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PARTICLE

UNM'S LITERARY MAGAZINE

solace

University of Nottingham
Malaysia Campus

ISSUE 14 | SPRING 2020

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.

Note: This issue has been recompiled from its original.

Submission information can be found at particlelitmag.wixsite.com/site

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Spring 2020 | University of Nottingham, Malaysia

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Contents

- 1 Butterworth
Jenny Hor
- 7 Me, Myself and I
Amira Izzaty Abdullah
- 11 Passing
Lancelan Pegan
- 17 If I were the Orang-utan
Christina Yin
- 21 They Who Continue to Live
Naufal
- 23 Reason
Srilakshmi Bhavana Chintakindi
- 43 Me & You
Ho Zhi Ying
- 47 Project Genesis
Athirah
- 59 Things Unsaid
Yasmin Nasharuddin
- 61 My Skin Journey
Amira Izzaty Abdullah
- 65 Carve
Damia Munira

Editor's Note

During uncertain times, we often look for solace.

For many, it is found in family, friends or work. For us, we find comfort in our words.

With this sentiment in mind, this year's Spring issue of Particle was created. With this iteration, we aim to relieve you of the fear, worry, concerns and sadness synonymous with this unprecedented period of our lives. We invite you to fully immerse yourself in these words, and find your solace in between the lines. Give yourself a break from the craziness of the world, even if it is momentary, even if it only lasts the length of one poem.

In my four years working in Particle, this issue has been one of the most memorable — not just because of the time, but also because of the stunning range of pieces we've received and the impressive skill of the writers in bringing their ideas to life. From self-acceptance, to self-introspection, to self-care, to self-identity, and many many more in between, we hope this issue gives you solace just as much as it did us. And if it does not, then we hope it helps lighten the burden a little bit.

To the writers, thank you for sharing your art. To the readers, thank you for your support.

And to Particle, thank you for four great years, and for being a comfort during uncertain times.

Farah Aina binti Azaharuddin
Head Poetry Editor

Butterworth

Jenny Hor | Essay

Sometimes it gets awkward when people ask me what are the good food and places around Penang. Believe me, I could only take you places where they have good ratings on Tripadvisor. It is also hard for me to take you around the island to know good food that are hidden within the reach of tourists.

Why? I thought you are from Penang?

I did tell you I am from Penang, but not the island side. It is the mainland side that I am actually referring to. I have been staying in this town called Butterworth, a place that I truly call home rather than the little island that everyone's talking about.

What's Butterworth? Never heard of that.

Well, this is the best time for you to get know of this place.

In short, Butterworth is a place... which is totally not tourist-worthy!

Dum. Dum. Dum.

I am not lying. There is nothing beautiful to see around here. There is no picturesque view of paddy field like Kepala Batas, or the beautiful sandy beach of Batu Ferringhi. All we have are the unkept paddy field in Sungai Dua and the less mesmerizing look of Pantai Bersih. We do not have the grand Kek Lok Si Temple, but there is the Tow Moo Temple in Raja Uda Street that is only crowded during Chinese New Year season. There are no funky museums that show old toys or illusion art, or a butterfly park with colorful insects. There is a bird park in Seberang Jaya that not much people seem to notice. Gurney Plaza and Queensbay Mall, you might have heard either one of these. Sunway Carnival Mall and Pacific, have you ever even heard any one of them? The places around the Raja Tun Uda Ferry Terminal are hotshots that deserved to be Instagram-worthy; while the Sultan Abdul Halim Ferry Terminal has nothing much to venture around except for the Penang Sentral that just opened its gate last year. We need to go to the island if we wish to go overseas, but the KTM train is always operating to send people to outer states or welcome them to Penang. The towering Komtar is an iconic building that rested in the heart of Georgetown. Yet, we do not even have a unique establishment for us to claim as the symbol.

The lack of cool amenities around Butterworth is the reason why we would drive to the island during the weekends. That is where we find the best coffee shops around, to enjoy the aromatic latte and savor the best Western delights. That is where my Dad would join his climbing buddies to conquer the Penang Hill and have a barbecue session on the hilltop. That is where my Mom would visit her family and relax by the massage and facial spa treatments. That is where I used to attend extensive English classes and buy organic groceries from the supermarkets.

Technically, I was born in Island Hospital on the island almost twenty-one years ago. It was my parents' decision to deliver me in a private hospital with better healthcare and services rather than any of the general hospitals available in the mainland. On the day I appeared to this world as a human being, my Dad had to drive across the Penang Bridge to meet me for the very first time. It was pretty funny story, he was about to go home because he was pretty impatient about my arrival, only to find out my mom had successfully brought me to the light when he was in the mid-way of the bridge. He had no other choice but to pay the toll in order to get through the bridge one more time.

However, Butterworth is the town where it hoarded the best and the worst memories of my life. There were the days when I would follow my grandma to the wet and smelly Apollo Market where she got her ingredients for dinner. There were plenty of poultry, vegetables, fruits, cakes, snacks, fried noodles and clothes around the area, crowded with loud Chinese aunties who were either bargaining or chatting. Sometimes Grandma would sneak in a few popular monthly-edition of children comic books inside her basket, which I managed to find them in between the green vegetables and fresh fruits. There were the days when my mom would drop me off at a tuition center in Jalan Ong Yi How which I low-key despise, spending two hours per lesson trying to improve my exam marks. There were the days I would cycle around Jalan Kampung Benggali to tapau a packet of nasi lemak with extra anchovies or a bag of ais kacang that had almost melted when I got back to my Dad's office. I still remember observing the funeral parade of Ah Niu's grandfather on the rooftop with my grandma. Both of us witnessed the guests going in and out of the old kampung street, even laughed at some of the VIPs' ridiculous outfits. Then, we quickly went inside when there was a guest decided to do his personal business at the uncultivated land beside our building.

From primary to high school, I had completed my 11 years of compulsory education, within the same town. Growing up in a Chinese family, studying in a Chinese-oriented environment is the most acceptable notion by most parents. It also meant I had to mingle with the people whom I had known for years. It could be boring, the lack of diversity made everything looked uniformed and bland. Everyone seemed to be discussing about the same thing: which K-Pop groups they like, who are their Taiwanese Idols, have they watched the latest K-Drama and what tuition center is the best. That was the time I feel like I was not in sync with this place and people, a foreigner which no one could understand my language. The feeling of hatred and disappointment within my heart grew as time went by, a desire of leaving out of the town to meet people with similar interests.

After graduation, I left the little town to further my studies in Selangor. There were times I would ride on the LRT or MRT to shopping malls or highly recommended cafes around the capital, a sense of freedom that I had never had within my hometown. There were also times I would miss Butterworth's delicious food, which in Kuala Lumpur where authenticity in food courts is not truly real and the prices are ridiculously high.

Every time when I travel back by train, I would look out the window to see the shifting sceneries from the tall concrete jungle in Kuala Lumpur, then the valleys in Perak state, to the suburbs of mainland Penang. As the train slowly made its arrival to the little town I recognised, the feeling of euphoria and anticipation had piled up like a stack of books.

The little town also made its changes in secret. It was a game of spotting the difference, I have to see which place have installments or eliminations during my period of absence. I spot the long road divider in Jalan Raja Uda that has created a congestion in mid-way. The National Registration Department office that was once in Bagan Ajam has moved to Kepala Batas. Oh, there is a newly built Tesco in Jalan Bagan Ajam, somewhere I could drive there to get some snacks and last-minute groceries. The uncle who used to sell delicious Jawa Mee was long gone, and his daughter who replaced him could not replicate his recipe. Boba tea stores began to mushroom around the area as well, attracting the youth to swarm around to purchase the cups of sugary drinks.

Despite my mixed feelings of fondness and contempt, this little town of Butterworth is a home where I would always feel safe in its arms.

Notes:

Tapau: take away

Nasi lemak: a type of rice cooked with coconut milk

Ais kacang: shaved ice served with sweet corn, grass jelly, and red bean

Ah Niu: a local country singer and actor

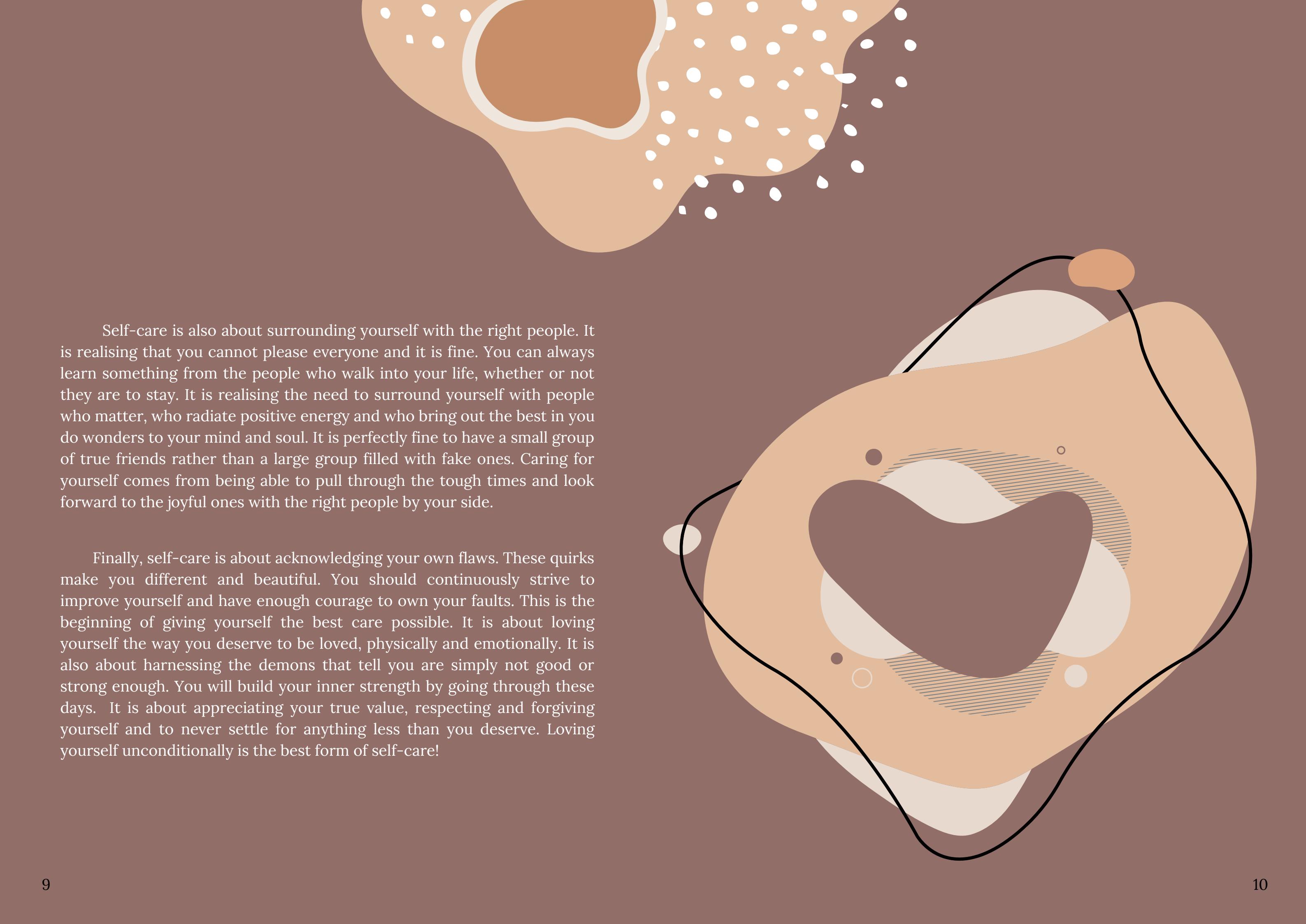
JawaMee: a traditional Javanese style noodle served with thick potato gravy

Me, Myself and I

Amira Izzaty Abdullah | Essay

The phrase “self-care” is one that we hear often, as it is all over social media nowadays. It is typically mentioned when people post pictures of their days at the spa, relaxing with a face mask on, or unwinding to their favourite tunes. As I am writing this, I too, have a Korean face mask on, lounging on freshly changed sheets with music blaring loudly from my laptop. However, I have become curious as to what self-care is exactly. Is it merely the process of pampering yourself, or does it go beyond that? I gave this matter a long thought, and can conclude that self-care consists of three things.

