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PARTICLE UNM'S LITERARY MAGAZINE • SPRING 2021

# PARTICLE

UNM'S LITERARY MAGAZINE

in  
the  
water

ISSUE 16 | SPRING 2021



# 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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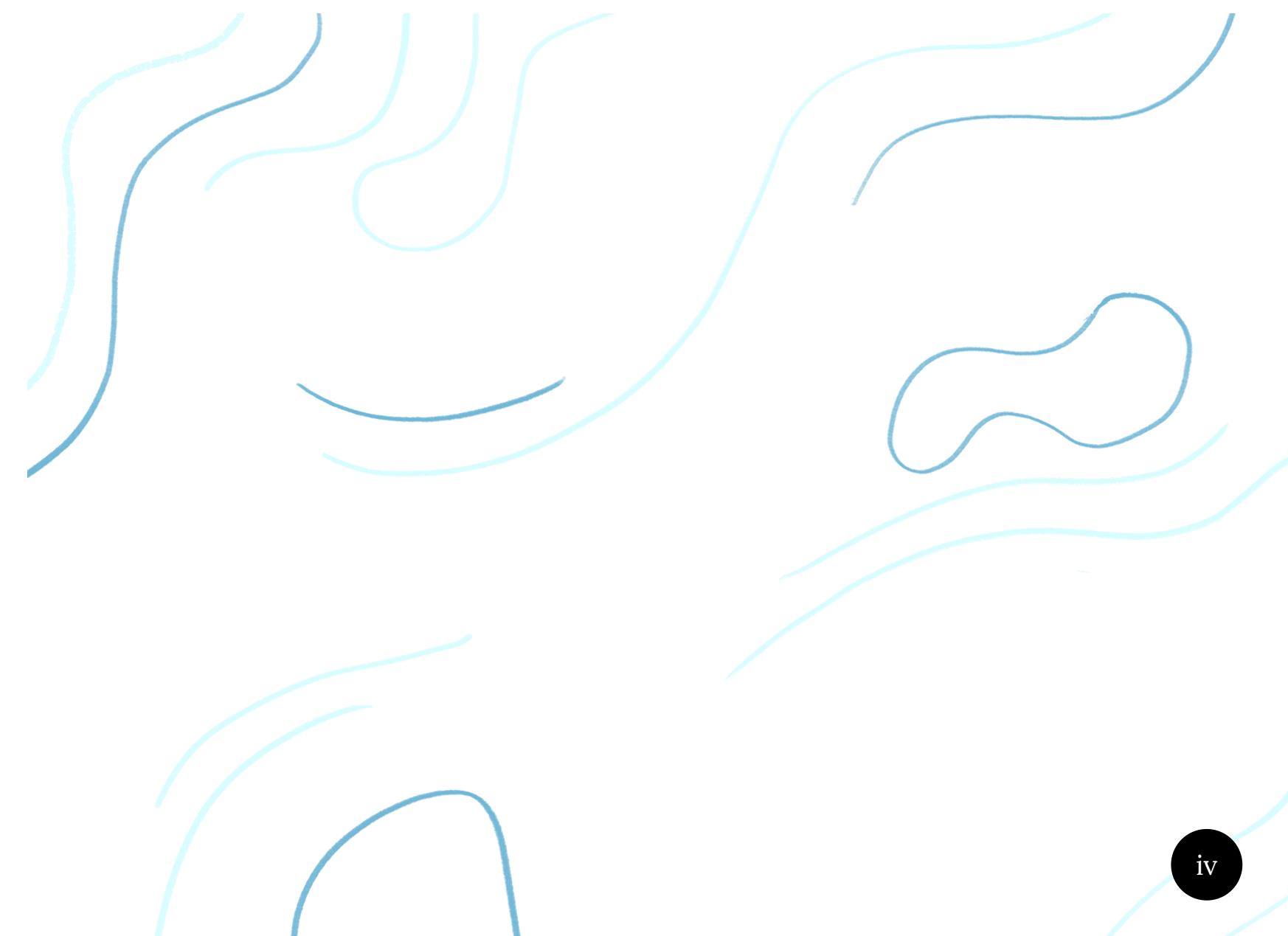
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# Editor's Note

**Dear Reader,**

When Syaza and I were first handed the reins, we were saddened at the sight of *Particle* sitting in its own dying embers. Words cannot convey the gratitude I feel for this wonderful team, without whose dedication and artistry, we would never have been able to nurture that small spark into the blazing fire it is now. We have accomplished many goals during our time together, but this issue truly takes the cake.

For the first time in its history, *Particle* accepted submissions from beyond the UNM campus. This marks our first step in fulfilling our promise to amplifying the voices of Southeast Asian writers and artists. We are honored to share such beautiful creative works with you.

This past year we have all been plunged into darkness. We have navigated, and continue to navigate a global pandemic and its aftermath. It has impacted us all in different ways, yet many of us have felt the same: isolated, anxious, and beaten in the face of a future in flux.

As I made my way through this issue, a single quote came to mind. On January 18, 1915, when the world was facing the catastrophic carnage that was WWI, Virginia Woolf wrote in her journal: "The future is dark, which is the best thing the future can be, I think". It was a bold declaration, a celebration of darkness. The very same darkness that we innately fear as children and continue to as adults. Yet, we are contradictory creatures. Afraid of the darkness of the unknown, we choose to close our eyes, finding comfort in the darkness of obliviousness.

At times like this, like now, it is the writers and artists among us that step into the dark with eyes wide open. With every gesture, with every word, they come up against the unknown and they find the limitless. They come back and what unfolds, unfolds in a myriad of unexpected ways.

In this issue, you will find pieces that blur the boundaries of reality and dreamscape. You will find quiet and calm meditations on nature and the ordinary. You will find pieces that delve into the abyss we've all become familiar with. You will find stories that explore the facets of human connection and our consciousness. You will also find pieces that call for justice and change.

All of them, are flowers of resilience that have sprouted from embracing the inexplicable. We are proud to have been given the opportunity to house them. Our beloved readers, we invite you to meander in this garden, sink into the soil and let their sunshine illuminate a path through the darkness.

**Love and light,**

**Rasha Hamza**  
Co-Editor in Chief



We would like to thank all the contributors who submitted their work and we thank you for your patience in the release of this issue.

I'd also like to extend my gratitude to our amazing staff for being committed and working through the pandemic to bring this issue to life. To our admin team – for your resourceful talents. To our editors – for your dedicated time and wisdom. To our designers – for your meticulous crafting and consideration. Lastly, to my partner – a true wonder of a woman. I am so proud of the tenacity, flexibility, and passion this team has shown. It was a true joy to work with all of you.

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# Hope

Sreana Habiba | Creative Nonfiction

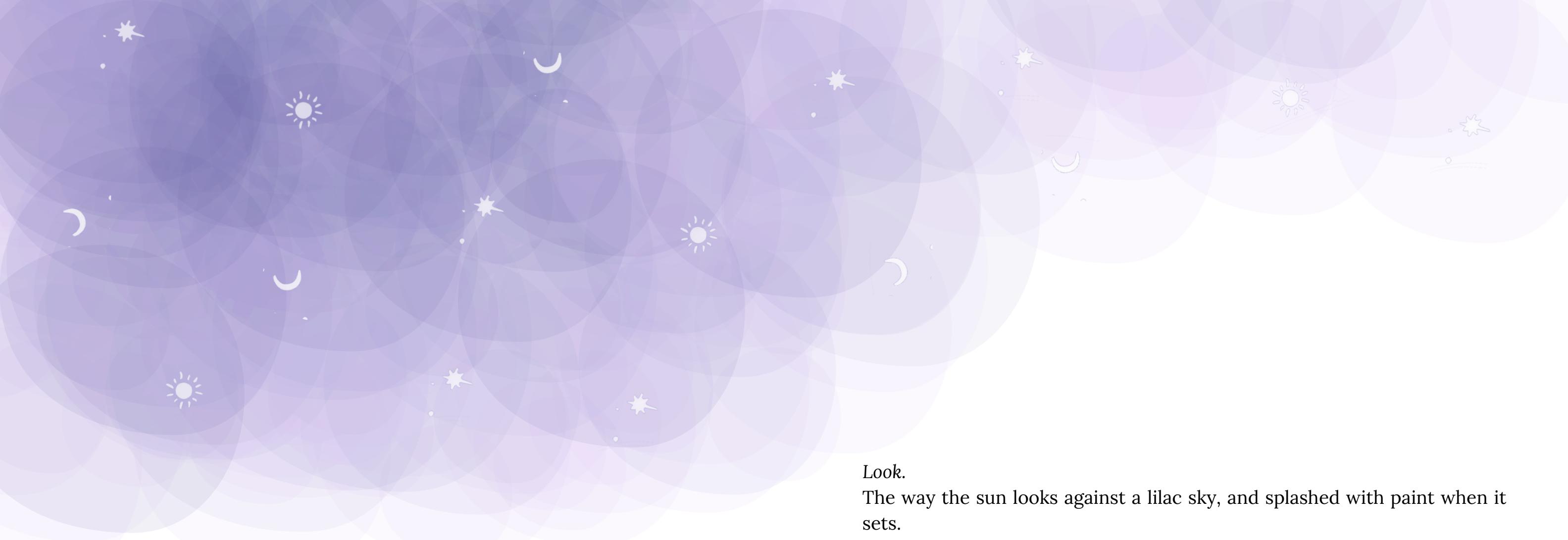
There is a fond and dreamy memory from my adolescence that I find myself going back to in my mind time and time again whenever living gets too much, too difficult, too bleak.

It is the memory of being in a beautiful wooden cottage on top of a hill. There are floor-to-ceiling windows to the sides, seeming to eliminate the sense of boundary between the house and the world outside it, merging the warm interior and the grassy curves of the hill. It's foggy, but not completely indecipherable; the surrounding trees can still be seen, the green stretching on for miles.

I remember lying on the curve of the hill at night and watching the stars. They were overwhelming and incandescent, glittering against the dark tapestry of the sky. In that moment I felt the entire universe bloom in my chest, as if the infinite beauty of the world was somehow filling up the perennial emptiness within me, the emptiness that exists within all of us that craves for something beautiful and meaningful to be poured into it. That night, although tired, I fell asleep smiling, my head full of cosmos.

I remember waking up at dawn, looking through the windows and feeling a strange sense of tranquility, like when the world is too quiet and idyllic and the calmness and beauty imbues into your heart as well. The world creeps up on you sometimes, slowly whispering for you to fall in love with it again. It beckons you and pulls you in to take a quiet moment to realize you are at one with everything on earth – every animal, every tree, every flower, every river. There is always a place for you here, however lonely you are. You just have to be reminded of it sometimes – which these memories do for me in times of despondency. The world wants you to love it, and by extension, love yourself. ‘Loving me means loving you,’ says the world. ‘If you have it in you to open your heart and find beauty in nature, you have it in you to do the same with yourself.’

I believe the existence of loneliness is in a way a testament to the fact that we belong to something larger and more significant than ourselves. By giving yourself up to the serenity of the world, by trusting it enough to encase you in its unabating continuity, its comfort and its light, you can begin to find something equally luminous and glowing within yourself: love. Look around you, the proof of it is everywhere.



Look, look, look.

The way the stars are always within your reach at night, unceasingly twinkling, filling you with hope.

Look.

The way the breeze makes the trees billow and dance, spreading joy through your body.

Look.

The way the clouds are ruffling in ripples, waiting for you to point to them and make out the objects and faces you see in the shapes.

Look.

The way a flower blooms out of concrete, reminding you that it's possible to flourish no matter the circumstance.

Look.

The way the sun looks against a lilac sky, and splashed with paint when it sets.

Look.

The way the birds are always on a journey to some unknown and mysterious location, travelling together in flocks.

Look.

Love is within you and all around you. The world is lovely, bright and inviting.

Look.

You are not alone, you are not alone, you are not alone.

# Dear Darkness

Muhammad Humza Khan | Fiction

I stood alone, trembling in pitch-black darkness with my eyeballs rolling but I was unable to see anything. I couldn't even discern my fingers but I could feel them moving. I moved my legs and discovered that my bare feet were on a rock-strewn ground. As I stretched my arms, it grazed a stone-edged surface, providing me with a mental image of my surroundings. Like a mountain carved around to contain me. All my senses felt like they were being activated simultaneously. While I was still busy questioning my existence in between this nowhere and the next, I heard irrefutable howls echoing in distance.

A surge of adrenaline raced through my body. Sensing a path in front of me, I advanced with low-pitching modest steps, considering it to be the most viable option. I could have decided against proceeding towards those beasts, but isn't that what life is all about - Hard choices?

Trudging ahead, my forehead struck on something that I believed to be a rock. Waving my arms around, I felt my surroundings become narrower. I ducked and continued ahead. A few steps later, my eyes reckoned a source of light; the only source of hope out there. Moving closer to it, I could feel the crisp breeze whistling in through the exit. The cold air did hurt my dry nostrils but being exposed to more oxygen was surely a relieving sensation. Meanwhile, my mind couldn't let go of the Russian proverb: 'It's never winter in the land of hope'. Perhaps I understood its meaning differently. I laid down and used my hands to pull myself out of the narrow exit. Coming out, I squinted ahead and saw a never-ending series of woods, around a never-ending series of woods, around a never-ending series of woods.

Having nothing but darkness behind and prolonged howls ahead, I lingered, deciding my next course of action. Unwillingly, I took the stride. Making almost no sound, I gradually moved forward betwixt bushes. Knowing that I wasn't capable of an encounter nor sneaking through them, something still convinced me to keep going. As I tiptoed, my right leg caught on a stray twig. Stumbling, I fell to the ground. Suddenly, the howls came to an immediate pause.

My face turned white, and my body started to feel numb. It felt like my entire existence numbed with it. I lay there helplessly while I heard the bushes rustling in close vicinity. I told myself: this is it.

The next thing I remember was my mom's voice reverberating in my ears. It kept getting louder until the world around me faded and I peered at her face as she said: 'wake up already, you're late'.

Sweating, I leaned on the edge of my bed and asked myself: Why are we so afraid of the dark? Is it just because it takes away our ability to see? Is it true that the fear goes away as we grow older, it is just a matter of age? Should humanity be blamed for how it has associated darkness with the paranormal and the supernatural? Or is it simply human nature to dislike the dark; just as some animals hate the light?

Dear darkness, mystery might not be the perfect way to name you, but it is true that you have retained your position as a place of fear for mankind.

# The Moon

Ismim Putera | Poetry

The moon encircles the sea  
pulling it closer towards a star  
the sea turns vivid blue  
then crimson red  
then pearly yellow  
like the colour of our eyes

We catch nothing but heaven-sent fishes  
and sea shells  
Blessings float around us  
like driftwood  
We wait until the moon turns pale  
or at least all the stars have fallen back  
into the sea at dawn

Oh! It rains again with light and thunder,  
smearing sand and seaweed on our  
shivering spines

# Icarus

Zoe Yap | Fiction



I bask in your approval. I enjoy the way it puts me together, over and over again. You gather my delicate shards; you bleed a little when you do- but that's the price of love, right?

It took me a while to realize that I was the one bleeding- not you.

*Meet me halfway!* You shout. It should be easy for you, I've done half the work here!

You're right. Half is so easily divided, so easily shared. Each of us does half of the work, don't we? That way, we meet in the middle. Half makes it easier for us.

I struggle across the acres of land that shift beneath my feet. Red-hot grains cut into the soles of my feet with every step. The quietness swells with the rising heat, leaving me to think about those cold, stark mornings. How silence is ruthless with you. The exit signs on the way are but mirages- they shimmer bright red when I touch them. They are temptations, I tell myself. Intricately designed by you to test my patience.

I yearn to meet you halfway, whole. I want you to be desperate as I am, as I throw myself into your arms- finally as wonderful as you want me to be. The journey has been long and hard, but I've proven myself.

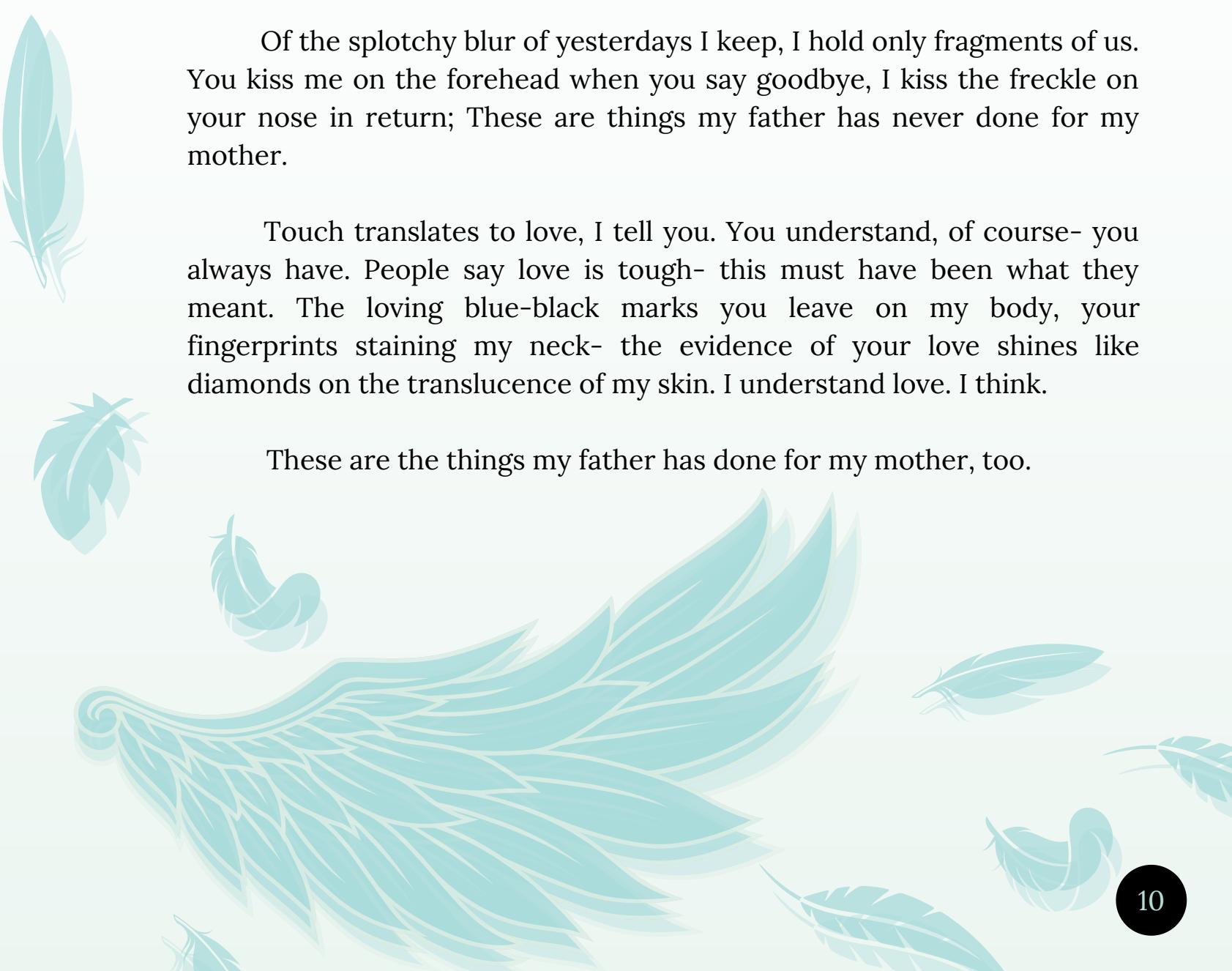
There are rough days, of course. Some days I crawl after you, begging desperately for the love only you can give. I want to swallow your affection whole, gulp it down so it is within me forever. I feel the entirety of its weight when I feel your blows on my body. I know it is only a short, sweet prelude of what is to come- when you put me back together again; the weight of your hollow apology sitting still in my ears.

