the calm surface and brew warring waves capable of engulfing ships to the depths of the sea. The storm within this story slowly gathers strength from passive-aggressive behaviors to give rise to an explosive and dysfunctional family dinner. It is a tale of love and pain; of a father whose world is his family but which is also his greatest burden. The Price of Salmon is a battleground cradled in the arms of familial love, where the shields of familial affection, pride, and responsibility war with the swords of personal insecurity, stress, and misunderstanding. This is a tale echoing the love I feel and the pain I carry, an exaggerated narration of a heartfelt and intimate account of how money can tear a family apart.

When he saw the price of salmon had dropped from ninety to twenty-five dollars apiece, Horace bought what their freezer could handle. After his retirement, with his modest pension, Horace frequented the fish markets and learned to wait for special offers. All this, for his son, Victor, who loved seafood. And when Horace found out that Victor had called his mother that afternoon to say he *will be back for dinner and might stay for the weekend but it depends, so don't buy that much*, Horace went and bought what he believed his son needed instead.

“Ai,” his wife sighed and paused her beading when Horace came home, “I said a few pieces would do. You know your son hates it when you overbuy on his behalf.”

Agatha looked at her husband from the dining table where she sat. She stared pointedly at his refusal to meet her eyes as he took off his shoes, went into the

kitchen with the shopping bags, and busied himself with stacking the pieces of salmon into the freezer. As she gazed into their tiny kitchen, her eyes lingered on the shopping bags which had now been emptied of the salmon.

“Horace?” she said.

“We could finish the salmon next week if he doesn’t stay the whole weekend, alright?” he replied, with his back towards her.

“Just don’t mention it if Victor doesn’t ask,” Agatha said and she went back to her beading, hoping to finish a sellable bracelet by that night.

“Abby in her room?” Horace asked after finishing up with his stacking.

Agatha nodded.

“Don’t touch the salmon, ok? Just let me know which ferry Victor texts you he’s on so I’ll know when to cook the salmon.”

At this, his wife gave another small nod but otherwise kept her eyes locked on her beads. Her hands wove one plastic colored bead after another, over and over, into an unending plastic chain divided in the middle with a heart-shaped pendant. Horace went to his daughter’s room.

Horace loved his daughter’s room. He had painted it pink many years ago. The color was advertised as to help soften the atmosphere in people’s homes.

“Abby, honey,” Horace said as he entered his daughter’s room.

Abby was stuck facing her computer, typing away at her desk.

“Yea, Dad?”

“How are you doing? How was school?”

“It’s ok,” said Abby, typing away in a rhythmic pattern.

“Working on school work?” Horace asked. “You need any help?”

“No, it’s ok. Thanks, Dad.”

“Ok, honey. Just let me know.”

There was a pause before Horace spoke again, “Your brother’s coming back home tonight.”

“Hmm? Yea, I know he texted me.”

Horace stared at his daughter for a while. His daughter who was typing away on her computer and facing away from him. He stared at the pink walls he had hand-painted himself ten years ago. He wondered about the color he would repaint his daughter’s room now if he could afford it. Black, perhaps. He stared at her hunched shoulders. No, perhaps, a blue.

Horace walked up to Abby and kissed her on the head, “I love you, honey.” As he lifted his head, he saw her computer screen had the same sentence, “silence speaks the truth”, typed over and over and over again.

Horace laid his hand gently on her head and walked away from her typing.

Horace let out a breath and went to replace the bedding in his son’s room. He washed all the beddings a week ago when his daughter came back from her first term in university. He had sealed his son’s bedding away in preparation for when he chose to visit. Thinking about this, Horace realized Victor had been gone longer than he wanted to remember, longer than before. Discomforted by this thought, he refocused on doing the housework. After Horace laid out the blankets, he checked the clock and realized it was nearing five. He collected the fresh load of washing they did now only once a week. He didn’t trust his wife to do the laundry as she wouldn’t make sure each load was worth it, that each load had accumulated enough of what was truly necessary and truly dirty to warrant the load. And each loading was important now, each shopping trip as well, as they all became a slow, unending drain on what was left of his limited retirement. Draining and draining away. After handling the washing, he went out into the dining room and placed a newly washed table cloth on the table. His wife was prepar-

ing the vegetables for dinner in the kitchen.

“Victor said he’s on the five o’clock ferry to Lamma,” she said.

“Ok,” he replied.

Horace went about taking four pieces of salmon out. He weighed them in his hands and pondered about how little a hundred dollars’ worth of salmon can weigh and yet how much at the same time. He shifted the salmon between his hands for a while and then shook himself out of it. He started his preparation for the salmon. Horace liked cooking the salmon in a simple way. To bake it gently in the oven for twenty minutes and then sprinkle it lightly with salt and with a light squeeze of lemon. If his wife had her way, it would be more elaborate and she would waste it. Horace liked his salmon clean.

“Want me to turn on the oven?” asked Agatha, reaching towards it.

“Don’t touch it. I said I’ll do it,” replied Horace, grasping Agatha’s extended wrist and flinging it away.

Without a word, Agatha massaged her wrist and then resumed chopping the vegetables, quieter than before.

As they worked silently, Horace’s radio was on and he listened to the evening’s news.

When the salmon was in the oven and the vegetables started to boil on the stove, they heard the door open and Victor came in.

“Brother!” Abby said, moving out of her room to embrace her brother before he could take off his shoes.

Victor laughed and hugged her tightly. “You ok?” he said with a smile.

“Yea,” she replied, holding onto his side.

Agatha and Horace stood, waiting their turn, at the side. Both wore a wide smile.

“Hi, son,” Horace said, clapping him on the shoulder. “Glad you’re home.”

“It’s good to be home.”

“You look buff. Gym’s going well?” Horace asked, taking in the growth of his son. In the way he held himself taller and stronger. Muscles clear and etched, resilient and proud, on every plane of his body. Horace felt a burst of pride, and clasped Victor on the shoulder again, “Glad you’re home, my son.”

Victor smiled at him again. Agatha touched his face and said, “Go clean up. Dinner’s ready in ten.”

Soon after Victor cleaned up, he and Abby helped set the table with four sets of cutlery and plates on the newly washed table cloth. Abby moved her mother’s bracelet aside to place a water glass for her.

“You doing ok with everything, A?”

“Better now.”

Horace smiled at them and lifted the salmon from the oven onto the dining table.