First and foremost, self-care comes from accepting your feelings, be it good or bad. It is understanding that not everyday will be a breeze, and that there will be days where you will find yourself struggling to get out of bed. You will encounter days when your assignments continue to pile up into seemingly never ending stacks and tests are looming just around the corner. Such stressful situations can lead to your skin breaking out or have you randomly bursting into a puddle of tears at the smallest thing you find upsetting, which is farthest from the definition of self-care if there is one. That being said, it is important to identify feelings such as sadness, anger or frustration as completely normal. Understanding that it is okay to feel this way will make all the difference in the world. It doesn't make us any less of a person, when in fact it only proves that you are human. Of course, there will be days when your heart and mind are comfortably at ease as well. You will find that these are the days that we will cherish even more because of the bad ones. Thus, an enormous aspect of self-care comes with acknowledging your feelings as they are in addition to finding healthy ways to cope with them. This can be done by talking with a close friend or a trusted family member, or something as simple as writing your feelings down in a journal.

The background features abstract organic shapes in shades of brown, tan, and white. There are large, irregularly shaped forms resembling leaves or petals, some with internal white spots or dots. A prominent dark brown shape on the left has a white wavy line running through it. On the right, there's a large tan shape with a black outline, containing a smaller dark brown circle and some hatching. Smaller white and dark brown circles are scattered throughout.

Self-care is also about surrounding yourself with the right people. It is realising that you cannot please everyone and it is fine. You can always learn something from the people who walk into your life, whether or not they are to stay. It is realising the need to surround yourself with people who matter, who radiate positive energy and who bring out the best in you do wonders to your mind and soul. It is perfectly fine to have a small group of true friends rather than a large group filled with fake ones. Caring for yourself comes from being able to pull through the tough times and look forward to the joyful ones with the right people by your side.

Finally, self-care is about acknowledging your own flaws. These quirks make you different and beautiful. You should continuously strive to improve yourself and have enough courage to own your faults. This is the beginning of giving yourself the best care possible. It is about loving yourself the way you deserve to be loved, physically and emotionally. It is also about harnessing the demons that tell you are simply not good or strong enough. You will build your inner strength by going through these days. It is about appreciating your true value, respecting and forgiving yourself and to never settle for anything less than you deserve. Loving yourself unconditionally is the best form of self-care!

Passing

Lancelan Pegan | Fiction

The neon lights glimmered out into the ocean. Their reflections shimmered as the tide pulled the water in and out again. The gentle waves broke as Kiyong threw a bottlecap into it, with a sigh.

Ever since the first day he made a home for himself in Singapore, he'd escape to this spot in Bedok to get away from the bustle. It reminded him of home somewhat. The seaside front always felt more familiar to him. It felt like the Kuching waterfront. It had almost the same story: a small bazaar slowly grew with the city around it until the money went to other parts of the city, leaving it like this. Bedok felt vaguely like home, if only wider and a tad noisier.

Tonight though, it barely provided any solace for him. His body was grounded on a bench in East Coast Park but his mind was clouded.

The week had been a long one. It started with a call from home. He wasn't feeling so good, so they went to the hospital to check up on it. On and off through the week, he'd get calls from home about how things were going. His condition was going up and down as the doctors were scrambling to find out what was going on.

Then, earlier that evening, he got the final call. They finally found out what it was. Some rare, one-in-a-million condition. It was terminal. He was going home to let himself rest peacefully.

That night, he booked the first flight out, and got ready a bag to return home. After triple-checking everything he needed, he went to bed. Ten minutes of restless lying later, he got up and went to his spot, if only to clear his head.

Sitting there, looking out towards the Singapore Strait, his mind only flitted back to his situation. Having been in Singapore for five years, Kiyong wasn't sure what going back home meant, especially under these circumstances. He rolled over what he could recall from the past, mildly distressed by how little seemed to come back to him, even after a while. He tried to think of things to say, how to face his family after being away for so long.

I meant to come home sooner, but I never got the chance to.

He knew he couldn't say such a bold-faced lie to his father's face. He knew he relished the distance away from his pastoral upbringing, his days of running through fields of paddy. He knew, deep down, a part of him never wished to return.

Kiyong mulled over this, going over endless permutations of words in his head like a mantra. By the time he finished his bottle of beer, he still hadn't figured his words out. He tapped on his phone. It was almost midnight. The last train was probably going to depart soon.

Disposing of his drink in a recycling bin, he made his way home, at the very least, tired from the journey there and his thoughts. He had another journey ahead of him in the morning, and he wanted to be ready for whatever may come his way.

Kiyong set his foot forward on the old bamboo veranda of his longhouse as the sun began to set.

The structure jostled slightly, buckling under the presence of this new-found weight. He found it unsettling, how the once-verdant green hue had dried out and left behind a pale, bleached remnant of what it once was.

When he got off the tortuous, rickety ride aboard the biplane, the smell of wet paddy brought him back to his roots. Making his way out of the small airport, he reminisced more and more as the scenery changed from cleared out grasslands to more forested domains.

He saw the river; the place where he first learned to fish. His father had taught him how to arrange the stones in the river so that it would funnel everything through the bubu that they had made out of rattan earlier. He remembered the pride on his family's face as he lifted the trap out of the water, so full with fish that he struggled to pull it out.

Having made a stop to take a closer look, the river before him seemed smaller than the river in his memory: somewhat shallower, the banks having grown into the river, leaving it to not much more than a stream. The shallow depth only served to magnify another thing: there were barely any fish in sight. He could see a fair amount of tadpoles, their silver tails glinting in the mid-day sun. If he strained a little bit more, he could make out the silhouette of a few bottom-feeding catfish and river shrimp. Regardless, it wasn't the roaring, bustling current it used to be. He pressed on, ready to return.

Finally, setting foot onto the bamboo steps of his longhouse, he thought that he felt prepared to see the scene before him. He had felt that the long, arduous trek from his cosy HDB in Singapore to his jungles in the highlands would have given him enough mental and emotional distance to face everything head-on.

However, as he entered the room, he could feel the atmosphere shift sharply. The windows were now closed, as the sun gave way to nightfall. The only sources of light were a few moth-bitten holes in the nipah ceiling and candles lit around the room. His relatives were there, faces sullen, tired and long. They sat, some cross-legged, some on their side, around the man.

Kiyong's father was laid there. Kiyong had thought he would have been ready to face the reality before him. He had heard of the various prognoses, had looked up all the guides of what this disease entailed in the people who had been struck by it; but he couldn't help but tear up at the sight of his father. The once-built man in his memories was barely there; replaced by a hollowed-out husk. His body, once full of vigour and life, was now almost ghastly, his ribs seeming to be almost poking out of his skin. His face, once joyful, had cheeks that seemed to cling onto their bones like the roots of banyan trees.

All that Kiyong had thought over, all the words he meant to use as a shield went out the window as the situation hit him like a tidal wave. Wiping the tears from his face, Kiyong knelt down beside his father, who was now smiling before the face of his son; finally, his son.

Kiyong began to try to speak his mother tongue. He stumbled over his words, having long left the language unused in the back of his mind. Nevertheless, his father appreciated it. His father responded, his voice now raspy and rattling, almost receding. Kiyong continued to utter his apologies for not having been able to return for so long, letting an outpour of love free from himself for one last time for his father. His father, in return, went with his son over all their shared moments and experiences. They both tried to make up for the loss of the five years of distance, in the span of that moment.

After this long back-and-forth, his father seemed to let go of the tension in his body. He reclined more onto his back. His breathing grew agonal, raspy, rough. He whispered out from his lips.

"Thank you, son."

Kiyong gripped his hand tightly.

"Thank you, father."

His father let loose the grip on his hand. He set his hand down by his side and closed his eyes. He had finally left, in peace.

Kiyong's relatives quickly moved in towards his father's body; some to confirm his death for the certificate, some to prepare him for the traditional funeral. They started uttering a chant or prayer of some kind in his native tongue. Yet, it was old; Kiyong couldn't make out most of it. He tried to follow along with his family, but he was utterly lost.

If I were the Orang-utan

Christina Yin | Creative Nonfiction

If I were the orang-utan Peter, an adult male with cheek pads enlarged, confiscated and caged at Matang Wildlife Centre, unable to be released as I can't fend for myself even if there were an area of rainforest large enough for me to roam, I might ask

"Where are the trees?"

"Where are the branches and leaves to make my nest?"

"Where are the females?"

"Why am I here?"

"Why can't I leave?"

If I were the orang-utan Edwin, a young adult male born of two confiscated orang-utans at Semenggoh Wildlife Centre and raised semi-wild here, sitting on a feeding platform, I might be thinking

"I turn my back on the humans and their noise and eat this fruit."

"I wish I could eat in peace. Should I break this branch and throw it at the bothersome humans?"

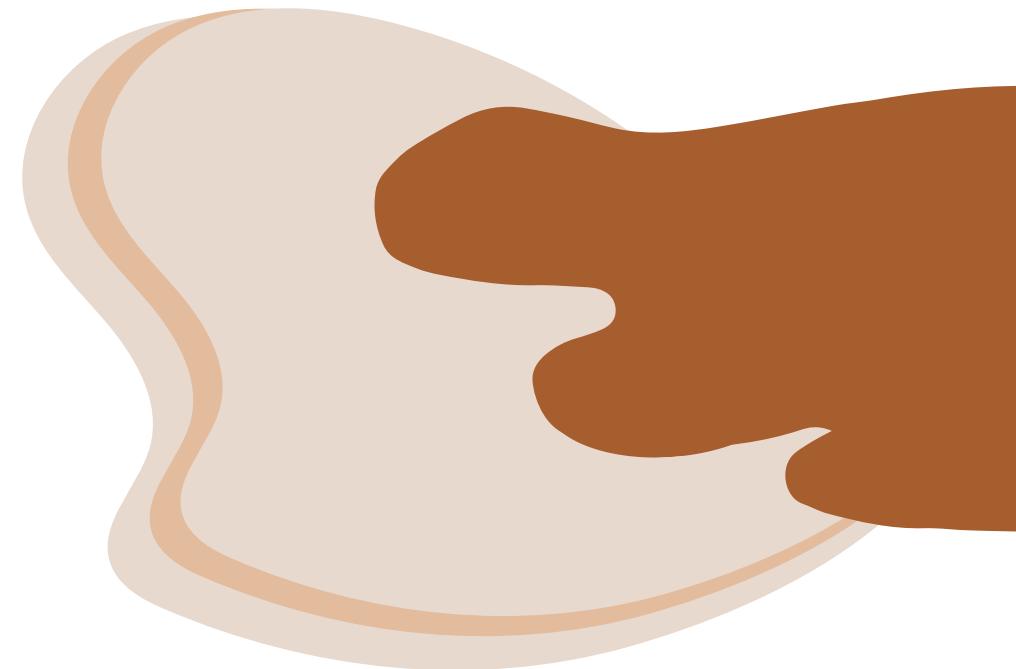
"It's too crowded here. I just want to be alone in the forest and eat in peace, but there are too many orang-utans here."

