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PARTICLE UNM'S LITERARY MAGAZINE • SPRING 2022

PARTICLE

UNM'S LITERARY MAGAZINE



adrift

ISSUE 18 | SPRING 2022



PARTICLE

UNM'S LITERARY MAGAZINE

Particle is an online literary magazine run by the students of the University of Nottingham Malaysia.

Established in 2013, Particle publishes biannually, committed to providing a platform to amplify the voices of both emerging and established writers and artists.

The work contained in this magazine does not necessarily represent the opinions and views held by the Particle staff or any member of the University of Nottingham Malaysia.

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Editor's Note

Dear Reader,

As we continue to move forward in life, there will be moments where you feel lost— lost in the middle of an ocean, where only adverse emotions exist.

We become so lost that we would let ourselves float aimlessly, voluntarily. Where was the strength we thought we had? Or the resilience we had built from the ground up to strive forward? We had neither at that moment, as waves lapped against our bodies and stripped bare skin.

That's why we present to you our themeless 18th issue: *Adrift*.

In Issue 18, our writers braved waves of doubt and currents of insecurity, putting forth pieces dealing with disruptive and turbulent issues of loss, grief, and memories. Their voices echoed against pure emptiness, hoping someone would listen to them.

For you, our dear reader, who has been floating adrift for so long, it's finally time to gather your strength and swim towards their voices. The creative works in *Adrift* will become your safety boats, lighthouses, anchor, in your journey to find your purpose.

With that said, we would like to give our sincerest of “Thank you’s” to our brightest and ever hard-working team of editors and designers for the amount of effort they put into this issue.

Edits. Lines. Diction. Forms. Colours. Designs.

All of these were meticulously thought-out, and executed with the highest degree of professionalism and passion. There is nothing more we could ask for – besides replying our WhatsApp messages on time!

We would also like to thank the contributors for creating such beautiful pieces, and allowing us to share them with everyone else.

Finally, thank you, our dearest Readers. Thank you for being here with us. From the bottom of our hearts, we hope you will be able to find your purpose and voice within these works.

Love and light,

Ivan Ling & Sara Mostafa

Co-Editors in Chief

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Eigengrau

this
is the colour of
rubble sodden and trodden
eroded from the grit and grime of

Disasters

stained glass fragments
dot the path to big man's door

fuchsia for fidgeting frightened
liver-lilac spasming pulsing
crass crimson crippling
dripping
Almost
Reaching for it
Then and there,

hollow ghosts cry out,
barely

till the end
of phantom criminals
these wispy shades of hue
stay stripped from our souls

the nowhere men

free-falling
through acid rained holes,
mud memories & washed-out wishes

strike frequently

faster—
palpitate beats erratic heart
tongues cut eyes smeared
lifeblood

too late we realise
we all had something to say
echoes in our headspace

“i was
Somebody—”

till the leathery silence consumes.
of briefcase browns
and worn wallets
that stole into our soles

falling faster still faster falling

we forgive for giving

and you'll forgive for-getting

Obsessive Observations

Aurellie Livia Kyansputri | Fiction

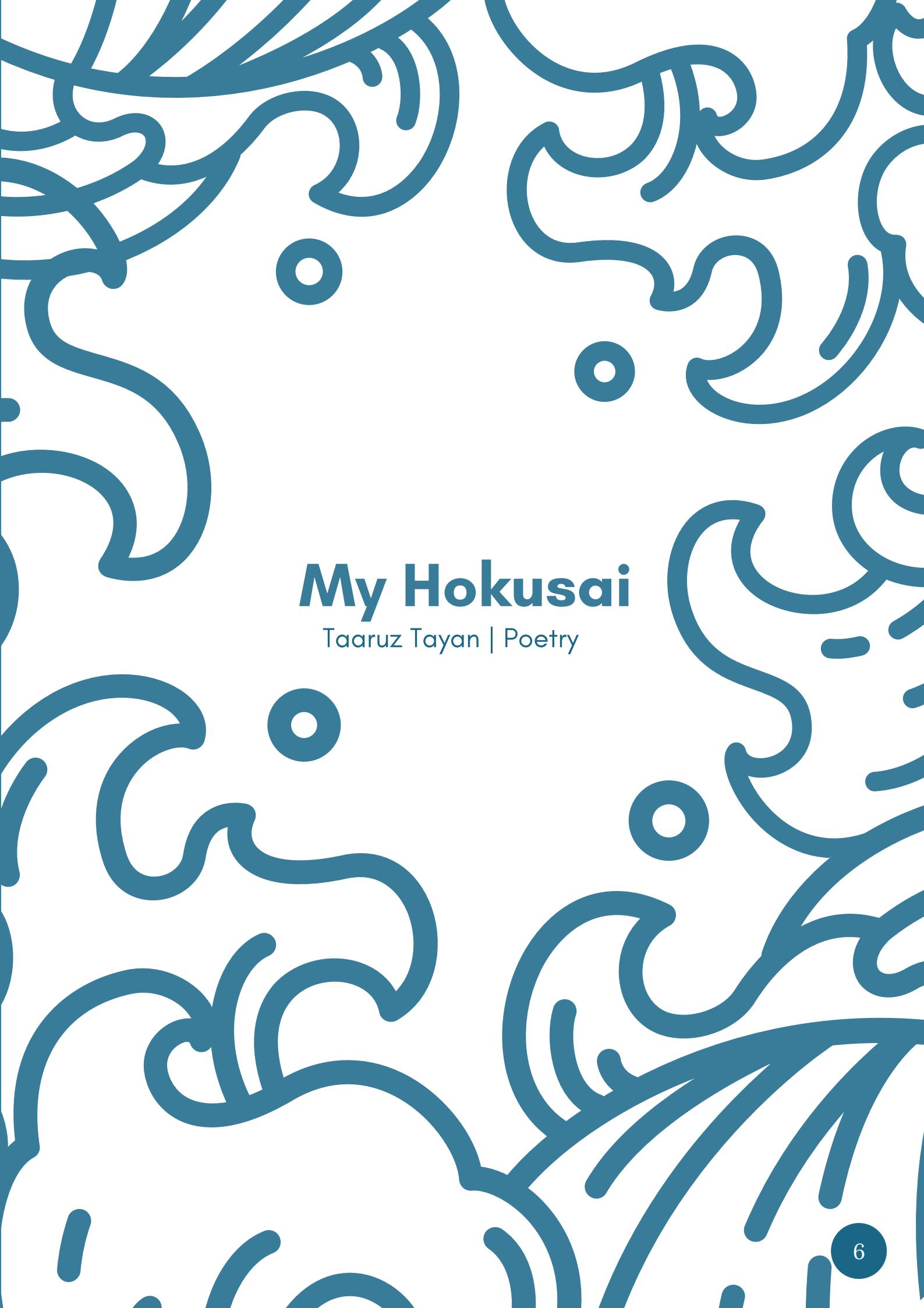
Gazing longingly at the woman in front of you, you hoped the pillar served to be a large enough cover for your hideous form. Maybe hideous was too strong a word... But you weren't pretty. At least, not as gorgeous as that woman with her shiny hair, pearly whites, and long lashes. She could make anyone do a double take as she passed by them on the street. She knew that she was stunning and the way she carried herself showed it.

She's been coming to this restaurant a few times, though she was not a regular so nobody knew her name. The other waiters talked about her as if she was some sort of celebrity – a model of some sort in another country such as El Salvador or Honduras. Nobody knows for sure. But there was one question that nagged at everyone's minds: what was she doing here?

The restaurant was not run-down, but it was a far cry from a Michelin five star, which she ought to be in. The beautiful woman with her fancy dress stuck out like a sore thumb amongst the crying children and tense teenagers, where the menus were often sticky and the chairs were squeaky. But people don't come here for the ambience. People come here for the cheap, delicious food; not all restaurants in this area have a good deal like this one.

You remembered the first time she entered the establishment a few months ago. Her presence was known quite instantly, what with her maroon dress hugging her curves, showcasing them in a flattering way. The room quietened down. The distressed mothers of toddlers watched her with jealousy in their eyes while their good-for-nothing husbands ogled her with no shame. Through all of this, she remained oblivious and took a seat at the table that was at the very center of the room – you had stared at her with parted lips. With that kind of beauty, it is of no wonder she had so much confidence. The waiter that attended to her that day seemed to linger at her table for a beat or two longer than necessary. If she was disturbed by it, she didn't show it. Instead, she responded to his fussiness with a dazzling smile.

Behind the pillar now, you noticed things about her that you wouldn't have noticed a few months ago. When she crosses her legs, her skirt would hike up a little to reveal a mole on her left knee. She is always grinning, whether it's with her eyes or her mouth... And she never stops smiling. It must be nice to live a life with such joy that happiness just oozes out of you, and sometimes you can't help but think to yourself, "Do I want to be her or be with her?"



Darling,
Two dollops of black coffee, eyes so hypnotic
Chugging away this sphere
This is where you keep all the tragic and magic
They are the embodiment of enigma, I should know
Boundless beauty in them, almost oceanic
You are flowing in-between my flesh and bones
Undying desire to memorize you, is this what they call chaotic?

Rajarshi's silent screams, only heard by the mighty tides
The sound of agony, carried within by my Hokusai
Taarruz's longing eyes, only met by the starry nights
The paintbrush Van Gogh held, didn't let him say goodbye
Bewitching to witness them surrender;
burst;
and let their worlds collide. Breathe in the existence of the fire they ignite.

Darling,
Hair as dark as the crevices of unknown
Disheveled waves without a care
You said you've learned to walk through life alone
Kanagawa's ripples inspire, the little painter would know
For you, faith in innocence revived screaming, down to my bone
The allure of death is to know you anew
Share this journey with me, on our way to the unknown?

Rajarshi's silent screams, only heard by the mighty tides
The sound of agony, carried within by my Hokusai
Taarruz's longing eyes, only met by the starry nights
The paintbrush Van Gogh held, didn't let him say goodbye
Bewitching to witness them surrender;
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My Hokusai

Taaruz Tayan | Poetry

Pastiche

Adlan Haziq | Fiction

The funeral was cheerful, as these things go. No wailings or muffled sobs carried through the masjid. Only the echoes of the Yasin, some eighty-three verses, rang amidst the star-adorned pillars, buttresses, and stained-glass windows. Between forty rows of carpet stitched with bedazzled minarets, only one was occupied. Eight sombre men dressed in dark robes and kopiah.

Abdul felt the weight against his chest grow. To others, his bowing neck read of reverence. Their flitting eyes darted away, giving him the privacy to grieve. He buried his face into the slight pamphlet that carried the sacred texts. *Why don't I feel anything?*

Even in death, Kasim's face kept the same hardened look it had in life. Deep set grooves, tanned almost black under an unforgiving sun, carved the character of his years for all to see. Beneath the milky cataracts grown in twilight, those beady eyes never seemed to look away. Abdul met his father's gaze for once.

The imam handed him a pair of rubber gloves, beginning the ghusl. On a stainless-steel table fitted with drain holes, it felt like an operating room — Kasim's body a test dummy for novices to practice with. Timid hands pulled aside the veil that shielded Kasim from the headlight's glow. Abdul jerked away, remembering how much his father hated being woken up for anything. Hoping the imam didn't notice, he gingerly moved back towards the cadaver. *Deep breaths. In-out, in-out.*

"Abdul, do you remember how?", the grey-whiskered imam asked.

Pulled out of his reverie, Abdul nodded and recalled the steps pounded into memory as a boy. Slipping his hand behind the small of Kasim's back, the weight surprised him. The once-sinewed frame that towered over him felt small today. With his other hand, he pressed onto the stomach thrice, bracing for the stench. Abdul held his breath and kept his mind to hosing away the undigested slop of a half-chewed last meal, reeking of dark urine.

With a fresh sponge, he reluctantly slid his hand under the lower wrappings, clearing whatever solids remained. Turning the body over, Abdul mechanically finished his cleaning. He looked towards the corners of the room, where draft holes or a window might have been. A fruitless search. Lack of ventilation was never a problem — no one wanted to smell corpses, with few complaints from the tenants. The pregnant quiet of the room was cut off from the world, leaving nothing but father and son.

"Did you get it right?" the imam asked from the corner of the room.
"Yes, yes. Can you help with what's left?" Abdul asked tersely.

Creaking from his chair, Abdul passed over the hose and let the robed imam follow through with the ghusl. Sputtering a stream through both fingertips, the arms, and a once-over of the body again, Abdul sneaked a glance. The movements of the imam were no different than a man watering his plants, keeping a close eye over unfettered soil. Together they prepared him with wudhu — Kasim's final ablutions.

Dearest son, I'm due to leave this world soon. I know it. Whatever may happen in the upcoming weeks, know that I —

Done. In the grey-green light, Kasim almost wore a smile. His son moved away from the table. Plucking a small pouch out of the funeral kit, he ripped open the plastic and mixed a fine white powder into a shallow bucket. Wafts of camphor filled the room; Its heady aroma was unmistakable as it mingled with the taste of death in the air.

Try as he might, he started panting rapidly. Pungency – the prickly balsamic tinge of the powdered herb ate away at his nostrils. Its fuming cocktail reminded him of the hospital's sterile, antiseptic smell. He hurriedly stirred the bucket, not waiting for the imam before dumping the contents over the body.

Abdul unfastened the door lock and left.

The masjid men came up afterwards to prepare the wrappings. Three bare sheets were placed on top of one another. Another peppering of camphor and drying salts covered the base, not unlike the mummies of Ancient Egypt – though Kasim would never associate with any of those backwards pagan beliefs.

"Abdul, would you do the honours?" one of the goateed men asked.

Without a word, Abdul took a last look at his father. His eyes were drawn to the pockmarked arms crossed atop his body, thirty -odd years of heavy smoking and construction work had yellowed the fingertips of his calloused, misshapen hands. They seemed bare without the agate rings. What little decoration remained were the scars. Nicks from a thousand bits of gravel, a shallow rotan line that never truly healed.

And the indent where his wedding ring used to be.

I know things could have been better between us. Your mother never did forgive me, but I hope you have it in your heart –

The thrice-perfumed cloth compelled him to act. As if to string him along, the sweet smoke of bukhoor reminded Abdul of the wrapping. Left-to-right, right-to-left. Again and again until the masjid men saw fit to step in. Though he could have sorted it out himself, the goatees seemed to understand it better. This felt more like their world, where death reminded them of their own fleeting years, burdened heavily with sins of the past.

No one looked back to Abdul or questioned why he wasn't more of a help. The masjid men were older and knew better about such things.

Kasim had plotted out his grave only a few weeks prior. But Abdul couldn't have come earlier, some business keeping him in KL when he finally made it back to the kampung, he walked through his childhood with a stranger's eyes.

The hardwood timber of the house had worn down to splinters without the dutiful eyes of his mother. Like most kampung builds, nature had reclaimed the trunks that steadied the house, the stilts that raised the one and only floor created a basement of sorts underneath. It was here that Abdul felt the sting of the rotan, played sepak takraw and badminton. Stashed away the rusted remains of his first motorcycle. These stories begged to be told yet were only remembered by the rotting planks. He stooped underneath, where he found his father puffing away clouds through his pipe. Abdul had long given up on stopping him.

"I'm dying soon." Kasim said, hiding the jitter in his hands whilst relighting the pipe.

"Abah, it's not for sure yet, right?"

"I know it. I've put aside everything in the will. Be grateful that you've no siblings or mother to fight with. Only a pittance, anyway. That's what you wanted to ask, right?"

"Abah, please. Can we not –"

"Oi." He said, "You got your answer. Go."

Abdul held his tongue. He would not cry in front of his father, those tears long dried up. Hobbling off in a haze, he slumped back into the Mercedes and sped off, banana and palm trees melding into a sea of greens and browns. Fronds of leaves leaning over the car, looking down at the prodigal son. Twenty-two years too late to return.

The doctor called him not five days later.

The quiet murmurs of prayer had finally dimmed down. As the only child, he was head of the pallbearers and together they carried him in a near-unadorned casket, with only the cheapest of engravings whittled into the sides. Though the body was a dried husk of the man it used to be, the knees of the eight men buckled as they struggled to bring him out.

I can see the end. I know there's nothing up there for me. Last night I dreamt and woke up screaming. Pray as I might, there's nothing but darkness. When I breathe it feels like I'm choking and –

The grave had been dug up earlier in the morning. Journeying from the masjid, they reached the seven by three feet pit that would be Kasim's final resting place. Swaddling over, the grey imam offered a handkerchief to wipe his brow to which Abdul gladly accepted. The weight against his chest felt heavier by the minute, almost drawing him into the grave himself. He steadied his feet against the edge of the pit.

"Pak Abdul, we can lower him in now.", the gravedigger said. The boy, with a face so used to death, smiled up at him. He couldn't have been more than fifteen.

They lowered Kasim into the hole with a makeshift pulley, careful to avoid the rocks lining the edges of the inside wall. The casket swayed on the way down, almost fighting against being put away. From the corner of his eye, Abdul could almost see a shadow hanging over him..

He dared not look.

The pile of dirt heaped beside the hole was returned to the earth, one spade at a time. Abdul tossed a few handfuls of it over the grave as part of the ceremony. Soil pitter-pattered against the coffin as he threw down the last bits of dirt.

With the spade, he sealed off the burial mound.

Abdul watched the masjid men pat down the dirt and install the headstone. The old man would have rattled on about how the grave lines weren't straight or how few people came, knowing what he wanted to say before the words rolled off his tongue. The ringing numbness in Abdul's head paired well with the weight in his chest.

One by one, they left. First the gravedigger, already forgetting the face and name of the man he put under the ground. The masjid men went next, tired and sweaty, well overdue on their daily dose of teh tarik and gossip. Finally, the imam who politely nodded and mumbled 'inalillah' as he went. Only Abdul stood by his father's side, keeping mum as he looked down on Kasim.