“Dinner is served. Bon appetite.”

Victor laughed and said, “Thanks, Dad. The salmon looks great.”

“Bought it just for you,” Horace said as they sat down at the table.

Agatha came out with the vegetables. It was heavy and hot. She was using a new make-shift protector pad that Horace made himself instead of buying a new one, and it wasn’t able to hold the plate of vegetables firmly. While the others were conversing, she tried to place the vegetables on the table but it slipped from the make-shift protector pad and knocked over her cup of water on the table. Agatha gave a shout as the water spilled over the table cloth and onto her bead bracelet.

“Oh no,” Agatha said, quickly grasping her bracelet and drying it with a towel

she had over her shoulder.

“No. No. No. No. No.” Horace said. Sharp and firm under his breath. He yanked the towel that Agatha was using to dry her bracelet and threw it onto the floor.

“I just washed this,” Horace said.

“Mom, you ok?” Victor went and grasped his mother’s arm, “Was it too hot? Did it hurt you?”

“No, I’m ok.”

Abby grabbed some tissue and began dotting her mother’s bracelet, “It’s ok, Mum.”

Horace cleaned up the water on the floor and placed a towel under the table cloth. “I just washed these. Now I’ll have to wash them again,” he said to Agatha, pointing a finger in her face.

“It’s just water. But I can do the washing,” Agatha replied, sitting down at the dining table, and looked at the food. “Let’s just eat. Ok, kids, let’s start eating.”

“Do the washing? Another load of washing? Are you paying for it?” asked Horace.

“Dad, it’s just laundry,” said Victor.

“It’s not just laundry. It’s laundry I did for us. Why do you have to ruin that, Agatha?”

“Horace, enough, please,” said Agatha. “It’s a tablecloth. It will dry. Let’s just eat. The salmon’s getting cold.”

“I know the salmon’s getting cold. And whose fault is that? Who’s ruining things?”

“It’s not ruined, Horace. Can we please just have a nice dinner together?” asked Agatha.

“I wanted us to have a nice dinner. I looked forward to having one,” Horace said. “Why, Agatha, why do you have to keep doing this? You think we can waste things?”

“Dad, It’s just water on a table cloth. And the food’s fine. Why are we arguing about this?” Victor said. “Can you just sit down and eat?”

“Don’t tell me what to do, Victor,” Horace said. “I have to do everything here. I do everything.”

“Because you never let anyone help you,” said Agatha.

“How can I? When you’ll just ruin it?” Horace responded. “You think I worked hard for twenty-five years just so you can waste my money and effort and love by sabotaging the things I do for this family?”

“For goodness sakes, Horace, now’s not the time. It’s water on a tablecloth. It. Will. Dry. I didn’t ruin anything. Don’t do this in front of our children,” said Agatha.

“Don’t you bring them into this,” said Horace. “Don’t you turn them against me.”

“You’ll do that yourself,” said Agatha.

As Horace stared into Agatha’s black eyes, he felt the sudden but familiar surging of an animalistic anger. Abby, from her seat at the dining table, recognized her father’s distorted face, flushing with a pulsing red fade.

“The salmon’s nice, Daddy,” Abby said. “Let’s eat it.”

“I know it’s nice. I bought it because it’s nice,” said Horace, “but do I get to enjoy it? To enjoy a peaceful meal? Or the slightest sliver of appreciation?”

“Dad,” Victor said, standing up from his seat, trying to intercede.

“No, no, I don’t. Do I? I give everything. And get nothing in return. No, that’s not right, I do get something. I get soiled tablecloths. I get silence. I get stony

faces,” Horace continued.

“You know why you get that, Dad?” asked Victor. “Do you have any idea why we’re like this now?”

“You’re ashamed of me. All of you,” said Horace.

“What? No, Dad,” said Victor.

“All these years. After I’ve been let go. You’ve been ashamed of me,” said Horace.

“No, Daddy,” said Abby.

“That’s never been the reason,” said Victor.

Ignoring his children’s interjections, Horace stared at his silent wife, “But you love your mother. But what has she done? Ruining everything. Spending everything while I was working. And now what do I have left? Her disgusting, tacky bracelets? Have you seen them, Victor?” Horace laughed.

Victor’s face flushed, “Don’t speak about my mother that way.”

But Horace continued on.

“At least I have the salmon,” Horace said. “At least your mother didn’t spill the water on the salmon. At least you guys didn’t completely ruin that.”

Agatha pushed away from her seat at the table, “You son of a bitch. No one’s ruining your salmon. We have plenty of salmon. You bought a whole fridge’s worth of salmon.”

“What?” asked Victor. “Dad?”

“I bought it for us to eat, not for you to try to ruin,” Horace shouted, standing up to face her too. “It’s all cold now because of you.”

“Dad, why did you do that?” asked Victor.

“Do what?”

“Buy so much fucking fish?”

“You ungrateful brat,” Horace whispered.

“Ungrateful? Dad, you want me to be grateful over you making us feel like shit because you stressed yourself out?”

“What are yo-?”

“You bought a shit ton of fish. That we don’t need. And now you’re yelling at my mother for being wasteful over spilling water on a tablecloth?”

“I bought the fish for you.”

“No, Dad, you bought the fish for you. Because you’re ashamed. Because you can’t handle the fact you lost your job.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Horace, walking towards Victor.

“Just stop, man. You have got to stop this,” Victor said, enunciating each word, and shifted to place himself in front of his mother and sister.

Horace paused and took stock of the situation. At his wife, standing, glossy-eyed. At his daughter, face down, sitting at the dining table, picking at her salmon. *Man, the salmon*, Horace thought. Growing colder and colder on the table. But lastly, he looked at his son. Shoulders back and head straight. Standing in front of them and against him.

“You’re so ungrateful,” Horace whispered again. “All of you. I do everything for you. Can’t you see that? Don’t you care?”

“We care, Dad,” Victor said, stretching his hand towards him, “but you’ve got to stop.”

Horace slapped Victor's hand away. "Stop what?" he said loudly. "Stop ripping out my heart, my life, my money for this family?"

Horace looked down at his plate of cold salmon, "Why do I keep doing this for you?" And as he lifted his head, Horace saw Victor's face grew saddened and disappointed. And ashamed.

With a flush of anger, Horace swiped his plate of salmon off the table and it went crashing into the wall. The glass plate shattered and the salmon pieces laid severed across the table, wall, and floor.

