

ISSUE 3
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ECHO



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Editors' Notes

Over the span of two years and three issues, *Echo* has fledged from a tentative collection to a mature yearbook. Its content distills Starriver's spirit and offers a lustrous mirror for the reflections of its students. In this issue, *Echo* has attempted to pick up the cherished voices of a new round of writers and artists that embellished the expansive shores of humanities. Some of us have found our voices; some of us remain to be discovered. Whichever the case, *Echo* would stay with us and support us to the end.

----- Star Huang

Young writers lack audiences—*Echo* lets us encounter them. Starriver's young writers try to foster a diverse readership of alumni and faculty through *Echo* while presenting intimate and honest portraits of themselves. "Nothing but the ideal ever endures upon the earth." As writers and editors, in the originality of our conception, in the commitment to humanities' discourse, we endeavor to reflect the beauty of literature and intuition—to discover and to be discovered, with words echoing between pages.

----- Sammi Liao

The feeling of being touched when reading the first *Echo's* "Editors' Notes" was still fresh in my mind, and I became one of those who wrote mine in a blink of an eye. Collecting and compiling these over twenty pieces of works of art at close quarters was an impressive experience, for the power of words is far beyond my expectations. This gallery of different creations can undoubtedly provide you with a genuine intermission in chaos. May we always have the opportunity to appreciate the beauty of literature, and may *Echo's* passion, as well as everyone's, live on.

----- Ruby Wang

One simple question that I've always been asked, as a lit student, is what literature is, and why it's significant, and for this I know not how to answer. My response altered every now and then, but now I believe it's the question that should be changed—not what literature is, but what literature could be. Among those young writers I see passion rising, accumulating, and glittering under words, and I'm hopeful to see where they will lead us to. Let our voices echo, and our echoes shall never end.

----- Elena Xiang

We would also like to offer our genuine thanks to Ms. Su, Ms. Wang, and all the writers, artists, teachers, classmates, and parents who have made the completion and publication of this magazine possible.

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dame aux camellias

by Anonymous

Sick unto heart was she, and sick again,

Lying afternoons away in bed.

Thin perspiration soaked into her quilt, refining it into a soft and fitting pall.

As if a part of her has left her and entered the linen.

Warmth met her whenever she stirred a limb. Hypocritical. The whole of her enveloped by a shed life.

Curtains swelled and shrunk in the evening light, breathing a small, creaking hope.

When they swelled there was a ghost-blue flooding the floor's edge, and the silhouette of a flower shuddered in spasms.

Stains crept on the pale gauze like worm-eaten spots dotting a lily petal.

She wonders if blue can make the air stifling. Or vice versa, when the air becomes stifling so it turns blue.

Why else should everything be so pressing.

The city outside occasionally scraping her swollen eardrum, pitching up its laughter and chasing its carriage wheels,

Getting too drunk before it dies, too.

Breezes story-tell a scene of burnt-out clouds,

and how orange and yellow blocks of light turn up in the hotel rooms across the street, doesn't she see.

You know them well, don't you?

Wait till they are gone, she breathed,

And then have silence grow around thick as wild roses.

I have no need, when coughs, agony, insomnia, and suffocation shall clear a path to Dis for me,
and night whips my insides into tatters.

The Song of a Lonely Alien

by Yvonne Chen

I don't know who I am.

I do know I am an Alien.

I just accepted it.

I don't know where I came from,

For I am an Alien,

Traveling around without living it.

I don't know where I'm going.

Destination is no where.

As an Alien, I walked through it.

I don't know who I want to be.

Will I be recognized?

No one could answer it.

When they ask me about my origin,

I may reply,

But I always deny it.

When they ask me about my past,

I'll laugh and cry,
Trying hard to forget it.

When they ask me about my dream,
I'll shake my head,
For I am an Alien.
I don't deserve it.



Untitled

by Anonymous

Untitled-One

I can be the foremost witness

In my poem I only speak of you

Untitled-Two

Red leaves rhyme with chill tides

I impassion those snowflakes

Spent what times to collect, dye and paint

Picking up sorrows of sky along the way

Can it be the ears of wheat?

Gracefully bowing down and looking up

Yet I can't be held in the soft sunlight

Floating with roots

I am anchored to the pain and peace of the poet

And how can I

leave longing to

Drown the world

Untitled-Three

Green Train is their infatuation

Unsurprisingly

Falling through you is my rumination





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Clover

by Phoebe Yang

And we picked on toward the secret shade and our eyes would drown together touching on his hands and my hands and I didn't say anything. I said, "What are you doing?" and he said "I am picking into your sack." And so it was full when we came to the end of the row and I could not help it.

—William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*

The funeral was over.

The deceased old gentleman was the gatekeeper of the impoverished valley where I spent most of my childhood. We were a forgotten bunch—the nearest town was several miles away, and the only means of long-distance travel was the gatekeeper's motor van. Every time he and the adults went to town to shop for appliances, the elder children would plead for a ride, promising to watch over the younger ones after arriving in town, and the gatekeeper would reluctantly allow us to board the vehicle. I remember my first trip when I was only 5 years old, the only girl on the motor van, looking back at the sand suffused above the only trail which led us away from the valley.

The town was a place of interest for all children except me. As the others roamed the noisy fairs for toys and treats, I found the most interest in the quiet road connecting our valley and the town. I would sit on the side of the trail—with my trousers covered in sand and dust—and examine the clovers growing at the foot of the trees by the road. They say a four-leaf clover resembled good luck, and I devoted so much of my childhood time and energy into proving that I was the lucky one, examining the green in such detail that my eyes blurred every time I see the color green, even until now. But I loved that road: it was a place where one could never get lost, for there were only two ends—home, or destination.

We always returned to the valley before sundown, since it was dangerous in the hills at night. The gatekeeper would settle in his little cottage at the entrance of the valley, holding his golden-

rimmed spectacles with trembling fingers, frowning at the newsletters he bought in town, the motor van resting at the back door, and the engine still burning hot from the journey.

There was one night I particularly remember. It was almost midnight of August 31—I, the only educated person in the valley, would leave for my first year in university the next day. Threads of black clouds in the night sky blockaded the full moon's radiance as I lay in bed after a day in town, awaiting my midnight visitor, and the image of what happened in the previous nights recurred in my mind. Bobby Dill was only 12 years old, but there was more than naivety in his chubby cheeks as he knelt down with me along the road and picked the clovers.

I suddenly realized that I had left my clover in the gatekeeper's van. It was his gift to me that day, and my heart palpitated as I remembered the manner in which the young boy handed it to me. It was not a four-leaf clover—it was his clover. The devil awaits me if I were to lose it.

I jumped out of bed, hurriedly wrapped a coat around my pajamas, and escaped my bedroom. I did not notice the portable bed temporarily set near the door, where my new sister-in-law rested. The town was asleep, except for the tiny pub gathering at the Dill cottage, which I knew my elder brother was attending that night. The clamor echoed throughout the valley, and I could picture my good-for-nothing brother partying his life away while his newly-wedded wife, who was asleep on the shaky portable bed in the kitchen of our house, bore all his duties in supporting the family.

I crept along the roads of the valley, and as I approached the edge, I noticed a beam of light vaguely swaying in the gatekeeper's cottage. Under that light, I silently rummaged through the back seats of the van, and found the single piece of clover that, like a burst of green flames of inferno, meant the world to me.

Clasping the clover in my palms, I could not help but wonder why the gatekeeper had the lights on at midnight. I stood on tiptoe and peeked over the window sill into the cottage.

Under the swaying light, I saw a scene of such familiarity—clothes were tossed about and spreadsheets were wrinkled as the two picked their way through the garden. Yet what surprised me was the volition involved in what I saw, how voluntary their action was. They seemed to have been picking clovers in an exclusive four-leafed garden instead of rampaging through three-leafed fields like me and Bobby Dill.

I squinted for more details, and vaguely made out the face of the woman.

In utter shock, I stumbled away from the window sill. At that moment I realized that I could no longer return home. I could no longer face the empty portable bed at the door, nor the chubby boy who would sneak in to see me around midnight.

I hid behind the motor van, hugging the engine for warmth in the chilly night air.

Then the door of the gatekeeper's cottage cracked open, and I ducked down in the back seats and peaked through the corner of my eye. A limping shadow of a woman exited the lighted room, grasping a bundle of things in her chest. At the door stood the silhouette of the gatekeeper, who stared into the distance, not leaving until she had paced down the road and squeezed into the door of my home. As the gatekeeper turned back into his cottage, I saw his eyes, glistening longingly yet as empty and colorless as the hidden moon that night.

As he entered the lighted house and shut the door, I stared down into my palms and noticed that I had clasped the clover so tightly that it was already crushed to pieces.

And I broke into tears, sobbing and shivering beside the cottage at the edge of a valley in deep slumber.

The next morning I left for university, and never returned since. But I would remember that night for life, for it was then that I understood what he meant to me. When one lives among an entire field of three-leaf clovers, one might fail to conceptualize serendipity. But as long as at least one single four-leaf clover exists in the field, the seeker would be willing to labor to death for an alternative. And that was exactly what I ended up doing.

I stood on the old road earlier today, staring into the clovers at its sides as if staring into the passage of endless time. I remembered the exact position I knelt in when Bobby Dill handed me the clover that day, and I stood there once again. As I stroked the freshly-grown leaves, the clovers injected into my palms memories of the village which I had missed during my years away: how Bobby Dill went missing on the 1st of September and was never found since—people said he was probably attacked by one of those beasts which rummage the woods. A year after that night, my sister-in-law gave birth to twins and passed away during labor, but later the twins both died of “congenital illness”, and they were all buried at the edge of the valley, right beyond the gatekeeper's cottage. I remembered that later, as telephone cables were installed in the valley, children no longer pleaded for rides to town, and no one even noticed when the gatekeeper sold his motor van. He seldom appeared in the community since, and people gradually forgot the cottage. It was only earlier this month, when my family visited the tomb of the twins, that they noticed his corpse beside the three tombstones.