If I were the orang-utan Analisa, born of a confiscated mother, semi-wild with my own infant moving through the trees at Semenggoh Nature Reserve, I might say

"Come, little one, grasp this branch with me."

"Yes, there's a human there and he will give us fruit to eat. We have nothing to fear."

"Don't worry about the humans over there watching us. They're far away and they're weak. They can't climb trees or break branches to throw at us."



If I were the orang-utan Anaku, a juvenile who knows no other home than Semenggoh Wildlife Centre and its Nature Reserve, perhaps, I would say this

"I love my mother. She teaches me to climb."

"She teaches me to make a cosy nest to rest and sleep in."

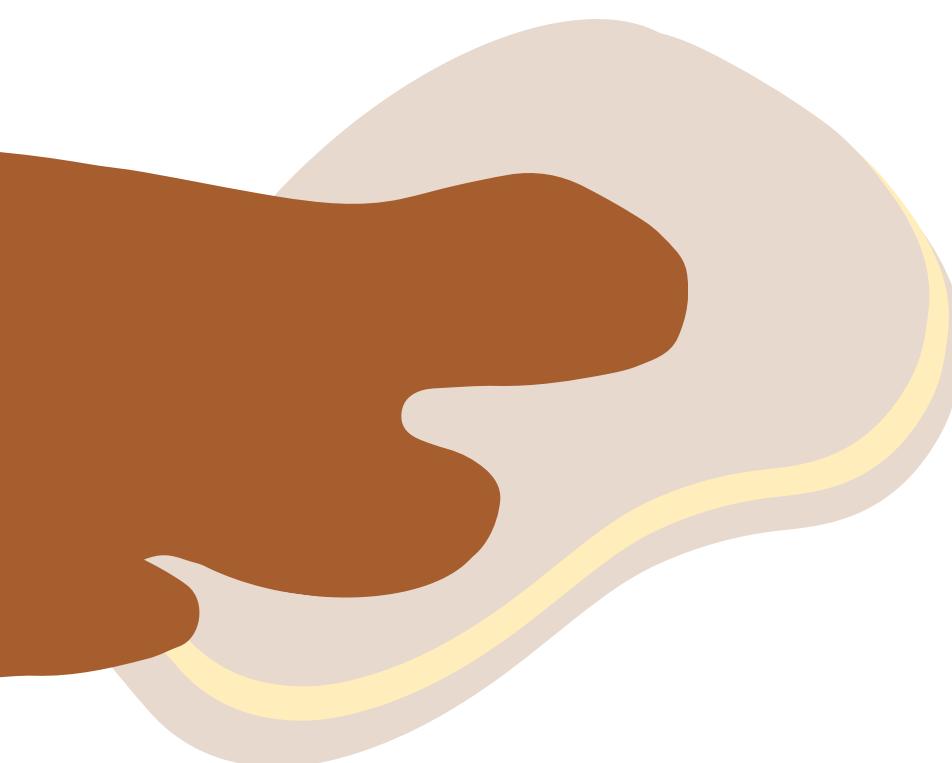
"My mother tells me where I can roam and what I can eat."

"I ask my mother, why don't we leave the forest and explore the villages we can see from the treetops? Couldn't we eat the fruit in the gardens? Why is it dangerous? The humans will let us eat from them. They give us fruit to eat here every day."



If I were the orang-utan bundled in a suitcase in Bali in March 2019, snatched from my forest home and drugged to be smuggled out to become some human's exotic pet, I might ask

“Why did you kill my mother?”
“Why did you take me from my home in the forest?”
“Why do humans want to own wild things?”

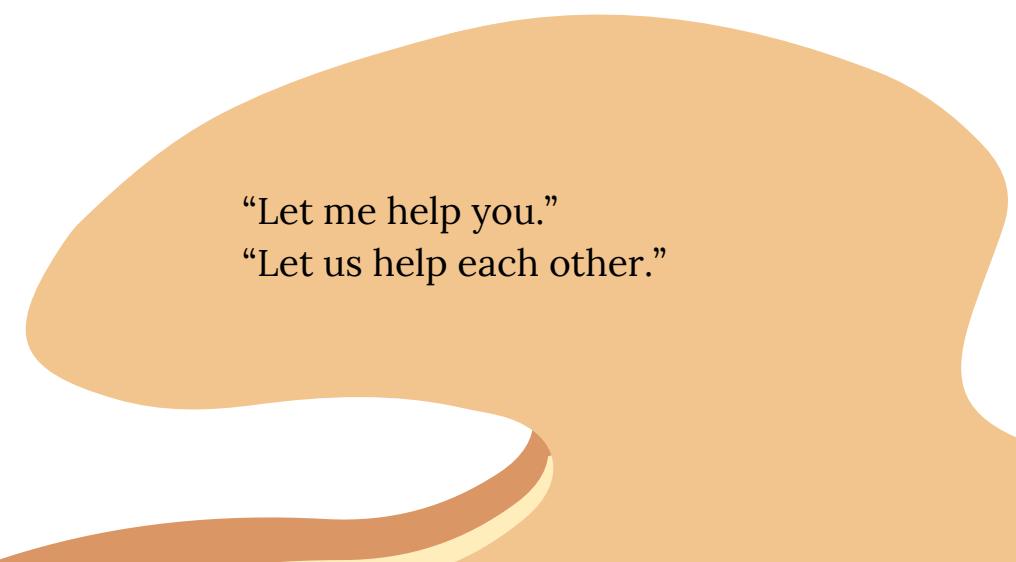


If I were the orang-utan, in 2013, wild and angry, fighting a bulldozer that is destroying my home in Sungai Putri Forest, Borneo, I have

no words for this.

And yet.

If I were the orang-utan in Kalimantan, Borneo in September 2019, reaching out my hand to a man chest deep in a river, I would say



“Let me help you.”
“Let us help each other.”

They Who Continue to Live

Naufal | Poetry

as sweet as the rolling sounds of rice
that fell from the hands of mites.
Soon their life would perish
for they put high hopes
as they fell from the slopes.

But there is nothing to expect
except to be a toy.

They who stumbled,
trampled under skirted women
and collared men
shouting *human rights!*

We are stepped on!
Laid down on tarred road!

Stop!
There is no use for you to write this!
Our fate would never be overturned!
Terima kasih!
Terima kasih!
Terima kasih!

Reason

Srilakshmi Bhavana Chintakindi | Fiction

The year was 612 BCE. The sun was just rising in the kingdom of Magadha¹ as Ajaatashatru made his way to the guest chambers of the royal palace. The two sentries outside bowed low. "Rajkumara²," one of them said respectfully. Ajaatashatru nodded at him and he pushed open the heavy wooden doors.

The room the prince walked into was large and airy, and as cold as the hallway outside, indicating the windows hadn't been closed the night before. A faint aroma of *Jasminum sambac* lingered in the air from the long-extinguished incense sticks. The Odissi dancing ladies in the portraits adorning the walls appeared to be wearing judgemental expressions today as they posed. A figure was gazing out of an open window, through which he could see the clouds in the sky outside turn a magnificent shade of tangerine as the sun rose further up. The copper water-pot on the bedside table gleamed in its light.

"Did the sun rise in the west³ today? You're already awake!" the prince exclaimed. Rajkumara Harshavardhana, his childhood friend, turned away from the window and gave him a watery smile. "And fully dressed for the day too, Guru maa⁴ would be proud."

Harshavardhana said nothing at the teasing, which was so unlike him.

"Are you watching Parvati practising Dhanurvidya⁵ with my sister?" continued Ajaatashatru, gesturing at the window, through which one could see the palace courtyards. "She's such a proficient; every shot right on target! You should take her hunting one of these days."

Harshavardhana nodded. "Yes, a moving target does provide much more of a challenge," he muttered, moving away from the window and distractedly smoothing down the silks he hadn't changed out of since the day before.

"Why are you up so early anyway? Did your father send word for you to return to Kannauj⁶ today?" Ajaatashatru asked, only now noticing the dark circles under his friend's eyes. He looked over at the giant four-poster canopy bed; it had barely been slept in. "Harsha, what is going on?"

Harshavardhana looked up at his best friend. Ajaatashatru saw guilt in his eyes and immediately realised what he was about to do. "You're not LEAVING?!"

Harshavardhana didn't deny it, if anything he looked more guilty.

"You'd better start talking Harsha, or else!" Ajaatashatru yelled, drawing his sword from its sheath with a metallic shwing and pointing it at his best friend, who merely frowned.

"Harsha, you can't, Parvati will be devastated! You do realise what she's been through, right?" yelled Ajaatashatru, the tip of the sword now digging into Harshavardhana's chest.

"Get this out of my face!" said Harshavardhana irritably, swatting the sword away.

"Harsha, she was locked in Raja Amar Singh's dungeons for months, only the Lord Vishwanatha knows what tortures she must have endured there," Ajaatashatru expounded vehemently. "You have no idea what state she was in when we brought her back. She is just starting to recover, and you want to abandon her now? Don't you care about her?!"

"Of course, I care! That's why I'm leaving!"

"Are you out of your senses? How will that help her?"

Harshavardhana opened his mouth to say something, but then they heard the muffled jingling of royal anklets outside and the authoritative command of 'Open this door now.' The wooden doors opened for a second time and Rajkumaris⁷ Parvati Devi and Padmasundari walked in, they both still had their talatras⁸ and shastakas⁹ on and were carrying their bows in their left hands, quivers in their right.

"Brother, what is going on?" Padmasundari asked Ajaatashatru, warily eyeing the sword at his side.

"We heard... raised voices," said Parvati breathlessly, noticing that Harshavardhana was avoiding her eye.

Just then, a hawk flew in through the open window and landed on Harshavardhana's shoulder. The others looked on curiously as he untied the scroll from the hawk's leg to read the note. Tense moments passed as he stared at the words on the scroll.

Ajaatashatru stalked over to his friend. "Give me that," he said, snatching the scroll away from his fingers. Harshavardhana made a weak attempt to take it back but relented in the end. Ajaatashatru's eyebrows furrowed as he read the mysterious scroll. He could make neither head nor tail of its contents.

"Will someone please tell me what is going on? Ajaata?" asked Parvati, looking to him for help.

The hawk on Harshavardhana's shoulder made a low kuk-kuk sound and nipped at the shell of his ear, but he ignored it. It didn't appreciate the inattention and flew away. Ajaatashatru glanced at him. "Harsha is leaving."

