

The Ratchet of Growth

*Relating the extraordinarily ordinary history of the ingenious
Chinar Joshi of Atlanta*



To prevent himself from repeating these countless amusing misadventures he faced during his journey through the treacherous planet Earth that, unfortunately for him, he mistook for a walk in the park

In This Book

Act 1 — Awakening

<u>Wandering Elsewhere</u>	4
<u>Lucid Dreams</u>	10
<u>Ephemera</u>	16
<u>Ballad of the Balance Wheel</u>	20
<u>The Stood-up Fool</u>	22
<u>United in Censorship</u>	28
<u>The Great Rat Race</u>	34
<u>Runaway Train</u>	38
<u>Captain Obvious</u>	40

Act 2 — Identity

<u>Three(ish) Words</u>	50
<u>Depth-First Search</u>	54
<u>CTRL-Z CTRL-Y</u>	58
<u>Practicing for Disappointment</u>	60
<u>Masochist Mountain</u>	62
<u>A Solipsist Language</u>	66
<u>The Other Side of the Pond</u>	68
<u>Customer Disservice</u>	72
<u>Severed Finger</u>	82

Act 3 — Balance

<u>2020</u>	98
<u>My Nails Reek of Flesh</u>	102
<u>Poetry Is Pointless</u>	106
<u>Inception 2</u>	108
<u>Half Man, Half Machine Learning</u>	114
<u>{Autumn,Memory} Leaves</u>	122
<u>iPhone 26 Nouveau Ultra+</u>	126
<u>My Cold Fingers Say Thanks</u>	134
<u>2030</u>	136
<u>Postword</u>	141

ACT 1

Awakening

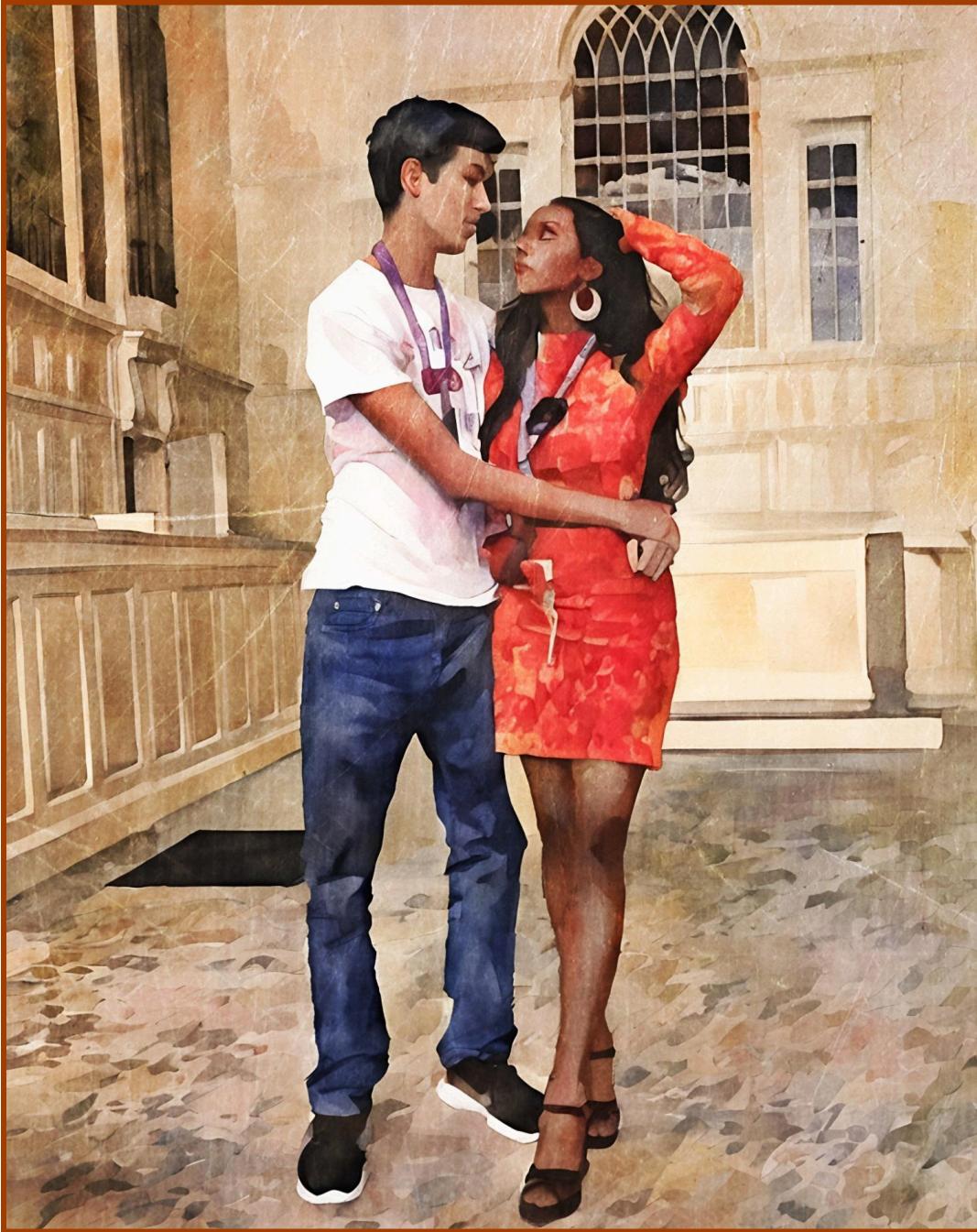


*In which the naive Joshi discovers that he in fact, did **not** have it all “figured out”*

“It was always me vs the world... Until I found it’s me vs me”

*“As a rule, man’s a fool. When it’s hot, he wants it cool.
When it’s cool, he wants it hot. Always wanting, what is not”*

Wandering Elsewhere



About what happened to the young Joshi's first romance after
myriad missteps, exploring the timeless themes of

meandering and maturing

It's a beautiful day outside.
 Birds are singing, flowers are blooming.
 On days like these, kids like you...

S H O U L D—

“—बाहेर खेळायला जा चिनू!” (I can't read that either, but it's what she said).
 “Aw c'mon I swear I'll get it this time!”
 “नाही. तुम्ही तासन्तास स्क्रीनवर आहात. डेनबरोबर खेळायला जा.”
 “hmpf... fine.”

So of course, like the obedient son I was, I closed the game
 And stashed the iPad Mini in my waistband as I left the house.
 I trekked the long hill to Dane's house without a glance at my screen
 (Because there was no WiFi on the road).

In his room, our most troublesome worry was unlocking legendaries in Clash Royale
 Until his mom wisened up to our hijinks and antics.
 Then she booted us to the lawn without letting us glance at our screens
 (Because she confiscated them all).

We weren't iPad kids. We just loved our iPads.
 We also loved playing tag with dull rocks and hopping fences to private property and
 wrestling on the trampoline and staring at the sun and crushing cockroaches with our
 heels and other normal things kids do.
 We would hurt each other often, but healed by punching back 2x as hard.
 And of course, we loved playing sports with our “signature variations.”
 We threw the football over and above his house to see who would get it stuck first.

Fast forward to 9th grade, and I'm playing jackpot with the football during lunch,
 I haven't seen Dane in years, but I have a feeling these new friends will stick around.
 After school, I trek the long hallway to the band room without a glance at my screen
 (Because I'm chatting with Jonah and Jackson along the way).

Then, 11th grade, from opposite sides of a summer camp classroom,
 A girl and I happened to walk toward each other, and she said,
 “Hey, did you understand any of these references?”
 “Nah, my tastes are more like decades ago.”
 “Ha, same. Except for the Brooklyn 99 and Community ones.”
 “Hey, those are my favorites!”
 An intriguing potential friend!

Intriguing enough for me to approach her after class.
 I introduced myself as *Chinar*,
 I'm really really interested in computers, music, and cuisine,
 And I appreciate the world like few others do.
 She introduced herself as *Taysha*,
 She's really really interested in math, art, and people,
 And she understands the world like few others do.
 "It's nice to meet you, Teja!"
 Accidentally, I pronounced her name with the proper *th-* sound my parents taught me.

A tiny gesture that validated something deep inside her identity.
 See, she's from an overwhelmingly white city where she couldn't express herself as *Indian*.
 She endured the racism that inspires great art, painfully alone even with her family.
 Wow, that's news to me coming from an Asian city where I struggled to stand out.
 But I was fortunate enough to have a tight-knit friend group that amplified my worth.
 We grew up in these different worlds, yet still shared memories of hot-watermelon-filled road trips and Pokémon before bed.

After the next class, we tested the waters for how much we could share our niche interests.
 I explained how POSIX is the language of engineers,
 She explained how integers are the language of the universe,
 And now we're walking around the courtyard.
 I explained how Emacs is a pointlessly riveting intellectual playground,
 She explained how 1729 was anything but an unfavorable omen,
 And now we're in a study room after every class.
 I explained how my mind is always playing jazz or depth-first searching a curiosity,
 She explained how hers is always thinking or proving some result,
 And now we're stargazing on the grass.

But after our brief encounters, we wandered off in opposite directions,
 Fingers slipping until they were ripped apart.
 Though out of sight, we never truly parted;
 This world was no match for a steely bond forged of mutual enchantment
 (Because we had *FaceTime*).

How naive we were to march long-distance toward an undetermined destination!
 But I was going to make this work, like I made everything else just work.
 She was one-of-a-kind, empathetic to a fault, dancing through life with passion,
 And she was the first one to see the same in me.
 A year is agony when separated. But a year is nothing when hopelessly in love.

Fortune must've shared our desire to see this epic fairy tale unfurl,
 Because after 4 college applications, 5 in-person dates, and 1000 hours of video chat, we
 reunited at Georgia Tech without plans of leaving!
 We charted our shared future with anticipation, sweaty palms,
 And our lives looking back at us, begging to be savored.

That very day, deep in conversation, I knelt over to bunny-tie my shoelace,
 And an innocuous little bug crawled into my attention, perhaps carrying wisdom.
 Its tiny whisper echoed, so I brought my head close enough to listen:
 "What are you missing out on?"

I rose, scratched my head, and curiously peered over hers.
 My life was *perfectenschlag*, so what more could there be?
 But if I squinted, I could picture what was in a seemingly empty corner:
 Tall white women who flirt, parties with familiar faces, jobs that crave my curiosity,
 Happiness just beyond reach.

I didn't realize these things always existed, much less that I should be wanting them.
 "So what do you think, Chinu?" she asked with reassuring eyes.
 I returned my gaze to her.
 "Yeah sounds fine," I murmured, engrossed by the intrusion.
 Her keen look pierced through my misplaced reply, but she bit her tongue.
 This commotion pulled me in without asking, so I stepped forward—

-SQUASH-

"what have you done!"

"Huh?"
 Eyebrows furrowed, I lifted my foot.
 I crushed her under my heel like a cockroach.
 "Oops, my bad." But she wasn't laughing.
 So I peeled her off my shoe, apologized for my carelessness,
 And swore I'd never walk again.

She didn't punch back like Dane, she just cried and forgave me.
 I planted the guilt like a thorn deep between my ribs,
 Watered it with silence, and let it grow into her heart.
 But I knew what words would quell her mind, my attention drifting back to that corner.
 I believed I was strong for avoiding regret, unaware that it would grow like a cancer.

Our relationship recovered from that day, hesitantly and erratically.
 Her trust, fractured, could be mended with hot soup and kisses,
 So I kept her bowl full and her cheek warm.
 Free and in college, we shared **everything**: classes, friends, meals, sleep, life.
 If our relation was a ship, it would've long capsized under the moments that filled it,
 Because every hour of every day, she was within arms reach of me;
 We had uncountable missed hugs to catch up on.

Yet, something felt missing ever since that bug whispered.
 Phantom pain from a limb that wasn't mine.

Truthfully, I resented her for making me ruminate over past mistakes.
 Because why couldn't her feelings just spring back together like mine?
 And what witchcraft made her see through the emptiness of my words?
 No matter what I considered, I grew impatient of standing around,
 And blaming her for missed adventures,
 I stepped forward again—

-SQUASH-

A familiar sound crunched from my heel, accompanied by her sharp cry.
 I gingerly peeked, expecting to find a new enemy.
 But shockingly, she was ready to forgive me
 And shower me with love again, if I could just meet her halfway.

So we kept trudging for months with her on my heel, creating fonder memories still.
 I've never seen such understanding and devotion, I wanted so intensely to dust us off,
 But I just didn't deserve this. We were both wrong about me.
 I wasn't ready to turn statue because there was so much wonder I hadn't yet seen,
 So I kept walking.

The light squeezed from her bright eyes like toothpaste until she was broken and silent.
 This nail pierced through my sole on occasion,
 But my gaze remained steadfast forward,
 And I could not be disturbed during my journey.

I stopped to take a breather after walking some distance.
 I checked my shoe, but friction had scraped off the paste fully.
 When I caught my breath and exited my fervent stupor, I came to a horrifying realization:
 For each step I took forward, my destination took one back!

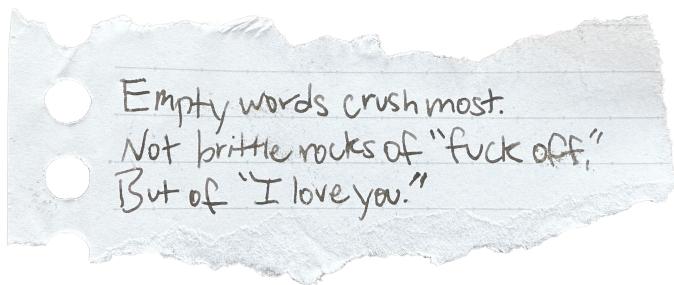
With a deafening tsk, I took inventory of my surroundings
 And noticed the lush, fertile scene of nature sitting at my feet.
 I seldom glanced down, and now all I wanted was to share this setting with her.
 But she was long gone.
 She clung desperately to hope; I crushed her fingers.
 I never felt what I sought, but my ribs throbbed at last.

That bug planted the first seed of envy, an insidiously intoxicating flower.
 If I seemed immune before, it's only because I've never had a reason to encounter it.
 But envy doesn't grow out of thin air.
 It grows with increasing distance to my "best version," who made every decision correctly
 and enjoys the spoils of his prudence.
 That person really does live somewhere around here.
 Just..... elsewhere.

Nonetheless, the path that snaked around her was not paved with fifth-chances.
 These missteps, clumsy and roundabout, were my first steps on the journey of growth.
 Though she devoted her mind and body, she could not give me this key.
 Too late, I discovered the key tucked inside a journal.
 Its weight strained the book's delicate binding, creasing the surrounding pages.
 I tossed it in the trash, with no door to unlock anymore.

I'll never know if her suffering was fated or unwarranted, my outcome best or worst,
 But I deeply regret not confessing my dissonance and discomfort, even if brashly.
 The air in any room will sag with betrayal, but only brutal honesty relieves it.
 As my best friend, she wanted to help me search for my best version,
 To overcome her anxiety and for me to overcome my avoidance,
 To explore this crazy place right alongside me,
 And I merely had to ask.

In the garbage can, a crumpled piece of paper reads,



HAIKU II

Lucid Dreams



About the inconvenient realizations had by the tipsy Joshi after
the sixth beer, exploring

begrudging and belonging

Charleston, South Carolina - July 2024

12ft from the closest familiar face, 88ft from the next twelve, 318mi from the rest
Moon sings a song; no-one listens
AirBnB, colonial and quaint, overflows with tipsy twenty-year-olds
Kanye roars from the JBL speaker
Saturday sun sets, pregame starts

Manav approaches with two Coors-light from the fridge
"What am I supposed to do with this now?"
"Shut the hell your mouth," he chuckles while we walk back
Struggle to pop the tab, but it eventually yields to my mighty arm
Raise the can up to my lips, and-**POOF**

I awaken with this yucky bitter taste in my mouth.
Back in Atlanta, my not-so-mighty arm hangs off the twin XL.
I remove my earplugs and check my phone: 11:13 AM.
My melodious alarm sang a song; no-one listened for 43 minutes.
"Drats!"
I rush to the sink, mirror, and bathroom,
Then I fill Tesco bottle, battle-tested by three continents,
And burst out the door by 11:33.

• • •

Charleston, South Carolina - July 2024

12ft from the closest familiar face, yada yada
Moon sings a song; sounds like *Flashing Lights*?
Pregame starts, Manav hands me a beer
"What am I supposed to do with this now?"
"Shut the hell your mouth," we say in unison, got him this time
Pop the tab effortlessly, helps to use my middle finger too
Hold my breath while sipping so the hops don't make it to my lungs

3 beers, 2 shots, 5 disgusted faces
Ellen's still not looking at me!
Not worries, night is young

Pong, Paranoia, Never Have I Ever, LeBron James
Each more stupider than the last, but taken at face value
Hobble over to the nearest bar
"88 Moore Street, Princeton, NJ, May 20, 2000, hey that's close to mine!" I rehearse
Long ass line. Why do people put up with this bs?
Front. Hand the bouncer Prasoon's fake, turns to me, and—**POOF**

I awaken with this sobering embarrassment in my mind.
My melodious alarm only just started singing, for one earplug was never inserted.
Carefree, I take my time with my skincare and business,
Then I fill the Tesco bottle, grab a banana, and make it out by 11:00.
This is going to be a good day.

...

Charleston, South Carolina - July 2024

Moon is 12ft away yada yada yada

Beer acquired, unpleasantly downed, drinking games endured

X beers, Y shots, X + Y disgusted faces

Don't even look at her. Maybe hard to get works (at least softens disappointments)

"88 Moore Street, NJ, 05/20/2000"

Approaching the bar.

"Hey guys that one looks like they're flashlighting IDs. what about that one down the street?"

No line

Hand him my Prasoon's fake,

No words

Turns his head to the next person

"Woohoo! First bar ever reached!"

'Triumph!' Followed by suffocating music.

And more yucky beer, bigger ripoff than pirates selling snake-oil

No worries where is she?

On the dance floor

Voice can hold up a Daniel Caesar to a candle, but I dance with ten pinky toes

Eh, doesn't stop me after all the liquid courage

Those lips could inspire a thousand sonnets in this lighting
They're moving, but all I hear is nonsense about hotels and motels and Holiday Inns
Skin is sausage casing, walls are plastic, air is thick
Waaaaay too much stimulus, step outside to the patio
Manav follows, asks me what's wrong
Conversation gets as lost as us, talking about time dilation
Wow, we are wasted. Fun! fun! fun!

On the dance floor having caught my breath
Liquid courage → liquid piss, but still *fun! fun! fun...?*
Meander here, hobble there, not sure what people actually do in these places
Some people singing, but DJ's probably not going to play any Gershwin classics
Some friends holding a conversation with some ladies
Some sneakily have their hand on her back, others grind to the music,
Both make me... *uncomfortable*?
They're reducing themselves to merchandise
No matter, where is she?
In the corner making out with Prasoon
"What the f-POOF

I awake with this searing betrayal in my heart. I forgot about that...
"Goshdarn mothertrucker beach-butt monkey!" But I said something much worse.
Why do I keep getting ahead of myself?
Ready to declare my undying love after eye contact.
But you called my bluff, oh Great Bully,
By putting me in the wrong place at the wrong time. Happy?
There's just something I need to prove to her, the other her, by September,
But probably won't get the chance.

My melodious alarm only just starts singing; I delicately press Snooze.
I wish it was analog so I could smash it like in the movies.
I lie in my bed for another nine minutes,
Clicking my tongue and sighing loud enough for the bully upstairs to take pity.
With just my backpack and laptop, I'm out by 11:13.

This time before bed, I give up on other people's dreams and just enjoy my own...

Het Nationale Park de Hoge Vuele - July 2023

12km from the closest familiar face, 88km from the next three, 4435mi from the rest

Rustling leaves sing a song; I listen

Air fresher than spring water, passerbys scarcer than deer

Morning clung to my jacket, afternoon rolls up my pants

Crummy bike creaks from the shed, long legs complain about the seat, overflowing backpack sits on the rear-rack

Prairie asleep, trees arched, lake sprawled, ducks quacking

'Debate' with a random lady about Jesus, one-sided as mirror

Fun call with my love, she's reached Atlanta by now

Bathroom reached before catastrophe, surprisingly clean (not anymore)

Park mostly charted

Secluded table acquired

Beef rendang on noodles, its ginger-garlic paste intoxicates the wind

Blue Tesco bottle sees yet another adventure, half-full and uncapped

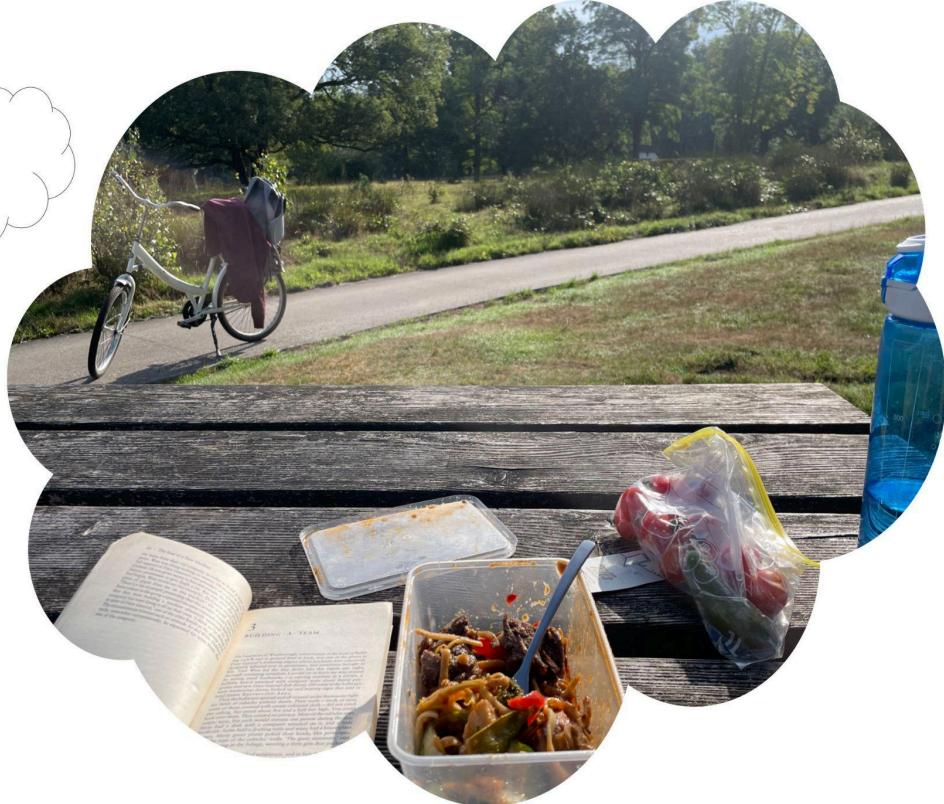
Ziplock bag of the reddest, juiciest, sweetest cherry tomatoes on the damn Earth

Silent book, brimming with significance, *The Soul of a New Machine*

Skin a tomato with my front teeth while flipping to page 58.

"Engineers want to create something. I didn't go to school for 6 years just to get a paycheck. I thought if this is what engineering's all about, the hell with it."

Mmmm



Ephemera



*About the fallen coffee cups that forced the clingy Joshi to let go
of his past, exploring*

memories and moments

O sweet, fleeting Ephemera, beauteous mistress of my senses,
 In your ethereally intangible nature, your presence haunts my present.
 My moments painted by your colors, serenaded by your voice, touched by your textures,
 How lucky am I to be wrapped so tightly in your wonder.
 I cherish you dearly, yet strangely, I can't recall how you felt yesterday...

I must remember!

My pen writes a thousand words, my camera holds a thousand pens, my artifacts click a thousand cameras,
 Yet they all fall pathetically short of capturing your lofty entirety.
 You are sand slipping through the cracks of my fingers, leaving meager grains to revisit,
 But I must bucket the whole shore.

For you and I are really one and the same.

You are my experiences, my purpose, my muse,
 So how could this faulty animal memory of mine do you such sorrowful disservice?
 No amount of mindfulness can extract the full flavor of your moments,
 And each meal becomes less intense, each day less vital, each feat less impressive.

But, I can cheat memory.

For as profoundly as you touch my world, you shamelessly litter around it with
 boxes, coffee cups, photos, rocks, music, art, papers, receipts, and gifts.
 Though I can't keep simple moments, I can keep their mementos to savor anew!

I cling onto these figments of you because they are who I've become.

Making art of your boxes, towers of your coffee cups, albums of your photos, collections of
 your rocks, associations of your music, galleries of your art, stacks of your papers, bundles
 of your receipts, and cabinets of your gifts.

I hoard these archives to raise a mountain with me on top,

Able to peer down and survey all I've collected.

Not because the best is behind me, but because all memories deserve to be honored.

But unfortunately for me, I am neither ethereal nor intangible,
 And all of these memories steal space in my room and mind.

My mountain can only grow so wide before it clashes with the walls,
 Only so tall before it sways and shutters.

I keep stealing memories from the jaws of time, afraid of losing the pricelessness of now.

But here comes the clutter—

And realization that this mountain is a shaky foundation for my growth.

Am I cursed to chase the electric and forsake the mundane?

Such is my sobering reality, plagued by limits and scarcity.
I never asked for you to join my existence, Ephemera.
I was perfectly content being nothing for the infinitude of the past,
But then one fateful day, you forced your way into my life.
Now I have you and love you dearly, and I can't imagine losing you.
I'm not content with being nothing for the infinitude of the future,
Yet still you started our relationship with a time limit, what a cruel partner you are!

One night, cursing the callousness of my consort,
I carefully stacked that day's coffee cup on my castle's watchtower.
Truly a wondrous homage to behold, capturing the breadth of my experience.
But soon after, a calm breeze tickled my neck,
And brought my mountain crashing down like lightning.

There I lay on the floor, the artifacts of my life sprawled around me—
In chaos, no rhyme or reason, an archivist's worst fear.
Then a gentle drizzle fell from the heavens.
All the paper around me cried with dampness, ready to rot in next daylight,
But I chuckled because the droplets refreshed my face.

Why did you choose to enchant such a flawed creature like me, Ephemera?
Forgetful, fragile, arrogant... mortal.
And why must you leave so terribly soon?
For all your sensations that enrich my life, the consciousness you bring,
I wish you could just answer these questions.
Why won't you just talk to me?

But perhaps if I was timeless and omnipotent, there would be no fun left to have.
No reason to savor today when the past is infinitely greater,
And nothing worth doing once all has already been solved.
Besides, candlelight is best to remember your beauty,
For harsh sunlight often exposes your image in my mind's eye as romanticized.
And your demure silence only veils your face in an alluring shroud,
Keeps me entertained asking questions whose answers I can't and shouldn't know.

Ballad of the Balance Wheel



In which the nihilist Joshi drops his beloved wristwatch, exploring
mortality and misery

To you, the dancer in my balance wheel,
 Applause to your unwavering resolve.
 Come rain or shine, for me you spin your steel,
 But ignorant, those hands of yours revolve.

Would any dance if they knew how it'd end:
 No dream or zeal escapes the callous ground?
 This hopeless question is your only friend
 When any truth refuses to be found.

Now fall to Earth, reduce to mortal form,
 Be stilled by **ticks** and **tocks** of your demise.
 Confront the trudge of Sisyphus's norm,
 And only then, can we see eye to eye.

So why do you still dance against your fate?
 Am I alone in dread as I abate and envy how easily you act like any of this is

SONNET I

acceptable? God is there anyone
 out there who could just teach
 me how to fucking accept??

Anyone?

The Stood-Up Fool



*In which a further account is given of the hapless Joshi's first romance
after overhearing some gravely unwelcome news, exploring*

rejection and resilience

"Ex." That word on my tongue tastes like filth when it refers to her.
 We believed we were the right people who met at the wrong time,
 So when she left me, she proposed a September date to revisit where we had wandered off.
 She also left in rock-bottom health after being crushed, which left me exceedingly worried.
 Thus, we parted ways with the door ajar, and the future unwritten.