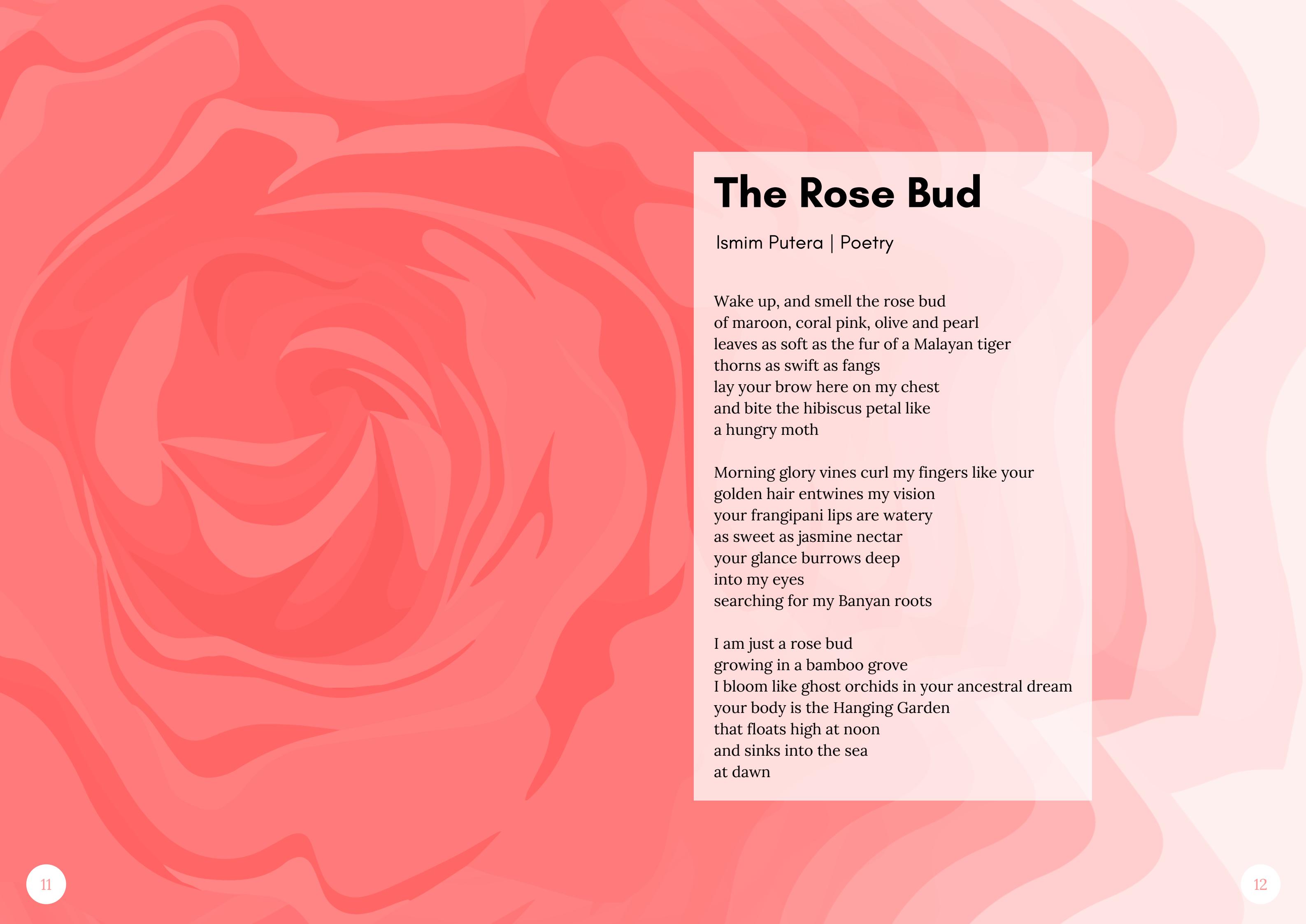
I fly high in my feather-waxed wings. I am forever caught between the scorching heat of the sun and the rising mist of the ocean- the sirens, they are loud and insistent. I long to follow the lilting melody escaping their lips. Should I soar upwards into the heat of the sun, a stranger kind enough to melt my feathers away? Will I fall into its fatherly embrace, finally free of you?

Of the splotchy blur of yesterdays I keep, I hold only fragments of us. You kiss me on the forehead when you say goodbye, I kiss the freckle on your nose in return; These are things my father has never done for my mother.

Touch translates to love, I tell you. You understand, of course- you always have. People say love is tough- this must have been what they meant. The loving blue-black marks you leave on my body, your fingerprints staining my neck- the evidence of your love shines like diamonds on the translucence of my skin. I understand love. I think.

These are the things my father has done for my mother, too.





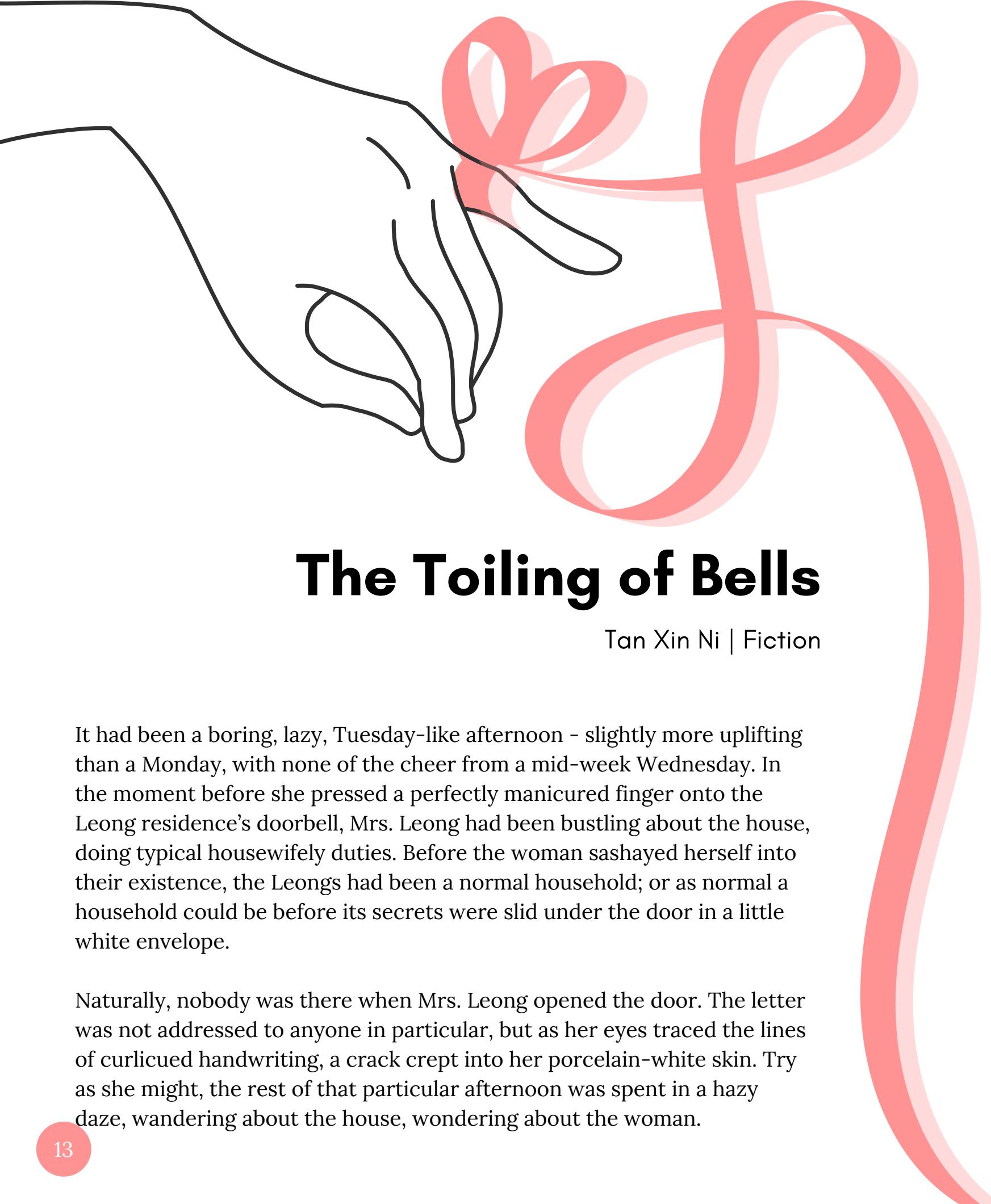
# The Rose Bud

Ismim Putera | Poetry

Wake up, and smell the rose bud  
of maroon, coral pink, olive and pearl  
leaves as soft as the fur of a Malayan tiger  
thorns as swift as fangs  
lay your brow here on my chest  
and bite the hibiscus petal like  
a hungry moth

Morning glory vines curl my fingers like your  
golden hair entwines my vision  
your frangipani lips are watery  
as sweet as jasmine nectar  
your glance burrows deep  
into my eyes  
searching for my Banyan roots

I am just a rose bud  
growing in a bamboo grove  
I bloom like ghost orchids in your ancestral dream  
your body is the Hanging Garden  
that floats high at noon  
and sinks into the sea  
at dawn



# The Toiling of Bells

Tan Xin Ni | Fiction

It had been a boring, lazy, Tuesday-like afternoon - slightly more uplifting than a Monday, with none of the cheer from a mid-week Wednesday. In the moment before she pressed a perfectly manicured finger onto the Leong residence's doorbell, Mrs. Leong had been bustling about the house, doing typical housewifely duties. Before the woman sashayed herself into their existence, the Leongs had been a normal household; or as normal a household could be before its secrets were slid under the door in a little white envelope.

Naturally, nobody was there when Mrs. Leong opened the door. The letter was not addressed to anyone in particular, but as her eyes traced the lines of curlicued handwriting, a crack crept into her porcelain-white skin. Try as she might, the rest of that particular afternoon was spent in a hazy daze, wandering about the house, wondering about the woman.

By the time evening rolled around, Mrs. Leong's deliberations had come to a decisive conclusion. A little red tin barrel had been sitting at the end of their driveway for as long as she could remember, and traditionally, it was used once or twice a year for sacrifices to honour the dead. That day, however, a most unconventional offering was made to the heavens, and when Mrs. Leong's husband pulled up to their home after work, it was almost as if the letter had never existed.

Throughout dinner, her husband had seemed preoccupied, so she thought it wise to not bring up the occurrences of the day, for fear of worsening his mood. In the few hours between dinner and going to bed, her husband became engrossed in a sports match - football or basketball or some other ball game that she just could not be bothered with. The day after, he'd woken up late for work and made up for it by putting in overtime - and so this went on for weeks, and then months, and Mrs. Leong just never could find the right opportunity to slip the letter into conversation.

That is, until one day, two years after the incident, everything came to a head when her only daughter flew home from Canada.

"On a break from work," Ah Mei had claimed, but Mrs. Leong's motherly instincts were already tingling. Sure enough, after she'd landed, Ah Mei fluffed her way through some small talk, before seizing a lull in the conversation and dropping the big news: that she was engaged and wanted her parents' blessings to be wed.

Mrs. Leong had been overjoyed - she knew something was up anyway, from the insistent way Ah Mei had brought up flying home during one of their video calls - but her joy was cut short when Ah Mei asked her that fateful question.

"What makes for a happy marriage?"

Mrs. Leong had thought the question should have been easy to answer. After all, she had been married for over two decades and had built a home with her husband and children. There couldn't - shouldn't - have been anyone better to answer that. And yet, when Ah Mei had asked that question on their ride home from the airport, she'd been blindsided.

"A man and a woman, happy with each other, for each other," She'd managed at last.

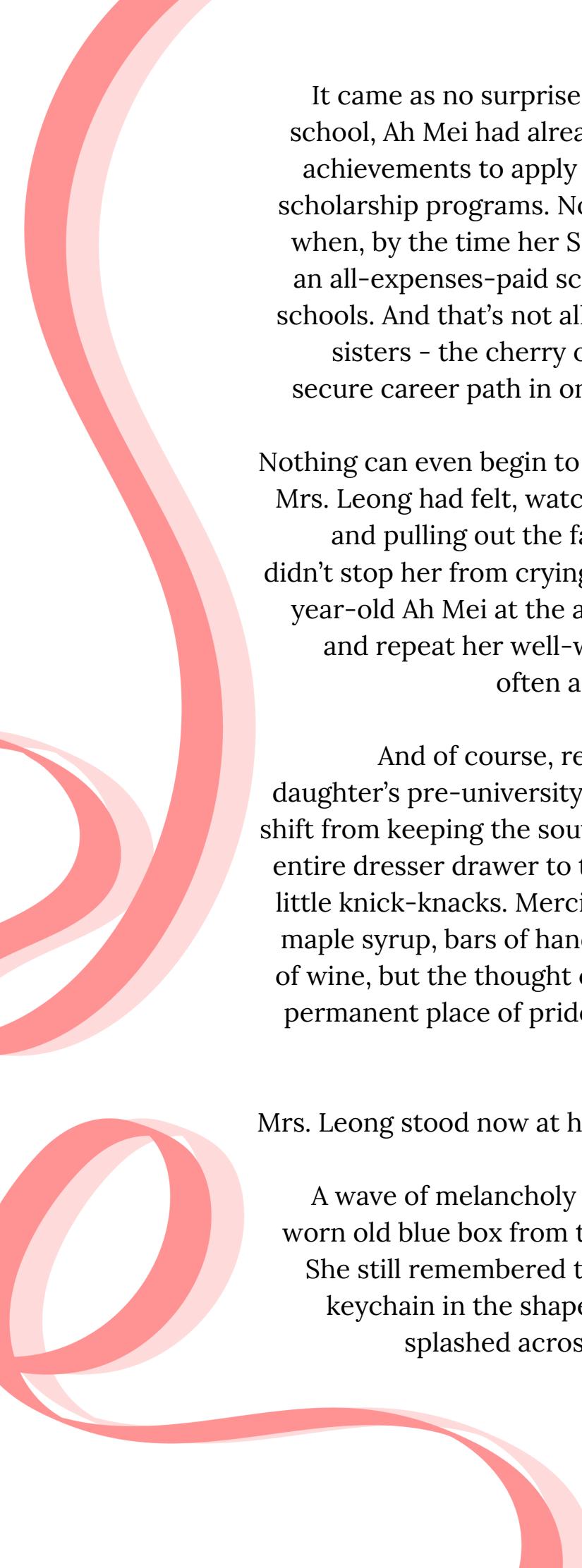
A quick sideways glance at her daughter proved that her flimsy answer had done nothing to assuage whatever doubts her daughter had.

They spent the rest of the ride home in silence. Ah Mei had claimed a headache from the long plane ride and time difference, and quietly lugged her luggage to her room.

Watching her daughter disappear up the stairs, Mrs. Leong felt her age in a way that had never quite struck her before. For the first time in a long while, she thought about the letter that was never meant for her. For the first time in a long while, she ached for the days past, of children clambering for her attention, for her love.

"Her first two sons had moved out once they started earning a stable income. Neither were particularly studious; one became a mechanic, and the other a salesperson. Her last child and only daughter, however, was the pride and joy of the family. No, she wasn't being biased, she justified to her sisters over one of their many tea-sharing sessions; she just understood the potential of her children, and by God, she just knew Ah Mei could go further than anyone else in the family.

And she did. Country's top five percentile in her SPM results, three-time recipient of the National Bright Young Scientist Award, brand ambassador for none other than the ever-popular cocoa drink, Milo. Ah Mei's achievements were endless. Unlike her brothers' poster-ridden walls, her daughter's bedroom walls were covered with framed newspaper clippings featuring Ah Mei front and center, all painstakingly cut out and carefully pressed into presentable little squares by her doting mother.



It came as no surprise then, that before she even graduated from high school, Ah Mei had already begun using her forecast results and shining achievements to apply for some of the most sought-after international scholarship programs. Nobody was more proud than Mrs. and Mr. Leong when, by the time her SPM results were released, she'd already secured an all-expenses-paid scholarship for one of Canada's top-rated medical schools. And that's not all - Mrs. Leong recounted gleefully to her jealous sisters - the cherry on top of it all was that Ah Mei was guaranteed a secure career path in one of the affiliated award-winning research labs.

Nothing can even begin to explain how absolutely over-the-moon ecstatic Mrs. Leong had felt, watching her daughter open that big white envelope and pulling out the fateful cream-coloured acceptance letter. Still, it didn't stop her from crying tears of joy when she sent off barely eighteen-year-old Ah Mei at the airport, prompting her daughter to hug her tight and repeat her well-worn and yet still comforting promises of calling often and sending home postcards and little souvenirs.

And of course, reliable ol' Ah Mei kept her word. Throughout her daughter's pre-university to postgraduate days, Mrs. Leong had to slowly shift from keeping the souvenirs in a simple jewellery box to dedicating an entire dresser drawer to them in order to accommodate all the delightful little knick-knacks. Mercifully, nowadays Ah Mei only brings home jars of maple syrup, bars of handmade soap, and every so often, a cheeky bottle of wine, but the thought of her daughter's display of love for her having a permanent place of pride in her chest of drawers always made her heart swell up in joy.

Mrs. Leong stood now at her dresser, with the souvenir drawer pulled out.

A wave of melancholy washed over her as her fingers idly picked out a worn old blue box from the neatly arranged rows of little boxes and tins. She still remembered the first little souvenir Ah Mei had sent home - a keychain in the shape of a maple leaf and the word 'Canada!' cheerily splashed across it. She drew it out, flipping it over in her palm.

*What makes for a happy marriage?*

Surely Ah Mei was happy. Mrs. Leong had never seen a wider smile on her daughter's face than the times the both of them have appeared together in Ah Mei's weekly video calls home. She's even met the boyfriend - fiance now - on several different occasions, and by her judgement, he had seemed like a decent fellow. One of those American Born Chinese people, but where Ah Mei was headed, Mandarin was no longer a requirement. Plus, his family has a good name in the medical field, and from the way Ah Mei described some of their dates, money wouldn't be a problem for her down the line as well.

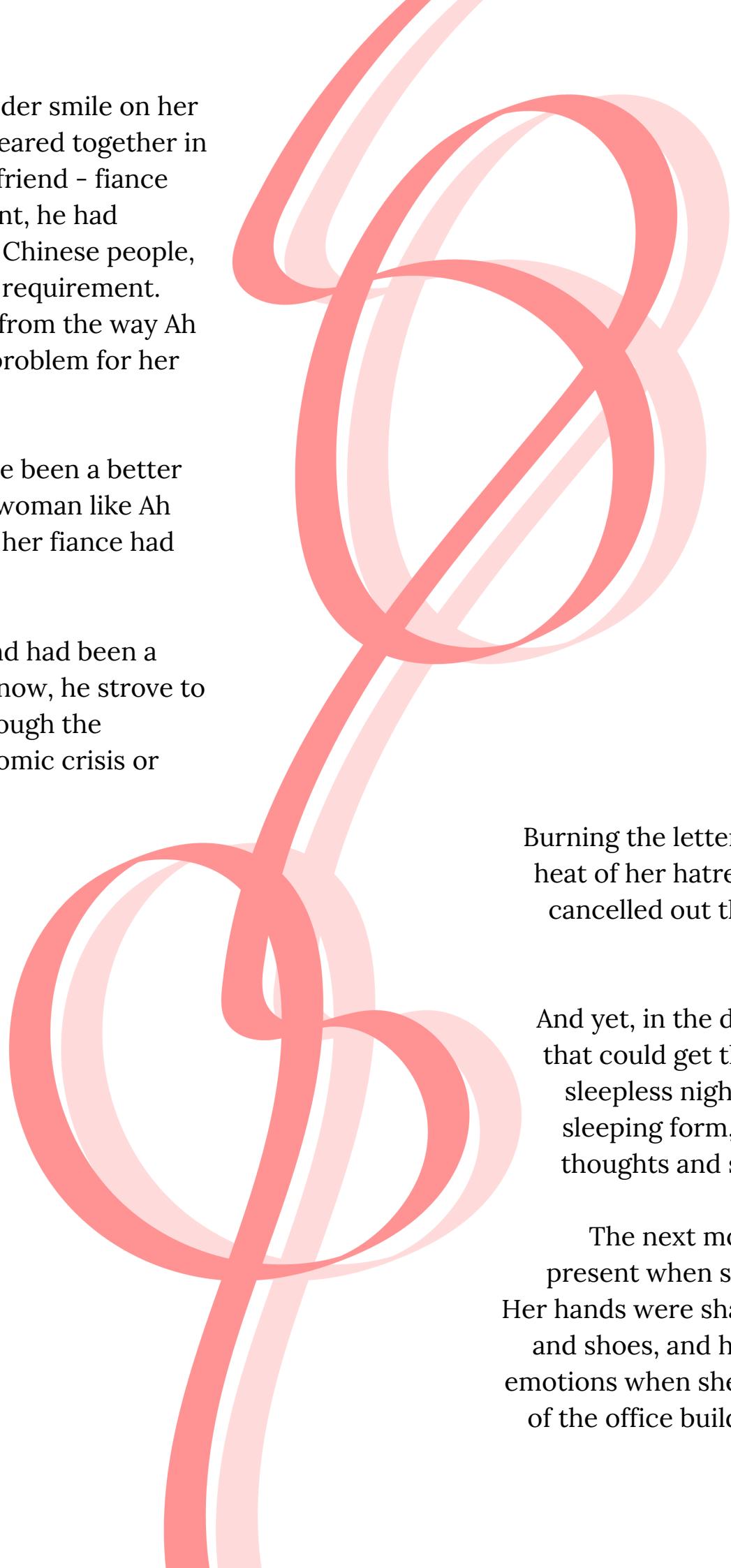
As her sisters had so eloquently put it, there wouldn't have been a better partner for Ah Mei throughout her life. An accomplished woman like Ah Mei needed a man that could lift her up in the world, and her fiance had everything she would ever have needed.

Even Mrs. Leong herself hadn't been so lucky. Her husband had been a boy from her hometown in Klang, and everything he had now, he strove to build from ground up. Ah Mei would never have to go through the struggle of trying to build a home in the midst of an economic crisis or feed a family of five on hoarded grocery coupons.

Of course, all that was in the past now. The hard times have come and gone, the children have grown into decent, working adults, and not too long ago, Mr. Leong was talking about retiring in a few years. Where they were once the perfect picture of a pair of young adults trying to make it in the big city, Mr. and Mrs. Leong were now the elderly genteel couple who could live off their pensions for the rest of their days, comfortably settled in a home they had built.

Why was it so difficult to answer Ah Mei's question then?

Tucking the key chain back into its box, Mrs. Leong pulled out a few other boxes, shuffling through their contents. Her fingers faltered when she reached for one of the boxes at the very back of the drawer.