"What?" said Padmasundari, confused.

"Why? Did your father summon you back? Is that what the scroll is about?" asked Parvati, ignoring the growing dread in her chest.

"No," Ajaatashatru told her. "He just wants to leave."

"Leave, as in- " Parvati stopped abruptly as she realised what this meant for her. Harshavardhana looked up too meet her eyes for the first time. She couldn't decipher the emotion in his face, his face was a mask. "Leave, as in, you don't want to marry me anymore?"

No one answered her.

"Is this because I, being a woman, was bold enough to propose to you?" she asked him, handing her bow and quiver to Padmasundari and stepping closer to him. "I am sorry, I know I should have waited for your proposal, but I just thought it was what we both wanted anyway. Is this- Is this not what you want right now? Do you have other tasks you need to complete before you can marry?"

Silence.

"Harsha, say something please, I'm trying to see reason here," she said, stepping even closer and putting her hand on his shoulder.

"He's not going to talk, Parvati, he's a coward," said Padmasundari, carelessly placing bows and quivers dangerously close to an open inkpot on the writing table and folding her hands crossly.

"Padma, will you be quiet?" scolded Ajaatashatru. "You do have a habit of making mountains out of mustard seeds¹⁰."

"Isn't that right, Harsha?" said Padmasundari, ignoring her brother completely. "I know why you're leaving."

"And what might that reason be?" asked her brother sarcastically.

"He believes her sanctity has been violated whilst trapped in Lalitpur¹¹."

"Sanctity?" he asked, confused.

"My virginity," explained Parvati. "Is that your problem?"

Harshavardhana shook his head in earnest. "No! That's not what I'm-"

"I thought you were better than this, Harsha!" exclaimed Ajaatashatru, outraged that his own friend could think like this.

"Why? If Lord Rama¹² can question the purity of his own wife—" Padmasundari began.

"Lord Rama did that for society, not to reassure himself!" Ajaatashatru interrupted his sister adamantly. "I knew you were judgemental, but now you think yourself learned enough to judge the Gods?"

"Why not? What he did made it okay for a woman's purity to be questioned in public like that. Now every *undeserving* guy thinks it's his birth right to question these things shamelessly!" said Padmasundari, lowering her voice, lest the soldiers outside hear.

'Undeserving' and 'shameless'; two words that fit me perfectly right now, Harshavardhana thought desolately. Padmasundari had always possessed the talent of being able to accurately delineate people's characters, despite not knowing the whole story.

Parvati's eyes stung as she heard that statement. "Nothing happened between Raja Amar Singh and I, I promise on the Goddess Akhilandeshwari!" she wailed. "He only kept me there so the Kingdoms would be ready to talk about the treatment of those forty-two Jain mendicants on the banks of the Brahmaputra¹³."

"That kind of thought didn't even cross my mind, I swear, Parvati!" Harshavardhana insisted, but no one was listening to him.

"If you're so suspicious about her virginity, then I'm suspicious about yours!" Padmasundari declared, pointing dramatically at Harshavardhana.

"What?" he asked, a tremor in his voice making him sound more guilty.

"I remember two years ago, when you and your family went on a pilgrimage to Rameswaram, you fell off your horse and broke your leg. The Pallava¹⁴ king was kind enough to host you until your leg healed, and you stayed at their palace for eight weeks—"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Rumour has it that you and his daughter Rajkumari Shailaputri got very close—"

"She and I are good friends, nothing more!"

"Well, how do we know for sure nothing happened between you two?"

"Nothing happened," Harshavardhana maintained, glancing at his best friend for help, but Ajaatashatru was staring at the scroll in his hands.

Now he recognised the royal seal on it. It was that of the Pallava King.

"Then what is this, Harsha?" he asked, holding it up.

"What is that?" asked Parvati.

"It's a note from the royal household of the Pallava king," Ajaatashatru informed her, and she gaped at both of them.

"No!" panicked Harshavardhana.

"Are you saying this is not from Rajkumari Shailaputri?" Ajaatashatru asked his best friend sternly.

"It is, but—"

"Parvati dropped onto the ornately carved teakwood armchair beside the writing table and started crying.

"No Parvati, don't cry, please," said Harsha, kneeling down beside her. "I-

"Please don't leave me, I love you!" she begged, her eyes, pleading.

Padmasundari glared at her brother like this was all his fault, and he gestured questioningly at her.

Harshavardhana looked at his betrothed for a long moment. "I- I know."

Since he didn't say it back even at this crucial moment, she understood it to mean that he didn't love her anymore. "Oh," she mumbled, wiping her eyes. "Oh. If you want to marry Shailaputri, it's alright, go ahead."

"No, I don't want to marry Shailaputri, she and I are just friends," Harshavardhana insisted. "Please believe me."

No one did.

"Look, you don't have to say that," Parvati continued. "You don't have to marry me just to honour the Peace Treaty our five kingdoms signed. The Treaty still holds whether or not we marry—"

"I didn't agree to marry you for the sake of the Peace Treaty!"

"Then what?!" Ajaatashatru yelled, his deep voice resounding in the chambers. "What is bothering you so much, Harsha? Just tell us."

He stood up frustratedly, moved to the window and put his hands on the windowsill, breathing deeply. "Kalanabha."

Ajaatashatru's demeanour changed completely. He exhaled deeply and put his sword back into its sheath on his belt. That was a name he hadn't heard in years. "He's back?"

Harshavardhana nodded, still looking out of the window. The two women exchanged confused looks.

"Who is Kalanabha?" asked Padmasundari.

"When we were in Gurukula¹⁵, Harsha would often hear this voice in his head."

"His intuition?" asked Parvati.

"No," said Harshavardhana, turning around resignedly. "This is a different voice. I can hear him as clear as day. The voice has a different name and a completely different personality to me."

Kalanabha?" she asked, and Harshavardhana nodded again.

"How do you know this voice's name?" Padmasundari asked him.

"He told me."

Harshavardhana and Ajaatashatru exchanged worried glances. "Look, girls, he's not possessed by some spirit, alright? It's his brain that came up with this voice."

"We get it," assured Padmasundari. "Do you remember when the Alakhana¹⁶ launched that sneak attack on us?"

"Yes, Harsha and I were still at the Gurukula when we received the news," said her brother.

"Yes, at the time, Parvati and I were sent to the kingdom of Gandhara¹⁷ as a security measure," Padmasundari went on. "We got quite bored there, so we decided to apprentice under their Royal Physician, Vashti."

"Yes, we did. One day, Vashti took us out to one of the poorer neighbourhoods, where he'd heard of a man apparently possessed by multiple ghosts. Padma was so frightened at the sight of him, she wanted to go back immediately."

Ajaatashatru snickered. "So much for being the bravest Rajkumari ever, Padma," he teased his sister. She glowered at him.

"What happened to the man?" asked Harsha, he was bursting to know.

"Nothing," said Parvati. "He wasn't possessed. Turns out he had five voices in his head. He was having five different conversations with all five voices - basically talking to himself. So, everyone thought he was possessed."

Yeah, that's how I found out about Kalanabha," recalled Ajaatashatru. "One day, Guru maa sent him to fetch some water from a nearby stream and it had been a few hours and he hadn't returned. She got worried and sent me to find him. I found him sitting at the bank of the stream, just talking to himself. I surveyed the area around me, and even up the nearby trees, thinking there was someone else there, to whom he was talking. But there was no one there."

"There was, though," said Parvati. "This Kalanabha was there." Harshavardhana blinked at her.

"Remember that one time you thought there was a puppet perched on the edge of your sleeping mat, but there was actually nothing?" said Ajaatashatru.

Parvati and Padma widened their eyes and exchanged looks.

"Can you not freak the girls out further?" muttered Harshavardhana, mortified.

"I apologise, I'll shut up now."

Padmasundari sighed. "Look Harsha, even hallucinations sometimes occur in this condition, it's not anything to be ashamed or embarrassed about. Vashti patiently taught this man how to deal with the voices, show him what was real and what wasn't. The man wasn't healed, but he definitely learnt how to make peace with the voices, they didn't clutter his headspace anymore. He went back to his family in the end," said Padmasundari, smiling encouragingly at Harshavardhana.

"No, I am not worthy of you, Parvati," he said, looking at her. "You are so good, and honest and true. You deserve someone at least medically sane."

"You are not insane, Harsha," said Parvati. "You just have a problem. Did Kalanabha tell you not to marry me?"

"No, he didn't," he replied.

"What exactly did he say about me?" she demanded to know.

"He can be quite mean sometimes," Ajaatashatru answered for him, unable to stay quiet for long.

"He was never mean about you," Harsha added hurriedly.

"No, he's only ever mean to you," agreed Ajaatashatru, nodding.

"Is he here right now?"

"Not right now, no." "Wait. I thought he was gone, when did he start coming back?" asked Ajaatashatru.

"He came back twice. First when I broke my leg and was stuck at the Pallava King's palace."

"Oh, so you told Shailaputri about Kalanabha?"

"No, do you think I'm an idiot? Why would I do that, Ajaata?" asked Harshavardhana irately.

"Alright alright, sorry!"

"The first few days there were really stressful. I had many nightmares, then he was back. I didn't realise what was going on, I just started talking to him, the servants noticed, and eventually, Shailaputri found out."

"Oh, is that what this note is about?"

"Sort of. When I received your father's letter that you, Padma and General Arjuna had ridden to Lalitpur to rescue Parvati, I came as soon as I could so I may meet your riding party on your return, but I missed you in Mangali Nath."

The Forest of Mangali Nath is very thick, we could have been mere metres from each other, but may have passed like two ships in the night."

“Harshavardhana sighed. “I actually lost my way in the forest. That’s when Kalanabha returned for the second time...” he said with a faraway look in his eye. Then he ran his fingers frustratedly through his silky hair. “Just when you think he’s gone, he returns again. He wears me out completely sometimes, he doesn’t stop talking! I had a lot of time to think in the forest. I made my decision-”

“You mean Kalanabha made it for you,” said Padmasundari, as if stating a fact.

Harsha blinked a few times and then shook his head. “No, it was mine, I didn’t want to subject Parvati to this... when I returned to Magadha, the first thing I did was write to Shailaputri about my decision, and that’s the reply she sent me.”

“Where? What does she say?” said Padmasundari, taking the scroll from her brother. Parvati leaned in to read it. It had only one line and it said, ‘Can you live, though?’

“Er, what does this mean?” Padmasundari enquired.

“It means, can I live with my decision... can I live without Parvati?” he said, almost in a whisper, and Parvati looked up at him quickly.

“Well, can you?” Ajaatashatru asked loudly.

“No,” he mumbled. “But-”

“No buts,” said Parvati, throwing herself into his arms. The siblings chuckled at them.

“But-”

“I said ‘no buts’. I’ll help you, Harsha. We can go see Vashti after the wedding. Don’t worry, everything will be alright,” she told Harshavardhana.

“Yes Harsha,” said his friend. “You’ve never let this hold you back from anything. Why start now?”

Harshavardhana still looked dubious. Easy for them to say.

“I do understand how big the rift is, between how you experience this world with that voice, vs how the rest of us experience it, I really do get it,” said Parvati, stroking his cheek lightly.

Harshavardhana still didn’t say anything, he merely looked into her eyes.