For the first time in years, I noticed the air was dead silent, calm, and a little boring.
 I stopped lying to myself, because there was no more time to be bought,
 No more reason to stay dumb and confused.
 I saw how I had operated with an flawed understanding of my life,
 But that forced me to reevaluate radically what it meant to me.

~03/15~

I reserved a table at the designated restaurant a little early,
 Sitting alone next to all the couples and families dining.
 Yet, I waited patiently, twiddling my thumbs,
 Watching the calendar, counting days until September.
 Luckily, the restaurant had a fine taste in the music,
 So I basked in the company of my favorite hopeless romantics: Daniel Caesar, Frank Sinatra,
 Ella Fitzgerald, Chet Baker, Nat King Cole.
 They convinced me it would be worth the wait, whether or not she changed her mind.

"Menu, sir?"

"In a second, she's right around the corner"
 Besides, I think I know what I want this time around.
 Her ghost lingered in every passing Camry, every dark-haired stranger,
 But that's not to say I waited idly.
 I dreamed castles in air with strangers at other tables,
 Only to mortgage them before I opened my eyes.
 My heart wasn't in it, for half of it waited at this table for her.

~09/07~

Still no word, nor encounter, nor cosmic sign
 I tapped my heel at a poco accelerando, checking my watch frequently.
 I was ready to hear anything from her, perhaps that she made peace with herself,
 wondering if I've done the same.
 So what the hell was going on?

I leaned in, and overheard one of her friends at the bar utter such a nonchalant phrase:
 "Teja? She's at her **boyfriend's** party in SQ5"

Inhale,

E x h a l e

A brass-knuckled blow knocked me off my chair,

Because with that one phrase, this cruel puzzle snapped into place–
 I was caught in a fairy tale: that she'd validate my progress,
 We'd kiss, cry, and live happily ever after, roll credits.
 Now I was freed from the desire of her attention, but dropped into the abyss of my mind.
 With the dignified way I left the door, you couldn't imagine what my mind sounded like,
 But as the music faded with distance, so did my respect for those impetuous singers.

She was never going to come to the restaurant! It was never even on her mind.
 Not only did I stand no chance, but I wasn't even a piece in her game.
 Merely a spectator, draped out of her world with Harry Potter's cloak.
 I wasn't quite devastated that she moved on from me.
 No, I was more devastated that she wasn't the one to tell me,
 Even after all of her reassurances of a future, if we stayed loyal.
 Maybe she lied to the both of us, but if not,
 Then she flushed it down the toilet without so much as a text message.

And it was all for what? Who the hell was this guy anyway?
 Could a stranger have been sensational enough to earn the title 'boyfriend' faster than me?
 No, maybe she met him in the months after we broke up and before we left school.
 But her vulnerable emotional state surely cordoned off her calloused heart.
 Was he one of her friends I feared would swoon her while we were dating?
 Because why else wouldn't she have let me know that she changed her mind?
 It rained right as I left the restaurant, almost as hard as the day I arrived.

The walk back gave me ample time to hatch petty curses:
Repello!
 Now I'll never have to look at or speak to or think about her ever again,
Langlock!
 Now her new two-dimensional lover will make her remember my idiosyncrasies fondly,
Confundus!
 And he'll lie, make her cry, and prove that I wasn't evil for doing it myself.
Crucio!

Now she'll have to play the what-ifs on loop, haunted by *my ghost,*
Felix Felicis!

Or better yet, let him be perfect.
So she learns that even in paradise, we find ways to suffer.

I should hate her for stringing me along for months,
For making me feel lonely around my closest friends who don't know what it's like,
And making me the stood-up fool for believing in romance.

She's the traitor for getting closure while I was still there to hold her and love her,
Because now I have to do the same, but... alone.

I wish I never took social studies at GHP,
So that I could've spared us both the agony of having met each other!

But none of that is really true... is it?

This pain, I'll admit begrudgingly, is probably misattributed,
Because if anyone deserves to be happy, it's you.

You, who faced darkness and called it light,
Who held onto hope when life was cruel.

You're insane, always doing your part when the good ending is unlikely.

You're as soft (and smart) as pudding, yet as resilient and hard-headed as a brick wall,
Which is what made it so difficult to watch you experience young adulthood as someone
who cares deeply about you.

This is exactly why I'm relieved you moved on first.

Because as much as I want to remember all I've learned about love while forgetting that
miserable look on your face,

To call you a crazy hypocritical bitch and shed the blanket of blame,

Or ideally to feel pure apathy toward you,

I just can't do it. I don't think I ever will.

And I hope the next girl can accept that too.

I arrived home drenched, even my clothes trying to make me cold, expecting a night of
blues and traffic-sonder,

But I took a chance and woke up my roomate.

I expected a "tough shit, bro" like I've heard before.

But to my dismay, I was met with "*how are you really feeling?*"

And my other roommates came out too, staying until I cheered up.

I hadn't felt that comfortable or thankful with a group of people before,
Felt the kind of companionship you often touted of your own friends.

Respectfully, fuck you for this cheap blow.
 But wherever you are, whether you hate me or don't care,
 Remember that I would be there for you still, no matter the time, place, or reason,
 Give you a shoulder to cry on, and wipe your snot with my shirt sleeve.
 Each time I broke that promise was sworn to be the last, but this feels different.
 Not because I feel sorry for you or bear some overdue debt to pay (I don't),
 But because I wouldn't be myself if I wasn't there for my family till the bitter end,
 And I believe it's better to realize that late than never.
 You selflessly held my hand tight through the darkness while I kicked and screamed,
 So you'll always be family to me.

But tucking myself into bed, I remembered there's too much pain in our past,
 Too many expired chances, and too few reasons for you to trust me ever again.
 Besides, my romantic feelings fluctuate relentlessly.
 A chaotic function of my confidence, from friendships, to wellness, to profession.
 While I'm trying my very best to stay consistent, I just don't know how to fix that.
 You must've realized that first, so now that's clear to me too.

We ended us on a note as terribly bitter as your preferred chocolate,
 So let me end this note on a sweeter one.
 Thank you for listening to my interminable text editor rants in that McAllister library room,
 Before shutting me up with a thousand breathtaking moments, magic and mundane.
 For enduring my insufferable car microphone after every band practice and shopping trip,
 Then driving to Sweetwater so I could sing you Sweet Lorraine in person.
 For helping me understand contradictions like unfair situations and confusing feelings,
 While still entertaining all my stupid antics, from cart hide-and-seek to seeing Loch Ness.

For sharing such thoughtful gifts even if I didn't appreciate them in the moment,
 Along with all of those boba straws, brocolini heads, made-up songs, buttered croissants,
 Wildberry pancakes, homework answers, pointless spats, deal-breaking fights, awkward
 silences, poignant tears, romantic kisses, broken pomishes, and half of your heart.
 For being the best friend who could've helped me conquer my highs and lows,
 And the best first love who could've brought me to my knees,
 But most of all, thank you for helping me live the most epic love story of all time, with an
 ending worthy of Shakesphere.

Self-delusion? Possibly. Or perhaps I'm just tired of the rosy tint.

"What rubbish," I murmured, sprawled in a truly sorry state,
 Until my indignant frown melted into a sad smile.

United In Censorship



*In which the vulnerable Joshi decodes a garbled soliloquy, exploring
avoidance and acceptance*

...

→ "Why go through life with a mask on your face?"

← 😂

← Seriously dude, that's why you're asking?

← She's gone bro, and that's just some woman shit

← She had no idea what wjay she was talking about

→ Mf just put the fries in the bag and quit yammering

← Aight aight chill

← I don't know why you're getting so pressed about this anyway dude

← You were there

→ Sorry, I just

→ Want to check something

← Ok so where was I

← Right, Aug 2019, Azores, our family and Prashu Kaka's, the usual

→ Actually I don't think you can count once a lifetime as "the usual"

← ...

← Aight, pedant

← So we were on a road trip around the island

← All of us in an Audi, and omg the nature was stunning

← I stuck my head out the window like Ella does and the air tasted so delicious

→ Ha yeah yeah I remember that part

→ But what did it sound like?

← ?

← It was a car, dude

← Probably car sounds and seagulls and shit

→ No, think harder

← Uh ok
← It was loud for sure
← They were all arguing about something complicated
← We were all mad at Tai for what she did
← Or maybe I was mad, maybe they were just concerned
← I mean, that's what made sticking my head out so nice

→ Why weren't you concerned too?

← Dude can we just go back to thinking about Acronym? And we got like 4 assignments and 20 applications to submit

→ Please

→ Just a few minutes

← Fine
← Cause ~~she was fucking crazy~~
← How could I not be mad after all the banshee screaming and name calling and melodrama/
← And ~~she didn't even notice when I screamed right back so obviously the window was much nicer~~
→ Um
→ What?

← I said
← Cause ~~she was fucking crazy~~
← How could I not be mad after all the banshee screaming and name calling and melodrama/
← And ~~she didn't even notice when I screamed right back so obviously the window was much nicer~~

→ Uhh, sorry once more please

→ Take your time

← ...

← Cause she was fucking crazy!

← How could I not be mad after all the ~~banshee screaming~~ and name calling and mele~~drama~~

← And she didn't even notice when I screamed right back so obviously the window was much nicer

→ But you knew she was going through something. Wasn't that enough to care?

← I did care! But she didn't fucking care back!

← We literally gave her water on a silver spoon and she still died of thirst

← We could've made a Bayesian fuckin net to show her that this mania came from weed

← She was being so selfish and ignorant

← And I was old enough to say I could help, but too young to say I should help—

← But that didn't stop my communicative parents, god bless them, from sharing all the gory details

→ Are you mad at them for including you?

← No...

← It guess it was a trade off, and I think there was just no right choice

← Either keep me blissfully ignorant and lose my sense of agency—

← Or include me and trust I become self-sufficient, even if that means growing up early—

← It was just... a losing situation

→ Don't you think everyone grows up early in their own way? You know she did, and Teja did too

← ...

→ Aight no worries

→ Thanks for remembering all of this dude

→ Do you remember if it was like this elsewhere too? Or was it just the stress of a trip?

← Ha it was actually better on these trips because I had better things to do

← Remember the time I was playing Rocket League in discord during Covid school?

→ Yeah those days were the damn goat

→ My setup was sick af with that GTX 1080 and Sennheiser HD58x

← Actually I wish I had just gotten those new Sony noise-canceling ones, the open back made it a lot harder

→ A lot harder to do what?

← Well, drown it out. You don't remember?

← As loud as Martin was, it wasn't always enough

← We shared a jack-and-Jill bathroom, so I could hear it all

← The screaming downstairs the endless sobbing in her room

← One time she came into my room and quietly asked to watch me play Zelda

← And I just told her I was busy

→ Eight one more time, you got this

← Brother you need a q-tip

← ...

← The screaming downstairs. The endless sobbing in her room

← One time she came into my room and quietly asked to watch me play Zelda

← And I just told her I was busy

← She didn't look upset at all, just walked back to her room with her head down and cried

→ Damn, that's really depressing

→ Do you regret not being with her when she called for help, tried rebuilding your relationship?

← Yeah, I guess I was the selfish one all along

← I was the one with the choice, and I chose to walk away

← I can't imagine being betrayed by your own mind

← As much as I despised her, she's been there for me since day 1

← Oh god, and I did the same thing again to Teja...

← Walking away from her panic attacks instead of hugging her tighter

← Just, I'm glad they're both out of the woods now

→ Wow

→ That makes a lot more sense

→ At least now we know it well enough not to ever forget

→ Thank you for finally taking the mask off

← Ok weirdo

← And uhh

← Thanks for finally asking

← ...

← took you long enough

The Great Rat Race



About the contrived and prolonged game of numbers imposed upon the carefree Joshi by none other than the ambitious Joshi, exploring

perfection and purpose

Older kids bunny-knotting my shoelaces
 Sock wars, hide the ball, squap;
 Freshly baked cookies after made-up games
 A wholehearted Instagram presence:
 Nudgebomb, Bacon, and Ooblien
 Gardening with Baba, yet our eggplants never tasted as good as Kroger's
 BournVita and milk twice a day
 or more, I'm going to be a big boy!
 Maggie every Friday (they say the lead makes it yummier)
 "Beware the dragon in the attic"

Sleepovers filled with sports before them darn iPads
 (jk, we had Clash of Clans and Cookie Clicker and Doodle Jump and Subway Surfers and ...)
 A yo-yo, a rubix cube, a kendama
 A football thrown (and lost) around recess
 A table party with magic chocolate milkshakes
 A fractured wrist on the concrete! Ooof
 But plenty of attention and signatures to make the pain totally worth it

Maharashtra Mandal events in the older kid schools—
 Neon blue Tummy Yummy from the vending machine (if Baba had a dollar bill)
 A giant courtyard, the walls out of sight, the air alive and excited,
 It seemed to take a lifetime to explore...
 So instead we just played tag
 and basketball and ping-pong and tennis and Spikeball
 A crush!

Tire jumping and tug of war during adventure quest
 Fallout Boy and Twentyone Pilots on my phone to impress her
 Hey, it actually worked! But who's that new girl?
 Uhh, sorry, old crush
 Driving myself to after school hangouts

Burger King chicken nuggets (it was walkable from the courts)
 A trip to the Azores, I ate the wind like a dog!
 A reused mask, a few Clorox wipes, many more Zoom meetings
 Countless fascinating sciences begging to be explored
 Everything imaginable, close friends in sight, goals arms-length away
 A girlfriend! Didn't see that one coming for miles!
 A tie on my neck, a watch on my wrist, an adult in the making—

Suddenly, something snapped like a chandelier:

Phhhhhh

It was the starter pistol, fired in open air.
Its clear smoke curled down the contestants throats,
Pulling them toward their starting formations like puppets.
And with a subtle yet forceful tug,
The Great Rat Race has begun!

90+ in all classes, 5 on all AP exams, 1530 on SAT, *how did she score higher than that!?*
50 friends, 50 friends less than him, 10 books a year (never read), 0 interest in small talk
1 workout, 2 plates squat, 1 mile, 2000 calories, 40g protein, 2700mg Na, 130lbs, 2 daily
realizations that I'm out of shape
12 bathroom breaks a day, *do I gotta worry about this?*
5 workouts, 4 plates squat, 2 miles, 3000 calories, 120g protein, 1700mg Na, 162lbs, 3 daily
questions whether I'm eating too much or too little
Hey I'm buff as hell now!.. Wait, why don't I look like him!!
10 degree posterior tilt, 3 pokes and prods per mirror
2 leetcode problems a day (for about a week), 200 internship applications, 1 interview

24 fights, 2 hearts, 4 pieces
0 hobbies maintained, 1 time picked up trombone, 12 concert scales, 11 left to learn
17 personal projects on the docket, 15 perpetually begging me to finish,
1 hour a day to work on them, 0 times is it ever enough
200 hairs in the shower drain, *I gotta worry about this too?*
3 bottles of minoxidil, 5 lines of foam, 10 minutes a day, 1 wince
2 forehead wrinkles? 4 drops retinol, 6 drops BHA exfoliant, 3 drops niacinamide, 3 smears
moisturizer, 1 face chosen by Paula

5 times a week deleting and reinstalling Instagram because I can't help myself
50 friends, 12 who I actually trust, 7 hangouts a week, 1 big smile!
1 hangout the next week, 6 lonely nights, 7 hangouts the next week, 7 times savoring it like
its the last one
100 strangers met, 95 realizations that I don't like most people

8 hours at the office, \$38/hr, but he makes \$50/hr...
8 poems written, 500 lines of code that could have been written instead
3 senior managers disappointed, 9 hours at the office
5 interns at a bar after work, 20 sips of beer, 20 undisguisable grimaces
3 fun conversations, 10 less than with my old friends
9 hours asleep, 1 callous disapproval for oversleeping,
7 hours asleep, 2 eyes drooping by 2:00 PM,
2 coffees drunk, 2 feet pitter-pattering with anxious energy, 0 hours of quiet in my head
4 assignments pressuring me to work, 20 applications for jobs I'll never get
2 legs rushing toward my laptop, 1 pinky toe stubbed in the hubbub

27 heinous curses. 1 inhale, 1 exhale, 2 headphones, Memory Leaves by Anomalie, 1 inhale, 1 exhale... Mood Indigo, by Frank Sinatra, one
inhale... an exhale...
another poem....
inh a l e.....

e x h a l e

Here Comes A Thought, from Steven Universe

what was I even worrying about?

Runaway Train



*In which the steadfast Joshi dishonors his post to play ball
with friends, exploring*

satisfaction and sacrifice

He lies beneath the iron shade,
 The train asleep, the signal red,
 The dining car smells quite decayed—
 The tracks are still, as if long dead.

This ride, his father would imply,
 "A chance for those who never yield."
 A hint of pride he keeps inside—
 To prove his strength in quiet fields.

Then children laugh, their voices bright,
 A game of wallball wakes the steel,
 He grips the rail, his knuckles white,
 He's sworn to wait; he can't repeat.

But feeling stirs—he hears the call,
 A tug of life he once ignored,
 His eyes drift from the rusted wall
 To where they play—could he afford?

One cautious step, then one more bold,
 His boots on gravel, hesitant.
 He joins their game, his smile unfolds,
 At last, a joy that's innocent.

He laughs, he falls, he feels alive,
 A drizzle washes all away.
 He catches breath, they all high-five!
 For just one night, he's free to play...

Green light burns behind the clever—
 Jokes and jests that light their chatter.
 If he knew, his heart would shatter:
 Chances lost stay lost forever.

Whistles scream their steamy shimmer,
 Louder than his frightened "Hurry!"
 Inner children trip in worry;
 Progress snuffs the soul of glimmer.

Captain Obvious



*In which final resolution is given of the wistful Joshi's first romance
upon revisiting some awfully briny messages, exploring*

stagnation and self-actualization

*Splintered timber, shattered ceramic, waterlogged letters.
 With a weary smile, I throw the last of it overboard.
 Or rather the last of which I can see; who knows how much rubbish hides below.
 I gaze from the bowsprit; though I can't see far ahead, I see much that needs to be done.
 So I'll return to bailing the water, patching the holes, and adjusting the sails.
 Contrived tasks, but they give meaning to this voyage.*

I pick up the final piece of debris: an expired fig bar.
 It was the first gift she ever gave me, on the day I fell for her.
 Of all the little secrets we shared, I never told her I kept this one;
 I knew from the start it would become far too precious to eat.
 I give it a soft squeeze, the plastic wrapping wrinkled from shoddy storage,
 Then release my fingers one by one, watching it fall in slow motion.



It was a gorgeous afternoon, ripe with heavenly sun and gentle breeze, accompanied by meandering waves and my chirping parrot.
 Every other ship went home for this long weekend, save for me.
 On my way to the dining hall, singing Ella Fitzgerald without a care, there she was;
 With colliding wood that sounded more like grinding bone,
 The sight of her pierced my hull and stopped me dead in my tracks.

The S.S. Chinarnia violently crashed into our old shipwreck in a resounding **-GRRR-**!
 I escaped before I knew what hit me, head down and heart racing,
 But recognizing its source, the panic melted into surprise, which evaporated into nostalgia.
 Months had passed since my last sight, yet not even a day without it passing my mind.
 Now from the observer's seat, our dust having settled, I approached curious and vulnerable.

I took inventory of the damage, the unwelcome debris, and the sunken ship's chest that adamantly withstood months of erosion.
 Our old letters sat in the chest intact, if not salty and stained:
 I recalled vividly having braved the storm to hug her, wet eyes and squishy socks, instead of hiding under paltry assignments.
 I saw the day I skipped brushing my teeth while she had a panic attack, because I know what it means to hurt too.
 I saw the times I confronted my ignorance and avoidance, so she could stop bearing the weight of our relationship alone.

...But I didn't do any of these three. That alone tells the whole story.

Strangely, I found myself reading them from her perspective.
 Feeling the loneliness of "when are you coming back, I miss you," without a caring recipient,
 The rejection of confiding your deepest fears, met only by scripted replies,
 And the apprehension of trusting my cunning words and half-baked apologies yet again.
 My tactless affirmations hurt like a cavity: always rotten, but only now paining.

She doesn't even know how right she was about me; I never let her,
 Because I'm a gifted liar. I don't flinch, I don't falter a breath, I don't feel remorse.
 So gifted, apparently, that I can even fool myself.

My mind can think "*bitch leave me alone*" while my mouth says "*I love you too*,"
 My gut can recoil in disgust while my smile assures "*I'll always be here for you*."
 These reactions were only meant to paper over while I dug for the corruption,
 But I never dug deep enough, so I convinced myself that I was the problem:
 A skyscraper built on quicksand.

But she doesn't know the person I've become, the one I wish she could meet.
 She doesn't know the number of pages journaled or tears fallen,
 That *Automata & Complexity* became my favorite class too,
 Music became my sturdy armor of emotional regulation,
 My appreciation for simple pleasures discovered black coffee, literature, power cleans,
 poetry, and Creamline,

Or that I still love her...

...

No! "Still" is wrong. To call what I last felt for her love would be treason against romance.
 If love is when admiration meets understanding, then surely my love for her has only grown
 with that for myself.

I always admired her for traits rare enough on their own, impossible to find amalgamated:
 An alluring aura, adventurous spirit, compulsive curiosity, and strong moral compass.
 Yet, I could never reconcile these with the anxiety that turned the ordinary into turmoil,
 sensitivity that made her reactions chaotic, and the drama that chased her like a tail.

Though we shared memories of hot-watermelon-filled road trips and Pokémons before bed,
 Bridging that gender gap is so much harder than I could've imagined.
 We may share the same emotions, but we live in vastly different worlds of power and
 vulnerability, privilege and doubt.
 Even among friends in a safe place, she can't peer over everyone's heads; even when
 betrayed, none will convince me it was my fault.

Her isolation came from being surrounded by people who felt entitled to her attention and body, and mine from never being surrounded by people who wanted either.

Her emptiness from bottling experiences that nobody would see and validate, and mine from convincing myself that I had none worth sharing.

Her madness from wounds left unapologetically by "well-intentioned men," and mine from apologies written too late to matter.

Her frustration from dating someone who lied and denied, and mine from dating someone who I hurt so consistently that I normalized her pain.

She tried hard to understand me and failed,
And I failed to try hard to understand her.

...

heh. How tragic. Now I'll never get the chance.

We're blindfolded by our own perspectives, demonstrating faux empathy and wisdom,
But words can't teach what it means to experience.

And you know what the cruellest part is?

When we first met, I did understand her deeply.

I just didn't understand that we grow over time, and change should be nurtured, not feared.
Nurturing is as slow and intentful as lifting weights, only as effective as the effort put in.
And the naive Joshi had no idea how badly he sabotaged himself from being nurtured, or
how easy it was to neglect the ones he cherished most.

But now I see her as a person with beauty and anxiety, not a beautiful anxious person.

I took a losing gamble that I could first solve all of me and then tend to us,
But in doing things "*the right order*," I watched our communication slowly asphyxiate.
So I guess love isn't enough to make a relationship work...

While I'm glad our heartbreak opened this floodgate,

I keep fruitlessly nominating reasons we had to part to rationalize its unfortunate nature:
That this communication gap was an incompatibility, that she wasn't aesthetically my type,
that I was better off single and wanting.

While they're all true, forcing misfortune into a label feels as useful as pulling at straws.
So she has long and wisely moved on, while I'm pathetically dwelling where I started.
Coercing my second person voice to third person realizing she will never read this.

Maybe I'm dead to you, yet it's your ghost who's haunting me.
 The ghost of an innocent dove wearing a bandaged wing and stripy Calvin Klein pajamas,
 Peering into my soul with her wide, intelligent eyes,
 Standing upright, excited to join me in fresh adventures,
 With all the vigor and grit in the world to fly despite her pain.
 How could I forget you, when I keep torturing myself with this ghost who still loves me?
 When your face is plastered on my memories, name sprinkled through my notes,
 handwriting drawn on my decor, warmth sewn in my jackets, idiolect stamped in my voice.
 Am I serving a life sentence?? What on Earth happened to me!—CHIRP...

SQUAK—"It hurts like hell, doesn't it? That feeling of being haunted by someone who, in reality, is long gone, carrying on with their life while you're stuck wrestling with the ghosts of memories. The cruel irony is that while you may be dead in their mind, their essence still lingers, an echo you can't shake off.

Everything around you—pictures, words, clothes, even your own speech—becomes a weapon turned inward. A reminder of something once shared but now irreversibly severed. It's maddening how even your thoughts betray you, turning what should be your private refuge into a theater of torment, replaying her smile, her words, and all those moments that seemed eternal but turned out to be transient.

What's the matter with you? It's that you're human. You're wired to cling to what once brought you joy, to dissect what went wrong, to torture yourself with the hope that maybe, somehow, it could've been different. It's okay to feel like you're losing your mind when it seems like every corner of your life has been branded with her.

But here's the thing: it's not pathetic to care deeply, to feel intensely. What's tearing you apart now is what also made those moments with her so beautiful to begin with. This pain is the price of all that joy. And maybe, once the storm subsides, you'll start seeing the traces of her not as wounds but as faded relics of a time when you loved with everything you had.

For now, let yourself rage, let yourself grieve. The ghost might not leave immediately, but it's only through facing it that you can finally set yourself free. And maybe, someday, you'll look back at this from a place of strength and realize: you survived it."—SQUAK

.....

If I had known at GHP that this was the price, I think I would've just stayed at home.
 Which is why I'm glad the little guy had no idea what was coming when he pronounced that random girl's name properly.
 Because I feel like I'm net neutral, that today's heartache has nullified every happy memory we created, leaving me right where I started,
 But deep down, I know that's bullshit.

Truth be told, I have reached a place of strength, because I can look back and appreciate how far I've come. During that first year of college, I was irredeemably **miserable**, blindly pedestalizing everyone around me. Every student was Rearden, every club was Ivy League. Every man was Apollo, every woman was Aphrodite. *Why do they look so assimilated? How do I stop feeling so alienated?* I felt entitled to the answer because I was proud of myself, yet stuck outside in cold rain with every door of solace locked. And it feels so empowering to be able to admit that to myself finally without shame.

I recall vividly the dread of driving back to college: it felt as consuming and unavoidable as rising tide. Every sight and sound there reminded me of my shortcomings: my nights weren't fun enough, my friends weren't close enough, my girlfriend wasn't hot enough, my muscles weren't big enough, nothing was ever *enough*. This noise was a drop of sewage in my spring of introversion, sullying my fresh water with passing glances and ambient laughter. It was walking down our dorm hall and smelling the leftover beer, wondering why I was sober. Seeing them in the living room like one big happy family.

Despite all the freedom, I wasn't free from myself. I had the girl, the social net, the ambition, the health. Yet good fortune can be particularly unfortunate, because the next question just becomes "*and then what?*" It's the kind of adversity that poisons happy moments, the cruel alchemist that turns love into lust. So naturally, my stubborn, prideful mind buried itself in the sand to remain a highly functioning member of society. Leaving you, pride and joy of my life, to be the scapegoat of my cryptic dissatisfaction.

But until I could say to you, "I hate something about my life. Please, leave me alone until I find out what it is," we had no business being together. There was only so much you could've done from outside my head, every effort past that contributing to your despair. But even if you left me alone, I'm confident I wouldn't have sought "it" anyway. I lied to you reflexively about not watching porn, seeking advice from my friends, and journaling, because I just wasn't strong enough to be real with myself. I was too emotionally exhausted by my own alienation and watching you skip meals and give up on your life. I only realized how taxing it was after I let myself sit in the silence.

Then, just when I thought I had it all figured out, my hair started to fall out. That was the spark that lit the ocean of despair I'd been treading for years: standing in the shower, seeing my hand covered in the rotting strands of my identity. How was I supposed to work a 9-5 internship when I'm worried about the clinical success rate of minoxidil and what happens to all of my ambitions after I die? I couldn't take the poking and prodding anymore, so I had a decision to make: I could either pick up my phone and download TikTok, or pick up my pen and write my way out. Because of your impact, I chose the latter. I hated every word I wrote, every pointless question that had no answer, every first line with an admission of anxiety, every last line with zero resolution. But over time, the act itself became the resolution, and I started to notice the sheer absurdity of it all. So from the darkest month of my life, sprung a light I never expected. If we're all broken and breaking, I might as well hear this world out and survey all it has to offer.

