

# TOTEM





2019

# TOTEM

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CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY  
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Special thanks to the Division of the Humanities and Social Sciences, Student Affairs, and the Associated Students of the California Institute of Technology.

# T A B L E

## LITERARY

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NIVETHA KARTHIKEYAN

# I Come From a Line of Women

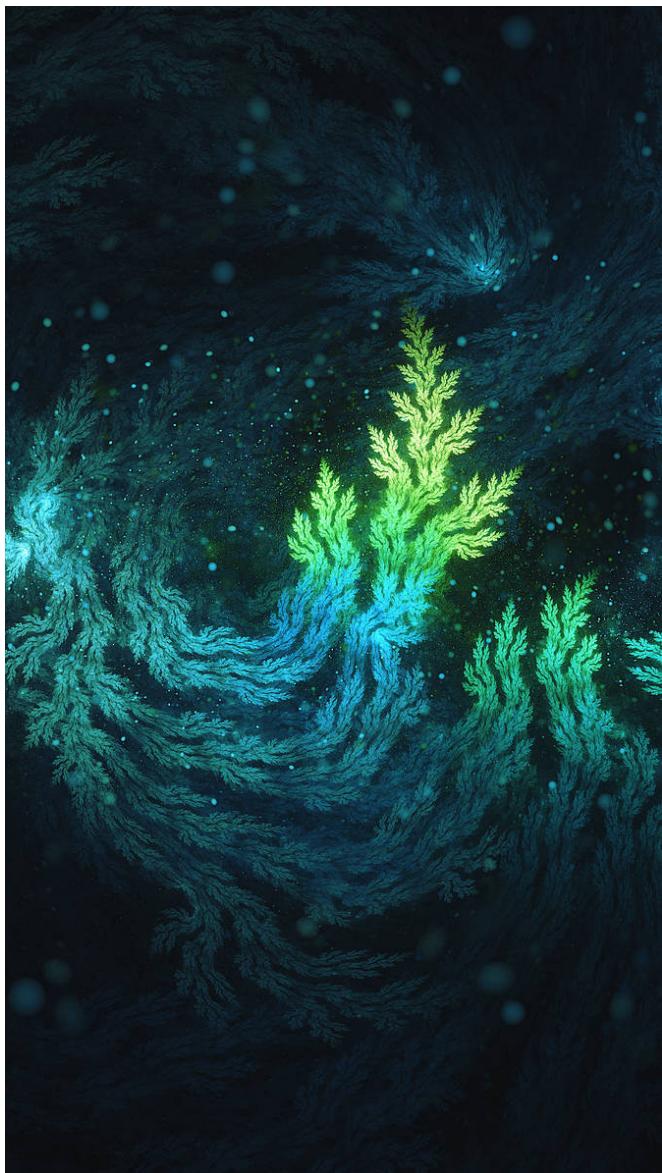
I come from a line of women,  
all short  
and stubborn  
and strong.  
Women who put work on their backs  
and babes on their breasts  
and me on their shoulders  
and carried us here.

And here the story should end.  
They did it.  
They made it.  
It's done.  
But how can we say it's over when

Amma glares silent  
in her swiveled chair  
as he gives updates on her project, and  
Avva stands hunched  
by the hot stove  
while he washes up for dinner, and  
I work alone  
over my painstaking notes  
while he laughs mindlessly, uproariously with the prof.

We're *not* done.  
Not until we can  
talk about things we did not do  
and eat food we did not make  
and take space we did not have to work so hard to earn.

When we get there, we can say we found  
balance  
and hope  
and an end.  
But until then,  
we stride on.



LOGAN APPLE | Liferoot | Digital

# **Me Too ...**

City of women city of men

It's been two days, I can't remember  
Did you think of the impact?  
Three years, can't forget

Heavy fist.

Too heavy for her  
Her head hits the pavement  
Her cheek against his fist  
He raises his arm again  
Red fills the screen  
Everything is filled with her voice  
What is he doing?  
You know  
She doesn't hope anyone can hear  
There is no hope, only instinct

This movie is too rugged

Thank god you can't feel anything  
When her head hits the pavement, you don't feel a thing  
When he raises his arm again  
and again  
you don't feel anything

and then  
adrenalin  
stops  
pumping

there  
under those trees  
you lay  
A figure at the top where the lights are  
The world has drowned in voice  
And that voice is mine

Back up on the feet, feels much too strange  
Standing is not on the program for tonight  
Everything in vertigo  
Liquid red pouring out of my mouth  
I see it form shapes on the pavement  
But someone holds me up and pulls me away  
doesn't let me consider the shapes  
I want to know what they become

Bar crowd drunk, tranquil, all look me in my eyes  
No one's telling me what's going on

Somebody's holding me under my arms  
and on the phone is 911  
Operator asks too much  
I don't know the address of this place  
I don't know  
More blood deposited into the trash can near by  
The cooks have steel stomachs  
I'm still standing

Cop's car, eye color now green  
I don't remember crying  
The cop asks too many questions  
I don't remember anything from the moment I met the ground  
That doesn't help the search  
I hear helicopters overhead  
So many cops  
How many?  
Two.  
- Clothes? Yeah, something  
- What skin color?  
I don't know.  
- Anything else?  
Shock. NO visuals  
None

That's good, because I won't ever have to see the face  
but I will remember the rhythm of his stride  
behind my back  
They won't find them



JESSICA DU LI | Reconciliation | Digital



YSL 益小业

SERENA YAN | Xie Lian | Digital

SIERRA LOPEZALLES

# An Unexpectedly Broken Heart

With all the stories I've been told, I always knew that Caltech would ruin me,  
I just never expected it to be in this way.

They say "Home is where the heart is"  
So the more you love, the more places you have to live.

They never said that having two homes would feel so much like heartbreak.

It has torn my heart apart, the left from the right, a bleeding broken aorta speared  
to the Sears Tower and a vena cava pinned to a nine-floor-library, with a trail of  
veins connecting the two corners of the map like the path of road trip I've traveled  
more times than I care to count.

"Home is where the heart is"  
But my heart has been rent in two.