"Harsha, this is not some favour she's bestowing on you, alright?" said Padmasundari, walking up towards them. The two of them turn to look at her. "She's doing this because she loves you, and she knows exactly what she's getting herself into."

Harshavardhana looked down at Parvati again, who nodded eagerly, and smiled tentatively at her. "Okay... okay," he agreed, finally hugging her back.

Ajaatashatru cleared his throat pointedly. "Rajkumari Shailaputri sounds like a very intelligent lady," he observed, and everyone grinned at him.

"Oh, she is," Harshavardhana replied. "And her favourite sport is Kalaripayattu¹⁸."

"Oh my God!" shouted Ajaatashatru, ecstatic.

Padmasundari giggled at her brother's excitement. "You're definitely inviting her to the wedding, no?" she asked Harshavardhana.

"Of course, I am. We can't forget the kindness of the Pallavas, can we?"

"No, we can't," said Parvati, smiling up at him. "Oh, I can't believe you went through all this on your own, I wish you had just told me sooner."

"It is not that easy," Harshavardhana said, shaking his head.

"No, it's not, Harsha. Judgement and alienation are very real, we know. But the people who really care about you, who want the best for you, they'll never judge you. They'll understand," said Ajaatashatru, nodding sombrely.

"True," agreed Parvati. "And I guess that is one way to find out who your people are."

"Since when did you become such a wise old langur?" Padmasundari asked her brother in feigned shock.

"Excuse me, I have always been wise, it's only you who has noticed so late!" he whinged. The sound of laughter penetrated the thick wooden doors into the corridor outside and the two sentries outside smiled at each other.

#stopthestigma

Notes:

- [1] Kingdom in the Northern region of Ancient India
- [2] Translates to 'son of the King' or 'prince'.
- [3] An Indian saying referring to something/ an event that can never happen, just like the sun can never rise in the west
- [4] Wife of their guru or main teacher/master
- [5] Sanskrit word for archery
- [6] A city located in present day Uttar Pradesh
- [7] princesses
- [8] Leather defence worn by archers on the left arm
- [9] Leather defence for the finger of an archer
- [10] Popular Indian saying, like the English phrase, making mountains out of molehills'
- [11] City in the Northwest region of India, present day Rajasthan
- [12] Prince Rama in the Ramayana, famous for asking his wife Sita to walk through fire so the world would be convinced of her purity
- [13] River in north-eastern India
- [14] Royal dynasty in the south of India
- [15] Traditional Hindu boarding school for boys, run by a guru.
- [16] The Alchon Huns, a nomadic tribe from central Asia.
- [17] Kingdom in the north of India, present day Kashmir.
- [18] The South Indian traditional art of sword-fighting.

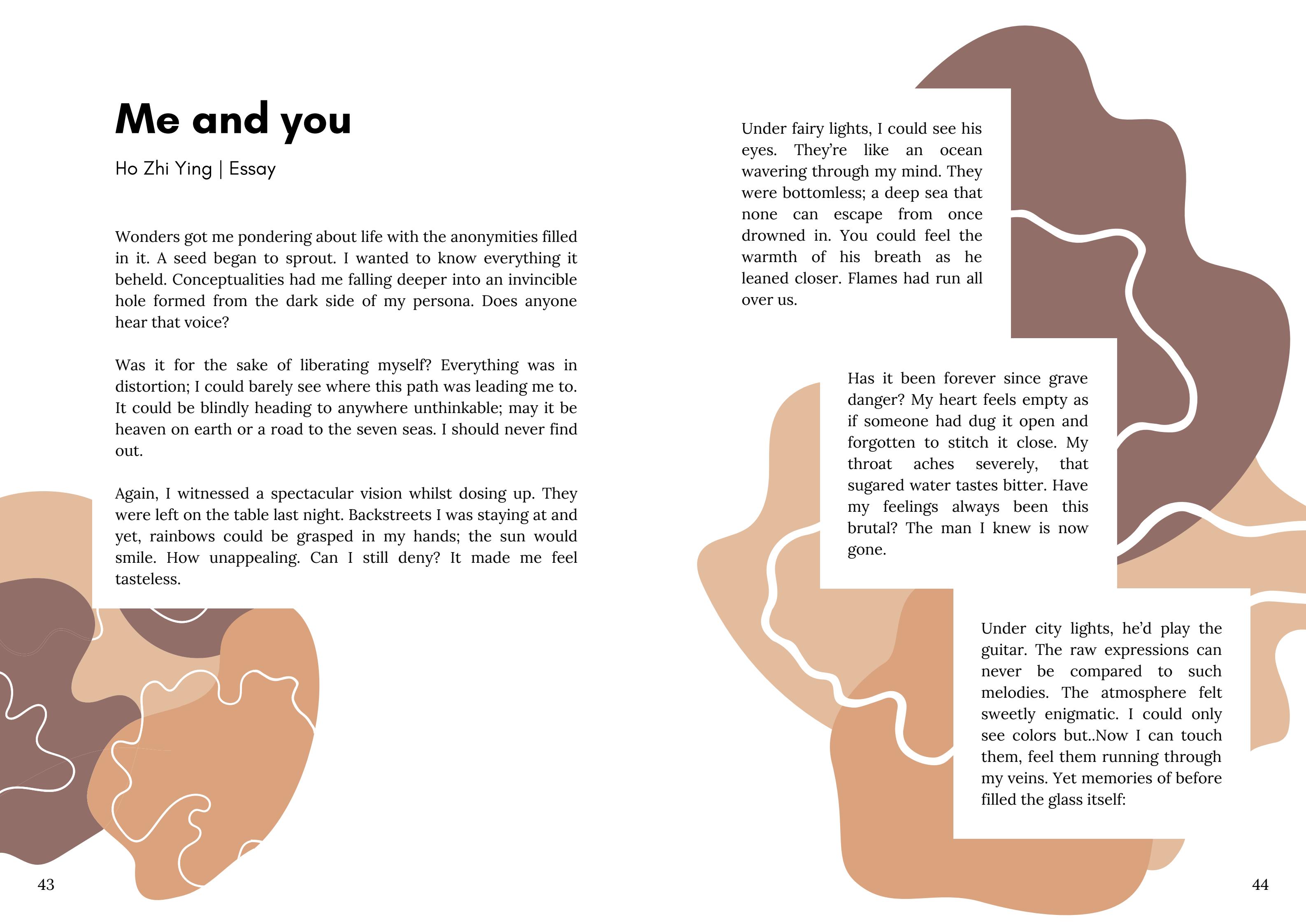
Me and you

Ho Zhi Ying | Essay

Wonders got me pondering about life with the anonymities filled in it. A seed began to sprout. I wanted to know everything it beheld. Conceptualities had me falling deeper into an invincible hole formed from the dark side of my persona. Does anyone hear that voice?

Was it for the sake of liberating myself? Everything was in distortion; I could barely see where this path was leading me to. It could be blindly heading to anywhere unthinkable; may it be heaven on earth or a road to the seven seas. I should never find out.

Again, I witnessed a spectacular vision whilst dosing up. They were left on the table last night. Backstreets I was staying at and yet, rainbows could be grasped in my hands; the sun would smile. How unappealing. Can I still deny? It made me feel tasteless.



Under fairy lights, I could see his eyes. They're like an ocean wavering through my mind. They were bottomless; a deep sea that none can escape from once drowned in. You could feel the warmth of his breath as he leaned closer. Flames had run all over us.

Has it been forever since grave danger? My heart feels empty as if someone had dug it open and forgotten to stitch it close. My throat aches severely, that sugared water tastes bitter. Have my feelings always been this brutal? The man I knew is now gone.

Under city lights, he'd play the guitar. The raw expressions can never be compared to such melodies. The atmosphere felt sweetly enigmatic. I could only see colors but..Now I can touch them, feel them running through my veins. Yet memories of before filled the glass itself:



That's when we decided to fly to the moon; visualizing that you'd protect me no matter the circumstances. You broke that promise ever since you were taken away. You were so consumed by your own fantasies that no one could go near the center of your heart.

It started pushing me to the brink of death. Then, it swallowed my mind without me recognizing its intentions. There wasn't once that it's not having a pleasant banquet. It encouraged me to do intense actions and make surreal decisions. I had myself savored.

It made me become more and more similar to you; revealing everyone living here is foul and detached. The things you longed for, the dreams you had, the lights you'd seen; nothing really matters on the day you left this place. It was a lesson learnt with happiness lost.

Now, the seed planted in me years prior has finally fully bloomed. Although the seed was jet black, the flowers bloomed were absolutely beautiful; just like the love letters you once wrote to me when life was simpler.

All those words...I kept them real close to my heart. Every blue I had seen in the skies were used to shelter and conceal all these feelings I have for you. Do you understand my numb words when stringed together? To be with you, I cannot differ; that's what you worship.

Some bells rang the last time we traveled. You'd give me a soft glance and I'd return it with a kiss. We'd write love letters and recite poetry to each other despite knowing that we'd fallen apart. I miss everything about us, especially you. I wouldn't want anyone to corrode my soul but you.

With all the things we've been through, I treasure the fact that our relationship was so hauntingly fragile and yet breathtaking. We've wasted our time on beautiful things far too much, so let's rest before our spirits become even more miserable. Just like what people have told us before:

When there is someone you wish to see, you're probably not alone anymore...

Project Genesis

Athirah | Fiction

Helen Cho stares at the tiny pale body lying on the metal table, a small frown on her face. Hands wrapped in gloves prod the body, raising the tiny arms, then the legs. Good, good, all the limbs are intact and healthy, ten fingers and ten toes.

Her hands pry the legs apart and she peeks at the juncture between the legs. Her frown deepens at the sight that greets her.

Another failure.

Helen glances at the glass vials arranged on the top shelf of the glass cabinet lining one side of the room. Well, not a complete failure. She could still collect some tissue samples and inspect them later.

The sound of the glass door sliding open startles her from her musings. A dark-haired man enters the room, wearing the same attire as her. A black apron over long-sleeved scrubs, hands in latex gloves, a surgical mask over his mouth, scrub cap over his head and closed rubber shoes. The door automatically closes behind him.

"Ah, good, I was waiting for you. Take the camera on the desk and let's begin."

Her assistant, Mark Adams nods and moves slowly towards the desk pushed up against the left wall. He picks up the small black camera and fiddles with it, his eyes averted from hers. Helen glares at him and snaps, "I don't have all day, Adams. Take the pictures, weigh the foetus then take the blood samples. I can take it alone from there."

Adams sets the camera down, clearing his throat. "Doctor Cho, I... I'm afraid about the path this project is heading. Perhaps there is a reason why this has not been attempted before." His voice rises, "God is punishing us for playing around with his —"

"Be careful with your words, Adams," Helen says loudly over his words. "The stress is getting to you. You must remember that we have made tremendous strides since we first started this project. Mister Page," she narrows her eyes at him, "has invested a lot into this project and we cannot fail him."

His dark eyes nervously flicker around the room before he meets her gaze. "Of course. I remember now, Doctor Cho."

"Good. Now pick up that camera and let's get to work."

Adams grabs the camera and starts moving towards her. A disembodied and pleasant female voice coming from the ceiling makes him pause in his steps.

"Doctor Cho, Mister Page requests your presence in the executive office."