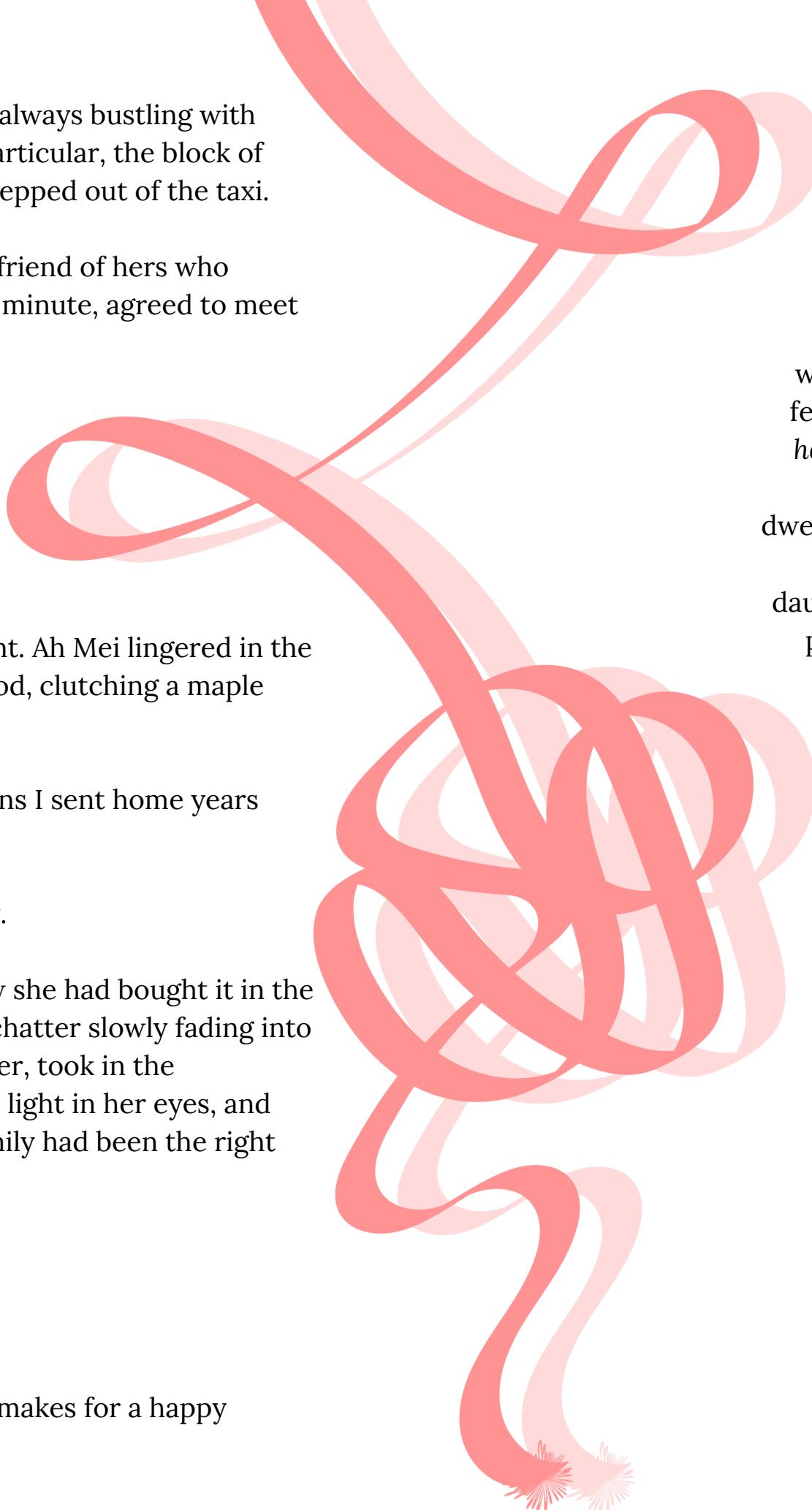
Beyond the reach of light, hidden in the murky depths of the dresser was a white envelope, not too different from the one she had left to burn in their driveway. Mrs. Leong's eyes searched the darkness at the back of the drawer, and involuntarily breathed a sigh of relief that it was once again, safely tucked out of sight.

Most days, when it was so carefully kept away, it was almost hard to believe that Mrs. Leong, of all people, had almost thrown it all away. Mrs. Leong knew her place in the world - she was the nurturing, caring and loving mother of three beautiful children and proud wife in a long-standing marriage. And two years ago, as she stood in their driveway, staring at the smouldering ashes of the anonymous letter, she never would have imagined wanting to take an ax to that perfect picture.

Burning the letter was supposed to be the end of it all. The searing heat of her hatred and anger for the anonymous woman perfectly cancelled out the passionate heat of emotion in every disgusting word in that letter.

And yet, in the days that followed the incident, there was nothing that could get the letter out of her mind. During one of the many sleepless nights that followed, as she laid next to her husband's sleeping form, the seeds of a plan had pushed through her fiery thoughts and slowly began to take root in the haze of her mind.

The next morning, Mrs. Leong's thoughts were anywhere but present when she bade her husband goodbye as he left for work. Her hands were shaking with nerves when she grabbed her handbag and shoes, and her mind was buried in an avalanche of conflicting emotions when she hailed a taxi and headed downtown. At the sight of the office building she'd been looking for, her throat dried up at the thought of what she was about to do.



Her lawyer's office has never been a happy place, always bustling with dull, grey-clad professionals, but on that day in particular, the block of concrete and glass seemed to leer at her as she stepped out of the taxi.

Mrs. Leong had no prior appointment, but an old friend of hers who worked as a divorce attorney had, at the very last minute, agreed to meet up briefly to talk about the Leongs' marriage.

Of course, Mrs. Leong loved her husband.

But that was not enough reason for her to stay.

"Ma?"

Mrs. Leong's thoughts snapped back to the present. Ah Mei lingered in the doorway before walking to where her mother stood, clutching a maple leaf-shaped keychain.

"Oh wow, that must have been one of the keychains I sent home years ago!"

"The very first one," came Mrs. Leong's slow reply.

Ah Mei laughed and began telling the story of how she had bought it in the airport right after she had landed. With Ah Mei's chatter slowly fading into the background, Mrs. Leong looked at her daughter, took in the smoothness of her skin, the ebony of her hair, the light in her eyes, and for a moment, she knew that staying with this family had been the right choice.

*What makes for a happy marriage?*

And suddenly the answer was clear.

"Ah Mei," Mrs. Leong began. "You asked me what makes for a happy marriage,"

Ah Mei quietened down, sensing something amiss with her mother.

"Your happiness *makes* a happy marriage," Mrs. Leong continued, staring into the darkness of the souvenir drawer. "If you're not happy, then the thinness of the marriage certificate shouldn't keep you from being happy,"

Mrs. Leong slowly met her daughter's steady gaze. A weight was lifted off of her shoulders, and Mrs. Leong felt that she had finally done her daughter right - done *herself* right. The silence between them was thick with past regrets and future potential; where one's mind dwelled on the loss of love and time, the other wondered at a myriad of hopes and dreams. As the mother and daughter sat together in the lingering silence, one made peace with their past, whereas the other had lit a tiny beacon of hope in their heart.

And so the lives of the Leongs continued as you'd have expected it to. Mrs. and Mr. Leong both gave Ah Mei their blessings, and finally, after six busy months of discussing, planning and negotiating, Ah Mei's wedding day had finally arrived.

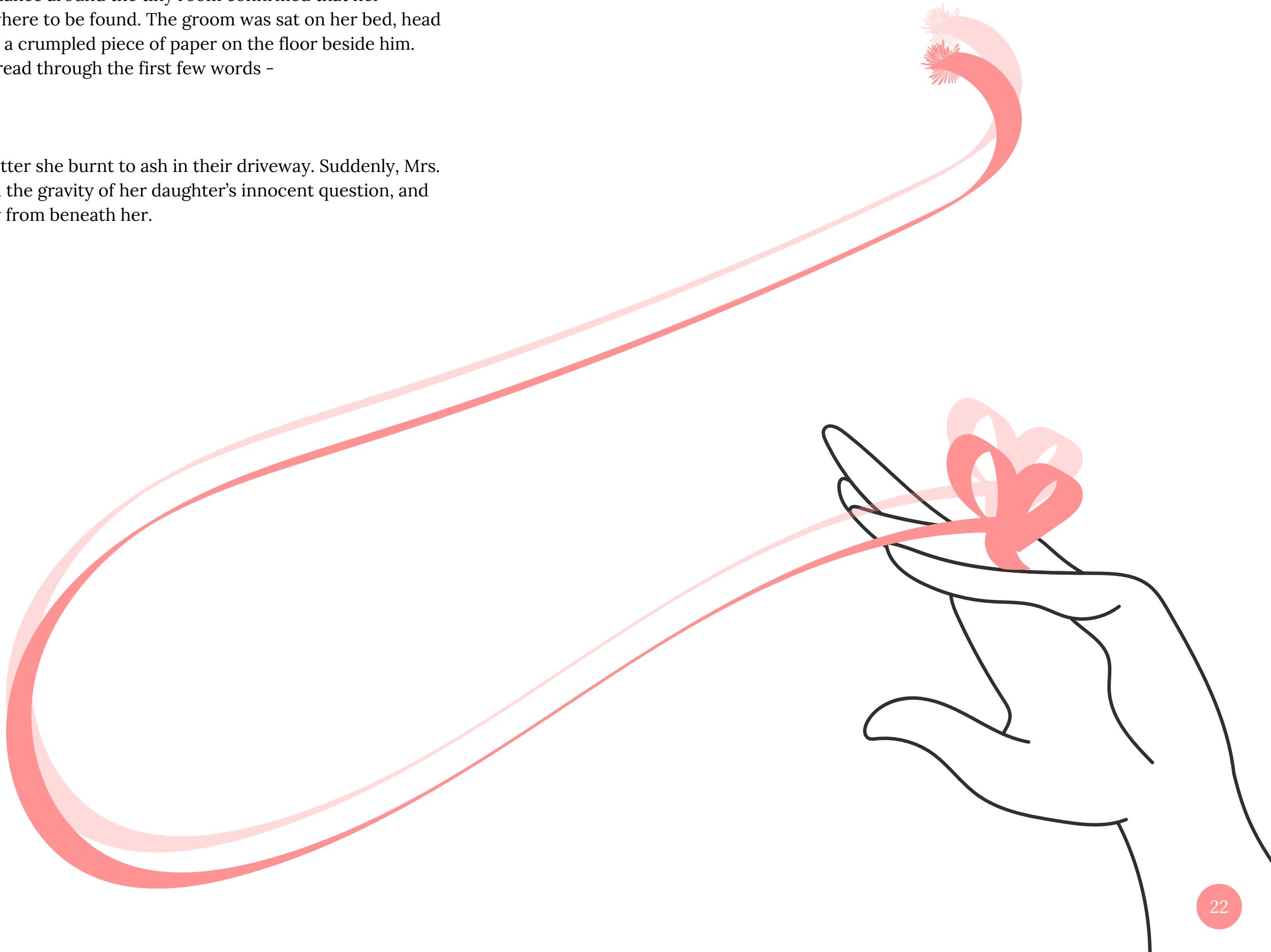
The morning had been filled with the typical loud fanfare that came with a traditional Chinese wedding, beginning with the groom and his friends announcing their arrival with incessant car honking. Then came the rowdy door games and the cheerful negotiating of red packets from the groom. After suffering through embarrassing dances and scarfing down disgusting condiment mixtures, the groom finally made it past all the challenges to Ah Mei's room.

Mrs. Leong stood by idly as the groom knocked gently and entered Ah Mei's room, and awaited the bride and groom's appearance. She watched as the cheerful chatter amongst the friends gathered around the door suddenly grew concerned.

Sensing something amiss, Mrs. Leong pushed past the crowd into Ah Mei's bedroom. A wild glance around the tiny room confirmed that her daughter was nowhere to be found. The groom was sat on her bed, head hung in his hands, a crumpled piece of paper on the floor beside him. Picking it up, she read through the first few words -

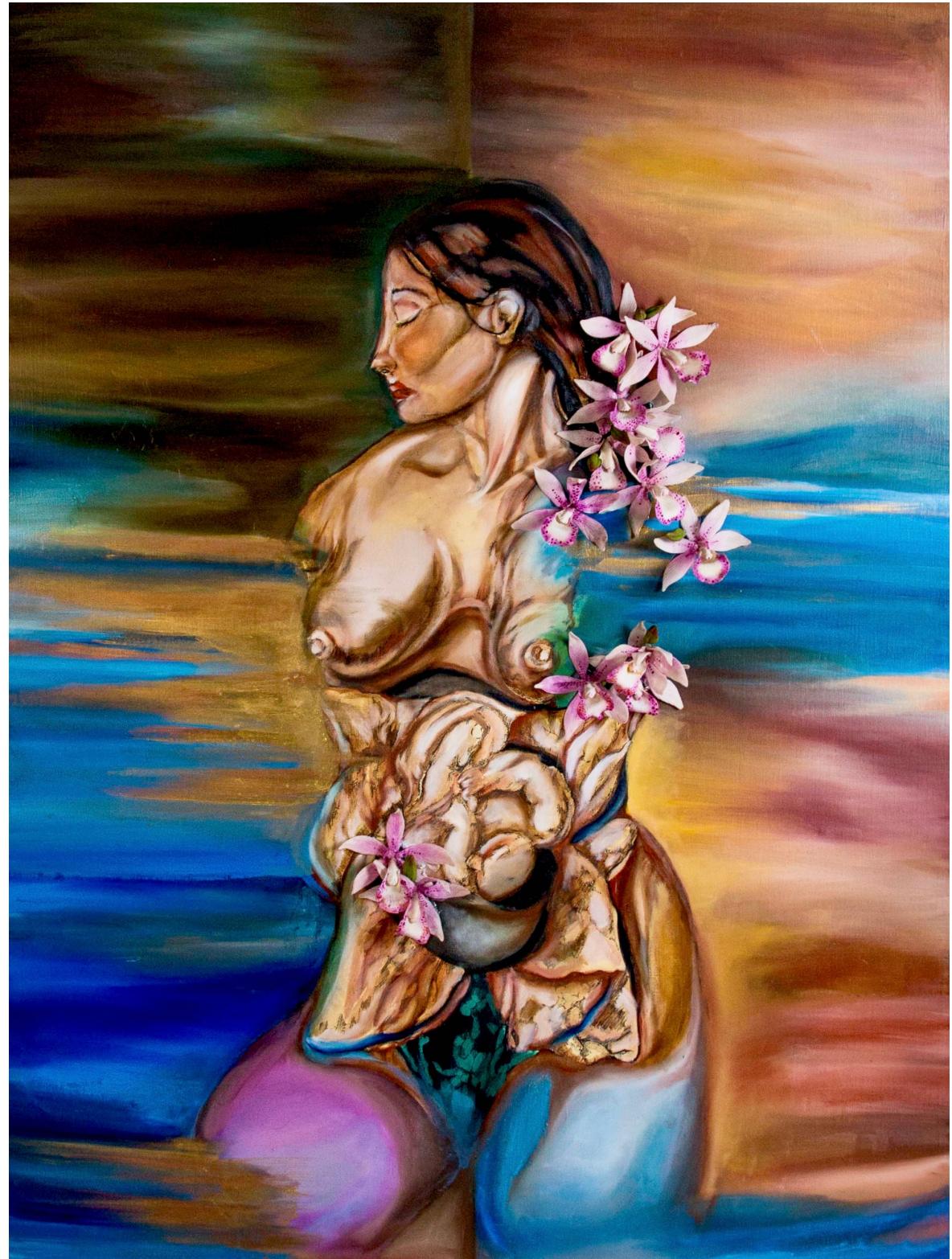
- I love you, but -

- an echo of the letter she burnt to ash in their driveway. Suddenly, Mrs. Leong understood the gravity of her daughter's innocent question, and the floor gave way from beneath her.



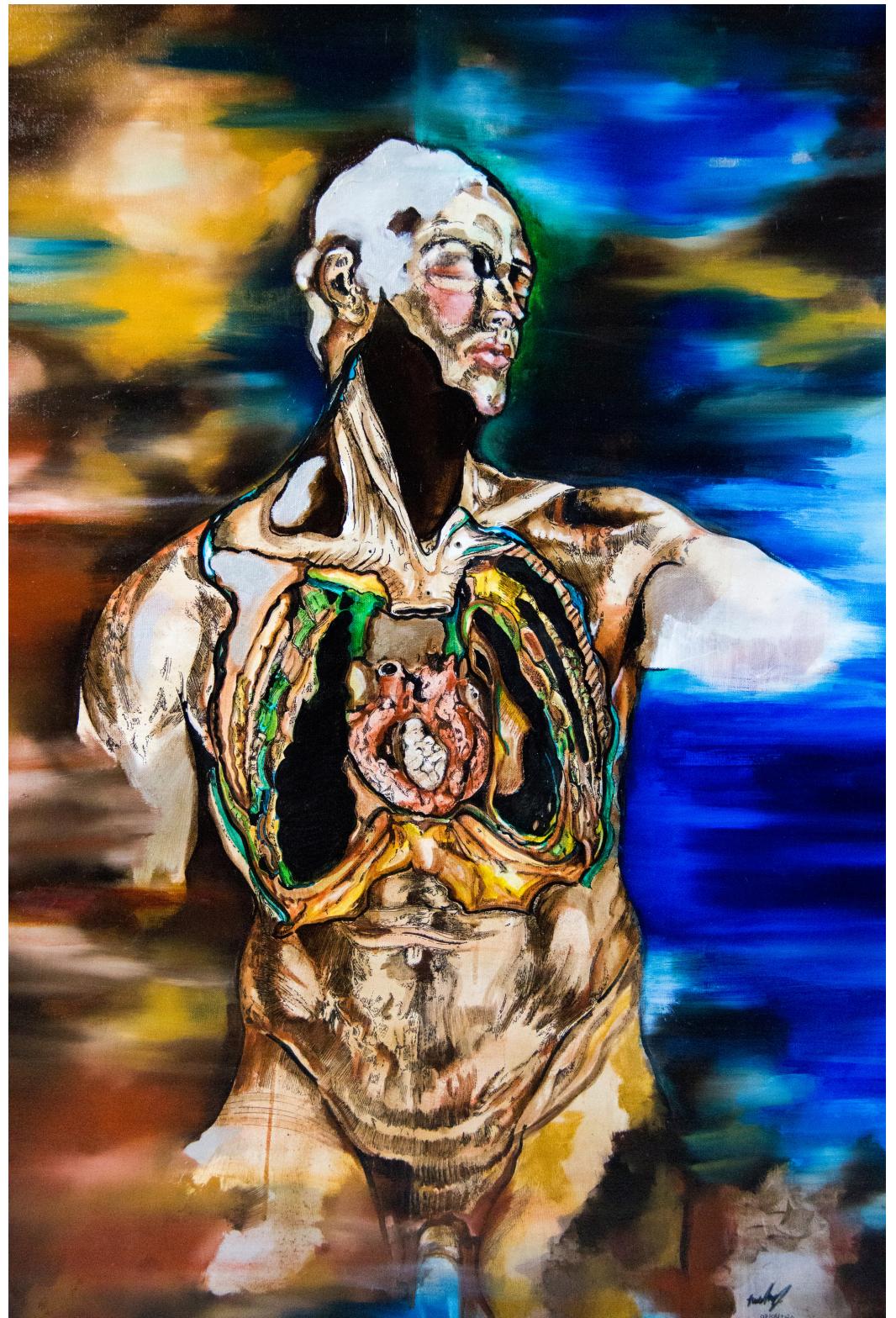
# Bloom

Jude Akkad | Artworks



# Surrender

Jude Akkad | Artworks



# Two Breasts

Ismim Putera | Poetry

If my two breasts  
are not milky enough  
to feed your childish lust

then

I will add a third  
in between  
it bounces only at night  
squirting holograms  
of 72 buxom  
virgins

If my two breasts  
are not dreamy enough  
to lull your curvaceous eyes

then

I will pump air into it  
and flap my wings  
ride me like a Sphinx  
we will fly through all  
the seven hanging gardens  
and swallow the forbidden fruit  
you'll be an angelic woman

# Zero O'Clock

Nethmi Dimbulana | Fiction

The clock ticks. Seconds pass by. Hours pass by, even days. Time either slows or flies and sometimes, there is no in-between. She crouches on her bed staring at the empty paper-thin walls ahead. It's been a rough few days. Heck, it's been a rough year. She pauses waiting for change or waiting for normalcy. She doesn't quite know anymore. But she's waiting.

She scrolls through her phone, eyes darkening as she sees her classmates going about their busy lives. They look happy, don't they? But she wouldn't know, at least not for sure. She barely speaks to anyone these days.

Trapped. She feels like she can't breathe. The room sometimes feels like it's closing in, encapsulating all her fears and worries into a tight space. It's almost too much to bear sometimes. She breathes heavily. But still, she breathes.

The days tick by. Some days are harder than others. But she bears through it all, although she's not quite sure why anymore. She goes about her day; she studies and sinks into her bed with her laptop on her lap. It's easier to fall into an alternate reality on the screen than to face the blue and grey reality of her world. She waits; it's zero o'clock.

The silence floods the room he's in. It's quiet, almost too quiet. The quietness makes him nervous, as if he's waiting for the other shoe to drop. He feels out of place in this new world, and it scares him. He's been running after his dreams for so long, and now, he doesn't know how to stop. The world has slowed around him, but he's still chasing, sprinting.