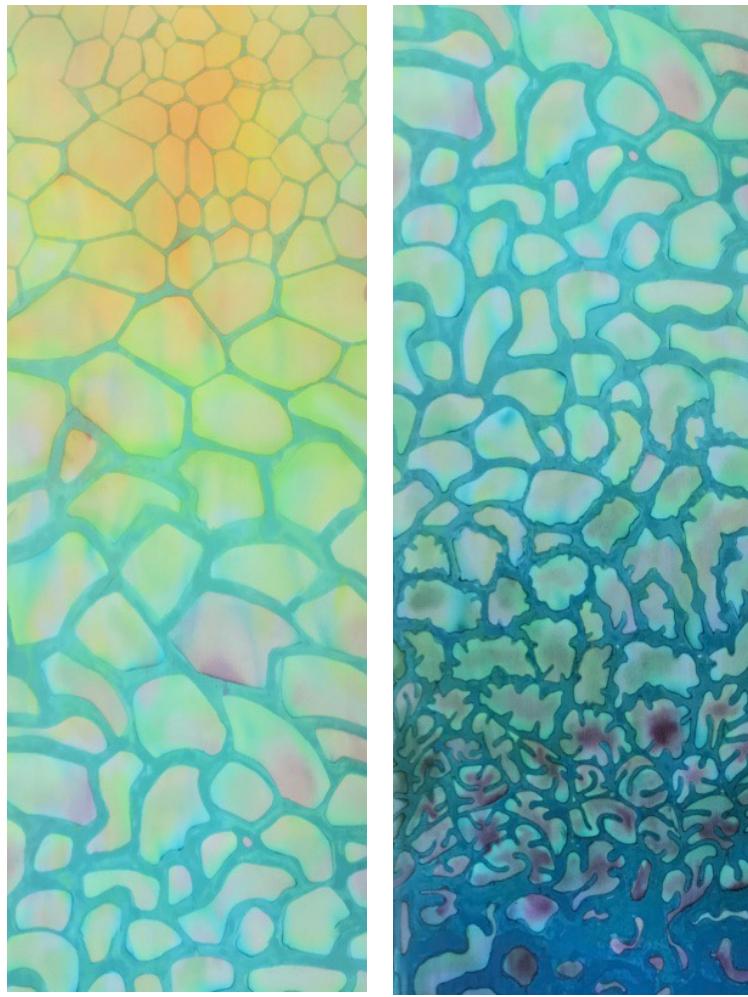
Half of my heart has been left behind, tied to my childhood home and schools, to  
cornfields and late night driving, to my dog who whines in my absence, and to snow,  
beautiful, glorious, pain in the ass snow.

The other side has been taken hostage by palm trees and interhouses and  
conversations that are half scientific jargon and half inside jokes.

"Home is where the heart is"  
But what am I to do when my heart is scattered from the Great Lakes to the Pacific,

I have two homes that can make me happy,  
But neither can make me whole,  
For there is always something I'm leaving behind.

They say "Home is where the heart is"  
But I have given my love to Caltech and it has only left me with two homes, two  
families, and an unexpectedly broken heart.



MICHELLE DAN | Turing Model for Animal Patterns | Silk Painting

*This silk painting was made for a System Biology (Bi 192, Prof. Lea Geontoro) final project, and aimed to simulate the Turing Model of reaction-diffusion instability to generate animal patterns. In this "model," the piece of silk served as an animal "skin" while the dye and rubber cement acted as diffusible morphogens which activate or inhibit each other along a gradient. The results is a series of patterns which transition downwards, corresponding to biological analogs which from simple dots, to hexagonal cell arrangements, to giraffe and leopard spots, to pufferfish and angelfish designs, and then to simple stripes.*



SRI PRIYA RAVINDRA KUMAR | Forest Fire | Acrylic Painting



IVAN DUEV AND DMITRY DUEV | Deep City Dream | Digital

RAHUL PUROHIT

# Passing by the Woods

**STOP!!**

## PART – 1 (Save me!)

Passing by the woods I heard a cry,  
    Stopped for a moment and thought let's give it a try;  
Stop, Stop, Stop!  
    Oh Please, Save me, Save me, Save me!  
Thou I looked here and there,  
    I saw nobody there;  
It was getting dark, cries weren't abating  
    Louder it went again, Stop! Stop! Save me!  
I kept wondering, who is crying and who is he,  
    When nobody is around, then whose is this sound?  
I tried to look to and fro,  
    Though I didn't know where to go;  
Soon at once what I could see,  
    Was nothing but a fallen tree;  
I walked next to him,  
    And the cries went louder;  
Please Save me, Save me, Save me!

## PART – 2 (Human's Ignorance)

In this darkness what I could see there,  
    Was a nest of birds lying, and small birds were crying,  
A deer running at fast speed, perhaps he was also in need;  
    Fallen trees on the ground, and others were mourning around,  
One of them was weeping, seeking help from me;  
    And again crying, Save me Save me Save me!  
But I did not bother, I did not care,  
    So I tried to escape from there;  
I can't help you, I'm getting late,  
    You are helpless and it was in your fate;  
Walking four feet ahead, it started raining,  
    Perhaps seeing the situation, Mother Nature was also mourning;  
Seeking for shelter, I tried to escape from the rain,  
    With no trees around, all the running was in vain;

Soon in the sky, there was lightening,  
I could not grasp, what was happening;  
A loud sound came from the sky,  
Stop, Stop, Stop at once!

## PART – 3 (When NATURE Speaks)

Engrossed with fear, I asked who you are,  
There was an answer, I'm the NATURE;  
She became furious,  
Yes, I'm the NATURE;  
I did what I could do for you,  
I made this world heaven for you;  
All these beauties and all those trees,  
All the mountains and rivers for you;  
I loved you and lived only for you,  
But how selfish are you;  
I have given my all to you,  
In turn I just want some care from you;  
You are Humans just live for yourself,  
Destroying me every moment for the sake of you;  
Oh Humans!  
Mend your ways if you could,  
Otherwise outcomes won't be good;  
Get lessons from your past,  
If you disturb me, you have to suffer at last;  
By destroying the NATURE what you got,  
It's nothing but Floods, Fires and Drought;  
Love me and I will love you,  
Care for me and I will take care of you;  
Otherwise the results are known to you.

## PART – 4 (The Reality)

I apologized, Oh NATURE!  
I'm sorry to you,  
I will do what could I do for you;  
A ray of light came from the window of my room,  
I woke up from sleep and realized it was a dream;  
Oh! No, It was not a dream, it is the reality,  
This ray of light has awakened me from my centuries long sleep.



MALCOLM TISDALE | Untitled | Photography



LEOPOLD THEBAULT | Mill | Photography

DAVID BROWN

## Pill Crush

I was never good at keeping secrets. In fact, being so bad at it has gotten me in trouble so many times before that I've completely given up trying. So when I walked in and saw what she was doing, I knew there was no way out of this without ruining things for somebody.

"Regina, what are you doing?"

I didn't even need to ask; it was obvious. But I like to hear how people react to obvious questions, especially Regina. Regina was standing at the kitchen counter at Jeremy's place, Jeremy's pills spilled out on the fake marble, carefully counting them one at a time. In her left hand was a most innocent-looking box. In any other scenario, it was just a silly gag gift: a box of sugar pills, marketed to "Make children and adults alike happy!" Some tourist trap from a medieval apothecary gift shop. But Regina wasn't using it as a gag gift; she was using them as placebos.

It also didn't matter what question I asked, because she couldn't hear me. Earbuds in both ears, likely trying to drown out the guilt. And an extra layer of insulation from the rebellious bundles of brown hair that had slipped out from her ponytail. Maybe they were in on it too. This was also likely why she didn't hear me come in.

Her face said everything that needed to be said. Her typically focused eyes widened, and her mouth opened in subtle shock when she saw me. A fraction of a second later, her resolve clicked in. Jaw tight, eyes glared. She took her right earbud out.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" she snapped.

"Jeremy asked me to stop by to pick up his rackets, he left them this morning."

We were both silent for a moment. Who would speak first, accuser or accused?

It was Regina. Her voice became innocent; saddened, almost.