And, earlier this day, when asked to compose an epitaph for him as the only educated person in the valley, I took the knife and carved a shape of a four-leaf clover on his tombstone, followed by the words "The Alternative".

People applauded in approval as if I had left a piece of fathomless saintly wisdom on the stone.

The Dill pub was destroyed long ago, since a group of drunk men were of no benefit to the harmony of the community. The Dill family moved to another residence outside the valley, and their old house was abandoned and out of maintenance.

I was strolling around their house with some girls in the valley, and they noticed that one of the stone planks made a hollow, echoing sound as they stepped on it. One of them knelt and swept away the dust on the plank with her hands.

They stood in awe as a tiny line of engravings appeared on the stone:

"Bobby Dill (Oct. 31, 1965 - Aug 31, 1977)" followed by a zig-zagged, childish carving of a three-leaf clover.

Denouement

by Conny Zhou

“To cremate or bury, that is the question,” I bellowed at my father at the funeral parlor. “Speak, for God’s sake, speak! Are you deaf or mute, you sadism?”

“Sir, may I help you? I understand that ...” a funeral assistant walks by and fails to finish his sentence.

“Understand, of course you understand given your poor service here to my dear old dad. What a disappointment! See how pale his face is! You should stab at him to give him just a little bit more reddish color. ”

“Sir, I am afraid that your father is already gone.” he speaks in such a warm and soothing tone, and that gets me repulsive.

“Dead?” I cannot help grinning, but I guess the social protocol bans such disgraceful conduct. Fake it to make it. Fake it to make it. I am in absolute control of myself. “Of course he is dead. You should feel grateful my father is not alive, otherwise he will rape this enterprise until everyone of you goes unemployed. You think I am being figurative, but I am really not.” I laugh, hysterically, uncontrollably, contemplatively, fearfully. I am in absolute control of myself. I will not become my father.

In the apartment, I let the issue slide as either way my father is getting the better of me. I will leave him there, no cremation or burial whatsoever. I dozed off, while my father was there in the coffin sleeping. He will never wake up, and it renders me reassured.

I am incapable of resurrecting my childhood, and I naturally assume I do not have one. In dream, with the help of medication, as the demarcation between reality and imagination blurs, pieces of

uncertain yet familiar scenarios reveal themselves. A date tree, my father was scolding at me for stepping upon the scattered dates; a piano, and my father was there yelling at me for not being smart enough; a dressing table where my mom never cares to leave, and so she isolates herself. My father never fails to find a pretext to do whatever he wants to do to me, and my mom never manages to do anything. There was something horrifying, a secret that my father told me to keep, not to reveal in anyone's presence, not even my mom, and so I kept it till this age, that my father used to rape me. My father told me to savor this in my dream, but I found it a nightmare. "Maybe a long life have to be filled with many unpleasant conditions if it is to seem long" — this is my father's life tenet, and mine as well until he is too old to do that again to me.

It is hard, terribly hard to stay lucid in this dreadful winter. Tirelessly grinding myself away, I ponder which heartless entity has instructed the sun to rise with such resentful punctuality, divining it must be an aristocratic Englishman who snores in derision about absolute everything, just like my obnoxious father. Perhaps, in the last two minutes, somewhere inside my torso, that snarky hypothalamus was cajoling multiple organs to its little cult, and there, they vehemently reached an agreement that they shall betray the command of my upper kernel whatsoever. But don't worry, everything is in my absolute control. Among all servants, I never fail to admire the loyalty of my precious, fully-functioning pumping machine who has been responsible for diluting whatever comes into its way, quaalude, amitriptyline, protriptyline, and, the best of all, heroine.

Desperately governing those scattered stamina, I lift myself up a bit and rest my eyes upon the despicable window which I have never managed to open. I mean what's the point of a window if you cannot jump out of it? Outside, the streets of London is rife with pompous social climbers striding in procession, sodden mendicants importuning passersby, and sobbing school boys carrying weighty satchels, a spectacle which would have been germane to a documentary on overpopulation. Dragging myself towards the presence of the coffee table is not an easy errand. The haphazard arrangement of furniture, the broken syringes and wine bottles, each and every one of them could perchance be the murder tools contributing to my denouement. But don't worry, everything is in my absolute control.

In the moment of my tentative journey to the coffee table, a series of peculiar yet familiar footsteps come into my notice. Instead of the usual tapping of two, a third one, the tapping of a walking cane strikes me back into reluctant sobriety for it is the conclusive proof of the arrival of Nicholas, another snobbish aristocrat, a ghoul pantaloons. I plod on ground that undulated softly, much like a swallowing throat, preparing myself to hear the living coagulation of evil.

"Christ! What an appalling dump! See what have you been reduced to?" Nicholas scrutinized the

apartment like an old-fashioned politician, making comment on whatever bothers his sight.

“What nuisances have summoned you to my little hovel?” I broached the question with a slight tinge of sarcasm and contempt, yet realizing it has been too late to withdraw it soon after.

“A nuisance indeed, as you have put it yourself. Your loyal little friend Johnny came to me last night, elaborating on the fact that how distressful and lugubrious you have been after receiving the bereavement of your prodigious father, requesting me to conduct a sincere inquiry to examine your state of well-being. At my advanced age, it would have been magnanimous not to meddle with other people’s business, but since I promised your dear father to get you back onto the right track, I embark upon this journey to your bloody bachelor home. There is no need for me to remind you of how great and venerable your father was. He had a precious and rare disdain for the opinions of most people. Imagine how devastated he will be if he saw you in such an abhorring condition. Remember how your father taught you that cruelty and love had been close neighbor and shall...”

“Close without being incestuous!” The direful childhood nightmare befalls again, a noose tightened around my neck, rendering me incapable of breathing. This gruesome spokesperson of my bloody deceased father is tearing me apart with ferocious inculcation. Numbly I observe the relentless movement of Nicholas’ lip, and the familiar, impregnable loneliness drifts in around me like suffocating fog.

“Bugger off, will you Nicholas? I would rather rot here than hear a single word of my father.” Avoiding, escaping, ejecting, I feel the irregular palpitation of my heart. The urge to dose takes charge again, but don’t worry, I am in absolute control.

The building should be tall enough, and I wonder how beneficial it would be for my denouement.



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Diary

by Conny Zhou

“Writing is a socially acceptable form of schizophrenia.”

Against the backdrop of morning clamor, with a cup of hot chocolate in hand, feeling the tender friction between the nib of the Pilot pen and bohemian pages, I infuse my diary with imaginative scribbles, innocuous mumbo jumbo, and contemplative soliloquies. Regardless of whether an immediate resolution emerges, I feel satisfied pouring down my mental quandary because I understand that to keep a diary implies hope.

For me, writing on paper is the most intimate and expedient paradigm of expression. It differs from vocal articulation during which the human element of discourse restricts as I adapt the message to the audience. It contrasts with the overwhelming sense of stagnancy engendered while typing in a computer which hinders the stream of consciousness by adding unnecessary distractions. With the simple paraphernalia of a pen and an empty notebook, I am permeated with an immense impulse to create and reflect.

I see myself as a rule-breaker in my diary. When life becomes too complex, too baffling, too surreal, I sense the necessity of confronting it face to face with bravery and with a certain magnitude of the disorder. In my diary, I feel liberated to resist syntactical and grammatical normalcy while composing sentences, whilst maintaining my voice and authenticity. It is an audacious provocation towards life and a declaration of self.

Oftentimes, the urge to jot in my diary is triggered by a tremendous inflow of sentiment deriving from sensitivity. Sensitivity, my old friend, used to haunt me relentlessly. It obstinately indulged me in a vortex of thoughts, fears, and tears, which subsided after I adopted the habit of diary writing. It is now one of the most mundane and common collections of my diary. Through substantiating floating sentiments into tangible language, I render the uncontrollable controllable. The loss of respect, a divorce between parents, the trauma of unrequited love, or simply a failed exam, were incidents that resonated with my sensitivity, but now they rest motionlessly on a page, waiting for belated recognition, hopeful to be understood.

Understanding never arrives immediately. It arrives in retrospection as I flip through those oil and

ink-stained pages. It takes months, even years to resurrect and digest those feelings. Time is the one last silver lining rendering the human effort to be futile. It never disappoints me as it meticulously disentangles the convoluted knots of my past through unanticipated awakening or mere oblivion, one way or the other. Nevertheless, there are still pages I dread to look back upon, pages in the middle of nowhere, complex and unresolved, but there they remain, locked in my diary.

In case it was exposed to potential peepers, I used to hide my diary in a secret compartment inside my satchel as if it was some sort of confidential intelligence. It was a conundrum concerning the existence of an audience, compelling my diary to stylistically oscillate between a monologue and a harangue. On one hand, I strove to evacuate the presence of an outside reader in the process of writing for the sake of authenticity, but still, I expected an audience, either intentionally or accidentally, to linger into my little realm of secrecy, no matter how little the chance could be. Right now, I choose not to conceal my diary from plain sight. I am tired of effacing myself, and I endeavor to share my ruminations and my method of processing negativity to as many people as possible for I see my personal pain has its own aspect of universality.

Sometime in the far future, I will revisit my diary to see how those past episodes metamorphose on their own. I imagine those wounds healed, ecstasy becalmed, and everything returning to simple balance. Even so, I will keep writing and keep hoping regardless of how life changes.

Eschaton

by Kevin Liu

The sky was gray as I looked out the classroom window helplessly.

Looking back, the sound of that voice haunted my ears again. The muffled, heavy, surly sound echoed in my ears. I couldn't quiet my mind, turning my pen restlessly.

He chewed sticky gum, staining the nasty gum between his eyes. Probably only the crumbs spit on by my heart could be muddy with gum and make such a noise.

The geographical knowledge I had memorized last night was chewed mercilessly by him. He still didn't stop. My pen didn't leave a mark on the paper. I stared at it, trying to remember what I had memorized, but the black words on the paper became bite marks as he grinned at me. I couldn't breathe.