Agatha, who stood next to the wall, gave out a sharp yell. She held up her hand to her right eye and cried out again.

"Mum?" Victor and Abby whispered.

"It's alright. I think it's just a small piece," Agatha said and went to the washroom.

"What is the matter with you?" Victor shouted at Horace.

Horace stared after his wife, at her retreating, silent figure.

"Will you, fucking, stop?" Victor screamed with tears in his eyes. "What is the matter with you?" he said again as he pushed against his father.

Horace slammed Victor up against the wall, "Don't you raise your voice at me, boy," Horace said, staring into his face.

Victor's face cracked. In that instant, Horace saw a little boy behind that strong man façade and he stilled. "You're not the man I came back for," Victor said, shoving Horace's arms off of him. He moved to go after his mother but turned and said, "I don't know why I came back. I don't know why I had hoped for something different at all. You're not the same man you were before."

Horace stared after Victor's retreating body. He watched as his proud son hunched in on himself and gave a shuddering breath. But then his back straightened and he didn't turn back.

THE PRICE OF SALMON

Horace turned and gazed at the disaster that was their dining table. His plate of salmon had flown all over, the table cloth was ruffled, wet, and upturned at some places. And it was only his daughter who remained sitting at the dining table. Red eyed with wet cheeks. Stabbing her salmon gently with her fork. Over and over.

After a while, Horace asked, “Is the salmon nice, honey?”

“It’s nice, Daddy,” Abby said, “Only a little sour.”

And Horace stretched his quivering lips into a smile and sat to eat his cold salmon.



We accepted denial as our master. My hands were tied and her fate was sealed.

THE WHITE PINE DOOR

William Sekkingstad

I'm William, I come from a place where it rains all the time. In the winters, the sun sets at 4 pm. During the summers it hardly sets at all. We're happy there, according to the World Health Organization. The happiest people in the world some years they say. Not the first time they've given us reason for distrust. Bunch of liars.

I find myself being happy a lot, especially in this city. My story might be sad, but that's not out of the ordinary. I only write happy stuff when I'm sad. I hope you enjoy what I've written, the text became important to me as I wrote it. With any luck it might become important to you as well.

Standing by the white pine door, waiting for something. Not knowing exactly what, but something. On the other side there's the woman I love. She's resting from yesterday's treatment, number four of twelve. The first one had made her nauseous, the second and third sent her to bed for the day and this one had wrecked her completely. She won't be leaving the hospital after the next. They told us it would be bad, worse than anything before, they said. They didn't know how right they were. The tumour is lodged between her Cerebrum and Cerebellum, connecting them both in a way that should never be. They tried surgery, twice. The only effects were tears over ugly scars. They tried targeted chemotherapy using a proteasome inhibitor, Bortezomib. She grew resistant, leading the tumour to grow aggressively. There were tears, from all of us, not for the first time and not for the last time.

Then they told us that she had a year, at best. It was time to be with family and

maintain some quality of life. She was angry then, told them that they should be honest and call it quality of death. Life was for living, not dying. I was angry along with her, cursing the doctors for giving up. But my rage was not for myself; I gave up when I saw the x-rays. My father went the same way. It's not a good way. No, my anger was, and is, for her. What else could I do, tell her to die? Tell her that it was time to take the easy way out? Maybe it's what I should have done, I still can't figure out if I was brave or a coward. Anyway, it doesn't matter, my resignation would be the biggest nail in a coffin already built. So, when they brought up their Hail Mary, a chemotherapy standing at ninety percent mortality, we accepted denial as our master. My hands were tied and her fate was sealed.

My hand is on the handle, brass metal warm in my hand. There's a vibration in my pocket, the third one? Fourth? I should get back to work. They've fired three people this month, and it's not like my absence isn't felt. Still, my boss is lenient with me. Much more than he's willing to admit, two of the three fired had seniority over me. Whenever I ask to go, he looks at me in that way he has and tells me to come back when I can. "Just a quick trip to the doctor for a check-up and some test-results today" I told him, smiling. I should call him, let him know. ... I won't.

As from afar, I see my fingers start moving to open the door, though I haven't told them to. Just as the handle shifts ever so slightly downwards a warm drop falls off the tip of my nose, hitting my hand. The fingers stop, frozen in place by that one tear. The first of many. Silently they fall; on my hand, the floor, one drips on my shoe, giving the spot a small sheen. I was looking at my shoes after the doctor told me. Two times now, I have been in that office looking at my shoes with ringing ears and a quickly disappearing world. Same doctor, same news, same tumour, same position, same likelihood of survival. Everything the same, just different person, and entirely the wrong one.

White fills my vision, my head is leaning on the door, eyes open, hand still on the warm handle. The tears have stopped, I think. That must mean it's time to enter. I fill my lungs and prepare for words that can't possibly be prepared for. Words that should never be put together in one sentence. Hey dear, I know that you're fighting both agony and mortal anxiety right now, but I have to tell you that the cancer that is slowly killing you is also killing our daughter. Oh, and at a slightly accelerated rate due to her young age so you just might live long enough to see her die.

That's how my father told me, while stopped at a red light on our way to basketball practice. "Hey so you know I went to the doctor last week, right? Turns out I got cancer and won't be around for much longer. Just wanted to let you know". He wouldn't look me in the eyes for weeks after that, maybe he couldn't. He'd given up on life, on his family. At the funeral my grandmother confessed that she had forced him to tell me. He had wanted to just get sick and die, and leave my mother to deal with the aftermath.

Since my wife's diagnosis I've come to understand him better. Compared to some conversations, death and shame are favourable alternatives. But you still have them, you have to, right? Looking into my daughter's eyes earlier, I told her what I will never forgive myself for having to say. Things I never forgave him for trying to hide.

At the doctor's she was brave, but she doesn't really understand what's going on. Just that she is sick like her mother and we will try to make her feel better. "Feel" being a keyword here. Her mother, a physically strong woman in her prime, had a whopping ten percent chance. A five-year-old asthmatic body would be torn apart by the chemo. The little girl that has been my world since she was a second old is downstairs crying in her room, angry that she can't get the medicine and be strong like mommy. All the hopeful lies we told her seem so foolish now. She thinks I hate her and want her to die. I think I want to die.