Adams tightens his hold on the camera, eyes going wide with worry. Helen sighs; her weekly updates with Mister Page is usually scheduled on Saturdays and today is only Thursday. "Don't do anything without me," she tells Adams. "Just put the fetus back into storage"—she jerks her chin to the huge cooler with four windows standing at the back of the room—"and we'll continue after my meeting with Mister Page."

Helen heads towards the metal sink nestled in the corner of the room. She tugs off all her disposable equipment and throws them into the red hazard bin beside the sink, leaving her just in her scrubs and rubber shoes. With her mask off, she could smell the heavy disinfectant in the room. She promptly washes her hands, taking her time to be thorough.

After that, she heads to the door and keys in the code. As the door slides open, she glances over her shoulder and sees Adams gently lifting the body into a white bag, hands cradling the small body.

The door leads out into the main hallway of the ground floor. Helen strolls down the empty hallway with her hands in the front pockets of her scrubs, rubber shoes squeaking against the floor. She passes by a room: Birthing Room. Another room: Implantation Room. Cryopreservation Room is the last room she passes by before she reaches the elevator at the end of the hallway.

In the elevator, Helen presses the button for the tenth floor—the top floor—and waits. Her foot taps somewhat impatiently against the metal floor.

The elevator door finally pings open to her destination. Helen straightens and walks out, hands going to her head, making sure there are no stray hairs escaping from her tight bun. The woman sitting behind the receptionist desk looks up and smiles at her. "Mister Page is waiting for you."

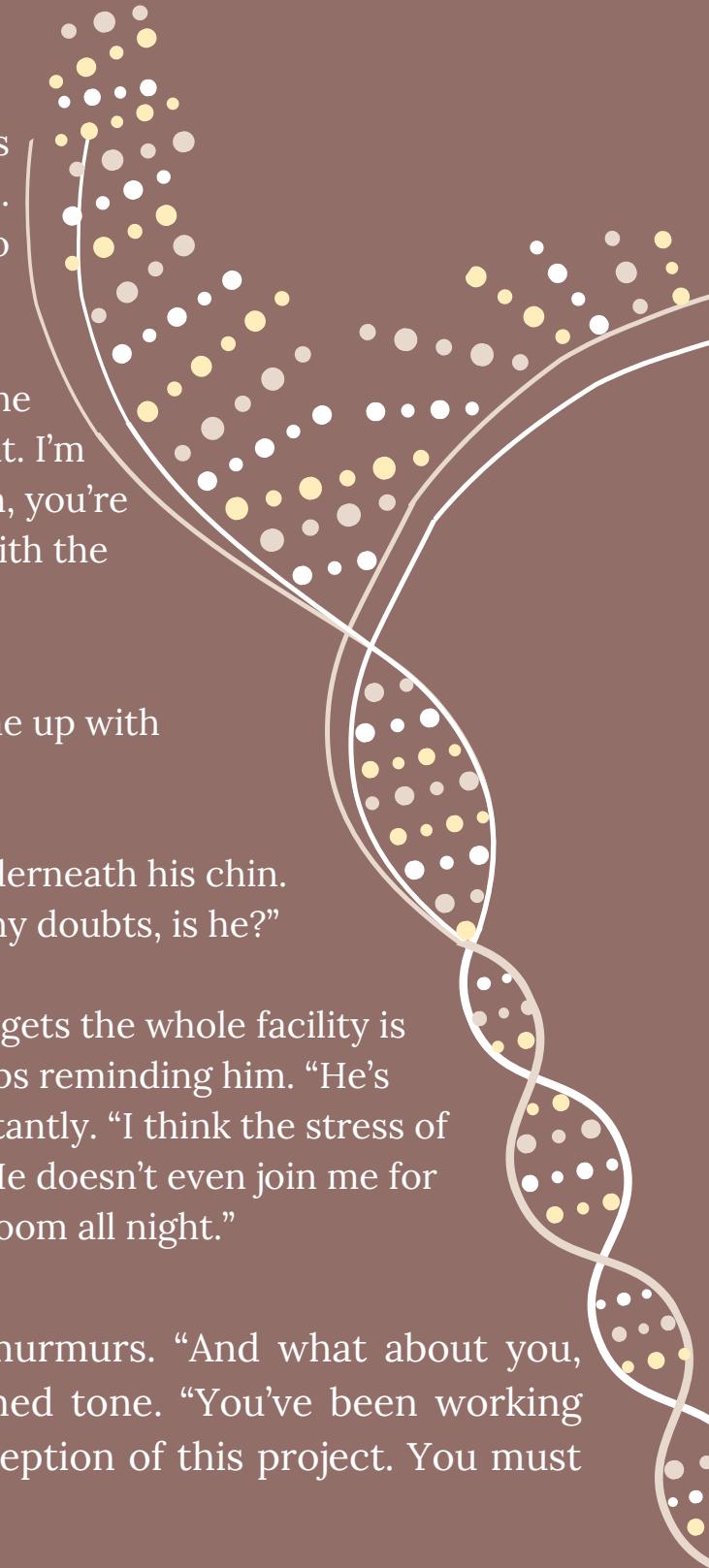
Helen nods and strides briskly down to the end of the corridor, stopping before the large mahogany doors. She knocks and waits. A deep voice calls out, "Enter," and Helen pushes the doors open.

The CEO of Page Industries, Robert Page stands with his back to the door in his crisp black suit, a stark contrast to his red hair. The smell of nicotine clogs her nostrils. He turns around when he hears her enter, removing the cigarette from his mouth. His bright blue eyes light up. "Helen, I'm so pleased you could join me today."

"A bit early for our usual updates, Bob."

He takes a drag from his cigarette, blows out a puff of smoke then snuffs out the cigarette in the ashtray on the corner of his desk. "I was checking up on Augmentation Project and thought I might as well see you while I'm here. Please, sit. Do you want any coffee? Tea? I could ask Rachael to make some for you."

"That's not necessary," she replies curtly, sitting down opposite him. Helen could feel the short back of the chair digging into her stiff spine. "Surrogate number eight is dead."



"Always straight to business," he laughs. He takes his seat, languidly leaning back in his leather chair. "I already knew that, my dear. She died in delivery—luckily you didn't have to give her your Orchid injection. What was it again?"

"A placental abruption, leading to hemorrhage."

"And the baby?"

"Twenty-eight weeks and stillborn," she states. "Well-formed physically, but I haven't checked the internal organs yet. I've already figured out how to use the CRISPR molecule to alter the white blood cells, just as you requested."

"A new record," he says, looking pleased. "I'm sorry I interrupted your autopsy then. Anything else?" He raises his eyebrow pointedly.

"There was one thing of note," she begins carefully, "the foetus had both testicles and a vulva. I believe the attempt to duplicate your X chromosome is having an adverse effect on the foetal development of the genitalia."

Bob tilts his head. "And what would you suggest to solve that?"

"I know you wanted a girl, but at this stage I don't think it would be viable. Cloning your existing gene sequence to make a boy would be the best option."

Bob is already shaking his head before she finishes her sentence. "I can't accept that. I'm sure you'll figure out another way, Helen, you're a smart woman," he insists. "Continue with the project and keep me updated."

She purses her lips. "I suppose I can come up with something."

"Very good." Bob stepples his fingers underneath his chin. "And how's your assistant? Not having any doubts, is he?"

Helen holds back a sigh. Adams often forgets the whole facility is bugged, no matter how much Helen keeps reminding him. "He's been difficult lately," Helen admits reluctantly. "I think the stress of staying in this facility is getting to him. He doesn't even join me for dinner anymore. Stays locked up in his room all night."

"Every night. How...interesting" he murmurs. "And what about you, my dear?" he questions in a concerned tone. "You've been working around the clock ever since the conception of this project. You must be tired."

"I am no delicate flower," she scoffs. "Rest assured I won't stop now. I cannot stop, not when we're so close. I can feel it."

"I admire your dedication," Bob smiles. "Thank you for the update, Helen. That's all for today." He picks up the tablet on his desk and looks over it, clearly dismissing her.

She stands up and heads to the door, hand on the doorknob—

"Helen," he calls out, waiting for her to turn around, "tell your assistant he should not be afraid of God." His mouth stretches into a smile, all teeth. "He should be afraid of me."

He should be afraid of me, the words bounce in the pink of her skull six months later as she steps back from the bed, empty syringe in hand. The woman currently sitting up in the bed looks pale, but there is no mistaking the immense look of satisfaction gracing her features as she holds up a cheque to her eye-level.

The heart rate monitor set up beside the bed has a steady rhythm going on. A line zig-zags up and down the screen, a beep sounding every time the line peaks.

She begins to count in her head. One, two, three...

When she reaches the first minute, the surrogate's eyes start to drift and close, chin drooping to her chest. A few seconds later, her hands go slack and the cheque flutters down to her lap. Her head falls back onto the pillow.

The line goes flat and a long monotonous sound penetrates the room.

Precisely two minutes for her Orchid injection to work. As usual.

Helen hands the syringe to a waiting Adams. "What shall I do with the body?" he asks listlessly.

"Just cover it for now," she tells him. "I'm going to check on the baby."

Helen strides over to the connecting room, stopping just past the threshold. She stares at Bob sitting in the chair near the crib, suit jacket draped over the back of the chair and the top of his shirt unbuttoned, the baby cradled over his heart. His head turns to look at her.

"The books say skin to skin contact is important."

Helen quirks an eyebrow. She had not expected that from him. "I thought I should run the screening tests on the baby now," she says instead. Her hand itches to run some tests on it, to check under an X-ray all the internal organs, to slice a bit of skin and see how fast the cut would heal.

He stands up and carefully places the baby back in the medical bassinet. With expertise she does not expect from him, he swaddles the baby easily and adjusts the small pink cap on its head.

Helen walks up to the bassinet and stares down at the baby. The culmination of ten surrogates and eighty embryos lies right there before her, pink-cheeked, living and breathing. Engineered to be better, faster, stronger. Even with its eyes closed, she knows the iris is as blue as Bob's. The sparse hair on its head will grow to become the exact shade of red like his.

“What are you going to name it?”

Bob gives her an admonishing look. “Her name is Cecelia Page.” He gently strokes the baby’s cheek, a smile playing at his lips. “My little Cece.”

Helen makes a humming noise, still focused on the thought of the screening tests. “You can hold it while I draw blood from the heel,” she offers.

“Later,” he says softly. “Call Adams in. I want to talk to the both of you.”

Helen calls out to Adams while Bob heads back to the chair, buttoning up his shirt along the way. Adams shuffles into the room. Helen barely spares her assistant a glance as he stands beside her, her eyes transfixed on the baby. Bob casually leans his hand on the back of the chair and smiles at Adams. “How are you, Adams?” he asks.

“I’m fine, Mister Page,” Adams responds flatly.

“Your encrypted message to the Juggernaut Collective says otherwise,” Bob replies blithely.

Adams turns pale.

“Did you really think,” Bob continues, “that I would never find out you’re leaking information? I have eyes and ears everywhere. I know *everything*. And what I know now is that you are a liability.”