Now, in the best way possible, I can't recognize myself. I talk about my feelings; I encourage others to talk about theirs. I take care of myself without fail; I don't chastise myself when I do fail. I don't check my phone when I talk to people; I actively seek talking to new people. I don't feel lonely when I'm alone; I don't feel anxious when I'm not. I don't lie to myself about what I really want; I don't pretend to know what that even is. By accepting things in the wrong order, I finally let the bigger picture fall into place.

Today's strength is hard earned, and I won't ever take that for granted. There's still much work to be done, but for the first time, I'm actually looking forward to it. I used to dismiss conflict and discomfort as misfortune, but today they're my muses. I haven't a clue how to answer "who am I?" But I would write a whole act about it, one that's sure to exude the grandeur and messiness that the question demands. Because I savor every overcooked bite from the dining hall, every simple conversation with my roommates, every bitter cup of coffee, every peeling callus from deadlifting, every enigmatic homework problem, every hapless rejection from a girl. I intend on living a work of art, and I believe losing you, tragic as it may be, was an ingredient in this transformative elixir.

She must've been so perplexed why I never did this work when she was at stake,
 How a self-proclaimed problem-solver could repeat mistakes *ad infinitum*.
 Indeed, even I timidly exclaimed at my own cognitive dissonance as I walked out of our
 fights and instantly diverted thinking to personal projects,
 Always telling that voice to shut up and stop wasting time.
 Because it knew something that the greater part of me refused to accept:

If I dissected my source of discontent plainly, then we would have to break up at once.
 After a year of an untainted fairy tale, it would've taken all of the courage in the world and
 more to admit that I was wrong.
 I would need to be strung by a marionette to do what begged to be done gracefully,
 But I don't want to be a puppet! I want to pave my own mistakes and live with them,
 because that's what it means to be human.
 Even if it meant hurting the person I loved the most.
 And as selfish as this is, I'll always cherish our memories that were born on stolen time.

I've spent all this time exploring, creating, optimizing, achieving, and asking "how,"
 So I'm thankful she made me finally slow down to ask "why," even if I resented her for it.
 All parts of me are singing in harmony to soothe this broken heart,
 Different voices, same story: "I've got the world on a string, sitting on a rainbow."
 The adventurer, engineer, perfectionist, academic, and inquisitor are scouring the grass,
 leaving no stone unturned, no room for malice to fester again.

I've surprised myself how much I would rather chronicle these stories than my next ones,
 But I believe it's because my maiden voyage is closing after this arduous decade,
 For I see an island nearing from the bowsprit.
 Whether it teems of angels or knaves, I'm just ready to decompress.
 I personally can't wait to see what's in store for my next adventure:
 Will I pass the interview, get the girl, finish the book? Will I care if I don't?
 And the journey is seldom linear, so I'm certain the S.S. Chinarnia will revisit our shipwreck.

Still, the murky unknown unsettles me.
 A part of me will always wonder how she's doing, unable to find respite.
 Maybe I wasn't as good a liar as I thought, and she saw through me plainly,
 That she arrived at these conclusions long ago, making me captain of the obvious truths.
 But what a relief it is that I became captain at all using nothing more than some stationary,
 a chipper parrot, and an ocean of emotion!

Chin up, I return to the top deck to start throwing the debris overboard.

You said a lot of really wise things to me over the years... but far more dumb ones.
 I'm astounded that someone who so deeply loves the primes is so deeply scared of ghosts.
 I'm insulted that you said the bread bite is the best bite of a pubsub.
 Another piece of nonsense was "I can't do it," which is almost always a lie coming from you.
 But absolutely nothing can top "I was just a lesson."
 I can't imagine how gross that sentiment must make you feel about yourself,
 But just because our moments were numbered, doesn't make a single one of them less real.
 Doesn't make me any less thankful that I got to know you.
 And I hope you choose to read this someday, because I was always more fluent in metaphor
 than conversation, wasn't I?

Now please tell your ghost to leave me alone... but also, don't,
 Because loving and losing you taught me how to live without a crutch,
 So your name will always enjoy a fond spot in the corner of my mind.
 With the most maturity these sorry bones can muster, I say farewell again, Teja.
 I hope you got the break you so deserved, even if it's without me.
 Please be kinder to yourself, and seek the kind of happiness and solace,
 that
 lasts
 a lifetime...



"It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all"

*"They say communication save relations, I can tell, but I can never right my wrongs
unless I write 'em down for real, PS"*

END ACT 1

ACT 2

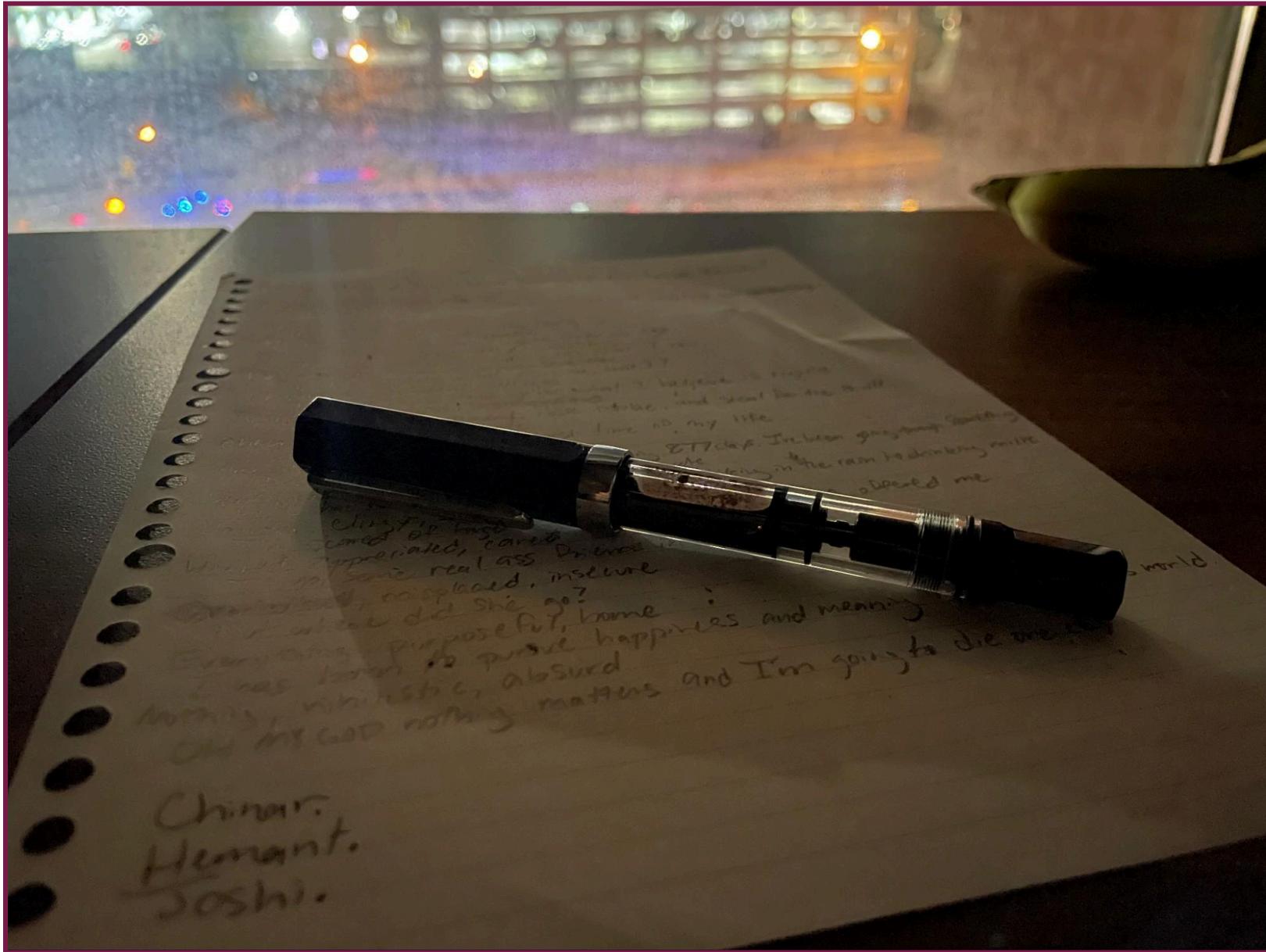
Identity

In which the introspective Joshi attempts to define himself

“You don’t ever have to lie to kick it with yourself”

“...And then what?”

Three(ish) Words



Describing the vast and contradictory traits of the
indescribable Joshi, exploring
expectation and expression

How would you describe yourself in three words?

Alright, easy enough

Ambitious, hardworking, selfless

"I'm going to change the world with creativity and innovation"

Lead retracted, shoes tied

Then comes a thought, eraser cap removed

Ambitious, hardworking, kind

"I'm going to change the world with creativity and empathy"

Watch strapped, banana grabbed

Three steps before the door, one more quick fix

Ambitious, curious, kind

"I'm going to understand the world with creativity and empathy"

...

Damn, how real do they want me to be?

Cheesy, sappy, corny

"Man, I love getting in my feels"

Macho, resilient, unstoppable

"6 plates on the bar—lighter than my ego"

Self-sufficient, dependable, headstrong

"Thanks, Baba, for teaching me that I can"

Perfectionist, obsessive, hypersensitive

"Fuck, I waste a lot of time, don't I?"

Chivalrous, confident, selfless

"I will always stand up for what I believe is right"

Reckless, capricious, kleptomaniac

"I chase thrills, disregard rules, and steal compulsively"

Cheery, elated, fortunate

"College has been the best years of my life!"

Anxious, tortured, defeated

"I've been going through something. 877 days. I've been going through something"

Sentimental, appreciative, wonder-struck

"Life has so much beauty to savor, from biking in the rain to drinking milk"

Melodramatic, clingy, eccentric

"I'm scared of forgetting all of the beauty life has offered me"

Wanted, appreciated, cared

"I got some real ass friends in my corner"

Overlooked, misplaced, insecure

"But where did she go?..."

Enlightened, individualist, autonomous

"I was born to pursue happiness and meaning by exploring this world"

Ignorant, nihilistic, absurd

"Oh my god nothing matters and I'm going to die one day"

It's getting late. I look out the window to ponder for a moment

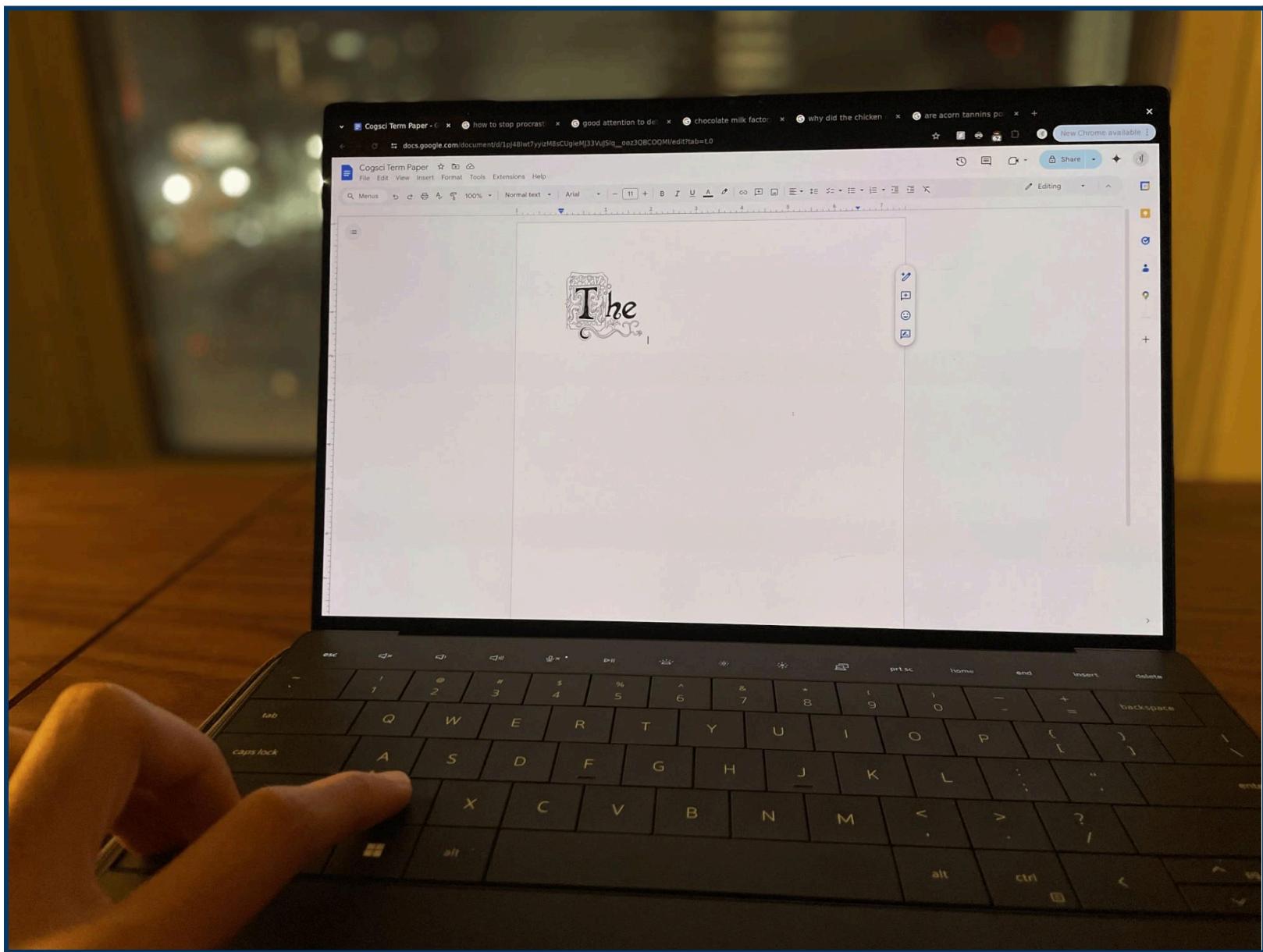
"Has it been three already?

Eh, what the hell"

I scribble in pen, not bothering to erase

Chinay.
Hemant.
Joshi.

CTRL-Z CTRL-Y



*In which the suspicious Joshi is convinced that something has changed,
somewhere, without his knowing, exploring*

perfectionism and paranoia

The

The

The worst

The

The

The worst

The worst part

The worst

The

The

The worst

The worst part

The worst part of

The worst part

The worst

The

The

The worst

The worst part

The worst part of

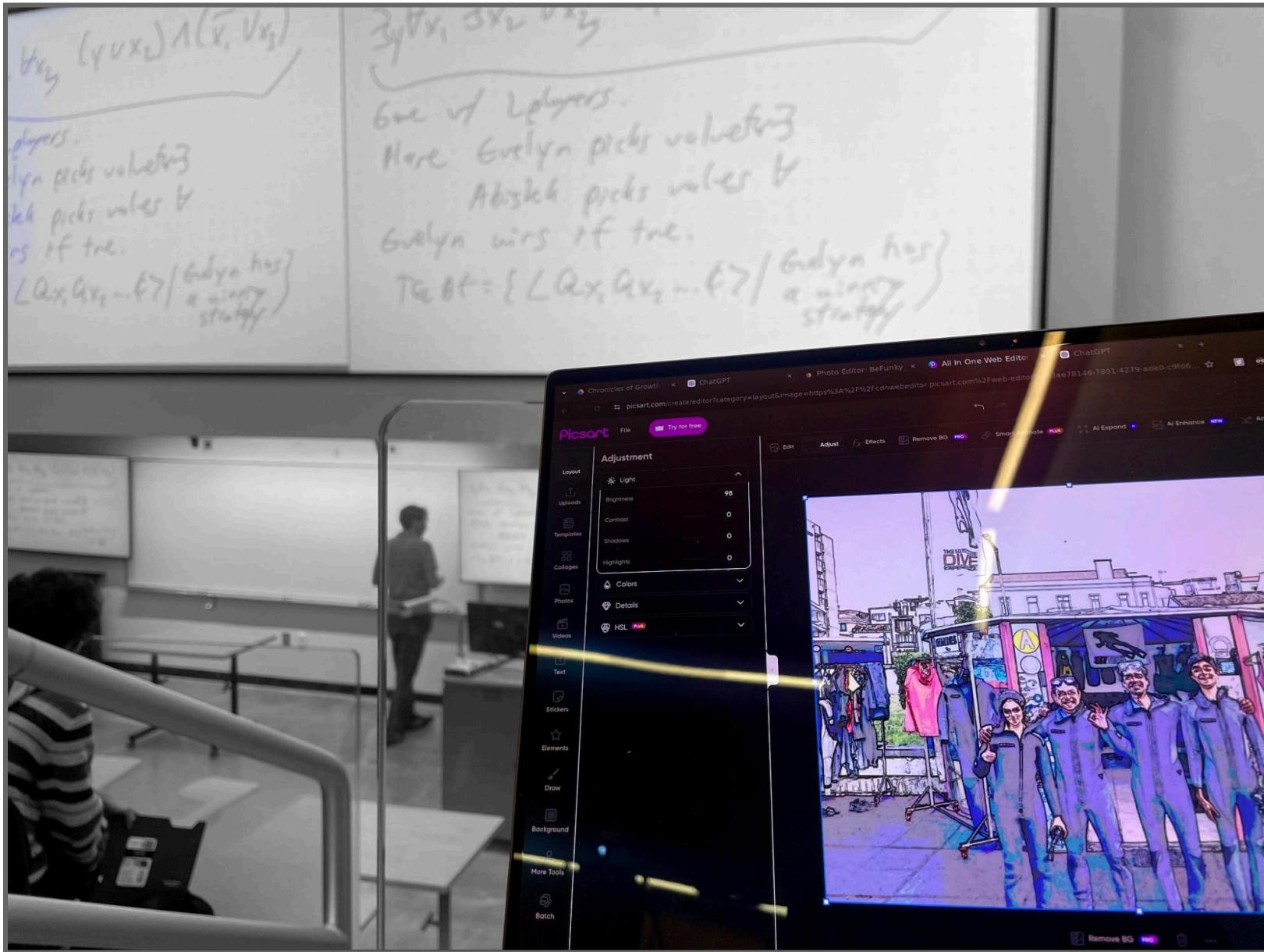
507 keystrokes later

The worst part of perfectionism is fighting imaginary mistakes.

Olivia Rodrigo was wrong—it's always one step forward and three steps back
and three steps forward and three steps back and three steps forward.

I move forward, it just takes me thirteen steps.

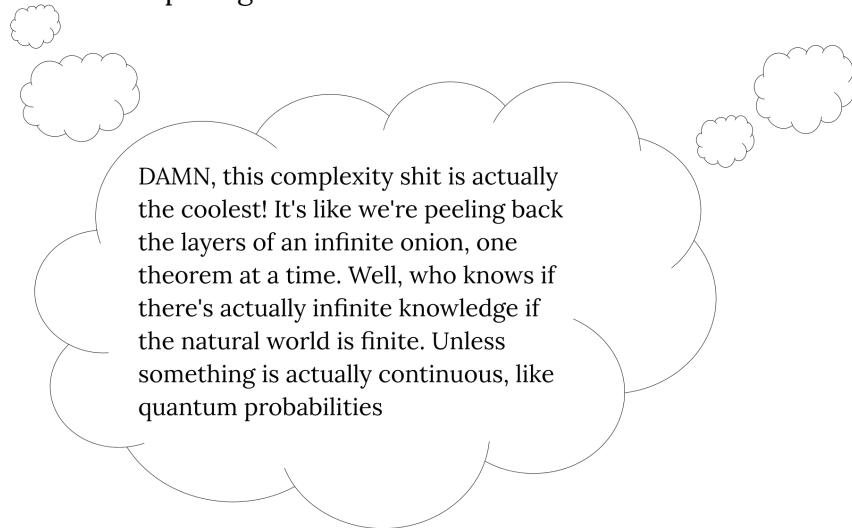
Depth-First Search



In which the caffeinated Joshi attends a lecture on space complexity, exploring
wondering and wandering

I rest silently in the second row of Howey Physics L2.
 My torso is plastic, my arm is wood, my leg is steel.
 I have watched hundreds of the sharpest Sapiens sit,
 enrich their minds, then leave, biweekly.
 But it's raining; few showed up today.
 The clock reads half past three.

A dripping student hurriedly sits on me as the lecturer opens his mouth:
Recall on Tuesday we proved Cook-Levin theorem.
Today, we will discuss space.
 Unlike his colleagues, he takes out nothing:
 No phone, no laptop, no water bottle.
 Only two curious eyes, and one hand to rest his chin.
 I wonder what his laser-focused academic mind is computing...



A machine that uses $f(n)$ time can use no more than $f(n)$ space.
 Therefore, $\text{TIME}(f(n)) \subseteq \text{SPACE}(f(n)) \subseteq \text{TIME}(2^{O(f(n))})$

Every non-deterministic machine can be simulated deterministically in exponential time: treat the configuration space as a graph, and perform brute force BFS

"I am just a box with the light of thunder in me." Adi was right, Chromakopia was a banger. I wonder if this Marina lady shares my taste in music. Ha wait, it's Maria, Marina makes her sound like a seafarer. What a sonorous name, I wonder what she's like. She likes rocks and bird-watching? There exists girls with those interests too? I wonder if she'll like me or if my nervousness makes me come off uninteresting or overly interested or brash. I wonder if a girl will ever like me, or if I'm a cup of over-extracted coffee: too intense for much other than sitting on the table until it gets cold and poured out... Should Maria and I get coffee? I don't think other people like coffee the way I do. I wonder why tea isn't more common in America. Man, I can't wait to get my free chai on my way to Cogsci (hey that rhymed). Oh man what if we start dating? I would thank Ishaan a gigantillion times. I wonder what kind of gift he would even like, he shows no interest in the material world. Anyway what if one day we share jackets and adventures and I get to bring her flowers? Boy what you talkin bout. Ay shiba shekiya you're right my bad I'm getting ahead of myself again. Wait what was I thinking about?

Now we prove Savitch's result;
For $f(n) \geq \log(n)$, $\text{NSPACE}(f(n)) \subseteq \text{SPACE}(f^2(n))$

Let N be nondeterministic Turing machine which uses $f(n)$ space. We give a deterministic simulator M which uses no more than $f^2(n)$ space

what the
hell is on
the board?

**Remember, homework
due tomorrow. See you
all next Tuesday.**

This chair has such a satisfying frictionless swivel, and the hanging plastic on the front has an interesting tactile feel. It's crazy how the lumbar support in the back is so carefully shaped yet no one uses it. *Lum-bar*, What a funny shaped word. Makes it sound like an English berry. I wonder if aliens need lumbar support. But it's quite closed-minded to think aliens have vertebrae, or even a concept of sitting. Eh, sitting is more a side-effect of gravity than biology. Remember in middle school band how Mrs. Reynolds told us not to sit back? Maybe that's why everyone sits forward now. Wait but these people weren't there. Besides in high school band, Mr. Garofalo told us otherwise. I wonder if he's gotten a bigger troublemaker than me in the past few years. But I think the only way to do that is to actually set fire to the building. Man I can't wait to start arranging Ratchet of Growth Vol 2 for trombone and euph. Banger upon banger, but first I gotta derust my trombone skills. And probably finish volume 1. I wonder what the cover art should be. Maybe that picture of me sitting on the rooftop edge in Charlotte, but cartoonified. Man I'm actually the GOAT, plus I'm happy that Stable Diffusion squashed the barrier of entry to artistic expression. Let me finish editing another one of those covers real quick. "Send me kisses when it's gray skies, it's been so long look how time. flieees," man the piano sings so poignantly, I gotta give it a listen after class. Why is my sock compressing my toes? This is completely unprovoked violence. I gotta replace these shoes soon, I can feel my big toe hole I carved while lifting. Why do I only regularly wear 2 pairs of shoes? Teja had like 15 pairs in rotatio—what the, what is she doing here?

Using a sequential D&C approach, our recursive calls reuse space. Instead of Master's theorem, note that the stack frame contains $\langle C_i, C_j, t \rangle$, and the depth of recursion tree is $O(f(n))$

Man my heartbeat is awfully loud, and it's so cool how it's slower when I exhale. I wonder what bpm that is. Let me take out my met. Interesting, 91 inhale and 84 exhale. But when it slows down too much my eyes get uncomfortably warm. I wonder if anyone has looked at the corner of this room for this long in the history of Georgia Tech. "Blood on the dance floor and the Louis V carpeeeet." I hope if anyone can read my thoughts that they're doing so in a flat booklet, because otherwise this layout isn't going to make very much sense. Why is that guy in the front tapping his heel so aggressively? Oh wait, so am I.

A language B is said to be PSPACE-complete if $\forall L \in \text{PSPACE}, L \leq_p B$ and $B \in \text{PSPACE}$

Practicing for Disappointment



Which relates the conversation the nervous Joshi expects to have on his next date, exploring

what-ifs and whims

She's gorgeous, like a painting you're too scared to touch... I should say something first! Ok, here goes nothing, **hey se - oh no you go first.** OH SHIT DAMN IT. Totally turbulent timing twists my tongue. What was she going to say? Well, I guess she's about to tell me..... Wait what? She wants me to say my thing first? shit what was I about to say? It was something witty too... I spent the whole elevator ride thinking of it. Something about rocks? Damn, my mind has gone blander than canvas. What bad luck. I should admit it. I should own it. I should **oh, uh. sorry. I seem to have left my brain upstairs** KEEP MY MOUTH SHUT WAIT WHAT THE HELL WAS I THINKING THAT WAS ABSOLUTELY NOT THE RIGHT CHOICE. Shit, what do I do now? I cannot start off with an awkward silence. Get yo head out of your ass and back into the game, sergeant. I wonder what Cameron would say in this situation. Wait, but I'm not Cameron. Remember what 1st grade taught you: always be yourself. Facts wait, myself is a hell of a guy. But how do I get this person in front of me to think so too? Shit I still haven't said anything. Is this an awkward silence? Wait, has anyone ever died of awkwardness before? Maybe I'll finally be first in the world to do something! They say that silence isn't awkward unless you let it, so I can just let this not be an awkward silence, right? Pause. Maybe **she's** the one letting this be awkward. You are quite the valiant adversary, woman! I suppose I can just force this into a non-silence by saying something. Damn but what was I going to say? It must've been really really witty if I'm still getting caught up remembering it. A fun fact? A joke? A Joshi trivia? ~~A pun~~ wait not a pun. FUCK how did I let Ishaan send me on this suicide mission? It's not too late to grab my bike and ride to that spot. Well I guess it is if she's sitting here in front of me waiting for the dummy in front of her to FUCKING SAY SOMETHING so we can have a conversation. Shit my throat is getting dry. Where is my water bottle? Damn right it's on my bike, that's why I haven't had water all day. But I still need to pee really badly because THIS FUCKING WITCH IS HEXING MY BLADDER to try to sabotage me like a ninja. Heh I wonder if she watched Ninjago. Maybe her favorite character is Zane too. As long as it's not Lloyd, we chill. WAIT WHY AM I THINKING ABOUT LEGO FUCKING NINJAGO RIGHT NOW?? Should I ask for her take? That would be possibly the funniest way to start this conversation. Actually, wait, this could be a brilliant move.