Yesterday's scene came back to me and lingered.

I craned my head over, pitying the mangled corpse of the green worm in the corner. Its exquisite flesh looked adorable.

I felt that the bug was not something ugly, because when I got bored with it, I could dust it with both fingers to erase it from my world.

An abnormal noise yanked my eyes back. I saw him put his hand around the table leg and start to stroke it. The ghastly smile on his face was still there. I thought it was the smile that had been etched in my head two minutes before, only to fix my eyes on it and realize that his expression still hadn't changed. After jerking the table leg, he cast a covetous glance at my iced coffee.

I have never seen a wild creature with such a salacious gaze.

I was about to speak, opened my mouth slightly, and before I could, his hand wrapped around my iced coffee. His hand curved and undulated over the bottle, and I watched as my coffee tumbled through his hands. I couldn't speak. I was furious, my heart pounding against my chest, but my face was frozen like dead dust.

Afterward, I touched the bottle. The plastic packaging was covered with a layer of grease visible to the naked eye.

The grease dazzled with the most mottled colors in the world, and I felt something rushing from my body to my throat.

I drew a piece of paper.

I handed over a piece of paper and tried to focus my eyes on my geography teacher's face until class ended.

The bell of gym class intensified the sting in my ears. I stepped out of the building to find that only the western sky was the scum gray.

The sky was so pale and decadent that it did not hang a cloud, nor did it give a drop of rain. Perhaps the rain is reluctant to hit his body.

I looked back, the window of class 10 (6) was facing the west.

When school was over, his sound never died out. I opened the headphone case, panicked, and plugged the headphones, but the headphones could not be connected. I looked at the sky, the gray sky silts between the overpass like a layer of phantoms, neither black nor white.

At my feet, a grease-covered coffee bottle flowed with a few remaining drops of coffee. I was not the one drinking the coffee, but these last few drops were as weak and helpless as my hopes for a normal school life, dried up by the wind and nobody cares.

Every Morning

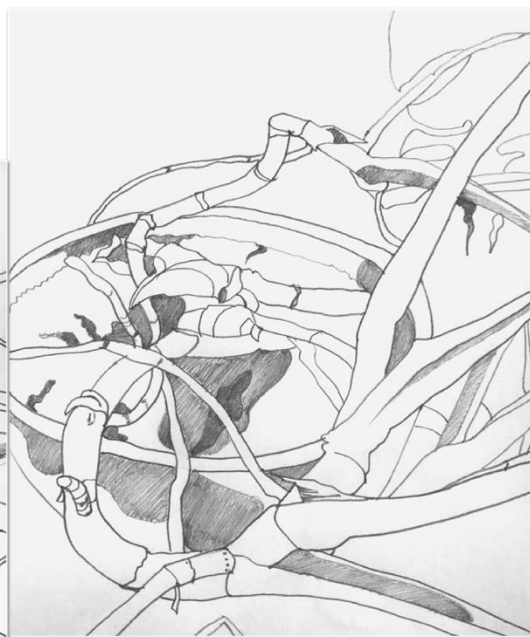
by Star Huang

Every morning I fling myself, sore and dejected, out of the iron door, down the stairs between the faux Corinthian columns of that apartment built at the turn of the century. At once I am under the unruffled sky of a Shanghai winter, its vast dome hanging over the city like a satin shroud. Under its cover I drift past the rows of motorcycles, the crumbling heaps of bricks and cement, the ajar door of the gatekeeper's office, the bushes and the evergreen camellias. The wheels of my load rattle and rumble behind me on the brick-red footway, my clenching knuckles turning pink as they are scraped by the chilly breeze. When I walk past the cars I stare into their curved and darkened windows at my bloated, spectral visage, aware that no one will ever heed my brazen debut beneath the sky every morning.

In the twenty years they have suffered, the buildings have acquired a sham of elegance as the peeled-off paint and bird droppings turned their artificial whiteness into a semblance of weathered ivory. Nevertheless, when spring comes and the camellias wind around the Roman columns in dewy blushes, one would be reminded of a tender sigh, a repressed dream, a poem. Yet I am not the rose or the daphne, the albatross or the fawn, much less the maudlin maiden whose eyes are wells of passion, or the black cat flitting its shadow across my way. My parched lips do not deserve poetry. I am but the forgery of a dead craving, long abandoned and unworshipped in this city.

A mist begins to grow on my lenses, its haloed fringes woven smoothly into the sky above. In this sea of suffocating whiteness I run toward the fork of the road, knowing, in an evanescent moment, that I will ultimately find no way out of my dream.

But when, O when will spring come and the camellias wind around the Roman columns again,
rendering me their dewy blushes?



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I Can Feel It

by Yufan Chen

I'm unique

Even though I live only in a small seashore village, I kind of feeling that I am the most unique one in this country, or this world.

Cause I can feel the wind.

Sitting on the hill, staring at the sea,

Hearing about the wind, hoping for the life.

The sun is going down, so will me, my mom will catch me home for dinner.

But I still need to use the last time to enjoy the wind.

"This wind shall come from the north, and it is young, with vigorous energy, like a naughty boy."

"This must be from the sea, wet and continuous, but it is yelling, seems like the rain is coming."

"This blow... Humm, anxious, my mom is coming."

I spit the bristlegrass from my mouth, picking up my hat and slides down from the small hill. Unsurprisingly, she appears on my horizon, wearing her black fishing bib, running towards me with bare feet. I can hear the sound when she steps on the grass along the shore. These pitiful pants become flattened immediately, and strangely, they don't stand up again as usual.

She then begins shouting, but she is too far. I can only see her mouth opening.

But she knows I can hear it,

Because she knows wind can bring it.

With a gust of wind lingering by my ear, I can hear her voice clearly:

“Linh! Time to go home! It’s already five-thirty! Your father has come back from the sea with plenty, and it’s time to have a big dinner to celebrate!”

All right, time to go back.

The night seems darker than before, and the sea wind becomes even fiercer.

II

Another ship is leaving the small port under night, bringing some of my neighbors away. So many people push and squeeze on the deck, seems like some of them may fall into the sea in just one second. Father says they have gone on a journey, to a place where different winds blow. It’s so frequent to see the ships these months, and near half the village has become empty.

When mother opens the door, I walk through the dry net on the floor, and seeing my father’s overcoat and fishing bib are folded well on the sofa. Father is sitting by the table, smoking and counting some green papers, and on the table there is a great dinner, with so many dishes that I have never seen before.

“The Nguyens... have left... right?” Dad stubs out the cigarette, speaking with a continuous cough.

“Yeah, just now.” Mom replies.

“Never mind that, I think we will be soon.”

“Have you got all the things prepared?”

“Definitely, see?” Dad waves a dozen of green papers, somehow like money, but not the blue dongs I’m familiar with.

“Okay, Linh is still here, Let’s just start eating, all right?”

“Pa, Ma, what are you talking about? What’s ‘we will be’?”

“None of your concern, Linh, just eat as they are still delicious, all right?” Then mom just keeps picking food into my bowl, and all of us stay silent when eating, only the loud wind blows through the window, shaking the whole table.

III

“Ma, can I go to your room and watch TV?”

“No, take a bath and go to bed now!”

“Why? You always permit me to do that after dinner.”

“Listen, Linh, I know you want to watch TV, and Ma also permits you, but you just can’t.”

“Why? But...”

“But me no but, Linh, get to the bathroom now!”

The wind inside the room is irrational.

IV

“Pa, can I go to your boat to see the fish you get today?”

“What? No! NONONONONO! Linh, it’s time to sleep now.”

“Why, Pa? You always take me to your boat after you get a big day.”

“Huh... I know, Linh, but get to sleep now, and don’t mention about the boat, okay?”

V

The wind is sobbing, so is Pa.

VI

Even though the wind I can feel is still dim, Pa just wakes me up and carries me out of the house. I can also see Ma running with luggage and bags. Meanwhile, some of the neighbors also rush out from their home, converging into a team. Also, somewhere not far away, the wind I feel is shaking, and then the light of blue and red illuminates the whole village, exposing everyone running in strong light.

“Ouch, they are coming, we need to be quick!” Pa is shouting, and the wind around me becomes chaotic. This is the first time I cannot identify wind.

“Where are we going, Pa?” I ask him on his back.

“On a golden venture to a place where different winds blow, just like our neighbors, be quiet Linh, I need to speed up.” Pa holds Ma’s hand and runs even quicker.

Not long we reach the port, seeing a small ship with a rusted hull and broken beck. Pa immediately throws me onto the beck, and then brings mom on.

“Hey wait wait wait! No luggage, throw them all!” Someone comes out from inside of the boat

shouts at us.

“That’s all food and water!” Pa replies and keeps moving our bags on.

Then the man kicks the whole bag into the water and shouts, “I’m the boss here, and I can just simply kick you off my ship, and now my money! Or you can just wait for the jail in this no-hope small and poor country!”

Pa hands in the green papers and carries me and mom into the cabin, and I just cannot hold on anymore.

VIII

I fall asleep immediately after we get into the cabin. When I wake up, I just feel disgusted and frowsty. The stuffy and stale odor comes from everywhere, but there is no light for me to see what is around. It is totally dark, but there is still wind. Through a hole behind me, I can feel the breeze fondling me and telling me it is the sea. No land winds anymore, but I can feel the gulls and fishes, also the peaceful water beneath. When I try to move a little, I likely touch someone else, then he begins reviling. Ma seems to be nearby, and she apologizes immediately.

IX

I have nothing to eat for almost three days, and the odor becomes even more disgusting, Ma whispering that someone dies, but I don’t know.

X

The sardine can.

XI

I cannot identify anything. I even don’t know whether the odor exists or not. When I move the man never makes a sound, and when I can my mom there is no reply. The wind behind me seems to disappear, leaving me alone in this hell.

XII

Ma...

Pa...

Wind...

XIII

When I wake up again I find myself on a beach, Some men with completely white skin surrounding me and talking in the language I don't know.