My hand finally finds its courage and opens the door. I see the woman I love, she's in our bed, bucket by her side. On her face is that smile she always has when she's asleep. It makes me smile too. Dying can wait, I'm still her husband, I'm still a father. I wipe away the moisture on my face and gently nudge her awake. We share a kiss and a silent moment. I want to remember it, this last moment before I tear the last shreds of her heart apart.

Her dark eyes, full of love and kindness in spite of it all, asks me a question. I say nothing, her lips, trembling slightly, repeat the question. "What did the doctor say?"

Fuck.

I can't do this.

Any shame is better than this.

It's only a year, I can manage a year.

Then I can die.

“Lisa will be fine. The migraines are because of her asthma and will pass over time, he said.”

This woman that I love, that loves me and does not know of my lie, smiles at me and closes her eyes, going back to sleep, peaceful now. I hope she dies first.

POETRY SECTION

MOMENTS/ MOVEMENTS

Describing the picture through its pixels



Holding a Candle

By Emily H. Olsson

Holding a candle
in a rhodium-plated
sterling silver candelabra,
I exhale, and watch,
as the grey wisps tremble,
muted, like phantoms
holding their last breath,
gasping,
and grasping on-
to the dancing candlelight
of a lone silk ballerina,
against a charcoal stage,
simmering bright as the sun dawns
on a brighter day,
and she lacerates my flesh
with her kiss, as I hold my thumb
over her destructive paws
and she feasts upon my burnt
crisp, as I hold her along my palms,
she lingers by, flickering,
and skirting the edges of my eye, as
I hold her.



Seasons

By Linus Lee

The first leaf falls.
The nip in the air marks a new beginning.
New encounters, familiar faces.
None of them really missed it—the brown-covered ground and
the never-changing green rectangle they know
they're stuck with for two more seasons.

Then the leaves turn white.
The chilling winds wrap scarfs round their necks and mufflers on their ears.
Heart-melting smiles, blushing red cheeks under the mistletoe.
They probably loved it—layers of white on the tree branches and
myriad-colored decorations on the street lamps
that are only there for a month.

Unknowingly, sprouts lift their heads.
The warm breezes breathe life unto the land and their spirits.
The refreshed moods and energetic expressions.
They just love it—the times when they sit on red-white checkers on the green pastures,
temporarily forgetting about the ordeals
that will come as the season ends.

It isn't long before the flowers bloom with extravagance.
The blistering heat draws lines of sweat down their necks and backs.
The heartfelt laughter of joy as they play with one another in the sea.
It's their favorite time of the year—the time when they can enjoy themselves on the
warm sands and cool waters thoroughly without burden,
before the first leaf falls again.

And how many more times will these seasons remain beautiful and same,
until the old clockmaker comes for them?



Sleep to See My Wish (After Langston Hughes)

By Chong Yun Fong

What happens if I meet a beautiful dream?

Does it tinkle

Like the wind chimes in a farm?

Or lick at me like a lovely puppy—

And then run away?

Does it fade like melting ice cream?

Or get sticky and sugary all over—

Like an expired sweet?

Maybe it will drag me down

Like a heavy stone

Or could it bring me a day closer to being true?



Caffeine Night

By Suzanna Lam

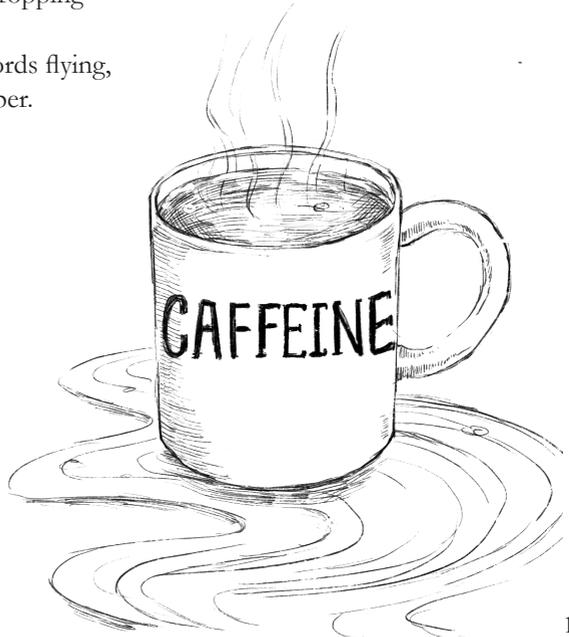
Coffee morning,
Milk tea noon,
Black tea evening,
I sit in my room.

Ebony stains,
Sepia patterns—
Splatters wonders
across the milky terrain.

Earthy aroma floating
through the musty room,
guiding my hands through buttery
valley of words,
of creamy phrases.

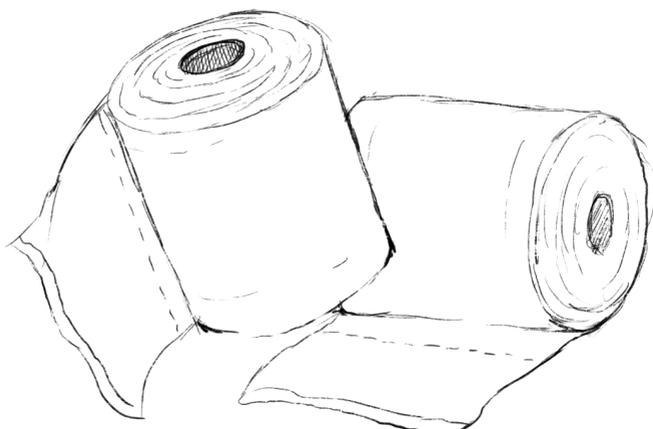
Diving into the stream —
Dripping steams. Tap. Tap. Dropping
glucose through my system.
Wide eyed, gears spinning, words flying,
Hitting the last line of the paper.

My mug drained,
I sit back.
Heart contented
dropping me into deep sleep.



THOUGHTS IN THE TIME OF CORONA

Trying to capture what no one wants to see



Rolls of Greed

By Evelyn Ma

The desert plains stood
most barren and bleak;
amidst the people mountain
and the people sea.

You can hear it in their cries.
You can see it in their eyes.
But no voice of reason
can make this fear die.

Funny thing is fear;
for it spreads— it itches
us to move
against the tides.

With the sharpest knives
and the even sharper greed,
t'was rolls worth raiding
as the sunlight bleeds.

It isn't rolls of money
like you might believe;
but rolls of paper,
Yes—the one you use when you pee.