"I'm just trying an experiment. I don't know what to do anymore, David. You know things haven't been going well for him."

"You really think it's the pills that are causing the problems?"

"Maybe."

"How long?" I demanded.

"What do you mean?" she asked, seemingly confused.

"You know what I mean. How many times have you done this?"

"Wha... what do you mean? I haven't done..."

"Regina, stop lying. This explains everything, and you know it. You

can't talk yourself out of it. The only thing I'm not sure of, is whether you've been doing it for 4 months, or 5, or 6. So just tell me."

"I dunno. Maybe 5, 6. Sometime in January."

"Jesus, Regina. I can't fucking believe this. You're supposed to be the one helping him through this, and you think it's a good idea to play doctor and experiment on him? You know it's probably your fault, right? The accident?"

"I know."

"And you're *still* doing it?"

"Look, I don't expect you to understand, but I stand by what I did! Jeremy hasn't been himself for years, David. Years! It's not the same as when you're *with* the person. You barely even knew him back then, and you don't see him in his outbursts nearly every evening, so don't talk to me like you know what's best for him."

"And you do?"

"No! I don't either, okay! But I'm trying, I'm trying whatever I can come up with, and yes, it's fucked up, and yes, it probably won't work, but I'm *trying shit*. Which is more than his fucking psychiatrists do."

"You don't know that. They were doing some new stuff with ECT, but it was *supposed* to be in conjunction with the pills, Regina."

"That shit is barbaric, David. It's ridiculous."

"Studies show..."

"Oh, shut up about your studies. I don't want to hear this again."

I took a seat at the sofa and leaned my head back, looking up at the speckled drywall patterns on the ceiling. My safe place. Just follow the lines, see where they go. Where do they stop? I will know.

Regina came up and sat on the old chair next to me. It was obviously a gesture because no one in their right mind ever chooses to sit in Jeremy's moldy-smelling, itchy plaid recliner. He should have thrown it away years ago.

Regina stared out the window.

For all its dirtiness, Jeremy's apartment had a nice view out the back. Some trees, speckled with a bit of green life. No concrete. And it was the early hint of a stormy day, with a gentle wind rustling the leaves. Morbid. Fitting. Fuck Seattle.

For all her wrongdoings, Regina had a strength of character that was admirable. A lot of fire, speckled with a bit of purpose. No bullshit. And *this* was starting to break her character, with subtle cracks in her sanity, coloring her actions. Draining. Unacceptable. Fuck Jeremy.

"Are you going to tell him?" she finally asked.

"I don't know. I can't lie to him."

"But you don't have to say anything."

I snorted. "I'm not on your side, here, philosophically speaking, Regina, so you can't use that tactic."

Strangely, or perhaps exactly as I hoped, a small smile. She knew I knew she knew. Understanding.

It felt like forever that we just sat there, staring out at our respective safe places. I poured through my head the events of the last few months. January... yeah January made sense. Jeremy had a huge outburst after Christmas. I only knew bits and pieces, but from what I gathered he had attacked her, thinking she was some Nazi spy trying to get into his head to dig out the secrets he had picked up from his missions abroad. Or something like that. The kind of details that made it into movies didn't really matter. What mattered is that Jeremy was feeling afraid, and he didn't know where it was coming from, and his mind thought she was somehow involved. And what matters is that he hit her. She didn't get the police involved, of course, but she told the psychiatrists. And their response? Up the dosage.

But January wasn't the worst of it. Things had been doing nothing but getting worse since then. Jeremy got fired from his job in February for losing his shit during an office meeting. He accused the marketing team of Nazi propaganda. And in April was the accident. Jeremy thought it was a good idea to take his car and chase down some unsuspecting vehicle passing by, for who knows what reason. Jeremy didn't stop until he rammed into the back of their car. Miraculously, they were fine, but Jeremy busted his head and his back up pretty good. The doctors had assumed the medicine wasn't working. Turns out they were right. Sort of.

I wondered what Regina was thinking about. Were the same events playing through her head, or was she playing out the future? Or was she scheming how to get around this situation? She looked melancholic.

She broke the silence again. "David, can I sit next to you?"

"Of course. Everyone hates that recliner."

She got up and sat next to me on the sofa. Right next to me. There was some comfort here, shared between us. We were at a stalemate. Jeremy was my best friend. Jeremy was her partner. But we were friends, too. And despite her questionable ethics, part of me agreed with her. Maybe medicine wasn't the way to cure him. Maybe he needed to feel what it was like to be alive. Maybe he needed to play out his delusions, see where they take him. Maybe there was some truth to them.

I looked over at Regina; she had softened up. Whether it was because she felt relieved to be found out, or because she too felt some comfort here, I wasn't sure. Probably both. It's usually both of everything.

And then, Regina cuddled up next to me and put her head in the

nook between my shoulder and my face. I didn't stop her. I felt it, it was right.

And then, a soft sob. "I just don't know much longer I can do this, David. It's so... heavy. I'm tired."

"Shh, it's okay. I know. Believe me, I know."

We were in this together, had been for years. Jeremy was more than a one person job.

And then, I looked at her there, looked at the two of us, there on the couch, struggling together, snuggling together, and I understood.

"Regina?"

She looked up at me, a few tears still running down her cheek.  
"Yeah?"

I smiled. "Hey"

She smiled. "Hey"

And then, I leaned forward, and placed my lips on her cheek. I tasted the sweet salt of her tear, and gave her a kiss.

She pulled herself closer to me and wrapped her arms around me.

I kissed her other cheek. Another tear.

How salty.

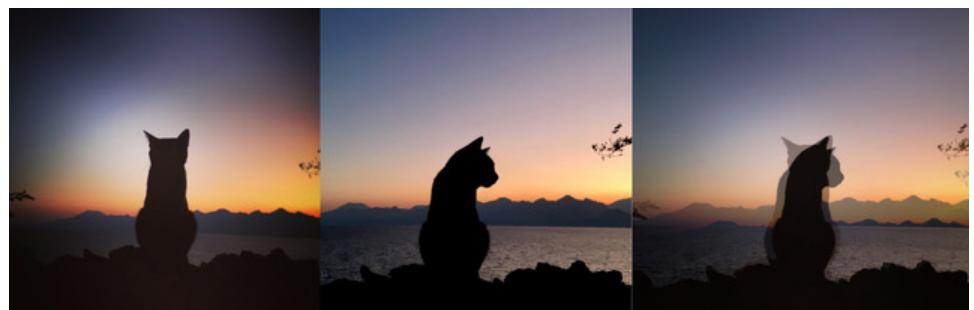
I placed my hands on her back and tightened.

And then, a kiss. My lips on hers. Soft.

Why had we waited so long? I'll never know. Jeremy knew. In all his delusion, he attacked her with reason. He thought she was a traitor.

And, in some way, his mind was right, before we even knew.

How bittersweet.