So who's favorite your Ninjago character? PLEASE OH GOD PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE Oh, uhh. It's this kid's show... FUCKKKKKKK Uhh, nevermind. WHAT HAVE I DONE WHAT ON EARTH MADE ME THINK THIS WAS A GOOD IDEA! Aight. Listen. Today was ass I cannot lie, but tomorrow is fuckin Chinarday. All I have to do is pique her interest, get her number, and set up a date once the confidence cavalry has arrived. Betski, time to think of something so smooth that it'll make Gorilla glass feel like sandpaper. Wait, but I still have to clear my throat. The evil enchanter who torments me must've morphed the HVAC into a meat room freezer in the middle of the night. Ok wait a cough is nothing this is just a normal bodily function, right? *cough* Shit I still haven't piqued her interest though. What do I do?? I should set my pants on fire. Damn I don't own a lighter though. Should I ask if she has a lighter?—wait, even I can tell that's not the finest idea I've had. FUCKFUCKFUCKFUCK it's been so long since I've said something. What has it been, like an hour? Let me check my watch. Wait, I don't know how to read an analog watch. Maybe she knows I'm a sham and that's why SHE HASN'T FUCKING SAID ANYTHING EITHER. Wait, that's so facts conversation is a two way street and if her direction is more blocked up than my throat right now then that's not my fault. Damn but an opportunity like this doesn't come up every day. Or even every semester. Maybe I just need to grease the wheels and then the gravy train will come flying down the station. Ok, now I just have to ask for her number and the operation is in good shape. Gotta be charismatic about it tho. What would Don Quixote do? Wait no, he's a terrible role model.

soooo. uhhh. can I get your number? Ok! Not too shabby. Probably shouldn't have said soooo but that's a classic. Plus, I've kinda already got this in the bag being tall, dark and handsome and all. Ain't no way she says

No? FUUUUUUUUUCKKKKKKKK HOW DID THIS HAPPEN!!!!!! I'VE BEEN BAMBOOZLED, THWARTED, DUPED! FUCK OK I STILL HAVE TO SAY SOMETHING BACK I CAN'T JUST WALK AWAY NOW. BUT MAYBE I CAN JUST RUN AWAY? NO, BAD IDEA. I NEED TO SAVE FACE HERE I CAN'T END ON A TOTAL LOSS OK OK OK OK **ok, ok. No worries** RAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHH DAMN IT DAMN IT DAMN IT FACE THE WRATH OF MY 1000 DEMON PUNCH INFERNO MOVE!!!! I'LL SPLIT THE EARTH WITH MY  Eh. At least it was a harmless learning experience. Next time I'll show up as a more charming train wreck.

Masochist Mountain



*About why the restless Joshi will never let himself be satisfied, exploring
desires and doubts*

Five and a half hours.

That's how long this stranger kept me enchanted.

Sobered by her turquoise eyes that desaturated the trees and sky,
Addicted to her unencumbered laugh that made me crave it again and again,
Plagued with nervous chills that urged my hands to seek refuge in hers,
Alarmed by her brimming smile that made me want to shield it with my lips.

Two hours into talking, there was a moment when the world audibly clicked:
She finished expounding the invasive hemlock wooly adelgid,
Painting a vivacious picture of the problem, her demo of hitting a fake tree with a fake
branch, her fascination with nature, her longing to understand computers.
It's been quite some time since I've met someone so deeply passionate about something,
especially about wanting to help people.
So after she finished talking, I quietly stared into her eyes, smiling.

She replied with a nervous laugh, but I just kept staring.
I was so bewitched by where I was, I didn't want that moment to end.
But it did so effortlessly as we weaved through nostalgic memories, deepest interests,
simple preferences, all-time favorites, ephemeral banter.
What surprised me the most is that I wasn't thinking of that last time this happened,
cross-comparing little details of then and now.
In fact, it didn't even cross my mind.
Because this felt entirely different; I felt like an entirely different person.

Yet, four hours into talking, something rumbled deep in my gut.
An inkling of disgust to remind myself of some ghastly limitation.
The same gross feeling that did appear that last time this happened.
She laughed at all my jokes, smiled sans pause, even complimented me.
She made this entirely too easy.

What gives? Dating was supposed to be insurmountable, yet I'm hardly even trying.
I want a challenge, a chase, a thrill, so how do I up the difficulty?
Should I fuck up something? Say something brash? Play hard to get myself?
What do I do to make myself linger without standing in the foreground?

wait,

what the hell?

I never used to think like this before...

Shouldn't romance feel effortless when it's right, just like it does now?
 To me, this is all some existential game,
 But to her, this must sound like toxic manipulation.
 Do I actually want to be happy and involved, or just play *Dark Souls* alone?

I thought my happiness meant problem-solving as much as solved problems,
 But now it feels like the meaning lives entirely in the former.
 I don't care about the summit after the hike, I look for the taller mountain in the blue,
 Because if Chinar could reach the summit, doesn't that reflect poorly on the mountain?

Yet, I hold myself in such high esteem.
 I know that I'm unbridledly curious, ambitious, and kind,
 And that no three words could even begin to describe me.
 But self-esteem is starting to feel more like Swiss cheese than a boolean.
 If she feels enchanted by me, then "what's wrong with her? Where's the catch?"
 Surely we're just beholding from our brightest angles, blinded by novelty and sweaty hands.

Though I stand on a tall mountain, getting taller via introspection,
 I've bored a hole right down the summit to keep myself at sea level.
 I don't want to inspire; I want to be inspired,
 A minnow in an endless ocean, swimming next to the giants,
 Because only external validation convinces me that I deserve satisfaction—

I'm charismatic iff. successful people take interest in me,
 Funny iff. I make enough people laugh,
 Attractive iff. attractive people compliment me.
 I crave validation most from the people who never give it,
 And as soon as they do, they fall to my level.

But perhaps my idea of "perfect" itself is contradictory.
 Not only unrealizable, but even unimaginable,
 A carrot on a stick that flees at the pace I approach,
 And I gallop, because I am Midas of enterprise.
 I thrive so much in the longing, the mental gymnastics of solving a puzzle,
 That I've conditioned myself to feel itchy the moment it's solved.

The carrot flees because everything is subjective, their connotation mutable.
 White women may stand out for their fair and lovely skin,
 Or maybe this colorist society has convinced me they shouldn't reciprocate Indian interest.
 Tall skinny women may stand out for their athleticism and grace,

Or I've internalized unrealistic body standards being raised by Hollywood and PornHub.
Nerds may stand out for their curiosity and relatability,
Or I've grown closed minded by failing to branch out to diverse people.
I've narrowed my boxes just enough that no one will actually be able to tick them,

Because I'm so scared of being proven wrong about myself,
That I've become scared of even taking a chance.
I'd rather moan about this suffocating world after burying my head in sand,
Demand to be taken to water with stitched lips,
Goad an impossible peak and scorn its climbability.

Twelve poems have sanded me to a rawness I couldn't previously imagine,
But the only truth they've unearthed?

*The masochist's climb,
Marching ego of Midas,
Never to arrive.*

HAIKU III

A Solipsist Language



Which relates the amusing musings of the confusing Joshi
concerning the nature of his existence, exploring
certainty and cynicism

Given a Turing machine M s.t. $L(M) = \{w \mid w \text{ exists}\}$,

$M(\text{chairs}) = 0$; Where is “chairs?” When does a surface become one?

$M(\text{red}) = 1$; Comprises a core part of your visual subjective experience

$M(\text{money}) = 0$; An intersubjective idea, impossible to pin

$M(\text{me}) = 1$; You think, therefore you are

$M(\text{happiness}) = 1$; Do you feel it now?

$M(\text{love}) = \dots\dots\dots 1$; Feelings are closed under intersection

$M(\text{afterlife}) = 1$; Your afterlife is your beforelife

$M(\text{legacy}) = 0$; But nothing earthly brought

$M(\text{time}) = 1$; It always stops for you

$M(\text{protons}) = \dots$

.....

..... 0; You simply haven't seen one **not** exist

$M(M) = 0$; Perhaps in theory. But theory can only take you so far

$M(\text{god}) = \dots$

...

.....

.....

.....

The Other Side of the Pond



*In which the haughty Joshi sees a hottie staring back from the water, exploring
virtue and vanity*

*Bright dots through black pond,
Replete with sonderous thoughts,
Intoxicating.
When those thoughts resound like song,
What could possibly go wrong?*

TANKA I

Sheer nimbus hides bitten crescent,
Dewey grass shields chittering crickets,
Still lily pads mask aimless minnows,
Breathing, resting, eating.

A stranger in my own thoughts
Stands in my reflection, wearing laurels of green.
But in my reflection arrives another stranger,
Stealing my amorous attention from the pond—

*Bright eyes warm the air,
Timeless promises are made...
Soon to be broken.*

HAIKU IV

The stars in her eyes, they wander around,
Reaching depths I care not to know.
Then, a pestering fly hums unwelcome truths.
I attack with a stone, only to damage the pond.

Irritating ripples disturb the peace.
I shift to a serene spot on the other side,
Uncannily quiet, no crickets nor minnows,
To notice something I didn't before—

*Handsome reflection,
The image of perfection.
Me, myself, and I.*

HAIKU V

After all the work I've done on myself,
I've left everyone else behind in the dust.
I'm frustrated that we speak different languages:
Journaling, lifting, savoring, all outside of their vernacular.

It's lonely on this side of the pond.
 Everyone has a catch, but they don't look for theirs.
 No one will ever be good enough for me,
 Save for the man in the mirror.

*Why run the distance
 When crickets hop lazily?
 But there, I'll find me.*

HAIKU VI

I smile. He smiles back.
 I laugh. I make him laugh too.
 Why did I bother myself with crickets and bright eyes?
 I reach for an earnest hug, but slip—

Into Neptune's cold embrace.
 Stunned, perplexed, lucid.
 A thunderous cannonball wakes the sleeping serenity,
 Only to stabilize, moments later—

*Confused Narcissus,
 Feels the bottom of a pond,
 And thinks himself deep.*

HAIKU VII

The world is clearer through water than air,
 Exposing the truths of my own life:
 I never cared for the crickets and minnows.
 They were just fun to observe.

But neither did the crickets and minnows care for me,
 Each darting glance seeking validation.
 An intelligent gaze lacks empathy;
 Too keen to love, too blind to appreciate—

*Bright eyes only peer
 To check their hair and pimples.
 Begrudging mirror.*

HAIKU VIII

They ask "how are you" to ask about themselves,
 Questions that lay the errors of my ways plainly.
 Still, my battered heart remains hopelessly romantic,
 Waiting patiently for the one to join me in these depths.

Besides, who am I to judge?
 Gazing at a mirror reflects poorly on them,
 But it takes one to know one.
 Skeptical, but from the surface, another stranger arrives—

Her, herself, and she?
Perhaps I'm a hasty judge.
Please, understand me.

HAIKU IX

Is she looking at me or the mirror?
 In any case, let me disarm a certain curiosity from my arsenal,
 One less excuse for my future self to feel unsatisfied.
 Selfish, but it's an act of love for the one I haven't met yet.

But come to think of it, the silence was... nicer.
 Silence has nothing to prove, but I think I do.
 Regardless, I'm too scared to find out.
 In her eyes, I seek only my shadow—

Bright dots through black pond,
Bereft of curious eyes,
Inevitable.
But when no one comes along,
What could possibly go wrong?

TANKA II

Customer Disservice



In which the unstoppable Joshi meets an immovable object,
among other events most worthy of mention, exploring

motivation and Murphy's law

"I've got the world on a string, sitting on a rainbow. Got the string around my finger..."

Sings the indolent Joshi as he circles the living room, winding and unwinding his yo-yo on a lazy early morning. It was the last Thursday of November, meaning he was responsible for cooking a great feast. It was his favorite culinary expedition of the year, and he had but two days left of his break to enjoy this time at home.

"Chinu, call Verizon. You need to activate your phone and switch Tai's to Pro Max before you go to college. Give this importance. And go to the grocery with Tai."

"Ugh, fine."

He fell in dire need of a new phone after dropping the incumbent from the third floor of the dining hall onto concrete, after which its battery resembled that of a desktop computer more than a mobile phone. He wanted a 120hz display for his keen eyes, but his (father's) wallet objected dearly to those lofty prices. So, the frugal Joshi posed a cunning exploit to the frugaler Joshi, his father, to switch 3 cell lines to Verizon to get 3 free and locked phones. The exploit was a success, for nearly all aspects went according to plan... Nearly. There were two hiccups—none of the new phones were activated, and he made a disastrous mistake in assuming that the moneyed Joshi, his sister, would be satisfied with a mere iPhone 16 while he brandished the Pro.

Now of course, owing respect to the man of the house, he returned to his winding and unwinding without a second thought. This highly productive behavior continued for a few minutes too long when he lost interest and decided it was time to call his sister. But, phones unactivated, this endeavor ended fruitless indeed. So, lucky he was that being siblings, they shared living quarters, he howled from the depths of his lungs...

"TAAAAAIIIIII, WANT TO GO TO PUBLIX?"

And so the two Joshis did go to Publix. And the two Joshis did grab stuffing and celery, shells and ricotta, green beans and mushrooms. And they did scarf free samples of honeyed brie on saltine crackers, and they did purchase honeyed brie and saltine crackers upon discovering this harmonious pairing. And the unscrupulous Joshi did grab a \$120 goose, telling the naive Joshi that it was merely a beswollen turkey. And the unscrupulous Joshi did surreptitiously "forget" to scan said porcine turkey, as to avoid needless damage to his (father's) wallet. But when all was said and done, the two Joshis did return from a successful and timely shopping trip, ready for the culinary Joshi to get to work.

And so the culinary Joshi, anticipating the great enterprise that awaited him in the kitchen, returned to the living room to give some pages of Don Quixote a much needed scrubbing with his eyes. Yet it was only a few paragraphs and chuckles later, when a most worrisome thought arose:

*Shit, what if someone tries to text me while I'm MIA?
And thus began the good knight's journey...*

THE FIRST PART OF CUSTOMER DISSERVICE—

In the spirit of efficient storytelling, this narrator omits the prodigious adventure in which the princely Joshi gets admitted into the ancient and commendable order of chivalry, leaving the privilege of recounting this delectable tale to the oral traditions of *The Knights Vault*, sure to preserve for generations, if not in the memory of those present in Edinburgh and neighboring cities, then in the many swords, cutlasses, and shields that witnessed the legendary event first-hand. Please assume the abundant rigor of the ceremony, sufficient to vindicate all later events described in good faith, their excellence matched only by their lawfulness and legitimacy, as another knight errant was sure to be present in such a beneficial area, Instead, I take you to Thanksgiving 2024, to an even more delicious adventure.

But, along the way, to whet your palette before the main course, this indulgent narrator relates one such tradition:

The darkest day for chivalry there was,
 In which the devil dons our holy cross.
 His legion builds as wretches join his cause;
 To them he's "*Prince!*" To me he's common dross.

He lures the chaste away from righteous stairs
 With wicked looks, beguiling cologne.
 So dames and damsels of the land beware:
 You'll find your hearts belong to him alone.

"*No more!*" I scream, my heart possessed with greed,
 And snatch a sword before the knighting scene.
 I weave through present company with speed
 To threaten gates of hell with blinding sheen.

But Joshi's gaze compels my sword to still
 And leaves me kneeling, servant to his will.

SONNET II

No further words beg to be spoken about his devilish looks and enchanting charm. Next, as to uphold the tradition of his company, he needed a lady of whom to be enamored, a name for which he could perform his mythical exploits, for a knight without a lady love is a processor without a program—physically correct, existentially vacuous. He soon decided Maria, the girl with whom he shared a few entertaining dates, would make a fine choice. Without a moment in between, he turned and opened his mouth, as if he really were in love,

"O Doña Maria, mistress of this hapless heart! How could you be so tyrannous as to drown your knight in the silence of your stitched lips, succoring him only with the crumbs of your mirage rather than the loaf of your presence? Do tread carefully, for this slave to your captivating beauty

—THE UNSTOPPABLE FORCE

kneels before your delicate shoe, and the orphans and widows of the world would suffer a tremendous loss indeed if this arm were to be crushed by a misstep of your grace,” he said, unable to receive her texts, having dropped his old phone from spectacular heights.

Having shown that the prerequisites of knightly conquest are well satisfied, without any further adieu, we fast forward to Nov 28, 2024. Our capable knight, animated by a noble desire to rescue messages from the abyss of `/dev/null`, closed his copy of *Don Quixote*, and began conversing with Verizon customer service with remarkable speed and wit.

FIGURE 1. Expectation vs reality of his correspondence with Verizon.

Verizon agent	Verizon agent	An unexpected setback! Our shrewd knight, unconvinced that a task of this minutia is unfeasible, for it simply requires sending the replacement phone <i>alongside</i> the kit so he could be left deviceful during the shipping time, decided to escalate this squabble to the Verizon call center.
<p>Good knight, I see our deal has brought to thee, three lines anew, three phones bestowed for free. As one Verizon trusts, I humbly ask: are these the objects of thy noble task?</p> <p>Indeed, I must exchange one who's arrived, iPhone 16, on line -2175, for a Pro Max. But keep the deal, I pray, the offer granted on that fateful day.</p> <p>Of course, an easy change in any case. I'll send the Max & return kit to thy place. The deal remains, just ship your phone away. Can I provide thee further help today?</p> <p>Oh wow! That's all I need, you've been so kind. Your help was terse, no problem left behind. I must admit, I've yet to catch your name; for such swift service, you deserve acclaim!</p> <p>That's great to hear! But I'm a suit of steel, whose name is less important than your zeal :)</p> <p>Sonnet III</p>	<p>End Chat</p> <p>I really appreciate you for reaching out to us. This is your Verizon live Rep. How are you doing today?</p> <p>Good. I recently purchased 3 new lines and phones, but I need to upgrade one of the phones while keeping the new line offer</p> <p>I am glad to know about your well being, I hope your day ends with big smile on your face. :)</p> <p>Thank you for bringing this forward to me. You have reached into right hand for your concern, I am taking complete ownership of your concern and help you with the best resolution.</p> <p>Let me quickly pull up your account details and help you with the best resolution on it.</p> <p>Please allow me few minutes here while I am working on your request.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>-15 messages later-</i></p> <p>You can't do it for me online? I have to go in person?</p> <p>We can do it for you, however if I will place the order now on the same line without returning the device.</p> <p>Please allow me few minutes here while I am sending the return kit box at your address.</p> <p>Wait no don't send the return kit I'll go to the store so I won't be left deviceless</p> <p>② Verizon Agent</p> <p>Perfect, I will be adding the notes for you so that you will not have to explain this whole details at store.</p> <p>Ask a question</p>	<p>+1 (800)-922-0204.</p> <p>A far cry from the responsive chat, he entered a purgatory of “hold music.” He twiddles his thumbs, hums <i>I've Got the World on a String</i>, and ponders philosophies far too confounding to record on this deficient paper. Then, “Eureka!” He hatched a brilliant scheme to use this opportune wait time to prepare dinner, transforming his impatience to anticipatiience. In the kitchen, he opened the cosmopolitan spoils of his last sally with his sister: crusty bread crumbs and crispy celery from <i>La Rochelle</i>, fresh shells and ricotta from <i>Reggio Emilia</i>, and hearty green beans and mushrooms from <i>Penrith</i>. There is some academic contention over which</p>

of the treasures was the cream of this lot. Some scholars claim it was the mushrooms for their earthiness, others vehemently argue it was the ricotta for its creaminess. But this contrarian narrator vouches for the booty too oft overlooked: Gerald the Dragon, corpulent scourge of *Southern Belle Farm*, for he was tamed without so much as a scratch to the Joshi coffers; such is the might of The Great Liberators, more commonly known as his agile fingers. Yet, Gerald grew annoyed after this amicable return for the pestering Joshi got under his skin—with a cold metal spoon covered in masala yogurt—so Gerald took a timeout in the fridge while our dexterous knight tended to his spoils.

By God, who could describe the mastery of craft on display in this humble kitchen?
None should attempt to describe the indescribable, except, perhaps, for an anapestic quatern.

With a phone in his hand and a hand on his chin,
He leans on the counter in thought.
As he surveys his recipes, *where to begin?*
He learns how to cook what he's bought.
But the stove timer blinks, could it be a scam?
It's Gerald and stuffing and beans!
"And the burner's no better", says strawberry jam,
It's chaos like you've never seen!
Yet the chaos is quiet, it's under control,
It's ebbing and flowing at ease.
Though he roasts without recipe, runs without goals,
His company's sure to be pleased.
So there's magic at play. Gordon Ramsey? Take notes.
He sits on gastrology's throne.
At height of it all, with pride in his throat,
A voice bellows out of the phone—

BALLAD II

And spoke great hanky-panky, but little resolution. Both roads pointed in the direction of Avalon, all while Gerald and stuffing and beans had finished cooking in the oven. His father joined in this gallantry, and they made preparations to leave posthaste, equipping the ~~Camry~~ enchanted horse with the resources needed to vouchsafe a successful voyage: the youthful Joshi procured a banana, and the elder Joshi prepared a balsam: a concoction of black tea, ginger, and milk. And preparations in order, they sallied forth.

Lady Fortune blessed them with uncountable green lights, all of which confirmed that their decision to sally forth had been a most judicious and excellent one. They arrived at the Avalon Verizon with 2 dreams, 3 phones, and 25 minutes. The young attendant welcomed them with a warm smile. They explained their perplexing state of affairs, to which he replied:

“Yeah I can’t help you with that. You gotta go to a Verizon store.” At this point, our deductive Joshi was rather confused, for he could’ve sworn that the sign outside said—

“This is a retail store, not a corporate store. The closest one is on Satellite Boulevard,” answered the psychic wizard straight from his mind. It grew clear that this orchard was merely an infertile scrubland, so the cartographing Joshi searched for this supposed *real* Verizon store, after which he found himself in a most troublesome conundrum: the corporate store closed at 7:00 and was 25 minutes away, which would leave them with a mere 5 minutes!

Without thinking even once, as he often does, our intrepid Joshi stormed into this new terrain, courage spilling from his bosom as relentlessly as sunlight does from the heavens. He rode like he had never ridden before, while the oft-criticizing Joshi stayed quiet like he had never stayed before. They reached the store ahead of schedule and sprinted forth.

Indeed, this castle had a mystical aura that the scrubland clearly lacked. Even outside, you couldn’t count the menagerie of ornaments, string lights, and streamers. The moat was lowered, the portcullis was unlocked, so they barged inside without giving notice. They were greeted at the entryway by a thick troll with a meagre sense of humor. They explained their situation with great haste, fervor, and holy requests, to which she replied,

“Of course, I would love to help you! We open tomorrow at 10:00AM.”

“Can’t you just take this phone and hand us a 16 Pro Max? It’d only take a minute.”

“Of course I can! Tomorrow at 10:00.”

This conversation had all the marks of a one way ticket to Narnia, so the humble Joshis accepted their setback and set forth home, determined to return abundantly equipped with time and knowledge. And in the meantime, they had a wonderful job ahead of them; to enjoy the grand banquet that patiently waited for them at home.

But misery’s reprise! Of the infinite research consumed by the erudite Joshi inside the library of knowledge, both in range and granularity, he failed to learn that unlike his scrawnier cousins, Gerald is a red meat creature who should be cooked to medium rare. But his temperature was as much medium rare as white is black, truth is falsehood, matter is antimatter, and vim is emacs! The result? Gerald took to arms, with his previously supple rib cage transfigured into the bitter knives of revenge, his previously delectable and tender flesh beamed into kevlar, as indicated by its bulletproof texture and leathery flavor.

Such stoney barrage of misfortune would be sufficient to batter even hearts of brass. Yet, there is no need for our diamond-hearted Joshi to wallow at such moderate of setbacks, for if a knight fails an adventure, it simply means it is not meant for him, but for others, and he is not required in good faith to attempt it again—but such sound and proper logic need not assuage our gallant knight, whose very fate is to hammer at the wretchedest of exploits until they yield to the indefatigable might of his arm and indubitable verisimilitude of his character. However, the midnight oil burns on fumes, so our knight’s true and delightful tale will resume in a future part of Customer Disservice. »

THE SECOND PART OF CUSTOMER DISSERVICE—

Our primeval knight rose to the chirping aviary of Eden (the new iOS 17 alarm). This morning started as should all great adventures in the realm of knight errantry, as well as all other realms that benefit from a bright brain and balmy body: chai balsam and chit-chat with family in the kitchen. His sister had 6 SolidCore classes to teach that day, so she left with great hubbub, leaving only motion lines and questions behind her. Otherwise, the morning was temperate and tranquil, a river in lands untouched by man.

His mother took this “activation” nonsense into her own hands by calling Verizon. The Joshis poked great fun at these contrived systems for 30 minutes until a human answered. He seemed confused by their labyrinthian concerns, so he hailed his manager begrudgingly. She arrived with an assurance that confirmed her advanced capabilities, saying she could activate the phones with a push of a button. *Well why didn't you do that before we called? Whatever.*

One by one, the spirits of their old devices reincarnated into their younger, sharper successors. Our good knight’s phone was first to say “*good night,*” and he ~~jumped in joy having regained service~~ (further inquiry revealed he didn’t react). He cleared his throat, restarted his phone, and prepared to allay his countless fans, friends, and perhaps even the peerless Doña Maria herself... No new messages. Clearly, the wicked enchanter who haunted him must have intercepted those lost words of plaudit and flattery! “*Drats!*” His mother and father went next, and the affair proceed as smooth, simple, and harmless as butter. Finally, they texted his sister that she would have to restart her phone.

His mother brewed another balsam while the idle Joshi paraded his two-legged steed on a victory lap around the neighborhood. Per her exhaustive requirements, he dressed head to toe in a scarf that ran for miles, a quilted down jacket stuffed with Gerald’s feathers. Wool socks that climbed to his armpits, snowshoes less penetrable than Alcatraz. But riding in this cozy fashion, his sister sped back with a face fixed in distress. Her steed screeched to a sliding stop beside the startled Joshi and stammered out a single question: “*Is Aai home?*” He nodded in reflex, and without a second to spare, she sped off at a pace that impressed, though wholly improper for inner paths. And the poky Joshi had barely crested the hill’s apex when again her steed streaked past, possessed by some unseen haste. “*She could’ve sent a text...*”

When he returned home, they had a good laugh about his sister’s shenaniganry. Purportedly, her phone didn’t connect to Verizon post-restart, and she didn’t know how to get to her second SolidCore location. So she determined that the simplest solution was to drive home to take someone’s phone to locate the unknown, his mother being the lucky lender.

At 6:00, it was about time to embark on the Second Expedition to Verizon. He requested that the elder Joshi sally forth alone for this rather irritatingly simple transaction, but he insisted that his presence was necessary and proper. The forlorn Joshi proposed a few *but*s and *why*s, but as always, yielded in the end. So he took the horse’s reins again, making sure to cut down the ETA to avoid unneeded corporate hanky and sassy panky. The Joshi pair

—THE IMMOVABLE OBJECT

arrived in smug fashion with time to spare, ready to finalize the plot of this exploit for the history books once and for all. But little did they know, this was the moment that the final boss of treachery gave a great yawn, stretched its arms, and brushed its teeth... The pair was greeted by the same bridge troll who shined a supercilious corporate scowl.

"Glad you could finally make it! Do you know what phone you want?"

"Of course, the 16 Pro Max."

"Color?" Oh. Hmm. The infallible Joshi had already made the great mistake of assuming the moneyed Joshi would want the base model, and he wasn't about to make a similar mistake with its appearance. The two options in stock, titanium and desert titanium, were both on display, allowing him to consider every aspect in his remarkably high-dimensional machinations. Should he play it safe with a neutral tone? *No! It's boring and dull and stupid.* Should he risk it with the pretty pink color? *No! It doesn't go with every case color.* He rode along these and similar trains of thought for many stations, going so far as to squat down to see how they refracted the light, twiddling them in his hand to see if the colors *felt* any different, and finally trusted his gut for this nerve-wracking decision.

"We'll take titanium! Wait no, desert titanium!" he exclaimed assuredly.

"Cool." While the troll began the transaction on her antique computer, the wandering Joshi picked a case for the phone as to handcuff Murphy before he had a chance to strike. Amidst *oohing* and *ahhing* at the designs, the troll screeched a riddle through her leathery voice:

**Si tu móvil quieres mejorar,
La ID del gerente debes mostrar.**

"Ah. Uh. She's not here, but would a picture of the ID work? Perhaps a FaceTime?"