He reached inside his robe pocket for the letter that the doctor passed to him outside of the emergency room. The shaky handwriting had to be his father's, carved into cheap photostat paper with a blotchy fountain pen. Lifting off the seals, he tried to finish reading it.

Be a good man. Remember what I taught you. Those lessons weren't for nothing –

Crumpling the note in his fist, Abdul tossed it into the trash heap outside the cemetery.

Sestina: Dear Diary

Sara Mostafa | Poetry

Often, I would sit and write, 'dear diary'
Today I learnt the definition of love
I had spotted it in an outdated forgotten
dictionary my mother gave to me
When I turned twelve years old.
A very strong feeling of caring for someone—you

told me that love can't be taught. Instead, you
must drench in their honey eyes. Dear diary,
yesterday I turned sixteen years old.
I hid the crumbled letters of my lover
underneath the pillow and *prayed* my
father didn't know. I had forgotten

that he never believed in love. I'm trying to forget
that it's not allowed to expect affection from you
in place of others. Sometimes, even I
find it hard to believe. Dear diary,
tomorrow I am reading a book titled 'all about love;'
I still trust that words hold the ancient old

recipe for making love stick. I am twenty years old
and words of endearment remain a forgotten
dialect stumbling awkwardly across my lips. I love
that you don't ask me to say, 'I love you.'
My mother never stopped asking. Dear diary,
the thought of your lips on my neck consumes me.

I'm trying to be better at making love work for me
and you. I am soaking the remains of my old
dictionary in honey water. Dear diary,
please give me permission to forget
the taste of honey in your voice. You
told me that I can't learn about love.

But I discovered that my methods of love
were written instructions my mother left me
on the door of the fridge one late night. You
can't convince me your grandmother's old
necklace pendant isn't a love lesson she is trying to forget
but begged you to learn every single day. Dear diary,

I am thirty years old, and I can finally say love-
filled words. I've forgotten the stutter my father taught me
and now when I talk about you, I don't use my diary



Writing Wrongs

Faith Foo | Poetry

And so the wall drips white again—
again, hands hastily smear over the familiar splatters
Of blood blooming red
Of red ribboning into names
they fear. tutup pintu! cepat! catkan! I tell you it's true.
behind doors, behind bars, rubber hoses dousing,
swish, slosh, slugged by sheep in shiny blue.
Gloved hands repeat

a customary rush
worn brushes lazily dipping into whitewash tubs,
patching over flakes of rust—
coloured stains peeking out from under,
unavenged, unforgotten in spite
of the spotless tiles, defiant despite
being scrubbed clean from official files.

When will we win?

He who hurts Justice is stagnant, still
soaked in in-tangible sin,
he who has Her scales stolen, Her heart missing,
he who stands still in the rift, who bridges the mischief of mice—
squeaking lines into the staccatoing machine,
relentlessly blurring, redacting, doctoring
print after print stacking onto the tarnished tomes of honourless “tradition”

Bloated
with baggy cheeks loose, protracting his demise
By breaking bones after wind,
he lauds whims
whelmed in the exorbitant plague
of prisons and police, bullets peppering their promises to
protect us—
Us. We by the wall,
we do not stand silenced.

We write red over white.

Sestina: Honeyed Needles

Lingkan Carissa | Poetry

I awoke to the sight of father
slowly drooping under the morning
blaze. Steam from his watery tea
creeps into cabinets, yet honey
is still out of its gaze. Only grey
pens, each with a harsh-biting needle

at the end. Beyond every needle
lies a fruitful life that dear father
desires: children counting sticky grey
wrappers, shoes leaping over morning's
eye, stubby fireflies and their honey-
glazed light reflected in his warm tea—

his wide mugs of milky, sugary tea.
All replaced by sharp, slender needles,
crowding the fridge; no room for honey.
Kisses, bread, prayers; things my father
needs to unlock the gate to morning
are swimming within his short, grey

jars of insulin. They whisper grey
memories—warnings whenever tea
fills my cup, "It will steal your morning.
Never try to bargain with a needle.
Biggest mistake taken by your father.
So, put the dipper away, honey."

Should I? What can a drop of honey
do? The tip of my tongue is grey
and stale. Fat, fried batter that father
enjoys submerged in thick, creamy tea
I also miss. Don't worry, a needle
will not be the ticket to my morning—

a promise I fail to keep. Morning
refuses to see me until honey
is away, waiting for the needle
to pierce my thigh. Hair is far from grey
but rain has become sweeter than tea.
Still, mind keeps on thinking: Father,

despite my blurry mornings, father,
I continue to indulge in honey tea.
This needle—I have found balance in its grey.

Timezones

Sara Mostafa | Poetry

How are you?
Or should I ask, whose day are you draining away?
Are you north, speeding the flow of their sand
seeking to stir them awake on the wrong side of land?
Are you east-west, of where we last met
teaching them to count seconds alluding to
the drifts of silhouettes before history begins?
Or are you lost, trying to find your way
back to the seasons before they wake up?
Last time I felt you, you were chronological,
arising at dawn, dragging your waist at midday
and blinking farewell upon the witchin' hour.
But now you're a gradual breeze,
a dated commodity, a snowflake.
— Osiris, Cyprus.

Dear Timezones, I hope you are doing well!
I was born a few decades ago,
or maybe it was just one,
I stopped adding after
seventeen laps around the sun.
Sometimes in Asia, I'm ahead,
but in Africa, I'm always behind.
I'm afraid the future is passing me by
and I can't dial to say,
wait—I'm coming back.
So, I'm writing this to inform you that
I will no longer be taking part in your competition.
I have indulged you for so long now,
I am not sure whether tomorrow has arrived
or if I'm already in yesterday.
I believe you understand when I'm
coming from. I know this imbalance
is causing you misery as well, but I hope
you can find it in your hands to let me go
and chain someone else to your digits. Perhaps,
those progressing academics in the west,
they seem keen to pursue endless golden periods.
I bid you goodbye, please take care
and slow down—for your own sake.
Sincerely,
— Sara, Enharda.

What up, Timezones? I hear you be making everyone
zone out, zooming away their twenty-four hours,
“Out, out, brief candle—” I think I heard you said.
What are you doing man? Gen z is trashing you so much,
leaving them the last letter wasn't a nice touch.
Now they gonna believe you're slashing their chords
before they even begin to speak.
You better start moving faster before they catch you, man.
Anywayz, I'm just textin' to tell you
that you don't have much time left
they're counting you down, instead of counting on you.
Do you wanna stop for a while? Take a breather,
orbit the galaxies a few times and come back young?
What do you think? Let me know, ASAP.
— Clock, Bangkok.



Under Streetlight (19)

Faith Foo | Poetry

Dusk. Humid gust of dust.

Hand uncovers
steam. Salty porridge. Briny Bubur.
Consistency of water and mosquito eggs
a hot bowl balanced on legs
on thighs too thin.
a pause—Prayer.

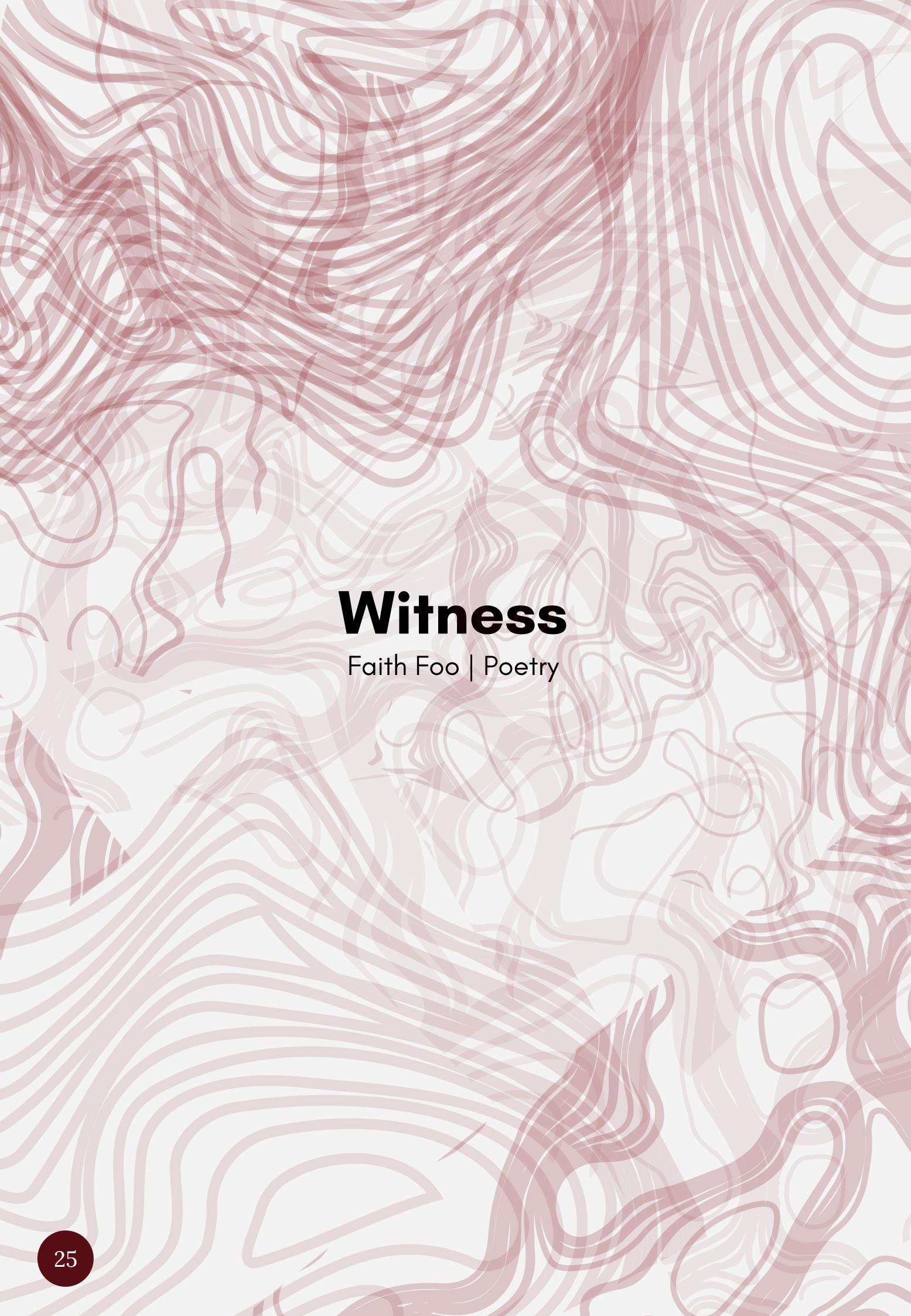
Then,
lifting,
gulping, gasps,
ikan bilis up the brain, down the chin.
Divine, divine,
hunger pooling out from feet—
Sweet, sweat, heat
pinpricks surfacing skin.
Smile

Warm
for a while.

The Heartbreak



Jedidah-Joy Lai Jo-Kay | Artwork



Witness

Faith Foo | Poetry

Berkibarlah!

Flap loose, Jabber free!
Taste once-hallowed air in solemn rooms now
reeking clownery;
Spittle sunk in sticky floors,
Mouths with sugar crowned lips sip-sipping from
sewers, leaving open sores—
festering a muffled rhythm of lies for buzzing flies
to scheme, to rub their hands in glee—

Rhythms, rubbing one off to brutality,
silencing scores of names,
of souls trapped in unmarked graves guiltily
hidden
in secrets hastened to oblivion.

We witness these crimes and
While the screams straining the swell of our lungs are
lost in more sonorous shades of
Deceit, dribbling down watery tongues,
We remember.
We, the rakyat
We grind our palms working

in all forms of prayer, surrendering
layer upon layer of our losses in
sweat-stained singlets-saris-sarongs-tudongs-turbans:
We remember
the scrap of our allegiance hangs
onto two tiny rocks nestled between straits and seas,
Hanging by the vital strand that is Hope,
For Malaysia to really boleh—

Witness, remember.

Teether, And Fall.

Tan Xin Ni (Pixie) | Fiction

Look at me.

Look at me, look at me.

This is the girl you loved, the girl you said you loved, and the girl who loved you back. Bared and bore through it all, I loved you when you were the boy who didn't show up, the boy who loved them and left them, the boy who was trusted as far as one could throw him.

Now look — Look at this blinding white silk sticking uncomfortably on my skin; look at my pristine , cakey made-up face; look at the prickly roses in my hair. I loved you so.

I loved you so that you could do this to me.

The looks on their faces — of disdain, of pity, of embarrassment. It smelt of freshly cut grass and vanilla cake and still only the smoke of your car exhaust choked my airways. The green of the garden bustled and hummed and breathed life into an unnaturally still crowd that didn't dare move a muscle, into a bride whose breath you robbed when you left her, into your mother's red-veined eyes, twitching in Morse Code; the sun blared down unrelentingly on the perfect day for a garden wedding, and I stood there on that altar, a shadow of a widow amongst wisps and whispers.

I never knew how to love you, dearest; I don't know how to love you still after this.



I'm here now, by my desk at the window—the cool night air a salve to a soul scrubbed raw. It's one of those nights, love, when the moonlight is bleak and sincere and cruelly ambivalent in its ascent over the city. It's one of those nights when your thoughts can't help but dissipate with the caresses of the chill, when the crickets' chirrups weigh heavy on your tongue, and the sea you didn't know existing in you rocks gently in your ears. You'd know this, love, if you were here.

You'll forgive me for going off on a tangent, you've always loved my little rambles into obscurity; though only Providence would know how much I thought I knew of you was true. The awful gossip — you'd balk at it love, and maybe that's why I was the only one left here, a battered dam cracking under the tsunami of shifty side glances and the millionth almost-out-of-earshot 'poor thing doesn't know's.

Look at me, love.

Maybe it's true what they say, or maybe it's not, but love, you had a choice and you chose wrong. But I'll be like you and choose my battles; just tonight, I'll cheer to you and all that could have been. Just tonight, I'll bathe in the make-believe glow of newlyweds and dance our first dance under the moonlight alone. Just tonight, I'll teether on the edge of forever, and tomorrow, I'll fall.

Short Escape

Shaida Salwi | Fiction

The sky was painted pink as the sun wedged itself between the clouds and the vast sea. Sipping my coffee, I watched as a young boy was dragged away from the crashing waves by his mother. His loud wailing and thrashing echoed in the quiet space of the beach. Throwing the paper cup into a nearby bin after the last drop of coffee, I stood up and dusted sand off my skirt. The strong breeze swept my loose curls, spraying sea salt onto my face. I licked my lips unconsciously.

As the sky turned violet, I crossed a bridge that overlooked the city. A little girl in an orange dress walked from the other end of the bridge, hand in hand with a middle-aged man. As she came closer to me, the bunch of daisies in her palm swayed slightly when she moved her hand. Without a word, the man plucked the daisies from her and threw them over the bridge. The small girl's head hung low, rendering her face unreadable. I waited for them to pass by, pretending to gaze at the distant metropolis before walking slowly towards where they'd come from.

At the end of the bridge, the entrance of a slum's narrow corridor revealed itself. It was very dark, saved for the illuminating light from the bridge's lamp post. A black cat was chasing a mischief of rats amongst stacked cardboard boxes. One had nearly collapsed onto an old man, who was bent over. A make-shift table had been constructed from the boxes; shoes and small tools were spread before him. He wiped his dirty hand on a politician's manifesto banner. When my shadow had obscured his vision, he looked up with a frown. Sneering, he said, "You've been cleaned, ain't ya?" His yellowing, chipped teeth had left permanent, jagged marks on my skin even after all these years.

Ignoring him, I walked deeper into the slum where the light gradually left me. The sounds of papers crunched beneath my feet. Clones of the same politician smiled up at me. More of those tattered banners littered the streets. I played a game of lava but instead of avoiding the cracks, I avoided the pitiful man's face.



Scantly-clad figures stood along the alley walls, the flash of their lurid dresses rendered me temporarily blind. *Kupu-kupu malam*, I thought. These ladies bristled at this unwanted visitor in their area as they flitted and fluttered across the alley, puffing out smokes with soured expressions at the person who was once one of them. I winced from their stares, and from a sudden nasty reminiscence of past memories.

Out of the corner of my eye, there was a tinted, black Vellfire slowly and closely following me. My heartbeat quickened in parallel to my pace as they tailed me even closer. I made a dash for it but a strong hand caught around my waist and dragged me towards the car. I flailed my arms and kicked the man's shin until he finally released me.

Arms crossed, I scowled at the suited, burly male who had an earpiece jammed in his left ear.

"Time to leave. He's worried."

There was a silent tension between us. I sighed. Slow with reluctance, I climbed into the plush seat of the tinted, black Vellfire.

"Sayang, where have you been?" The man twisted around in his seat.

The man from whose banner I stepped on.

On Being 19

Sara Mostafa | Creative Non Fiction

When I turned 19, I created a list and named it twenty by twenty. Twenty things I wanted to do by the time I am 20. Obviously, I was a bit too ambitious (and ended up abandoning most of them midway).

One of the goals I set for myself was to write love letters to my loved ones on their birthdays. That was the only goal I could remain faithful to. So naturally, when my birthday was nearing, I found my fingers itching to write a message for myself.

I just didn't know I was writing a love letter.

19, brimming with doubts, anxiety, uncertainty, and an overarching sense of losing my grip over reality.

19, full of many days where I tried to unlearn all that I've been forced to know, many days where I tried to untangle myself from qualities that weren't my own.

But there were worse days, too. Days where I had to recognize that my goodbyes were piling up. Goodbye to my university days, my friends and my memories that were snatched from me.

How do I say goodbye to things I never knew I was going to miss? Like the rain, rushing clumsily behind the bus on my way home. The sticky tables where I used to play cards with my friends. The family of lizards posted vigilantly on the walls of the cafeteria. Or the trees embracing the classroom as my professor read a passage from Dickens. I miss the streets of Malaysia and the fluffy cotton candy clouds that wandered aimlessly with me.

My time as a university student in Malaysia feels as if it is a brief love affair. So brief and swift that only a collection of blurry photographs and a looming shadow remains.