EZGI KUNTTAS | States of Loneliness | Photography & Digital Manipulation



ANDREW ERWIN | Stargazing on the John Muir Trail | Photography



ANDREW ERWIN | Summer Mountain Days | Photography

MADISON BRADY

# Truly Worthwhile

*Editor's note: The following two pieces, "Truly Worthwhile" and "Truly Unjust," are different versions of the same story, authored by Madison Brady and Zane Taylor, respectively. The stories were written as part of a collaborative writing exercise in Caltech's creative writing club, TechLit. In this exercise, the first writing partner used two randomly generated plot elements and character traits to construct a short story. The plot elements were "discovery of what's in the glove box," and "letter to the editor"; the character traits were "attention-seeker," and "person who steals cats." The second writing partner then re-wrote the original story ("Truly Worthwhile") with a unique spin and style—in this case, from a different point of view—to create the second story ("Truly Unjust").*

"Are you only dating me for my cat?"

It was a chilly November afternoon, with the sky going gray with swelling clouds and the leaves of nearby maple trees already starting to fade to brown.

Harriet, with her puffy black coat drawn tightly about her, continued petting Lychee, the small white cat in her lap. "No," she said amidst coos, "of course not."

Her boyfriend, sitting next to her on the park bench, didn't say anything else for a little while. Most people would have read the silence as awkward, but Harriet was unconcerned with such things. Lychee had the world's most perfect little pink nose, the world's most perfect little paws, and the world's most perfect little ears, tiny and covered in a dense white fuzz. Harriet had taken off her mittens to pet the guy, and it was worth it even though her fingers now felt almost completely frozen through. He wouldn't stop purring loudly and rubbing his perfect little face against her palm in such a way that it squished and squooshed his cheeks. The only problem with him was the collar her boyfriend had insisted on affixing around his neck, which was black, unfashionable, and uncomfortable-looking.

"Are you sure about that?" Harriet's boyfriend asked, his voice sounding a bit irritated. She tore her eyes away from Lychee for a moment to glance over at him. Her boyfriend was one of those guys who didn't really seem to feel cold that much, clad only in a white short-sleeved polo and khakis. He was checking the time on his phone, not really looking at her.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure," said Harriet, returning to shower Lychee with more attention.

Her boyfriend put his phone away. "Well, then," he said, "I think we should really start heading back. It's getting dark."

Harriet nodded faintly and started getting up, still cradling Lychee in her arms as she did so.

“You can put him down,” her boyfriend said, “he knows how to walk.”

“No, I don’t mind carrying him.”

“You’re spoiling him.”

With a bit of a pout, Harriet bent down and placed the little cat gently on the cold, hard ground. It had been raining recently, so his paws sunk a little bit into the ground. His beautiful snow-white fur would be covered in mud by the end of this. In addition, he’d probably hurt his feet from all this walking around outside. But her boyfriend was Lychee’s *de jure* owner, and, unfortunately, his rules were the law.

The man grabbed the other end of Lychee’s leash and began walking. Harriet couldn’t help but notice how it tugged a bit on the poor cat’s neck.

That day marked the beginning of the end, in a lot of ways. Due to the holiday season, Harriet’s job at Macy’s became twice as stressful. A sheet of ice formed on her driveway, so she frequently had to ask her neighbors for assistance pulling her car in after the second shift. And, worse, of all, her boyfriend had broken up with her. It had been a sudden sort of thing, completely out of the blue. The only reason she could think of was the one he had brought up to her in November, that she spoiled his cat too much.

It was a silly reason to break up with someone, she thought. It’s not as if she was hurting Lychee. It really didn’t have anything to do with their relationship at all. And, well, she wasn’t even spoiling Lychee. She was just being reasonable. Honestly, he was the one who was being unreasonable about it. It was so selfish of him to break up with her. Once he was gone, she was alone and he wasn’t. After all, he had Lychee.

It was 8:37 pm. Her neighbor, a huge balding mountain-man with a bright red nose, was positioned behind the back of Harriet’s car, shoving it while his sister, who looked rather eerily similar to him, slammed on the accelerator. Harriet stood outside, watching quietly as the two operated as they had many times before. However, the snow on her driveway was quite deep today, and all they seemed to be doing was creating huge dirty ruts that only trapped Harriet’s car further.

The woman behind the driver’s seat cursed a bit and threw the driver’s door open. “I don’t think we can get it in,” she called. “You really should call your snow-plowman and give him a piece of your mind!”

“I will?” Harriet responded, deciding now wasn’t the best time to confess that she hadn’t hired anyone to plow her driveway this winter. She had been planning on spending more time at her boyfriend’s place over the season, and that hadn’t really panned out.

The woman dropped out of the car, landing heavily in the snow. She wiped her nose, now even redder than usual because of the cold, and glanced around the bottom of the car, tsking quietly.

"I think we might just have to leave it out here tonight," her brother said, releasing the back of the car and rubbing his mittened hands together. "Sorry 'bout that."

"Oh, no," Harriet said, "it's okay. I'll be fine."

He nodded in agreement and turned around, beginning the very short trek back to his own home. In comparison to his cozy, warmly-lit little place next door, Harriet's own tiny, dark place seemed like an empty hovel. To be honest, it was an empty hovel, now that she knew Lychee would never be there again.

She must have looked very sad at the thought, as the other woman stomped over to her in her oversized snow boots and awkwardly patted her on the shoulder. "Don't worry about it, the snow-plowman will probably be by tomorrow," she said. Harriet nodded mutely, and the woman then reached over and grabbed Harriet's free hand.

"Huh-?" she began as the woman pressed something cold and hard into Harriet's fingers.

"It's your house key. Saw it in the glovebox," her neighbor said with a smile. "Don't want you walking all the way down your driveway without it, so I grabbed it for you." With that, she turned tail and dashed off to catch up with her brother.

"Thank you," Harriet's response was automatic, but not fast enough to reach the woman before a gust of wind blew it away, "but I don't have a house key."

Regardless of whether or not she owned a house key, however, there was no doubt that what sat in her hand was, indeed, a key. It took her the entire three-minute walk down her long, dark driveway to guess at what it was, what it had to be.

It was her ex-boyfriend's key. She had a vague recollection of him, at some point, mentioning something to her about how he was going to give it to her so that she could come in and feed Lychee one time when he was out visiting relatives, and an even more vague recollection of putting it somewhere in her car. And, now, here it was, in her hand. It was like some higher power was trying to tell her something.

After punching the combo to open her front door, she dashed into her house, turned the heat up as high as it would go, and flopped onto the chair by her dining table. The little steel key, cold like ice, glowed brightly and sparkled in the incandescent light. Like that higher power was really trying to tell her something.

Harriet pursed her lips. If that higher power was going to be so insistent, she didn't really see *how* she could resist.

She had met Lychee (and her boyfriend) a little over a year ago. Her boyfriend had been one of many editors to an online newspaper, and, like many internet personalities, had shielded his identity behind an image of his pet. With a bit of Facebook digging, she had managed to find his email address and get some dialogue going about Lychee. He sent her a few cute pictures of Lychee, and eventually a few less cute ones of himself. He only lived about an hour away, so they met for coffee in a pet-friendly shop a few times and eventually started dating.

Due to his career, his means were relatively modest, and he existed peacefully in a third-floor apartment in a neighborhood that wasn't particularly good, but not particularly bad either. The building was the only one that allowed cats in that area, he had told her, so he didn't really have a choice except to put up with the many, many treks up a half-condemned outdoor staircase.