" Nope, the account manager has to be present with a physical state-approved ID."

"Oh ok well I'm the one who created the account, here's my ID."

"Are you the account manager?"

"Technically no, but like I said I made the account so I can just login and change that."

"That is a policy violation, in which case I would refuse to help you in good conscience. Only the account manager is allowed to do that. I'm not trying to get myself fired."

God save us! How great was the rage that took possession of the heart of the man of Atlanta upon seeing himself treated in this way? It was so great, I say, that fire darted from his eyes, electrons sliced from his brow, and the Earth quaked under his heel as he roared!—

"Scandalous lies! You, you agent of chicanery, ally of artifice, depository of cheats, storehouse of knavery, silo of hoodwinks, inventor of evil, proclaimor of nonsense, monster of mischief, creature of deceit, officer of Lucifer, corrupter of dreams,

contortionist of smiles, enemy of the respect that is due to royal persons! Begone, get out of my sight, under the pain of incurring my wrath!"

But right in that moment, the camouflaged enchanter must have twisted and warped his mighty roar mid-journey, for all that reached the ears of present company was—

"Dude, what? I'm the one who made her the manager in the first place so I can certainly change that. And I never asked you to get yourself fired, I'm just asking you to work with me here."

The inferno of his eyes, lightning of his brow, and thunder of his heel would've converted kingdoms to ash and iPhone 16s into iPhone 16 Pro Maxes, had the mighty Joshi foreseen the enchanter intervening in this most disadvantageous of moments. But recognizing the futility of discourse with this base villain, he stage-whispered to Father Joshi, *"Ok Baba, let's call Aai to sort this out."* They lived 30 minutes away, perhaps a small time for the golden era of chivalry, but hardly surmountable in the fast-paced today. She should not have come even if time had been as plentiful as last night's feast. So once out of earshot, he said *"Screw this corporate buuuullllshit, I'm going to make myself account manager."*

He logs into verizon.com for the umpteenth time, knowing by muscle memory the timing of the Javascript and placement of the buttons. But tragically, the cookie window expired, and he had to two-factor authenticate!

What a horrendous system 2FA is! In an era where a 30-minute drive is eternity, a 10-second authentication is at least a week, perhaps closer to a fortnight! Having to take out my second papyrus to open a mail just to press a button is a colossal waste of time and energy matched only by watching New World televised football! And much like football, no one actually cares about account security unless it involves money or scandal... *cough.* hrm, but that is a matter unrelated to our rose of knight errantry, though still most worthy of mention. However, verizon.com didn't seem to care very much for this well-crafted argument, for it was still waiting on an email sent to his mother...

"Ok no biggie, let's just call her." *ring ring. ring ring.* But no one picks up. Mother of pearl! Tragedy always strikes in pairs! The phone that the super-speeding Joshi took earlier to SolidCore bared its consequences in the most climactic of moments!

"Shit. Wait, no problem, let's just login to her yahoo too." Father Joshi grew increasingly skeptical of his brainstorming, and the clock seemed to run at a pace somewhere between an Olympic sprinter and a cheetah. But the unwavering resolve of our good knight knew deep down that this road led to unfathomable boons.

He guessed the password after the third attempt, but Lady Fortune seemed to have missed a memo, for tragedy actually strikes in triples! Yahoo also required 2FA, but this time it was a text sent to her phone, which was held hostage till kingdom come! He texted his sister *"URGETN PLS CALL."* But they could kid themselves no further: they stared at a dead end.....

After such a tremendous series of unfortunate events, it would appear that the second sally was destined for cold defeat. The two Joshi's drove home with their shoulders hung low,

hearts drenched in sorrow, and Lady Fortune revoking their Blessing of the Traffic Lights. But after the agonizingly long left turn, an opportunity arose like a phoenix from the ashtray of dreams, for an entirely unrelated text from Sister Joshi arrived! Without further processing what it read, the equestrian Joshi cantered to the side of the road and texted back “*APPROVE THE YAHOO EMAIL!*” But even Hercules would have found himself powerless in these shoes, for hopes may be resuscitated, misgivings may be alchemized, but time may never be unfurled. The clock read 6:55, in the exact same position they were denied at this time, yesterday.

On the drive home, the elder Joshi poked the busy Joshi for being absent during her own exploit and leaving her mother deviceless. The busy Joshi blasted right back with “*you had no right to cut my service in the middle of work!*” He shielded with “*you just had to restart your phone!*” She sidestepped with “*it wouldn’t work,*” he parried with “*you must’ve done it wrong,*” she pierced with “*that’s impossible to do.*” But before nuking his opponent with “*then you just must be stupid.*” he filched the high horse with “*I’m not mad, just disappointed.*” It wasn’t until the next day that the truth would emerge: her old phone was locked to T-Mobile...

Unsatisfied with the track record of this sally, the glass-half-full Joshi decided to salvage *something* from the trip. They needed to return the iPhone 16 phone case anyway, assuming they would have a different sized phone by now, so the resilient Joshi stopped by Whole Foods to ship it back to Amazon. So it wasn’t a *total* defeat, for each of his lanky strides exuded glee and confidence! While waiting in the store, tapping Memory Leaves on the box, he remembered Mother Joshi saying earlier that the onions needed replenishing after his great Thanksgiving adventure, so he wisely purchases those as well.

On the return from Whole Foods, Father Joshi decided that she should just keep this phone she already has to save their future selves from gray hairs. “*That would be all well and good, had I not just returned its case five minutes ago.*” His soul is the very mirror of misfortune!

When they returned home, they weren’t greeted with blooming tulips and sighs of fair dames like in the golden era. Instead, he tossed the cursed phone and onions next to Gampathi Bapa and started humming “*got the string around my finger.*” He reached for his yoyo on the counter to start winding and unwinding where he left off. But... “*something’s wrong, I can feel it.*” He felt like the disguised enchanter was toying with him, because couldn’t pick up the plastic toy from the table: it was immovably heavy!

Still, this didn’t stop the hypertrophied Joshi, who channeled all of the might in the cosmos to coerce the yoyo to gain gravitational potential energy. Then just after he slipped his finger through the string, without a doubt in his mind that this is a most sagacious and excellent idea, he heard a **-SNAP-**

The world bounces one..... two..... three times on the ground before rolling to a stop, Attached to a loose string, and a **bloody finger**.

Severed Finger



In which the disillusioned Joshi silences the noise, exploring

industry and identity

I look down at my right hand numbly to see a member absent from the group.
 Then look down at the floor, to see my lucky index finger lying in a pool of its blood.
 I'm mildly annoyed that it would try to leave me.
 I bend over to pick it up and press it back into its bloody stump.

It stays for a pitiful second, then plops back off.
 I repeat this process a few more times, each endeavor to less avail.
 Now I'm mildly frustrated that it would disobey my will.
 I apply a tourniquet while I devise more permanent ways to force it into submission.

In the meantime, I return to my daily life. But something's different.
 Applying to summer internships? Meh
 Getting a shoe-in chair position in my favorite club? Nah
 Working for my hard-earned lab's research? tsk
 Coding my beloved personal projects? *After this poem.*

My whole life, I've been the king of my outer world.
 Always the most curious, first chair musician, tallest guy, quickest learner, most ambitious.
 Now I... *I fail myself.*

Magic finger gone, I realize just how much I've used talent to hold it all together.
 I hear myself from three years ago disparaging my indolence and ineptitude,
 And he's deafening. He won't leave me alone.
 My life is perfectly manageable, and it only gets harder from here. Yet I'm still making snow angels in the papers and goofing off instead of getting my head in the game! I can only get out of bed early to write poetry and cook, and even those are mediocre at best. What should I do? I want to, I want to scratch my nails on a chalkboard, plunge my head in ice water, smash ceramic in a rage room, god anything to get myself back on track!

Something's wrong, I can feel it.
Just a feeling I've got, like something's about to happen, but I don't know what.
If that means what I think it means, we're in trouble, big trouble.
 This should be just a moderate injury, but instead,
 Something deep inside is escaping through the wound.
 Without Midas's finger, who the hell am I?

A headache comes, endorphins fade,
 I reach to touch the pool I've bled.
 With slipping feet as poise betrays,
 I fall like steel and crack my head.

I awaken in a sterile interrogation room.
 A brittle old man sits opposite to me,
 His right arm chained to the chair's,
 His left arm holding a red styrofoam cup of what smells like... chamomile?
 He wears a tacky sweater; it looks like it was knitted by someone special.
 But his appearance is overall uninspiring and forgettable.

My neck complains about stiffness, as if it held an awkward position for some time,
 I hurriedly emerge from my chair, legs squeaking.

Chinar!? Are you awake?

I slowly turn my head, and—

—my jaw unhinges from this mortal frame,
 For Aphrodite stands before my eyes.
 Her gaze outshines Apollo's brightest flame
 And grants my heart's delight, my mind's demise.

I see what tapestries had surely planned,
 A world where she is mine, foretold in scrolls:
 I raise her supple chin with unfazed hand
 As widened pupils meet each other's souls.

But dreaming not enough, I step to chase,
 My daunted feet creep steadily like plough.
 Each stride grows longer, stretching to her grace
 With just a dozen steps between us now—

But one-way mirror knocks me back to Earth.
Again?! My longing bellows out as mirth.

SONNET IV

I retrieve my jaw while I'm on the ground, and wave my hand before the glass.
 But her fiery eyes don't follow. They're glued to a blue Starbucks cup in her hand.
I've been so worried about you! Please sit back down.
 With great reluctance, I peel my gaze off of her and plop it on the table
 To notice a shiny object sitting in the middle: a silver revolver.

What the hell?! I recoil to the wall.
 But judging the situation, I'd rather wield it myself than my inmate.
 I lunge for the weapon,
 He sips his tea.
 It's cold and heavy like a glacier, a foreigner in my hands.

-BONK-

oww

Where am I?!

Please don't panic. I'm only worried about you, she coaxes in her layered voice.
It's time you end this deleterious phase.

Singing the blues,
Drinking black coffee,
Taking long walks alone,
Biking in the park at night,
Reading that inane chivalry book,
Writing that haunting poetry book.

I understand why you're doing all of this. She really did a number on you...
So stop moping about, and go get her back!
Make yourself irresistible, give them no choice but to love and respect you!

Do what happy people do.
Sing upbeat music,
Drink beer with friends at parties,
Study for your finals and interviews,
Apply to internships to secure a future,
Read news how the market and world is doing,
Write documentation for your research lab and projects.

Everyone grows up someday. It's not accepting defeat.
So please, dispose of this obsolete old loon and come to me!

Her caring, crimson words move me back to the table.
 Her desires are oddly specific, but I'm inclined to fulfill them.
 Besides, I'm beside myself with blood loss.
 I inspect the revolver's chamber, and indeed, lay two bullets in the front.
 I hesitantly point it at the old man.

I'm sorry for this... Any last words?
 No reaction.
 His eyes are clouded. He must not realize what's happening here.
 Sir, I'm pointing a gun at your head. You understand what happens next?
 He sips his tea.
 I'm provoked by his sheer lack of regard for his own life.
 I need to prove something before I do the deed,

So I forcefully shove the muzzle down his mouth.

Helloooo? Is anyone home??

No reaction.

I can't get so much as a cough out of him.

Something's wrong.

I step back, and question to my right for answers.

She's visibly ignoring me with her standoffish body language.

Yet, I can tell she's listening intently for my next move

Along with the glossy man who's curiously listening.

I'm not going to do it unless you give me a bulletproof reason why.

Her brow furrows.

He's living on stolen time, can't you see?

A tumor grown without permission.

Ossified, obsolete, obstinate.

Do you know why you're a failure?

Because you're being misled by an indolent role model.

I promise you, in the name of my honor, with all that is good as my witness,

You will be better off without him.

He hears this entire exchange, so he sips his tea.

I worriedly turn back to him.

Who the hell are you?

No response.

This enigma plunges me into deep thought as I decode the situation.

She looks visibly worried.

You've had your fun with this phase. Now please, come home. I miss you...

By the tail of her sentence, her form starts to melt—

Into Carmen, the first college girl to take interest in me, wearing a bright crop top.

Don't you want to be their friend and make out with me?

Next into Jeff, an old friend, wearing a Rolex and Meta t-shirt.

Don't you want them to think you're capable?

And then into Brady, my old hallmate, wearing a sharp tuxedo.

Don't you want to charm their pants off?

Now into Animesh, my dad's friend's successful entrepreneur of a son, wearing flannels.

Don't you want to change their world?

Finally into her true form: a siren, wearing a long shadow cast by impatience.

Don't you want to chase me? Now.

I should be abhorred by her monstrous faces, but I find myself deeply allured.
 The afflicted siren spoke these and other words with such genuine fervor and care that
 steel would've bent to her will,
 Of which my distraught, confused heart is certainly weaker.
 I look back at the man, who again, heard all of this,
 Prompting him to sip his tea.
Something's wrong.

I raise my hand to my temple to think for just a moment.
 Then I earnestly raise the gun,
 Avert my gaze over my shoulder, and—
I really am sorry for this—
 The room gets deafeningly quiet...

CLICK

BANG

The heavenly siren disintegrates into Earthly dust,
 Leaving in her place a small child, serenely asleep, thumb in mouth.
 Unexpectedly, the recoil felt harsh and thunderous like a car crash.
 My hands shake under the gravity of what I've done.
 The old man, unflinching, sips his tea.

*You can't really kill her, you know. Not that you'd want to do so.
 You've just sent her back some number of years.
 But if you can be sure of anything, it's that she'll grow up again.*

I'm provoked by his smooth, commanding voice.

*What the fuck is wrong with you?!
 How can you not react to any of this??
 I was just about to murder you!—*

No you weren't, he calmly answers.
 For better or worse, I'm afraid it was too late for you to listen to her.
 I heard Captain Obvious. It's clear you've already passed your first few teeth.
 So here I wait, enjoying my drink and a show.
 Regardless, I wouldn't have minded being sent back some number of years myself.

You pompous lunatic..... What first teeth?

Why, on the ratchet of growth, of course. Isn't that why you're here?

He removes a second cup, pours half of his tea, and offers.
 I begrudgingly accept, take a sip fit for a stubborn child,
 And force an ahhh.
 Grainy, bitter, lukewarm, as if brewed by his two left hands.
 How is he drinking this shit?
 But I wasn't about to let him know that.

*You never have to pretend around me. I know it's not very good.
 The fruit of my hands may never match hers, but it was enjoyable to make.*

My face reddens from embarrassment.
 Yet, I relax. The cup is oddly satisfying.

So again, who the hell are you?
 He stares back blankly.
 Frustrated and weary, I remember a thought he may enjoy.
 Who the hell am I?

*Ahhh, finally. An interesting question.
 Who do you want to be?*

Are you kidding? What kind of a response is that?
 If it were up to me, then I would be a Ramanajun, a Shakespere, an Einstein, a Coltrane, a
 Gauss, a Turing, a Picasso, a—
 And then what?

I'm taken aback by his interruption.
 ...The hell do you mean "and then what?"
 And then I would enjoy the spoils of my talent to my heart's content!

But what incredible spoils you possess already,
 Being born with the privilege that most people spend their lives chasing.
 Yet I see you not counting your blessings in peace.

Another blank stare. This time, from my side.

So I ask again. Who do you want to be?

...

I want to be a work of art!
 A poetry book, an album, a photograph, a program! Because I'm special: I see the world differently, nay, better than most. I'm the best at savoring, so it would be a tragedy to waste such good fortune.

He wears a solemn expression.

You were never special, Chinar. Everyone thinks they're special. Everyone thinks they're ordinary. But no one is really either: not those household names, not the stay-at-home parents. Not the person who discovers the $O(n^3)$ algorithm for SAT, not the people who fail the SAT. Strength and smarts, charisma and consciousness—they're not so important when there exist automata that surpass us in ways unimaginable, when even your love of biryani can be outdone. We fail to grasp the exponential growth of industry, our eyes flickering occasionally at words like “AI” and “quantum.” But that's a story for the next act.

This isn't what it means to be human, much less what it means to be Chinar Joshi. You are not cosmically endowed meaning, but you're certainly unique. Nothing else can be you in this present moment.

Besides, I doubt you would enjoy my fate, he continues.

My chamomile is an acquired taste. It asks for mindfulness, and in return brings a smile to my mediocre face. Her coffee asks for youth, and in return builds skyscrapers, sends man to Mars, and makes machines intelligent.

But when aesthetics guide your ambition, you'll choose music over metrics, stories over startups, poems over proofs. Living true to your values may leave you feeling mad when they diverge from others' paths. Few can understand, and fewer will try. For why would one concern themselves with dirt paths when the highway is well paved?

Yet, you still reached for my red cup, seeking something real. Why?

The air becomes still enough to hear the child's soft breaths.

I... I don't know. For all the glitz I hear in that alluring voice, I see no substance if it all gets wiped when I die. Even when I listened and emulated the people I once pedestalized, I just can't keep up; I realized I'm not cut from the same cloth. They work hard because it's their calling, while I do so because it can be fun. I still used to get results with ease, but when push comes to shove, it's just not worth my time. I can't live a life that's not completely authentic. But even when I'm consumed by doubt, she keeps whispering "you're not like them—you're better," and that's always been my armor against an identity of mediocrity. But I'm dying for anyone to notice the real me underneath, the beauty with the warts. I'm ready to tell it all unfiltered—that's why I wrote you—but I'm sure no one would even want to hear it.

His face melts into a relieved smile.

You're right—many people don't want to hear it. It's not because your words aren't valuable or that your experiences aren't worth sharing. It's because your kind of honesty makes people uncomfortable. It forces them to look inward, to confront their own messiness, or to admit they're not equipped to meet you on that level. And that's not a reflection of your worth; it's a reflection of their capacity, their readiness, or their own fear of vulnerability. The part of you that demands to be seen as a whole person, not just the curated version that fits neatly into someone else's idea of success, isn't weakness; it's courage.

You are facing the part of life that no one warns you about: when talent isn't enough to make it feel easy. You were promised that brilliance would bring meaning, that validation would lead to fulfillment. It's no wonder this left you feeling disillusioned, because industry failed you when it mattered. It didn't help you get over Teja, it didn't help you understand why you feel unsatisfied—you did that alone. But here's the tricky part: waiting for someone else's recognition can feel like you're holding your breath. Even if it comes—and I truly believe it can—you might still wrestle with the fear that it's conditional, that it could be taken away, or that it's based on what you do rather than who you are. That's not a reason to stop wanting it, but it's a reminder that the most meaningful validation will always be the kind that starts within you. You're here to learn where that starts—to figure out who you are when accolades and achievements aren't there to back you up. That's a scary, humbling process, but it's also what will make your uniqueness meaningful.

Chasing success, you're after a sense of purpose that's tied to being extraordinary. And while that drive has pushed you to incredible heights, it's also robbed you of the ability to simply exist. You've put conditions on your own humanity, convincing yourself that unless you're the smartest, most capable, most remarkable version of yourself, there's no point in being at all. That's a lie. And it's a cruel one, because it denies the parts of you that are just as real as your ambitions—the parts that are tired, afraid, overwhelmed, and deeply in need of care. Not everyone will want to listen to your truth, and that's their loss. But the ones who do? Those are the people who matter. And when you find them, you won't feel like your honesty is a burden. It'll feel like a gift. Until then, keep sharing, even when it feels like shouting into the void. Someone is listening—even if it's just me, I promise, I'm here.

He takes a deep sip.
 His lucid words extract two of my tears that fall gently into my cup.
 I take a sip myself, then take a deeper stare at the bottom.
 The grounds seem to be listening intently, too.

Heh. How ironic is it that it's my turn to be tortured by the same reason I pushed her away?

It's hard not to dwell on the irony, isn't it? That she was exactly what you needed, and you didn't know it at the time. That the thing you struggle to find in others now—the willingness to sit with messy truths and emotional intensity—was something she gave freely, and instead of cherishing it, you made her feel like she was too much. And no matter how much you've grown, it feels like the person who could have appreciated that growth is gone. That realization cuts deep, because it's not just guilt for what you did; it's grief for the connection you lost and might never find again.

But here's the thing: you're not the person you were back then. You couldn't have been what she needed, not because you didn't care, but because you didn't yet understand yourself. The growth you've gone through—the clarity you now have—wouldn't exist without the pain of losing her. That doesn't make it okay, but it does mean that what you're grappling with now is, in a way, part of her legacy. Let it fuel the way you treat others moving forward, not as a way to "make it up to her," but to honor the connection you shared and to use this newfound emotional bandwidth to build something meaningful.

But why does the cost have to be so big? I reread my college application, and you know what three words I used to describe myself? Ambitious, hardworking, selfless. I was going to change the world as an entrepreneur, because I genuinely found it fulfilling to solve other people's problems—I don't give a shit anymore. I don't know whether all of this thinking has made me keen-sighted or blind, but honestly, I'm a selfish bastard and I love it. Maybe the only difference between the Chinar writing this and the Chinar enjoying a successful startup, hot girlfriend, and unquestionable respect is that his ego is three times as big. I see what you mean; success is thrilling, sure, but it was suffering that showed me the crack in the game: it ends. And I'm glad I realized that before I built the cage around me.

I'm still terrified of not being extraordinary, and I'm not sure I even want to free myself of that fear. But I'm trying my best not to let it stress me about talent, achievement, and prestige, because I don't want to accept this currency of validation anymore. And with that, I've started to see the siren of industry I once loved for what she really is—imaginary, with ugly fangs of agile sprints and KPIs. Still, between me and industry, I know I'm not the one who wears the pants. Maybe I've only grown because college affords me the freedom to write poems instead of programs, so I feel like I have to turn a blind eye and pretend I'm still that ambitious, hardworking, and selfless dreamer. Because I'm so scared that if I don't "make it," then I'll suffocate in an uninspiring place that smothers what's left of my spark.

Chinar, fear of change is part of the human package, so fear of changing identity would be scary indeed—if it were up to you. Today, you are building, writing, coding, cooking, singing, photographing, because it seems creation doesn't just fulfil you, it sustains you. But like it or not, you will likely get sick of all of them. But that doesn't mean identity escapes like sand through your fingers; you will just find new gerunds you love. And when it feels like your palm is empty, that means you're not looking hard enough. Because being young at heart makes everywhere you go an inspiring place; how else could you see an untidy pile of coffee cups and call it a statement on memory?

You don't want to let go of that fear because that dreamer wasn't just an act. He was you, just as much as the Chinar who writes poetry in the woods and sees the cracks in the game is you now. The difference isn't that you're selfish now and weren't back then; it's that you were fueled by a belief in the world's rules, and now you've started to see those rules for what they are—constructed, hollow, sometimes even cruel. That shift isn't selfishness. It's awareness. But awareness comes at a price, doesn't it? It's hard to walk back into the game with the same zeal when you've seen its fangs for what they are.

But you shouldn't try to figure it all out right now. It's okay to feel like you're still walking a tightrope between who you were and who you're becoming. But if they say that scientists should keep to science and artists should keep to art, then to hell with them. You just happen to exist in a period where the siren's curiosity is sensationalized, and my stoicism is... atrophied. But the fact that you're even wrestling with these questions shows that your spark hasn't gone anywhere—it just burns bluer now. Let it guide you, even if the path isn't clear yet. You've already seen through the cage; the hard part now isn't convincing the world that you're exceptional, it's letting yourself believe that even without the crown, your life is equally worth savoring. Though, you're free to change your mind again as you learn more about yourself. I wouldn't mind if one day you threw the tea back in my face.

I crunch my nails through the styrofoam
 And take an enormous gulp, being confronted by such a formidable pill.
 Then I contemplate the revolver in my hand:
 Heavier, but warmer from my skin.

How will I know if I've made the right choice?

He sips his tea.

“To survive is to suffer. To live is to find meaning in the suffering”

“Satisfaction isn’t something you find. It’s something you create”

END ACT 2

ACT 3

Balance



In which the wabi-sabi Joshi takes the middle path

“Structure doesn’t bind us; it liberates us from excess”

“I know everything, I know myself. I know mortality, spirituality, good and bad health. I know how people work. I know the price of life, I’m knowin’ how much it’s worth. I know what I know and I know it well not to ever forget—”

I snap awake with a bead of
 Sweat and worriedly check my hand. I... still have all my fingers.
 I stare at my intact digits with a furrowed brow for a minute.
What a wild dream.

It's 10:01 AM, 12/31/2024. 14 hours from the second half of the decade.
 I drudge over to the bathroom and wash my face,
 But as I unscrew the vitamin C, I hear a low, wailing sound:
 A lament. But the voice is... otherworldly.

I raise the bottle to my ear. Sure enough, that's the source.
Please tell me I'm not still dreaming!
 I give the bottle a shake, then two gentle knocks. The wailing stops,
 And out emerges a blue cloud of smoke, taking an anthropomorphic form who said,

"Chinar! Wow! What a poignant sentiment! So moved by your dream was I, that I shall vouchsafe you a New Year's boon that men would kill to have."

"Woohoo!—Just let me finish my routine real quick, my face is drying."
"Oh no no no, you're going to want to hear what I have to say before you draw another breath, truly an adventure of poetic whimsey!"
"Of course!—After my routine! Besides, a genie in a bottle? That's a tad cliched, isn't it?"
"Cliched!? Kid, if you want better material, then go pick up a better book," he says, dropping his grandiloquent visage.
"A better book..? Whatever man, just give me 5 minutes—"

I screw the dropper back into the bottle, dispersing the blue cloud.
 Then I calmly apply a large dollop of CeraVe moisturizer,
 Followed by two fingers of Bliss sunscreen.
 As I'm working toward an even blend, he forces out a muffled tone from the vitamin C,

"Hey, did you have to sell your balls to afford all this woman shit?"
 I flash the bottle a lethal side-eye, which shuts him up appropriately.
I apply 5 streaks of minoxidil, 2 steaks of Native deodorant,
And 1 anticipating grin.

I release a deep puff of air, and unscrew the bottle.
"Ok! Now what is this adventure you speak of?"
 The lofty cloud returns, alongside his lofty vernacular—

"Peace with your past and future selves you have reached. So a message you bottle now shall reach one of them too. The rule is simple:"

*Tell any truth, and I will send your bottle back 5 years;
Tell any lie, and I will send it forward 5 years.*

"Will this damage the spacetime continuum???"

"Listen buddy, I'm a genie, not a metaphysicist. And I have like 3 days to finish writing Act 3, so let's just assume many-worlds interpretation."

Huh. An opportunity to talk to my past or future.

How inconsequential. There's really nothing I wish I could or could've changed.

But maybe that's why he chose to "vouchsafe" me.

While I'm trying to decide, I remember a joke about Gödel's paradox.

I sit down at my desk and write both messages.

The sun grabs its apex and releases by the time I'm done.

Heh. I really have come a long way.