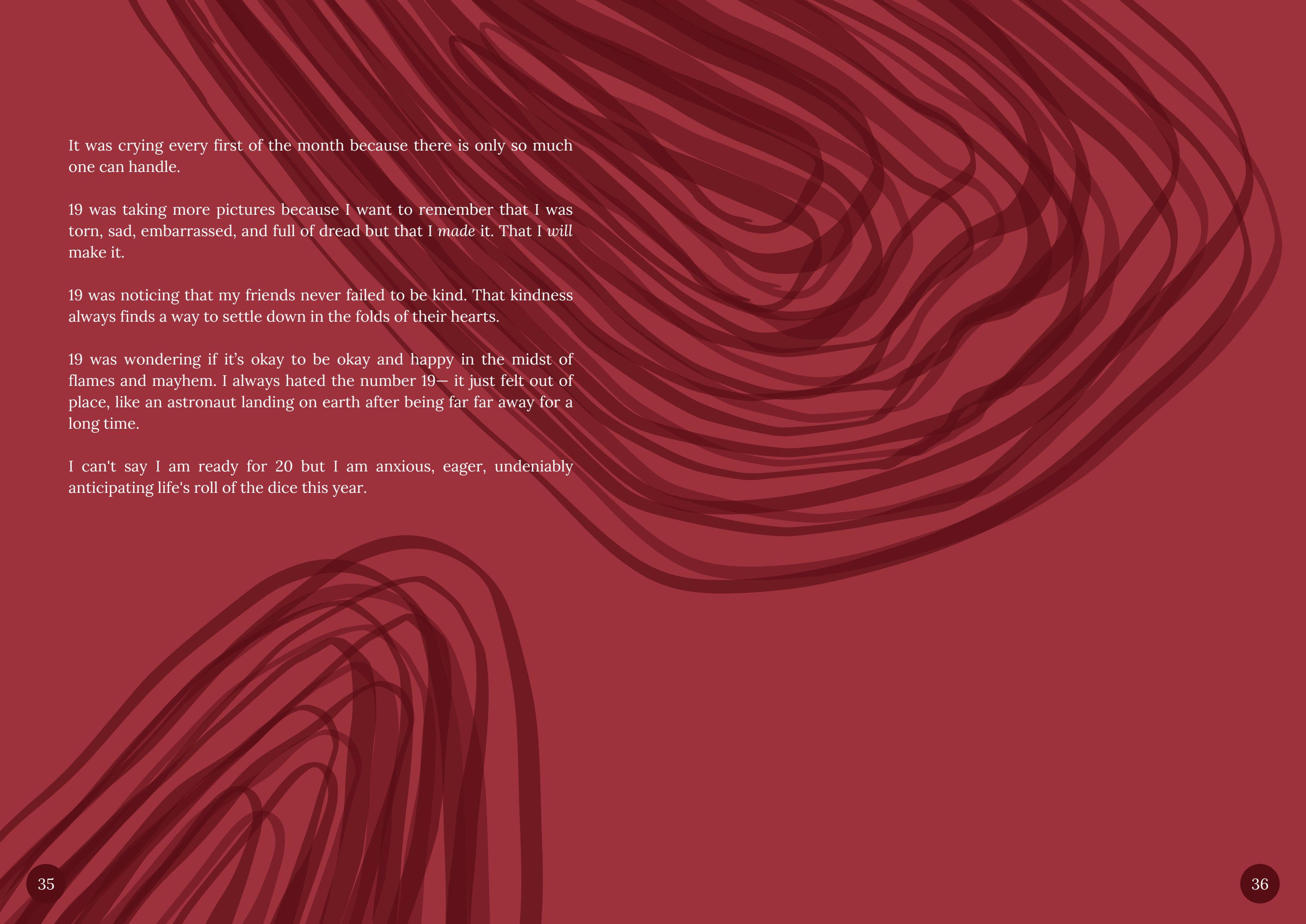
19 was trying to accustom myself to a global tragedy. It was trying to make space for the unknown in every fraction of my day.

19 was realizing that I am so much more privileged than I had ever known. It was appreciating every small blessing. It was realizing that I have to give back, that I must give back or I will never be content.

19 was falling in love, again and again and again. In a different way every time, in a familiar yet oddly strange way every time, in a way that makes me revisit the definition of love and rewrite it all over again.

19 was realizing that I am far from moving on just yet. That I have to swim in my sadness a bit longer. Not too long that I feel like I am drowning, but just enough to come back to the surface, calling for help.

19 was embracing my friends every chance I had.



It was crying every first of the month because there is only so much one can handle.

19 was taking more pictures because I want to remember that I was torn, sad, embarrassed, and full of dread but that I *made* it. That I will make it.

19 was noticing that my friends never failed to be kind. That kindness always finds a way to settle down in the folds of their hearts.

19 was wondering if it's okay to be okay and happy in the midst of flames and mayhem. I always hated the number 19— it just felt out of place, like an astronaut landing on earth after being far far away for a long time.

I can't say I am ready for 20 but I am anxious, eager, undeniably anticipating life's roll of the dice this year.

Pause

Sara Mostafa | Fiction

The silence of a quiet home was not unfamiliar to Suriya Hakeem. It's a type of silence that stretches across weekdays and weekends, from holidays to birthdays to new years. Such stillness was aloof and withdrawn, unaccompanied by passive-aggressive conversations or loud jarring fights that helped you fight for your love, or maybe even prove it. No, growing up in her home, whenever the peace was shaken by a family member, everyone remained motionless in their place—soundlessly, waiting for a sign from the universe to move again.

When her husband gradually stopped asking her, "What's for lunch?" or "Are you free next weekend? Let's go on a date," she pretended not to notice. That was what she was taught to do: Never disrupt the silence. No matter how much she wanted to.

She didn't tell anyone either. When her mother asked if they were coming to visit soon, she pretended that she hadn't heard her. If her mother knew her husband hadn't been talking to her, she wouldn't have been able to keep the smirk off of her face. 'I told you so,' she could almost hear her say, 'He won't love you for long. No man loves a woman that's always working, Suriya.'

Before her marriage, no one dared to point out her disinterest in love or relationships. So, when she had announced her engagement to her family, their congratulations were hesitant, marred with hints of astonishment and disbelief. Her mother snickered. The stifling laughter left her mouth so very slowly that every syllable had lingered on Suriya's ears one second longer than necessary, "I give it two years."

x x x

Today was her eighth wedding anniversary. She wanted to convince herself that today would be different, that today held the sign she had been waiting for to mend her marriage. So, she left work early—a rarity that left her co-workers stunned—and took the bus home.

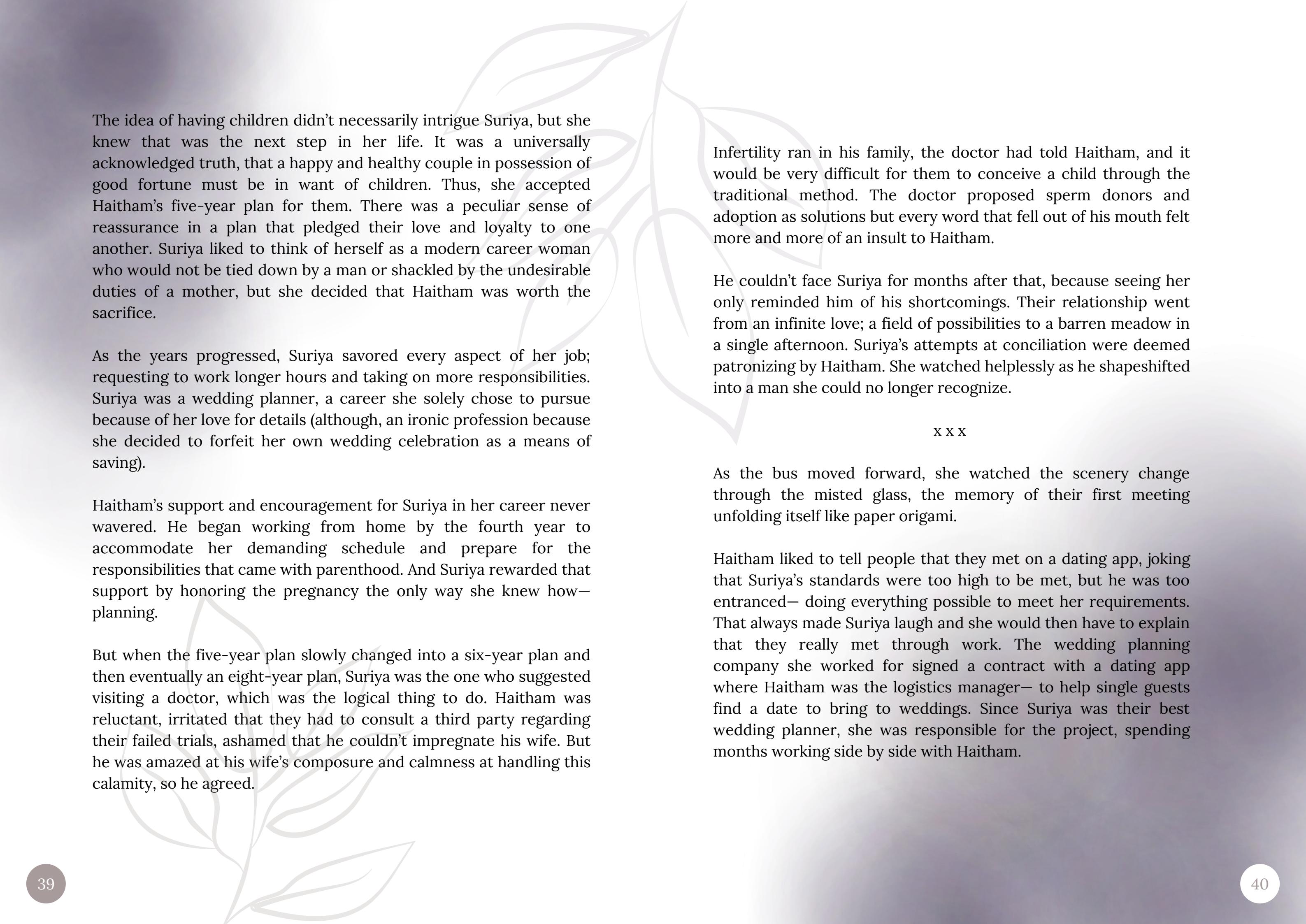
Most of her co-workers weren't aware of her marital status. Her long working hours and busy weekends signaled to everyone that their boss was a workaholic that only had her laptop as a husband. Some respected her for it; the women in her team idolized her, wishing that someday, they too would be career women that refused to settle for mediocre marriages, but instead, paved their own way in life. However, when they found out that she was, in fact, a married woman, their perceptions shifted. They pitied her husband for having a wife that was never home in time for dinner.

"The real homewrecker is a woman who doesn't put her husband first. If you can't take care of your husband, how will you take care of your children?" She once overheard her co-workers whispering as they left work when their shifts ended.

x x x

The bus was empty, save for a mother and her child seated towards the back. The mother seemed to be showing her child how to count; she held his hands tightly and closed his fingers one by one, softly chanting "one, two, one, two" until he repeated after her.

They were supposed to have children. That was Haitham's five-year plan for them; save up for a house by year one, buy the house by year two, furnish it by year three, start trying for a baby by year four and finally, welcome a new family member by year five. Everything was going according to plan. Saving up for a house and furnishing it was easy, they had lived their entire lives sensibly and saved their income for an unforeseen disaster that never arrived.



The idea of having children didn't necessarily intrigue Suriya, but she knew that was the next step in her life. It was a universally acknowledged truth, that a happy and healthy couple in possession of good fortune must be in want of children. Thus, she accepted Haitham's five-year plan for them. There was a peculiar sense of reassurance in a plan that pledged their love and loyalty to one another. Suriya liked to think of herself as a modern career woman who would not be tied down by a man or shackled by the undesirable duties of a mother, but she decided that Haitham was worth the sacrifice.

As the years progressed, Suriya savored every aspect of her job; requesting to work longer hours and taking on more responsibilities. Suriya was a wedding planner, a career she solely chose to pursue because of her love for details (although, an ironic profession because she decided to forfeit her own wedding celebration as a means of saving).

Haitham's support and encouragement for Suriya in her career never wavered. He began working from home by the fourth year to accommodate her demanding schedule and prepare for the responsibilities that came with parenthood. And Suriya rewarded that support by honoring the pregnancy the only way she knew how—planning.

But when the five-year plan slowly changed into a six-year plan and then eventually an eight-year plan, Suriya was the one who suggested visiting a doctor, which was the logical thing to do. Haitham was reluctant, irritated that they had to consult a third party regarding their failed trials, ashamed that he couldn't impregnate his wife. But he was amazed at his wife's composure and calmness at handling this calamity, so he agreed.

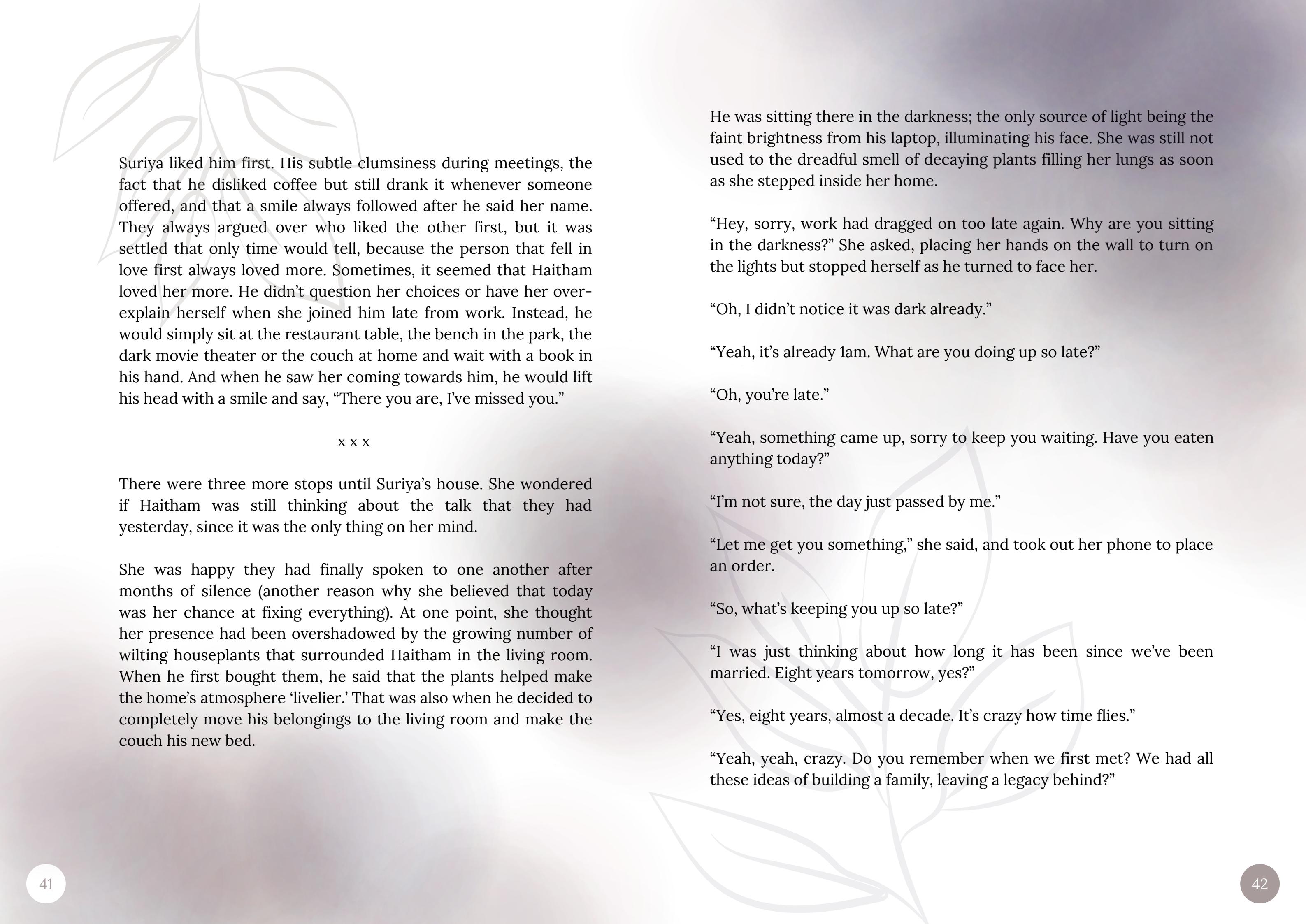
Infertility ran in his family, the doctor had told Haitham, and it would be very difficult for them to conceive a child through the traditional method. The doctor proposed sperm donors and adoption as solutions but every word that fell out of his mouth felt more and more of an insult to Haitham.

He couldn't face Suriya for months after that, because seeing her only reminded him of his shortcomings. Their relationship went from an infinite love; a field of possibilities to a barren meadow in a single afternoon. Suriya's attempts at conciliation were deemed patronizing by Haitham. She watched helplessly as he shapeshifted into a man she could no longer recognize.

x x x

As the bus moved forward, she watched the scenery change through the misted glass, the memory of their first meeting unfolding itself like paper origami.

Haitham liked to tell people that they met on a dating app, joking that Suriya's standards were too high to be met, but he was too entranced—doing everything possible to meet her requirements. That always made Suriya laugh and she would then have to explain that they really met through work. The wedding planning company she worked for signed a contract with a dating app where Haitham was the logistics manager—to help single guests find a date to bring to weddings. Since Suriya was their best wedding planner, she was responsible for the project, spending months working side by side with Haitham.