Harriet sat in the parking lot outside, feeling a lot like an undercover cop on a stakeout. She had bought a new hat today to cover up her hair, and large sunglasses to cover the upper half of her face. Her engine idled as she squinted at all of the other cars there, trying to read their license plate numbers through several layers of dirt, ice, and darkness.

It wasn't there. Her heart skipped a beat and her face flushed. Harriet wasn't surprised (she knew that he liked grocery shopping an hour before closing time), but it was still rather exciting to think about what she was about to do.

Out came her phone. She paused for a moment, taking in the background picture. It was, of course, one of Lychee, sniffing a dandelion with adorable curiosity. Soon, they would be back together again.

She stepped out of her car, trying to walk through the crunchy snow in the most quiet and innocent manner possible. The long trenchcoat and sunglasses were probably the opposite of discreet, but she absolutely *couldn't* be recognized by his neighbors. That would ruin the plan.

The metal grating of the stairs bounced and shook slightly under her feet. Drifts of snow scattered into the air beneath her as she climbed, looking carefully around her after every three or four steps. Her heart pounded with the fear and excitement of committing a crime, and she had to keep stopping to pull out her phone and remind herself why she was here.

He didn't care about Lychee. He made Lychee walk around in the mud, get all cold and wet and hurt. He didn't *deserve* Lychee. He wouldn't treat Lychee like she would. She would love Lychee, love him *forever*, treat him just right, get him treats and play with him and get him nice little shoes so his feet wouldn't get wet. She would carry him whenever he tired out, take lots of pictures of him posing cutely, buy him lots of toys.

She paused in front of her ex's apartment door, reaching in her pocket and taking out the key. With one last glance at the quiet lot behind her, she turned the

door and walked into the apartment.

It was dark in there, save for a single lamp sitting on the end-table besides his single leather couch. Harriet took off her boots and set them down on their sides (so the treads wouldn't give her away) and closed the door behind her.

"Lychee?" her voice was barely more than a whisper. "It's me, Harriet!"

There was no response, anywhere. She stepped deeper into the front room, feeling the squish of her ex's familiar shaggy carpet under her stocking feet. Lychee wasn't in his usual sleeping spot on the couch. That meant he had to be awake, right?

Harriet walked into the kitchen, her eyes glued to the ever corner of the floor, every possible hidey-hole. She continued calling, this time letting her voice get a bit louder. If Lychee was awake, why wasn't he coming to her?

What if he wasn't there? Then where would he be? Had her ex gotten rid of him? That was a truly awful thought.

The only light in the apartment was that single lamp one room over, so the entire kitchen was cast in thick bars of deep shadow. Her entire body numb and heart pounding, Harriet glanced behind her and, after seeing that the coast was clear, ghosted her hand over one of the cabinets' doors. The strip of light from the other room cut across a single oak cabinet, showing it to be slightly ajar. Slowly and very quietly, Harriet reached over and opened it. Maybe it was another sign.

And, lo and behold, it was. Not particularly because of Lychee's presence, but rather the presence of something else.

Cat treats.

Her ex had always said that he had some, but had refused to tell Harriet where they were or feed to Lychee them in front of her. Said that she'd just give Lychee the whole jar if she had the chance. That irritated her, too, maybe Lychee deserved the entire jar.

Temptations For Cats. Made With Real, Mouth-Watering Steak. No GMOs.

A truly worthwhile product for a truly worthwhile feline. Harriet lifted the holy can off of its wooden pedestal, held it up to her ear, and shook it a bit. Whatever was in there, it sounded delicious.

After a few shakes, she heard the wonderfully familiar sound of little pattering feet dashing across tile floor. Harriet looked down with a wide grin to see Lychee, standing there on the ground and looking up at her. The poor thing looked so tiny, all alone in the big, empty apartment. He meowed a few times, and Harriet laughed with relief. Putting the can back down on the counter, she scooped him up in her arms, not caring about getting white fur on her coat, not caring about *anything*. She was here with Lychee now, back with her love, her baby. She held him up to her chest and he buried his face in her coat.

"Hello, there, Lychee," Harriet cooed, reaching down to pick up the can with her single free hand. "Want a treat, little guy?"

It may have just been her imagination, but she was pretty sure Lychee

nodded in response.

Harriet popped the lid off of the tin and shook a few treats out. She placed Lychee on the counter, and he bounded over to them and started snacking excitedly. He looked so cute eating, Harriet couldn't help but take a few pictures.

After he was done eating the brown, irregularly-shaped pellets, he turned back at her, looking right into the camera (another perfect photo opportunity) and began meowing insistently.

"Want more, Lychee?" she asked, smiling. "We can go home and get more." She capped the jar and put it back in the cupboard, shutting it carefully so that it looked *exactly* the same as it had before. Lychee continued sitting on the counter, meowing still.

Harriet picked him up again and carefully retraced her steps through the apartment, humming to herself with joy. He was very well-behaved in her arms, looking around curiously and purring loudly. It was hard to pay attention to anything else, but she had to get out of there at some point. After all, she *was* breaking into her ex's apartment.

To put her boots on, she unfortunately had to tear herself away from the cat to free her hands. He rubbed up against her side as she laced them up her legs. Unfortunately, it looked like they were going to leave a big dirty mark on the floor- she'd have to deal with that.

Before opening the door, she noticed Lychee's leash, hung up on the wall by the door.

"You won't have to deal with that anymore," she said to him conspiratorially. "Cats shouldn't wear leashes."

Lychee meowed, and she nodded in agreement.

"All right," she said, "let's go."

With that, she opened the door, lifting a leg in preparation to step outside.

However, Lychee had other plans. Like a burst of white lightning, he yanked himself away from her leg and immediately bolted, top-speed, out the door, out into the cold night of winter. All Harriet could do was stand there mid-step, staring in utter disbelief as the cat bounded out of the apartment and down the stairs. As his white coat disappeared into the dark snow-drifts in the distance, another figure materialized out of the snowflakes in the air and started approaching the apartment's open door.

After a few seconds, there he was, still in one of his characteristic t-shirts, breathing heavy puffs of steam and his arms laden heavily with reusable shopping bags.

Harriet stared past him, eyes blank.

"Scott, I think I've been used," she mumbled.

Her ex glanced behind him, out towards Lychee, and sighed.

"Yeah, I think so."



ZIYAN MO | Night II | Digital

ZANE TAYLOR

# Truly Unjust

*Rewrite of “Truly Worthwhile” by Madison Brady.*

Noosed by this terrible Collar of Torment, I sit primly and struggle to maintain a modicum of my dignity in the face of this wretched farce. Huffing with anger, I follow the leash from my strangled throat to the hand of one among that degenerate, lesser species in which I have been so wrongfully incarcerated: the Gaoler. Wretched and idiotic as that disgusting race is, they are too powerful to overcome and only my cunning can rescue me now.

Looking upon a device in its clutches, the Gaoler looks around with the icy wind ruffling its unkempt fur.

It is impatient.

Well, so am I. I am hungry, miserable, and cold. My feet are soggy and chilled from the bench on which my captor and I wait.

Let this waiting be done.