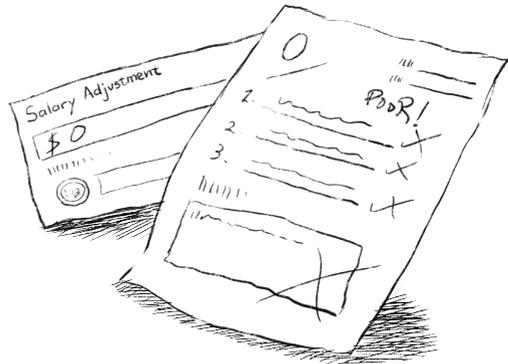
Zero

By Karen Liu

In a classroom teeming with
Students lining up nervously to get their exam papers
Holding the paper in their hands, sweating
Anxiously and tensely muttering
“Please don’t be zero”

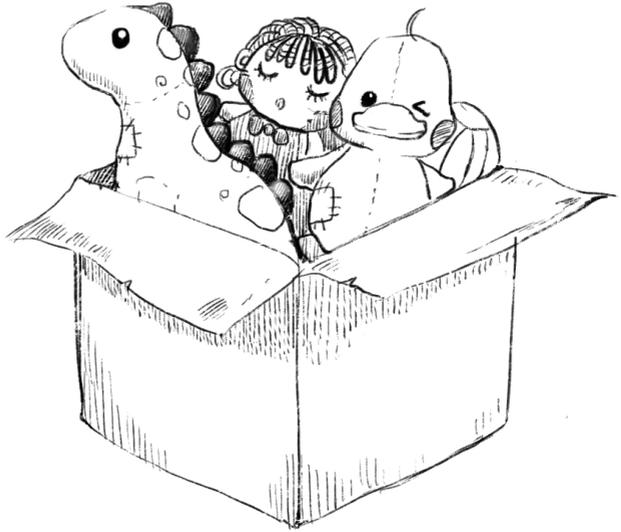
In an office at the end of the year
Officers sitting on their chairs, still
Holding their salary adjustment letters
Worriedly and nervously expecting
“Please don’t be zero”

In all the houses around the world
People staring at the news report
Holding hands of one another
Sincerely and genuinely praying
“Please be zero”



YOUTH AND YEARNING

Blurring the line between the two



I'd Go Back

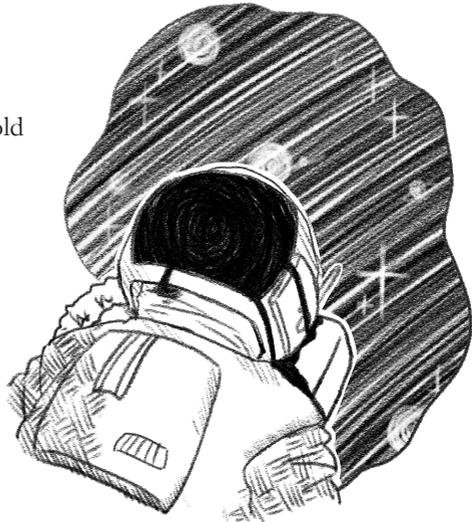
By Chan Sze Wan

If I could run
I'd run to the other planet
I'd put your helmet over my head
and forget it all

If I could go back
Back into the past
I'd hug myself before every teardrop
and forget it all

I'd go back to the beach
when he stole my soul
when I was begging him not to lose control
back to the beach
standing right beside him
and defending myself from that sadness
which now depresses me

So I keep walking till now
chasing after every dawn
trying to explain
every word I have said
but no matter how the story is told
nobody knows



In Mrs Beaker's Class

(after "In Mrs Tilscher's Class" by Carol Ann Duffy)

By *Stephanie Ho*

The sharp, straight lines of an isosceles
 Were like the concrete confines of your shoebox home,
 So you filled your mind with fairies. Unicorns. Farms.
 Not Mrs. Beaker's tedious geometry.

It was that for an hour, then a shove in the playground
 And your packed lunch thrown into the trash.
 A window bolted tight in the classroom.
 The pulse of the clock and a paper in a foreign language.

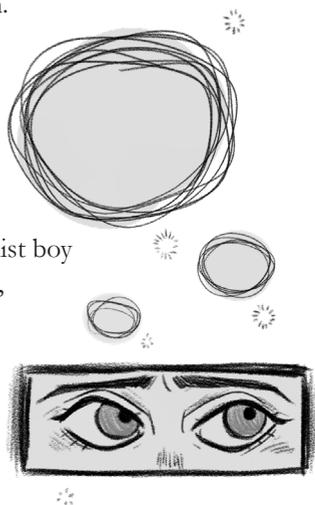
This was worse than home. Everyone's condescending looks.
 The classroom stank of sweaty stale air like a drama stage.
 Stage fright. Forgot all your lines. Bunny came into your mind,
 A marker pressing against paper with the right answer.

Mrs. Beaker hated you. Some mornings, you stood
 Outside the classroom, hands on head, for things you didn't do.
 The whirring of a pencil in the machine, hastily sharpened.
 A high-pitched recorder wailing from the music room.

Over the Easter term, the chicks never flew.
 Wings clipped, they stayed in their cage.
 Flapping desperately and crashing to the floor,
 Followed by a line of kids sat in the exam hall

Followed by another line in the form below. A Buddhist boy
 Said you could be reborn as a cow. You smiled at him,
 And stopped going to church with your parents.

That July, the air was hot, humid, suffocating.
 Grades were read aloud.
 You ran back home, wishing to be grown,
 As the sky split open into a thunderstorm.



Unpacking

By Alyx Tong

They are my friends – the dolls.
 They are fond of the touch of my hands
 And the rub of my nose.
 They share my joy, wipe my tears
 And are by my side all these years .

Say hi to Mr. Dinosaur.
 He has the longest neck among his likes
 And highest ground where he stands—
 Shelf Highland, where he grazes during the day.
 But he rests on my pillow as moonlight arrives.
 A humble friend, he is, and my nighttime knight.