I calm down and try to feel the wind to know where I am, but I cannot understand it.

I know there is wind, for they are blowing my face, but I can't feel their meaning anymore.

Is this the place where different winds blow?

Completely different.



Significant Insignificance

by Kiara Shan

I felt lucky as I roamed down the sunlight-lit hallway of my school, taking in the tranquility of quiet classrooms left behind when students were jubilant in P.E. The autumn air was slightly perfumed with the scent of Osmanthus, and the overall serenity refreshed my soul. No one around, no voices heard—no disturbances at all. I enjoyed the moment, melting into the sunlight...And then suddenly, a group of students, sweaty and noisy, came back jostling and laughing. The tranquility was shattered, leaving only remnants of that poetic dreamland. I tiptoed along the wall to get away from these ‘intruders’... ‘I don’t like them’, I murmured to myself. I didn’t like being disturbed.

It was a Wednesday afternoon last semester. I gave myself thirty minutes to meditate in my bedroom after exhausting tour from school, and afterwards, turned on my phone screen to find a message from Amy, one of my classmates in Economics class, asking if she could borrow my notes. Feeling serene and optimistic after my meditation, I readily gave my notes to her, even though we never talked in class. She texted “thank you”, and I texted back a smile. I forgot about this insignificant event as soon as I put down my phone. So did she, I supposed.

It was a Friday last semester. On my way to the school’s cafeteria, Cathy, a girl whom I knew only by name, came to ask if I could lend her some lunch money. I had always liked her iconic shy but sweet smile and pink, fluffy dresses when I passed her in the hallway, so I was more than willing to help. We exchanged contact information, and I forgot about the trivial event as soon as I went to order lunch. So did she, I assumed.

It was a Tuesday afternoon this semester. I skipped back to my classroom after savoring a hearty dinner, humming in the autumn breeze. Picking up my phone on my desk, I saw that Cathy, the girl who I lent lunch money to, had messaged me: “I’m searching for another leader for school’s philosophy club. Are you interested?” I was surprised, for I never expected that Cathy, with whom I had only talked once, would select me to be her co-leader. I was sure that if our paths hadn’t crossed that day, she would not have reached out to me with this opportunity.

It was a Saturday morning this semester. I looked at my phone with the candy cotton cloud from my dream lingering on my tongue and saw a message that drove all my drowsiness away: “Hi! Do you want to be the leader of our psychology club?” It turned out that Amy, who had borrowed notes from me, had recommended me to the psychology club. I was amazed again.

These events seem insignificant, yet what is significant is the love and friendliness revealed. I offered my goodwill, and my classmates received it, remembered it, and gave me more. What is more beautiful than seeing two strangers spontaneously willing to give each other friendship and help? I was moved by this natural love between people, not as deeply as to cry, but enough to

change my mind about my “noisy” classmates.

I felt so fortunate to walk among the chatting and laughter of my classmates down the hallway. I smiled to them, and they smiled back with authentic trust and happiness...I strode, together with the whisper of the autumn breeze and golden sunshine, into the crowd...

This was poetic.



Love, Adolescence and Borderline Personality Disorder

by Kevin Liu

The bell tower outside the classroom is tolling.

It is already 10 o'clock. It is the time when the students are ready to go for a class meeting. In the corridor, the students walked into the classroom unhurriedly like small fish and shrimps flowing into the baleen whale with the slow current. It is a tiring summer. The sun is hanging in the air, roasting the energy of students.

Brian walks into the classroom with sweat all over. He looks around and finds Linda's seat. He smiles and pulled out the chair and sits beside Linda.

Linda is a perfect girl— —at least in Brian's mind. She is just like an animated and beautiful summer. Her skin is white, just like fine white sand on the coast of Maldives that has been blown by the gentle sea breeze. Her eyes are as azure as the ocean and as clear as crystal.

"Ah, I never thought it would be so hot this summer. My wonderful summertime shouldn't be like this." Brian strikes up a conversation with Linda, "How do you feel today?"

"Uh, I'm exhausted because of the temperature. Our school doesn't even have an air conditioner. It's ridiculous to have no air conditioner in this kind of summer, you know. All they have are these shabby fans that actually do nothing." Linda answers with hands fanning herself, attempting to create flowing wind artificially. "Do you know the campus art festival today?" she asked.

"Ah! I know. Last year that art festival was full of outdated music. I want to make something different—no—I must make something stunning. Who wants to see these people in suits and hairspray standing still like the Eiffel Tower?" Brian answers.

"Yeah, I want to see something new, too. Whenever I see those serious-faced, wooden sculpture-like people playing the violin, I feel that my time is wasted," Linda yawns.

With an worn notebook in his arms, the teacher walks into the classroom with a leisure pace. He clears his throat and says: "The annual campus art festival is coming. In this art festival, we will develop different art forms, including drama, literature, film, or any other kind of art forms. I hope you can participate and enjoy it."

Then he raises his head, bends his neck, and scanned around the classroom with small eyes. "This time we have a special project—magic," He continues, "Only one person in each class can participate. Those who want to participate raise their hands and I will choose randomly."

Brian turns to Linda and winks at her. Linda smiles back. When Brian turns his head, he sees someone in the corner staring at him and Linda with flames of fury in eyes.

That glaring is piercing. That look is like a ferocious beast in fairy tales. Abruptly, Brian feels that he is experiencing asphyxia. He opens his mouth, tries to say a word, but his brain shuts down. He tries to remember why he opened his mouth, but his consciousness is blurred. He feels nothingness float in his mind wavily. He seems to feel a faint pain in his throat, but could not catch his feeling when his mind is sinking inside the void.

After a moment, he takes a sharp breath. He seems to have taken a leap in the cosmos. He feels a little strange about his reaction just now, but he can't recall the face of the person who stared at him.

The sun is emitting a terrible pale light. Brian can't look directly at the sun. The wild geese fly by, adding a bit of dreariness to the glaucous sky.

"Okay, so now, raise your hands if you want to participate in the magic show." The teacher yells at the class in a shrill voice. "Raise your hands!"

Students raise their hands actively. The teacher takes some sheets of paper and writes down their names: "Ah, Jayce, Brian, Sheila, and...emm...what's your name?" He points at the student in the corner.

Brian now can see his face clearly, but he only glances at him once. He only dares to take one look. While he looks directly at that student, he feels an inexplicable sense of oppression. That student's dark circles under his eyes are raven. His countenance looks hostile. He has a slender body with an aquiline nose. His skin is white—it reminded Brian of the color of his friend's shroud when he attended his friend's funeral. He exudes a weird, chilly aura; inaccessible, Brian thinks.

"Houdini." That student answers the teacher, with an extremely unique, hoarse, deep voice; like an ancient god overseeing all beings in the cosmos.

This obscure voice reminds Brian of a giant monster he had dreamed of in his nightmares.

Houdini! Brian swallows and searches his mind about this name. After a minute, he remembers that this guy had been reading Edgar Allan Poe's texts in class, but they were taken away by the teacher because their class is not allowed to read books that are not related to the class. Besides that, Brian cannot find any other memory of him.

The teacher turns the paper over and starts switching them randomly. Brian gazes at his hands with tense. He can hear his breath mix with the sound of the crowing bird outside.

The teacher gradually stops switching the paper. He swipes through each piece of paper with his hand to pick the lucky person.

Brian sweats.

The teacher smiles and then put his thumb on a piece of paper.

The clock tower tolls. He pulled out the paper in a flash and read out the name on the paper:

"Our magician is...Brian!"

Applause explodes in the class. Brian breathes a sigh of relief. He wipes his sweat and relaxes his body into his chair.

* * *

Time passes by and dusk arrives, the glowing sun looks frail and shaky, reflected in a pool on the campus, the water swaying with the breeze. Such a laid-back atmosphere makes Brian feel a little tired. His consciousness also wobbles with the waves. During this relaxing time, Brian begins to dig his thoughts about Linda in his heart.

"Her attitude towards me was so plain, just like a normal friend." Brian thinks. He picks up a leaf and sighs. "Can the magic show get her attention?" Brian feels blank at the moment, then he throws the leaf; the leaf flutters in the sun, shining in the divine light. He quickens his pace and walks to the hall.

"Oh, you are the magician?" The staff with a thick beard asks.

"Yes." Brian answers.

"Okay okay okay, listen: we are running out of time. So let's practice it for several times and perform directly on stage later. Understand?" The staff continued to explain the magic to him: "Basically, you should get into this cabinet. Then, I will use knives to stab into the cabinet. You must stand very straight, then bend your arm. I will put in the knife slowly, and I will put rubber on the cutting edge of the knife. It will not hurt you."

The warm voice of the staff sounds reassuring. The staff practices it with Brian several times successfully. Brian can see the staff's skills with the staff's proficient operation.

"I want to go to the toilet. Be ready when I return. You're almost up! " The staff leaves. Brian sits on the sofa in a casual pose and observes the items in the waiting area. He notices a black cat with crystal eyes. The cat is elegant and aristocratic.

A sudden noise of the opening door interrupts his observation. He sees the staff returns with a mask on the face. It is a kind of performing effect, Brian thinks. He follows the man with the mask to the stage.

He sees Linda sitting in the audience with shining eyes. Pride and self-confidence flooded his mind. This is the ultimate chance to show himself off. Without hesitating, he gets into the cabinet smoothly.

"Now it's the magic show, stabbing into the cabinet!" The host announces with passion. The audience cheer and applause, great enthusiasm breaks out in the hall.

Brian tries to see through the cracks in the cabinet. He found that the man outside does not have any beard on his face. He starts to feel it's kind of damp in the cabinet. Nonetheless, the only thing in his heart is Linda's ineffaceable face of happiness.

"Is Linda staring at the cabinet now?" Brian thinks, "But she will be crazy for me after she sees that blade through the wood!"

With a huge wave of screaming, He heard something piercing through the wood cabinet.

In an instant, Brian feels the sharpness of the blade. Then, his mind congests with a familiar deep voice.