Suriya liked him first. His subtle clumsiness during meetings, the fact that he disliked coffee but still drank it whenever someone offered, and that a smile always followed after he said her name. They always argued over who liked the other first, but it was settled that only time would tell, because the person that fell in love first always loved more. Sometimes, it seemed that Haitham loved her more. He didn't question her choices or have her over-explain herself when she joined him late from work. Instead, he would simply sit at the restaurant table, the bench in the park, the dark movie theater or the couch at home and wait with a book in his hand. And when he saw her coming towards him, he would lift his head with a smile and say, "There you are, I've missed you."

x x x

There were three more stops until Suriya's house. She wondered if Haitham was still thinking about the talk that they had yesterday, since it was the only thing on her mind.

She was happy they had finally spoken to one another after months of silence (another reason why she believed that today was her chance at fixing everything). At one point, she thought her presence had been overshadowed by the growing number of wilting houseplants that surrounded Haitham in the living room. When he first bought them, he said that the plants helped make the home's atmosphere 'livelier.' That was also when he decided to completely move his belongings to the living room and make the couch his new bed.

He was sitting there in the darkness; the only source of light being the faint brightness from his laptop, illuminating his face. She was still not used to the dreadful smell of decaying plants filling her lungs as soon as she stepped inside her home.

"Hey, sorry, work had dragged on too late again. Why are you sitting in the darkness?" She asked, placing her hands on the wall to turn on the lights but stopped herself as he turned to face her.

"Oh, I didn't notice it was dark already."

"Yeah, it's already 1am. What are you doing up so late?"

"Oh, you're late."

"Yeah, something came up, sorry to keep you waiting. Have you eaten anything today?"

"I'm not sure, the day just passed by me."

"Let me get you something," she said, and took out her phone to place an order.

"So, what's keeping you up so late?"

"I was just thinking about how long it has been since we've been married. Eight years tomorrow, yes?"

"Yes, eight years, almost a decade. It's crazy how time flies."

"Yeah, yeah, crazy. Do you remember when we first met? We had all these ideas of building a family, leaving a legacy behind?"

"Yeah, we were two young kids with nothing but dreams. But, the plan is still in motion, right?"

"That's the thing, Suriya, I don't know anymore. How can you be so sure that we can make it happen? I mean, of course you can be sure. You have your work and life figured out, you're making people happy, and they will remember that for years, but what do I have? What do I have...? What am I leaving behind?"

"Well, I guess you have your work too. Plus, we're a team, my success is yours. It's our success, I couldn't have achieved it without you."

"No, you can. That's the thing, you *can*. Life can throw the biggest hurdle at you, and you wouldn't even be fazed. You will wake up the next day and get ready for work anyways. I can't just do that. I can't wake up and live my life like nothing's happened. Because something *did* happen."

x x x

It was hard to grasp what he meant yesterday but she now understood every word. He wanted her to prove that she was worthy, that she needed him, that he could lean on her. They were on the same page now, she knew what she needed to do to bring everything back to normal, she knew— Her train of thought was interrupted by the buzzing of her phone, indicating a new message.

"Suriya,

When we met eight years ago, I knew it had to be you. You were the person I wanted to build a family with. There was no doubt in my mind, but it just hasn't been working, right? We tried to make it work, didn't we? But I just think recently we have been battling different demons. I am grieving for the loss of the future that I promised myself and you, and I guess I just wish the grief had paralyzed you as it did me. But nothing ever does.

I know you will do fine without me.

Take care of the plants.

Happy anniversary.

Goodbye."

Suriya looked up from her phone.

She had missed her stop.

Musk, Leather, Bergamot & Cedar

Zoe Wee | Poetry

And so, I ran.

Panting, sweltering, crashing
Through dense undergrowth,
A wild escape, from baring
Brilliant fangs, desiring their betrothed.

You foul, stinking beast—
Stinking of musk and leather and bergamot and cedar; creeping closer.
Your luxuriant coat of ink, not in the least
Lacking, slinks and shines under

Needlepoints of light creeping through
The cracks and crevices of swarming branches,
Your villainous visage so gorgeously terrifying. Though,
Why must you chase me so? It aches.

The devious beginnings of a whisper,
Writting a silken dance upon jungle floors, defying what I have forsworn
To myself. It selfishly insisted that I returned, to come hither.
Perhaps it was from sickly, nasty pride that borne

This fervent desire so thick and viscous.
An excruciating pain pierces my chest to imagine life without,
I find myself drowning in its richness.
Fearing the day when I must come up for breath, I doubt,

That these thoughts may pass your mind,
Tis' fatal to harken on these agonising notions.
I know the longer my heart lingers, *The Fates will repay me in kind!*
I shall certainly find myself trapped in the motions.

Glowering at my figure, a mere meal to be had,
Terror bubble and froth within my throat: why do I swallow it down?
I must be turning a sensual hue of mad.
This delicious warmth, addictive and sublime; I am but mere prey-bound.

It tortures me, watching your brutish talons upon
My heaving chest, barely breaking the skin; it is all too tender.
This, this sadistic affection and depraved possession.
The stench of musk and leather and bergamot and cedar—it lingers.

One day, I shall be stuck in an endless loop of strange remembrance,
Wishing that I'd seared the memory of your touch, gaze, scent, in mind.
Does the possibility of unfulfilled yearning not frighten you? Not repulse your embrace?
And still, I am compelled to take part in this destructive bind—

I watched in horror as your lips began their descent.

Your carnal gaping maw, a silver
Tongue lolled out in serpentine slither, dripping.
Poised to lacerate in the name of a lascivious lover.
Hissing out cries of craving and itching and burning.

That tantalising purr drizzling over quivering skin,
Heavy with hunger, dizzying in its desire,
With a voice of liquor, vile vermin,
Reeking of musk and leather and bergamot and cedar, you whisper:

Muttering **Mess,** **Mysterious,** **Magnetic,**
Impeccably, **Irresistibly** **Innocent.** **Incomparable**
Naivety. **Nubile** **Naked** **Naiad,**
Effervescence **Erupting** **Earnestly;** **Euphoric.”**

And so, I ran.

Seputih-Putih Melati

Tan Xin Ni (Pixie) | Fiction

I didn't do it.

I couldn't have done it.

Shh, quiet. You hear it too, don't you?

The distant blare of sirens, the ceaseless chatter of shifty-eyed, jaywalking crowds, the frantic pitter-patter of critters scattering into gutters. Even all the way down here, the noise, it worms into your brain, lodges into your skull like a stubborn piece of food stuck between the cracks of yellowed teeth. Half the time I don't even know if it's just in my head, or if the sounds of the city have gotten to me.

There's too much of everything in KL.

You'll agree with me, Melati. You must — I can tell you're like me. Don't look at me like that, I can see it in your eyes. You're young, scrappy. Hungry. You think the world is your oyster — no, you're more cynical than that. You think the world is concrete pavement and you're a lucky seedling thriving in a crack in the ground. A wild Melati flower.

You can't think like that— they weed people like us out.

Listen to me, from one Melati to another, don't move to the city. Don't be tempted by the shining promises of riches and abstract abundance of "opportunity". The city is the belly of a beast and we're all being marinated in our own sewage. If God exists, He doesn't set foot here.

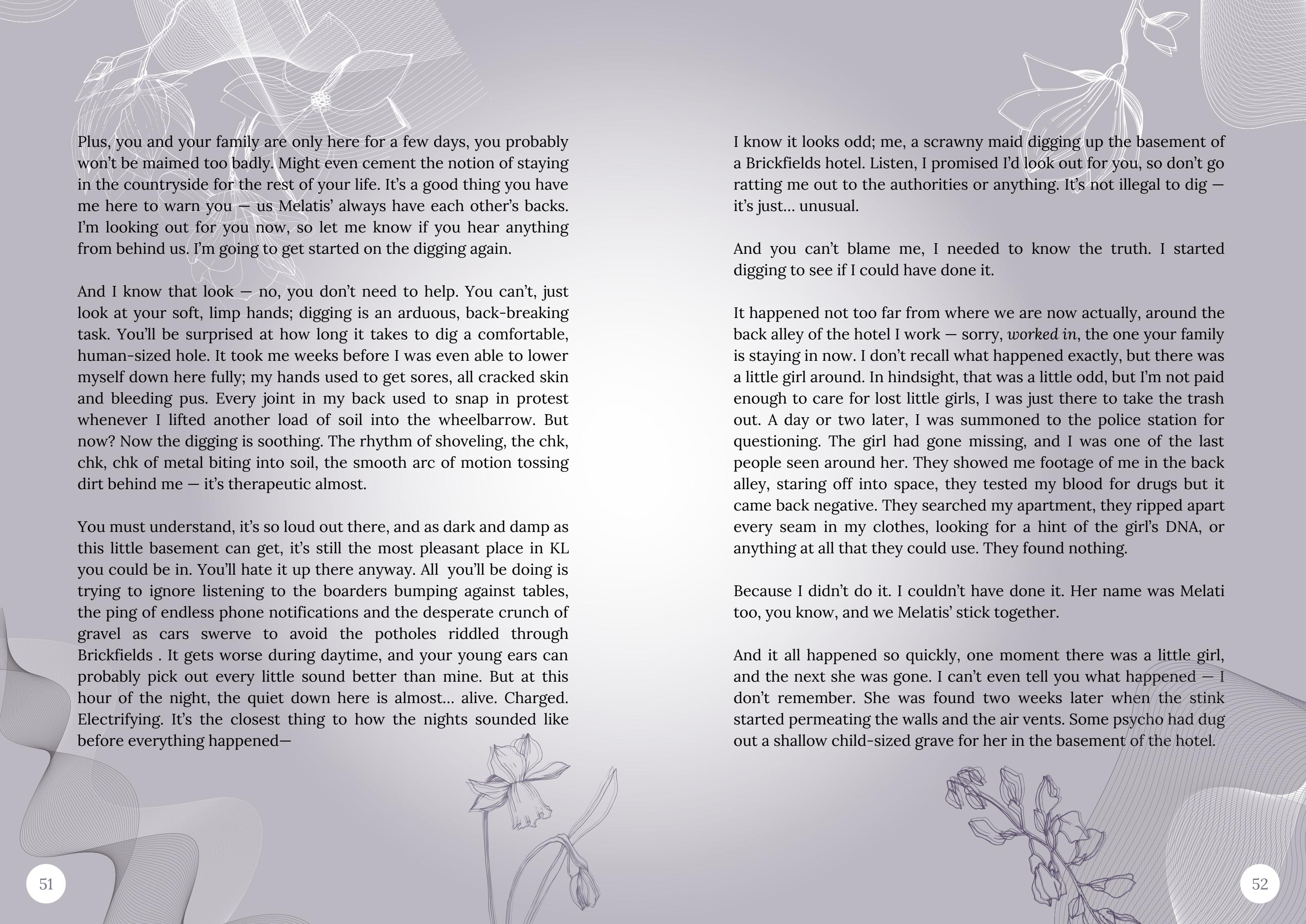
It's best you leave the city before you become one of us. The city works in mysterious ways, and never in the favour of people like us. We're just tools, foolish work horses biting our tongues down on a metal bit, blood lost in the froth flying from our mouths — do you know the tale of the Black Beauty? In the hotel you and your family are staying in, Villa Nabila, a man was once worked to death and buried in the concrete foundations when the building was still under construction. Maybe it's just a rumour, but I think we'll all end up like him; little ginger workhorses, slaving away for the same people who will cart our bodies off without batting an eye, filling our spots with dumber, more obedient versions of ourselves.

I'm breaking the cycle now, Melati.

Ah shit. Sorry, I forget you're just a kid. That's the city in me, that's KL talking. The dust of the roads seeps into your pores, the exhaust fumes rot your airways — one moment you're sane, and the next, you're standing over a dead body in the ground.

I'm joking. Clearly.

Don't look so worried, I wouldn't hurt a fly. You got here in one piece, didn't you? Just for a friendly chat, but I got carried away — my brain takes a while to catch up sometimes, and I'm sorry. No more talking about the city, I think you've gotten the point.



Plus, you and your family are only here for a few days, you probably won't be maimed too badly. Might even cement the notion of staying in the countryside for the rest of your life. It's a good thing you have me here to warn you — us Melatis' always have each other's backs. I'm looking out for you now, so let me know if you hear anything from behind us. I'm going to get started on the digging again.

And I know that look — no, you don't need to help. You can't, just look at your soft, limp hands; digging is an arduous, back-breaking task. You'll be surprised at how long it takes to dig a comfortable, human-sized hole. It took me weeks before I was even able to lower myself down here fully; my hands used to get sores, all cracked skin and bleeding pus. Every joint in my back used to snap in protest whenever I lifted another load of soil into the wheelbarrow. But now? Now the digging is soothing. The rhythm of shoveling, the chk, chk, chk of metal biting into soil, the smooth arc of motion tossing dirt behind me — it's therapeutic almost.

You must understand, it's so loud out there, and as dark and damp as this little basement can get, it's still the most pleasant place in KL you could be in. You'll hate it up there anyway. All you'll be doing is trying to ignore listening to the boarders bumping against tables, the ping of endless phone notifications and the desperate crunch of gravel as cars swerve to avoid the potholes riddled through Brickfields. It gets worse during daytime, and your young ears can probably pick out every little sound better than mine. But at this hour of the night, the quiet down here is almost... alive. Charged. Electrifying. It's the closest thing to how the nights sounded like before everything happened—

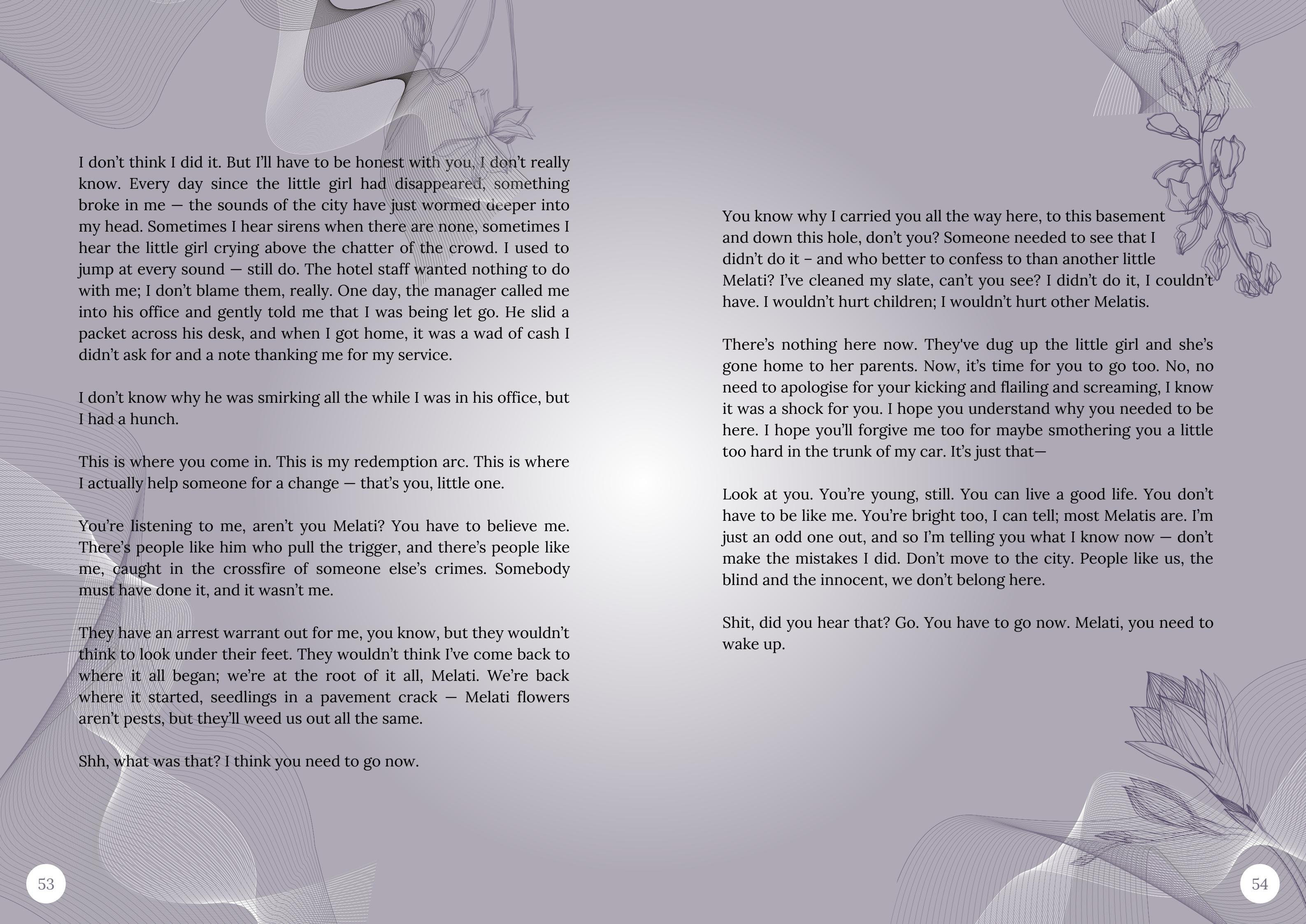
I know it looks odd; me, a scrawny maid digging up the basement of a Brickfields hotel. Listen, I promised I'd look out for you, so don't go ratting me out to the authorities or anything. It's not illegal to dig — it's just... unusual.

And you can't blame me, I needed to know the truth. I started digging to see if I could have done it.

It happened not too far from where we are now actually, around the back alley of the hotel I work — sorry, *worked in*, the one your family is staying in now. I don't recall what happened exactly, but there was a little girl around. In hindsight, that was a little odd, but I'm not paid enough to care for lost little girls, I was just there to take the trash out. A day or two later, I was summoned to the police station for questioning. The girl had gone missing, and I was one of the last people seen around her. They showed me footage of me in the back alley, staring off into space, they tested my blood for drugs but it came back negative. They searched my apartment, they ripped apart every seam in my clothes, looking for a hint of the girl's DNA, or anything at all that they could use. They found nothing.

Because I didn't do it. I couldn't have done it. Her name was Melati too, you know, and we Melatis' stick together.