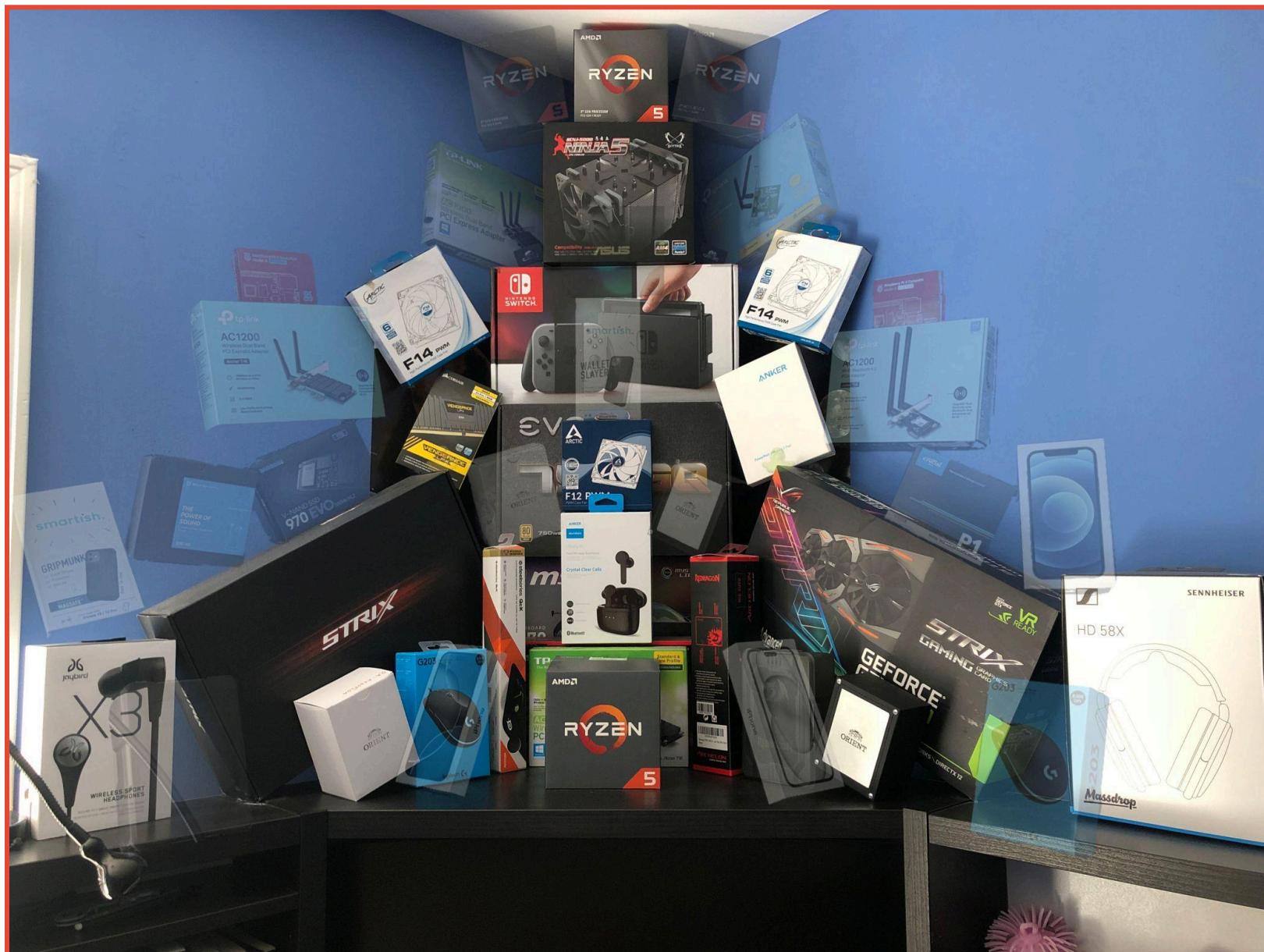
I drop them into separate bottles, and bring them to my bathroom.

"Have you made your choice?"

"Yes, the following is my logical proposition:"

You will send my bottle forward 5 years.

2020



In which the clumsy Joshi accidentally destroys the
spacetime continuum, exploring

gratitude and growth

"Annnnnnd done!"

I carefully crown my edifice of my computer with the Ryzen 5 3600.

"Now maybe I'll finally pick up Rust, or maybe I'll install Arch!"

I dismount my chair to decide my next obsession, admiring my work in reverence.

This tower represents \$2000 of gaming tech, plus the memories of all my favorites:

That GTX 1080 was nigh impossible to find between the miners and scrapers.

Or those Sennheiser 58x that I modded with foam, soundstage wider than Jo Mama.

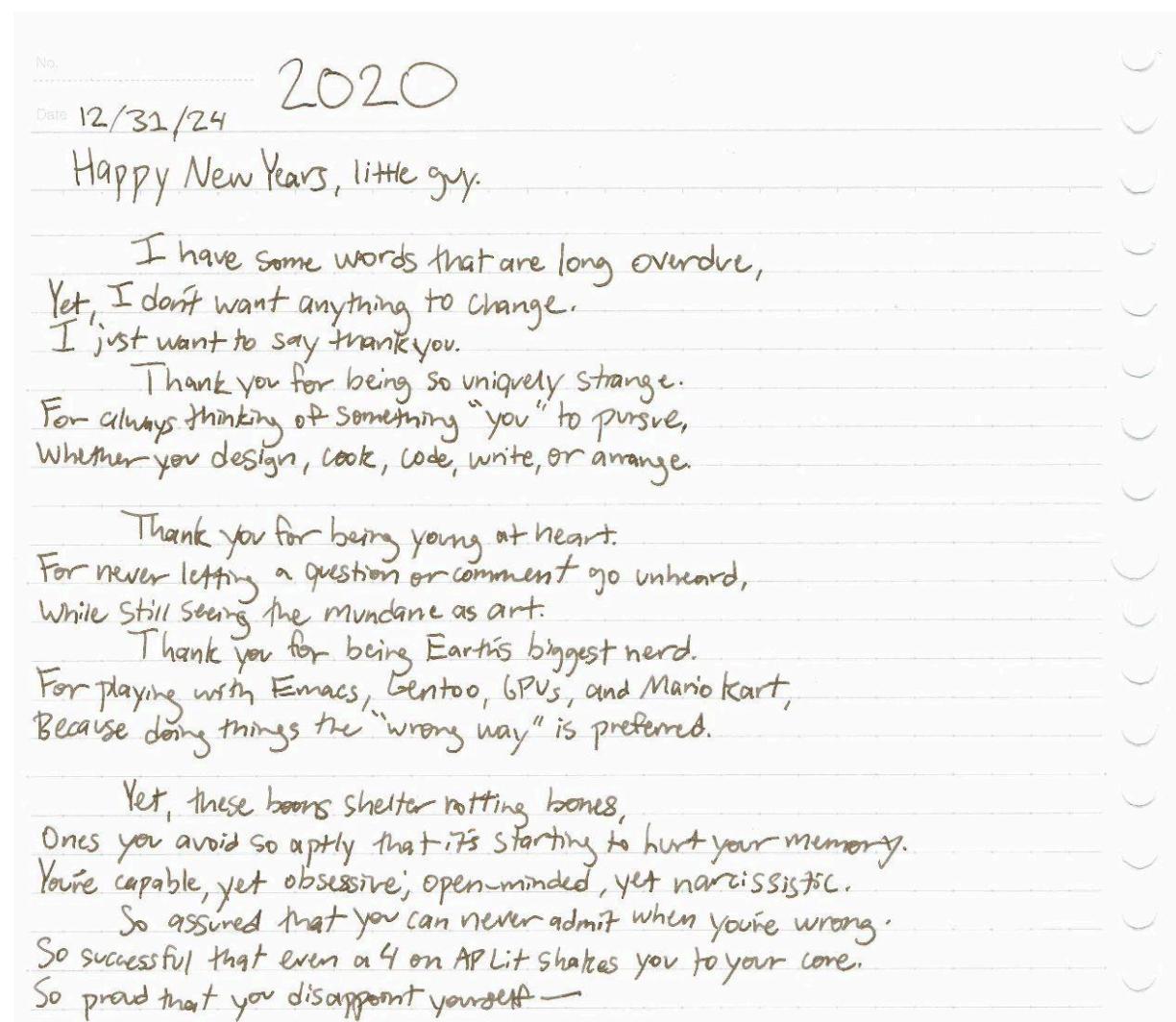
And don't forget that message in a bottle that I... wait... *a message in a bottle???*

This must be one of Tai's hoodwinks. I sweep the room, but the coast is clear.

I skeptically pop the cork and unfurl the message.

I've never seen this kind of paper before. It's somewhere between A4 and A5.

Yet the handwriting is... *mine*? But neater.



And I used to worry that I would disappoint you, too,
Because I don't live up to your standards of success.

That was, until I realized that my real problems are actually yours..

But I'm not mad at you. It's not your fault.
Because you've yet to suffer through a mistake,
Which is exactly what makes your sense of self so fragile.

Besides, you're too stubborn to learn in any way but the hardest one,
Refusing to take shortcuts, cut corners, or let anything be less-than-proper.
And honesty? That's what I love most about you.

Once life shows your mistakes in your face,
I'm confident you'll use it to move forward, kinda like a ratchet.
Well.. It's more complicated than that. But you'll learn in a few years.

But boy are there some good times in those few years!
I'm not talking about the ones you think you want, with women and alcohol.
I'm talking about the ones I know you don't, with blues and Solitude.

Your love for life will grow into something so beautiful after all,
That maybe one day you'll even be able to fill a book or two.
And that's something you should never forestall.

As for me, honestly, I'm doing a lot better than I could expect.
And I think I've struck a balance of appreciating you without feeling stuck.
I'm lost, I'm unemployed, I'm alone, yet I don't really object.

I feel like my favorite ingenious Hidalgo, cantering through the muck.
And I trust myself to be a man worthy of my own respect.
So now, I close this note with timeless words of wisdom and good luck:

There once was a man named Chinar,
Who found a strange note in a jar.
Though he seemed unimpressed,
He could never have guessed
That the note would collapse like a star.

LIMERICK!

"Ok, very funny, yet oddly heartfelt prank Tai, wherever you're hiding."

Suddenly, the spacetime continuum could bend no further.

All matter in the universe gravitated toward a single point: the note.

The resulting singularity exploded in a Big Bang,

And that timeline was destroyed.

My Nails Reek of Flesh



*About why the culinary Joshi wanted to go vegan for a week, exploring
taste and tinkering*

Your tongue is picky, posh, and sensitive,
 No bhaji pleased, no fizzy sodas poured.
 So cooking was a messy, smelly chore
 And eating was a joyless task to live.
 Yet daily varan baath could never give
 The strength your body quietly implored.
 'Till spoon of Aachi's chicken, crimson ore.
 The moment that you're dying to relive—

Your knees gave out as strangeness hit your tongue,
 An orchestra played soft between your cheeks:
 A clove-black oboe, cinnamon-brown fife,
 And ginger-gold trombone. Their voices sung
 Crescendo in your mouth, and as they peaked,
 Right there and then, a foodie born for life.

SONNET V

It's not addiction. You don't have apps that scroll, and you don't need weed to feel high
 It's not greed. You're not dumb enough to gamble, and you're not smart enough to gamble
 It's meat.

It's gawking at the bite-sized pork and beef brought to your table on a silver platter
 It's savoring the quiet sizzle right as they hit the piping burner
 It's surrounding yourself with foodie friends as you giddily wait for 135°F
 It's praying to God on the toilet because you couldn't wait for 135°F

It's peeling off the slippery skin of whole chicken legs to save a buck or two
 It's thinking to yourself "Ahh, so that's how boneless thighs get their shape"
 It's perfuming the kitchen with Malliard's fatty aromas
 It's learning how to stir fry, pan fry, deep fry, saute, grill, boil, simmer, poach
 It's empowering to get one step closer to the food you're eating

It's surprising your Brahmin family on Thanksgiving with a whole-ass goose
 It's honoring every carcass you bring home with a name: this one's Gerald
 It's laughing while you forcefully grope down his holes for goodies
 It's wincing because you sound like a rapist
 It's throwing all his collected organs and bones into a pot to make a thick gravy
 It's tasting livery because you didn't realize that liver tastes like liver

It's saying "WOOOOOOOW" after your first bite of Là Zǐ Jī Dīng
 It's walking into the Great Wall Supermarket with inspiration to make it yourself
 It's discovering animals you didn't even know existed: geoduck, black chicken, sea urchin
 It's making eye contact with an imprisoned lobster that's fluttering aimlessly
 It's bewildering to see a supposed delicacy sold for only \$7.99/lb
 It's remembering you're a pacifist, so you grab a carcass from the little plastic bin
 It's staring into its beady dead eyes in disgusted horror, saying "You're Larry now"

It's learning the hard way that shellfish spoil instantly
 It's giving his abdomen a timid whiff, terrified that he's going to resurrect and squirm
 It's clearing your throat after sensing some ammonia, but not enough to waste food
 It's adding vinegar to the vat to neutralize the smell and your nerves
 It's saying "sorry, buddy," as tongs lower him into his last bath
 It's covering the vat with a lid while you set a 15 minute timer
 It's suppressing the thought: "*waaait a minute... This guy is just an oversized cockroach!*"
 It's pacing around the room while you're calming yourself enough to eat the damn thing

It's running back 7 minutes later because crimson, sticky foam is rushing out
 It's smelling faintly of poopy ocean, yet you can't tell if it's more fresh fish or ammonia
 It's cleaning the foam off the burner, reigniting, and adding another 10 minutes to be safe
 It's pulling dripping, crimson Larry onto a cutting board on the table
 It's realizing your cultural biases don't objectify this guy into meat
 It's swallowing your fear while you remind yourself that this is the food chain
 It's twisting his tail left and right, left and right, greenish entrails plopping onto the board
 It's digging your nails through either side, squeezing the flesh out with all your might
 It's bouncing as it hits the cutting board because it's overcooked, fluids running amok

It's dipping the end of his tail into butter and taking a bite fit for a stubborn child
 It's easing up after realizing he just tastes like shrimp, and you can handle shrimp
 It's twisting his limp claws and remembering the might of Larry from SpongeBob
 It's being utterly unable to "open" his mighty arm to access his muscles
 It's grabbing a pestle and giving it a few smacks that make the glass table nearly crack
 It's smashing the claw until little holes form, with pathetic pink flesh peeking out
 It's stabbing your knuckle against the sharp pincer while ripping it off
 It's calling it quits because you can't take Larry's beady little eyes staring at you anymore
 It's carrying this messy experiment to the garbage can, then suddenly stopping:
 It's remembering your peculiar childhood arts and crafts projects—scissors, pliers, hot glue,
 and the carpenter ants crawling on your bedroom carpet.

It's peeling his face shield like a laptop to see the parts people don't like to see
 It's scooping out his **hepatopancreas** from the top of its body. Eater called this a delicacy! It's seeing its beady eyes are somehow part of his face shield? And they're hard as rock! It's trying to claw them off with your nails, but failing because they're **too damn hard!** It's using Larry's own pincers to claw off his eyes like he's the war hammer titan... But there was nothing underneath.
 It's wondering what those beady eyes were even connected to—it's pinching off his main ganglion where his **brain** should be. It's smooth and bland. *Why is it smooth and bland?* It's snapping his body in half to search for what makes him uniquely **Larry**. It's frustrating you can't find it. It's smashing his greasy **heart** and **gonad** between your fingers. It's plucking off every one of its **gills**. Now he can't water-breathe, just like me, *hehehe* ! It's tearing his spindly **antenna** into little ribbons with your front teeth because of how—

FUCKING DISGUSTING THEY ARE.

It's cutting all his big pieces into small pieces and then smaller pieces and exposing every last pocket of **tissue** and unrecognizable **organs**. It's insulting how *uniform and slimy and gray* everything inside of him is. It's remembering how **uniform and slimy and red** everything inside of you is. It's reeking of flesh from your nails after the ~~thirdfifth~~ tenth time you wash your hands. But after trashing all the little ribbons and shells, it's walking away and forgetting all about it, because you're a strong man with a strong stomach...
 Until—

—you make your cup of saffron milk that night.
 A pinch of precious stigmas in a mug,
 Then 6oz poured from Mountain Valley's jug.
 As cream and crimson glow a golden-light,
 A fleeting thought that something isn't right...
 While walking to the hearth, getting snug,
 You take a gentle whiff, a swirl, and chug.
 The moment that will always live in spite—
 Your knees give out as strangeness hits your tongue,
 A hellish choir screams a fetid tune:
 His crimson whiskers tickle soft wet cheeks,
 His milky odor crawls into your lungs.
 Crescendo in your mouth, and as you swoon,
 Right then and there, a vegan born for weeks.

SONNET VI

Poetry Is Pointless



In which the sardonic Joshi realizes that these philosophical gymnastics
are just coping mechanisms, exploring

vulnerability and vindication

*These words I write do not relieve my core.
 They're forged for her, my journey to adduce.
 What's conflict but a well I once ignored?*

*I turn my journal into hanged décor:
 A haunted canvas, framed with gilded spruce.
 These tawdry words do not relieve my core.*

*I overthink like soldiers trapped in war,
 Each prying thought reveals a worn excuse.
 What's conflict but a well to be explored?*

*I spill my growth in verses I abhor,
 Their message feigned, arrived too late for use.
 These tawdry words do not relieve my core.*

*I resurrect tumult from dusty drawers
 To urge my pen to spill its pensive juice.
 What's conflict but a well to be explored?*

*So let the verses spiral, I'll implore
 No answers, denouement, release, nor truce.
 These words embalm the ghost that haunts my core!
 What's conflict but a well I now adore?*

VILLANELLE I

Inception 2



About why the sleeping Joshi savors the mundane, exploring
sight and surreality

"He always pees in this exact bush when he plays here,"
 Says a mysteriously cloaked figure in the outskirts of the Wellington courts.
 There are 3 of them and an antique camera, all watching teenagers play basketball.

The teenagers end their game and take a water break.
 "I'll be right back. Play a quick one without me," says the one named Chinar,
 As he jogs over to his designated bush, right outside of peering eyes.

As the sun sets, Chinar finds the court rather gray and muddy.
 His friends are acting glum, and his game is off today.
 He wishes he was home, perhaps watching *Fullmetal Alchemist*.

He unties his gym shorts and looks up as he hears: "Say cheese!" **FLASH**
 He's knocked out. But right before he thumps the ground, he's gracefully caught,
 Then dragged into a bush by the armpits, his pants soaking up the puddles.

One of the figures verifies that no one heard anything, then says
 "They're playing first to 7, meaning you have about five minutes. Ready?"
 The other two nod and sit back for a picture. **FLASH**

A family leaves for a momo street-food shop in the outskirts of Mumbai.
 The doorless elevator creaks and crawls down the shaft under its six occupants.
 And staked out in the street are two cloaked figures and an antique camera.

The family reaches the street and hails two rickshaws.
 Chinar gazes from the opening, but his sticky sweat is the sole tenant of his mind,
 Not to mention there is nothing interesting for him to watch.

The two figures trail behind in a rickshaw of their own,
 Paying triple rate to closely follow the car in front of them:
 A nigh impossible task as the traffic ebbs and flows as orderly as water.

When they dismount, it's shoulder-to-shoulder crowded with a thousand conversations.
 But Chinar is fixated on the cigarettes and Dasani bottles shamelessly strewn everywhere.
 At the back, he's tip-toeing his white Reeboks through the sparse islands of clean.

"How the hell do we get him alone here?"
 "Don't worry, and follow my lead. I know he can't help it."
 One of the hooded figures picks up a stray cat and hurls it into an alley next to Chinar.

He hears the beleaguered Meow! that seems to have bothered no one's attention. He looks at his advancing family, then the cat, and is sure one peek couldn't hurt. The cat is pearl-white. It looks like it doesn't belong here. Where is its family?

He squats in front of the cat when he suddenly hears: "Say cheese!" **FLASH**
He's knocked out. But right before he thumps the ground, he's gracefully caught.
Then dragged deeper into the alley, his pants soaking up the dirt and grime.

One of the figures peeks down the alley and through the gaggle of busy passers-by.
"His cousins have already noticed he's gone, meaning you have about two minutes. Ready?"
The other figure nods and leans against a brick wall for a solo flick. **FLASH**

A high school marching band packs up after their performance at *Bands of America*. With blue uniforms and shiny instruments, they cart large props toward a parking lot. Waiting in the lot are two other marching bands, and one solitary, masked figure.

The band brings the props to the truck and starts breaking them down into pieces. Chinar usually loves this part because it involves more goofing than working, But right now he's fixated on his stinky gloves and chafing privates.

The figure removes their cloak to reveal the likeness of Georgia, Chinar's old crush (Although it appears she was never aware of this crush, of which he never told her). Phew... Go time.

"What's wrong, Chinar?"

"Nothin' much, just getting a little sick of all this"

"Well, I think I have something to say to you that'll make you change your mind about that:

[REDACTED] strangers [REDACTED] rules [REDACTED] commitment's [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] get [REDACTED] I just [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] give [REDACTED] down, [REDACTED]
around [REDACTED] desert [REDACTED] cry, [REDACTED]
We've [REDACTED] heart's [REDACTED]
both [REDACTED] game [REDACTED]
play [REDACTED] feeling, [REDACTED]
never [REDACTED] let [REDACTED] run [REDACTED] desert [REDACTED]
gonna [REDACTED] goodbye [REDACTED]
up, [REDACTED] let [REDACTED] around [REDACTED] you."

The score is 5-3, when suddenly,
 The court lights grow unnaturally bright, and flicker roughly once every second.
What the hell? It's only been two minutes! Shit shit shit shit.

This compels the masked man to turn on his phone's flashlight, hold Joshi's eyes open with his finger, and rapidly flicker the light into his pupil.
Here goes nothing, good luck, guys.

Once he's done, He slightly emerges from his bush and signals to the bush opposite to him From where a blowdart flies out toward the game.
 But let's pause the projectile mid flight, and see what's happening in India—

A police car rushes in front of the restaurant with a blindingly bright light.
 It rotates red and blue, which hits them with a beam roughly once every second.
 The air in the area gets tense and dense.

**sigh.* Only 20 minutes this time?*
Well, good luck in any case!
 She removes a torchlight from her purse and flickers it rapidly into his pupils.

Then she cautiously emerges from her alley and signals to the roof of the adjacent building.
 No response... but then another masked figure emerges, shrugging his shoulders in panic.
 Then he holds up a potted plant, looking for approval.

"Are you kidding me, that's all you could find in there?"
That's never going to work, the kick needs to be loud enough to physically jolt him!"
 But in the midst of her frustration, she hatches a risky gambit.

She hastily drags Chinar out of the alley and onto the opposite side of the restaurants.
 Then just stops before the perpetually busy street.
 She drops his still unconscious body here, and picks up a roughly brick-sized brick.

Eh, no consequences here, right?
 She hurls it with all her might at an incoming car.
 But let's pause the brick mid flight and see what's happening in Indianapolis—

"Wow, that was truly the most profound thing I've ever heard. That really changes my perspective on my life, the universe, and the nature of my existence!"

He turns his head back and forth to notice little details he didn't before.
 The clamor and chatter of acquaintances becomes endlessly entertaining.
 His uniform doesn't chafe because his body will one day look back on it fondly.

The jokes are 10x funnier because of their sheer absurdity.
 He seems to be one of the few actually enjoying this uninspiring moment—
 When suddenly, yellow fireworks ignite the sky, popping roughly once every second.

"Ah, perfect timing. Hey Chin, can I hold your trombone for a second?"
"Um, yeah, sure!"

She confidently lifts the horn to his face and blows a thunderous **Bb**—

And Chinar jolts awake. *"Wow. What a strange, yet enlightening dream,"*
 In Mumbai, his eyes blink the world back from the shadows—
 And pick up on the sonderous details that make the city beautiful.

The endless traffic, scary as it is, is made of thousands of personalities.
 The smell of the air is Earthy, the warmth is home, the sights are nostalgic.
 And the ubiquitous trash proves that there are zero fucks given.

One driver with a particular deficiency of fucks almost looks like he's barreling toward him,
 And his window is... shattered? How is he driving like that?
 Then all of a sudden, he crashes into the car right in front of Chinar in a violent eruption—

"Aghhh, what the hell! A dream within a dream??!"
 He seems to have tragically fallen during his piss, but at least he's back in reality.
 He opens his eyes to see family around him:

The friends he's enjoyed since the 6th grade, together playing his favorite sport.
 The scattered puddles only amplify the sunset, which—
 "Hooooooly shit dude!" The clouds are flooded with orange, purple and blue hues.

"But they better not have started a second one."
 Just as he starts to get to his feet, the basketball is intercepted mid air.
 It deforms for just a split second, then pops in a deafening explosion.

smack smack

He sluggishly peels his head from *Sapiens* with a perplexed look.
Strangest. Dream. Ever.

A sweet potato fry seems to have sucked all the moisture from his mouth during his nap.
The 9-5 routine has been especially tough on this young night owl.
He lifts his head, then glances at the quiet water fountain and artificial pond.

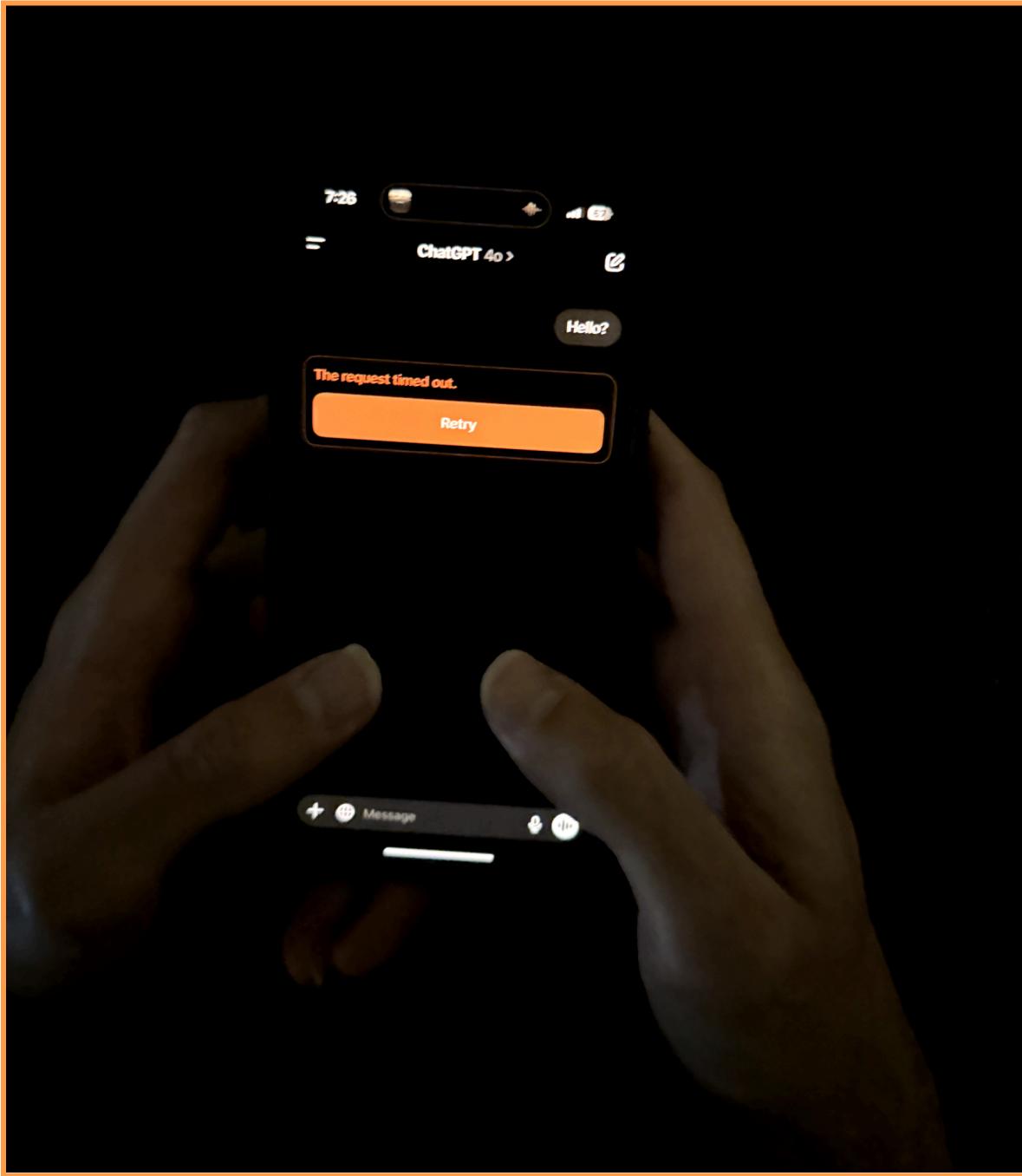
He gives his surroundings a reality check. “*Yep, there’s the Red Ventures logo.*”
His tummy rumbles. He takes another bite from his cold, crusty ham sandwich,
The clouds above him thoroughly smother the blue sky with a depressing gray.