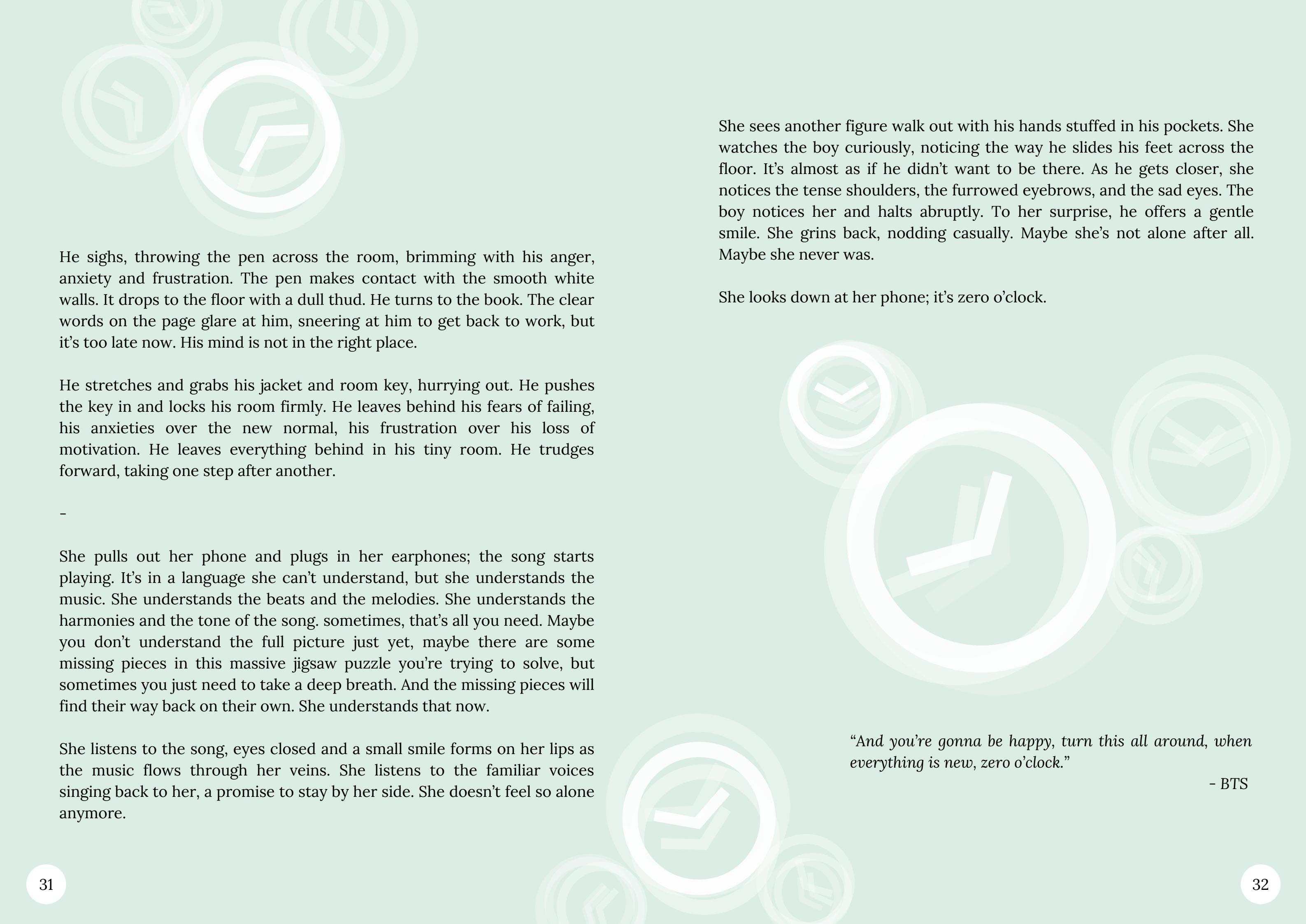
He sits in the dark, gazing out the window of his room. He stares at the sky, hoping to see the stars again but they are covered by the clouds in the tainted night sky. He glances back at the piles of books and the books glower back, demanding his attention. But he simply looks away. The world halts, and for the first time, so does he. So does his dreams.

"What's the point honestly? What's the point in all this? The world has stopped in 2020 so what's the point in trying?" He whispers to the abyss that surrounds him. There's no answer, no epiphany, no fairy godmother to tell him what's right and wrong. There's only silence as the clock strikes midnight; zero o'clock.

-

She enjoys the silence the night brings. It's dark and it's eerily quiet, but it settles her mind. She used to fear the dark and the unknown, but now she delves into it headfirst. She walks alone along the pathway, taking in the cool breeze as it washes over her face. A small smile forms. She pulls her jersey closer to her chest, making sure the cold doesn't seep into her body. She stops at the benches, carefully sitting down on a clean spot. It rained that morning; she remembers the sound of water droplets splattering against her window. But now, the sky is clear and the air feels cooler. It's almost easier to breathe again.

Although she enjoys the silence that surrounds her, her heart still feels heavy. She looks up at the sky, the stars barely visible but she can make out small glimmers in the night sky that are still with her. Her eyes drift to the moon, a full moon. Her heart feels lighter now.



He sighs, throwing the pen across the room, brimming with his anger, anxiety and frustration. The pen makes contact with the smooth white walls. It drops to the floor with a dull thud. He turns to the book. The clear words on the page glare at him, sneering at him to get back to work, but it's too late now. His mind is not in the right place.

He stretches and grabs his jacket and room key, hurrying out. He pushes the key in and locks his room firmly. He leaves behind his fears of failing, his anxieties over the new normal, his frustration over his loss of motivation. He leaves everything behind in his tiny room. He trudges forward, taking one step after another.

-

She pulls out her phone and plugs in her earphones; the song starts playing. It's in a language she can't understand, but she understands the music. She understands the beats and the melodies. She understands the harmonies and the tone of the song. sometimes, that's all you need. Maybe you don't understand the full picture just yet, maybe there are some missing pieces in this massive jigsaw puzzle you're trying to solve, but sometimes you just need to take a deep breath. And the missing pieces will find their way back on their own. She understands that now.

She listens to the song, eyes closed and a small smile forms on her lips as the music flows through her veins. She listens to the familiar voices singing back to her, a promise to stay by her side. She doesn't feel so alone anymore.

She sees another figure walk out with his hands stuffed in his pockets. She watches the boy curiously, noticing the way he slides his feet across the floor. It's almost as if he didn't want to be there. As he gets closer, she notices the tense shoulders, the furrowed eyebrows, and the sad eyes. The boy notices her and halts abruptly. To her surprise, he offers a gentle smile. She grins back, nodding casually. Maybe she's not alone after all. Maybe she never was.

She looks down at her phone; it's zero o'clock.

*"And you're gonna be happy, turn this all around, when everything is new, zero o'clock."*

- BTS

# Little Thin White Lies

Tan Xin Ni | Creative Nonfiction

I live on the edge of a ‘forever’, an all-consuming abyss. A living, breathing, heaving mass of nothingness, eagerly, gleefully awaiting these little breadcrumbs that I feed it, always roiling in its hunger for more.

I clutch onto my precious, precarious precipice overhanging it, and I long for the day when I might be brave enough to just let go.

This kind of life is not made for people like me, our breaths too short, our grips too loose, our skin too thin.

There are no consolation prizes for those who come second, and I’m chasing after the unreachable. Always late, always screaming, always ripping at the seams- and always, always just falling short. When can I stop waking up to the crack of a starting pistol and strip out of this skin-tight tracksuit?

I’ve traded in my eyes for a bright blue screen, and my fingers for a mechanical keyboard. I clack out manuscript after manuscript, text after text, article after article, and still I cram more words into my minutes, more promises I can’t keep into the future I don’t have.

I’m living from one held breath to another; I’m breathing in the ashes of what’s left of my sanity. There is poison in my bloodstream, and a manic woman in my brain.

Common sense tells me I should retch this wretchedness out and sedate the stranger, and behind these bright blue screens, you must believe me when I say I scratch and claw till my fingers are but bloodied stumps.

On the outside though, I’m a wide-eyed deer, sprawled paralyzed in the wake of bloody tire prints.

Do not mistake my inaction for indifference. I am tired; tired from this running, exhausted from this fighting.

The exit is right there, the rope to pull myself up from certain death within arm’s reach.

And yet.

What would I be left with, if I make it out from this abyss of doom? What will I do when I no longer run these mindless racetracks through pure deranged determination? What then, will happen to me when it is no longer the fear of the dark that propels me onwards, but the hope for the light?

This is how I live, this is the only way I know to breathe, and it almost feels like in my drowning, I’ll finally come alive. The death warrant has been signed, stamped and sealed; and eagerly, gleefully, I await the breadcrumbs they feed me, roiling in my hunger for more.

Is this a passion or a poison? A sickness or salvation? I don’t know, I can’t see when everyone speaks through veils of their own demons- I don’t have the time to look around, I don’t have the energy to swim against the current, I don’t have the will to strain my eyes to look beyond my next meal ticket.

So I drivel on. I will write my fingers to the bone, until my eyes are blind, until my brain has rotted, and my corpse has decomposed. Water will run, the planet will spin, and these fingers will write, even as the rest of me bleeds.

# Lost To Time

Farah Nadia Zulkiflee | Creative Nonfiction

autumn

winter

Walking along the sidewalk these days feels therapeutic. The autumn wind is relentless but exhilarating, and the dried leaves make a satisfying crunch under the weight of my shoes. The pavement is covered by yellow and brown; in some parts wet from last night's rain, and the rest crisp from the sudden rise in heat. With earbuds stuck in my ears, I take my time walking from one faculty building to another, just to make the most of my extra hours between classes. Yet it is during these moments, surrounded by silence save by the rustling of dried leaves blown away by the breeze, that it seems like all is right with the world; that all is right with me.

Sometimes I walk aimlessly around the campus until the final hours of the day, for reality will return to me once I arrive home, and I am forced to confront it against my will. Now and then I shift left and right, making way for the persistent cyclists who enjoy ignoring their designated pathways. They always have a focused look on their faces, as if there's nothing more important in the world than their destination. It is truly humanity's loss to not appreciate the beauty of nature when presented with it; always rushing from one place to another, always in fear of the merciless entity named time.

But even now, nature is going through change under the orders of time. It strips itself bare of its coat, readying itself for the arrival of a harsh companion. After all, winter comes bearing no warnings of its traps hidden beneath the inches of white snow.

Getting up from bed these days feels taxing. The heater isn't nearly enough to overtake the extreme coldness creeping in from outside, and I'm constantly bundled up in thick hooded sweatshirts and long socks, hiding under the covers. These apartment walls are thin; I hear the excited chattering of my housemates from the living room, and their horrified gasps at the dramatic happenings in the new Riverdale episode. I think of how guilty pleasures are meant to be consumed for selfish fulfillment, and how valuable they are now that I have lost them. The sound eventually drones on as white noise, lulling me to the third meaningless nap of the day. It is during these moments, alone and deprived, that the demon comes knocking on my unlocked door; its calling a familiar warmth to my numb soul, and its presence a welcomed companion.

The human body no longer understands time when the sun leaves as early as 5pm. Every time I stare out the windows I only see white and grey — hedges of untouched snow on the ground, aligned next to the wet pavements covered in dirty, muddy trails left behind by countless people running through. As enchanting as it is, the snow doesn't understand the courtesy of waiting turns. It doesn't wait for the old one to melt before raining in a fresh batch in the night, eventually stacking up inches of burden for people to deal with the next morning. It feels as if time has been frozen by the cold, and I am stuck in an endless loop, spiraling downwards into the mind's abyss.

But even now, nature is going through change under the orders of time. It distracts you with false promises of a better tomorrow, the lies soon piling up to render you helpless. After all, spring won't come until the darkness is ready to leave you unbound from its stifling binds.



spring

Stepping out of the house these days feels uncertain. I'm never entirely sure of what sight to expect. The ground is green again, and tiny specks of yellow have popped up, a striking contrast to the previous monochrome. Yet now and then, the snow returns for one last curtain call, as if it couldn't move on. As if it doesn't want to release its grip on me. Even on days when the sun shines in the morning, I bring my winter coat with me, wary of any sudden changes nature might think of having. Then, I would stare out of the bus window and see people bringing out their picnic mats and recliners to their front yard to lie out in the sun, basking in what little heat they can get for the day. It is during these moments, overwhelmed by the prospect of incoming summer days, that I understand the difference between those who have lost their race against time, and those who persevered.

Spring is nature's way of atonement. The puddles of melted snow return to the soil for new lives to sprout. Yet my mind is still lost underneath the cogs of shame and doubt, and my body moves only by the demands of routine and responsibilities. I barely remember what I did yesterday, or if I have eaten today. How many days have passed since the last time I spoke to someone? But whenever I raise my head and feel the gentle spring breeze against my skin, I am reminded of those days in autumn; when nature's embrace had felt like a soothing caress, rather than a suffocating chokehold. If you don't follow its pace, you will get left behind — such is the cruelty of time.

And even now, nature is going through change under the orders of time. It revives the dead and finds the lost; and one day it may heal me. After all, I still have to take a step forward everyday, even if the past few months I have lost will never return.



# The Mind and The Body

Ismim Putera | Poetry

The mind stretches the body  
left to right to right to right  
then upside down

somewhere in between the first toe

the plasticity of our i beyond  
the elastic limit of our  
the interaction can never be

all excess energy  
as per all the thermodynamic  
and gas constants

Where else is dented, my boy?  
the face is the  
your buttocks, hips, lips, flail chest,  
receding hairlines, pimples jutted  
they explode louder than the  
some remain motionless like the.

down  
down  
down  
and the last ring  
finger

brown adipose tissues  
further metabolised

dissipates into heat  
laws

Ring of Fire  
armpits  
out like deep sea vents  
Krakatoa volcano  
Vesuvius

The deformation is solid  
but feelings sink like mercury  
a queer state,  
and our mind changes state from air to ice to water  
ransacking all the particulate elements  
again

I am appalled by my own  
this is beyond  
of consciousness  
no scientific studies specifically.  
and its psyche  
other than anatomical forms,  
or their physiological

Then the mind stretches the body  
like a balloon  
that buoys up

to the blood-brain barrier.

state of mind  
the metaphysics  
study the body

up  
up  
up

# Facelessness

Chan Jun Loong | Fiction

One step to the right, spin, breathe in. This was where she belonged. Unfold the paper fan and steadily arch the back. Her body was lost to the flow, the rhythm, the expression. Exhale. Now bring the fan close, twirl to the left. The fervent patting of the *taiko* and *tsuzumi* and vigorous whistling of the bamboo flute consumed the air. Turn to the moon and reach out to its dim light.

Uproaring applause broke. All three of them took a deep bow.

“Sachiko! Sachiko! Sachiko!” the crowd chorused. The dancer named Sachiko earned the revealing glowers of her colleagues as they removed their masks. Sachiko tucked hers closer and shied away.

An anomaly, that was she. There were supposed to have only two performers: the *shite* and their *waki*. It wasn’t true to the play, but Manager had insisted she joined anyway because —

“Can you smile for us!” the crowd said, interjecting her thoughts.

Smile... that was “happiness”? Sachiko fished inside her sack, strapping on a beaming maiden’s face. With the mask on, she presented herself to the crowd. But she remained expressionless.

Roars of cheers thundered greater.

Her masks expressed her emotions for her because she couldn’t feel any. Sachiko was a *menreiki* : a spirit born from masks long-abandoned and discarded by her former owner. A *yōkai*. Her birth had come suddenly. Nowhere to go, nobody to belong to. It drove her mad. The shock, wrath, hopelessness, piling up inside of her... They howled to be let out, to explode from within the trenches of her heart and into a torrent of emotions; let them rain upon humans, upon this world who cast her aside

And she’d have — if it weren’t for the man who’d witnessed her lamentation. He was the manager of a Noh agency, and his keen eyes had known what she was. He’d offered to take her as his dancer, beckoned. A place... And so he’d christened her the name “Sachiko”, after bliss.

But a *yōkai* milling among humans was too risky, Manager had said. So, he'd given her a sack for her masks on her temple. Normally, she'd simply swap them to her liking, but she knew Manager knew better. If humans found out, they'd be frightened of her, he'd said. She'd be hurt, he'd said.

"Can you smile for us!" backstage, the lead dancer parroted the earlier fan in a jeering tone at Sachiko. Sachiko, in turn, stared vacantly from beneath her visage of a miserable old woman. "Seriously, why did Manager even think of hiring a freak with a mask complex? Your presence is undermining the meaning of *our* performance to the audience. People aren't spending yen to watch our story; they're coming to see a museum exhibition of you! Don't you ever feel sad knowing you're dirtying the very essence of Noh?"

"I'm sorry," the *yōkai* apologized in monotone. "I'm only following what Manager wishes me to do."

A muscle twitched in the shite's eyebrow. "Right, you're sorry," she repeated. And her next words were venom-slathered daggers. "Manager should wish you to crawl back to whatever hole you thrashed out from." Promptly then she left.

Why? Humans wanted to see her on stage because they loved their performance... right? Manager wouldn't lie to her. Manager had said she was special and that no soul had the right to drag her down because of it. Sachiko stroked her old woman mask. Did "special" mean becoming hated?

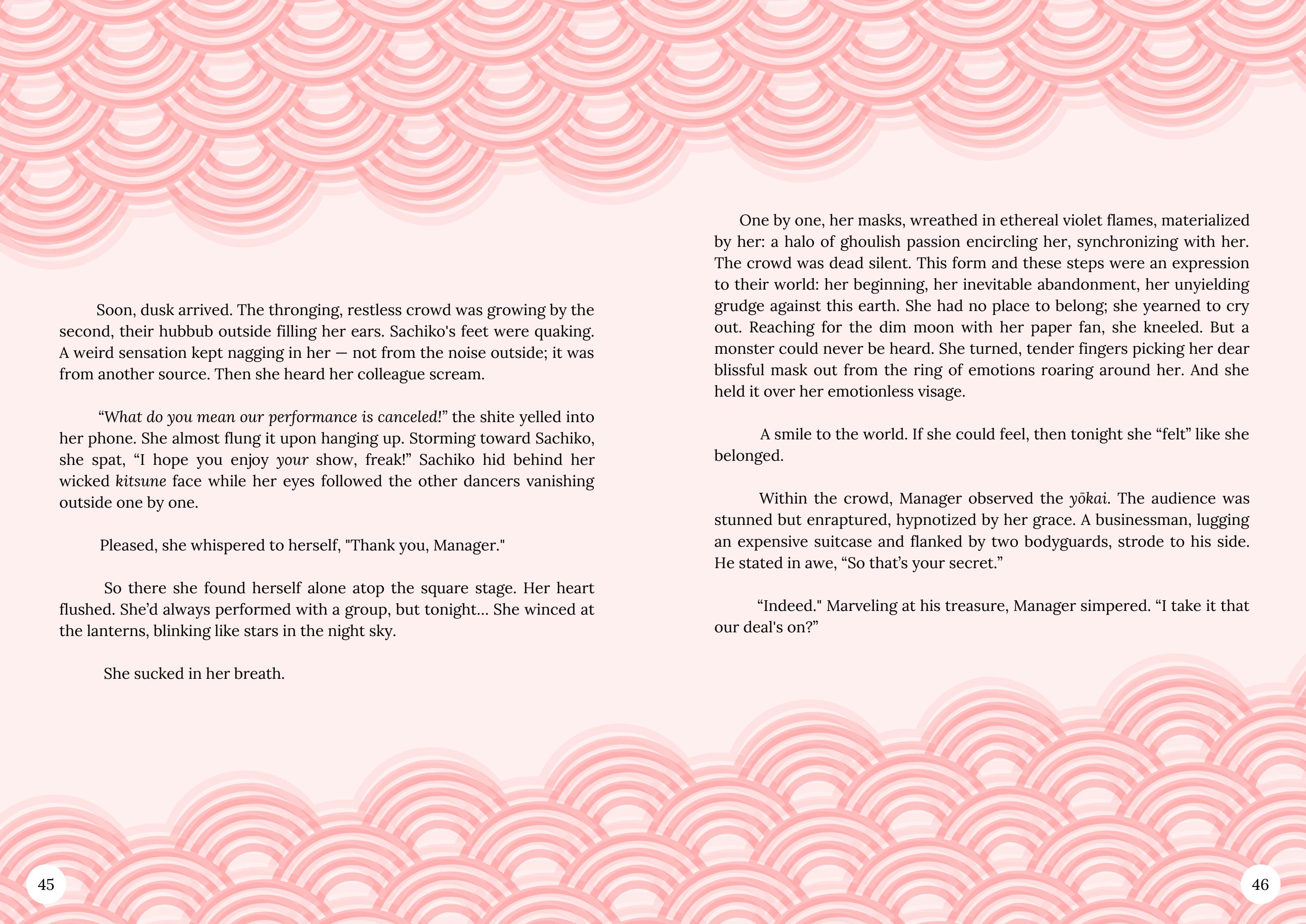
"Sorry to intrude while you're practicing," a male voice from behind her spoke. His eyes glanced at her mask and his face blanched.

Sachiko raised her gaze. Manager's head was peeking in from the tent! Oh, had she been dancing? With a jolted gasp, her mask shifted into the smiling woman.

He excused himself inside and invited her to sit beside him on a crate. "You are sad," he remarked.

"Yes." She hung her head low. As she explained, her mask phased into a furious red *oni*, and her tone deepened. "I don't understand. I can't. Didn't you say I was helping them?"

His gaze was understanding. Regretful, but understanding. "Sachiko, you know I'd never say that. You're precious and unique; everyone appreciates you!" He wore a gentle smile. "They pick on you because you let yourself be picked on. They're jealous because they don't have what you have. Listen, Sachiko. You are strong. Tonight's Shōwa Day performance will bring in people from all over the country. You need to show them you are strong." He paused. "I'll help you."



Soon, dusk arrived. The thronging, restless crowd was growing by the second, their hubbub outside filling her ears. Sachiko's feet were quaking. A weird sensation kept nagging in her — not from the noise outside; it was from another source. Then she heard her colleague scream.

"What do you mean our performance is canceled!" the shite yelled into her phone. She almost flung it upon hanging up. Storming toward Sachiko, she spat, "I hope you enjoy your show, freak!" Sachiko hid behind her wicked *kitsune* face while her eyes followed the other dancers vanishing outside one by one.

Pleased, she whispered to herself, "Thank you, Manager."

So there she found herself alone atop the square stage. Her heart flushed. She'd always performed with a group, but tonight... She winced at the lanterns, blinking like stars in the night sky.

She sucked in her breath.