Before his eyes were completely closed, he saw Houdini's eyes behind the mask, shining with vicious resentment.



Moon Phase, Shadow Light, and Crystal Luster

by Kevin Liu

Under the bloody moonlight, the damsel paced lightly along the river. She dressed in a loveable red satin dress reflected brightly in the moonlight, as transparent as her heart. She walked purposelessly, stopping occasionally to look up at the moon Those around her can not see through her inner world.

The rising moon was pure and white, the resting moon was tantalizing, the new moon was abstruse. The young damsel's eyes were full with the moon, the surrounding starry night and the moon were incompatible. She had no distractions.

At this moment, she is as eye-catching as the moon: light flows along with her long skirt, her purple pupils reflecting the moon, her skin was white in a slightly morbid way. The people around her looked at her curiously, watching her staring dazedly and joyfully at the heavenly round mirror.

The streets were clamorous. The lights were luminous, the moon's light was not blinding.

The young damsel lowered her head. Inside the gurgling river, a moon was glowing.

The river moon was moving. Unlike the sky moon hanging frozen on, it changed and shimmering unpredictably with the river. The damsel was enchanted. She gently bending down, reaching out her hand and trying to touch it. Her hand dipped into the water, her fingertips felt the passing of everything in the world

The damsel saw the moon was formless. She froze and gazed blankly at the image in the river. Not long after, she looked at the sky again. Late at night, the water went without return, the damsel's eyes tracked with the moon.

When the dawn light tore through the night sky, the rosy clouds shined, the ascending sun radiated. The creatures had revived, the cicadas sang, the geese cried. The damsel's hands were slender, searching for the moon in a trance. The water did not return, nor did the moon.

The moon had already fallen into the dream. The damsel only glimpsed a cluster of flower remnants, which seemed to have the clarity that should not exist in the earthly world. She squatted down, closed her eyes, and tenderly kissed the petals with her lips.

The mundane people on the road hurried past. When the moon rose again, the lingering warmth on the flower did not fade away like everything else in this earthly world.

Reminiscence

by Phoebe Yang

Oir la noche inmensa, más inmensa sin ella.

Y el verso cae al alma como al pasto el rocío.

—Pablo Neruda

Silently she left in the autumn breeze, the chilling wind sweeping the withered leaves at her feet.

In the beginning, She accepted with such ease. She never did consider that departure would turn out to be so difficult—not that the memory was worthy, though. Her memory had been around for so long that losing it would feel different. She merely feared difference.

She arrived on a bleak November afternoon, the sun stealthily setting amidst the fog, and the bus departing from the station with a smoky grunt. She glanced around, shivering in the dull shades of the skyscrapers lining the street, and decided to follow instructions of a map app on her cell phone to reach her destination.

She remembered the elevators, golden and dim, and clicking the button to floor 16 felt like pressing into endless time. There were the corridors, and times when she stepped idly on their furry gray carpets and rummaged through layers and layers of posters pinned to the walls on both sides. There was the room, with windows as large as the wall itself though which one could marvel at every street below. She had lived there.

She tried hard to remember more, but scenes from the past dashed by so fast that she could not make out a single image. How could the past feel so short but the present so long? She had not enough time to explore the place, to find out where exactly she was imprisoned, or to leave her mark of existence. She had not enough time to acquaint herself with the people there, ending every conversation with an awkward, stammering smile. She had not enough time to attach emotion to the

place: apathy settled in at soon as she entered the dimly lit corridors, and was not lifted until the street lamps lit up the nights, as dark as asphalt, and accompanied their late departure from the place.

She thought of the people there, and the faces were shadowy and unfamiliar. There was a particular instance when she was called upon in the day, and as detached as she was, she saw him holding up a poster, unpinned from the wall in the corridors.

“Is this yours?”

Nervousness engulfed her heart, and despite the uneasiness, she nodded.

“It is beautiful.”

She felt an unfamiliar sentiment, something almost as warm as her life prior to imprisonment.

“Thank you.” She murmured.

“Is this Brian?”

She nodded.

He smiled and scratched his hair awkwardly, failing to phrase what he wanted to express.

“I will...pin it back then. To the wall.”

And he left, holding the poster tightly to his chest.

* * *

As the image of the sheepish boy dashed across her mind, she made her decision. Night was beginning to fall, and her time was running out. If she desired to take something from the place for reminiscence in the future, she must act.

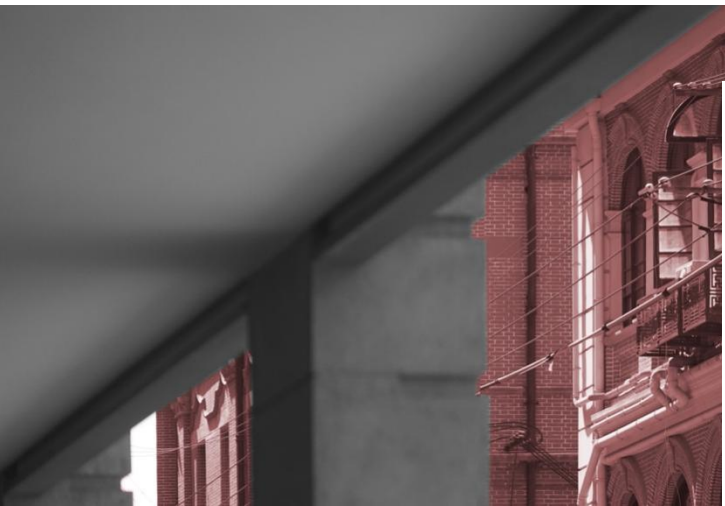
Pushing back to the familiar elevator, she arrived at the corridor, and rummaged through the posters one last time.

She could not find hers.

And now she was truly walking the streets for the last time, with the heaviness and depression of heart lifted and replaced by a much deeper sentiment. Scenes of the past dashed by, and failing to grasp one single image, she held her palms open to all.

Night had fallen when she boarded the bus. With an unwilling grunt, scenes outside began to accelerate.

Silently she left in the autumn breeze, towards her next destination.



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The Baleful

by Cheryl Li

Full many a weeping blossom flings

Her perfume, sweet as secret things,

In silent solitudes profound.

LE GUIGNON.

— *Ill Luck*

Her gaze held all the short grievances this life has to offer, and she was by no means shy to disclose them through her lacking discourses. If there ever was such an unfortunate being as a foolish creature, it is a creature wanting in both wit and humility, and she fulfilled all the requirements necessary for parading oneself as the exemplary lackwit.

There is something quite intriguing (if not the least bit unpalatable) when a certain amount of youth is proportioned with the imbecility that first passes itself off as naïveté, but that is a charm prone to melting away as the puppy fat does from an infant's stretching face, when it begins to unwind its shrunken features and grow into some semblance of a sentient animal with two legs. That intrigue ends when the parody does, and the remnant is a sickening medley of half-grown teeth and gnarled paws, the silhouette of Nebuchadnezzar etched onto daubed clay and viscous mud. She must have sensed this, as a toad crouching in the shadowy recesses of a dripping cave puzzles at an impending rainstorm, but the ambiguity of an argument in which both sides may see sense only served to bewilder her, and her ire grew as the mindless frenzies of the yapping duelers increased in volume.

At first she refused to take sides. Sides were simply disposable articles of no great value to her, and she did not believe in them anyway, with the tip of her nose perpetually buried in some musty book that taught her to disregard the inner workings of human nature as it had been presented to her, and focus instead on the inconsequential existentialism of philosophies that burdened the spirit and starved the soul. The irony of it all was most potent in the oblivion it imbued; she deemed it wise to be a cynic, and thus dispelled any discomfiting misgivings she might have had about being blown

around in circles like the paper-dry leaves on an autumn wind. She was the epitome of a modern soul, with cynicism, atheism, liberalism, and a number of other “-isms” all rolled into one, which sounded very impressive when put on paper and yet was nevertheless wholly unsatisfactory when presented to a crowd of spectators of the same caliber in real life. As the darkness that resents the impurity of another cavern drenched in black ink, the false light of what she thought was true knowledge lent her the unscrupulous backbone necessary to validating her unsavory conduct. If there had been any true malice in her to begin with, it did not matter any longer, since malice stood in need of an unceasing supply of fuel in order to smoke its sulphuric pipe and was incapable of lasting long without it. It flickers and dies, and leaves the air a little less breathable upon its departure.

None of this occurred to her in the slightest. She only knew enough to gaze into the abyss, praying, hoping, *yearning* see a monster reflected, and yet failed to note the metamorphosis of her own face. One may not lay the blame on her for that miserable shortcoming; we are all as prone to these vices as she is wont to be, and it is a pleasing frame of mind to be in when we hear all that we wish to hear and can ignore the irritable rumblings besides, complaining of things we did not wish to hear and truths we know not how to dispense with. I had previously been far too preoccupied with my own mess of affairs to note the unconventional route she has chosen for herself, but when I did it was the sort of derisive shock that places the recipient at a deucedly awkward position, the figurative version of a creek brimming with slush that runs knee-deep and abandons the poor victim without leaving him a paddle to remedy the dilemma with.

I came upon her as I had left her, seated in her usual hunch and surrounded by prodigious piles of informative books. They lay arranged like an furtive shield about her, concealing her within a fortress of her own volition and chiding me for intruding on what was no doubt a meditative trance of utmost importance. I brushed aside two dead flies lodged on one of the covers (the poor things were starting to shrivel and rot), shifted aside some of the rubble, and sat down briskly, never one to deny myself the comforts others would display in front of me. She cracked open the lid of one eye to examine me at length, then squeezed it shut again when she did not find the object of her inquiry much to her liking. Unperturbed by this turn of affairs, I initiated the conversation quite blithely (so to speak).

“You have been rather busy of late.”

“Yes.” Her reply was curt, but it lacked enough vehemence to render it off-putting, and I took it as a sign that she was not wholly sickened by my presence. Yet.

“Did you ever feel in need of a break?”

“From what?”