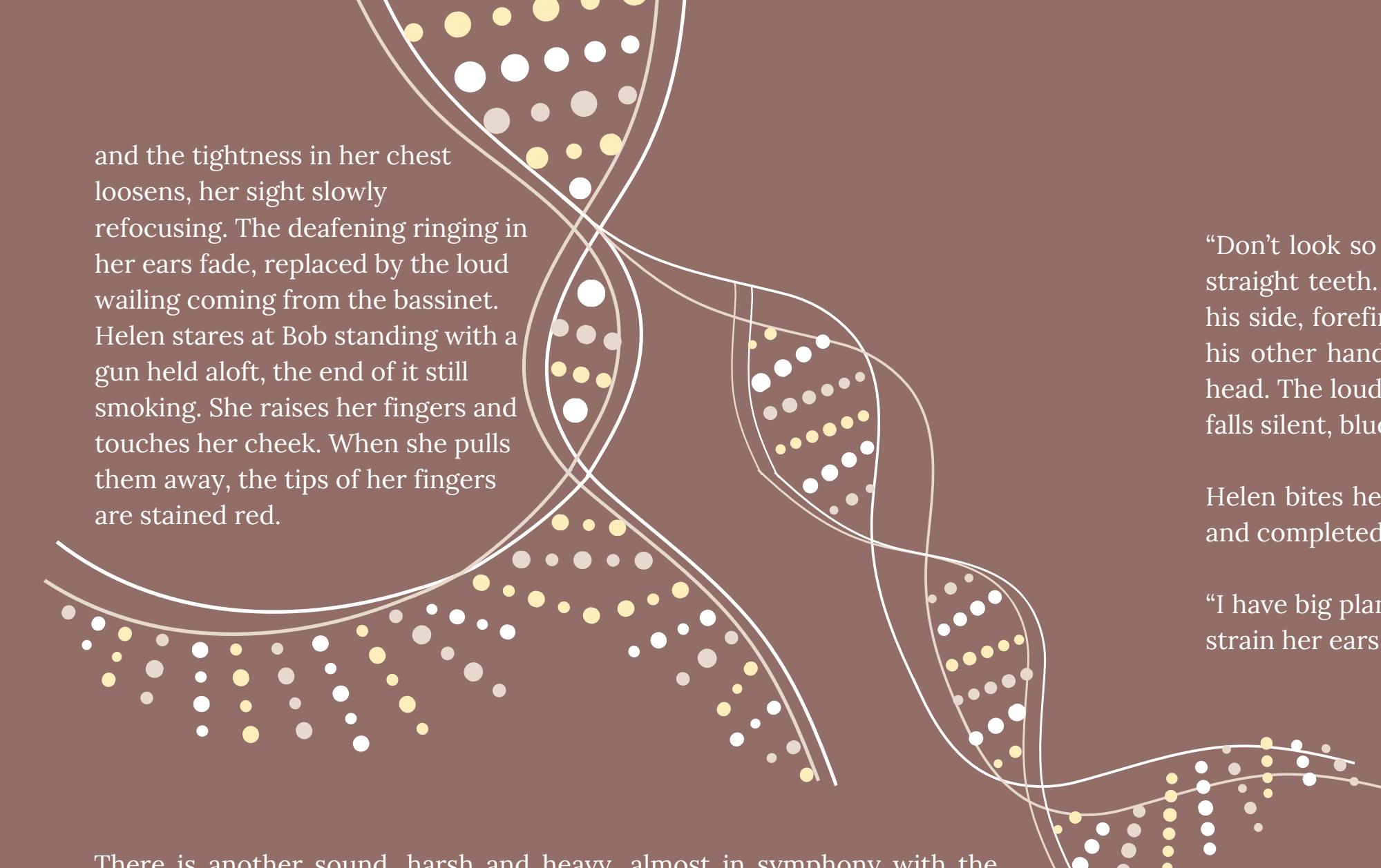
“Doctor Cho?” This time his voice trembles as he tugs urgently at Helen’s elbow. Helen finally turns her attention to Adams, calming words on the tip of her tongue. Out of the corner of her eye, she notices Bob’s hand creeping down his suit jacket.

A cracking sound pierces the silence, the sound so sudden that Helen recoils and nearly crashes into the bassinet. The sound so loud that Helen’s eardrums start to ring, drowning out every other sound in the room.

Something splatters on her face, thick and warm.

Her chest feels tight, like there is a hand squeezing her lungs, unrelenting. Her vision starts to blur around the edges.

After what seems like hours, she blinks once, twice and takes a huge gulp of air—



and the tightness in her chest loosens, her sight slowly refocusing. The deafening ringing in her ears fade, replaced by the loud wailing coming from the bassinet. Helen stares at Bob standing with a gun held aloft, the end of it still smoking. She raises her fingers and touches her cheek. When she pulls them away, the tips of her fingers are stained red.

There is another sound, harsh and heavy, almost in symphony with the wailing. Helen realises it is her, her breaths coming out in short pants as her gaze slides to the dead body by her feet. A dark red pool spreads underneath his head, the edges spreading across the pristine tiled floor to the tip of her shoes. The smell of rust stings her nostrils. No—not rust. A compound in the blood that causes the metallic taste and smell. She... she can't remember the name of it now.

The baby is still crying.

Bob points the gun to her face and steps closer. Helen takes a step back and nearly stumbles on the slick floor, the only thing keeping her from slipping is her hand flashing out to grip the edge of the bassinet.

“Don’t look so scared, Helen,” he says, his lips revealing his row of shiny, straight teeth. “I still have need of your brilliance.” He lowers the gun to his side, forefinger off the trigger. With his blue gaze still focused on her, his other hand reaches into the bassinet and starts to caress the baby’s head. The loud wailing turns to fussing. Bob shushes it and the baby finally falls silent, blue eyes blinking up at him.

Helen bites her lower lip. With a successful birth, Project Genesis is over and completed. What else would Bob need her for?

“I have big plans, Doctor,” he continues in a voice so low that Helen has to strain her ears to catch his words. “For me, for Cece. For the world.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Unless you want to end up like your assistant, you’d do better to comply.”

Helen looks at the dead body, at the wide-awake baby then at its father. She feels the blood seeping through her soles, feels her socks start to grow sticky. “What do you need me to do?” she asks warily.

“Now, we initiate Phase Two of Project Genesis.”

Things Unsaid

Yasmin Nasharuddin | Poetry

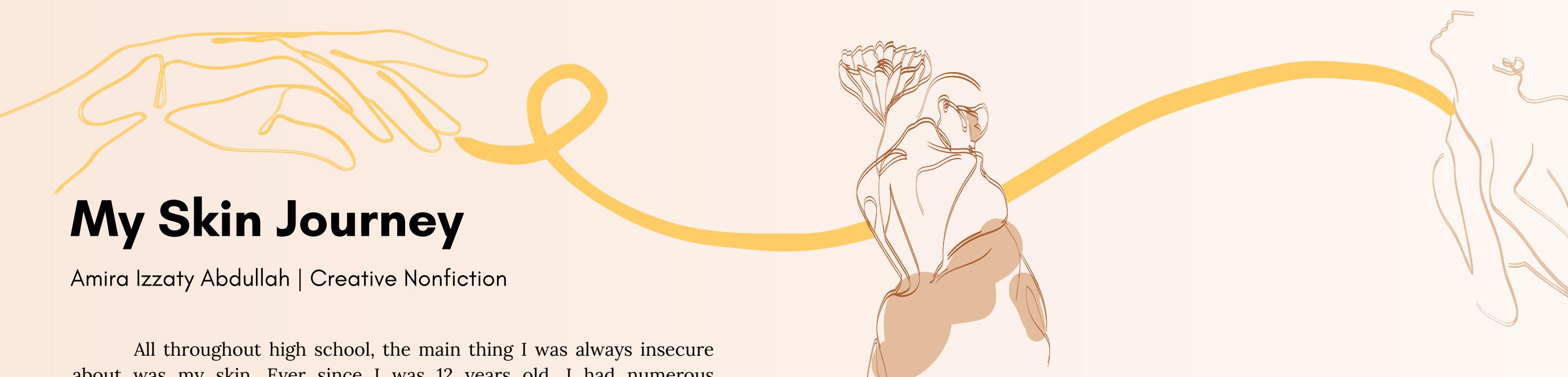
If you press palms against
thickening silence
with eager ear beside
you will hear the pulse
of Things Unsaid.

You will hear his short stiff
breaths that reek of blue
and purple hyacinths,
and you will listen
to Things Unsaid.

You will drown in his lines
of pungent truths
(and lies),
putrid words that shadow
the crippled creature
– Things Unsaid.

And you will suffer when
his hands curl around
neck, claw at heart, and then

you will surrender
to all Things Unsaid.



My Skin Journey

Amira Izzaty Abdullah | Creative Nonfiction

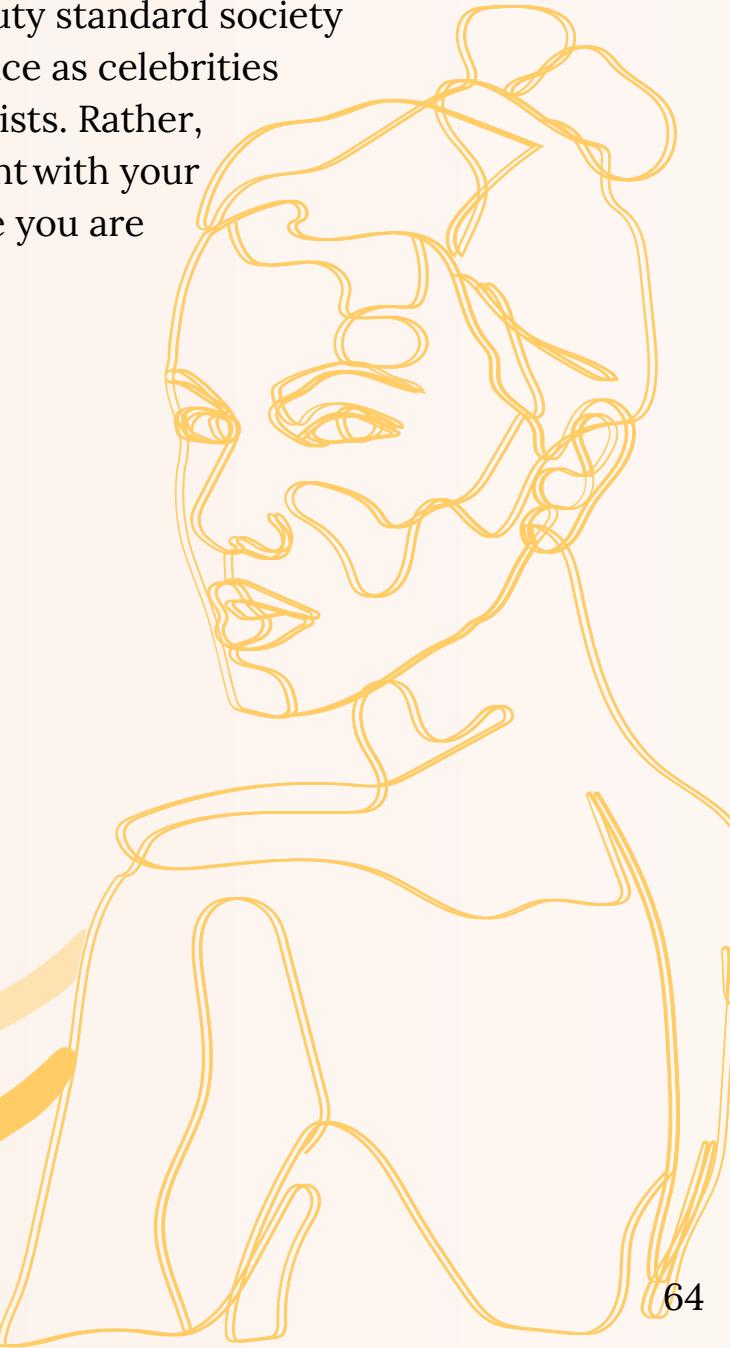
All throughout high school, the main thing I was always insecure about was my skin. Ever since I was 12 years old, I had numerous breakouts, severe acne and pimple scars that didn't seem to go away. I hated looking at my reflection in the morning and avoided mirrors as much as I could. No matter what cleansers I tried, my skin just didn't seem to cooperate, especially from ages 14 to 16. Disheartening as it was, I always told myself it would get better and that I was just going through what every other teenager goes through during hormonal changes. So I continued things as they were, but alas, the realisation didn't hit me until after I graduated.