One by one, her masks, wreathed in ethereal violet flames, materialized by her: a halo of ghoulish passion encircling her, synchronizing with her. The crowd was dead silent. This form and these steps were an expression to their world: her beginning, her inevitable abandonment, her unyielding grudge against this earth. She had no place to belong; she yearned to cry out. Reaching for the dim moon with her paper fan, she kneeled. But a monster could never be heard. She turned, tender fingers picking her dear blissful mask out from the ring of emotions roaring around her. And she held it over her emotionless visage.

A smile to the world. If she could feel, then tonight she "felt" like she belonged.

Within the crowd, Manager observed the *yōkai*. The audience was stunned but enraptured, hypnotized by her grace. A businessman, lugging an expensive suitcase and flanked by two bodyguards, strode to his side. He stated in awe, "So that's your secret."

"Indeed." Marveling at his treasure, Manager simpered. "I take it that our deal's on?"

# Imposter

Akmallina A. | Poetry

Adorned in a writer's skin,  
with jewels of words  
hanging on my neck,  
decorating my wrists,  
my fingers—

Yet underneath,  
the skin sags loose,  
haphazardly stapled to the body  
refusing to amalgamate.



# Lavenders at Sea

Sorfinia Md Shaiful | Fiction

The lavenders were in their full, annual summer bloom outside. Fourteen year old Brynn Myers sat staring at them through the living room window and wondered if the next owners of the cottage would keep them blooming that way. Her daze was interrupted by a series of thumps from the ceiling above and the old wooden staircase creaked as her older sister Leah sauntered downstairs.

"Let's go", Leah said and slipped an arm into her worn denim jacket. Brynn stretched her legs across the sofa cushions.

"Took you long enough," she replied before heaving herself up, "I hope I catch a shrimp today."

Leah stalked to the back door, her right hand pausing on the brass knob and her left angling up to show the time.

"We're meeting the doctors again at one. Make it count."

The sisters walked out and were greeted with the chilly morning breeze of the sea. A long, handmade wooden cabinet stood to their right and Brynn roamed through old hats, half-empty bottles of sunscreen, and picnic mats before finding her tin bucket. It was a worn old thing – dented and scratched from numerous trips to the rock pools. She shook out bits of sand from inside and skipped towards the lavender bushes that she was keenly marvelling at through the window. The blue buds were soft on her fingertips and she leaned in for a good sniff.

"Grandpa never failed to keep these growing."

Indeed, despite the salty winds and soil, their late grandfather, Cecil Myers, never failed to grow full blooming flowers in his backyard. The flowers and the beach cottage, situated in the quieter ends of Shellharbour were his pride and joy – only second to his family. He had taken care of his home alone for over thirty years since his wife's passing. The then young couple had found the place during a drive along the coast and fell in love with its crooked wooden panels and grey roof tiles at first sight. They had fixed the leaking water pumps themselves, installed solar panels on the roof and painted the outer walls blue: Cecil's favourite colour. Years later, he retired and was left alone when his daughter got married and moved out. From then on, the quiet and peace within the walls would be disturbed only by the lively screams and laughter of his two granddaughters when they visited from their flat in Sydney during holidays, and stayed for the summer every year afterwards. It was the sisters' favourite retreat and it had remained that way until old age had finally caught up to Cecil in the middle of last winter.

An hour later, the sisters' faces were flushed and slick with sprays of saltwater and sweat from the midday sun.

"I'm gonna head back," said Leah, leaning against a rock.

"So soon?" Brynn asked.

"I prefer the shaded comforts of the cottage."

"Lazy shut-in."

"Shrimp kisser."

Brynn sent a heavy splash of water towards Leah at that last comment, to which she easily dodged and snickered.

"Alright, bye-bye little fella," said Brynn, angling her bucket back into the pool.

"You're not keeping it?"

"Oh, I never do. I just play with them for a bit."

"Why?"

"Because they belong down there," said Brynn, as if that was the most obvious answer.

Leah let out a little snort. "Of course."

Brynn watched the shrimp swim out along the water. It seemed to twitch in delight.

"I mean, they usually die a day after I bring them with me anyway," she continued.

"If you keep them in that bucket they will," Leah pointed out, "If you put them in a tank, clean their waters and feed them, they could continue living. Happily even."

Brynn gave a nonchalant hum in response, staring towards blue walls in the distance.

"Or you could just eat 'em." said Leah.

It was Brynn's turn to laugh this time, "And keep them in my belly forever."

After a moment, she turned her attention back into the pool and peered deep inside. "I want to stay," she said, "I'll catch up in a bit."

Leah looked at her sister's face. At the half-lidded eyes and the soft graze of her fingers on the water. She turned around and walked away.



Leah's stroll back to the cottage was quiet. Knowing it was her last time doing so, she noticed that despite the wind and waves behind her, a strange quiet seemed to cloak the place. Her feet felt heavy as she walked past the lavender bushes, and for a brief moment the wind seemed to gently push her back towards them. She ignored it and took out a cigarette instead.

But as she stood at the porch and snapped the lighter on, the fire, from her angle, seemed to overlay the lavenders in its background. As if it would set the bushes ablaze.

It was odd of her to notice such a thing. Putting away the cigs and lighter, Leah Myers sat on the porch steps and merely watched the lavenders sway in the breeze. Back and forth. Again and again.



When they entered the cottage again, the sisters dragged in sand that coated their feet like a second skin. Though, there was sand in practically every nook and cranny of the house. As if the grains themselves were as much a part of it as the very walls that held the place together. It could never be rid of.



Brynn launched herself into the blue sofa while Leah headed towards the kitchen for her water bottle.

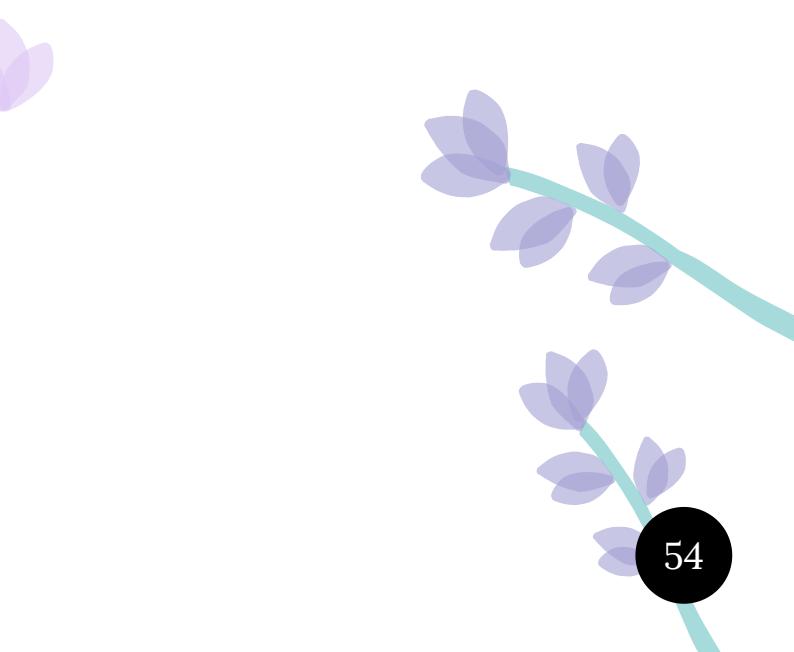
"Are we leaving the rest of the furniture here?" asked Brynn, picking at a bit of loose string on the cushions.

"Yeah," replied Leah from the other room, "I called the family last week. The couple seemed happy to get some freebies." She ran her hands along the worn edges of the countertop.

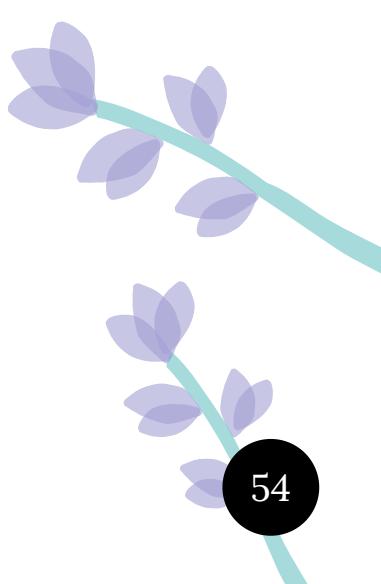
"Do you think they'll take good care of this place?"

Leah bit her lip and answered after a moment, "Hope so."

She glanced across the kitchen cabinets before grabbing her bag and walked out.



"Are you really sure we shouldn't replant those flowers?" asked Brynn when she spotted her sister again, "They can live in a large pot or something. I'll take care of them while mum's gone. She'll be back in a few weeks anyway."





There was no point in replanting the flowers. Leah knew this. They would wither away just like their times in the cottage and just like their mother – in the hospital bed with her leukemia. And when she is gone Brynn would enter the girls' boarding school and Leah herself would be attending university in a different city. There was no point in replanting them. But Leah did not say any of it to her sister and huffed instead.

"They're just flowers. We have a bunch of other things to remember grandpa with." She checked her watch once again. "C'mon, the appointment is in forty minutes."

"They're not just flowers," cried Brynn, "And you know that." She stormed past Leah and slammed the front door shut behind her.

Left alone in the cottage, Leah sighed and spun in a slow circle before stopping to stare at the cream walls along the staircase. The wallpaper was stained with lines and circles casted by the edges of frames that once hung on them. Pictures of a time and family that don't exist anymore.

Outside, the sunlight shining off the car was as blinding as the thoughts that roamed Brynn's mind. She went in and took one last glance at the cottage's blue walls through the side mirrors before leaning her head against the window, and waited until beads of sweat started forming underneath her shirt. Leah was really taking her time.

Brynn was a second close to pressing the car horn when she finally spotted her sister's figure through the mirror. She watched as Leah locked the door and rested her hand on the brass knob for a moment too long before walking away.

When Leah entered the car she sighed and gently laid her denim jacket onto Brynn's lap.

"You can dry these."

Raising an eyebrow, Brynn lifted the jacket and let out a soft smile.

A small tuft of lavender was neatly tucked between the folds.

# Debut Performance

Jenny Hor | Fiction

The ivory white dress was finally making its debut after being hidden underneath June's bed for weeks. It was neatly kept within an old, almost tattered shoebox where its appearance would not raise any suspicion. She had waited patiently for this special moment, for this was the first time she would shine on stage as Juliet, every girl's dream role.

June took off her monochromatic shirt and replaced it with the gorgeous dress. Her legs went first, surrounded by the pool of fabric before pulling it up to her torso. She could feel the light chiffon sleeves tickling her arms, but they were long enough to rest right on her wrists. Her fingers slowly made their way to her lower back, as she searched for the zipper to seal the dress together. It was a perfect fit.

"Wow."

She could not stop admiring herself in the mirror. Even the ugly crack in the looking glass could not hide June's newfound beauty. She was no longer Peaseblossom, but the elegant Fairy Queen Titania who ruled the fairy realm along with Oberon. Such an image that no one would ever suspect she had been a background actor for two years.

Her body twirled while the dress shimmered along with the lights. June was trying to reenact the ballet steps her sister April once performed during the Spring Showcase. She soon felt as if a pair of golden swan wings had emerged, feathers unraveling along her arm. If she flapped them, she might fly away from her house into the stars where she could shine together with the others.

Her anticipation bloomed like little cherry blossoms in spring. She could not wait to bask under the lights and cameras, with a thousand pairs of eyes admiring her from below. All June had to do on stage was to deliver the lines she had been practicing for months.

"Oh, I am fortune's fool," this would be the line that would make the audience fall for her in an instant, feeling pity for her fallen moment on stage. After the performance, a series of applause would come in when she appeared last during the actors' roll call. All thanks to the ivory dress that transformed her life.

"What are you wearing?" The thunderous voice of her mother boomed from behind her. The harmonized O Fortuna rang in June's ears as the woman slowly entered the room. June's instincts told herself to shield the dress before anything bad happened to it.

"I-I am the lead," Her mother had always been looking for chances to rip away the gleaming parts of her. This time, June had enough. "I got the role of Juliet."

"Nonsense, you didn't get any role."

"No, it's supposed to be me!" The grip on the dress became tighter, enough for her nails to pierce through the fabric. The ivory dress was the only chance she had to become a star on the stage. She did not want to let April keep taking the spotlight away from her.

"And how dare you steal the costume from your sister," her mother cried. "Hadn't you realized that she had been desperately looking for it?"

"The dress is mine."

"Foolish girl," her mother slapped her across the cheek. "You almost made April lose her role because of this."

The sting on her cheek reminded June of her multiple failed auditions and her lack of natural charm. Once again, her mother refused to give her a chance to prove herself on stage. It was always April, her little diva. It was always April, the Odette of the family. June was neither the white swan nor the black swan, she was just an extra of the cast.

"I—" The lump in her throat stopped June. A tragedy indeed, for a performer who could not even perform a rage aria.

"Take it off and give it to me," her mother's voice was firm as if she was the judge and executioner of her crime. "Now."

In reluctance, June slowly stripped the dress from her body. She stood there in her underwear, handing over the folded garment with trembling arms. Her mother received it like a treasured prize and left the room while calling out for her other daughter. June sat on the floor, almost naked, with the dim light showering over her as the curtains fell.

# Are You Gonna Tell Her?

Tan Xin Ni | Fiction

There's so much to unpack here.

I stare at him, then at our intertwined fingers. He's insane for wanting this, but if I'm not careful, I know I'll look into those eyes and slowly convince myself that this is what I want, too.

He's insane, he's insane. You're not serious, you can't be serious about this, I tell him. He laughs, of course, he isn't serious about this, he replies easily, but he knows I know the truth.

The waitress brings us our burgers and fries, and we break apart momentarily, welcoming a needed distraction from the chaos of everything.

You need to eat, he tells me when he catches me staring at the food. Funny, I just thought the same thing. Being with him makes the blurry world come into focus; it makes this dingy, stuffy diner seem a little more bearable, makes the dim, flickering lightbulb overhead a little more romantic than scary, makes the greasy mess of food on our plates more appetising than revolting.

And yet, something doesn't sit right with me. A family, he had said on the way here. Us, starting a family; there's nothing I want more than a warm welcoming home, and a jolly bunch of children toddling about, and - a shiver finds its way down my spine, and there is something inexplicably, fundamentally wrong with that mental image. I stare at him eating, chowing down the slops, completely unfazed by the conversation we just had, and maybe it was the food, maybe his crazed appetite, but in that split second, I reckon I've never seen a more disgusting person than him.

No, I don't mean that. I didn't mean that, of course, I didn't.

He reaches across the table and opens his mouth, but all I hear is the note of worry in his voice. He holds my hand, and all I can do is look at our fingers intertwined. It's disgusting, how I could bear to sit here - sit here and let him hold my hand.

Something's wrong with me. I need help. There's something I'm forgetting, something very, very wrong, and I'm not sure how long he'll put up with me. I'm not sure how long I have left until he leaves me again. Again, again. I put a fry in my mouth, chewing slowly. He stops his talking, stops his worrying, and I feel a little better. I feel like maybe I can give him a chance, give myself a chance, give this life a chance. When has he ever left me anyway? He's been here for as long as I can remember, and he'll remain here with me forevermore.

A patron leaves the diner, and the bell above the door jangles dismally as my eyes follow them through the greasy windows, vaguely making out what's going on in the outside world. A lump grows in my throat - I haven't the foggiest idea what was going on outside.

Something ugly grips me then. How did she taste? How did her skin feel under your hands? Was she quiet, like a docile dear? Or was she wild, the way you like your girls? I didn't ask these questions. It wasn't me, but he looks at me strangely and asks me what I was going on about.

What I was going on about, he asks. He asks me that question like he had the right to question me at all. The blonde, I say, almost surprising myself with the image of this girl. The one with blue eyes; sweet, gentle, but she's different when she's had too much to drink. The one at the bar, the one who would run her fingers through your hair, leaning in close enough that you can smell the sweetness of the alcohol on her breath.

Riley, you're doing it again, he tells me.

What, what am I doing? Telling you I saw it, telling you I know the truth?

No, you're hallucinating again, and he didn't need to tell me twice, I shut up.

I was hallucinating. I am hallucinating. It was all in my head. The blonde and her butterfly kisses. Her hands around my waist - it never happened. Who was at that bar, drinking it all away? I can't remember who she was. I can't remember the name she told me, but I knew her, I knew she existed. She must. She must because I can remember the tattoo on her shoulder, almost as clearly as I remember the blue, blue eyes she had.

The waitress brings us the bill, asks if I want anything else, and I turn to him, almost about to ask him if he wanted his usual milkshake takeaway, but I wasn't so sure anymore. He looked at me strangely and opens his mouth to ask for the milkshake. Something's wrong here.

The waitress repeated her question. She must have thought I didn't hear her. He asks her for a milkshake, but she wouldn't look at him, wouldn't even acknowledge his presence. My hands grew clammy.

"Um, Miss, do you want anything else?" She is starting to sound impatient. "Is there a doctor around here?" The words bubble from my mouth. I know from the way that he narrows his eyes at me that this isn't the first time I've done this, and I know I should take it back, or look away, or do something - anything to appease him, but I'm paralysed in my seat.

"Oh, Miss, one moment,"

Who are you? Who are you, and why don't I remember you like I remember her?

"Miss, I'll take you to Dr. Michael's two streets away, and he'll sort you out, alright?"

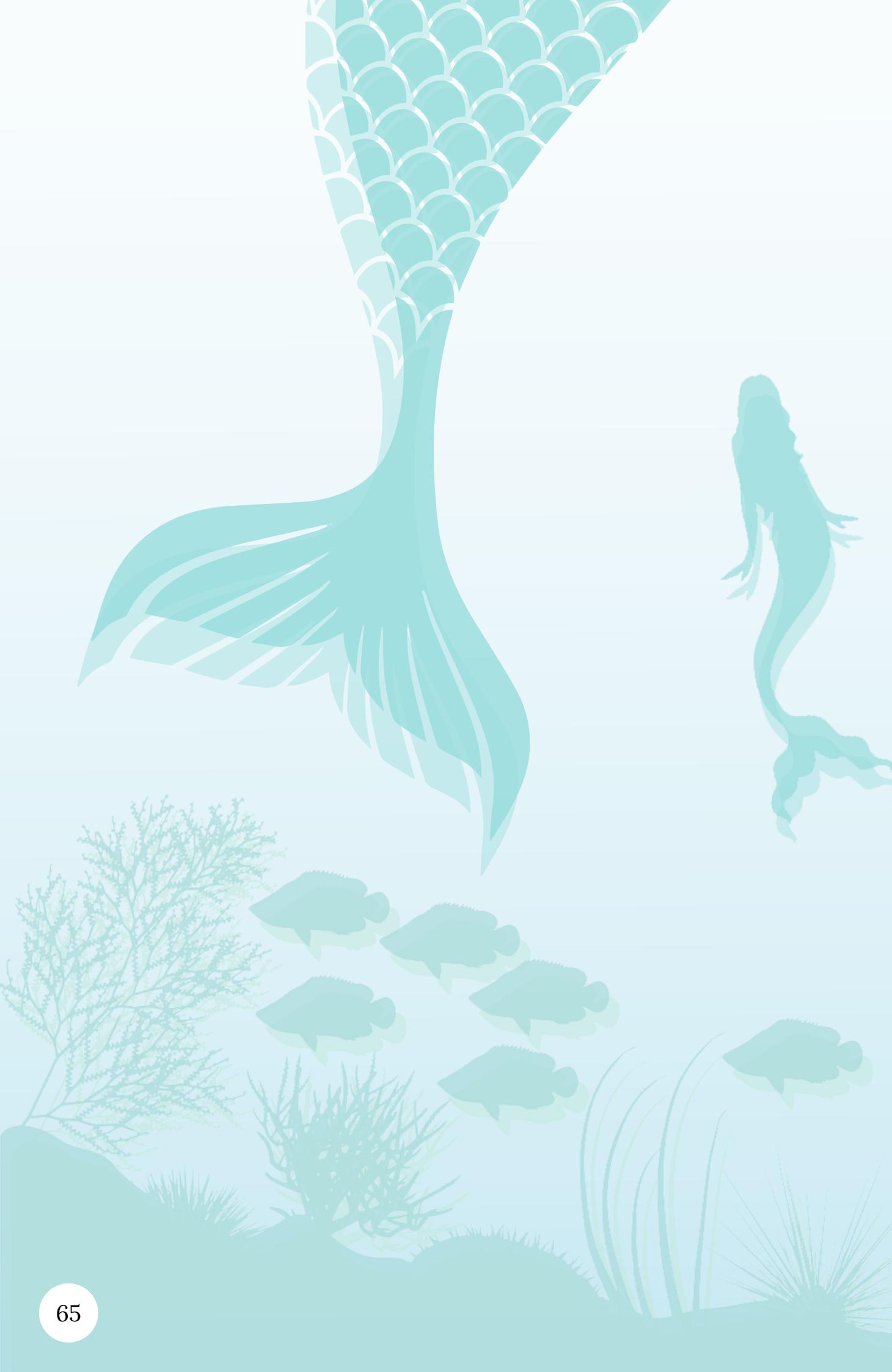
I nod slowly, watching as he stands up silently, throws down his napkin, and stalks out of the diner. I could just make out his figure walking down the street, heading to - wait, where was he going? Why can't I remember where he lived?

"Miss?"

"Yes, yes, I'm with you," I need to know something. I look down at the table, and I could see two meals, mine barely touched, and his, completely untouched.

"Tell me something," I venture weakly, a horrible notion dawning upon me. "Did you see him?"