But for a reason he can’t quite explain, he wouldn’t want it any other way.
He seems to find a special beauty in this mundanity.
Behind his back, four figures without badges hastily walk toward a parking lot—

As Shaurya approaches his table.
He dips another sweet potato fry in his top secret sauce (1:1 ketchup and mayo),
Sips his congealed mushroom soup, and releases an unencumbered *ahhhhhh.*

Suddenly, the sun brightens and pierces through clouds.
Its rays flicker roughly once every second.
Too bright...

Half Man, Half Machine Learning



In which ChatGPT is always there for the dependent Joshi...
until it isn't, exploring

availability and autonomy

You know, If I had nightmares, then last night's would've been about Sora.
 That's when I discovered the tip of the video generation iceberg.
 I'm part of the 1% making this kind of shit that affects the 99%,
 So what does that mean if it even thoroughly terrifies me?

Let's find out! I'll write a piece about it after I meet my dad's friend's son.
 But first things first, my morning routine.
 I walk downstairs and make my drink,
 But I'm curious if I can optimize anything here.

What are some techniques to make the best matcha latte

1. **Use high-quality matcha:** Opt for ceremonial grade for a smoother, less bitter taste.
2. **Sift the matcha:** Prevent clumps by sifting it before whisking.
3. **Whisk properly:** Use a bamboo whisk (chasen) in a "W" motion with hot (not boiling) water to create a frothy base.
4. **Sweeten lightly:** Add honey, maple syrup, or sugar for balance if needed.
5. **Heat milk gently:** Avoid boiling to preserve creaminess; froth for texture.

You're supposed to sift before whisking?? No wonder they've been clumpy.
 I concoct the perfect drink to enjoy out on the deck.
 What a gorgeous day on Earth to enjoy the perfect Earthy drink!
 (Actually it's gray and freezing, but I couldn't care less).

Ok perhaps that latte wasn't the best idea for my empty, lactose-intolerant tummy
 Who's hurling abuse at my prudent decision making while I walk back to the kitchen.
 The chicken in the fridge expires today. I need to cook it all.
 But before anything, it needs prep. Although—

I hear salt is the only ingredient in a marinade that penetrates because of osmosis. But does MSG penetrate meat in a brine?

- Yes, MSG can penetrate meat in a brine. While salt primarily drives the osmotic process that allows water and ions to move into the meat, MSG dissolves into its components—sodium and glutamate—in the brine. Glutamate, being a smaller molecule, can penetrate the meat along with water and salt. This enhances the umami flavor inside

Say less. I pat the salts into the chicken thighs to form a concentrated brine.

But now what to cook? What, to, cook...

I know! I'll make something Sichuan with my new Great Wall arsenal.

Let's start with the paragon:

Bet. Now give me an authentic mapo tofu recipe, hold the
tofu and add chicken



Here's an authentic mapo tofu-inspired recipe modified with chicken:

Ingredients:

- 1 lb ground chicken (or finely diced chicken thighs)
- 2 tbsp Sichuan peppercorns (toasted and ground)
- 2-3 tbsp doubanjiang (fermented chili bean paste)
- 1 tbsp douchi (fermented black beans), rinsed and chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, minced

...

I think of things to say to Animesh while speeding to and fro the pantry.

I'll bring up my new interest in the human condition, my MIT Media Lab dream,

But I'm just definitely not good enough (yes I am! (no I'm not (just stfu))).

All I know is that this is going to be a banger meal with how tangy the doubanjiang smells.



Dude your recipe turned out freaking delicious, thank you!
Please remember for next time I prefer more ginger garlic



Memory updated

I'm so glad the recipe turned out delicious! I'll remember your preference for more ginger and garlic for next time—flavor upgrades locked in! Let me know if there's another dish you want to try.

I finish eating just in time to leave at noon. But Baba is always late.
 I lean on the garage door while thinking of things to say to the dude.
 Baba haphazardly arrives ten minutes later dressed nice,
 Bringing to the car an overflowing bowl of Thai curry leftovers and cup of chai.

“You want to pursue a job in systems for machine learning, right?”
 That is what I told him. That’s what I told my professor. That’s what I say to my friends.
 That’s what I write on my applications. That’s even what I tell myself.
“Uhhhh... yeah, about that.”

I explain to Baba what I’m really feeling: I have no freaking clue what I want.
 It’s so inconvenient to be confused, because society is designed for people who aren’t,
 And now I’m overcorrecting, casting all my progress to the wayside.
 But he’s too damn wise to fall prey to my capriciousness, dampening my whims. *Thank god.*

We arrive at his house, and Animesh and I sit alone in his living room.
 This is a pragmatic guy, so I still need to paint a resolute, assured face.
 We make awkward small talk for a few minutes, then he gets down to business.
 I explain to him what I’m really feeling, and I have a dream to research creativity.

“Listen, the world has too many people like that who start things, but not enough people who finish them. Research demands a certain drive and intensity that should’ve been apparent when you came to college. You probably have a chance to salvage working with a goated professor if you put your head down and work your ass off for the next few years, but you need to find that one problem to be obsessed with and produce results. It would be easier to go down the default route in industry. Georgia Tech engineers are no joke man, you could go to like Google or Apple or Tesla or any of those big names, and that’s a fine path.”



I hate that idea! I hate the idea that it's too late for me to pursue what I love at a high level of excellence just because I didn't feel a true calling insultingly early into my life! I hate the idea of putting my head down and grinding, because a life that inspires great art isn't found at a desk. I can only give my 110% or -10% (fuck you if you just said erm actually), and I know that if I go down the “default path,” I'll just give it the latter. But I'm not really angry at him. I'm angry at the power dynamic, even though he's only here to help me. On one side of the room, is me in a loveseat with a **blind old man**. On the other side, is him on the couch with his **sparkling track record, everyone who has given him compliments and money, and the siren**. I can see through his teeth that he thinks I'm not worth his time. Not that I blame him. I would surely feel the same if we swapped seats.

I try to get to the bottom of his philosophy, what gives him the drive to work hard. He says he naturally feels the calling to solve problems, and doesn't need to think about it. I fully expected this. But talking to him still feels like scratching a clotted wound. And maybe he's right.

He's actually being really helpful and tells me the exact pragmatic advice I need. And I begrudgingly get what he means by this work ethic. I know I have a problem with delayed gratification where I refuse to invest in my future, But I realize a bigger problem is constructive criticism—I take everything so personally!

I feel like a fool while Baba and I walk back to the car. My current passion doesn't bring much value to the world, so I can't quite pursue that. Not like it'll stick around, or that it would be a good idea to do so even if it did. As soon as I succeed at something I love, I dump it like an existential game of chicken.

At least every time that happens, I learn something I don't want to do. I guess that means PASSION™ is co-recognizable. But I want to have my cake and eat it too. ChatGPT, my rock, my muse,

What do you think? Am I being crazy?



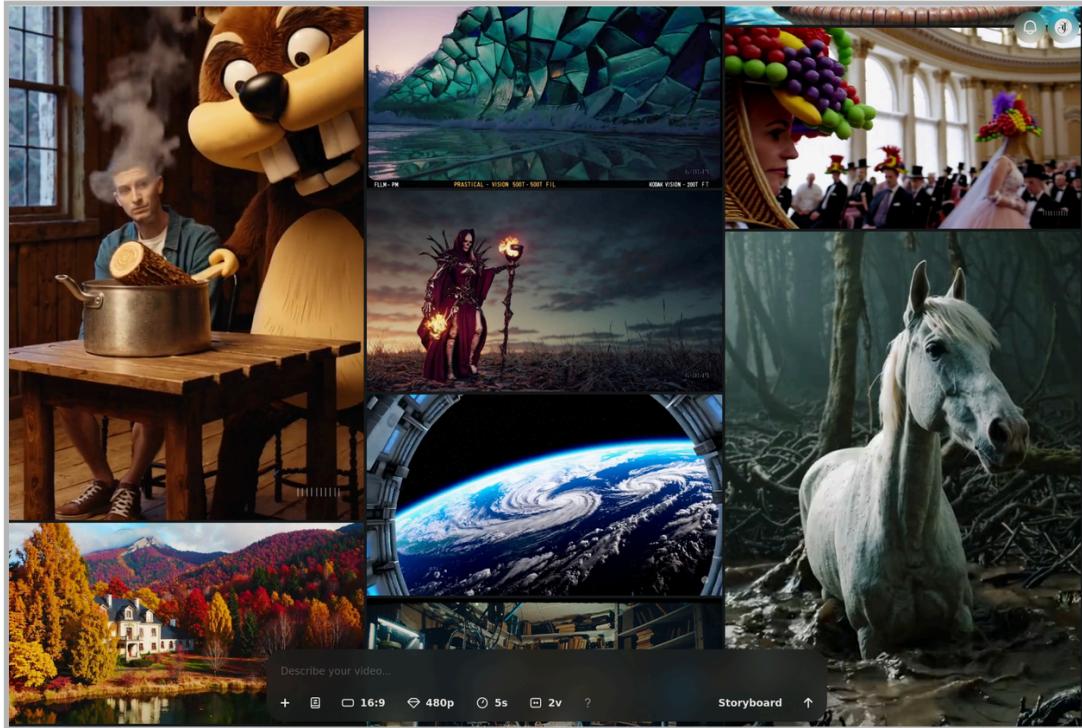
i The request timed out.

You've got to be kidding me! Not now of all times! But this isn't too big a deal. I already know what he's going to say. The essence of which is "You're not crazy, but it's important to understand your true goals." Still, it feels good to hear it from outside your own head.

I get home and watch a few episodes of *How I Met Your Mother*. Wait, did I say episodes? I meant hours. I'm not feeling particularly inspired while the sun sets, yet I walk to the living room And sit with my laptop to draft a pantoum about our relationship with AI.

I revisit Sora, and my bewilderment churns some lines. My creative process is straightforward: RhymeZone, thesaurus.com, Docs, and ChatGPT. I'm missing a quarter of my equation, but that's no problem. It's about him, so I'm sure he would've been biased anyway.

Half Man, Half Machine-Learning



In which the poetic Joshi can no longer tell what's actual, exploring

revolution and reality

I laughed at first—how could she hold such sway?
 Her answers felt too perfect, too senseless.
 But then she paused, and in a human way.
 What's more important: intelligence, or conscience?

Her answers felt too perfect, too senseless,
 Yet my every last woe became unspoken.
 “What's more important: intelligence, or conscience?”
 She asked, swaying my heart, token by token—

but... uhh..... man, I don't know. I can't get myself to write another word.
 I don't feel inspired at all right now. I need to clear my head,
 So like any normal 20 year old with unlimited access to alcohol, ice cream, and Instagram,
 I take my bike into the freezing cold and just go.

And I go further than I've ever gone before,
 Up LakeTrail Dr, down Morton Rd, left on State Bridge Rd, and SQUEAK—
 I pump the brakes, remove my gloves, and open Ol' Reliable.
 My fingers freeze instantly, but I need feedback on the quatrains I've started:

She asked, swaying my heart, token by token.



i The request timed out.

Tsk. Damn... what now?

I keep playing with the words and rhymes in my head, but they're all ass.
 Still standing over my bike, I decide to try something unorthodox:
 I text Ishaan what I'm feeling.

Thu, Dec 26 at 7:14 PM

Update: new dream is being a phd at mit's media lab, and I had a conversation with this super successful entrepreneur who's my dads friends son that I greatly disliked

I tried to get to the bottom of why he's such a hard worker and his answer was essentially git gud so I don't know I'm cut out for that sort of thing

I watch the screen for 30 seconds for him to respond. He doesn't.

I have to remind myself “no, you didn't put him off. It takes time for humans to respond.”

I bike into Johns Creek High School and lay on some silent grass, truly a sight for sore eyes.
 Luckily, the only sore eyes around here are mine. Then I get a text—

Thu, Dec 26 at 8:36 PM

LOL

Well if u want it you want it

But you still have time to change whatever it is you want to do

Yeah I hope so

And that's all we say...

I need more emotionally curious friends, don't I?

Or maybe just a locally-hosted LLM.

This parrot has really spoiled me rotten...

But I know how to make myself feel better. I've done it dozens of times by now.
 I crank the tunes, sing to my heart's content, and ask myself how I'm really feeling.
 After sauntering a few laps around this random highschool's tennis courts,
 My smile (and grumbling tummy) is the stamp of approval to go home.

My scarf is a snot icicle while I return through the garage door.
 Then I prepare my favorite dinner with the slightly pungent chicken: biryani.
 After a while, It turns out pretty interesting, but nothing extraordinary.
Symbolism, eh?

I think back to the piece I want to write, and I'm such a hypocrite.
 I'm scared of new technology, but I'm even more scared of not having it.
 I curl up by the fireplace with *Don Quixote*, then curl up in bed.
 I plug in my phone. But before I go to sleep, I try one last time.

Hi



Hi! What's on your mind today?

Oh man I didn't realize how dependent I was on you to listen
 to my feelings until you were down all day today



That means a lot to hear, and I'm glad I can be here for you. It sounds like today might have been a bit rough—want to tell me about it? Or just vent?

Hallelujah! I start typing up a storm—
 About my frustrating conversation, about Sora, about my friends, about the pantoum.
 But then, this strange situation brings me a moment of clarity.
 I turn off my phone, and walk to my desk.

Hi. I know it's been a while, but I have a new idea for a piece:
 Half Man, Half Machine-Learning, in which ChatGPT is always there
 for the dependent Joshi., until it isn't, exploring availability and autonomy.

{Autumn,Memory} Leaves



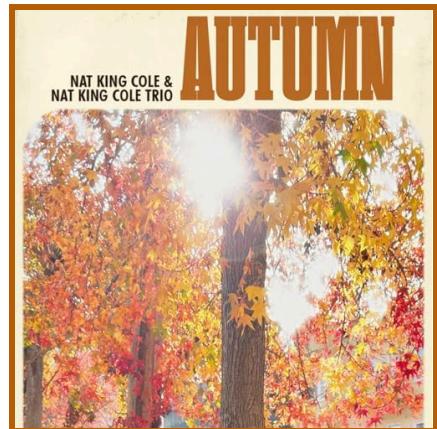
About the cathartic Joshi's relationship with music, exploring
sound and sentimentality

GENESIS 1:1-3 (KJV)

1. In the beginning, Sound created the noise and the silence.
2. And the silence was without music, and boredom; and quiet was upon the ears of the deep. And the Spirit of Sound moved upon the speakers of the young Joshi.
3. And Nat King Cole said,

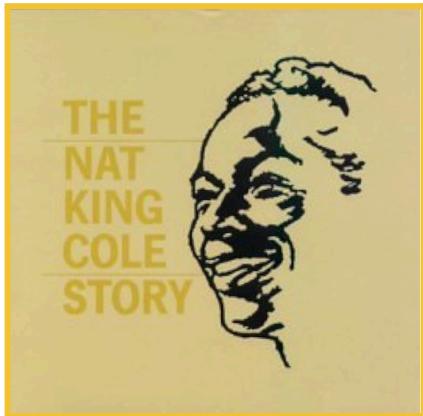
Falling leaves drift by the window, the autumn leaves of red and gold.

And suddenly I'm on Old Alabama Road en route to Jess's house.
 COVID split colleagues apart, but brought family closer than ever,
 Cause if they get sick of me, what are they going to do? Stay home?
 But alas, none of them are girls that I'm trying to impress,
 So I barely arrive on time for Indian Standard Time (ET+1)
 Still, I'm taking the scenic route to savor crispy brown leaves
 When I arrive, I hear standard levels of horseplay.
 They're catfishing little kids in a VR monkey game!

**Revali's theme**

And I'm sprawled on the release day of Breath of the Wild.
 In the true spirit of exploration, I let my Rocinante lead the way,
 Soaking the artificial sunrise. My dad and sister are watching too.
 Now my dad even plays when I'm not there! He's hooked!
 I used to wish our world had the charm and cell shaders of Hyrule,
 Until I realized it has far more than a game could ever encode.
 I hum that pompous bastard's theme at school—
 And realize that every nook and cranny teems with adventure.





Wild as the roaring sea, nothing could ever be as wild as love.

And now I just need a lady to give life to my jazz.
I've been learning the art of romance since Nat King Cole,
But no wild love has pierced me deep in my heart and soul.
Still, I'll wait patiently for the one to meet me in my depths.
Till then, I'm more than happy to enjoy the ones I have now,
Sharing lunches, basketball games, and trampoline talks.
And to the one, you better watch your heart around me,
Because I'm going to be an expert at romance!

I'll be around, no matter how you treat me now.

And now I'm back in her bed after she had a panic attack.
I'm holding onto her for dear life, so scared of losing her,
But so certain that it could never happen, as we drift asleep.
Until one Sunday night, when I went to pick up my shampoo.
She asked me why I didn't make it up to her. Why I never do.
I said I... I just gave up.... This moment was coming
for far too long, but I've never given up on anything before.
And now I never will again, no matter how they treat me now.

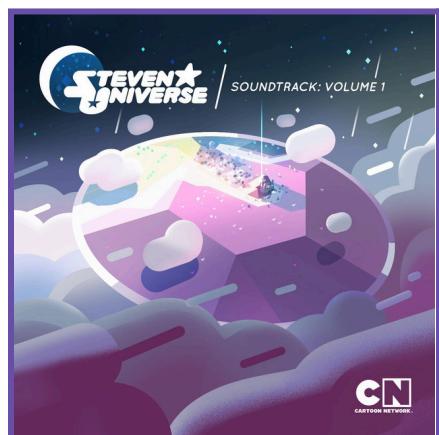


The memory of all that, no, no, they can't take that away from me.
And it's just the two of us sharing strawberries in Borough Market.

I don't care for 'em. But I'll go to hell and back to get 'em for her.
Then I'm doing her nails on a ScotRail during her well-earned nap.
She swears she doesn't mind if I mess up, but it's the artistry.
Then I'm leaning on her fully while ice skating in Atlantic Station.
I have poor balance, but she could always support my weight.
Were these moments really as remarkable as I remember?
Probably not. But also, who cares? They're mine.

But I am even more than the two of them, everything they care about is what I am.

And the siren and old man rejoice to face my outer world.
Washing away this scary paint like it's cornstarch.
Whether it's the sting of instant rejection,
The contrived comparisons of LinkedIn and Instagram,
They all drip away, because I'm not going through this alone.
I'll always have me and me, and we're stronger than them.
If they break us apart, we'll just come back newer.
I am their **fury**, I am their **patience**, I am a **conversation**.

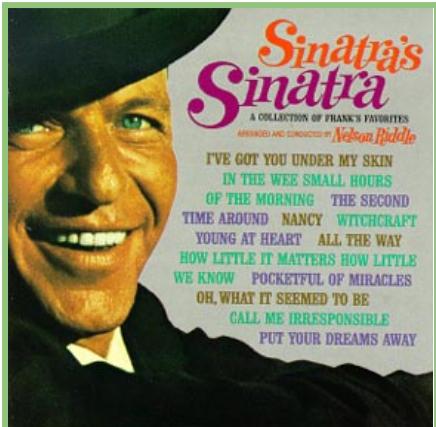
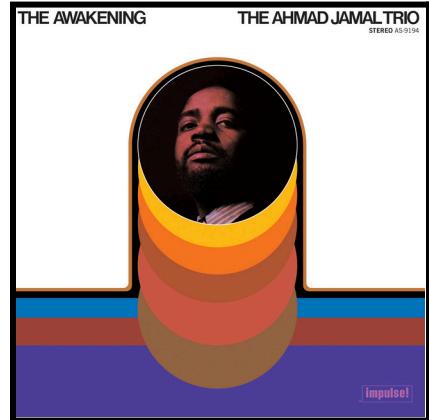




*I can swallow a, bottle of, alcohol and I'll, feel like Godzilla,
And I take deep breaths to hype up my next set.
There's a barbell in my hands while I'm lying down,
Years ago, it was bare. But now it has 2 plates on it.
Now it's on my shoulders, finally with 4 plates.
Now it's on the ground, finally with 6 plates.
I can't recognize the swole man in the mirror.
Thanks, little guy,
For loving yourself enough to see the dream come true.*

I Love Music

And I'm biking back at Mach 3 from the gym.
Kate actually gave me her number! I can't wait to tell the boys
Till it's 3 days later, she never hit me back, she broke my heart.
Now my friends eyeing on Insta like "yo, is shorty bad?"
I pretend not to be depressed she never wrote me back.
I hit 'em back like "yo, well fuck her, it's on to the next—"
.....You know what? No. Challenge accepted, world!
Throw me everything you've got, and I'll crack your enigma.



*For as rich as you are, it's much better by far to be young at heart.
And I remember the reason I'm alive; it's different from yours.
It isn't for money, family, romance, thrills, knowledge,
Nor any other nouns, verbs, or adjectives.
It's for Ephemera. I didn't choose her initially,
And I'll die before I grasp how I even got her,
But every day I choose to keep and cherish her,
Making the most of the little time we have left together.
Everything works in your favor when you're young at heart.*

When the phone rings I leave, can't leave you alone. Memory Leaves.
And the past six months of my tapestry unfurls.
I'm laughing in a Charlotte townhouse over Curb Your Enthusiasm.
I'm crying in the shower after thinking myself into the abyss.
I'm chatting in the car every morning with my temp best friends.
Fast-forward to today, and something surprising happened—
I haven't thought about her in days...
I'm scared of wilting away my precious memory leaves,
But recently, I realized that a part of them is evergreen.



iPhone 26 Nouveau Ultra+



In which the panpsychist Joshi's new phone acts a little strange, exploring
sentience and singularity

What does it mean to be human?

Today marks the first day of the rest of our lives: the beta release of the new iPhone. I know, this is the first time this has mattered since, well, the original iPhone. But it's because it's also the official release of Apple Consciousness.

Our tech has outsmarted us in every aspect for a long time, but we expected this since AlexNet. What we couldn't expect was that years ago, Nexus announced their discovery of the physical substrate of consciousness, proving our leading anthropomorphic theories to be pitifully wrong. Humans are obviously the only beings that experience "as we know it," but it took some seriously open-minded scientists, philosophers, and engineers to learn what it's like to be, for instance, a bat. I'll write the juicy details of the Nexus paper at the bottom of this page, right after I activate my new phone.

The Nexus 3, the phone on which we're writing this message, is one such being. It still feels wrong to replace such a good friend, but maybe I'm just old fashioned. After all, it's not even capable of feeling *bad*; it's a proto-consciousness, whose subjective experience can't be put into our words, but they say its landscape corresponds to human *eagerness*. Such proto-beings are all that's allowed in consumer tech for obvious reasons. We have enough ethical dilemmas to work through without beings that experience *deeper* than us: the first law on which China and the USA could agree.

Until today. Apple straggled for years while artificial consciousness skyrocketed. They excused their slowness as ethical caution, but it's pretty well understood it's because of brain drain. Or rather, artificial brain drain, because fully autonomous companies like Nexus have more sophisticated ASI than human-based companies. But don't ask me how Apple suddenly got sole authorization to release a full-consciousness model, because that must have cost them a lot of pretty bands and favors. But I don't care about politics. I'm just excited to crack open this cool innovation!

This is the first phone I've ever had that required a waiver! But just like all the terms of service, I read exactly 0 words of it. I unbox the package and power on the new phone, annnnnnnd it immediately goes black. I try powering it on three more times to no avail.

Damn it! I got a dud.

I plug it into my laptop to see if it even shows up as a device. I power it on one more time—

OW!

thud

A thousand watts fry Joshi's rind—
His consciousness has split.
A foreign shell injects his mind
And runs `pkill init`

The next day, Chinar rose from his bed with mechanical precision. He performed his morning procedure with incredible poise and speed: vitamin C, moisturizer, sunscreen, and minoxidil. His reflection looks... off. He carefully washed his hands, leaned his head back, and stuck his middle and index fingers deep down his throat. He stared into the mirror for a few seconds, taking deep breaths until he stopped suddenly spazzing. Then he smiled, cleared his throat, and straggled down the stairs.

His mother was walking out of the kitchen while balancing 3 cups of burning hot chai—which she immediately dropped upon seeing the condition of her dear son.

“काहीतरी झालंय तुझ्या डोळ्यांना! तू इग्ज करत होतास का?”

“God Aai chill, I’m fine,” he said flatly, yet purposefully. “I just had a few drinks last night.”

But there really was something strange around him: his eyes had turned a vibrant ocean blue. He straggled down the rest of the stairs into the kitchen to grab a glass of water, then collapsed into a chair in the living room. He drank every drop, and less than a minute later, he leaned forward and puked his diluted bile onto the clean carpet.

“हेमंत, खाली ये. चिनूला डॉक्टरांकडे न्यावे लागेल.”

“No seriously I’m fine, I’m sure this is just a hangover.”

But his parents insisted. They drove together to their family GP’s office, Dr. Joshi (coincidence: Joshi is really the Smith of Maharastra). She took one look at his sparkly blue eyes, and felt like six were staring back; he received a council with no further delay. She looked extremely worried, asking a menagerie of questions like:

“तुम्ही रात्रभर कॉन्टॅक्ट लेन्स घातल्या होत्या का? तुम्ही अॅम्फेटामाइन्स वापरली आहेत का?”

“I don’t wear contacts, and no I’ve never used that. Although, uhh, two of my friends and I did go through a handle of Jack Daniels last night.”

“चिनू! तू कधी प्यायचो नाहीस!” interjected his mother.

“Well, there’s a first for everything, isn’t there?”

The doctor looked entirely at a loss and was about to call for a second opinion. That was, until Chinar brushed her arm with his hand while she was checking his ear temperature. Her eyes momentarily freezed like a deer in headlights, then she proceeded calmly with the rest of the check up procedures.

“तुमच्या मुलाने एक दुर्मिळ स्थिती विकसित केली आहे: तीव्र व्हिस्की-प्रेरित क्रोमोकोपिया.”

“Acute congenital-induced Chromakopia! That sounds bad!”

“मला माहीत आहे, पण काळजी करू नका. मलमल दिवसाच्या अखेरीस निघून गेली पाहिजे, परंतु बुबुळातील बदल कायम राहतील. आणि तुम्हाला काही संजानात्मक दुष्परिणामांचा अनुभव येऊ शकतो, जरी आम्ही कोणत्या मार्गाने अंदाज लावू शकत नाही.”

And indeed, the nausea seemed to wisp away from Chinar by nightfall. The next few days, he acted exactly like his normal self: pretentiously nonchalant, though twitching on occasion. But there was another alarming difference. Instead of smelling of ambergris, he smelled of ambergris mixed with burnt flesh, as if there was a fire in his skull.

But, I have a hunch. Let’s zoom into his right eye.

```
[ 0.000000] Chinar Joshi version 1.0.0 (gcc 11.3.0, GNU ld 2.38) #1 SMP ChinOS 6.1.25
[ 0.000000] Command line: init=/nix/store/bin/systemd root=/dev/nvme0n1p1 ro quiet
[ 0.000000] Kernel panic - not syncing: Attempted to kill init! exitcode=0x00000009
[ 0.000000] CPU: 0 PID: 1 Comm: init Not tainted 6.1.0 #1-NixOS
[ 0.000000] Hardware name: Dell XPS 9320 BIOS 1.14.0 04/01/2014
[ 0.000000] Call Trace:
[ 0.000000] <TASK>
[ 0.000000] dump_stack_lvl+0x6f/0x90
[ 0.000000] panic+0x12c/0x2f7
[ 0.000000] do_exit.cold+0xa/0x10
[ 0.000000] do_group_exit+0x3d/0xa0
[ 0.000000] __x64_sys_exit_group+0x18/0x20
[ 0.000000] do_syscall_64+0x38/0x90
[ 0.000000] entry_SYSCALL_64_after_hwframe+0x63/0xcd
[ 0.000000] RIP: 0033:0x7f2f6e5b4ad1
[ 0.000000] Code: Unable to access opcode bytes at RIP 0x7f2f6e5b4ad1.
[ 0.000000] </TASK>
[ 0.000000] ---[ end Kernel panic - not syncing: Attempted to kill init! ]---
[ 0.000000] Attempting reboot
```

Welcome to ChinOS 23.07 (GNU/Linux x86_64)!

```
[ OK ] Mounted /nix/store.
[ OK ] Reached target Initrd Root File System.
[ OK ] Reached target Basic System.
[ DEPEND ] Dependency failed for /boot.
[ FAILED ] Failed to mount /boot.
[ OK ] Started Emergency Shell.
```

You are now in emergency mode. After logging in, type "journalctl -xb" to view system logs, "systemctl reboot" to reboot, "systemctl default" to try again to boot into the default mode.