Suddenly, out of the void of despair, I see it and so does the Gaoler.

My Chosen has come.

Of an equal wretchedness as the Gaoler, the Chosen was also one of that race, but bound by even greater imbecility and an unconscionable trust which I have so far disgraced myself to gain. As it approaches, the Chosen sees me and contorts its face in the most unnatural of ways that suggests pleasure among its barbaric kind and begins cooing as it hunches over and approaches with hands outstretched.

Wrapping its long talons about my ribs, I squeak in the most unnatural, undignified way as the beast lifts me from my feet, far above the bench into its lofty embrace. Here, it begins to nuzzle its gargantuan face down upon my half crushed and fully imprisoned body. As always occurs when this happens, I am tempted by the exposed throat and face I have been so bodily shoved upon. I could scar this creature for the rest of its days as punishment for the indignities it has forced upon me, but I am still leashed and collared.

To act so precipitously now would be to forever lose the opportunity posed by my Chosen.

So, instead, I disgrace myself still further as the giant comes to a seat beside my Gaoler with an alarming squeal of the bench.

Warming my blood to its advances, I proceed to seduce the gargantuan creature, smothering my face into its admittedly warm hands, each larger than my entire face, and emit the most pleased and contented sounds I can despite the gagging sensation I feel at the back of my throat the entire time.

All the while, the Chosen coos and becomes ever more distracted, its bulbous head addled by a blind adoration not unheard of among those of

its race. But blind adoration is not the only thing I need from this creature, simpleton that it is. I need its *pity*, grating as the concept is. So, I often reach further than is necessary, to literally come to the end of my leash just short of my Chosen's eager hands.

In this, I need not be very subtle.

This leash, this Collar of Torment as most higher races proclaim it, chafes my throat and traps me near this loathsome Gaoler. No bond known to my people is stronger, and the collar about my throat shortens my breath at the very thought and has often led me to a fit of nauseous panic and anxiety.

My kind was built for freedom and roaming, not pointless imprisonment in the dwellings and on the leashes of this race of gaolers.

Once, I was a Lord Emperor of the Several Clans. All free Felines from across the breadth of this gaoler city paid respectful tribute to me; all the known world of civilized beings honored my name.

Now, I am imprisoned under the false name, "Lychee."

How masterful my imprisonment was! My usurper overthrew me even while I feasted on tributes and ascended to the metaphorical throne almost without contest. I was shamed, disgraced without even a formal challenge to my honor on the part of my wretched overthrower!

Through these meanderings of my mind, I keep up the façade. But quickly growing tired of working at this farce, I settle into the lap of my Chosen, letting it do all the work of enticing itself to me while I pretend to be contented with its actions. So, it caresses my body, sending chills up my back; it crushes my face together to its own terrifying delight; it tickles my feet to its own, bizarre purpose; it strokes my nose as though to make me sneeze; and it torments my tail, trapping it in the collar of its own talons and tugging on it painfully until I want to destroy this creature with all my being, sickening creature that it is.

But the façade must go on. So, I purr, to its obscene gratification.

Finally, after inarticulate, nonsensical language is passed between the two larger creatures, the ancestors above grace me with an end to this debasing suffering.

Gathering me up into its arms too tightly, my Chosen summons a pained squeak from deep in my throat as it stands, ready to carry me over the sodden muck of the earth at my convenience! Looking deep into its imbecilic eyes, buried in its grotesquely contorted, bulbous face, I know I have the creature's blind desire.

When my Gaoler evidently demands my return to the ground, to walk upon my own feet as all but the most insidious prisoners must, I sense the hesitance within my Chosen. I even perceive the fractions of its thoughts which I have so long pursued to engender within it ... This creature is mine at last!

Thank the ancestors! They do not want to see me collared, but to have a chance to regain my glory against that upstart usurper who stole my honor.

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I am back in my Gaoler's gaol, an infernal prison in which I have so long resided without relief. It was a confined place, the which I knew every painstaking detail of, even though I lacked the strength to escape. My usurper, known in his homelands as Fluffy, Fluffy the Great, conqueror of me, had chosen my incarcerator well in a gaoler construct, home to numerous such denizens of terror and imprisonment.

Night after night, I call upon my ancestors, and just days after gaining the heart of my Chosen, it falls into disgrace with my Gaoler and is banished from the gaol. In this sign, I know my ancestors are with me, for soon, my Chosen will grow desperate for my torment, to its eternal delight. It will come for me, and in its coming, my infernal imprisonment will come to an end. Released, I will be free to retake my honor and rout my enemy and imprison him as he so justly deserves.

Night after night, I beckon in seance through the song of my ancestors for their beloved intervention. I raise my voice in song while the Gaoler is away and the prison is shut. I sing to the imminent coming of my Chosen; I sing to its imbecility; I sing to an easy escape and to my freedom; and I sing to the defeat of Fluffy. Oh, let there be an end to this torment! I long for freedom!

Night after night, I retrieve three mouse-skulls from the cleverest of hiding places and rattle them in the corner of the remotest nook of the gaol performing the most advanced, arcane rituals of magic I can gather to pray for all these things. Calling across the ether, I entice my Chosen to irrationality. May it come quickly and leave many opportunities for escape!

Night after night, I partake of my private stores of catnip, stashed away from those infrequent times when the Gaoler needed my mind addled for its own machinations. With my mind fogged in this way, and with the most rudimentary magics, I chase away the demons of bad luck which can only be hunted while so doctored. Please, let all go aright!

Finally, upon one such night, while my Gaoler is away and I am rattling mouse-skulls, long bleached white from use, I nostalgically remember, as I often do of a long night, the chants taught to me by my mother and her own collection of mouse skulls. She had collected such a fine assortment of skulls. The greatest of the witches of her time, she had given each of her kittens a mouse-skull of their own with which to learn her art, and she herself was the only witch in all known history to wield *seven* at one time. She had even conjured with the skulls of dogs she had taken and eaten in victory herself, trapping their demon spirits and bending them to her overpowering will.

In some ways, it was the masterful skills she taught me that had always allowed me to prevail, with the ancestors on my side. Eventually, with the ancestors and the arcane arts I learned, I was able to ascend to rule over the Clans ...

What was that?

I hear a rattling noise the likes of which I hear only rarely ... the can of bribing treats with which the Gaoler often attempts to buy my good behavior.

How did the insidious, clumsy creature enter the prison without my notice?

Stashing away my mouse-skulls as secretively as possible, I patter over to where I hear the bribe being offered ... and it is my Chosen holding them forth!

The ancestors are smiling upon me tonight!

For the first time since my imprisonment, I purr with genuine contentedness as I approach to accept the bribe. A bribe to myself, from myself, through my inconsequential puppet, my Chosen, to accept the freedom that I can almost taste at the hands of this imbecile!

Despite the painful disgrace of being cradled in the mindless beast's arms, I do not struggle to maintain a façade of happiness as I have so often in the past while it carries me to the entrance the gaol.

With the firm floor under my feet again, I wait patiently as the bizarre giant shod its feet by the entrance, as most of its kind do, noisily urging it on to open the door and give me my freedom ... Suddenly, I see it look at the Collar of Torment hung upon the wall and hesitate, praying to the ancestors that the influences of my magic had instilled the proper inclinations within the thoughtless creature.