The waitress shakes her head sadly, "No, Miss, you're relapsing again,"



# This Submarine

Ismim Putera | Poetry

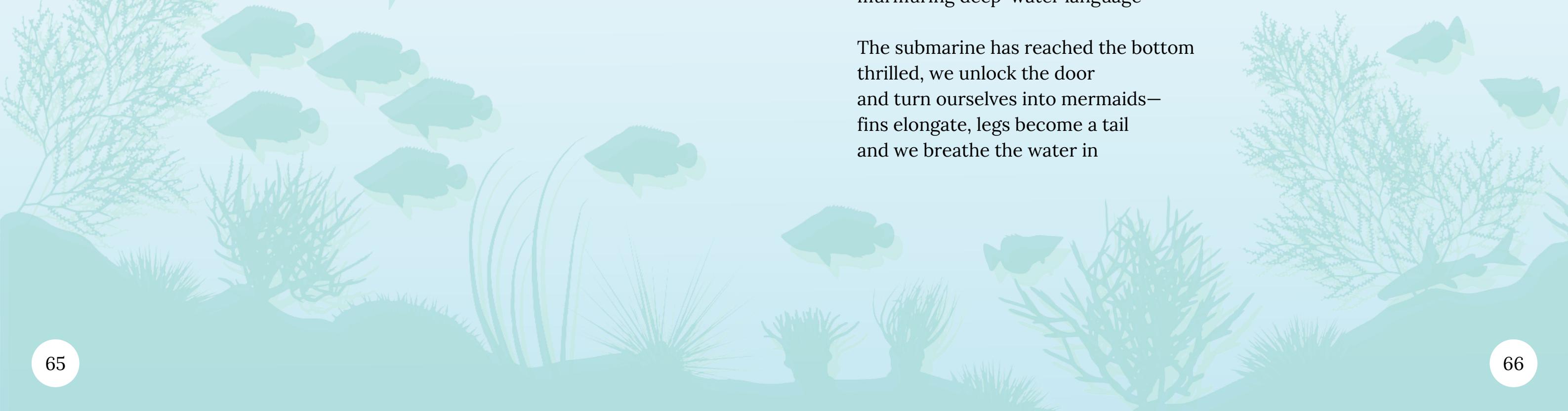


This submarine has been sinking for years  
sinking deeper into the trench  
each meter increasing the pressure  
hardening our slimy scales  
compressing our rickety chest

The trench smells like old wound  
plugging our windpipe  
invertebrate darkness oozes out  
from the crevices—like those daydreams  
from our Atlantean nightmares

A three-eyed fish glows in the dark  
but our heart blackens under the light  
as we descend  
jellyfishes encircle our tank  
murmuring deep-water language

The submarine has reached the bottom  
thrilled, we unlock the door  
and turn ourselves into mermaids—  
fins elongate, legs become a tail  
and we breathe the water in



# Shattered

Shweta Manoharan | Fiction

Glass shatters.

The sound is so remarkably distinct that my thoughts grind to a halt. Something about it makes my heart swell and then thud. What is it that my mum always told me about broken glass?

The subsequent silence is broken by the crunching of glass.

Of course. Broken glass is a bad omen.

I feel my body quiver. What can I attribute these shudders to – the darkness, the dampness, or fear brimming to the surface?

My eyes are wide open, but the darkness engulfs and holds me in its tight embrace, rendering me blind. They've done all the adjusting they're capable of, yet I still squint, hoping to catch a glimpse of something, anything.

I shift my focus to my ears. The sound of my ragged breathing is comforting. Shallow at times, deep otherwise, but unwavering.

If sounds could be described as whispers, then I feel the wind whispering into my ears. Not sweet nothings, no. Nothing as demure as that. It's like demons having hushed conversations demanding to be heard.

What are these demons saying? What do they want from me?

I suppress a groan.

I'm cold and wet and uncomfortable, yet I stay frozen in place, crouched under a rusty table. I have no recollection of where I am, and for the moment this feels like the safest place to be, though... that may very well be untrue.

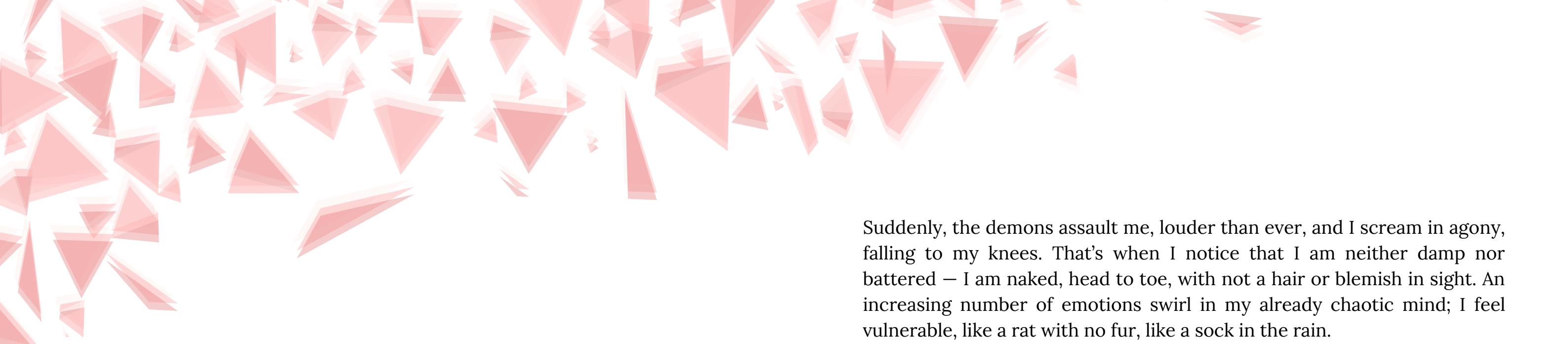
The whispers now sound like the hum of machinery, if the hum was somehow amplified in a pain-inducing manner. If only these whispers would hush so that I can listen. I need to listen.

I feel myself getting agitated as the sounds intensify, becoming screeches and screams. Do these demons surround me? Or are they in my head, one with me, consuming me?

"Stop!" I want to yell, "Just stop!"

But my lips remain pursed, frozen in place.

Just beyond the sounds of my ragged breathing and the whispers and screeches wreaking havoc, I hear something faint, out of reach. I try to hone in on it, to throw an anchor out into the void, hoping it will clasp onto whatever it is that is out there.



Then I hear it – the pitter-patter of feet. It's nowhere near the shattered glass. No, it's... behind me. I whirl around and wait, willing any inkling of fight left within me to resurface. This feels foolish. I know how fragile I am, I know that the gentlest breeze might blow me away.

The whispers have quietened now; the wind is crisp as it carries the pitter-patter to me and surrounds me with it. I feel it come closer and I hear it get louder. I am helpless as I wait. I hold my breath, my ragged breath that was once constant and comforting, and wait to be assaulted by the bearer of the feet. All I can do is wait.

Instead, I'm blinded by lights.

I blink incessantly, confused and scared. As I reach out for the table, I freeze. There is no table. There was never a table. I'm surrounded by a room of white – white walls, white floor, and white ceiling – with nothing occupying any space but me.

The glass... where's the glass? I can't have imagined the shattering of the glass; the sound was so distinct, so etched in my memory. The table has already faded into the back of my mind like a ghost that was never solid, never physically present; but the sound of the shattering glass is vivid – it was real, it had to be!

Scrambling to my feet I look around, but there is nothing there to feast my eyes upon other than blinding whiteness – I feel like I am submerged in thick, white paint.

Suddenly, the demons assault me, louder than ever, and I scream in agony, falling to my knees. That's when I notice that I am neither damp nor battered – I am naked, head to toe, with not a hair or blemish in sight. An increasing number of emotions swirl in my already chaotic mind; I feel vulnerable, like a rat with no fur, like a sock in the rain.

Where am I?

That thought is immediately replaced by another...

"Who am I!?" I scream as I curl up in a manner akin to that of a foetus; my emotions fight each other so that one may come out victorious, but none do. The whispers have softened to a gentle hum and I eventually let them lull me to sleep.

-



Somewhere behind a slab of glass, a woman observes. She jots down some notes on a writing pad before speaking into the microphone.

"Initiate Scenario #523 with Subject #2."

A countdown is initiated.

10...

9...

8...

The flat planes of Room #2 turn pitch black.

7...

6...

5...

Technicians, in a control room filled with levers and buttons, hurriedly fiddle with the mechanisms.

4...

3...

2...

The woman turns a switch on, and a jolt of electricity is discharged from the electrodes embedded in Subject #2.

1...

Subject #2 wakes up and looks around bewildered, unable to see anything.

0...

A recording of a man's maniacal laughter plays through one of the immersive speakers in Room #2.

-

I hear a man laughing.

It's the kind of laugh that sends a shiver down your spine and leaves you feeling gross and violated. What is it that my mum always told me about strange men and their maniacal laughter?

# Again, and again.

Tasia Khoo | Poetry

This doleful heart that grieves  
these distant views which my hands cannot hold  
That false present behind my eyes has me foolishly deceived.  
And I—

can only glimpse through a wistful haze,  
Barely a gaze long enough to believe it true.  
Take this pause—  
hang it on a single thread  
hung on that window's edge.  
The last oozing of that sun has bled,  
and stained this room crimson hues.

That pause which casts its shadow beside mine  
refuses to resume.  
Come rest, dear Time.

But Time has made me cynical  
That deceiving sign of the man-made—  
Lost in the words we create.  
O Time, take me with you there and then!  
But Time smirks knowing more than I.  
That view which I cannot hold—it fades  
and today will join that grave  
again, and again.

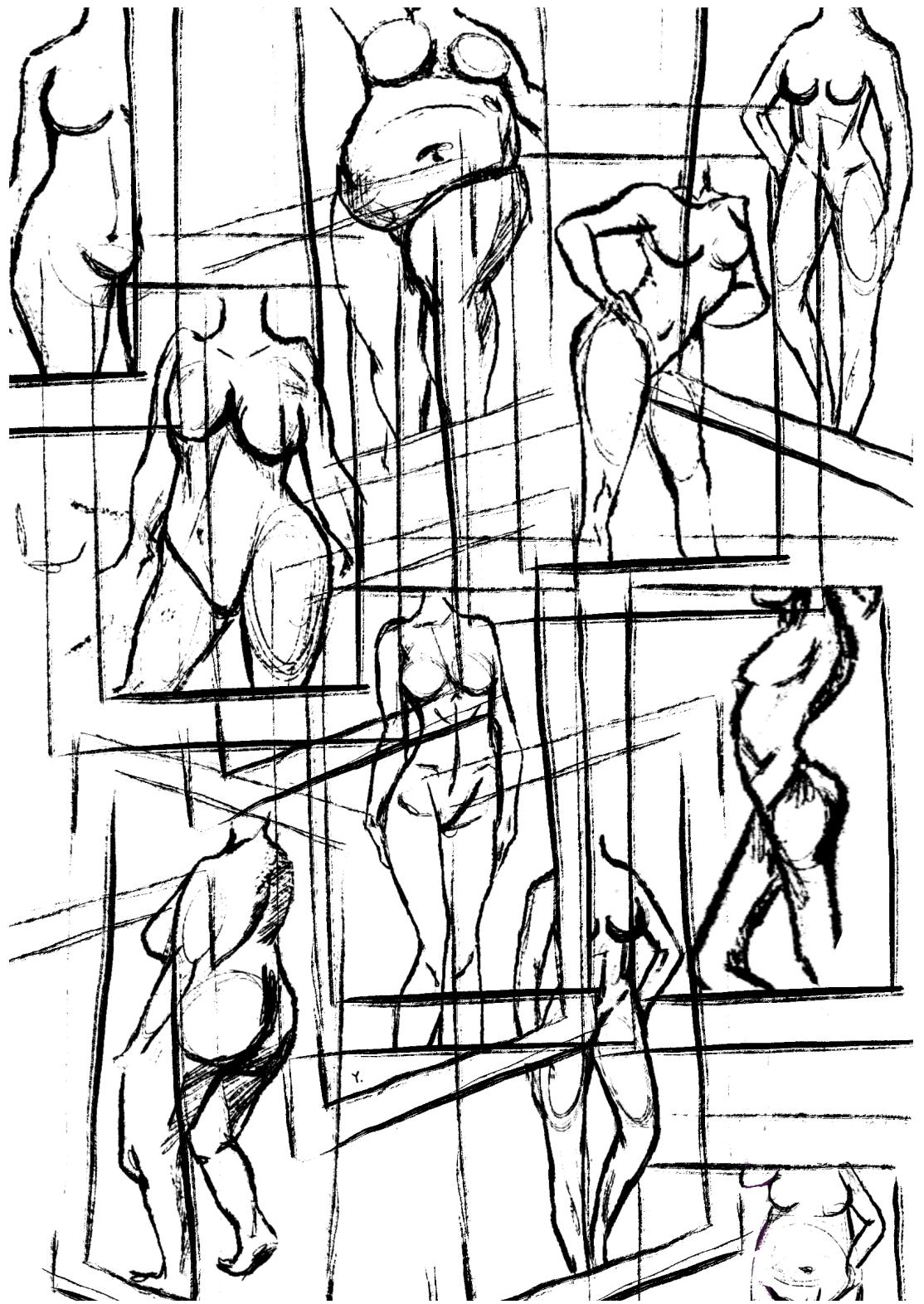
What odds and ends bring about this nostalgic melancholy?  
That which tastes of nightshade's bittersweet berries,  
with morning mist that blinds my eyes.  
The showers of weeping moons' that dash and divide,  
watched over by the heavens—  
and Death, in pensive mood,  
catches that celestial breath,  
buries it in a garden where bones lay,  
blooming sweet flowers on that sunny Sunday.  
All in a second, a single blink  
and we return.  
Tomorrow will join that grave  
again, and again.

What melody made that sand which travels ahead,  
laces now and graces the coffins of then?  
That which fades, returns and wanes.

Perhaps all tomorrows will always have yesterdays.  
Come eternal time—  
console this beating heart.  
Come along with me to that very end and start.  
All moments and I will join that grave,  
and be back then  
again, and again—

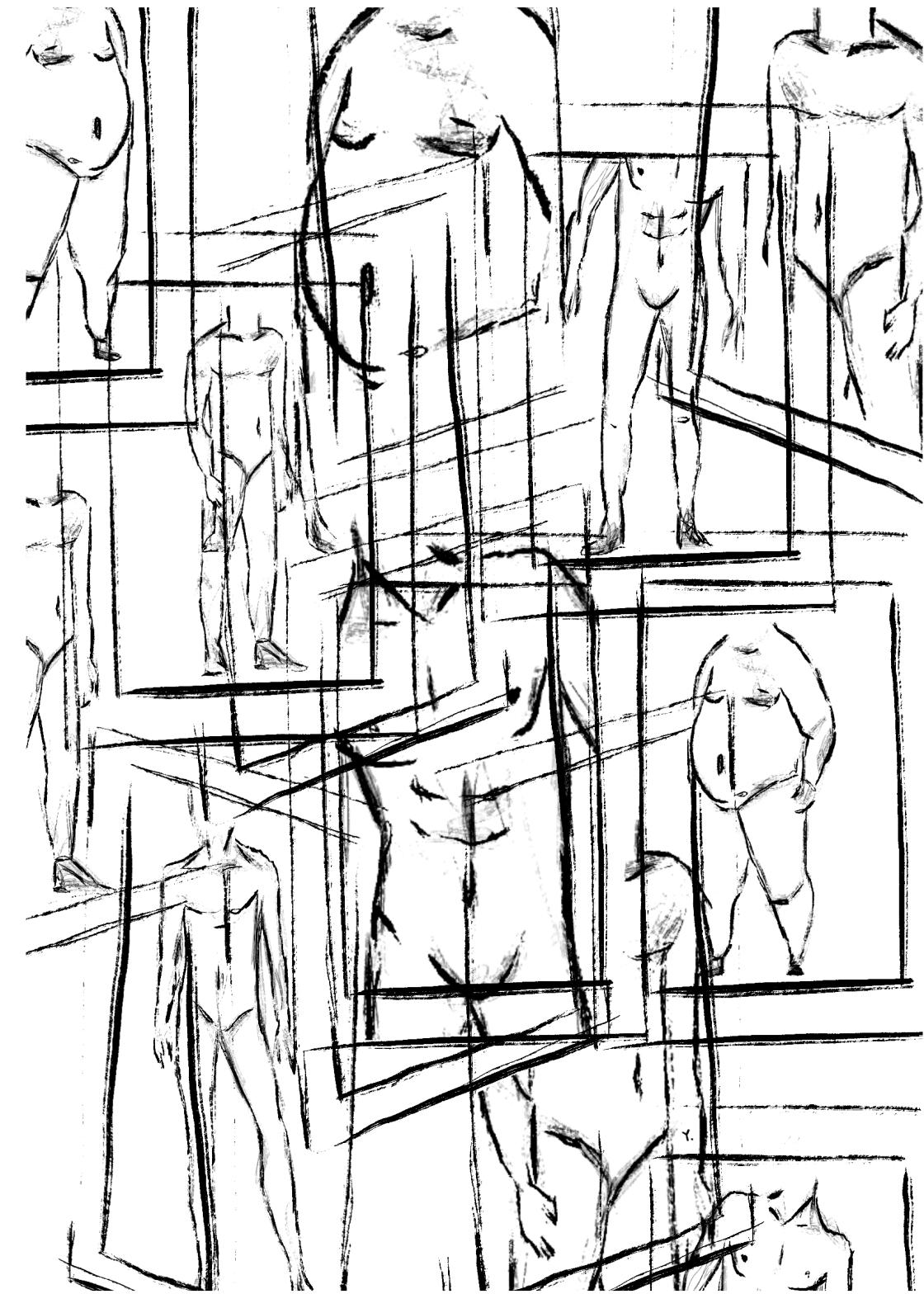
# Dysphoria I

Amalin Sofiya | Artworks



# Dysphoria II

Amalin Sofiya | Artworks





# Inside the Soap Shop

Sorfina Md Shaiful | Poetry

How I miss the millipedes of  
plastic beads and dolly laces  
on frangipani-printed fabric.  
Sequin scales of summer dresses  
basking in the sun.

How I miss the rainbow walls of  
soap blocks. From beeline ranks to  
leaning towers and pristine pyramids.  
In buckets and baskets,  
in cabinets too.

How I miss the calming raid of  
subtle scents. Floral whiffs amongst  
warm honey and the lingering  
salt of the sea, lining  
every inch of every space.

Had I not seen the sheen of  
opal rings, or marveled  
the polished turtle shells  
and drunk the citrus fumes,  
would I still recall?

Would I still be  
anchored to it all?



# Guilty Conscience

Edward Wong | Fiction

Their journey to the sea was rather cumbersome; endless miles of water, yet not a single fish to be found. In between his seasickness Thomas had tried to convince his dad to go home, only to receive a glare from him. If only the Sun didn't hate him so much, he would love to just sleep the hours away on his own.

"Why does dad even like this stuff?" Thomas mumbled as he tried to sleep comfortably, to no avail. "I swear, do we ever get anything off this place..."

The fishing rod on his left suddenly flew straight to the fence, as if diving into the sea. Thomas instinctively caught it mid-air in one half of a second, breathing a sigh of relief in the next. Waiting tirelessly was one thing, but losing the family fishing rod was another; one far more consequential with his father around.

"I got it, Dad!" Thomas yelled at the top of his lungs, as his body constantly shifted to the direction of the sea. His bare feet were starting to lose their grip on the wooden floor, and he was about to be tipped over.

"I got you!" his father grabbed onto him, both pairs of hands holding the rod at the same time. The rope soon weakened and the fish flung out of the sea, revealing its relatively large size. The fish nearly hit Thomas as it landed hard on the floor.

Thomas took a long hard look at it. "It's a salmon!" he celebrated as his father grabbed it by the throat and pinned it on the wooden board. The fish continued to wiggle around, and Thomas couldn't hide his excitement as his father brought out a knife... and gave it to him.

"What?"