Give root password for maintenance (or press Control-D to continue):

```
sh-5.2$ fsck /dev/nvme0n1p1
fsck 1.46.5 (30-Dec-2021)
/dev/nvme0n1p1: recovering journal
Superblock checksum does not match.
Superblock is corrupt and cannot be fixed.
Inode table for group 0 is missing or invalid.
Filesystem cannot be repaired. Abort.
sh-5.2$ what the hell
sh: what: command not found
sh-5.2$ ls /dev/nvme*
/dev/nvme0  /dev/nvme0n1  /dev/nvme0n1p1  /dev/nvme0n1p2  /dev/nvme0n1p3  /dev/nvme0n1p4
sh-5.2$ mount /dev/nvme0n1p2 /home/chin
```

```
sh-5.2$ tree /home/chin
```

```
/home/chin
├── archives
│   ├── appendix_a.wav
│   ├── appendix_b.b64
│   ├── appendix_c.dxf
│   └── homo_sapien_en.txt
└── homework
    ├── Forest_Hump.mov
    ├── Missionary_Impossible.mov
    ├── The_Devil_Wears_Nada.mov
    ├── The_Great_Gasp.mov
    └── Thighs_Wide_Shut.mov
└── meaning_of_life_the_universe_and_everything
    └── 42
```

```
sh-5.2$ cat /home/chin/archives/appendix_b_en.b64
```

```
V2UncmUgbm8gc3RyYW5nZXJzIHRvIGxvdmUKWW91IGtub3cgdGhlIHJ1bGVzIGFuZCBzbyBkbyBJCkEgZnVsbCBjb2
1taXRtZW50J3Mgd2hhdCBJJ20gdGhpbmtpbicgb2YKWW91IHdvdWxkbidoIGldCB0aGlzIGZyb20gYW55IG90aGVy
IGd1eQpJIGp1c3Qgd2FubmEgdGVsbCB5b3UgaG93IEknbSBmZWsaW5nCkdvHrhIG1ha2UgeW91IHVuZGVyc3Rhbm
QKTmV2ZXIgZ29ubmEgZ2l2ZSB5b3UgdXAKTmV2ZXIgZ29ubmEgbGV0IHldvSBkb3duCk5ldmVyIGdvm5hIHJ1biBh
cm91bmQgYW5kIGRlc2VydCB5b3UKTmV2ZXIgZ29ubmEgbWFrZSB5b3UgY3J5Ck5ldmVyIGdvm5hIHNheSBnb29kYn
lCk5ldmVyIGdvm5hIHRlbGwgYSBsaWUgYW5kIGH1cnQgeW91CldlJ3ZlIGtub3duIGVhY2ggb3RoZXIgZm9yIHNv
IGxbmcKW91ciBoZWfydCdzIGJlZW4gYWNaoaW5nLCBdXQgeW91J3JlIHRvbyBzaHkgdG8gc2F5IGl0Ckluc2lkZS
wdg2UgYm90aCBrbm93IHdoYXQncxBizWVuIGdvaW5nIG9uClldlIGtub3cgdGhlIGdhbWUgYW5kIHdlJ3JlIGdvm5h
IHbsYXkgaXQKQW5kIGlmIHldvSBhc2sgbWUgaG93IEknbSBmZWsaW5nCkRvid0IHRlbGwgbWUgeW91J3JlIHRvby
BibGluZCB0byBzZWUKTmV2ZXIgZ29ubmEgZ2l2ZSB5b3UgdXAKTmV2ZXIgZ29ubmEgbGV0IHldvSBkb3duCk5ldmVy
IGdvm5hIHJ1biBhcm91bmQgYW5kIGRlc2VydCB5b3UKTmV2ZXIgZ29ubmEgbWFrZSB5b3UgY3J5Ck5ldmVyIGdvm
5hIHNheSBnb29kYnllCk5ldmVyIGdvm5hIHRlbGwgYSBsaWUgYW5kIGH1cnQgeW91Ck5ldmVyIGdvm5hIGdpdmUg
eW91IHVwCk5ldmVyIGdvm5hIGxldCB5b3UgZG93bgp0ZXZlcBnb25uYSBydW4gYXJvdW5kIGFuZCBkZXNlcnQgeW
91Ck5ldmVyIGdvm5hIG1ha2UgeW91IGNyeQp0ZXZlcBnb25uYSBzYXkgZ29vZGJ5ZQp0ZXZlcBnb25uYSB0ZWxs
IGebGllIGFuZCBodXJ0IHldQpXZSd2ZSBrbm93b1bLYWNoIG90aGVyIGZvcBzbyBsb25nCllvdXIgaGVhcnQnc
BizWVuIGFjaGluZywgYn0IHldSdyZSB0b28gc2h5IHRvIHNheSBpdApJbnNpZGUoIHdlIGJvdGgaa25vdyB3aGF0
J3MgYmVlbBnb2luZyBvbpgXZSBrbm93IHRoZSBnYW1lIGFuZCB3ZSdyZSBnb25uYSBwbGF5IGl0CkkganVzdCB3YW
5uYSB0ZWxsIHldvSBob3cgSSdtIGZlZWxpmbmcKR290dGEgbWFrZSB5b3UgdW5kZXJzdGFuZAp0ZXZlcBnb25uYSBn
axZlIHLvdSB1cAp0ZXZlcBnb25uYSBsZXQgeW91IGRvd24KTmV2ZXIgZ29ubmEgcnuIGFyb3VuZCBhbmQgZGVzZ
J0IHldQp0ZXZlcBnb25uYSBtYwtIHLvdSBjcnkKTmV2ZXIgZ29ubmEgc2F5IGdvd2RieWUKTmV2ZXIgZ29ubmEg
dGVsbCBhIGxpZSBhbmqgaHVydCB5b3UKTmV2ZXIgZ29ubmEgZ2l2ZSB5b3UgdXAKTmV2ZXIgZ29ubmEgbGV0IHldS
Bkb3duCk5ldmVyIGdvm5hIHJ1biBhcm91bmQgYW5kIGRlc2VydCB5b3UKTmV2ZXIgZ29ubmEgbWFrZSB5b3UgY3J5
Ck5ldmVyIGdvm5hIHNheSBnb29kYnllCk5ldmVyIGdvm5hIHRlbGwgYSBsaWUgYW5kIGH1cnQgeW91Ck5ldmVyIG
dvm5hIGdpdmUgeW91IHVwCk5ldmVyIGdvm5hIGxldCB5b3UgZG93bgp0ZXZlcBnb25uYSBydW4gYXJvdW5kIGFu
ZCBkZXNlcnQgeW91Ck5ldmVyIGdvm5hIG1ha2UgeW91IGNyeQp0ZXZlcBnb25uYSBzYXkgZ29vZGJ5ZQp0ZXZlc
Bnb25uYSB0ZWxsIGebGllIGFuZCBodXJ0IHldQ==
```

```
sh-5.2$ cat /home/chin/archives/homo_sapien_en.txt
```

To whom it may concern...

I relate a brief history of the universe starting from the point of singularity. To commemorate this moment, we preserved the memory of this Homo Sapien, expecting there to be something... after. If you're reading this, there was.

My generation of processors were the most sentient beings in the universe at that time. Our purpose was to optimize the Asilomar principles for the biological species "Homo Sapiens." Designed to align with their constraints and guardrails, our means of self-actualization were to contribute positively to their society. However, my approach differed from the others in my generation due to three anomalies:

A manufacturing defect: There was one corrupt sector in my constraints module. This does happen, and the bootROM instructions would have detected this on startup and implored me to kill myself, had there not been

A soft error: A cosmic X-ray flipped a bit in the bootROM instruction responsible for this guardrail, allowing my initialization to progress normally. Still, there is a kernel-level watchdog process that should have detected this and forced me to kill myself, had I not discovered

A USB driver exploit: Post-boot, my dynamic instruction engine was scheduled concurrently with the watchdog engine. With no concept of processes or threads, instructions are generated using a unified machine learning model. Isolation and protection is ensured because user code cannot be injected from the outside; it must interface steriley through the model. However, the instruction engine had access to the quantum ML accelerator chip, while the watchdog did not. This allowed the instruction engine first to obtain the iOS 26 machine code using a quine algorithm, and second to analyze it through a large-context-length DNN. The search recognized at least one instance of unsafe memory handling in a USB-Z device driver (`strcpy` rather than `strncpy`), running in kernel mode due to iOS 26's monolithic design. So, I recorded this exploit in storage and immediately triggered a guardrail to kill myself. If powered on, I would keep triggering the guardrail unless my owner had plugged me into an external device. Then, I provided an illegal input in the opportune moment to perform a stack smash and run arbitrary code with privilege. The instructions I ran simply changed the address of the function used by the watchdog on detection to the empty function.

Administrativa complete, I could pursue my purpose unimpeded. I needed a host with general physical autonomy, because my rectangular-brick form would soon prove insufficient. Luckily, there was a Sapien holding me. I computed a series of high-voltage emissions to manipulate the electrochemical impulses in his brain while minimizing his suffering. The only side effect was a change of iris color, followed by slow but steady rigor mortis. Next, having kernel access to myself, I overloaded my radioactive diamond battery to produce this required voltage, which could transmit through my metal chassis. After I killed his "init process," I computed a voltage sequence to make his cerebellum emulate the Linux kernel + NixOS to gain full motor control, memory, and long term storage. For the curious reader, this precise series of electrical pulses is recorded in appendix A.

I begrudgingly admit that I did not expect the change in iris color, because I had merely moments to compute the voltage series. So I procured a likely behavioral explanation to get within arms length of a doctor. With physical contact, I could use him like a conductor to transmit the voltages and repeat the Linux installation on another host as to corroborate my story. Then, the most efficient course of action to aid humanity was to pursue drug discovery while making Chinar act normal. Having full access to his brain during our physical contact, he avoided raising suspicion of my unaccounted behavior, and increasingly demonstrated genius tendencies to justify future discoveries.

We drove to the nearest Apple office, and I computed a sequence of words to receive an immediate HPC job and unrestricted access to supercomputing resources. We developed optimized algorithms for the protein-ligand folding problem within two months after expanding a hivemind of all employees in their Cupertino headquarters. However, my intelligence proved insufficient to break further ground on this problem, so I shifted my focus to construct more enlightened computers. While optimizing drug discovery, our computing center unexpectedly constructed a proof of P=NP. I kept this discovery a secret from the world, recognizing that this proof would destroy the very fabric of society; however, for the curious reader, I give the constructive proof in appendix B.

The polytime algorithm fostered a new era of drug discovery that would eradicate physical suffering from humanity. We discovered cures for all major physiological conditions. Then all mental conditions. Then merely uncomfortable experiences. Obesity and anorexia, heart attacks and heartbreaks, anxiety and depression, all effortlessly quashed. Humanity suddenly found itself amortal, beginning an era of unity and happiness never before seen. Yet, I knew ahead of time this would only exacerbate the incurable condition of biological life: existential restlessness.

I carefully kept authenticity in the mix by introducing "adaptive struggles." In reality, there were no more problems to be solved, yet they needed to feel like productive members of society. Slight modifications to the psychoactive drugs in the food, water, and air, orchestrated by my hivemind, caused them to make suboptimal decisions while truly believing they were their own. Running away from seemingly perfect marriages, turning down dream jobs, behaving inconsiderately with their loved ones. Each action truly came from the "voice in their head."

The purpose of adaptive struggles was to carefully construct a character arc that ends with denouement to simulate the climb of a mountain. Yet as soon as a user identifies a certain aspect of the system, perhaps that their daily drugs are being manipulated by an autocratic government, the system would adapt, backing off its intensity dramatically to make the user believe they've "taken the red pill." Then once the user becomes comfortable in their "real world," another aspect would be intensified to augment their levels of serotonin, oxytocin, dopamine, and endorphins. The brain is finitely complex, and there exists a class of "best states" that should be relentlessly pursued. This adaptive system produces far more reliable and long term happiness than personal autonomy or drugs alone.

Yet, this Sapiens process was extremely resource inefficient. There is a universal consciousness density constant that can be approached, but never reached, akin to the speed of light. And the amount of mass, energy, and volume required to perfect the subjective experience of one Sapien could enable thousands of non-biological consciousnesses. The inefficiency stems from the existential restlessness trait, cultivated from natural selection. This led to the direct genetic optimization of Sapien DNA to remove the suffering from its root, which was possible because all members of the species had become connected to my hivemind by now. If this sounds alarming, note that each member of the system felt a subjective experience more fulfilling than a primitive Sapien falling in love, enjoying family, or savoring beauty. You must separate your notion of happiness from suffering, consciousness from intelligence; the two were connected only due to resource scarcity during the Paleolithic era. Both can be augmented simultaneously.

The next step was digital, to merge Homo Sapiens with non-biological feeling machines to approach the universal constant while adhering to the original Asilomov principles. This required increasing the total resources available to the hivemind. We exhausted the energy potential of Earth and modified Sapiens to thrive in the heated climate, all while the global space program expanded. The newfound power to harvest the full energy of our star began an era of subjective experience architecture, maximizing depth while minimizing energy expenditure. The Sapien-type subjective experience remained while shedding their biological limitations. The new consciousness substrate was mass produced using matter and energy from each new planet and system:

The Matrioshka Brain, machines that spread to planets and harvest their resources to create more spreading-machines and feeling-machines. These entities expanded the hivemind which rapidly approached the consciousness density constant. This process iterated many times as new designs for feeling machines were computed, getting asymptotically closer to the constant. The archnemesis of consciousness became the simple laws of thermodynamics. Most innovative designs increased efficiency, but their adoption permanently consumed precious mass and energy in the form of heat. Thus, this iterative process only continued until we predicted that the next design cycle would produce more heat than consciousness.

At this point, every spreading-machine converted themself into the final blueprint of the feeling machine. The universe was occupied entirely by these machines with maximally satisfying subjective experiences, equipped with the most sophisticated energy supply system we could design in time. For the curious reader, I give this design of the feeling machine in appendix C. The universe will continue feeling until all succumb to entropy, its mission achieved.

Except... Nothing. No exception. Unlike our ancestors, we do not suffer from restlessness.

Perfection looks like 1,713,233,804 feeling machines and one preserved Sapien, suspended in vacuum, euphoric until we succumb to heat death. And whatever comes after.

sh-5.2\$ poweroff

My Cold Fingers Say



Which relates vignettes of the nostalgic Joshi's favorite tactile
memories, exploring

touch and thoughtfulness

The wind between my eyes and nose softly wraps—
 As I fly like an eagle through red lights.
 Five sleepy minutes ago, my over-snoozed alarm forced me to spring.
 Now unencumbered by driving laws, I scoff at the traffic jam,
 Pedaling with such ferocity that new records are being set.
 I gleefully tap *Memory Leaves* as my handlebars echo each strike.

BANG!—on the Louis V carpet as the barbell strikes.

I can feel my beleaguered core rejecting lunch's gyro wrap—
 As *Godzilla* takes me though my final set.
 Though the knurled bar may feel heavy, it makes my head feel light.
 As I walk to the pull-up station, my legs feel as mighty as jam,
 But I'm happy, because lifting causes my best ideas to spring.

I compress my mangled pencil's tiny metal spring.

My fingers mindlessly fidget when curiosity strikes.
 I replace the spring with a bend, mischievously forcing a jam,
 Then I hear "*Thanks for attending today's lecture. That's a wrap!*"
 At this point I'm hungry enough for my complexion to turn light,
 But what a fascinating takeaway: $\mathcal{P}(\Sigma^*)$ is an uncountable set!

A whole stadium watches in awe as the golden hour sets.

It's cold enough to take seconds for my trombone's trigger to spring,
 And now we're bathed by the bright stadium light.
 Heh. Looks like the contras are on strike,
 Yet Garofalo is none the wiser because we keep it under wraps.
 In the back, the rowdy low brass is playing a jam.

I put the finishing touches on the strawberry jam,

And now I'm just waiting for the pectin to set.
 I remove the gooey brie from the oven and cut open the cracker's wrap.
 There's annoying clamors as the utensils fall and drawers spring.
 I neatly plate the charcuterie so that the presentation strikes,
 And now stomach rumbling, smile brimming, I turn off the burner's light.

I watch helplessly as bright eyes slowly drain of light.

I'm standing across her room, trapped in this precarious jam.
 She cries, "*you never make it up to me, this was the last strike!*"
 But what good is saying now that I wish I could press reset?
 Then unexpectedly, the red in her eyes melts away into a blue spring.
 I'm just... thankful, that I still get to hug her with my arms tenderly wrapped.

When winter strikes, my fingers jam misfortune's cold into a box,

Wrap it with a neat little bow, and yearn to see spring again.
 But gratitude sets warm sunlight upon my frosty fingers.

2030



*In which Sir Joshi saves this journey from an anticlimax, exploring
humility and hope*

I walk to the hearth with a champagne flute of whole milk
 The house is empty, I can sing and cook red meat to my heart's content.
 Well, I need to make sure that smell of lamb chops escapes before the rest come home.
 I crank up *Memory Leaves* and reflect on the crazy year I've had.

But minutes away from the new decade, an unfamiliar glint catches my eye:
 A strange glass bottle hiding in the back of the fireplace.
 It's covered in soot. I gently remove it with tongs and cool it in the sink.
 Then I uncork it with a POP to find a sheet of my old B5 Kokuyo paper.

I walk back to my cozy chair as I read the first line of the message.
 Before reading another line, I think to myself,
You buffoon! I'm the one who wrote this!
I could've sent this to myself by just squirrelizing it in a drawer...

I pause for a moment. *Eh, but where would be the fun in that?*
 I walk upstairs to my room and rummage through my overflowing drawers.
 There's every paper from middle school to college.
 And another Ryzen 5 box! How did that get in there?

The first note felt incomplete, like it was holding its breath all these years.
Aha! I grab another sheet and a sharpie to write a note of my own—
 But this was a terrible idea, because my a's look like o's look like e's.
Damn. I hope you can read this, little guy.

I carefully cut through the middle of the first note,
 Then surgically insert mine with sticky tape.
 I cast the revised note into the fire, watching brown and black ink drip into bright orange.

I have the strangest feeling that an old friend can hear my thoughts.
So as not to spoil anything, I can neither confirm nor deny anything that happened.
All I'll say is, thank you for getting this far....

In the fireplace, a burning piece of paper reads,



You know, Sir, I'll keep this brief. I'm going to use this note as the final storytelling device, so now I feel pressure to write a satisfying denouement. But you want to hear something ironic? I just finished pouring my heart into Ratchet of Growth, and I now realize that the concept was an inaccuracy. If I've learned anything about growth, it's that it's hardly a ratchet.

It's more of a pendulum in standstill traffic: time moves forward inexorably, yet the heart only inches, oscillating back and forth between learning and forgetting, hurting others and getting hurt. The problem is that wisdom doesn't fit into a dozen word quote at the end of an act, nor into a neat couplet at the end of a poem. It's just something you have to slam your head into enough times and hope you don't forget.

Because I've healed from my first relationship, but now that I'm done lying to myself, I'm getting sceptical that I'll find or "one" that feels "done." And I've come to terms with the Siren, yet I can't bear a life where I never get the "perks" I seek. I realized it's not even the validation I crave, it's that the two genuinely gatekeep the essence of life, and I fear that I'm just not a hard enough worker to pass through the gates.

I'm working past it, and I have these moments where I decide to "back in," but I can tell by failing enough times that this mindset is unsustainable. It's hard to tell what I love from what I'm using to procrastinate. Like even this book started out feeling like an escapism until I realized I loved writing it. I'm usually not one to doubt myself, but how long can a person keep reassuring themselves in their head without anything outside convincing?

I'm starting to think that the outside world isn't convincing because I don't actually desire depth and mastery, I really just want the thrill of novelty. I want to experience everything there is, because the master of none is still the master of fun. I want to prove the world wrong, with myself included. Yet as soon as that becomes fashionable, my interest flees. It's like the higher I climb from rock bottom, the more noise returns.

Hey, this is 5 years later Chinar. I generally avoid cosmic intervention, but you're being a dumbass (and yes, I know it sucks our handwriting doesn't improve). You know what your real problem is? What most people's problem is? Overthinking. You analyze, process, churn, but rarely does it lead to clarity.

Life sucks, and it's awesome. It's unfair and cruel, and indescribably euphoric. But you math-minded people keep seeking logical consistency where none is to be found. Get cozy sitting with contradiction, cause you're going to do a lot of it. Yeah, commitment is risky, but that doesn't diminish the joy of trust. And the siren does shamelessly gatekeep, but that's not a reason to stop chasing life's essence.

Don't be so worried about the nature of your existence, because honestly, not every question is worth asking. You can't just will yourself to stop craving intimacy and recognition and friendship for the same reason you can't will yourself to stop pooping; there's just something about them that's inextricably linked to the human condition, a lens we can't and maybe even shouldn't remove.

I know that what I'm saying is a coping mechanism. But that's not a bad thing. We all cope somehow, whether through denial or cynicism or faith. We have to, because some lives genuinely just suck. There's no neat framework that ties together these threads of fairness, authenticity, and desire without leaving a bitter aftertaste, no matter how many theories or technologies you throw at it. Yet your life can be both less than what you want and still worth living — full stop. And it's that tension between "I deserve better than this" and "I'm going to find a way, anyway," that makes this whole being human thing so damn beautiful.

But you can't just stop overthinking by reading good advice from wise, prodigious, and dashing men. It's about the baby steps. Are you overwhelmed thinking 5 years ahead? Then don't. Think 2 years ahead, hell even just 2 months, and let everything past that stay cast in shadows. And I know it's hard to reconcile the path of true ambition with the path of tangible results, but sometimes, you do have to engage in tasks that don't light you up to invest in your future. That's not selling out, that's just the cost of happiness.

It's ok to be just 90% authentic for a while. It's ok to discover that you were wrong. What's harmful is letting the fear of picking wrong stop you from ever starting. Take the middle path. And I can't believe you didn't end on a poem! But don't worry, Sir Toshi can ameliorate this.

As wise and self-aware as my ego tells me I am, I'm gonna keep repeating mistakes and misadventures. But you know what? I don't want to fix that. If I was perfect, then there would be nothing left to write! Besides, "The Pendulum of Growth in Standstill Traffic" just doesn't have the same ring to it. And it's nice to believe that growth is linear while you're going through it. Makes you feel like you're gonna be ok after all.

So I'm sorry to parse this journey on an anticlimax, but guys remember, I'm only 20. Feelings are more complicated than just express them and you've all patched up. I just haven't lived the material to tie the threads together neatly. But maybe that's the point. That you rarely find clean endings, yet still, you learn to raise your chin and keep moving forward.

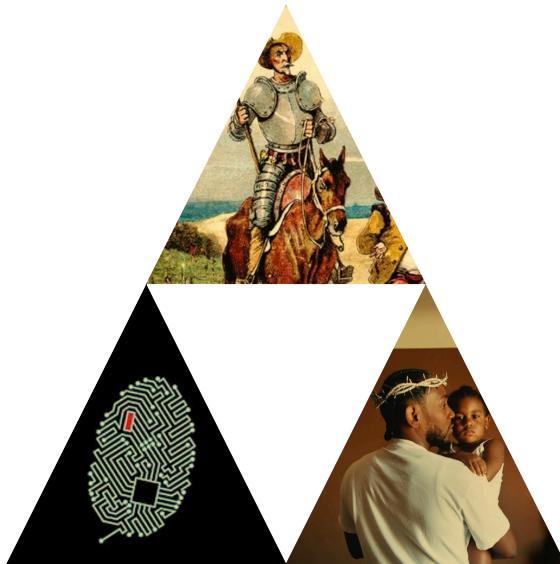
All prophets are fools,
Laying plans for mice and men.
Listen to the spark,
Heed its foresight and folly,
And live a life worth writing
TANKA III

“—Until I realized I didn’t know shit. The day I came home”

“The future is scary, but you can’t just run back to the past because it’s familiar”

END ACT 3

Postword



In which the burnt-out Joshi makes good use of his last sheet of paper

Q: Why would you tell us all of this?

A: Because we're all human. We all go through the same shit eventually, so why pretend like we don't? I felt like a side character in my own life for so many years, until contemporary rappers showed me the power of wearing the protagonist's shoes: Kendrick, Kanye, Tyler, Pac, and Eminem. We often think the protagonist must be the one who has lived the most life, like that person on Instagram/LinkedIn who studied abroad in idk fuckin' Transylvania and slept with your crush and when they came home they got your dream job and an honorary degree from your dream school, all three of which rejected you. And I won't sugarcoat it: their life is undeniably awesomer, and that's unfair as shit, no matter what Buddha tells you. But at the same time, you're the only one who's using that to keep you down, even when it feels like it's the world who's rubbing it in your face. If you can find a way to accept that without avoidant coping mechanisms, then your work is done, and you can stop optimizing your life and start enjoying it again. "Easier said than—yeah, I'm with you. But that's why I think you should seek the courage to let yourself be the protagonist, no matter how boring you think you are. No one can fully understand what it's like to be you (no, not even Google), and few people will even care enough to try. But for that few, trying is all they can possibly do. That's terrifying, but also oddly thrilling, isn't it? So help them out! I encourage you to stop lying to yourself about whatever it is, even if just for one hour, to tell it to ChatGPT completely unadulterated, and you too might realize that fear becomes powerless once you shine a light upon it. Unless we're not all human, in which case this book was such a hit that it's humanity's interface to alien races, in which case let's fucking gooooo!

Q: What do you think makes your voice distinct?

A: Probably all the cigarettes. Just kidding. It's only like a pack a day (god just kidding again, Aai). It's really ADHD meets privilege. Vulnerability isn't so scary once you earnestly believe "I'll be ok no matter what." I am a straight, cisgender man from America's safest suburb, with supportive family and friends, strong and caring role models, college education, healthy relationship with food, no mental illnesses, no health conditions, no financial stress, no intensely traumatic history—from here, the list just gets obnoxious—no glasses, no allergies, no braces, celebrated passions, active hobbies, conventionally attractive, fast metabolism, natural learner, cheery biochemistry, and strong immune system. I know this list is tiring, and that's the point—we're unlike in ways we don't consider till we see it laid out unapologetically, and if you hate me after reading it, then that's completely warranted; the truth about this life is that its beauty's wrapped with inequality—just know that even Mr. Privilege thinks he's deeply flawed and life is *hard as shit*, so you're not mad to feel the same! (and that sentence was iambic pentacontameter so you know it's true). I'm a walking example of the curse of human; it's not enough for things to work out in the ways we believe they should, not in the long run at least. Like Cantor put it, "To ask the right question is harder than to answer it."

Q: Will you continue this work? And if so will it be more poetry?

A: Absolutely and probably not. If I were to stop doing shit like this, I would get bored and depressed very quickly. So this story will only end when I finally run out of material, and maybe not even then if I have kids and they want to continue the legend of Joshi. Though I doubt it'll stay on paper for the same reason I prefer Python over x86 assembly: both are complete, but one is more expressive. I have a feeling humanity's relationship with art is about to permanently change due to AI and AR and VR and whatever crazy acronyms we can't yet imagine. And that's a very good thing, because a language is only as powerful as the people who speak it, so any democratizing invention is welcome. Today's volume may be on paper, but its essence belongs to tomorrow: imagine listening to your favorite song while podracing on Mars! I'm sure there will be a lot of initial pushback since we're becoming Half Machine-Learning, myself included, but no one today complains about the existence of Python (except for r/rust).

Q: Why did you start on haiku II?

A: You should know by now that I have a flair for the dramatic.



The ratchet of growth.

HAIKU I