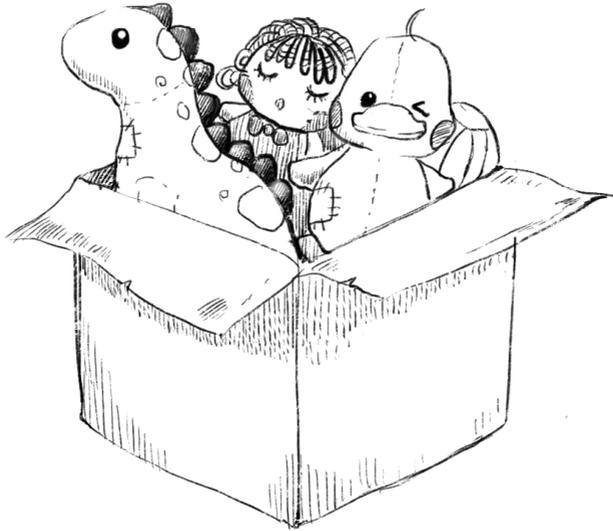
Pedro, how's your day?
 Relax, you will be bigger than Simon someday.
 Because You are a banana, and he a watermelon.
 But please don't laugh at his belly, I reckon.

Jerry the Duck has that smell
 Of the soothing, sweet applewood.
 Fluffy and soft, Jerry is, and Jennie loves him
 So I let Jerry stay at her place one night, as I should.
 The next day, Jerry comes home
 Attached with a new fragrance of raspberries
 And all day in my mind, the lady roams.

They were our friends, the dolls.
 They were fond of the touch of my hands,
 And the rub of my nose.
 They shared my joy, wiped my tears,
 But I have left them, forgotten them,
 And buried them for many years.

Unpacking

Until I come home, down, lame, and alone.
Until I lose sleep at night, and crouch under my bed.
Until I found and unpacked my old toy box,
And our glorious days flowed into my mind,
Cleansing me of my worldly pain,
and beacons my eyes that have gone blind.
Like an atheist child I wake up in the morning,
And next to the pillow a bulky Christmas sock.



Old Friend

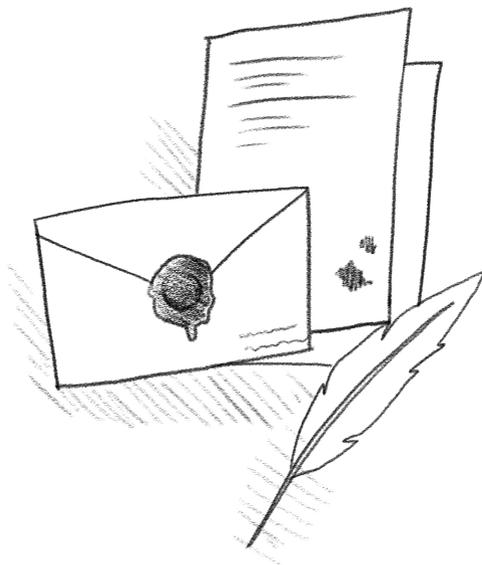
By Yuki Xia

I'm sorry you've always been the one who made the effort
To reach out and ask me how I am.
It's been years since I've last seen your face,
An unfamiliar mask with a familiar name.

To be honest I don't know who you are
my memory is sometimes hazy,
but even if I did, I doubt it'd matter
for time has weathered the landscape of us both.

I'm not a fan of confrontation,
I feel too awkward to be frank.
While you have been searching the seas for me,
I've long left you all behind.

Still now, I am unable to start a conversation.
Mouth dry, too unsure of what to say.
So I'm sorry you've always been the one who made the effort,
to ask me who I am today.



When We Were Younger

By Sophie Ip

Those were the days –

When daisies were whiter
Down the dirty street corner.

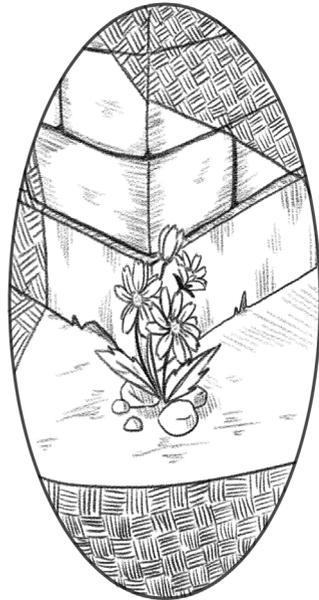
When sunsets were lighter
Than the weight on your shoulder.

When their laughs were louder
And made your heart flutter.

When your flaws seemed smaller
Than the kindness you harbor.

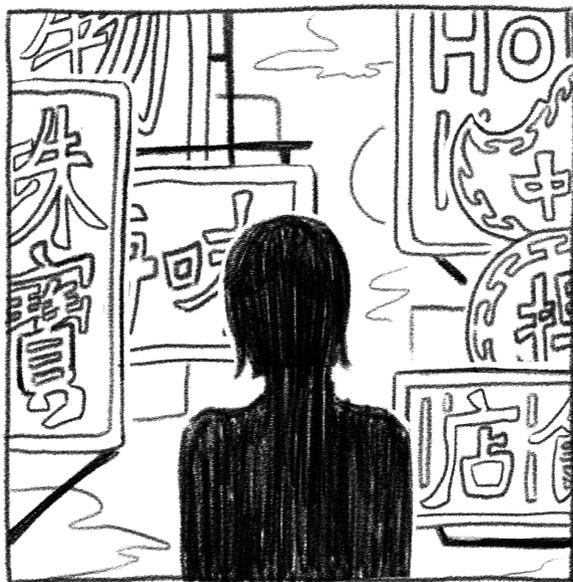
When our dreams grew bigger
Under the sky that summer.

When you and I were younger –
Those were the days made of wonder.



IDENTITY: A WOUND'S LANDSCAPE

Navigating the self



Learning to Love Hong Kong

By Coco Tse

so that people will shut up about it.

so that these 1106 square kilometers isn't just 1106 square kilometers
so that it may continue bridging day and night, east and west, north and south
so that it glows at night with neon and LED and billboards, Pearl of the Orient,
shopping haven

so that people know that isn't all there is to it.

so that we can learn how to live in tiny little squares and love it
so that we can learn to dance around bureaucratic incompetence and get used to it
so that we can learn to lie and keep on doing it

so that people know there's still more to this.

so that these pressing multitudes bleed for something
so that we can be someone we want to be
so that I can be something I want to be

so that I have something when someone inevitably asks me, forces me, compels me
bring your own thesaurus, I have nothing to say



I know you are tired

By Tamara Yustian

I know you are tired,
As the light hits your face,
As you dig yourself deeper into your blanket,
Wishing for more of that ignorant bliss.