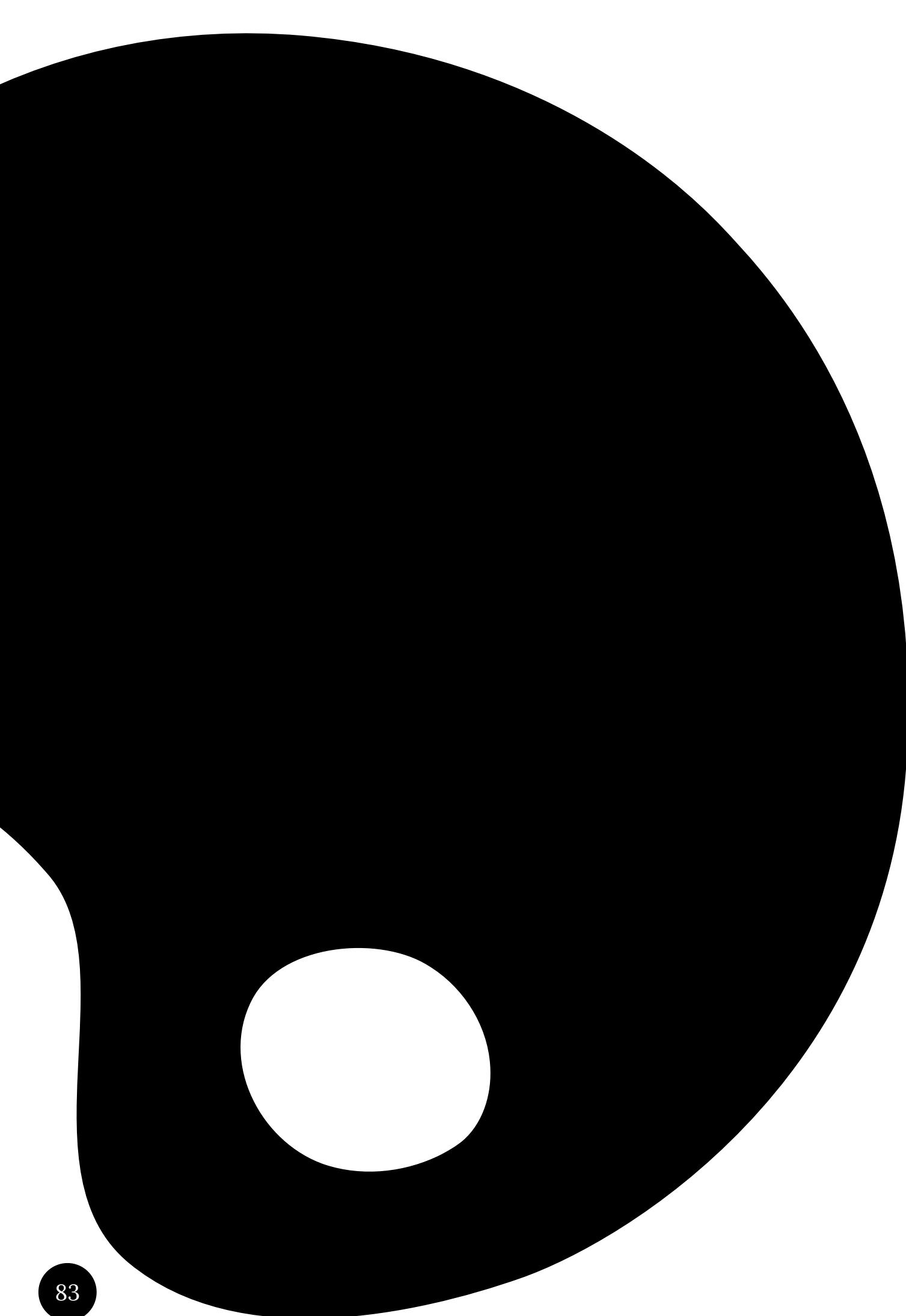
"You do it," his dad told him, holding the blade while offering the grip. Thomas chuckled, not sure on how to respond. "What are you waiting for?"

Thomas lost some of his excitement as he took the blade, and placed his hand on the tail to steady the fish. "Now, stab the head." the old man instructed, but Thomas barely heard him. The fish was as alive as him, its fins flapping about as it gasped for air. Thomas took in long breaths, feeling his heart growing heavy at the sight.

"I... really don't want to do it."

"You can." he instructed once again, in a more annoyed tone. Thomas shook his head, not ready to take a life. His father grabbed onto his hand on the blade, and gave a small cut to the brain. The fish drew its last breath, its dead eyes looking straight into Thomas' own. "See, no more pain."

"Whatever." said Thomas, feeling distraught as he walked back to the chair. A good nap should shake off the guilt.



# A Painter's Medley

SorFINA MD SHAIFUL | Poetry

I toast to the sun, the silence, and savour  
the brush strokes singing in harmony,  
with worn fingers gloved in colour.

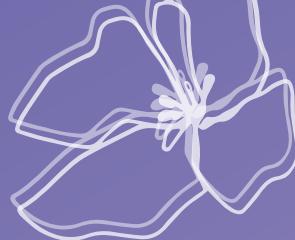
The art is a promised saviour—  
the choir for burnt souls falling empty.  
I toast to the sun, the silence, and savour.

Like the old bard and the embroiderer,  
I prick my fingers to string the sea  
with worn fingers gloved in colour.

The hues are strum raw and tender  
into living songs; a painter's medley.  
I toast to the sun, the silence, and savour.

the face of its finished grandeur—  
an occasion of quiet luxury,  
with worn fingers gloved in colour.

Born of hidden thoughts and endless hour,  
our works thrum with boundless symphony.  
I toast to the sun, the silence, and savour  
with worn fingers gloved in colour.



# Twilight Flowers

Rachel Wong | Fiction



Allowing a traitor to walk unbound after one week of solitary confinement isn't how triad executions usually go, but Kyi stops short of quipping once she realises where Xia Lu is taking her.

The cool mist of Kachin Hills settles around Kyi and Xia Lu like a shroud, capturing the first light of dawn. Before them, poppy fields stretch out far into the horizon. Pink, white, purple and red dapple an endless blanket of green – the colours of her childhood.

Today, at twenty-five years of age, these flowers will be Kyi's deathbed.

In Kachin, when a person dies, they are buried under tombless graves. And when poppy season comes, the corpses lose their names.

Kyi and Xia Lu walk in silence, but their clothes rustle as they amble through the poppies. Kyi remembers a time where her head could barely rise above the buds; she would feel as if the tall stalks could drown her in their embrace, especially when the winds winnow violently. Now, blooming flowers brush past her waist like a gentle caress. A homecoming. Kyi glimpses Xia Lu's clenched jaw and feels a sudden ache in her heart. *You're slaughtering your beauty with that frown*, she holds back on saying. It's plastic and cruel and not at all what she wants to say. But she doesn't even know where to start. What can she say to her closest confidant and friend, who is forced to execute her for a crime she knowingly committed?

“You look nice today,” Kyi tries with all her usual breeziness. It’s a pathetic attempt, but at least she isn’t lying. Xia Lu has on a turquoise maxi dress under her well-worn woollen grey coat, long flowing hair swaying gently in the cool morning breeze. Kyi herself is wearing her favourite ensemble: tank top and denim shorts under a long plaid jacket, minus her trusty Beretta.

Xia Lu resolutely keeps her gaze forward, and Kyi huffs at her friend's petulance. She knows Xia Lu isn't exactly being childish - Kyi was the one who fucked up after all. But she's about to be executed soon, so she was hoping that her dear Lulu would at least have one last, *pleasant* conversation with her.

Then again, she is probably asking for too much. Turning informant for the Malaysian customs was already a serious offence in any crime syndicate's book. Sabotaging their Thailand-Malaysia operations in exchange for impunity was worse. Wah Kee may not operate like a traditional triad, but they share the same core principle with all Chinese secret societies: Trust. Betrayal of trust means death, no exceptions. Ten years of bodyguard service to the Deputy's younger sister didn't matter. Same goes for living with both siblings and forming personal bonds with them. None of it mattered.

She doesn't regret it though. She wanted out of Wah Kee, but her plan was sloppy and she got caught. End of story.



"We can run away together," Xia Lu says quietly.

Kyi stops dead in her tracks, stunned.

Her friend however, continues as if she didn't just suggest mutiny. "I have your gun," Xia Lu says. For good measure, she shows Kyi the beloved Beretta, stowed in a cross-draw shoulder holster under her coat.

"Xia Yu doesn't want to kill you, you know. He's turning a blind eye," Xia Lu explains calmly. "It's not impossible to pull off - we are far enough from the Wah Kee grunts stationed in your village. And I asked some of the older folks for info earlier. If we continue walking, we'll come across some abandoned warehouses that used to belong to the Kachin Independence Army. I memorised the routes we can take. We will go from there."

Kyi gives Xia Lu a flat look. "You asked the villagers." The trail would lead to them eventually.

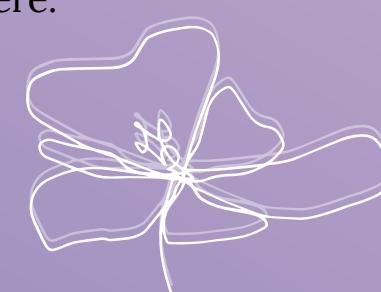
But her friend looks resolute. "You won't be able to remember your way around here after so long. If we're going to help you escape, we have to at least put on a convincing show for the Dragon Head." Xia Lu's mouth curls into an assured smile, like she actually believes that her half-baked plan will work. Like Wah Kee's Dragon Head won't send other officers that aren't Sun Xia Yu to hunt them down.

Kyi is touched, honestly. Xia Lu really is her ride or die. Too bad she isn't really planning to escape her fate.



She is tired of running.

So she flops down to the ground, not caring one bit that she just crushed two or three stalks of innocent poppies. "Come sit with me, Lulu."



Xia Lu's face instantly purses into a scowl. "No. Fuck you."

"You're not changing my mind, you know. I've been thinking about this for a long time - even before I started double-crossing the organisation." She doesn't elaborate, letting her words hang in the air like a grim reaper's scythe. Xia Lu keeps her face carefully blank as she stares down at Kyi, before looking away. She then joins Kyi on the ground, pulling her legs up to her chest and resting her head on her knees with a sigh. Again, Kyi's heart tugs painfully at the defeat she hears. During the past week, Xia Lu must have realised Kyi might want to be executed. Truth is, Kyi doesn't even see it as punishment. After all, this is her shortcut to freedom.



"If you wanted to die so badly, why didn't you just kill yourself?"

Kyi chuckles fondly. Xia Lu cuts to the chase like she deals with everything else in her life. Straightforward and efficient.

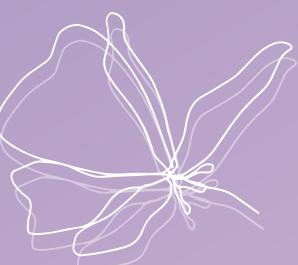
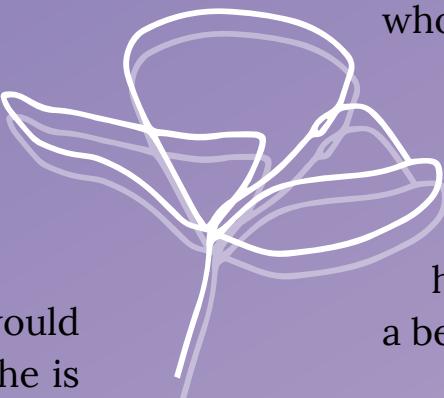
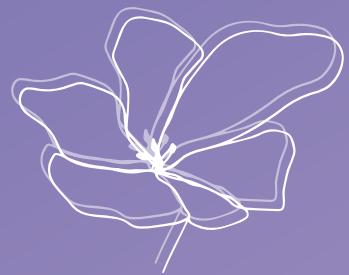


"Because I'm a coward." And between the both of us, you have always been the braver one.

It must be a family trait, Kyi thinks. For even when the odds were against them, the Sun siblings were brave and stubborn enough to thrive. The world took away their father and mother, took away their innocence, and they told it to fuck off.

Kyi misses them already.





But she misses freedom more.

She thought that following Sun Xia Yu into the triad underworld would change things. But it didn't. Whichever lifetime she's in, old or new, she is always just another pair of hands. To the world, she is nothing. Insignificant. Disposable.

In her past life, she was Kyi, the only child of a Kachin Independence Army leader and his wife. On a normal day, she would walk past row upon row of colourful *htameins* that were hung out to dry by the village women. She would admire the colours and designs, wishing the plain one wrapped around her waist was just as beautiful. She would cross the bamboo bridge, its thin stilts balancing precariously above the mighty and muddy Irrawaddy river. Then she would chop firewood with her father, walk back, eat breakfast, walk again, and make it just in time for school at the nearest town.

In that life, she was always just a pair of hands. Like everybody else in Kachin. The hands that collected firewood, the hands that washed clothes, the hands that sowed poppy seeds. The hands with a small scraping knife, that made poppies bleed. She grew to trust routine, grew to rely on it. With routine, muscle memory takes over when the brain can no longer process any more confusion or sadness or exhaustion.

But she had always wanted more.

Everyone Kyi had ever known then - her neighbours, family friends from villages along the Irrawaddy, their allies from other townships; all the ones who later died from a gun barrel - had they too, wanted more?

For the cause, they said.

Had they even known what the cause was? Had her father known? Or had he pretended he wasn't sending people off to die for the delusion of a better future?

Maybe her father and his colleagues promised their soldiers a future where they wouldn't be reduced to nobodies in someone else's chessboard. A future where their lives wouldn't be reduced to gambling chips.

On the 6th of June 2011, Kyi's parents brought her to Sun Xia Yu, one of Wah Kee's Enforcers sent to oversee heroin trafficking operations in Myanmar. Three days later, the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's armed forces, seized every single Independence Army hideout along the Irrawaddy. Kyi didn't know what happened to her parents - they never returned.

The day Sun Xia Yu told Kyi to call him Dailou - Big Brother - was the day she left the poppy fields.

Kyi chews the inside of her jaw. She doesn't know what to say.

Yet here she is, back in the poppy fields, just another pair of hands for someone who isn't herself.

"I had an older sister. She died when I was seven," Xia Lu says suddenly.

Kyi falters in her musings. This is news to her. She knows of the father who suddenly turned to alcohol and gambling dens to chase away his demons. She knows of the mother who worked three jobs until her heart gave out. She knows of the older brother, saddled with a sister thirteen years younger than him, who clawed his way up until he reached the upper echelons of one of Malaysia's most notorious triads.

"Xia Ling. She was a tomboy and a sweetheart - the pride and joy of our family. Xia Yu adored her. But one day, she slipped while walking down the stairs at home and cracked her head. Gone, just like that. She was fifteen - had her whole life ahead of her. And here you are," Xia Lu throws her a sidelong glance, eyes hard with disapproval. "throwing your life away for nothing."

In the end, she settles for a sigh. Any residual irritation over Xia Lu's judgement yielding under the weight of a long-dead ghost. She and Xia Lu sit quietly for a while. Mulling, waiting.



"Thanks for telling me," Kyi says at last, quietly. "And I- look, I'm sorry, alright?"

Xia Lu scoffs. "No you're not. You knew exactly what you were doing. And what would happen if you got caught."

"I was taking a chance." Then, gently, she adds: "I didn't know it would be you carrying out the sentence."

"I'll never stop being mad at you for this."

I know. I'm sorry.

"Thank you for everything," Kyi says instead. She doesn't want to see Lulu grieve for her. Feeling her time is almost up, she decides to be honest one last time. "I love you and Dailou, you know. I really do. It's just, my dream was to never serve anything or anyone other than myself ever again. First it was my parents and the cause. Now it's Wah Kee."





"We don't- "

"I know. But Dailou isn't the highest in the food chain. He still answers to the Dragon Head. Which means I answer to the Dragon Head."

"You know the ritual for quitting. You could've just given Xia Yu a red packet and be done with it."

"And live my days as a poppy farmer, selling drugs to traffickers again?" Kyi smiles bitterly and shakes her head. "You, me and Dailou have been in the underworld for far too long. We're so used to smelling rotten air that we can't breathe like the living even if we tried. But I don't want to rot in hell, I want the freedom to flit between both worlds."

Xia Lu's voice is small when she finally speaks. "Why can't you stay for me?" *Am I not enough for you to try?* goes unsaid, but Kyi hears it like her own mind. And for a moment, her princess looks so terribly, terribly young.

"I'm tired, Lulu. I've spent two lives trying. I'm done."

"There's really no changing your mind," Xia Lu says into her knees, voice muffled by fabric.

"Yeah."

"I hate you. I hate you so much." I'm sorry.



Xia Lu doesn't spare her another glance as she stands up and walks until they're at least ten feet apart. Distantly, belatedly, it occurs to Kyi that Xia Lu doesn't want to be splattered by her blood and haunted by nightmares of this moment.

Ah, I'm actually quite terrible aren't I.

Sorry, princess.

Sun Xia Lu pulls the trigger.

And as Kyi lets the poppies pull her into twilight, she hears the ghosts of her past sing her name.

Kyi, Kyi, Kyi.





# Hillside

Arvina Gill | Poetry

The drip  
drop of rain  
gently tap-tapped on the window

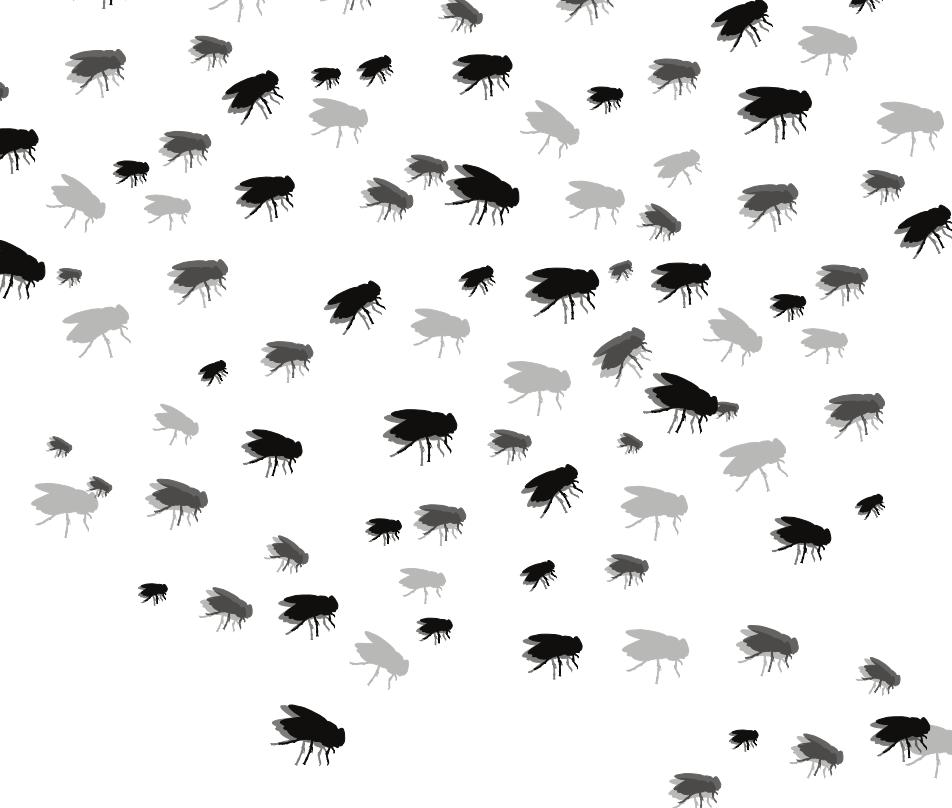
while smooth bamboo  
swayed steadily,  
its creaking and cracking  
drowning out the cicada's song.

Inside the house,  
the girl opened cold cola -  
it hissed and fizzed  
before settling with a sigh

Blinds clattered and rattled,  
as the wind whistled  
with rustling leaves.

The lush jungle  
thundered and roared while  
the girl sipped slowly,

savouring the flutters  
of thick tropical whispers.



# Leeches

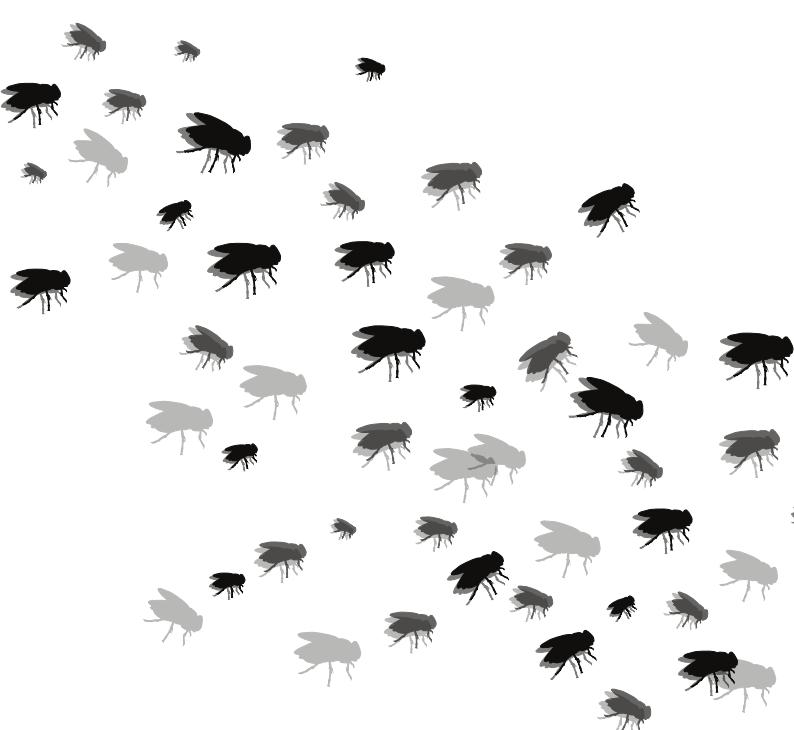
Yap Hor Yee | Poetry

Accusing maggots of wrongdoing,  
Digging up dirt on fellow flies,  
Dressed in silken suits and white robes,  
Drags crocodile tears from their eyes.

“Sorry for the inconvenience”  
Screech the leeches while  
bleeding out those who have  
broken backs, devoid of fat and flesh.

“We govern better!”  
Howl the maggots,  
crawling callously over  
eyes of those they deceive.

“We are the people’s party!”  
Chant the flies, clouding  
hearts and minds,  
tainted by a black haze.



“Uproot them all!”  
Cry the righteous, sobbing in chains,  
mouth sewn by laws, sharp stabbing needles,  
limbs bound by those who swore to protect.