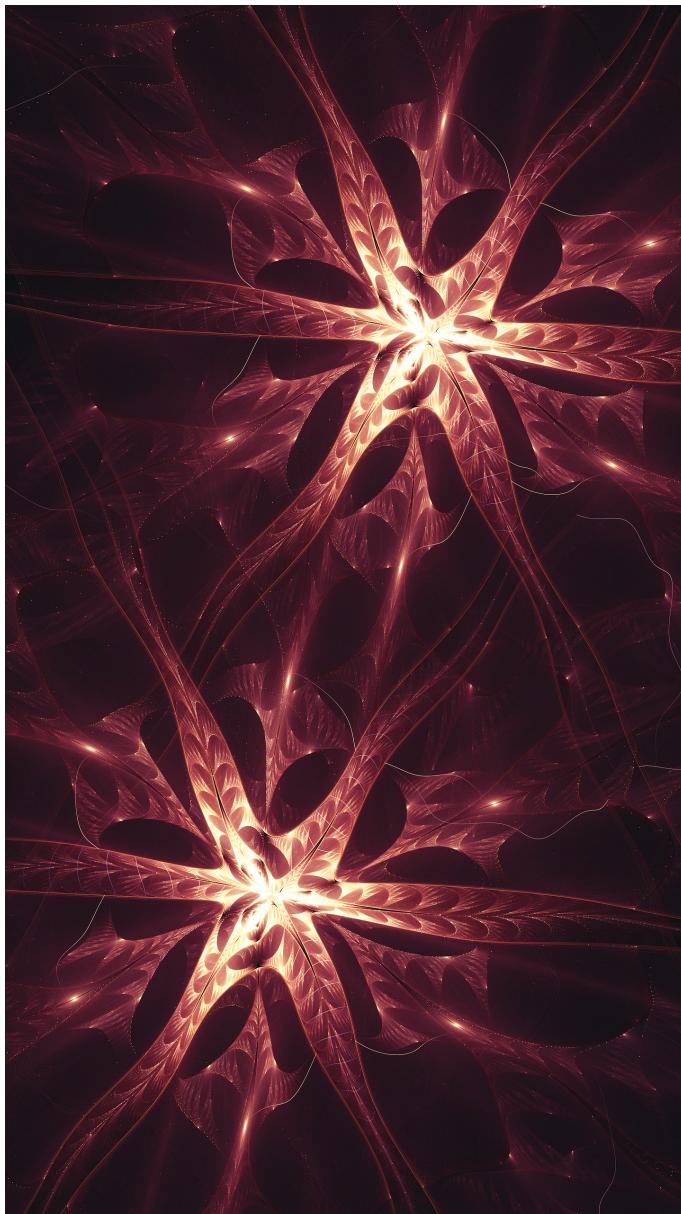
Looking up into its brainless, dumb eyes, I see it look back to me and inarticulately yammer in the mad tongue of the gaoler race. Suddenly uncertain how well my indoctrination of the creature has worked, I call out in the most pleading tones I can manage to bring forth from the depths of my throat. With relief, the creature turns away from the Collar of Torment and opens the door to my gaol with no restraint upon me.

I am free!

Bolting with the fullest speed my legs have ever carried me, I unwind like I have not unwound since before my torment began with my imprisonment.

Oh! The freedom to run through the snow!

I will exact my revenge upon this supposed Fluffy the Great! I Furball the Defiler, Lord Emperor of the Feline Regime and Supreme among Dictators Evil, will imprison that awful creature as I have imprisoned all my enemies before me and have now been so recently, unnaturally and unjustly incarcerated.