I know you are tired,
Hefting your bag over your shoulder
Full of textbooks, full of knowledge,
That you couldn't care less about.

I know you are tired
Of empty words stuffing up the air:
Compliments, gossips, secret favors,
Politics that sing you to doom.

I know you are tired
Of knowing everyone,
Of everyone knowing what you're doing
And not wanting to know how you're doing.

I know you are tired
Of speaking, shouting, screaming, waiting
For someone to listen, to care, to respond
All while that someone wishes for the same.

I know you are tired
Of running, chasing that gold and fame,
Only for it to spill out of your hands
Like water, again and again.

I know you are tired
Of keeping your cards all pretty and pristine,
Bringing them close to your heart
While trying to peek at others' hands.

I know you are tired

I know you are tired
Of bumping against bodies in the train,
All rushing for home,
Wishing for something more
Than just an empty bed.

I know you are tired
Of pushing yourself out of bed every day,
Only for life to push you
Back to the ground,
Back to where you came from.

I know you are tired
Of falling down,
Falling behind,
Falling in love,
Because sometimes they all feel the same.

I know you are tired
Of living a life that is never easy,
Wondering who puts you here,
Wondering when the game will be over,
Wondering where the finish line is.

I know you are tired.
I know I am.



Wanderer

By William Sekkingstad

There's a man in this land.
He's been walking for a while
First there was a forest, it was raining
At the end of the forest he met a murderer,
They talked of life.

In the green hills after he was joined
by a dog.
They walked in silence; it was good.

In the mountains after he found a dying man.
Water and soothing words given,
Conversation had.
Eventually he left him be and walked on.

Coming to the freshly paved road, surrounded by dust
And bones.
He met at lonely woman, child in hand.
They set down and shared a kiss.
A kiss and some time.

In the end he had to leave again.
He walked with a man who had become a familiar face
They walked together until taken apart,
taken apart by crossroads' fate.

At the end of the road he found a town.
In the town there was a tavern;
In the tavern he could drink.

At the outskirts of town, he bought a plot.
On it he built a house.
He lived there with silence and books.
When all the pages were turned,
he locked his door
And kept walking.



The Foreign Native

By Mabeen Haider

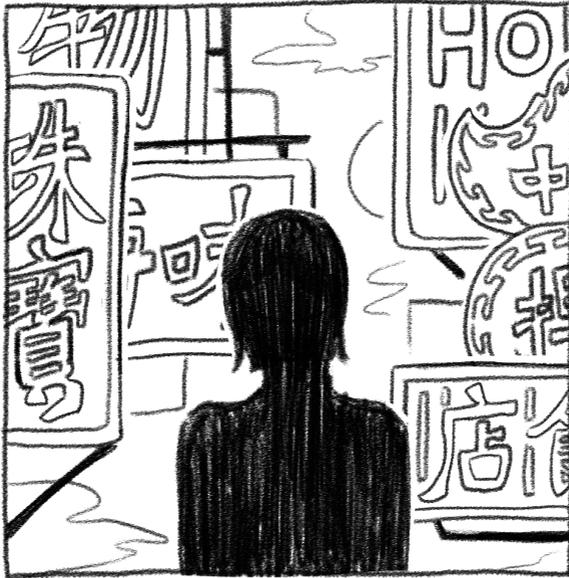
Here, I will transcribe the pockets of the city where my body resides.
The obscurity of lights far enough their brilliance
hits like an echo, caught only in the corner of your eye. An ode to the stars
sacrificed for hollow glow; children singing
“twinkle, twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are”.
That fairytale of excelsior jerked to realisation in skyscrapers,
sentinels of profit persistent as pollution I breathe and
make my home. The bones of business surrounded by a terrain of sinew,
all those animals roaming with ballistic intent, hungry
for predation. When I need to exhale,

I turn to the streets, lose that artifice in search of the nucleus of
that clamour so familiar. This city where my mind presides.
I call myself narrator of this story while the margins fill with
the truth of spaces I can't occupy.
Hong Kong leaves no space unmarked but there is
a space in its people that will never be filled. That prodding
at the abyss, the wound that is identity. This city of skyscrapers and
all its people with that impulse to stand at the edge of
great heights. All those atoms searching for a nucleus
unknown. I want to locate the source of my identity
but I don't know the topography of this wound;
how can I reveal it? In the punctuation

of breathing, I turn once again to that clamour.
That clamour like music to my ears. As
a child, I used to fall asleep to Iron Maiden. Rock and Roll was a
shape I recognised the function of; that need for volume to articulate. To
be heard over the percussion of feet on roads, the bass of vehicles that never
went home, the shops lining pavements like piano keys, the fog of clicks/beeps/sirens
in-between. I want to cull the fog, I want to still this city.
Still the noise, still the crowds, still the greed.
I want to see the expression this city makes when I take away its
masks, when I strip the stars from its flag and all that is left

The Foreign Native

is the flower; that flower the Chinese defined to mean
“foreign”. I want to cut out the foreign in me. I want to say
this city and mean my city. I want to look into the mirror of Hong Kong
and see my face staring back.



The Sound

By Tse Tsz Pui Joey

There is a sound in my head,
too loud to be ignored.
What if this is nothing but a feeling
that ends in nothing but dread?
What if the sound is nothing?
The sound fueled my flame,
the flame burning bright as the sky.
No, I told the sound
but it kept its merry song;
singing nonsense in my brain.
Turning it into jelly,
a jelly made from a maze,
a compass I found
that points everywhere.
How weirdly wonderful it is
never knowing where you'll end up
and how terrible it is
never knowing where you'll end up.
The sound kept on singing,
merrily as a Christmas song.
The Jelly starts to melt, with it,
I too melt.