And it all happened so quickly, one moment there was a little girl, and the next she was gone. I can't even tell you what happened — I don't remember. She was found two weeks later when the stink started permeating the walls and the air vents. Some psycho had dug out a shallow child-sized grave for her in the basement of the hotel.



I don't think I did it. But I'll have to be honest with you, I don't really know. Every day since the little girl had disappeared, something broke in me – the sounds of the city have just wormed deeper into my head. Sometimes I hear sirens when there are none, sometimes I hear the little girl crying above the chatter of the crowd. I used to jump at every sound – still do. The hotel staff wanted nothing to do with me; I don't blame them, really. One day, the manager called me into his office and gently told me that I was being let go. He slid a packet across his desk, and when I got home, it was a wad of cash I didn't ask for and a note thanking me for my service.

I don't know why he was smirking all the while I was in his office, but I had a hunch.

This is where you come in. This is my redemption arc. This is where I actually help someone for a change – that's you, little one.

You're listening to me, aren't you Melati? You have to believe me. There's people like him who pull the trigger, and there's people like me, caught in the crossfire of someone else's crimes. Somebody must have done it, and it wasn't me.

They have an arrest warrant out for me, you know, but they wouldn't think to look under their feet. They wouldn't think I've come back to where it all began; we're at the root of it all, Melati. We're back where it started, seedlings in a pavement crack – Melati flowers aren't pests, but they'll weed us out all the same.

Shh, what was that? I think you need to go now.

You know why I carried you all the way here, to this basement and down this hole, don't you? Someone needed to see that I didn't do it – and who better to confess to than another little Melati? I've cleaned my slate, can't you see? I didn't do it, I couldn't have. I wouldn't hurt children; I wouldn't hurt other Melatis.

There's nothing here now. They've dug up the little girl and she's gone home to her parents. Now, it's time for you to go too. No, no need to apologise for your kicking and flailing and screaming, I know it was a shock for you. I hope you understand why you needed to be here. I hope you'll forgive me too for maybe smothering you a little too hard in the trunk of my car. It's just that—

Look at you. You're young, still. You can live a good life. You don't have to be like me. You're bright too, I can tell; most Melatis are. I'm just an odd one out, and so I'm telling you what I know now – don't make the mistakes I did. Don't move to the city. People like us, the blind and the innocent, we don't belong here.

Shit, did you hear that? Go. You have to go now. Melati, you need to wake up.

Portrait of a Dead Family

Lai Chien Yue | Poetry

Portrait of a Dead Family

The incense burns and lingers,
Obscuring the hallways in smoke.
The picture is still and stale,
Gilded, gleaming dull, framed high.

My little hands tried to reach for it---
Trying to grasp the edges, trying to tear it down.
Even as tears rolled down my cheeks,
Clinging to the curve of my jaw.

Now the smoke has dissipated,
And the dullness in the portrait grows.

These memories become so distant,
And it was like I was never there.

Metallic Garlic

Sara Mostafa | Poetry

my Mother loved Her kitchen

food suffocated the cabinets and cupboards
the intoxicating smell of spices, seasonings, herbs
latched onto Her skin and hair

when She tells me
pretend you are a meal I'm preparing—
I play along

once, i forgot to remove my nail polish
missing my solemn request to God
so She said my fingers were nuts or pistachio
needing to be forced open with a nutcracker—

the metal jaw of the machine kissed my fingers
mixing my blood in the garlic
smell of Her hands

that was the first time i understood what it meant to
blend—
with the person you love

whenever i got too loud
or my personality stretched,
covering Her shadow,
i used the colander to strain my thoughts
and the mandolin slicer to shave
off the parts of me She didn't like—
praying that the remains were palatable

once a month, i would sit in boiling water
with the vegetables and the raw meat
cleansing myself of burnt scars: the smokey scents
of sins She can't forgive—
and i can't repent from

but the smell of metallic garlic
never washed away

Can I Have a Word?

Sara Mostafa | Poetry

Once, I was ethereal... I, I was divine. I was the breadcrumbs that fed the poor and paved the path to truth. I was the blinding sound that awakens the dead and the lyrical melody of life. I was love. I was the lover. But I was never the loved. I was the water and the land. I was the sun. Yet I was not worshipped. I was a never-ending field but they...they ended me.

The howling winds imitated my being and the empty ocean feigned my depth.

I miss the days where they discovered my insides and preserved me on walls and sewed me on bare limbs. As if I were a mirage. As if I were a well that could dry out. As if I could be forgotten.

Listen to me! Do you not remember the age of our beginning? Your innocent mouth kissing my corners, trying to learn how to call me. Your small palms offering to hold me, as if the spaces between your fingers can embrace my light.

Remember! I taught you the secrets that lay before your lips. I gave you power only Gods can dream of. And you went and created beautiful endearing sounds I never heard before. You added to me. You flavoured me with different tongues and teeth. You coloured me in tones only some can speak. You passed me around in bottles, angels and paintings. And wars, oh so many wars, but I was there, I made it all possible.

So, I rewarded you. I built history, time and made dragons fly for you. I buried the sad and the weak in trees of leather decorated with pigments and oil. I nurtured a nation of liars and impostors that named themselves poets and aristocrats. I gave them skies of rhymes and languages to flirt with.

But they ruined me, didn't they? You changed me, didn't you? You kept shackling me to forms and rules I didn't understand. You kept demanding I follow a structure, a shape. Why did I have to stop when you desired? I am not like you, I don't wait for divinity, I was never meant to pause—

So, I turned to the pious and the self-righteous hypocrites. I married governors to pastors and made them dance in sentences they cannot contain. But they altered me, they stitched my skin to meanings and definitions I wasn't meant to wear. They struck me and painted my blood 'censorship'. And you watched as they held the strings to my fate and swung me around like a pendulum to entrance the fools.

Look at me, look at my withered seeds. Look at what you've done. Now I have to ask before I speak, I have to hide behind curtains of syntax and context. Now you have to think twice before you trust me. As if I were the one that betrayed you.

Can you see that I no longer matter? Can you see that you're growing without me? I am dying, or maybe I have already died. Who will condemn you, the murderer of life? What words will they choose to chain you to?

Spilling Out

Lim Le Xian (Leona) | Fiction

The watch lies motionless in his hands as he looks it over. The glass surface of it has been shattered, brazenly exposing its innards. The ticking rambled on senselessly that, if anyone were to look upon it, they'd say that it was spouting mere nonsense.

Corm takes his time observing his own broken, but still faintly glimmering, watch. His Rolex watch, one that he picked up by chance in a flea market, looked entirely brand new just a few weeks back, the tiny cogs and machinery still intact and functioning properly. Corm looks on vacantly out of pure boredom, his empty thoughts of observation drowning out the steady beeping of his surroundings.

The hospital is definitely not a place for a man like him.

He had asked for a TV, and was grateful that the nurses had wired one up in his room. But within less than a day, the channels on the TV have already given Corm an idea of how much he missed the outside.

His fingers steady, Corm blows out a soft puff at the watch. Flakes of fine dust take off into the air, floating off along with sparkled particles of the gold coating. The Rolex comes undone, losing more of its artificial allure as he watches on indifferently.

Slumping in his seat, the bed is starting to feel like a solid blob of jello underneath his thighs. Sitting did not provide him any temporary sense of comfort at all. Corm sighs as he shifts into another position, thinking that lying on his stomach in a torpor manner might help. It is not as if a glass shard had been stabbed painfully into his stomach after all.

Suddenly, a hot flash of pain flares up on his left arm, his left knee tingling at the joint as he shuffles into his new position. With his legs kicked off into their straightened stance, Corm feels more at ease, as if he's already soaking away in the humid air of a spa centre. He tries not to think of the throb from his left elbow, though getting incredibly annoying as the time ticks along with the machinery's beeps.

He leans over the watch in his hand, being held in between his fingertips. Corm notes that his fingers are pale from the cold, particularly from the AC's chill. Now, budding from a reddened palm, his sticks of white tremble slightly as he places the object— the watch— onto the bedside.

The contents start to spill out—

“It seems that you’re enjoying your leisure time here.”

That voice, accompanied by the rumble of the rolling wheels beneath the room’s door, startles Corm in his position; he immediately picks the watch back up again.

“Team leader? Why are you here?” Corm tries to sit back up, but he is immediately halted by a wave of her hand. Team Leader Lotus is not someone who places importance on formalities, and for that, Corm always reserves a sense of respect for the older woman. He grins sheepishly.

“Well, you can say that I have something to talk to you about. It’s quite, particular.” She walks forward, the sound of her black heels clicking on the cool floor clashes with the dull beeping from the machine near his bed. She flicks her hand, tossing the paper in it forward. “It can’t wait until after your recovery.”

The paper lands right in front of his face, completely shielding off the broken watch in his hand. Corm allows a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the sudden requirement of reading from a close distance, before picking up on the headline.

'WHO IS THIS MYSTERY WOMAN? DOUBLE AFFAIR WITH JOURNALIST?'

Corm scrunches up his nose at the obnoxious title, glancing down to the photo attached right beneath it. He freezes.

"Recognise anyone here?" He hears his leader ask, and he nods softly along with her words.

He can't be any less wrong when it comes to identifying the person right on the blurry cover picture. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to notice their own face in a photo.

"Is this out already?" He asks Team Leader Lotus. She folds her arms, nodding her head. Her gold hoops shake along with the movement, faintly jingling.

"I tried to get the company responsible for this to stop, but it seems that they have already printed the copies when I got there this morning." responds the woman, a sour look hanging on her face. "Now everyone is going to see a member of my team in the headlines."

Corm looks back down at the cover, his pale fingers tracing the shape of his unhinged face on the newspaper. Huh, there was a green leaf stuck in his hair. Lotus glances at the broken Rolex in his hand.

"Did you break that in the process?" She asks, and he hums with a semblance of a "Yes".

Sighing, the team leader moves over to a nearby couch, settling herself into a comfortable position. Corm tries to ignore the glint reflecting off her golden hoop earrings.

"Well, mind telling me what happened then?" She smirks with her painted lips, the golden hoops still shining brilliantly from Corm's angle. "Before our boss comes running in and demands for an official report to be made."

He replies with a similar smile to hers. "The whole company's in a disarray now, huh? All because of me."

"That's right." She shifts her weight to the right to mirror him, her symmetrical face tilted to one side, as if a gesture for him to follow suit.

To let the contents of his head spill out...

And Corm finds himself back in the past, on the night before the accident.

...

It was way past bedtime for your average children, but not for working adults like him. As a reporter sent by his team, Corm was one of many thrown into a large crowd. A sardine of a school. A yak of a herd. A fly of a-

"...Business. Just pure business, that is all." One of the journalists near Corm sounded out to his colleagues. The night was getting colder as they lingered around the large metal doors. Corm held in a sneeze, flicking a gloved hand at his nose.

"Business? What sort of business could it be?" A younger voice asked, probably a junior from the same company inquiring for some work tips. "Aren't we just suspecting the guy of having a secret love affair?"

The older newsman promptly hushed the young man, making an exaggerated expression that suggested the severity of the youth's words. Corm blinked at the sight of the man's face, his skin looked to be stretched to their limits by the reservoir of fat upon his head.

"Now, now, young man. Just as we are here doing our jobs, that lady is probably doing hers as well." He replied huskily, "Whoever that goes on dates with a psychopathic millionaire like Tenax is bound to have a few dark intentions beneath as well."

Tenax. The wealthy heir to his own family business that had pharmaceutical branches in as much as ninety countries. He could've been more popular with the ladies... Well, if he hadn't been seen attacking celebrities with a wine bottle in public once.

"That Tenax fellow's notoriety doesn't stop there... That man's been seen slamming a coffee table into a waiter, trashing a glass over some politician's head, and kicking an actor in the balls right on the red carpet..." The senior journalist added, gesturing some sort of theatrics in the direction of his shivering junior.

"But... But isn't he supposedly in love now? Maybe he's changed...?" A moment of pause occurred; the elder man's face was frozen momentarily.

"In love? Bah! Dear boy, this is where you're wrong!" The old man teased the junior, slapping on his beer belly as if he was adding a beat to his non-rhythymical words. "It's all for show! I doubt rich folks like him even know of something like love!"

As he listened on, Corm shuddered at the thought of Tenax being in a relationship with a woman. He wouldn't even let his only sister- or any woman, for that matter- be within a five hundred metres radius of the man, not with those violent tendencies of his.

He walked to a corner of the large gates, gazing up to view the Tenax family emblem carved into the metal. He was beginning to get drowsy, working late hours yesternight was beginning to latch onto him. It's all because of his team leader Lotus, dumping all the work on him that day because of her need to be at a meeting. He thought about asking her for a raise soon, or perhaps just a meal that's on her for once. He stifled a yawn, one eye glaring down at his fake Rolex watch while the other closed temporarily. It's already 11:34PM. Judging from the crowd, it seemed that the journalists around him were also starting to feel weary and uneasy.

They were all here because someone from the industry had tipped them that the mysterious lover of Tenax had gone into his mansion earlier today, but no sign of her leaving was to be seen. Some of the reporters who had arrived the soonest, for all they knew, had not seen a single shadow appear near all the entrances and exits. She could have already left, as some feared, but she could also just be staying for longer than a few hours... Or even for the night.

Corm let out a tired groan, before picking at his coat pockets for a snack. It looked like he might have to camp out here for the night, unless Lotus could send someone else in time for a change in shifts. He went to one side of the road to sit down, his hand clutching the packaged bread he found in one of his pockets. Better to take a short break now, for there seemed to be no motions from beyond the gates.

His phone vibrated from another one of his pockets, signalling a message. Corm grabbed it, his mind desiring something of a distraction. Anything to cure him of his intense boredom at the moment, and the message did exactly that. His eyes instantly lit up at the sight of his sister's nickname. She was still wondering where he was at this hour.

He grinned, hitting send after selecting a sticker of a cat shrugging. Another vibration, and there she sent a reply.

'I'm feeling sleepy from work'

She even added a GIF of a sleeping cat, as if the text itself wasn't apparent enough.

"What's up with her...?" He muttered to himself. As he chewed at the dry food, a sense of dread settled at the pit of his stomach. Store-bought pastries really were terrible, though they were the only thing that he could afford to eat on nights like these. Corm gazed once again into the Tenax property. There was still nothing.

The rustling of the leaves overhead pulsated through the grounds. Amongst the silence, Corm felt at ease to be far away from others in the crowd. There was not really anyone who lurked near the side of the road, most of them feared missing the opportunity to catch a glimpse of the mysterious Tenax mistress. Corm watched on, observing as the other newsmen set up camp right on the asphalt road; some of them had already unpacked their complex cameras for close-up shots, while others had their bags of microphones opened up. They were keen on not missing a single moment, a single shot of potentially the biggest piece of news they could get a scoop on. The stereotype of journalists being pests was truly accurate at times like these.

Corm closed his eyes temporarily for his well-needed rest, leaning back as much as he possibly could against the tree to feel some form of comfort. It was a shame that he didn't bring anything else aside from a simple camera and notebook. He could've brought all his camping essentials and had an easier time.

If only there were something that he could lie on right now... A rug, or even a raincoat would suffice-

His eyes snapped open, as Corm quickly rotated his neck to the source of a sudden noise. He heard a metallic clank, albeit faint. A small stream of figures came flowing out through a tiny side door unseen to others, due to the flock of vines and leaves blocking the sight of it. Corm speedily made his way up, before slowing down his pace behind some bushes. Was this what being a cartoon villain feels like? Even after years of doing field work, he still couldn't get used to the sneaky aspect of being paparazzi.

Most of the people seen coming out were in uniforms, Corm immediately took note of the Tenax family emblem sewn into their backs. They were employees.

All aside from one of them.

There stood the prettiest woman Corm had ever laid his eyes on, her facial features by themselves made her distinct from the surrounding servants. Her platinum blond locks flowed effortlessly down her shoulders, her pale face glistened even under the limited amount of illumination. She must be the one they were all looking for.

Corm watched as one of the servants near her handed her a blank white sheet for her to veil herself with... He almost scoffed, whose idea was it, to let such an obvious target run around in a bright sheet?

For as stupid as that idea sounded, she did not seem to realise it. The woman did not react when the servants wrapped the piece of fabric around her, her eyes seemed to be focusing elsewhere...

On him. She saw him hiding.

Corm wanted to back away at that moment, as if running away would make this scenario his eternal little secret, the one he brings to his grave. Beads of cold sweat were forming, dotting his temples and forehead. She gave him an alluring smile, her eyes crinkled to reveal long lashes.

“Someone appeared! Over there, I saw a woman!” One of the journalists yelled, disrupting the quiet moment that he shared with the mysterious woman.

And before Corm could register it, she disappeared right along with the white sheet, as if it had swallowed her up completely into non-existence. What just happened?

The swarm of people behind him came flying, chasing the fleeing group of servants. The sounds of shutters, paired with disorganised sets of footsteps formed a cacophonic blackhole of disarray. The group’s presence had threatened to swallow up the glow of the mysterious beauty, a flurry of desirous moths flocking to consume the glittering blonde.

Corm had the instant realisation; it was nothing more than a distraction.

He immediately jolted right back to the front of the metal gates, where a rare few lingered behind to look over others’ belongings. Corm gasped from the instantaneous dash, but just as he expected, he saw those gates swing open.

Corm flashed a smirk as soon as he saw those headlights appear from beyond the foggy air. That bastard, he must’ve expected this all to have happened. The main attraction of the show was right here, while the rest of the swarm went on a wild goose chase. The car immediately dimmed its lights, for fear of getting more attention than it should at the entranceway.

Pleased with himself, Corm accompanied the other reporters who were nearby to close in on the vehicle. It was weird, the car was moving ever so slowly.

“Oh no, the car–” Someone close to him tried to stop it, only stopping in their words when a crunching noise came from beneath its wheels. The driver was aware of the equipment that the reporters had laid out, though the car ended up grinding them up anyway.

Corm ignored the tortuous sounds of the others’ monetary loss, he was more interested in the contents within the car. He leaned towards one of the closest windows, eyes trained to look through the blackened screen. If he could just tilt his head a bit more, he might be able to catch a glimpse of the truth–

A sleeping face spilled out, right into his sight.