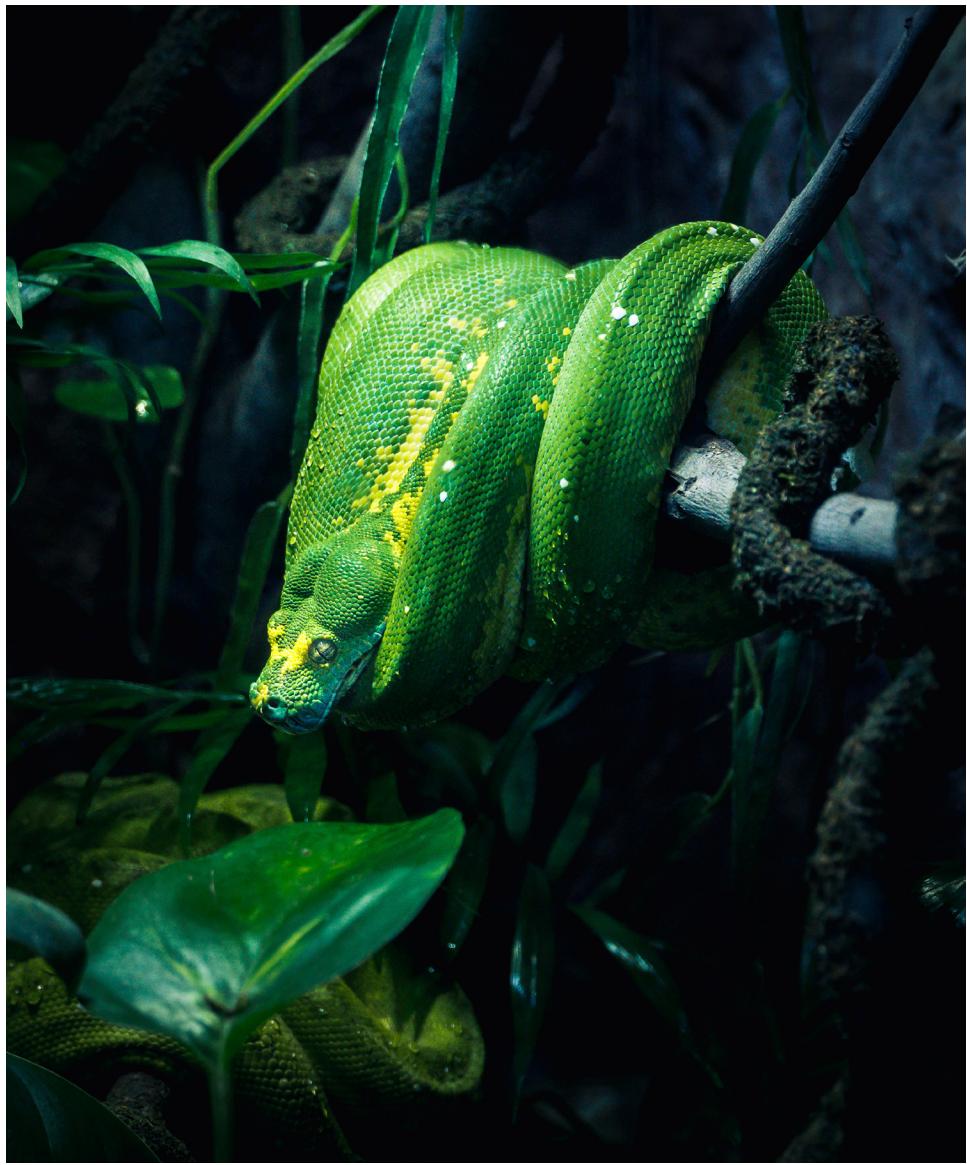
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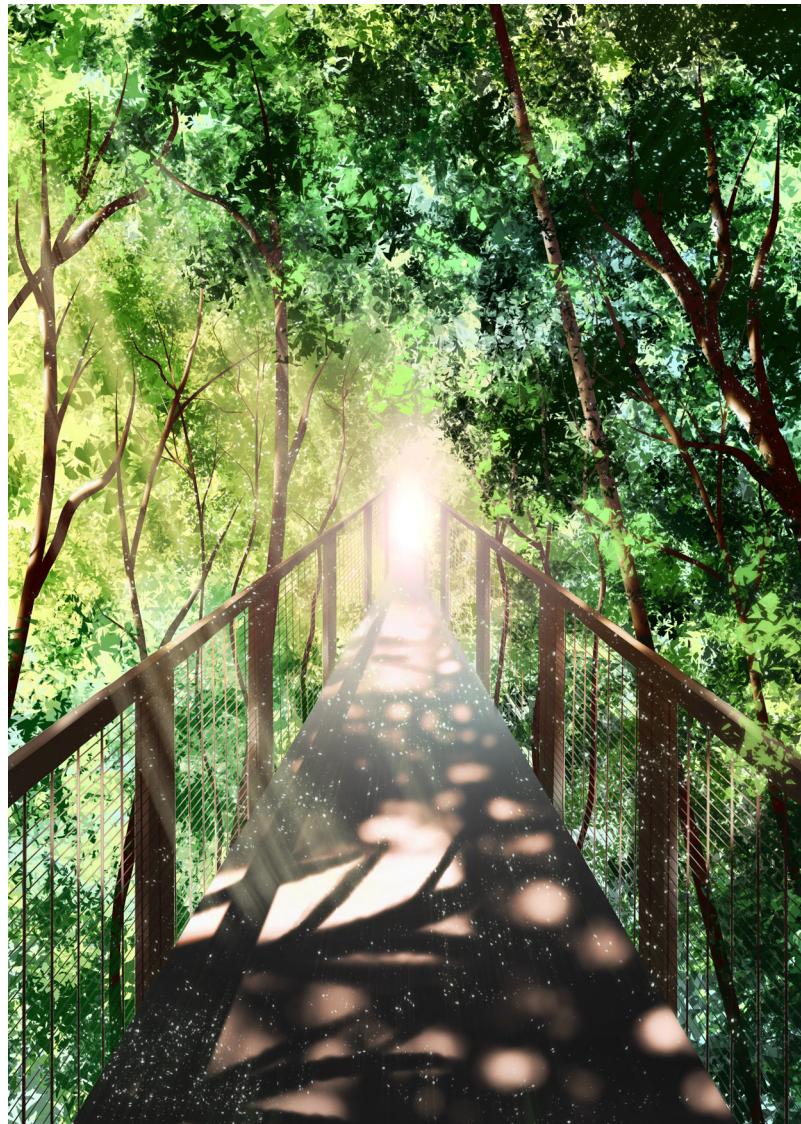
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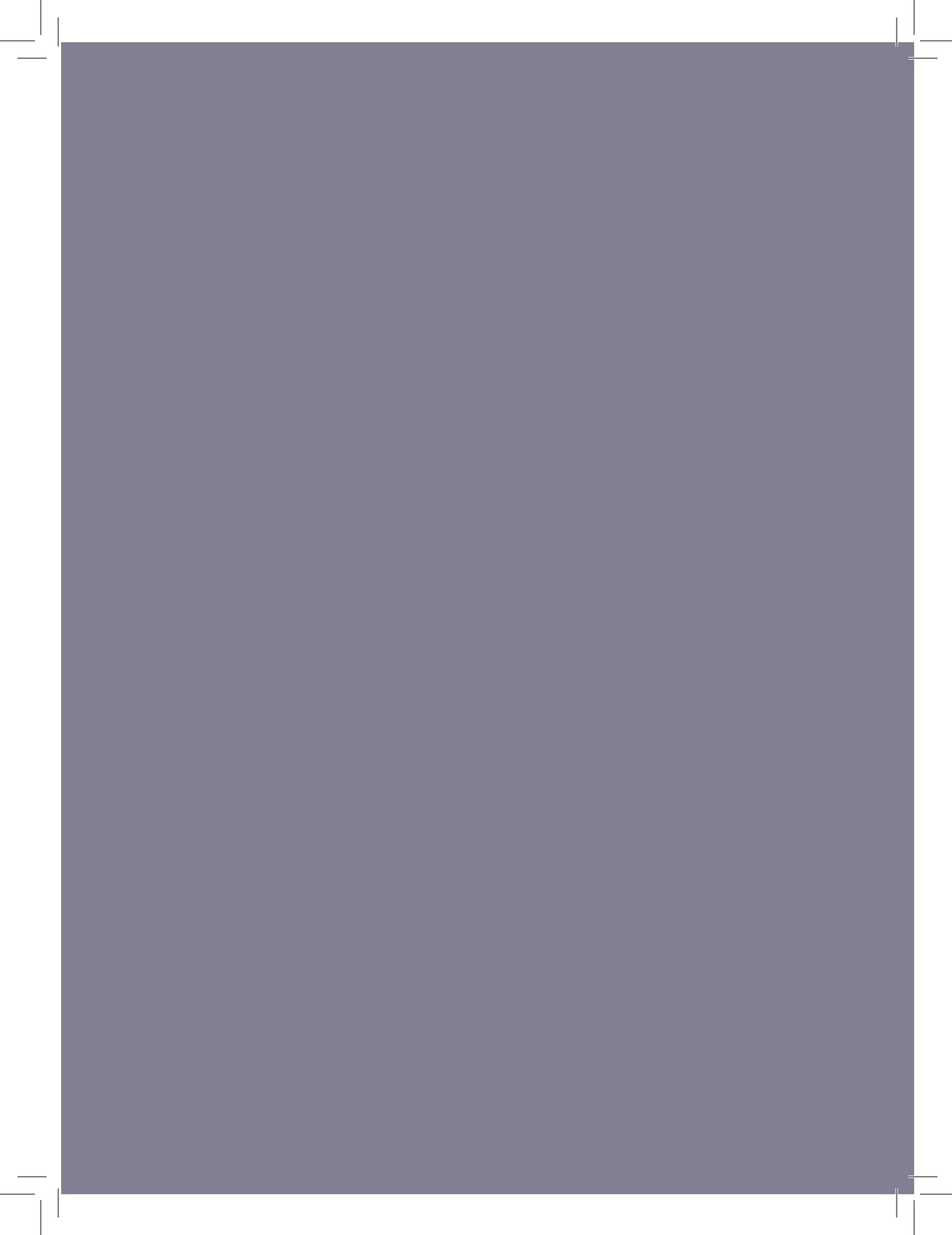
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JUNNO TSENG | Coil | Photography



ZIYAN MO | The Bridge to Nowhere | Digital



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