Here I was, wishing and praying that my skin would clear up but not actually doing anything to help that change. Truth be told, I wasn't even doing the three basic skincare steps; cleansing, toning and moisturising. I couldn't remember the last time I had used toner and I only moisturised a few times a week. The only thing I did daily was cleansing, although I soon found out that for combination skin like mine, this step alone wasn't enough. I decided it was time to start properly taking care of my skin. So, like any other person, I turned to Google for help to look for the latest skincare must-haves. Coincidentally, it was around this time that the 10-step K-beauty craze was trending. One of my friends had also started an online K-beauty business so it was only logical that I tried out these Korean skincare products.

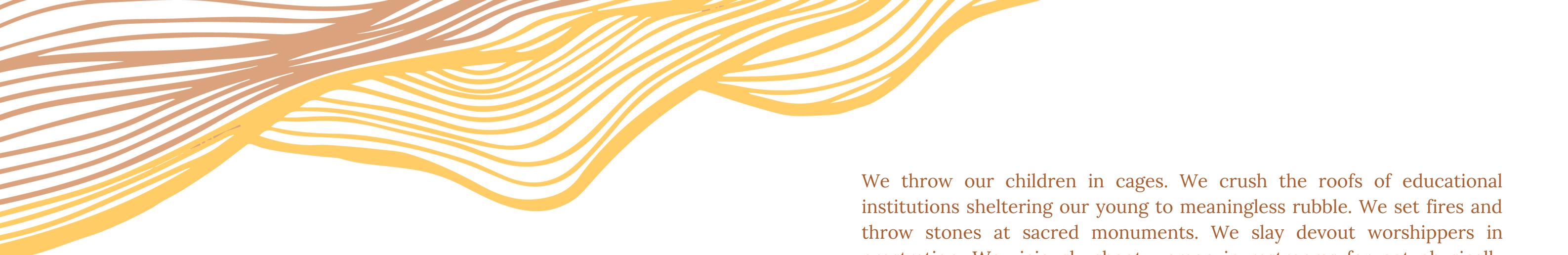
Even so, those few months were nothing short of a struggle. Countless weeks of testing, waiting for my skin to react, and changing brands had taken its toll; I was almost ready to give up. One main problem I faced was that it took me a while to realise that my face had changed from oily to combination skin. I found that this was why some of the products just weren't working out for me. It took roughly 4 months until I finally found the Innisfree Green Tea Line. The Green Tea Cleansing Foam and the balancing toner were my saviours and I soon found out that they worked really well for me! My skin felt smoother and looked and seemed healthier. It took longer but I also eventually found the Neutrogena Hydro Boost Water Gel which did wonders as well. During this time, I was testing out cream moisturisers and gel moisturisers and discovered that the gel type was my favourite. I had also started using a repairing vitamin E serum at night and wearing sunblock in the morning.



However, my skin journey wasn't just about experimenting with different products, it was also about my diet, the exercise hours I put in, hygiene, the hours of sleep I got and my daily routine in general. Getting through all this, I realised the importance of drinking enough water for hydration. I discovered that changing my pillow sheets once every few weeks and washing my hands before cleansing were small but crucial steps. I had also started doing more cardio than before and making sure I got enough hours of sleep. I made a deal with myself to cut back on unhealthy snacks and focus more on having three well-balanced meals a day. Of course there were, and still are, the occasional cheat days but overall I just tried to lead a healthier lifestyle. In short, I realised that my body is a temple and it was therefore my responsibility to love it as it is with flaws and all, but at the same time treat it with respect.



When all is said and done, everyone has different skin so what works for me may not work for you. Nevertheless, this could give you a boost in the right direction to finding your ideal skincare routine, bearing in mind that expensive products don't necessarily mean effective products, and vice versa. One of the things I constantly did when trying to find my ideal routine was doing lots of research and reading tons of reviews from other users who had the same type of skin as me. It is also important to acknowledge the fact that everyone will go through a breakout phase at some point and the occasional pimple will come out once in a while. However, it is equally important to never give up trying to find what's best for your skin. The ultimate goal isn't to have glass-like, fair and bouncy skin, which is just an unrealistic beauty standard society has set upon us, or to have skin as nice as celebrities who can afford personal dermatologists. Rather, the goal is to feel healthy and content with your skin, because it is the only one you are going to get!



Carve

Damia Munira | Creative Nonfiction

Often, I fail to recall a world outside of my borders. So I will take a moment now to consider the safety I take for granted, and not only the acceptance I receive from my community, but the ready embrace. In ugly brutality, in inequality, in unjustness, these basic needs are no civil rights, but prerogatives.

In my place of birth, I am no minority. I look around and I see women in flowing chiffon *hijabs*, who boast brown skin, who love flavourful East Asian cuisine. I also see men and women with varying shades of skin, who proudly don *bindis* and *cheongsams*, who also love flavourful East Asian cuisine. Perhaps someplace else, infuriated stares or incredulity would trail after me in my day-to-day, but here, I am met with courteous neutrality.

I am no minority in my home either, though I look at the world and I see a pattern: wherever or whoever we are, we despise the minority. Hence, we create boundaries to distance ourselves from them, only to manipulate the permeability of these boundaries for our own gain. We possess the privilege to aid the desperate, who run to us for fear of blood curdling screams and smoke and gruesome death, and we refuse them. We advocate for the powerful, who seek to divide, to seize even more power in order to eradicate.

We throw our children in cages. We crush the roofs of educational institutions sheltering our young to meaningless rubble. We set fires and throw stones at sacred monuments. We slay devout worshippers in prostration. We viciously shoot women in restrooms for not physically being born women. We beat students into a pulp in the name of justice for a global pandemic no one person is responsible for.

I say ‘we’, because there should be no ‘other’. I say ‘we’ because we too often separate ourselves from those who do irredeemable wrong. We all believe we are the heroes in the movie, and we all identify with the abused, the bullied, and the underdog. Tell me, how do these horrors come about?

I write this in an attempt to encourage remembrance. Not to lay blame nor to harbour grief or pity, anger or indignation, but simply to reflect. We all play a role in history. What begins as a thought blooms into an action. And this action could expand into a movement that inspires us, binds us together, and transgresses the borders we carve into our private worlds.

Let that thought be good.

Author Bios

Jenny Hor Jau Yang

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.

Lancelan Pegan

Lancelan Pegan loves creative arts too much to be majoring in Computer Science - but alas, prose is not legal tender in any country thus far. He doesn't really know how to do this 'writing' thing but he still tries anyways. When he's not sitting in front of the computer begging for a story to write itself, he's busy watching Youtube video essays, baking, and playing guitar.

Naufal Rahman Avicena

Naufal Rahman Avicena (or Naufal) is a second-year Environmental Science Student from UNM. He is passionate in the environment with particular interest on birdwatching. He is also an active advocate of environmental issues such as climate change and conservation with experience working in an environmental NGO. If not busy talking about the environment, he often fills his free time writing poetry and reading books. His favourite author is Ahmad Tohari, a renowned writer and one of the living legends of Indonesia's literature.

Christina Yin

Christina Yin is a PhD student at the School of English. Her research is on creative nonfiction; true stories of people working on orangutan conservation in Sarawak.

Srilakshmi Bhavana Chintakindi

Srilakshmi Bhavana Chintakindi is a creative writing student, constantly marvelling at the intricacies of the human psyche and the infinite possibilities of the Universe. She has dabbled in engineering, biotechnology, and wilderness studies before pursuing arts, and thus has a wide-ranging skillset and a unique perspective on life that makes its way into her works. Srilakshmi loves writing prose, poetry and plays. She is also obsessed with drinking orange juice and is pretty sure she was a dog in a previous life!

Yasmin Nasharuddin

Yasmin currently studies Biotechnology at the University of Nottingham Malaysia. In addition to her interest in the sciences, Yasmin enjoys diving into the world of literature in her spare time. Here, she can transcend worldly barriers and create her own.

Editor Bios

Syaza Binti Norazharuddin (she/her)

Co-Editor in Chief

Editor of Poetry

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.

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.

Farah Aina Azaharuddin (she/her)

Head Editor of Poetry

Farah Aina is a final year student in Pharmaceutical and Health Sciences in UNM

Iyath Adam Shareef (she/her)

Head Editor of Essays & Reviews

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.

Loh Ji Yen (she/her)**Editor of Essays & Reviews**

Loh Ji Yen (Angeline) is an undergraduate student at the University of Nottingham Malaysia studying Politics, History and International Relations. She helped in editing her school newsletter in secondary school which made her interested in the editing process. She is a minor history buff and cat lover.

Sofea Qistina Binti Isharhan (they/them and she/her)**Editor of Essays & Reviews**

Currently in their second year of International Communications Studies at UNMC, Sofea has a complicated relationship with writing. While once it used to bring joy, now it is associated with anxiety. In spite of this, Sofea is determined to not let their passion for writing fizzle out, and is now on a quest to rebuild their abilities and knowledge from scratch. In the meantime, Sofea mainly busies themselves by working as an editor.

Shafiqah Alliah Razman (she/her)**Editor of Essays & Reviews**

Shaf is a passionate English major at the University of Nottingham Malaysia and an editor for the school's literary magazine, Particle. Previously, she has worked as a content writer for a local news site, WORLD OF BUZZ. Her poetries and fiction have been featured in Particle and UNM Writer's Society zine, while her creative essay, "Fear Let Me Be Free", won a competition organized by Empower Malaysia. A shy novice in the field, she aspires to learn and find refuge in the art of writing and editing. She's also a tsundoku who constantly needs her caramel latte fix.

Nadiah Zakaria (she/her)**Head Editor of Fiction & Creative Nonfiction**

Nadiah is soon to be graduating from UNM with a Creative Writing degree. You'll always find her hunched over a notebook planning her next fan fiction or screenplay. If not, then she must be watching a horror movie somewhere or doing the usual introvert things. She always participates in the open mic events on campus hosted by the Music Society, and has worked as a fiction and poetry editor for her high school magazine before.

Tan Jie Ying (she/her)***Editor of Fiction & Creative Nonfiction***

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.

Farah Nadia Zulkiflee (she/her)***Editor of Fiction & Creative Nonfiction***

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)***Editor of Fiction & Creative Nonfiction***

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.