“H-Huh...?” Corm reached up a hand, his fingers pressed against the glass pane. He couldn’t mistake it, he recognised the face more than most people on this planet. An image of a certain cat sprung into his mind. Why would she be here?

His mind went blank, no emotion came to mind. How should someone feel about something as sudden as this?

“Someone appeared! Over there, I saw a woman!” The same line rang out, it appeared that the swarm was making its way back. Keen to circle the car as a crowd, the reporters, the pests, were back on track. No one could have expected the car to appear like this, without any additional security around it.

And no one could have expected what occurred next.

The window nearest to Corm was rolled down just slightly. Tenax, whom he’d only seen in pictures, was sitting a little too close to his sister. One obnoxious finger pointed at Corm in accusation.

'Watch.'

Corm's mind flickered in colour. Red.

The nearest reporters let out gasps and screams once they saw Corm's fist slammed against glass, the window split and cracked under the fierce pressure. He twisted his arm, and blood came spilling out against the pane, bringing the crowd around him into a standstill.

It only lasted a moment, before the cameras started snapping. Engulfed by hundreds of these glaring bright flashes, Corm lifted his fist, his knuckles flicking sprinkles of red substance onto the cracks. His Rolex was broken due to the impact, but he didn't take a single glance at it. Flakes of its fake gold coating went ahead and attached themselves between the glass pieces, collectively reflecting a shine of the camera lights.

As if punching the window wasn't enough, Corm lifted his left knee for a slight second, before-

...

"So, you're telling me that you forgot what happened after seeing the car?" Lotus sits cross-legged at her couch, her eyes filled with suspicion. "Not even what you saw in that car?"

Corm only shrugs at the woman. He hopes that the gesture was enough to let her know that it was something personal. She sighs.

"Y'know, I would have loved at least a clue of who was truly in that car. I really should've ditched last night's meeting." She looks to be on the verge of asking more, but Corm sees her shoulders relax in surrender.

"Does it matter though? He's bound to reveal that mistress of his." Corm smiles sheepishly, silently trying to negotiate for a way out of this. "You know how ruthless our industry can be."

"Well, *our* efforts yesterday were wasted." Lotus coughs out a laugh in response. "Since some genius decided to crack the window and make a scene, none of the reporters could get a clear shot of the mystery woman."

"That's just how it is, I guess. We—"

"FOUND THE MYSTERY WOMAN!" The hospital door slammed open. The boss of his company stands completely dishevelled at the doorway, sweat tickling his suit collar. Without a word, the old man moves pathetically over to the remote, all to switch to a specific channel on the TV.

The three can only watch as the talk host reveals his slideshow of pictures, all of them containing that recognisable head of platinum blond hair. Tenax's mistress has finally been exposed, her glorious figure placed at the centre of people's attention.

Corm pays it no mind, though, as he looks down at his Rolex watch. Once again, he tips it to one side, threatening to let its contents spill out—

A ringtone. Corm glances over to see that his sister's calling. She's probably calling to explain everything, but he can already grasp the truth in his head.

He smiles, unknowingly allowing the watch to slip onto its belly.

White residue of powdery glass reveals itself. Within the pile, Corm makes the mental note that there were dots of gold sprinkled in there as well.

The truth comes spilling out.

I Think of You (ghazal)

Srilakshmi Chintakindi | Poetry

I stand at my grandmother's balcony, safe, fresh, free, and I think of you.
Bouquets flow of the night-blooming winter jasmines, like when I think of you.

I was ever observant, never the observed. Even if observed, never acknowledged;
except by you, saving me a piece at the party, and I appreciate you when I think of you.

Only having known dysfunction, where even affection felt like sandpaper,
yours is pure 'function' — ah, a cooling gel pack, and I soothe as I think of you.

You never just listened, you learned; never intercepted my weirdness, rather
invited it over for the sleepover. I fear I won't find another like you when I think of you.

I was diffident and I deferred, asking you to the dance I was second.
Though you own a dilemma, I discern what is due, and I mope as I think of you.

An Unconventional Date

Sara Mostafa | Poetry

And so, every fortnight
quarter past 11, I sit and await—
the poem's arrival.

Sometimes it visits me in half-sleep
untethered, unarmed—and
I, a foolish predator, confine it in a four cornered room
confiscating it from drool and rule over it
so, I can arrogantly claim, that it was my idea.

Sometimes it's in the arch of mama's back when she performs rukū'
and I have to stealthily grasp the words
concealing them in the lines on my palms before
she notices that I'm entranced by the worldly rather than the holy.

Sometimes it's lurking—delaying her presence until baba's
lips manage to sound the 4-syllable phrase my mouth
never learned to say. Those are the times where even I want
the poem to linger on his stubborn wrinkles—to remain unsaid.
I am sorry.

Sometimes it's in that awfully written ballad
I dedicated to infatuation and someone's eyes I almost forgot
the color of—as if the poem can forgive me for the atrocious time
when I tried to rhyme their name with mine.

Sometimes it doesn't show up.
It abandons me on the last stanza, and asks that I
let it go—begs me to give up trying
to write the same line over and over again.
Pleads with overwritten and unprepared
after I finally found the word that rhymes with orange.

Sometimes it's breathing inside of me
lining my arteries with words I'm too hesitant to pronounce—
words I'm sure will echo the ache my knees carried too well.
It will spread its verses of no mercy beyond my pages—
Until I cough the truth. Until I,
surrender and become the poem.
Until we write it—together.

Remembrance

Ivan Ling | Poetry

An empty-eyed old man stares beyond
the horizon, towards a sundered evening sun,
while the land breeze coolly brushes
the bristles of his whitened beard.

A body motionless, the old man listens
by the beach— squawking of nosy seagulls
and roaring of hungry waves.
But there is this child, who stumbles

barefoot across the beige mounds,
heels kicking up sand dust,
his soul a new-born daffodil in March—
who catches the attention of this old man.

He watches the youngster
skip and jump
in spirals and clouds
of gold and orange—

a heartbeat.
Why did he care,
for youth has all
but seeped away from him?

Gone were his days, where raucous and vodka-filled cheers
echoed along this silent beach; where Mustang tracks crossed
in drunken stupor; friends and lovers slept soundly
under the star-sprinkled night.

Watching this child breathe with such an appetite—
the lost light finally returns to the old man's eyes.
He walks slowly towards the sea,
he watches as the waves swallow everything:

the vodka bottles, the winded tire tracks, the mismatched footprints.
And as the sea blew goodbye
to the last piece of ember
inside him, this old man could finally

smile.



Home

Gracia Ruya | Monologue Contest Winner #1

Hey ma, sorry I haven't visited in a while. I took the bus to come here this time, the whole 5 hours. I'm living on my own right now. It's a little small room, but its homey and I have my own shower too. I make sure to make my bed every morning now, I know how that used to drive you mad. I eat my greens, even been learning to cook them! I even got a job working as a plumber, the old man there is showing me the ropes and (chuckle) it's a crap job but it pays pretty good.

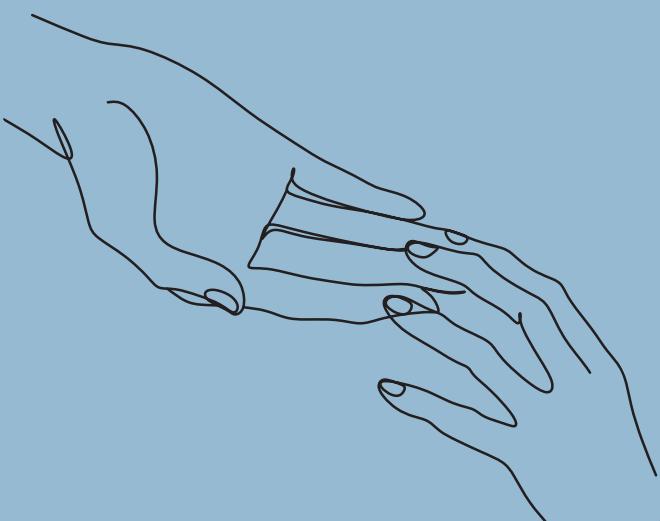
Alex is doing well, said she wants to study photography can you believe that? I heard her humming that song you used to sing the other day; I think she's happier now. She's applying to all those snazzy universities you used to make fun of. I'm saving up so it'll be easier on her when she gets in. The pictures she take are really good! I don't really understand them myself, but she walks around taking pics of everything: the stop signs, people in parks, and flowers on the sidewalk. I'm taking care of her best as I can, like how you taught me to. Are you proud of me, ma?

We've been doing pretty good for ourselves, I think. We've got our ups and downs along the way but its fine. I know you didn't think dad would walk out on us with that other woman. I know you wanted to forget, and that all the drinking messed up your insides. I know you stayed up waiting for him 'til dawn came with a stale cup of joe in your hand. Did you know that I stayed up too? All that staying up wrecked you, ma.

I'm sorry you can't be here to see us. I'm sorry life wasn't so good back then; I know you didn't plan on having us. I'm sorry we didn't say anything when we took the morning bus out of town. I'm sorry we took the booze money you hid under the pillow. I'm sorry for not being there for you, for not realizing you needed us like how we needed you. I'm sorry I didn't make my bed when I left.

We got to see a lot of things, at least. Stayed in a barn for a couple of days and hung out with some cows. Most of the days we slept in bus stations or under the stars though. It gets cold but as long as we sticked close to each other its fine. We kept moving to find a place we could call home. In the end home was the both of us. I just wished you could've been a part of our home.

I need to head home now before the last bus runs out of town. Rest well, ma. I'll bring you more flowers next time. Love ya, bye.



The Lie I Used To Believe

Muhammad Amry | Monologue Contest Winner #2

Bang! When I was a kid, I used to— Clang! I used to climb into this oversized Georgian mahogany wardrobe. It was way too large to be in a two-bedroom flat. But, it was free and an heirloom so... Bang! Clang! I used to sit in there with these winter coats above me. I had my metallic flashlight grandpa gave me for my 4th birthday. I'd sit in there and go through comics I got. I'd go through it over and over again. I couldn't get a lot of new ones. So, the ones I had tended to get worn out quick. Archie Comics was one of my favourites. There was this series called Jughead's Time Police. He'd dive into adventures through the streams of time. He'd travel to all these cool places and had cool gadgets. Got my little mind really excited. He even found a soulmate of sorts. That's probably the most unrealistic part of that story.

Bang! Clang! Thsss! It's always something. Pictures are great cause you don't have to be able to hear yourself. The wardrobe helps muffle noise a bit. I don't know which I prefer. Those ear grating sounds of random objects being hit and trashed around. Or the endless piercing fucking shouting. Either way, it makes my heart starts pumping like a galloping horse trying to outrun a cheetah. It gets really hot. I get all sweaty. And my body feels like it wants to jump. I don't know where it thinks we can go. But it's ready.

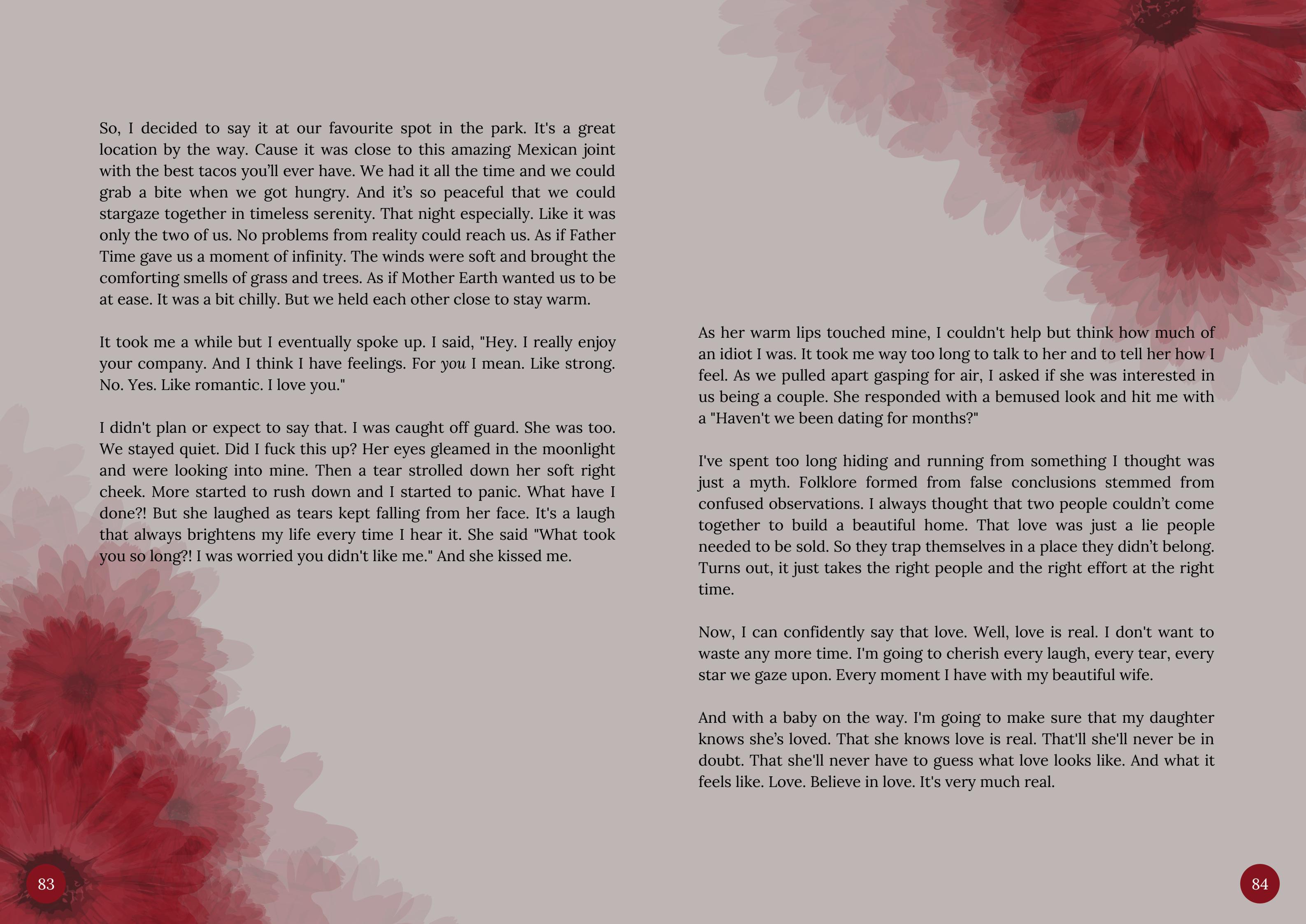
I learned pretty quickly that love. Well, love is a lie. It's a scam like an honest politician.

In high school, my friends would fall in and out of 'love' like tides undecided at the beach. This is the one they'd say. When whatever they thought they had eventually, and predictably, crashed and burned they'd jump in again. This time, this is the one. Shows what they know.

By the time I got to university, I was convinced that soulmates were big pile of bull. And love at first sight. Well that's just insane. You can't see someone and think there's a future here. No way can someone fall in love just like that.

Then one day, I saw her. It was like someone put in firecrackers inside me and lit them all at once. I didn't think much of it. I didn't want to. But we were in the same classes. I took some time to approach her but eventually I did. We talked and kept talking. And I liked talking to her and she seemed to like talking to me. And I just wanted to spend more time with her. Every time I saw her, I couldn't help but smile. I felt safe? I was at ease. It was easy being with her.

Was I a fool in my beliefs? I...I couldn't have been. Yet these peculiarities I felt. How would you explain them? Anyway, I just couldn't take it any longer. After months of being close I just...Well, I had to at least say something. Even if she might not feel the same way.



So, I decided to say it at our favourite spot in the park. It's a great location by the way. Cause it was close to this amazing Mexican joint with the best tacos you'll ever have. We had it all the time and we could grab a bite when we got hungry. And it's so peaceful that we could stargaze together in timeless serenity. That night especially. Like it was only the two of us. No problems from reality could reach us. As if Father Time gave us a moment of infinity. The winds were soft and brought the comforting smells of grass and trees. As if Mother Earth wanted us to be at ease. It was a bit chilly. But we held each other close to stay warm.

It took me a while but I eventually spoke up. I said, "Hey. I really enjoy your company. And I think I have feelings. For you I mean. Like strong. No. Yes. Like romantic. I love you."

I didn't plan or expect to say that. I was caught off guard. She was too. We stayed quiet. Did I fuck this up? Her eyes gleamed in the moonlight and were looking into mine. Then a tear strolled down her soft right cheek. More started to rush down and I started to panic. What have I done?! But she laughed as tears kept falling from her face. It's a laugh that always brightens my life every time I hear it. She said "What took you so long?! I was worried you didn't like me." And she kissed me.

As her warm lips touched mine, I couldn't help but think how much of an idiot I was. It took me way too long to talk to her and to tell her how I feel. As we pulled apart gasping for air, I asked if she was interested in us being a couple. She responded with a bemused look and hit me with a "Haven't we been dating for months?"

I've spent too long hiding and running from something I thought was just a myth. Folklore formed from false conclusions stemmed from confused observations. I always thought that two people couldn't come together to build a beautiful home. That love was just a lie people needed to be sold. So they trap themselves in a place they didn't belong. Turns out, it just takes the right people and the right effort at the right time.

Now, I can confidently say that love. Well, love is real. I don't want to waste any more time. I'm going to cherish every laugh, every tear, every star we gaze upon. Every moment I have with my beautiful wife.

And with a baby on the way. I'm going to make sure that my daughter knows she's loved. That she knows love is real. That'll she'll never be in doubt. That she'll never have to guess what love looks like. And what it feels like. Love. Believe in love. It's very much real.