“This.” I gestured vaguely at the dust-ridden pantomime gathered around us, and declined to put into words several colorful descriptions of what I thought *this* might be.

She fixed on me her deadened gaze, apparently agreeing that arguments were best conducted with eye-contact involved, and the corners of her lips curved upwards in disgust. “And I thought you might employ your time in better ways than concerning yourself with the likes of me.”

In that she had the gist of it, but I’ll be darned if I ever admit it out loud. Instead I contorted my face into what I hoped might pass for a strained smile, though it was much more likely that I only managed to look like a dentist suffering from toothache. It is a contortion of the senses simply to be her vicinity, and I could feel my wits unraveling even as I sought to rein them in.

Her voice was expressionless as it drifted in one ear, “Especially when the likes of me will never have anything to say to the likes of you.”

There was a time when I would have taken offense at that, at the aversion that comes stealthily in the night like a fumbling burglar and fails in his marauding before it even begins because he could not tell a mansion from a barn. There was a time when I would have pulled the alarm and sent the burglar scuttling out the window with his tail clamped behind him, but what was the sense in fruitless persecution when said burglar had not found anything of value? Rage simmers and dies and fails to come to a boil, and one giving vent to his unchecked emotion is fundamentally no better than the imbecile seated next to him.

The thinly-veiled smile I gave her this time was genuine, if not well-meant. “Perhaps you should consider chasing the next conserved visitor out of doors then. Better yet, barricade yourself in more securely, and the irksome mountain trolls like me will never come calling.”

She did not deign to reply, but let out a long *harrumph* and gestured for me to make myself scarce. I arose at a leisurely pace and sauntered out of her crevice, keeping the exhaustion well-hidden beneath my insolent exterior. It simply would not do to show her weakness — not when she could sniff it the way a shark smells the blood dissolving in brine five miles away. She was on nobody’s side except her own, though one might argue that that has about as much significance as a rat does when it drops the cheese it was attempting to steal. The cheese is still there (albeit inedible), but the rat isn’t — it has scurried off into its hole, a darkened space the size of my fist and no more pressing than the shaved rind of old cheese dumped in a garbage pail. That was all she seemed to me — garbage, and lodged in a pail to boot so that I would not have to trouble my own head about it, and I am quite adamant in my belief that the sentiment is mutual.

I left her to her own devices, as I am wont to leave things just as I found them (with a minimum of undesirable supervision). She fared much better on her own, at any rate, judging from the state of her during our abbreviated conversation, and I was loathe to relinquish any chance to see her take herself apart. The very nature of her being was a rope of sufficient length to hang her with, but the knot must be tied by her own hands if it is to contain meaning, and I have the refreshments already planned out for the crowd at her funeral. The gathering would be as pompous as she had been in life — idiots, after all, are magnets of a sort, and prone to attracting others of their own kind.



© Ida Zhou

The Brazen

by Cheryl Li

Too old am I to play with passion;

Too young, to be without desire.

What from the world have I to gain?

— *Faust*

Hark the peal of copper bells, clanging away over the hillside, like Satan's siren call! Joy bursts forth from the breasts of the most brazen of hussies and the loosest of women, clamoring to expose their lewd charms, unbeknownst to themselves what flagrant spectacles they make of their squandered youth. It is a fine undertaking to preach virtue to these heathens, these defilers of holiness, if one could ignore for a moment the unpretentious hypocrisies of ye pastors and ye priests.

Like the hoary beard of an old and hunchbacked laborer, the puckering fruit of a thousand lives are fated to waste and to ruin. Suspicion of the profound is what moderates a discord deemed otherwise intolerable, and yet we, the blackened souls lacking sorely in chastity and meaning, must resign ourselves to an impromptu prayer of no apparent uses. It is all very well to protest that there is no such thing as an irregular prayer (or an unregulated one), but since we have already been condemned to repeat the bland and unfeeling words placed in our mouths and tightly clamped shut, we may as well amuse ourselves by deviating from the *natural* course. Youth finds the idea of old age unpalatable, and old age becomes foolish in its forgetful wake, when it fails to remind itself that youth, in all its impudence and ill humor, has been fated to carved lines and papery skin as well. Thus is the aping antics of our best lives possible summarized and derided, and the bells are ringing with passion and with zeal, their echoes mocking the valley beneath, from whence comes the ghost of all our sums divided.

“It is only play,” he protested feebly when I ungraciously brought up the matter at hand, “it is play, and they do not know any better.”

“Oh?” I was in possession of very little contempt to spare, having exhausted all my reserves on the aforementioned party of drunken pastors and undignified priests (and there was such an impressive crowd of them), but somehow I succeeded in rolling up all my disdain and ill-humor into one loaded syllable, and flung it in his direction as one might fling a leather bag of explosives set on fire.

He took a long, shaky drag on the smoldering remains of his cigarette. The crimson tip was sputtering slightly, and its flame formed a few dying embers even the most potent of matches may not stoke. It quailed further as I eyed it, but its pretenses were ill-fated, for I was not exactly the most impressionable of dupes. I knew well the havoc that a fading spark could wreak, having exposed the raw skin of my left arch to a nugget of burning red at the age of six, and bitten back the sharp intake of breath when my nerve endings protested at the sudden contact. He must have flicked it my way when I wasn’t looking — I was in something of a quandary back in the old days, and my perception had been blurred to the point where a grinning leprechaun may waggle its spade in front of me and I would not bat an eyelash. It is testament to the foolhardy nature of youth in all its imbecilic glories, and I would have crowned myself with a wreath of worm-eaten peach pits had I dared.

No matter. The regrets I now share with him are inconsequential, the way most of their kind are, for is it not only the present that is within our grasp? Had I been granted my way, I would have bitten the ground ferociously when said leprechaun skips away after disclosing its tantalizing hint, and innocent clumps of grass might thus have to suffer once I am firmly set upon scrabbling for that pot of gold. There goes youth for you — almost always remarkably quick to engage in enticing ends that may be yielded through unsavory means, though I have no guarantee if that green-capped little fiend was simply meddling with my brain. He and I are disconcertingly similar in some regards, and I know for a certainty that he would scrape at the dirt for a much lengthier period of time than I would, and blame everyone but himself once it occurs to him that he has been made a fool of. That is old age, a mind-numbing drug we all gulp down eagerly enough when the timing is correct, for so-called *wisdom* is indeed a desirable thing.

But I digress. The eyes of the observer must now zoom back to the sheer cliff from whence came the noise of our discussion, and *do* please take care that you don't venture too close to the edge — he might push you in for a laugh, and the results would be quite unfortunate. This is another cruelty old age might find entertaining; and the worst was that their love of amusement would soon grow to be their decay. I see it in the milky caul coating his eyes, crawling slowly over the expanse between his eyelids the way a snail makes its unhurried trips to the lettuce patch and back. It would have been a lovely thing to witness, if not for the nagging notion that my turn at the vegetable garden is inescapable and soon to come. The heat emanating from the stubby end of his cigarette scorched the cocoon of air surrounding it, so that for an instant the space shimmered as though struck with the pulsations of a wound to the neck. Behind us lay spread a grey plain, as flat as a plate and as uninspiring, but before us gaped the bottomless chasm, and the sweetness of the bell-notes raised up a number of the tiny hairs that coated my upper arms. It was here that the sprawling plateau ended, not ten inches from the tips of my well-worn boots, and it was here at we stood at our impasse, the vision of budding womanhood erected next to a stooping figure wrapped in a large cloak.

He glowered at me, no doubt circling back to my rounded syllable that had carried so much of that indiscernible load called *indifference*. There had been a time when I found his glares frightening — even terrible — but as my bones unfolded themselves and my breasts grew high and full, his ability to effect abhorrence shriveled and died, and all I thought of him now was how utterly *wretched* he seemed in that dim, unfiltered light. I unhooked that ever-useful mask called a *poker face* and smiled at him, showing just a hint of my small, sharp teeth, shaped in the likenesses of chisels and pickaxes.

He gave a noncommittal grunt (it made him sound like a pink-snouted house pig choking on roasted chestnuts) and turned aside to present to me his crooked back. I reached one arm around him and snagged the end of the cigarette butt from between his listless fingers, its cotton fibers still moist from the evidence of his saliva. I dropped it to the ground, and pressed the metal tip of one boot against it. It gave one last feeble retch, and yielded gamely to death by suffocation. Its remains were shoved over the edge of the precipice without further ceremony.

We stood still for a while longer, the silence oppressive without being unbearable. He refrained from commenting on the inexcusable rudeness of my snatch, but it grated on him nonetheless, for he refused to acknowledge my presence any further, and instead settled for a passive aggressive manner of conveying his discontent, by humming an unintelligible lullaby into the depths of the abyss. Sickened by this renewed display of lesser intelligence, I turned and strode away, kicking at the strips of dirt with each step so that even the most steadfast of the sedentary pebbles rose to complain in scattered waves. The chiming of the bells had faded to a faint *click*, for the copper that formed the skeleton of their structures were shifting into a piteous shade of poison green, and softening as the naked carcass does when it has been left to the mercies of crows under a hot sun. He remained in his former stance, rooted to one spot like a block of weathered marble, and I spared him not a single backward glance as I departed.



The Cat

by Ruby Wang

The gray sky was mixed with those scattered pinks and purples, and for a moment the line blurred between light pollution and an impending dawn. Not a single light was on in the cross-section of residential buildings. The rough iron door squeaked open as I furtively pushed onto them. I dodged the dawdling guard's gaze, lest I be caught as a vagrant. The iron seats at the bus station maintained their usual post-September temperature, relieved by my thick cotton pants, it only conveyed the time and season.