Monsters

By Charlotte Wong

Yesterday,
a black long-haired woman stood at my back
Her face was covered by her hair
I looked around and faced her
with an emotionless face
She started to choke me on the neck
I could not scream nor fight
She stared at me, wishing I could die

Today,
a little boy was standing with me inside the elevator
He stood at the corner, emotionless and speechless
I stood near him, asked him where his parents went
He looked at me, smiled with a crooked neck
and vanished

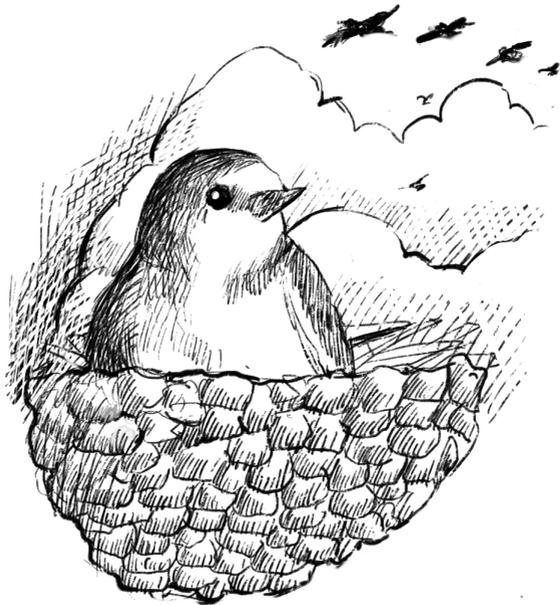
Tonight,
Scared, I smash the drugs on the floor
I don't want to see them anymore
I know I still dream of them coming to kill me
Terrified

Tomorrow,
Who will I see?
The woman and the boy, turn around



CHICKEN SOUP FROM THE POETS

A hearty serving for troubled hearts



Green

(with lines taken from Para Site "Café do Brasil" art exhibition brochure)

By Cheng Ming Chun Andre

Vegetables, fruits, dairy, and tea leaves –
vibrancy, energy, life, and nature,
all release gases while reacting
as signs of life and sustains life
with yeast, bacteria, microbes, sugar, salt, and water.

Glass containers of various shapes breathe silently on broken pedestals.
I stare at them, one by one, in search for a world hidden within
the fermenting food inside the containers
yet they do not speak to me. They are too dead to speak, like
the people, environment, and society outside –
confusing and confused, lost and blank,
in a similar state of flux and unpredictability.

You try to be neutral, and make the most casual bet you can.
Black and white, yellow and blue – the middle seemed safe to you
However, the middle is never the middle, and before you know it,
you have stirred the molecules in the air around you,
like a butterfly who flapped her wings and created a hurricane,
and with every breath you take,
you put yourself in nature at the expense of nature, while
these molecules are fusing and disintegrating.

It doesn't matter whether you're wallowing in a decaying past –
you can always find nutrients in history;
or whether you're looking forward to a bright future
where nothing has yet taken form and you can grow recklessly.
Brewed into time and released from the cold control room,
you watch the forest burning in the television screen,
convincing yourself that change happens naturally,
and apathetically hoping that life grows from the most extreme and hostile environments.

A burning forest on another continent is too far from your reach.
All you can do is absorb the good and bury away the rot –

Green

decayed or burned, life still fertilizes life –
and make another bet.



I Know You Hear Me

By Wong Cheuk Yiu

I know you hear me, now listen;
As the bell tolled from beyond,
By the snowy casket you wept and mourned
With the bed sheet you ripped and tore
You dried the tears of deep remorse.
At the bedside the framed joy sits,
Shreds of glass lying by your feet;
It is peace that you wish to seek.
Hold on as you clench your teeth
And the crimson streak taints the pallor sheets.
For the golden petals will stretch with shades
Of orange and pink and the smell of sage
And the amber hues will pierce the haze.
There where my passion never fades.
Have faith.

I know you hear me, please listen.
In the thick yellow woods you stray alone.
Hustle and rustle the leaves would go,
When my tricycle bumped and strolled,
And behind me you pushed me through.
Fondly the red trees embraced us two.
Beneath your feet the tracks were buried,
By the fallen leaves pried off the tree.
Gravity shows no mercy,
As autumn comes with farewells yet to be bid.
A coiled path bent in the undergrowth,
Beckons you to take a stroll.
Steady your rapid heartbeat though,
then sooth your cluttered mind and halt.
Shower in the colored rain that pours
Like the pictures I used to draw
Glimpse the sunlight on the forest floor,

I Know You Hear Me

The day sweet summer comes won't be long.
Hold on.

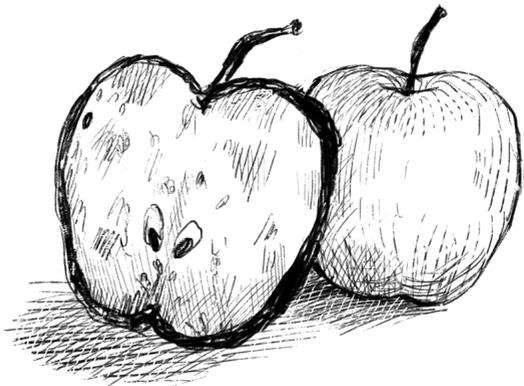
I know you hear me, just listen.
In the office the air-con hummed,
You look so serene but felt so stunted.
On the beach we kids grabbed and pull,
Pelting and leaping until bruises bloomed.
But never did we fight for true.
Two paths diverged in the yard,
The stifling heat burnt as we grew apart.
Sweat damped your neck and wetted your palms.
What remains tiptoed down
The gullies on your face and drowned.
Lay the veil across my face,
Our paths will converge again.
Be brave.



Food and Mood

By Chan Kar Chun

Can I set a cucumber on fire?
Will it burn in the way I desire?
Will the rice in the fridge dry out?
Will they scream or will they shout?
Is that thin-looking biscuit crunchy enough
Or is it even softer than that little cream puff?
Are the cakes meant to be so soft
so that we can bounce on it and fly aloft?
Do they really think tomato is some sort of tasty fruit?
When will they realize it stinks like an old boot?
Will that egg tart break its crust
when the customers no longer trust?
Will the apples still rust
if the world is not this unjust?



Home

By Cheung Sze Hang Gideon

There was one bird
that had trouble flying
and it made me anxious
But they all left their nest
safely in the end

If that swallow couldn't
fly away
with the others
What would happen to it?

Even
if it couldn't fly away
there might be some happiness it could find
simply by staying there.
It might even forget
about the others.

But
if that swallow didn't fly away
because it gave up trying, forever and ever.
Then I'm sure it'd stare up at the sky everyday
And
the swallow that truly gives up flying
would likely
even forget about looking up
at the sky.

For the swallow knows,
that any place
where you won't get wet from the rain,
will also have no

sunlight.





Pavilion of Harmony
by Suzanna Lam, Yuki Ng



Read the previous volumes and the colored version here!

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