Just Gud Things

Srilakshmi Chintakindi | Monologue Contest Winner #3

Look, I don't think you understand, once we open those cage doors and let them out, they enter this forest and it's over. We won't be able to round them up very easily, is what I'm saying! They'll dominate the entire fifty acres of land. These elephant shrews aren't the same ones you find on Planet Art or... or Earth, right? Ahem, Earth. Well, we're not on Earth anymore; we're not even in the same galaxy! We're in the Terentonus cluster. That's the M81 according to Earth's space nomenclature, I suppose. And as you can see, it's very different here. If you notice, the flora you find here doesn't even exist on Earth yet! They don't exist. Earth's ecosystems haven't evolved to this extent yet. Look at that orchid behind you. Have you seen such an orchid before? (Doesn't wait for an answer)

Of course, you haven't. It has tentacles like cuttlefish, it's endemic to Gud, and it appears to have taken a liking to your curly hair, (Orchid quickly retracts its outstretched tentacles).

Better stay away from it. (Phaxsi moves away from it, scandalised)



It's like- It's like you Earthlings are back in time. God, I can't believe they think a person from the Anthropocene can deal with wildlife issues on Gud! You're only here for research. Why do they think you should be allowed to make these decisions? Just try to observe and learn. Yes, I know your supervisor has three PhD's, Phaxsi. I don't care how many PhD's in astrobiology Dr. Merkel earned on Earth! University education on Earth not only primitive, it is also very subjective. You Earthlings didn't even know about life on other planets until roughly ten years ago, right? Surely, you don't expect to have gained complete knowledge about the ecology of all the known planets in such a short amount of time. I mean, you didn't even know that a planet from your own solar system, Pluto, was occupied by ice moths. And when your leaders found out about the ice moths, they went ahead and decimated the entire population for reasons unknown – no, I do not want to know those reasons right now! I visited Pluto after the fiasco. It was an extremely dumb move. Do you even know what happened when the Lepidopterans from Planet Gomma found out about the genocide? It took the leaders from the entire Western quadrant to convince them not to start a war! It was a whole thing. I think the Asteroid miners from dark space even made them some kind of deal. We didn't even think they were capable of thinking about universal peace, seeing as their favourite hobby results in dislodging asteroids and sending them flying in all directions... how is that peaceful? Oh, and the Martians were concerned if their proximity to Earth would put them in danger, it was that bad. Would have felt sorry for them too, if not for their terribly bad breath! Er, no, no. Just kidding, hehe. They're such peace-loving creatures, Martians. Good creatures. Solid morals. The Lepidopterans would have eliminated your entire race in a nanosecond! What? You didn't know about this? Your leaders forget to mention this little detail? Let me tell you this; when I was on Gomma... It was quite stupid what happened; I was asked to park in a secret location above a lake. Dozens of these juvenile tuft eels got into my hovercraft (makes a slithering motion with hands)



No idea how they managed that, but it was a nightmare, getting them out. They're very territorial, you know? And cleaning up all the slime, after? It's fluorescent too... stank up the whole cabin for days! It was the day I decided I needed an assistant... Their vice-senior scientist found it 'funny'. So rude. She kept laughing at dinner. Tried to hide it but her antennae kept bouncing, it was so obvious. Anyway, I'm digressing. I was allowed into a top-secret research lab where they were experimenting on NBED's. What are those? Of course, you don't know what those are! No one does yet, Phaxsi. Nucleotide-Based Extermination Devices. Basically, can be gas particles of any poisonous element, but nano-engineered to recognise and affect organisms with pre-specified gene combinations. Fascinating stuff, really! Okay, that was insensitive of me. Of course, there is no war. Don't worry, nothing is going to happen to the human race; your abuela is perfectly safe. But I ask you this out of curiosity: The ridiculousness in thinking you're alone in such a vast Universe? How? Only Earthlings would think that! Only Earthlings... sorry. Didn't mean to come off as a planetist. (scratches neck sheepishly)

Er... don't tell Dr. Tanaka I said that. He repeatedly told me to be polite since your research request is really part of the diplomatic treaty our solar systems signed, and I just- I'm not trying to start a war. I just want you to understand that these elephant shrews aren't the cute, cuddly rodents you find on Earth and the other planets from the Milky Way. These shrews are big, like your mastiff dogs. Tibetan mastiffs. And they have four torrimetre thick keratin scales that tranquiliser darts cannot penetrate. The only way you can tranq them is by shooting them in the gaps between their paw pads. And I'm sure you can guess that, despite not being evolved enough like us humans, they are sensible enough not to walk around with exposed paws - like with their paws in the air like this (demonstrates).

So, once we release them, tagging them would be extremely difficult for one thing. And secondly, if they fall ill because we overestimated their galactic immunities, we won't be able to treat them because we can't tranq them! (sighs loudly)

What? Is someone- (Whips around)

Wait- What! Sally? You're Sally from the 'Analysis of Crenothrix sp. on Space Debris' Project, right? You're Dr. Merkel?

The Right Decision

Tan Li Ling | Monologue Contest Honourable Mention

Hello? Hello? Is anyone out there? Oh! Of course, there isn't! Just my luck! The entire trip hasn't gone as I hoped, and now I'm lost, hungry, cold!

...Maybe...maybe it was a mistake coming here.

I hoped for a journey filled with wonder, yet...I only found myself facing problem after problem. How foolish I was to think that I was destined to embark on this journey!

Sigh...it does seem to be that way in the beginning. It does seem to feel that way...when I was offered the chance to explore a new world...I felt so...relieved. For a long time, I wanted so desperately to escape my home...the life I've grown so tired of living, the person I was so tired of being. And there it was! The golden opportunity! The chance to achieve what I wanted, to revel and discover who I am! Who I can be!

Yet, as I stand here, alone, in the dark, the old customs I abhorred suddenly seem...desirable. Such a cruel joke this is! All because of a pretentious desire of mine!

...Ma was right. I wasn't cut out for this.

Then again...if I hadn't come, I would never have known what it was like to let loose. Although, it did backfire a few times, but...it was better than having learnt nothing.

What will I have achieved if I had stayed? I've been there long enough to know that I'll be stuck in an endless cycle of the same things, the same people, and the same places! Day by day until I drop dead, unsatisfied with the life I've lived! All because I've thrown away the sole opportunity given to me. The solution to allay my discontentment!

Maybe...maybe...I had made the right decision.

Yes – I may not be happy with how some things turned out, but every cloud has its silver lining! Without this trip I wouldn't have met some of the most important people in my life! And without them I wouldn't have laughed as hard and smiled as bright! I wouldn't have tried so many things, seen so many sights and I wouldn't have made so many precious memories.

...I have made the right decision after all.

Because now I could go to sleep knowing that I have lived this journey.

Contributor Bios

Author of

Musk, Leather, Bergamot, & Cedar

Zoe is a coffee-addicted 2nd Year English student, still trying to figure out how to wake up before noon. She loves spending hours on Tiktok and crying over television dramas. She hopes you've enjoyed this piece <3

Author of **Honeyed Needles**

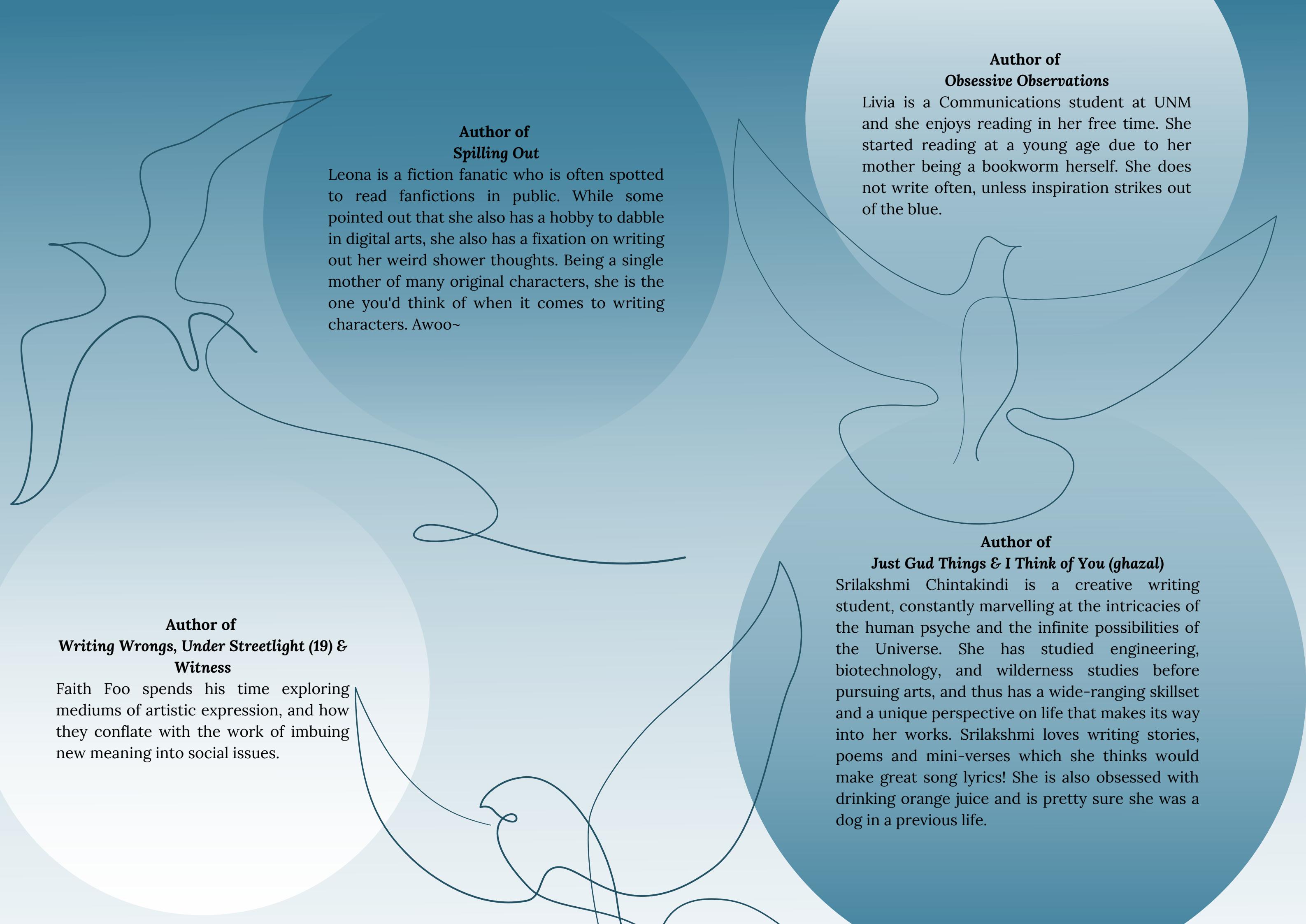
Lingkan Carissa is currently in her third year of studying English with Creative Writing at the University of Nottingham Malaysia

Author of **Portrait of a Dead Family**

Chien Yue (Julia) is just your average English language student who likes to write about anything that comes to mind!

Artist of **The Heartbreak**

Jedidah-Joy Lai Jo-Kay (Jedidah/Kay) finds comfort in being able to use her skills to create art. Not being able to find a comfortable medium, they eventually turned to using their body and face. They see it as an escape from reality each time they are able to create magic and wonder out of nothing but makeup and face paints. Being a self-taught artist has taught them to see beauty in everything and everyone all of the time, it has taught them to love themselves more. We are all, in fact, made unique and glorious in our own special way. Socials- Instagram: @_kkay._-



Author of *Writing Wrongs, Under Streetlight (19) & Witness*

Faith Foo spends his time exploring mediums of artistic expression, and how they conflate with the work of imbuing new meaning into social issues.

Author of *Spilling Out*

Leona is a fiction fanatic who is often spotted to read fanfictions in public. While some pointed out that she also has a hobby to dabble in digital arts, she also has a fixation on writing out her weird shower thoughts. Being a single mother of many original characters, she is the one you'd think of when it comes to writing characters. Awoo~

Author of *Obsessive Observations*

Livia is a Communications student at UNM and she enjoys reading in her free time. She started reading at a young age due to her mother being a bookworm herself. She does not write often, unless inspiration strikes out of the blue.

Author of *Just Gud Things & I Think of You (ghazal)*

Srilakshmi Chintakindi is a creative writing student, constantly marvelling at the intricacies of the human psyche and the infinite possibilities of the Universe. She has studied engineering, biotechnology, and wilderness studies before pursuing arts, and thus has a wide-ranging skillset and a unique perspective on life that makes its way into her works. Srilakshmi loves writing stories, poems and mini-verses which she thinks would make great song lyrics! She is also obsessed with drinking orange juice and is pretty sure she was a dog in a previous life.

**Author of
My Hokusai**

A being of logic who seeks magic in words.

Author of

**Sestina: Dear Diary, Timezones, On Being 19, Pause,
Metallic Garlic, Can I Have a Word? & An
Unconventional Date**

Sara Mostafa is a young Egyptian writer endeavoring to immortalize moments in her life through art. She is currently pursuing a Creative Writing Masters in hopes of publishing her own collection of poetry sometime in the future. Overwhelmed by the fleetingness of life, she asks that you forgive her if she makes a spelling mistake (or two).

**Author of
Pastiche**

Adlan Haziq is an English major currently pursuing his third year of study in Creative Writing. The writer bases most of their reading and writing in literary fiction, genre fantasy and science fiction. Career aspirations include professional copywriting and stand-up comedy flavoured with theatre.

Author of

**Seputih-Putih Melati, Tether, And Fall & Eigengrau &
the nowhere man**

Tan Xin Ni (or known as Pixie among her friends) has spent over half her life with her nose buried in a book. She used to have a dream of being published but nowadays, she mostly dreams about paying off her student debt in full. Having worked as a freelance writer, editor, and social media content creator for about three years now, she firmly believes that one day she will achieve the ultimate dream of finally being able to write in her sleep.

Author of Short Escape

Shaida S. is generally an outspoken introvert & a dorky nerd; there is no in-between. Her idea of fun involves getting her book in a nose; sipping steaming, instant coffee. Her dictionary says rainy days are fabulous weather. She collects humans' stories and shares them on her blog and podcast, The Shaida Effect.

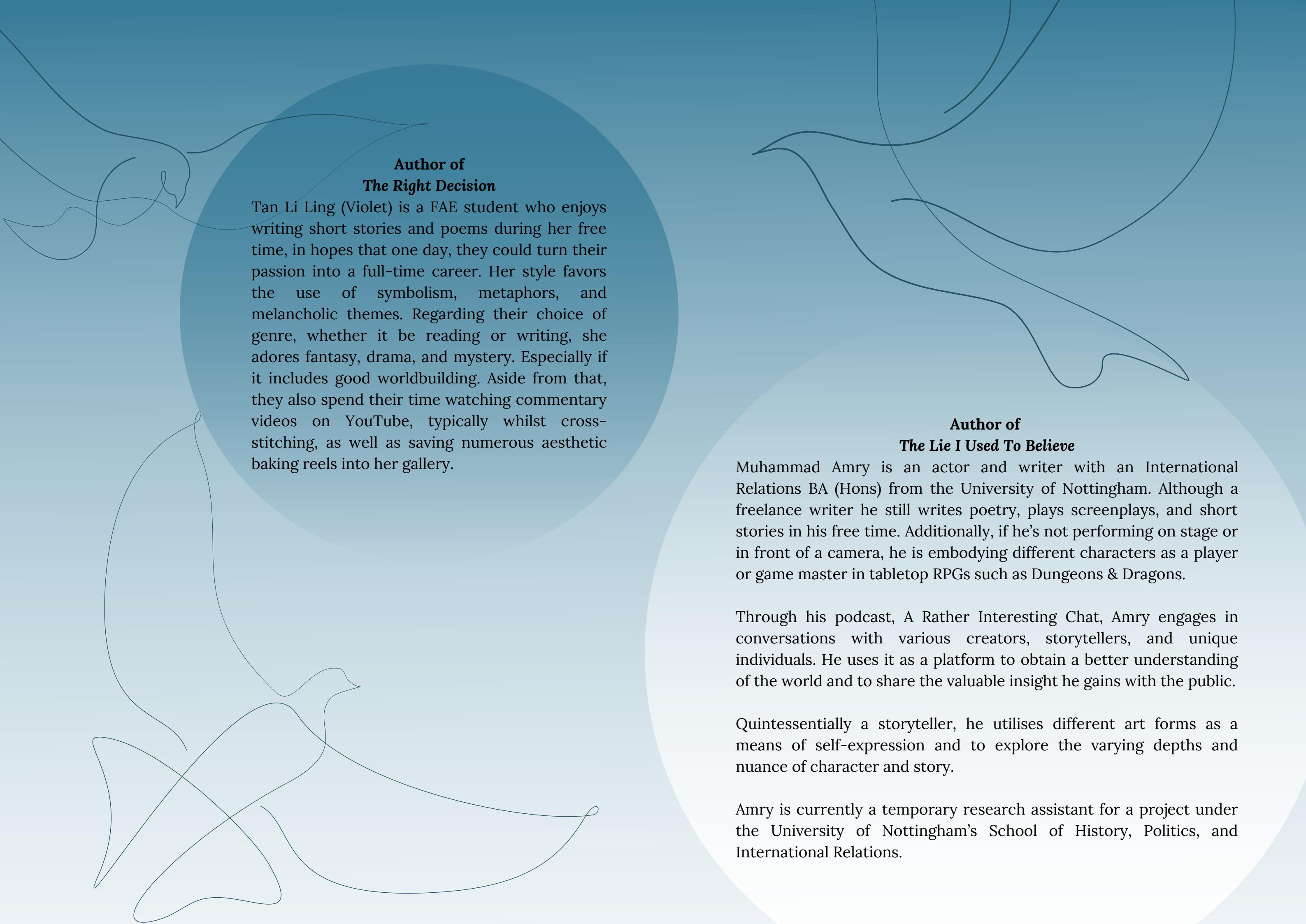
Author of Remembrance

Ivan is just chilling (well, he's trying to) as a final-year Creative Writing student at UNMC. Casually wasting away his hours on YouTube, he still writes poetry on a weekly basis – well, it's also because he has his own personal blog. How does he always get inspiration? A good bitter cup of Davidoff, and any object within his peripheral.