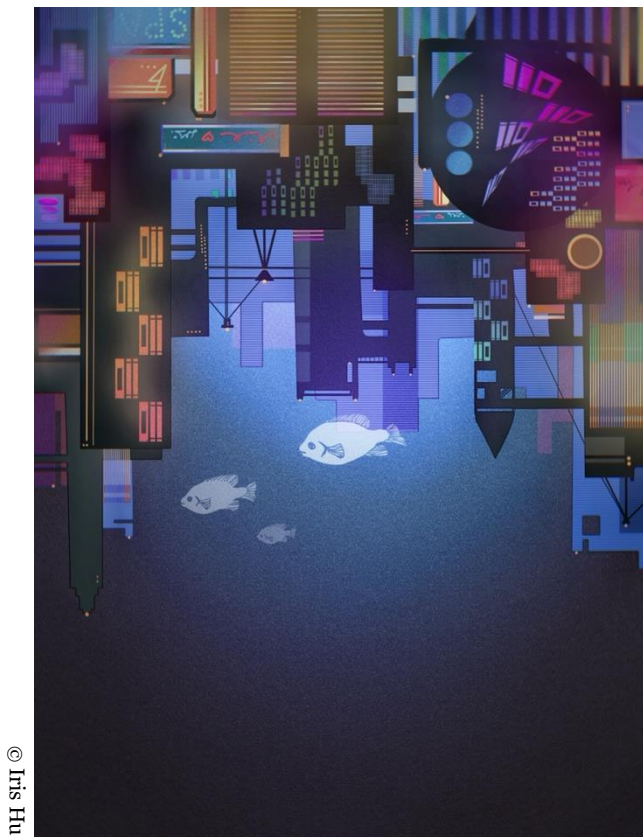
Quiet, so quiet. Early December. Three o'clock in the morning.

That I could hear the lone breath and heartbeat. Everything can be momentarily asleep—Let me count for you—squirrels, wind, even crunchy leaves of the sycamore trees were careful enough not to fall. The night, which should have been completely dark, was disturbed by the traces of humanity. Dark yellow streetlights shone on the leaves as if they were on fire. Billboards guarding the bus stop I was in were brightly lit. One, a green hummingbird at heart, wore out three years, with a ridiculous *Protect Birds* slogan; The other read *Homework Help* in red, with a bearded professor beneath. You have seen that smile, on a scholar in education industry, a '*Fox Smile*'. I pitied for the parents looking up at his lines of experience and awards.

Directions of the bus blended in with darkness, only traffic lights were beating annoyingly. Some dripping sounds, like echoes of locked car doors, hits of metal pipes on ground, mechanical chiming, repeatedly appeared in routine. The world was shrinking, as if two men's conversation at a distance accelerated all the way up to my ears. The delivery guy was moving through the deserted streets like a spinning top. *Fatigue or no business?* A cab pulls out between two buildings. *Back Home or to work?* No clues.

Two tall women with high heels and black furs stepped out from a car. The sound of the heels hitting the ground passed methodically along the cracks between bricks. Cigarettes in hand, they

spoke some English I couldn't understand, walked down the road with their heads held high like models. Metal-edged jewelry on their ears, or waists, or ankles or necks, or clothes, or somewhere else, clanked all the way to the air in overly harmonious ensemble with their footsteps, and only the occasional loud swear word made me realize they were still human. I was afraid of the strange stares, or questions and my deceitful answers. Glad they didn't see me, or just simply ignored me like those guards. *Oh well, her phone fell to the ground.* That bobbed woman slammed the car door, then smoothed her hair and tugged at her clothes. I skillfully avoided the danger of being noticed, but she walked off in the other direction, and I panicked, trying to turn or crouch, but she just strode away, past me, briefcase in hand, looking at her phone, not smelling of alcohol, and even a hint of perfume left for the 3:30 am bus stop. A wild cat came out and slipped into the grass. I quickly turned back without catching it with my sight, leaving only the sound of my heart beating more and more distinctly. *Humans are not night creatures.* People in the midnight whom I thought would be tired, messed, and vulnerable were dashing, staring straight ahead, subconsciously ignoring me, leaving me and my heart beating too fast, wrapped in my tattered skin of a cat, who was constantly ducking and dodging at the bus stop, a mess.



© Iris Hu

The Contorted

by Cheryl Li

*For he who follows every shade,
Carries the memory in his breast,
Of each unhappy journey made.*

— *The Owls*

I had quite the temperament for a distortion of the mind, and with these aspirations came the inevitable friction against solid decency, which produced sparks of a most gregarious nature and dampened whichever atmosphere I happened to reside in by a considerable amount. They arose to give flame to the ominous fuse called *memory*, and from that was birthed the sorrow of my acquiesce.

For memory is a bottomless well one leans over at a precarious angle, with neither intention nor wariness to blunt the final fall. We call it a lane as though it is something for the mind to skip and traipse along, as merrily as the dusty-winged moth is on a warm June evening when the first lamps are lit, but it is a lamp of autumn that it heralds, and once we lean in too far the fall becomes preemptory, an act behooved and sanctified by the base muck our consciences are made of. It seems almost indecent to forgo the ceremony once we begin entrapping ourselves within memory, and that road leads nowhere near the relief promised by reflection.

For memory feeds confusion. One may be bewildered at a great many things, but it is the inflections one hold dearest to his breast that renders the inadequacy of intellect so lethal and unforgiving. You do not reminisce about better days for the sake of reminiscence — it is an act engineered to breed madness out of deprivation, and there is nothing we crave half so much as that we may not have. Whatever good it might do us has no place in this striking relationship

between us and our desires; we merely bend to their will, and fool ourselves with the assumption that it is the other way around. Desire cannot be defeated when one is full of madness —no more than it can be surpassed or repressed. We bow to our desires and presume that a senseless master may be placated through sheer servility, and forget that desire knows no satiation. It embodies enough of our basest instincts to coax forth entropy, the redemptive quality that completes the cycle of our madness. This circle is carved out of rough diamond, and like the phoenix reduced to ashes in the flames of its own funeral pyre, it becomes everlasting through endless doubt.

No fallacy may account for this. You see that bulging hook in the beak-like nose of a supposed Jew? It is a degrading thing to mark, as if a mere physical attribute may account for the numerous atrocities committed in the name of *man*, as if Jews are not men because they have a hooked nose. While operating under the preposterous hypothesis that Jews are not men, we validate the many anti-Semitic hypocrisies of the previous age and use these foundations to build new bases for the next round of *Quo Vadis*. Have you ever heard of anything so ridiculous? No? You would deny its unsavory existence? And yet no mind is exempt from this particular vice, and Virginia Woolf herself condemned the hooked nose for its martyred lack of aesthetic virtues. You should be well-acquainted by now with the so-called *wisdom* man so prides himself upon — look well on the best that this age has to offer, and refute my derision if you dare.

Memory behaves in the same idiotic manner. By itself it knows no wrong, no more than you can blame an infant for its failure to overcome the bestiality bred into its soft bones. Memory loses its pained innocence when we give it free rein, and as we are wont to do so despite the vague terrors of a mind running wild, we do so with remarkable complacency and goodwill. It is not something one can *help* doing, if you will — half the time you start the journey without even realizing that you have one foot set on the yellow brick road. *Whither do you go next?* Perhaps you have no particular destination in mind, as I do not know myself where I wish to be at this moment (anywhere but here will suffice), and this is the confusion that memory spawns to advance its own ends, for it gains sentience through unwarranted bewilderment and runs us round in circles like dogs whisking back and forth while collared to a wooden post. It must derive great pleasure indeed in watching us frisk, and though I do not wish to don the motley of a court jester purely for its vile entertainment, I am rendered unable to rise against its crushing thumb, and so must settle for a spineless replication of remembrance as I sink back exhausted to my perch on the rafters of its stately hall. I have tasted of the bitterness that memory without end is comprised of, and I will

tell you in no uncertain terms that this water drawn from a poisoned well will not cure you of your amnesiac tendency to forget the frailties of *man*. It is a harbinger of a pack of predators eager to rip your mind into pieces, and since we have already bestowed upon it free and uncivilized rein, what should prevent it from trampling the few days we have left once we are done reminiscing? For life can be so very short when we try to recall the past — yesterday seems unseasonably lengthy, while today has a inclination to flash past before we can fully recognize it. Tomorrow will no doubt be the same, and thus we are forever trapped in an eternity of yesterdays, from which there is neither respite nor escape. I know of some who would no doubt be much gladdened to find themselves reliving their dreamlike pasts, but without today to add some semblance of intellect or emotion to what will surely soon morph into faded images, are we not simply reliving the self-same day over and over, with one finger hovering over the trigger as we consider the revolver? I do not wish to contemplate it. I do not even wish to see it. I am not a figure of celestial beauty holding a knife poised at the ready over my own portrait, and thus I do not consider myself eligible for the gunshot wounds or the thin trickle of scarlet blood drenching the length of silk wrapped about my neck.

Enough of this. I have been driven senseless by memory before, and shame on me if I ever fall prey to this contrariness again. Memory is a quirk of the undeveloped mind, an implement one employs to fish out the tiny fragments of glass scattered across the surface of one's brain. Bold of you to assume that one may extirpate himself from the infinite depths of his poisonous memory, and lift himself from that pool still dripping with last night's perspiration — memory clings and savages, and it is not in the habit of discerning the innocent from the guilty. We are all murderers in our memories, since yesterday has been butchered in our haste to get to today. No one thinks of the intricate patterns imprinted upon memory's senses, and no one remembers all it has done for us in the ages past before it succumbed to the lure of its downfall. Memory drives me mad, as jealousy, as hatred, as unrequited love and the passion of a thousand yesterdays I can no longer recall. If the emotions remain long after the object has disappeared, is it a shadow or a silhouette? Have I lived for three hundred sixty-five days that are all the same, or simply one day for three hundred sixty-five times? I do not think I will ever know — not when today is as impudent and as playful as the child of yesterday and grows into a dull and lifeless tomorrow.

Given the look of wondering disbelief splashed across your face, you have not taken in a word thus far of what I have said. It matters little to me when we are but men engrossed in inextricable memory, and only a few shreds of my mind yet remain after the long privation of a daunted today.

One shifts easily between madness, mercy, and memory when one is submersed in useless considerations, but I dare say that he may yet sound a great dissonance in the divine accord of a tormentor's crumbling defenses. It is the only decency he finds, and the sole decency he needs, the one decency not yet lost to him.