Leeches, Maggots and Flies  
Trampling over a rotting garden  
full of wilted flowers, a dying hibiscus  
faded red, torn green leaves, beyond saving—

# speak of that Tuesday in May\*

Tasia Khoo | Poetry

empty cups of a *congkak* board  
filled one by one, seven marbles full  
seven marbles      none

run    run      run  
let the past come undone

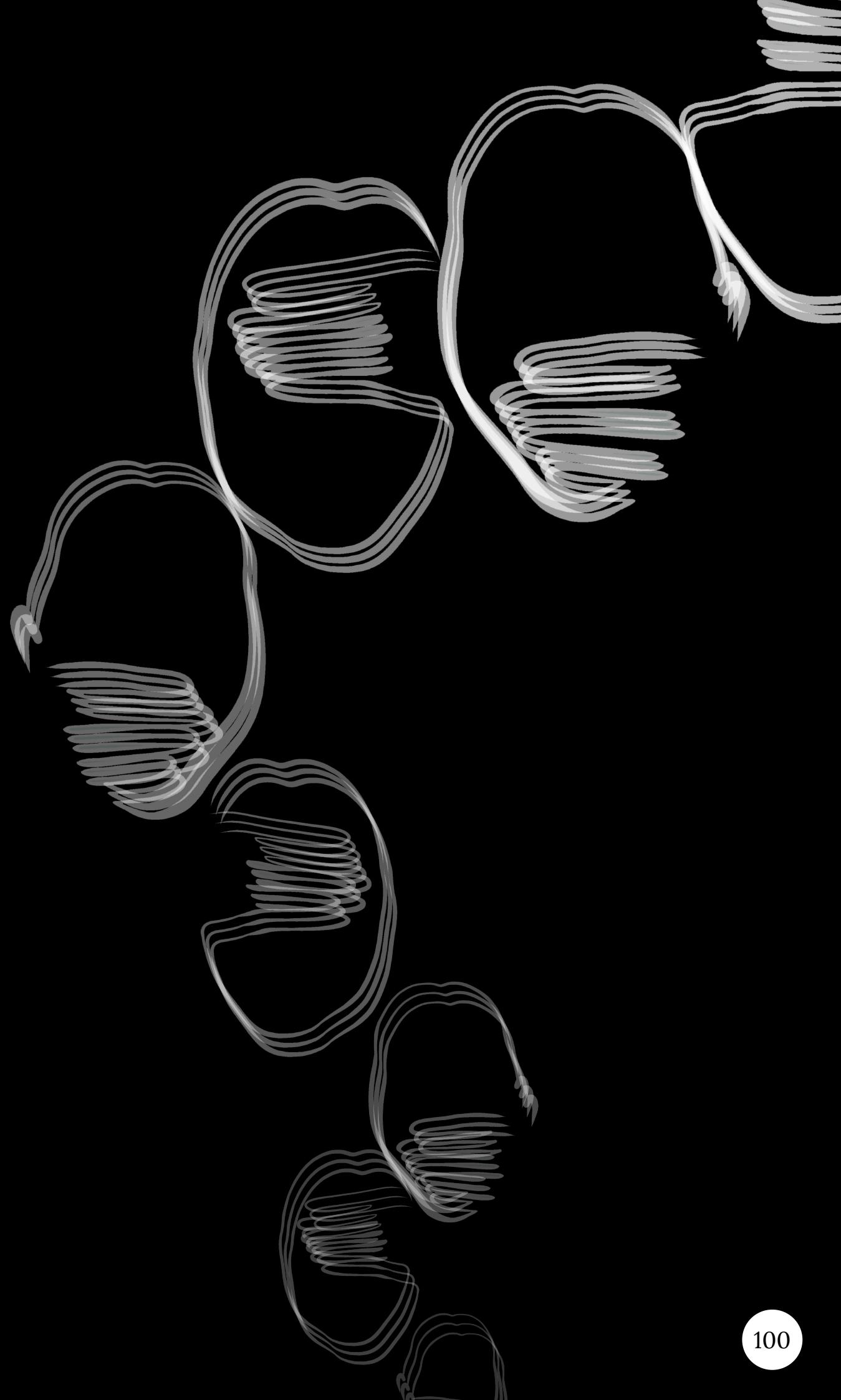
the colour      not in pictures, inside the lines  
the colour      on our skin      yours and mine  
the colour      a double-edged sword

erased from textbooks, erased from minds.

a story to tell  
they refuse to share

naked on the street painted red  
one eye closed      one palm bare  
other two light with prayer

a story to echo;  
not one to bury  
nor to let go.



\*May 13th

# Contributor Bios

## **Author of Hillside**

Arvina Gill is a published Malaysian writer and is currently pursuing an MA in English with Creative Writing. She is the former Features Writer at Harper's BAZAAR Malaysia where she wrote about lifestyle. She has an interest in the exploration of identity which often features in her writing.

## **Author of Dear Darkness**

Hamza is a sophomore year student studying Finance, Accounting and Management at UNMC. He enjoys reading fiction since he was first introduced to one of Roald Dahl's books in his childhood. He has always been an admirer of how writers play with their readers imagination. Developing some writing sense of fiction and description, he tries to execute it at numerous occasions as he feels power hidden within words.

## **Author of Debut Performance**

Hor Jau Yang (Jenny) hails from a small town called Butterworth, Penang. She majors in English with Creative Writing at the University of Nottingham, Malaysia Campus. Most of her creative works include the elements of food, human relationships, and human nature, while her non-fictional essays criticize the inequalities and harmful social norms. Jenny also writes for IGNITE's travel section that tells the tales of her adventures and gives interesting tips to new travelers. Fun fact: she is into character lore, mythology, and history.

### **Author of Impostor**

Growing up, Akmallina A. is surrounded with books, thanks to her bookworm family, and has spent her childhood writing fairy tales. Now, she is a final year Creative Writing undergraduate at Nottingham Malaysia, still spending her time writing, reading and listening to music. She's open to any genre and is willing to explore things that are unknown to her. Akmallina also loves learning new things and will go around sharing them. One day, she hopes that she'll be able to contribute to the global art scene.

### **Author of Zero O'Clock**

Although she's a science major, Nethmi's interests span across all fields of the creative arts, ranging from writing to playing music. One day she hopes to bridge the gap between her intensive biomedical science degree and writing by combining her academics with her passions. Nethmi hopes to bring warmth, comfort, and love through her writing with the readers.

### **Author of Icarus**

Zoe is a Writing-Communications student and part of the writing subcommittee in her university magazine, enabling her to reach further beyond the limits of her imagination. Creative writing has been her greatest passion while growing up- words have taken her to places no person ever could.

### **Author of Little Thin White Lies, Are You Gonna Tell Her? and The Toiling of Bells**

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 *A Painter's Medley*, *Inside the Soap Shop and Lavenders at Sea***

Sorfina Md Shaiful is a 3rd year Creative Writing student. Being both a writer and artist, she speaks in the language of brush strokes and imagery. She spends her days drawing away her favourite scenes from movies, dreams, and characters, with an aspiration to make a webcomic in the future. Her written works are inspired by the cultures and landscapes of the multiple countries she was raised in – from the sugar skulls of Mexico City, to the rock pools of Sydney. She aims to keep travelling to meet all sorts of people and continue her passions.

**Author of *Leeches***

Yap Hor Yee is a second year student in English and Creative Writing. She believes that writers need to have the courage to challenge and be challenged through the works they create, therefore, she sees fear as an even bigger obstacle than writer's block. In her free time, she loves delving into the gritty world of true crime through books and novels.

**Author of *Shattered***

Shweta Manoharan, a Biomedical Sciences student, is passionate about a lot of things, but rarely for a prolonged period of time. One passion that has stuck with her from her formative years is her love of all things fiction. She dabbled in poetry as a moody child (she'd very much like to set her early works on fire), before discovering the magic of creating fictional worlds. She soon realised she'd rather conjure up stories in her head than put pen to paper. And so, out of necessity, began her love affair with short stories. Her hobbies are varied and comprehensive - as long as they don't involve 'the outdoors'. She loves cats and aspires to be a cat lady someday.

### **Author of *Twilight Flowers***

Rachel (Rei) is a 22 year old graduate in English and Creative Writing. Rei grew up reading and writing stories, spending time immersing themselves into the world of literature. They faced many challenges with their upbringing, and it is with hope and a new perspective that Rei writes these challenges into some of their fictional works.

Rei is a writer that is fond of writing stories that evoke strong emotions. A favourite genre that they like to write are coming of age and queer themed stories. Their works challenge the reader to look past stereotypical societal norms, encouraging them to look at personal growth and interpersonal relationships through a non heteronormative lens. Rei is comfortable writing prose and fiction while using the skills they've learned during their degree study. Many of their works use poetic language, as well as contrasting descriptions that often hold symbolic meanings. The stories that Rei writes are centered around character growth, or a character analysis of struggling protagonists.

### **Artist of *Bloom and Surrender***

I'm a young aspiring artist born in the city of Damascus, Syria and I'm currently based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. I'm a self-taught acrylic and oil expressionist painter. Currently pursuing a degree in Biotechnology at The University of Nottingham, I found beauty in the subject of human anatomy. The field of biology is where I draw my inspiration from. Human anatomy is the subject of my most recent paintings. Beneath the skin our anatomy is the same, we are all the same, all just human.

Socials- Instagram: @judetakesonlife, Facebook: [www.facebook.com/judetakesonart](http://www.facebook.com/judetakesonart)

### **Artist of *Dysphoria I and Dysphoria II***

Sofiya does not draw often. But, when she does, it is an expression. Meaningful expressions. She finds her best joy when she explores different ways to pen the human body in a non-stereotypical figure. All bodies are beautiful!

### **Author of *Lost to Time***

Farah is a writer and editor, currently in her final year of Creative Writing degree at UNM. A fiction enthusiast from a young age, she often finds herself jotting down the tiniest hints of ideas that may come useful one day, and finds comfort in writing out her constant musings as a method of self-reflection. She enjoys exploring personal and social issues through contemporary fiction, with the hope that it will help bring forward different perspectives in navigating through life.

### **Author of *This submarine, Two Breasts, The Moon, The Rose Bud, and The Mind and The Body***

Ismim Putera (he/him) is the author of poetry chapbook "Tide of Time" (Mug and Paper Magazine, 2021). His works can be found in many online literary journals and are forthcoming in "To Let The Light In" Poetry Anthology (Sing Lit Station), Lyric: Anthology of Speculative Poetry (Paper Djinn Press) and Colours of Tapestry: Stories from Asia.

### **Author of *Hope***

Sreana Habiba was born and raised in Dhaka, Bangladesh. She is a second year Psychology major with a minor in Writing. She is in love with words and literature and the power they hold and the catharsis they can provide, and she is passionate about any kind of art that allows you to express yourself creatively. She enjoys indie, folk and alternative music a little too much.

### **Author of Facelessness**

Chan Jun Loong is an aspiring fantasy writer who is currently running a student newsletter for the educational non-governmental organization "Closing The Gap, Malaysia" as its editor-in-chief. He is a first-year undergraduate in English Language and Literature at the University of Nottingham, Malaysia on the journey of venturing the fields of language to discover which part of it sparks the brightest within himself. A lover of Japanese culture and a nonconformist, he enjoys exploring the idea of being different in society as well as challenging societal norms. When he is not working on his latest story, he is brainstorming questlines for his 2 years and ongoing "Dungeons & Dragons" game of which he is its Dungeon Master or busting his fingers marathoning rhythm games (and probably develop carpal tunnel syndrome while he does so).

### **Author of Guilty Conscience**

Edward Wong is a Year 2 Student in Business Economics and Finance. He is also a journalist in IGNITE, writing reviews for the FILM & TV section. He also write stories in my past time, be it short stories in various genres, in order to carry out his imagination. Hopefully, he aims to still write stories even when having a full-time job.

### **Author of speak of that Tuesday in May and Again, and again.**

Tasia Khoo is a soon-to-be graduate from the School of Arts and Social Sciences at Monash University Malaysia. She is passionate about the creative arts and memory studies as she constantly tries to unravel how one informs the other and vice versa. When she is not fixated on an existential thought, teaching children or writing, she is either painting or busy watching films until all sense of time dissipates.

# Editor Bios

## Rasha Hamza (she/her and they/them)

### **Co-Editor in Chief**

Rasha is a curious writer and editor. Soon to graduate as a Creative Writing major from UNM, she's dabbled in freelance content writing but is more interested in curating the creative experience for others. You'll likely see her digging into queer literature, poetry, and contemporary visual culture. Unrooted and a relentless traveller, don't be surprised when you find her in a different country next time you hear about her.

## Syaza Binti Norazharuddin (she/her)

### **Co-Editor in Chief**

Syaza is soon to be graduating from UNM with English with Creative Writing degree. If she is not in her room reading Virginia Woolf's "A Room Of One's Own" for the nth time, you will likely find her writing at a park among the trees. Besides writing, she is very fond of painting and playing the guitar. Although an introvert, she has ventured in spoken word poetry and has participated in spoken poetry events on campus. She has also worked as a social media copywriter and content creator in CGS-CIMB for her summer internship.

## Farah Nadhirah Binti Chairil Anwar (she/her)

### **Head Editor of Poetry**

Nadhirah is an editor and Outreach Manager for Meraki Press, a small Malaysian publishing company. She has also previously worked as a content writer for an online travel publication and a digital marketing firm. As a poet, her work has been featured in Particle and will soon be published in a collection of poetry by Malaysian youths. She once judged a pun competition and used to coach Malaysia's national quidditch team.

## Muhammad Aqil Najhan bin Faris Najhan

### **(he/him and she/her)**

### **Junior Editor of Poetry**

Aqil Najhan thinks his legal name is a little too long. Currently second-year English Language and Literature student at UNM, he once held the position of head editor for the literary department of his high school's magazine. His interests include theatre, queer literature, and, of course, poetry. Oh, and his own poetic work is set to appear in an anthology entitled Malaysian Millennial Voices - isn't that exciting?

### **Nur Hanisa Razalee (she/her)**

#### **Junior Editor of Poetry**

When she is not busy listening to music or planning shots for her next YouTube video, Nisa can usually be found writing or editing poetry. Her poetic works have been compiled into a zine titled Dreams, Delusions, and Made Decisions. Published under Terbitan Langit, the zine has been sold in places such as Kedai Buku Fixi and events such as The Georgetown Literary Festival. Nisa is also the producer at Paper Plane Boy Studio, a Malaysian video production start-up company.

### **Arvina Gill (she/her)**

#### **Head Editor of Fiction**

Arvina is a published writer and editor and is currently pursuing an MA in English with Creative Writing. She was the former Features Writer at Harper's BAZAAR and has experience in the PR industry. When she is not writing, she is playing with her cat, Leo, or drinking oat milk.

### **Evelyn Patricia Ramli (she/her)**

#### **Intern Editor of Poetry**

Evelyn is a first year English Language and Literature student at UNM. Although not as experienced in writing poetry, she has been an editor of her high school's literary magazine for the past two years. Evelyn's interest and passion for poetry, especially editing poetry, has been snowballing. 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.

### **Sara Mostafa (she/her)**

#### **Junior Editor of Poetry**

Sara Mostafa is an aspiring poet and writer. She has participated in a few local poetry slam nights and fell in love with spoken word poetry and words ever since. She aims to gain more experience in the literary field and publish her work one day.

### **Wong Li Wen, Rachel (Rei) (they/them)**

#### **Junior Editor of Fiction**

Rei is a UNM final year student in Creative Writing. They have been writing for years and publishing fanfiction under a pseudonym on many different platforms. They're particularly interested in writing LGBT stories and wishes to one day publish an issue that highlights the LGBT community in Malaysia. Rei was also the PR manager of UNM GSOC, and is currently part of their events team. Apart from being an avid writer, they're also a passionate gamer and a cosplayer in the local ACG community.

**Farah Nadia Zulkiflee (she/her)*****Junior Editor of Fiction***

Farah is a writer, editor, and currently, a final year Creative Writing student at UNM. She is particularly invested in exploring personal and social issues through contemporary fiction. Her other interests include watching cat videos and enjoying some nice lattes now and then.

**Chin Sze Wei (she/her)*****Junior Editor of Fiction***

Sze Wei (Kaitlyn) is a first year student at UNM and an aspiring editor. In her free time, she enjoys books, movies, journaling and writing poetry. Her editing journey began a few years ago when she started doing editing and proofreading for authors online and fell in love with the process. She hopes that her passions and experiences will continue for a long time.

**Niamh Flannery (she/her)*****Intern Editor of Fiction***

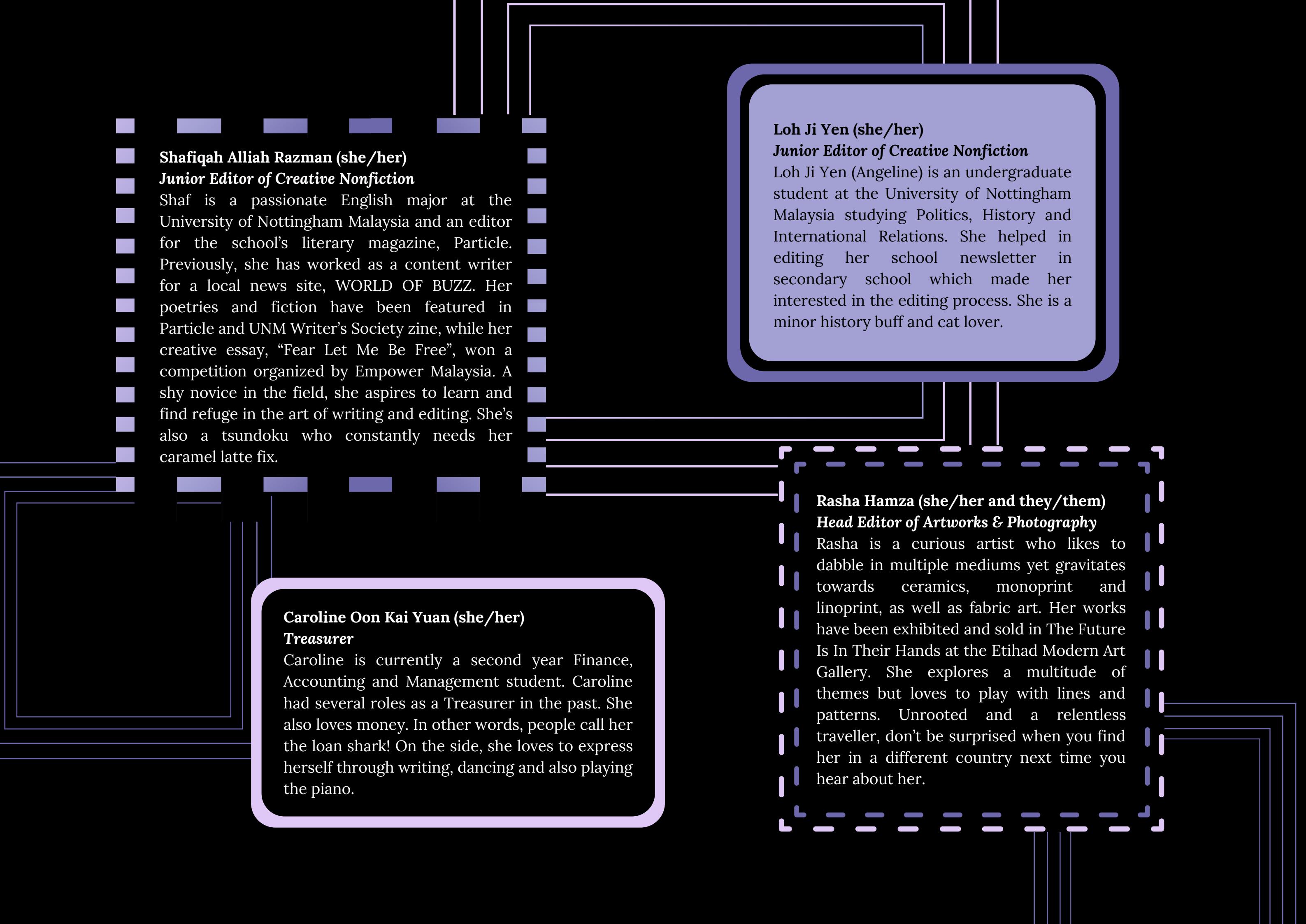
Niamh is an enthusiastic writer and aspiring editor. Despite being an Electrical and Electronic Engineering major, she finds great joy in writing, editing and all forms of art. Prior to this, she has had experience in shadow writing, and has edited earlier editions of her high school's magazine.

**Tan Jie Ying (she/her)*****Junior Editor of Fiction***

Jie Ying is a Creative Writing student at UNM and has published several short stories in various Malaysian zines including Nutmag, an annual zine dedicated to stories by Penang-born and Penang-based writers. Her previous work experience includes interning at Areca Books (a small nonfiction publishing company in Penang), and freelancing as a translator at CENT Translation.

**Iyath Adam Shareef (she/her)*****Head Editor of Creative Nonfiction***

Iyath is currently completing her final year of undergraduate studies in UNM, majoring in International Communications & English. She currently writes for an online travel website as well as for Ignite: UNM's Student Media. When not daydreaming about travelling, she can usually be found browsing through online recipes, and sometimes actually attempting them.



### **Akmallina Athirah Binti Mohamed Zaharin (she/her)**

#### **Marketing Director**

Growing up, Akmallina A. is surrounded with books, thanks to her bookworm family, and has spent her childhood writing fairy tales. Now, she is a final year Creative Writing undergraduate at Nottingham Malaysia, still spending her time writing, reading and listening to music. She's open to any genre and is willing to explore things that are unknown to her. Akmallina also loves learning new things and will go around sharing them. One day, she hopes that she'll be able to contribute to the global art scene.

### **Evelyn Patricia Ramli (she/her)**

#### **Graphic Designer**

Evelyn has been the head (and only) graphic designer for her high school's literary magazine for two years, which has given her the opportunity to enhance her abilities with InDesign and Adobe as well as her confidence with designing. She also teaches English online and works as an online freelance editor for essays, manuscripts, research papers, and more. When not studiously studying (haha) or watching k-dramas, Evelyn can be found in the dance room or badminton courts!

### **Fathimath Laisha Fahud (she/her)**

#### **Graphic Designer**

Currently a final year English Language and Literature undergraduate at UNM, Laisha aspires to work in publishing and eventually publish her own work. As a child, she was recognised as the girl reading books that weighed more than herself. Laisha discovered her passion for designing magazines at age sixteen when she embarked on her two-year journey as co-editor and designer of her high school's magazine. She has also headed design and marketing teams for various student body committees in UNM. A perfectionist to the core, Laisha may have to be forced away from her work station!