Author of Home

Gracia Angely Ruya is a Chemical Engineering student in Nottingham University Malaysia who loves reading, sleeping, and gaming. She is currently into reading fantasy novels and playing video games. Although she prefers to dive into mystical worlds full of magic and danger, Gracia also enjoys the small things in life such as having hot toast and tea for breakfast.

She joined the monologue contest with the support of her amazing friends who encouraged her to try her best despite not having written anything in a long time. Thoroughly enjoying the process, she hopes to continue writing more pieces in the future.



Author of *The Right Decision*

Tan Li Ling (Violet) is a FAE student who enjoys writing short stories and poems during her free time, in hopes that one day, they could turn their passion into a full-time career. Her style favors the use of symbolism, metaphors, and melancholic themes. Regarding their choice of genre, whether it be reading or writing, she adores fantasy, drama, and mystery. Especially if it includes good worldbuilding. Aside from that, they also spend their time watching commentary videos on YouTube, typically whilst cross-stitching, as well as saving numerous aesthetic baking reels into her gallery.

Author of *The Lie I Used To Believe*

Muhammad Amry is an actor and writer with an International Relations BA (Hons) from the University of Nottingham. Although a freelance writer he still writes poetry, plays screenplays, and short stories in his free time. Additionally, if he's not performing on stage or in front of a camera, he is embodying different characters as a player or game master in tabletop RPGs such as Dungeons & Dragons.

Through his podcast, A Rather Interesting Chat, Amry engages in conversations with various creators, storytellers, and unique individuals. He uses it as a platform to obtain a better understanding of the world and to share the valuable insight he gains with the public.

Quintessentially a storyteller, he utilises different art forms as a means of self-expression and to explore the varying depths and nuance of character and story.

Amry is currently a temporary research assistant for a project under the University of Nottingham's School of History, Politics, and International Relations.

Editor Bios

Amalin Sofiya (she/her)

Marketing Director

Amalin Sofiya is in Particle. Amalin Sofiya is Particle's Marketing Director. If you've read this far, please follow Particle's Instagram page @particle_unm — Please.

Sara Mostafa (she/her)

Co-Editor in Chief

Sara Mostafa is a young Egyptian writer endeavoring to immortalize moments in her life through art. She is currently pursuing a Creative Writing Master's in hopes of publishing her own collection of poetry sometime in the future. Overwhelmed by the fleetingness of life, she asks that you forgive her if she makes a spelling mistake (or two).

Varsha Murali Kaushik (she/her)

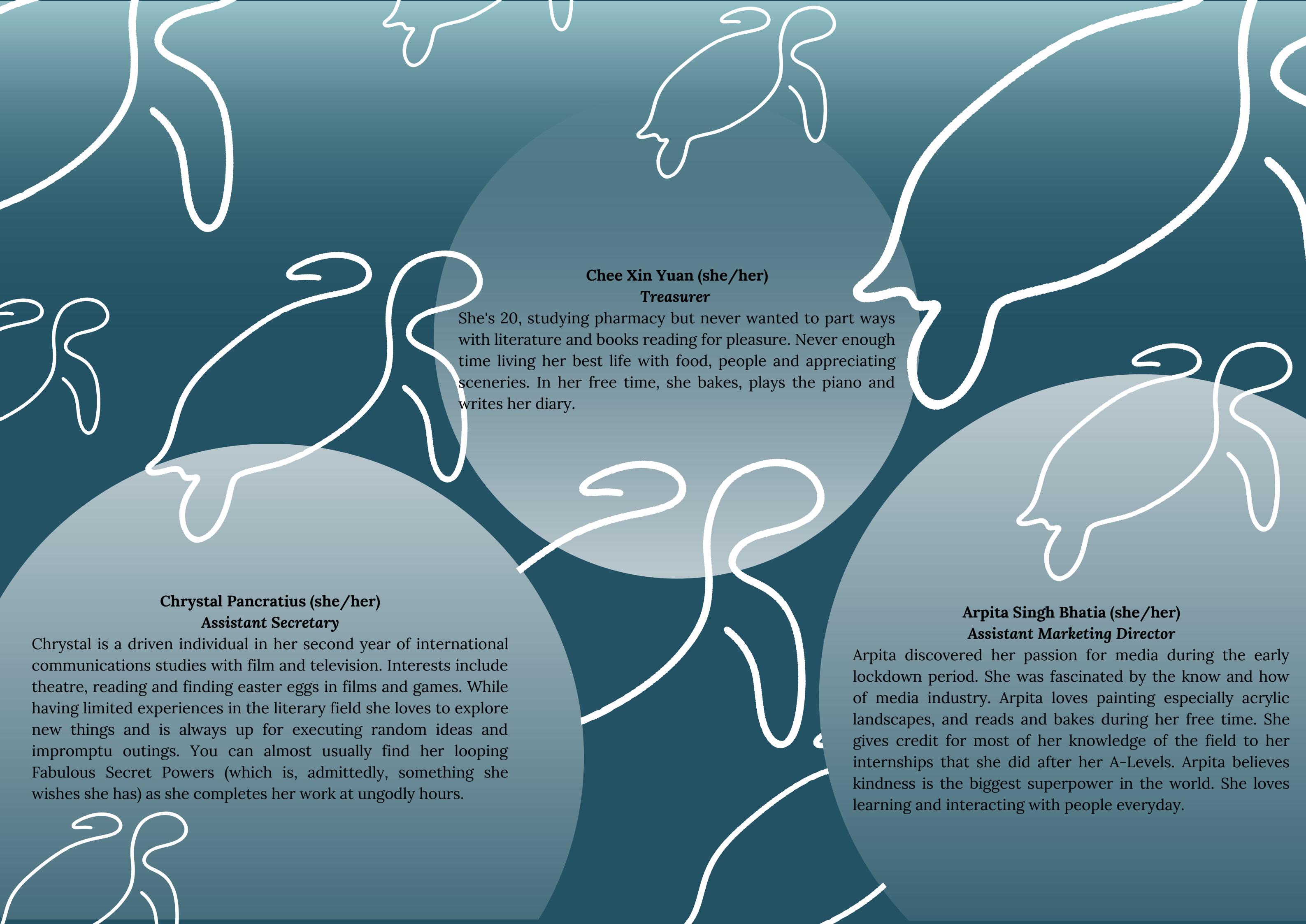
Secretary

Varsha's an avid lover of romances, K-dramas and a big-time Swiftie. She loves writing YA novels, and loves designing recommendation posts for her Bookstagram page. Vanilla and Butterscotch are her favourite ice-cream flavors. She hates tragedies with a passion and is all about a well-deserved Happy Ever After.

Ivan Ling Chen Chuen (he/him)

Co-Editor in Chief

Ivan is in his final year of Creative Writing here at UNM, and trying not to lose his mind! He'll say, "Everything is fine" as he continues to buy and collect books (but not read them!), and overdosing on Americano. With the mountains of books and lack of bookshelves around him, he just writes poetry and manages his blog (*Once Every Week*) in peaceful solitude.



Chrystal Pancratius (she/her) **Assistant Secretary**

Chrystal is a driven individual in her second year of international communications studies with film and television. Interests include theatre, reading and finding easter eggs in films and games. While having limited experiences in the literary field she loves to explore new things and is always up for executing random ideas and impromptu outings. You can almost usually find her looping Fabulous Secret Powers (which is, admittedly, something she wishes she has) as she completes her work at ungodly hours.

Chee Xin Yuan (she/her)

Treasurer

She's 20, studying pharmacy but never wanted to part ways with literature and books reading for pleasure. Never enough time living her best life with food, people and appreciating sceneries. In her free time, she bakes, plays the piano and writes her diary.

Arpita Singh Bhatia (she/her) **Assistant Marketing Director**

Arpita discovered her passion for media during the early lockdown period. She was fascinated by the know and how of media industry. Arpita loves painting especially acrylic landscapes, and reads and bakes during her free time. She gives credit for most of her knowledge of the field to her internships that she did after her A-Levels. Arpita believes kindness is the biggest superpower in the world. She loves learning and interacting with people everyday.

Raisa Anan Mustakin (she/her)
Junior Editor of Poetry

Raisa is an inquisitive being, who finds curiosity in basically anything related to poetry, nature and sports. Currently, she is trying to hone her skills in skateboarding and pastoral poetry.

Muhammad Aqil Najhan bin Faris Najhan (any)
Head Editor of Poetry

Aqil Najhan thinks his legal name is a little too long. Chiefly interested in the fields of performing arts, linguistics, and, of course, poetry, his work has recently been published in the Malaysian Millennial Voices anthology. If you can't find him busying himself with some theatre project or other, you might find him digging in his Notes app, looking for half-formed poems to polish.

Lau Yee Lynn (she/her)
Junior Editor of Poetry

Lynn is a foundation student at UNM, and several of her poems have been published in the literary magazine Aster Lit. She is in love with the exhilarating thrill of debate, and hopes to get over her irrational, deathly fear of public speaking. Aside from writing angry poetry, things that make her happy include: danmei novels, MMORPGs, and Ruelle's music.

Evelyn Patricia Ramli (she/her)
Junior Editor of Poetry

Evelyn is a second-year English Language and Literature student at UNM. Evelyn's interest and passion for poetry, especially editing poetry, have been snowballing. At the same time, she enjoys exploring new design ideas and enhancing her artistic skills! Constantly inspired by her peers, she is determined to do and learn as much as she can, and she is excited for her future in the literary world, wherever it may take her.

Zoe Wee (she/her)

Junior Editor of Fiction

Zoe is a bubbly person with a sweet tooth who's hobbies entail D&D, collecting soft toys and watching various TV shows.

Tan Jie Ying (he/she/they)

Head Editor of Fiction

JY Tan is a final-year Creative Writing student. Her short stories have been published in various zines and NutMag: Home Groan, an anthology showcasing Penang writers and poets. She hopes to finish her first novel before the pandemic ends.

Nadzirah Najlaa (she/her)

Junior Editor of Fiction

Najlaa, a final year English Language and Literature student, is a proud mother of two felines and Pilates enthusiast. Harboured with an insatiable appetite for books, you occasionally find her lurking in Kinokuniya for her next read. She also enjoys a piping hot mug of tea paired with a bucket of ice cream every now and then to soothe her worries in life.

Lam Ying Xuan (she/they/them)

Junior Editor of Fiction

Her name's Ying Xuan, but feel free to call her Mat. A first-year major in Education, Mat has had quite some experience in editing; be it in writing circles or on the internet as a beta reader, where you'll most likely find her editing and reading fanfiction. Laid back and just a tad eccentric, she's an open person ready to talk about anything with anyone—no topic too far flung for this girl!

Wong Xiu Wei (she/her)

Junior Editor of Creative Nonfiction

Xiuwei is a final year undergraduate student majoring in English with Creative Writing at Nottingham University. Her writing has been published in Alluvium, Eksentrika, the Asian Writer, and Malaysian Millennial Voices. She strives to have the courage to be honest and true to life so that it reflects in her writing. Reach her at [xiuweiwong@gmail.com!](mailto:xiuweiwong@gmail.com) She's friendly. :)

Nur Sabrina Azalea binti Shahizan (she/her)

Junior Editor of Fiction

Sabrina considers herself an old soul who dabbles in writing. She enjoys her own company in which she fills it by savouring written works. She aspires to create works that presents glimpses of Malaysian lives, especially female-centric works set in an androcentric society. On track in graduating from UNM in Creative Writing, she takes whatever opportunity she can to polish and sharpen her skills in producing meaningful takeaways from her stories, as well as skills to experience and learn more about the mechanics of everyday human relationships.

Chin Sze Wei (she/her)

Junior Editor of Fiction

Sze Wei (Kaitlyn) is an aspiring editor who wishes to improve her skillset to include writing. She greatly enjoys movies, reading books and writing poetry. Her journey with editing began a few years ago when she started editing and proofreading for authors online and fell in love with the process. She hopes that she will continue finding new passions and experiences in life.

Lai Chien Yue (she/her)

Intern Editor of Fiction

Lai Chien Yue (Julia) is a 2nd year English Language and Literature student full of curiosity on both subject's interconnectivity. When not studying or staring at her screen, invested in writing works of her own, she shuts herself in her room and indulges in visual novels for hours on end with a cup of good, warm Milo by her side. (She is especially partial towards romance or mystery visual novels).



F. Zahara Anver (she/her)

Intern Editor of Creative Nonfiction

Zahara is a cat-obsessed bibliophile. She loves reading the Classics in particular and writing nothing in particular. She also likes the word particular.

Kishaun Xavier (he/him)

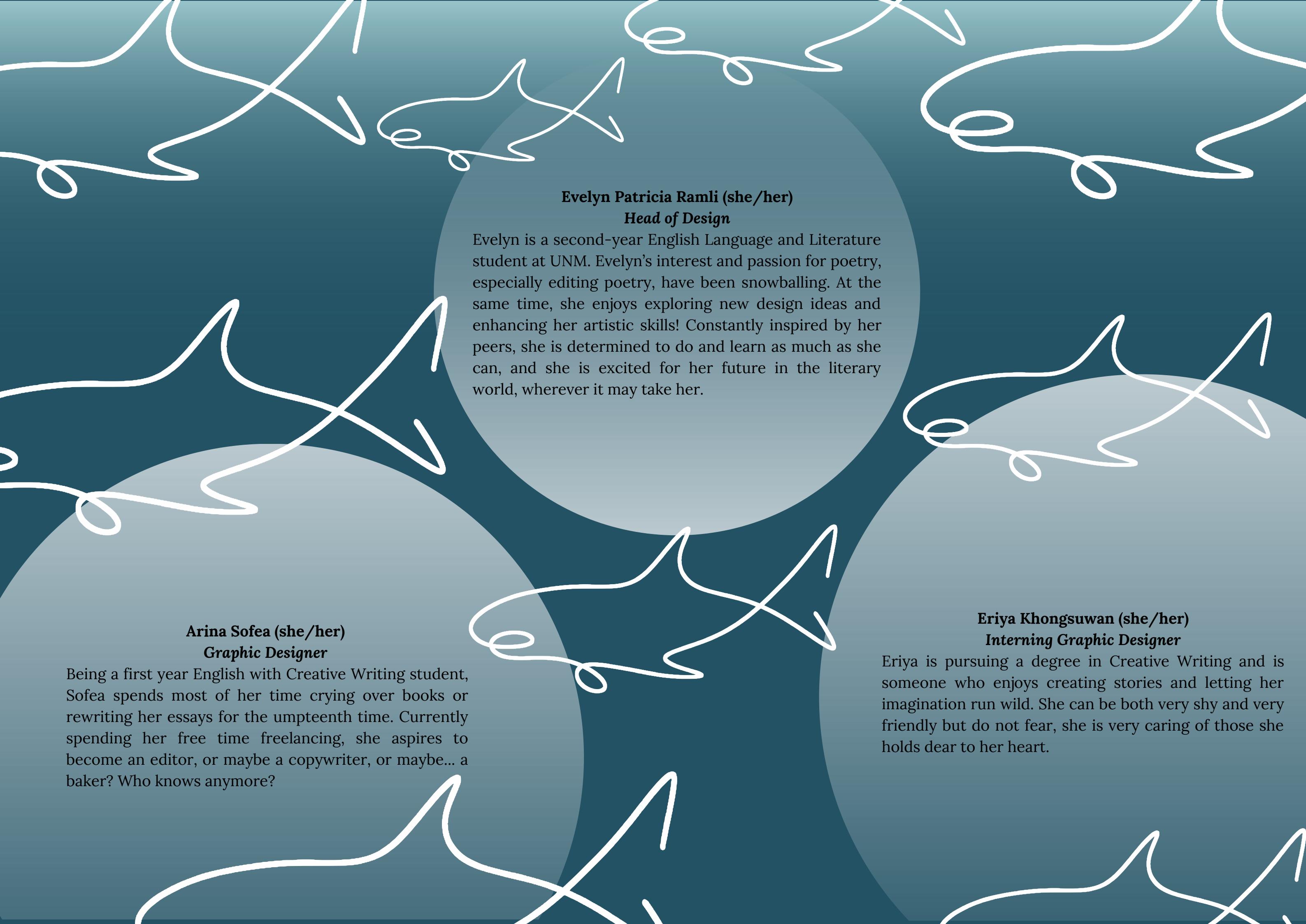
Junior Editor of Creative Nonfiction

I like sleeping in rainy days and I actually like some classics, just some. Like maybe one.

Vanessa Chua Hui En (she/her)

Junior Editor of Creative Nonfiction

Since childhood, Vanessa has found her way with words through writing personal diary entries which has drawn her to exploring descriptive essays and creative non-fiction as a young adult today. She still very much considers herself a new kid on the block when it comes to writing but her passion drives her to diligently learn and polish her skills from her peers and superiors. While she'd like to believe that she writes inspiring stories, Vanessa's writings are actually just full of angst and existential crises.



Evelyn Patricia Ramli (she/her)

Head of Design

Evelyn is a second-year English Language and Literature student at UNM. Evelyn's interest and passion for poetry, especially editing poetry, have been snowballing. At the same time, she enjoys exploring new design ideas and enhancing her artistic skills! Constantly inspired by her peers, she is determined to do and learn as much as she can, and she is excited for her future in the literary world, wherever it may take her.

Arina Sofea (she/her)

Graphic Designer

Being a first year English with Creative Writing student, Sofea spends most of her time crying over books or rewriting her essays for the umpteenth time. Currently spending her free time freelancing, she aspires to become an editor, or maybe a copywriter, or maybe... a baker? Who knows anymore?

Eriya Khongsuwan (she/her)

Interning Graphic Designer

Eriya is pursuing a degree in Creative Writing and is someone who enjoys creating stories and letting her imagination run wild. She can be both very shy and very friendly but do not fear, she is very caring of those she holds dear to her heart.