Crossing The Seemingly Insurmountable Divide - Summary and Thoughts on Online Volunteer Teaching

by FY

Looking back on the past year, I can't help but be incredulous about what I have been through—from the region of the country with an unsatisfying education to the region with the top education, from the relative confinement of the traditional system of education to the freedom of SSBS, and from uncertainty and confusion to a glimpse of myself—I have indeed crossed an insurmountable gap: a gap making people at either side become myopic to see and unable to sense in person the life and, more importantly, ideology of those living at the other side; however, with my own experience in the past year, a simple thought came to me: if I could cross some so-called gaps and become an incredible self, can I impart my methods and ideas to others who are as confused and uncertain as I was a year and a half ago? In other words, can education—the kind reaches beyond mere knowledge—help people to cross the seemingly insurmountable gap and thus help them become satisfied within their lives, or to become the ones they want to become? With this thought in mind, I decided to become a teacher in the future, and it was with the same thought in mind that I participated in this mission trip with great expectation—I want my student Yingjia to gain more than English vocabularies and grammars from her textbook, which means I want her to seek for her own method for studying as well as living that may eventually help her to cross that divide in this online volunteering studying.

As a student who studied the same textbook as Yingjia, I felt very close to the content I had studied three years ago, which brought both convenience to my preparation works and confidence to myself. My first contact with Yingjia, however, simultaneously strengthened but also destroyed my confidence. Yingjia's learning attitude was serious

and she was very independent in her studies, which made me feel very gratified. But on the other hand, her English was so weak that she couldn't even make a short introduction about her age and name, which was more or less unexpected to me, thinking back to my middle school three years ago where only a few people had such a weak English foundation.

And after nine weeks of instruction, I began to question her autonomy in her studies. She seemed to have memorized the words and completed the assignments after every class, though only partially and sometimes with a poor correct rate. But knowing that she lived at dormitory, which makes it inconvenient for her to submit her assignments online, and that some of her classmates even ignored the assignments, I still gave her enough trust. However, her unsatisfactory midterm and her zero on the ninth assignment made me ponder once again: How could a student with a good attitude and seemingly real effort fall so far short of expectations in the end? I think there are two factors that cannot be ignored.

One of them is the irresponsibility of teachers. According to Yingjia's description, her English teacher was "out of town" for two weeks, and this directly led to her falling behind in the course - when I had synchronized the class with Unit 9 as planned, Yingjia told me that her teacher had just entered Unit 6. Without a formal teacher, my teaching became obscure lectures for Yingjia. For example, when her in-school class was still in Unit 5, Section B, it became impractical for me to introduce the words of the twelve months to her. On the other hand, I have doubts about the ability of the in-school teachers to monitor her. If the in-school teacher had supervised the memorization of words and texts, as well as the practice of basic grammar such as subject-object-verb conjugation, how could Yingjia's mid-term exams have been so unsatisfactory?

The second factor that I think plays a decisive role is the seemingly insurmountable gap between people, and even between regions, is the difference in ideology, its resulting divide in thinking systems and learning methods. I have always believed that the most important thing in study is to learn various thinking methods and eventually develop a set of one's own effective way of studying. Therefore, from the beginning, I tried to guide Yingjia to find her own way and rhythm of learning English, such as abandoning the memorizing by rote of words. Obviously, I did not succeed in doing this in just nine hours.

I always thought that there are no failing students, only failing teachers, and I always thought that once I crossed this insurmountable gap, I could do my best to influence people around me, but it still proved to be an extremely difficult task.

However, the way ahead is long and I see no ending, yet high and low I will search with my will unbending. no matter how difficult it is to cross this gap, whether it is due to differences in life circumstances or social class, or the resulting ideological differences, I will always believe that it is only an " seemingly insurmountable gap ", not an "actually insurmountable chasm". That is why I chose to sign up for next semester's volunteer teaching with this semester's reflection and summary on both education and myself. I hope that I will one day be able to lead students to cross this gap and allow them to discover their true selves through education as I did.

The Wind

By Joyce Yang

I'm a gust of wind from nowhere.

Unlike human who is often hedged in with conventions and restrictions, I have infinite freedom to do whatever I like. I whisper to the leaves, making them cowering with rustling sounds; I shuttle between the clouds, chasing them from one place to another across the vast sky; I fan the cheeks of men and women in deep contemplation, wondering about what is going on inside their minds which I have no access to. To be honest, my greatest amusement coalesces around the mysterious mankind despite that most people regard me as indifferent and even cruel sometimes.

You may think that I'm intangible without a particular shape or size but that's not true. I'm like anyone of you with a figure similar to that of human. The only difference is that you cannot see me directly but through the "footprints" I've left. My fingers can be as tender as a soft breeze and have the capacity to bring catastrophes at the same time. Of course, how I behave all depends on my own mood which can be a pretty capricious thing.

It's nearly wintertime now, the time when most people are discouraged by my mere existence. The evening begins to close in but the late afternoon sun is still glowing idly. Most trees have withered into bare branches, making the few pedestrians who are in the park with their thick winter clothes on become seemingly more forlorn. In contrast with the other times of the year when the embellishment of blossoms and greenery is never absent, the park is often shrouded with an inexplicable sense of desolation in winter. Perhaps the chilliness of the season has banished the bustling

vitality away with its unyielding compulsion. Still, the park seems an intriguing window into the lives of various people, an ideal place for my observation, so I decided to stay there awhile.

I find a white-collar worker in his forties sitting alone on a bench with a furrowed brow, the kind of people worn down by the redundancy of everyday life whom you can distinguish at first sight. He's staring blankly at a job advertisement in the newspaper. As I approach and sit besides him, willingly to hear his worries, the paper clutched in his hands shivers as if with coldness.

"If only I could quit my job and start my own business." He sighs suddenly, talking to himself, "But why couldn't I? It won't be difficult to get a fund and all that matters is whether I'm willing or not. No, it's nonsense! Maybe I will think about it later..."

He ends up in silence, struggling to untangle his knots of mind. Meanwhile, he has a grievous expression on his face which I cannot understand. His inconsistency of attitude really baffles me.

"Stop thinking! Act for yourself!"

I want to give him this piece of advice, to encourage him to follow his heart, so I whisper gently in his ears. However, he ignores my message and simply wraps himself tightly with the coat. After glancing at his watch, he quickly walks away without another word. His family members might be waiting anxiously for him to return back home.

The man soon disappears so I turn my attention to a young girl who seems to be just off school. She's a regular visitor at the park and each time I see her she's always alone. It's obvious that she's bored to death with her feet dangling, her gaze unconsciously following a group of girls playing hide and seek nearby. They are about the same age as her in bright school uniforms, their hair pulling back into high ponytails. Their laughter echos like the tickling of bells which undoubtedly appeals to the lonesome girl who seeks companions. She senses my approach with a sneeze, then quickly positioning herself so as not to lose sight of the carefree ones.

She's probably considering about joining them. I wonder as I watch, even though I have long regarded her as a loner.

The poor girl bites her lip and stares at the happy ones with anticipation, hoping in vain that someone will notice her and invite her to join their game. Her disappointment is apparent--no one seems to notice her, not even looking in her direction.

She hesitates for a while, then takes out a coin from her pocket.

"Please help me make a decision."

She whispers and flips the coin.

"When the coin is tossed in the air, you already have the answer in mind."

I hear myself saying to her.

As I've expected, she stands up when the coin lands safely on her palm. She runs towards one of the girls and pats on her shoulder softly without reluctance, her dark sheet of hair swinging cheerfully under the filtering of the sun. The one who has sensed her touch turns around, eyeing her with discontentment for the interruption. At the sight of the bewilderment on others' faces, the girl bites her lips again, suddenly like a deflating balloon, standing there a long time with no words coming out. I watch her sympathetically with the realization that her previous courage is dissipating as her face gradually turns red.

"Come on, You can do it."

I back her up inside my mind earnestly but she remains agitated and silent.

The restless group stares at the dumb girl impatiently, then one of them speaks up, breaking the suffocating silence: "Hey, what's up?"

"Hi...No, I mean sorry," the girl is back to life instantaneously, red-faced, murmuring haltingly, "I.. I think I have mistaken you for, for somebody else... I'm really sorry."

Emphasizing with her embarrassment, I try to give her some encouragement by fondling her flushed forehead with my cool fingers, "Oh, poor little thing. Don't be scared."

Silence reigns again. Suddenly, she flees the scene speechlessly, breaking free from my touch, even hard for me to catch up with her. The girls left behind exchange glances of confusion, then burst into the heated discussion:

“Who the hell is that strange girl? Any of you guys know her?”

“She indeed looks strange.” I reply while the other girls shake their heads vigorously.

“Nope. Her voice really sounds like the whine of a mosquito.”

“She just want to play with you.” I say, feeling really sorry for the girl. But, of course, they can never hear me.

“It’s so cold out here. Let’s go back home.”

So they pass me without looking back, chirping and hopping hand in hand, attracting the attention of an old woman who’s trying to peddle some braided crafts. As I bend over to examine the delicate handicrafts, those sunken eyes of the women suddenly glow with guileless luster, soon lighting up her whole wrinkled face in a beam of benevolence. Our gazes meet for a split second and, to my astonishment, she seems to be able to see me right in the eye! Struck by the brand new possibility, excitement arousing accompanied with the indignation of having long been ignored, I hastily search into the deep-set eyes that might have captured my reflection but in vain. There is nothing in those dark pupils except the precipitation of time. Suddenly, she becomes a thousand miles away with that remoteness on her expression, perhaps reminiscing the past days when she was also a schoolgirl, consumed by a sense of nostalgia. My presence has undoubtedly disturbed her recollections since she flinches back into the warm coat with a cough.

I’m bitterly disappointed so I decide to leave in silence, hardly leaving any trace at all. On my way back to nowhere, I happen to see that girl still sitting on the bench alone, staring into the void.

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